

Past Decade Has Seen Aspen Ski Center Grow Tenfold



Walter Paepcke Harold Rowland Friedl Pfeifer
Builders of a winter sports empire.

(Editor's Note: This is the second of two articles on the growth of Aspen, Colo., into one of the world's leading ski centers. The first article reviewed Aspen's early attempts at ski development.)

By CAL QUEAL
Denver Post Staff Writer

ASPEN, Colo., Dec. 7.—World War II put an end to ski competition at Aspen but it didn't stop skiing—nor did it stop the dreams of "ski-happy" residents of a day when Aspen would be big time.

So, in wartime, the Aspen ski dream incubated. But the war just happened, also, to bring about the circumstances which gave Aspen its big push—a ten fold increase that by 1956, was to carry ski attendance here to more than 200,000 skiers per season.

Over the Sawatch range was Camp Hale, army mountain training center. Members of the Tenth Mountain division trained there—and its ski-minded members took busman's holidays to Aspen weekends to ski on Aspen's wonderful Roch run.

One of these army skiers was the famed champion Friedl Pfeifer, who first saw Aspen after journeying 85 miles over the mountains from Camp Hale on a cross-country maneuver. From that time through his Camp Hale duty tour, he was in Aspen for the weekends, looking over the hill and the snow with a critical eye born of long experience on ski slopes.

"Everything," he said, "was just as I wanted it."

Pfeifer met with the Aspen city council, told them of a bold plan that would make Aspen a center for the growing sport of skiing. They were impressed, as was the late Wilson McCarthy of the D. & R. G., who offered the services of two attorneys to promote the project.

Pfeifer was discharged from the army at Camp Carson one day in October of 1945, and was in Aspen that same evening. He began promoting his big plan, and fortunately found a ready supporter in Chicago industrialist Walter P. Paepcke. Paepcke was a man with vision, and money enough to make his ideas come true. He was most concerned with establishing a liberal arts college in Aspen, but by his support and his influence, he started the ball rolling for the ski project.

The first investor in the corporation was Chicago businessman Bob Collins, and first president was George B. Berger Jr., of Denver. Aspen skiing was on the way.

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With \$300,000 in the treasury, the corporation started building. New trails were cut, and the world's longest chairlift (14,000 ft.) began construction. With completion of its second section, it extended to the 11,200-foot level of Ajax mountain. Capable of carrying 275 skiers an hour, and with a spectacular 3,300 foot drop with routes for the expert and the beginner, the new lift gave Aspen one of the world's finest skiing operations.

In 1949 a T-bar lift was built on beginners' Little Nell hill, and in 1953 a double chair Herron lift was added at the top of the mountain. Skiers flocked to the town in record number with each succeeding year of operation. Other top ski meets were held,

including the F. I. S. world championships in 1950.

Pfeifer started the Aspen ski school in 1946, and was joined by Fred Iselin in 1948. The school now has as many as 50 instructors working during the ski season and is recognized as one of the country's finest.

As Aspen skiing grew, the town grew. New motels, many with Alpine decor, began to build amid the Victorian structures that characterized the town's architecture. Restaurants and night clubs came in, retaining old names, or pulling new ones from the town's mining past. Curio shops and heated swimming pools were natural developments.

With its peculiar combination of Victorian charm, mining history, sun, scenery, snow, and the inherent romance connected with skiing, the town became a winter paradise.

Skiing spells success for many Aspen businessmen. Jim Parry came to Aspen from a high-paid, high-pressure television routine in Boston and New York. With a yen to get away from it all and do some skiing, he came to Aspen and hired out as a snow packer on the ski hill. Three years ago he built the Glory Hole motel.

"It would be hard to find a better place for a motel," said Parry. "We were filled up for the Christmas season a year ahead of time, and right now February and March are taken up. We could rent 50 more units if we had them."

Parry's story is repeated all over town. Included among the businessmen are several former members of the Tenth Mountain division. Besides Friedl Pfeifer, there is publisher Bil Dunaway, contractor Dick Wright, architect Fritz Benedict, restaurateur Steve Knowlton, trucker Bill Lane, timberman George Gekouchick, merchants Ken Isakson and Bert Bidwell. Other "Tenth Mountain residents" include Curt Chase, Dick McCrudden, and Hal Hartman.

Manager of the Aspen Skiing Corp., for the past eight years is Harold Rowland, an Aspen native who has been interested in skiing since it got its start in Aspen.

"I had to leave Aspen for a few years because it has hard to make a living here," said Rowland, "but things looked up after the lift went in, and I was glad to come back."

As evidence that Aspen is one of the nation's most popular ski areas, Rowland noted that the area can handle 1,700 skiers a day. An expensive operation, Aspen skiing requires an annual \$18,000 for maintenance and clearing of trails alone.

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Aspen's spectacular growth is evident in the corporation's annual receipts. From \$32,000 the first year of operation, the total grew to approximately \$300,000 last year—tenfold in 10 years.

With skiing still a growing industry, Aspen realizes it can't rest on its laurels. Currently under construction is a new double chair lift on Little Nell hill. Made by the Riblett company, it will be 3,100 feet long, and have a drop of 1,800 feet. It will be ready by mid-December. Manager Rowland said plans were being made for a new 4,800-foot lift to the top of Bell mountain.