

Reno's Ski History

Question: What are some of your most memorable moments skiing as a youngster?

Answer: Oddly, my interest in skiing grew my desire to play another sport, which was ice hockey. As a five year old boy, I often borrowed my older brother's ice skates and sneaked away from home chores to the Frazer outdoor rink on the western edge of town to skate and watch the older kids play ice hockey. When I mentioned to my parents my desire to own a pair of hockey skates and stick, the idea was met with firm resistance born of the Depression Era. Incurring physical injuries and medical bills was all my parents could think about during that time of financial stress, and that was that. My parents forbid me to use my brother's skates at any time, a decree that felt tragic at my young age. As I was prone to crying easily anyway, these warnings set off daily crying for about a week until one of my brothers' friends mentioned that I could borrow his snow skis.

After my initial attempts to ski with the snow skis, I was sold on skiing instead of hockey. The friend offered to sell the skis for fifty-five cents because he wanted to attend the double-feature movies at the State Theater in Madawaska. We struck a deal for me to pay him ten cents each Saturday morning so he could pay for the movies. Thankfully, I gained my mother's approval for purchasing the skis. From that day on, whenever there was a frosty, white cover of snow on the ground, I headed outside to set tracks up the hills and then ski down, over and over. As I became accustomed to the speed of skiing downhill, I challenged myself to go higher up the hills; eventually I looked for steeper, longer rides that could be found near the gravel pits high above Madawaska. My former childhood dream of playing professional hockey was replaced by my new desire to become an Olympic skier.

My new skis were a pair of plain wooden maple boards with turned-up tips that had to be curled using a vise and hot water. The

skis had a strap to secure my gum rubber- toed boots. In order to keep the boot attached to the ski, I tied rubber seals from canning jars over the toe and around the heel. The only possible maneuver with this makeshift binding was a telemark turn. After lots of practice, I became proficient with this turn. I recall skiing with older boys who had real leather bindings and much longer wooden skis.

I can picture Louis (Pee Wee) Cyr, Don MacIntosh, Dutch Messecurr, Arthur Daigle, Don and Francis MacDermet, and a few more whose names I can no longer recall.

The skiing usually consisted of breaking a track starting at what is now the top of Fifth Avenue. We hiked up to the area we called The Slopes to Grande Mere Albert's farm house, then west to the Three Barns (now Perreault's A frame home), down the open field where the drive-in movie theater was later located, and finally across the water district reservoir and over the hill back to where we started. It seemed like a very long trip for an 8-9 year old aspiring skier. During the 1930's, this was considered skiing. I have many memories of my early skiing on the hills above Madawaska. Each time I slid down the ski track, I experienced an intense feeling of freedom; this was my world, my doing, a sense of self. I became aware of new strength, more confidence, and raw adventure.

Now, seventy-three years later, as I reflect on these memories, I look forward to feeling the same joy from skiing when I stride on classic tracks in Chugach State Park near my home in Anchorage, Alaska. It never gets stale.

I recall skiing my first properly executed left parallel turn as a child in Madawaska. The parallel turn, as we know it today, became popular in the early 1940's. It was introduced by a Frenchman named Emile Alais. Before the parallel turn, the main skiing style consisted of stem turning. The first time I saw this new style of skiing, I was watching the "News Shorts" previews to the

main movie feature. I felt excited to see a film clip demonstrating this “new” ski technique of parallel turning. The beautiful, graceful connected turns were performed with elegance and ease; it seemed as if the skier was dancing a slow waltz down the hill.

I determined that I would learn this new style of skiing. After many weeks of practicing on a short hill near today’s Fifth Avenue, I succeeded in making the left turn with my skis parallel. What an awesome feeling! It was the perfect connection with my body, skis, and the snow. I recall lying in my bed at night remembering that wonderful, amazing feeling as I thought of my parallel turns.

As there were neither instructors nor coaching available, the progress was slow and bolstered by sheer determination to master the turning technique. A period of one year passed until I was able to link the left parallel turn to a right turn, creating a complete movement pattern. Now I could begin to ski race! My skis, my body, and my movements were in synch.

From my early races in the Madawaska Winter Carnival, I continued to enter ski competitions throughout my school years. Later, as a young enlisted Air Force serviceman, I eagerly competed in the Alaska Armed Forces Ski Championship in 1953. When I won first place in this important race, my confidence inspired me to seek out additional racing challenges. I joined the Western State College ski team in Gunnison, Colorado and raced in NCAA competitions from 1955-1959. Even now at age 77, I continue to race locally, nationally, and internationally at cross-country ski venues. My adventures in skiing have taken me to Italy, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Canada, Norway, and many renowned ski areas in the United States, such as Lake Placid and Sun Valley.

From a strong desire to master that “new” ski technique that I saw in the World News previews film clip, a love of skiing was born that has endured and enriched my life with health, friendships, and pleasure. And the great thing is: there’s more to come!