

Squaw – from a rope tow to Olympic mountain



By Kathryn Reed

Alex Cushing left his East Coast law practice to move to Squaw Valley in the 1940s, soon convinced PanAm pilot Wayne Poulson to sell him 600 acres in what is now Olympic Valley and then spent \$100,000 to build a ski lodge near what is KT-22.

By 1954, Cushing was entertaining the notion of Squaw hosting the 1960 Olympics.

Lake Placid officials were furious he won the U.S. Olympic Committee's approval. He went on to beat out Innsbruck, St. Moritz and Garmishe-Partenkirchen. (Innsbruck was selected four years later and again in 1976. Lake Placid hosted the game in 1932 and 1980.)

In 1955, when the International Olympic Committee chose Squaw, the North Shore resort had one chairlift, a rope tow and a 50-room lodge.

Construction on Olympic-quality facilities started the next year – \$8 million worth. This set an Olympic record. (By contrast, the Vancouver Olympic Committee says the expense of this year's Games is in the billions of dollars.)

The abundance of snow in Lake Tahoe was one of Cushing's selling points. The problem in 1960 was the snow was sparse. There was talk of trucking in snow or moving the events to Slide Mountain (now part of Mt. Rose ski resort).

But Mother Nature cooperated; with the snow seeming to fall by the bucket load that February just as the Games were to begin.

So much fell that Walt Disney " who was putting on the opening ceremonies " feared all of the white stuff and nasty weather would ruin his festivities. (Disney helped found Sugar Bowl ski resort 70 years ago.)

Richard Nixon, then vice president and one-time congressman from California, was 90 minutes late because of the storm. The 15,000 people in attendance had to wait for his arrival.

With 10 inches falling in the valley and even more on the mountain, the men's downhill was pushed to the first Monday.

Seven hundred athletes from 33 countries competed in 27 events in 1960. The bobsled event was canceled because there wasn't enough money to finish building the route, though officials at the time said it was because not enough countries wanted to participate.

Leading up to the Games, Buddy Werner was one of the country's potential medalists in skiing, but he had broken his leg earlier in the season. If that name sounds familiar, youth ski programs now carry his name.

Jean Vuarnet stunned the world by winning the men's downhill on metal skis " the first time metal skis had been used. The French also didn't wax their skis.

It wasn't just the slopes that were catching people's attention. These VIII Winter Olympics were the first time any skating event was contested inside and therefore the first on manmade ice. Ponds of frozen ice were the norm before Squaw.

However, the speed skating was outdoors on a 400-meter oval.

They were also the Games to usher in electronic timing.

The Squaw Games were the first to have daily television

coverage. Walter Cronkite was the voice of those Games for CBS.

About 300 people worked security at Squaw. This pales in comparison to the number Vancouver is employing – 15,000 police, private security and military personnel at a cost of nearly \$1 billion.

Other than the Olympic flame and those famous five rings at the entrance to Squaw off Highway 89, relics of 50 years ago are hard to find.

The roof of Blyth Arena – the ice rink – collapsed in the 1980s. Condos near Red Dog replaced the torch tower and podium. The ski jump sat unused for a couple decades until it, too, was removed. The Nevada Visitors Center is now the Far East Center and the California Visitors Center serves as the members' locker building.

Although most of the structures are long gone, the memories of those 1960 Games at Squaw seem to burn as bright as the Olympic flame.

Publisher's note: *Read about potential Olympian Elena Hight on Jan. 5.*