

# History of Sierra alpine sports runs deep

By Jim Sloan, Tahoe In Depth

Many point to the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley as the event that kickstarted skiing in the Sierra and the Tahoe region. The event, only the eighth Winter Games ever held, was the first Winter Olympics ever televised.

But the truth is that skiing had been an established, vibrant industry in the area for nearly 30 years before the Olympics arrived at Squaw Valley. There were mechanized rope tows, cutting edge ski lifts, professional ski instruction, innovative equipment designs, ski lodges, destination resorts, celebrity sightings and travel packages all along the snowy Highway 40 corridor from the western foothills to Tahoe and the eastern Sierra above Reno.

## 49ers raced on skis

But even before that Golden Age of T-bars and rope tows, California gold miners were strapping on boards – really long boards – for ski races in places like La Porte and Johnsville. They developed ski waxes, 12- to 15-foot skis, and a one-pole technique that had some of them reaching speeds of 100 mph. According to writer Patricia Fox, writing in a 2007 issue of *Sierra Heritage* magazine, the first organized ski race in the U.S. was held in La Porte, in the mountains west of present-day Graeagle, in February 1867, 14 years after informal racing had started in the town of 3,000 miners.

Of course, everyone's heard of Snowshoe Thompson, who was not a snowshoer but actually a skier who traversed the snowy Sierra on skis for 15 years, bringing mail back and forth from Genoa to Placerville. Thompson gets a lot of credit for pioneering the sport of skiing in the Sierra, but the first

ski resort didn't open at Tahoe until the mid-1920s. Olympic Hill, it was called, and it was opened for guests of the Tahoe Tavern. Later, the ski area's name was changed to Granlibakken.

### **Granlibakken joins sport**

According to Jeffrey Weidel, a former newspaper reporter in Roseville who has been writing about Tahoe skiing for about 20 years, Granlibakken was the third ski resort to open in the U.S., behind Howelsen Hill in Steamboat, Colorado, and Eaglebrook School in Massachusetts. Soda Springs was the second California resort to open, hauling its first skier to the hills above Lake Van Orden in 1935.



What is now Ski Run Boulevard was once an actual ski run. Photo/Stephen Gennerich collection

### **Driving to ski**

According to historian Mark McLaughlin, in his book "Skiing at Lake Tahoe," the first ski lift in the United States was a

“pullback lift” built in 1910 in the Hilltop area of Truckee (the present-day finish line for the annual Great Ski Race from Tahoe City to Truckee). According to McLaughlin, the lift was initially built for toboggan riders but skiers also used it.

McLaughlin says skiing was already popular in the California mountains in 1930, where the Rainbow Lodge on Highway 40 was a magnet for winter sports enthusiasts. By 1936, there were a handful of popular skiing and sledding areas between Cisco, where the Auburn Ski Club built a ski jump and winter park, and Donner Lake to the east. Skiers either drove into the mountains, strapping their skis and poles to the roofs of their cars, or they rode the train into the Sierra and took horse-drawn sleds from the railroad depot to ski lodges.

By 1940 the “ski business was booming” in the Donner Pass region. Rope tows had replaced the original practice of hiking to the top of mountains to ski down. Ski schools imported experts from Switzerland and Austria to introduce and teach the latest techniques and equipment. You could stay at the Soda Springs Hotel for a dollar a day, paying 25 cents to a \$1 for a meal. Donner Ski Ranch opened up the road in 1937, and work began on Sugar Bowl across the highway a couple of years later. It opened with great fanfare – and a fantastic \$39,000 ski lift that allowed skiers to ride to the top.

### **Galena Creek Ski Hut**

About this same time, Galena Creek Ski Hut was being built near Mount Rose. According to the Nevada Historical Society, the ski hill at Galena Creek hosted an annual Intercollegiate Winter Sports Carnival where college teams came to compete against the hometown favorites at UNR. One of those UNR skiers was Wayne Poulsen, who would become a major landowner in Squaw Valley. One of the first significant resorts in Nevada was Sky Tavern, completed in 1945 near Mount Rose. Farther south, near Spooner Summit, the White Hills ski area opened in 1949 with a

T-bar lift and a ski jump. The resort closed five years later after several dry winters.

At the south end of Lake Tahoe, highway crews rarely completely cleared snow from Highway 50 between Placerville and Lake Tahoe. One of the first rope tows was installed at Twin Bridges, where the snow removal usually stopped.

### **Edelweiss on Echo Summit**

Then in 1941 Edelweiss resort opened near Echo Summit, according to "Skiing at Lake Tahoe." The resort operated for about 20 years before closing. The nearby Sierra Ski Ranch opened five years after Edelweiss and continues to operate today as Sierra-at-Tahoe resort. During the 1940s, other family-owned resorts opened along Highway 50, including Echo Lakes, Nebel Horn, Echo Summit, and, in the lake basin itself, Bijou Skiway Park in 1947. The park would soon be sold and renamed Heavenly Valley.

Poulsen, meanwhile, was scouting Sierra terrain for a major new ski resort. He settled on Squaw Valley. Although he worked as an airline pilot half the year, he and his wife, Sandy, purchased 2,000 acres of Squaw Valley with an eye toward finding investors to help build a ski resort over the five peaks surrounding his land. The Poulsens eventually partnered with Alex Cushing, but the partnership was short-lived, and Cushing went on to develop the alpine resort on his own while the Poulsens developed their valley land.

The wildly successful 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley ushered in a new era of large ski area development, as Alpine Meadows, Kirkwood, Ski Incline (now called Diamond Peak) and Homewood all came online in succeeding years. Some smaller resorts also emerged, like the Powder Bowl ski area in Alpine Meadows, but smaller areas couldn't compete with the new mega resorts and either closed or merged with a neighboring establishment. Sierra Ski Ranch, Heavenly and Mount Rose all

underwent large expansions to accommodate more skiers and to open up more challenging terrain. Over time, many resorts began adding snow-making equipment so they could open during low-snow winters.

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