

Snowmass celebrates its 40th today

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It was a turbulent, tumultuous year — 1967. The Vietnam War was escalating and along with it the volume and tenor of anti-war protests. The Summer of Love spurred the hippie movement into full bloom, while race riots spread across the country. Around the world, Israel defeated its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War and the Biafran War of independence began to tear apart the fledgling nation of Nigeria.

In Aspen, a season's pass to Aspen Highlands was \$75 and the Wienerstube restaurant was celebrating its second anniversary. "The Dirty Dozen" was showing at the Isis, while Wheeler Opera House patrons enjoyed "Shane" on the big screen. Letters to the editor about the Vietnam War peppered the weekly Aspen Times.

On Oct. 23, the Snowmass Villager debuted as a supplement to Aspen's only newspaper at the time. In anticipation of a brand new ski resort that was being built on meadows and sheep pastures in the Brush Creek Valley, the paper reported that two of the new resort's residential areas had sold out and it was expected to turn a profit in its first year — a bold statement from a high-ranking official with the company developing the area.

Indeed, Snowmass-at-Aspen garnered a lot of hype before it opened on Dec. 16, 1967, exactly 40 years ago today. An estimated 5,000 people had skied the pristine, powder-filled slopes of the Big Burn, accessing it via a snowcat operation as early as 1961. The partnership developing the residential and commercial areas — the Janss Investment Corp. and American Cement — had spent several years buying land and planning the resort, and they knew a thing or two about marketing and sales. Plus there was the unbridled enthusiasm that the mostly young crew assembled by developer Bill Janss, a former Olympic skier who also owned Sun Valley in Idaho.

"It was an exciting time and an extraordinary opportunity Bill Janss gave to a bunch of young guys," said John McBride, whom Janss hired to oversee the commercial development of West Village (now generally called the Snowmass Mall). "It's hard to imagine now; everybody's got lawyers and specialists. We weren't specialists, we had to learn what a deed was."

SCRAMBLING

McBride, who with his wife Laurie moved to Aspen in 1966, was charged with finding entrepreneurs willing "to move their businesses to basically a meadow." It wasn't too hard, he said — "those that were adventurous came out," and by opening day nearly 20 shops and restaurants were catering to the public in Snowmass-at-Aspen.

Compared to today's construction timeframes — about two years for Base Village's 236-room Viceroy hotel, for example — Snowmass-at-Aspen was thrown up in a matter of months. While ski trails were cut beginning in 1961 and the first double chair installed in 1965, a photo from April 1967 shows only a few dirt tracks on the gently sloping meadow on the side of what is now Fanny Hill.

Some 750 workers toiled during the summer of 1967, and the pace was so frantic that some of them went on strike, protesting the constant dust-filled air that made for unpleasant working conditions, recalled longtime local Dick Moebius.

"There was a lot of mess going on," said Moebius, a partner and the first general manager of the Silvertree Inn. Moebius, who had been working for IBM in California, was tapped by the Janss Corporation to run a lodge, and arrived in August 1967.

At the time, Brush Creek Road wasn't paved (it would be the following summer) and Snowmelt Road, with its 14-degree grade to be kept dry by heated pipes under the pavement, was an experimental engineering feat that wasn't ready by Thanksgiving.

Moebius said employees were still laying carpet and putting the finishing touches on rooms when the first guests arrived in mid-December. A bonfire of construction scraps had been lit the night before opening day, and "thankfully the snow covered it up," he laughed.

"Everyone was scrambling at the end," said McBride, adding that someone in his group had acquired a drug used to treat epileptics that kept everyone awake and lively — albeit quite glassy-eyed — in order to get through that final push.

Amid the frenzy, the Fritz Benedict-designed Snowmass-at-Aspen opened, on a Saturday, with five lodges and two condo projects, immediately above and below the mall. The Dec. 14, 1967 Aspen Times described it as an "ultra-modern \$10 million West Village at Snowmass-at-Aspen."

In terms of the mall, now critiqued as being hopelessly outdated and slated to be razed in the next few years, McBride had this to say about the design: "Fritz was reacting to Vail, which seemed to him like a phony Swiss-ville, an attempt to recreate Europe. He wanted to do something a little more modern. What didn't work was not the architecture but the failure of future owners to recreate what he was trying to do. It was the failure to hang on to a vision."

That vision included a number of small, self-sufficient villages — four, five or seven, depending on who is telling the story — clustered around the base of the mountain, which people could ski between, European style. When Janss sold his interest in Snowmass to concentrate on Sun Valley a few years later, the vision was not carried forward.

OPENING DAY

The small and intimate West Village bordered what was then a huge ski area, spread over 2,000 acres and 50 miles of trails served by five lifts.

The potential of the mountain had first captivated Janss when he landed near the top of 13,162-foot Mount Baldy by helicopter in 1957. The idea of a ski area was reportedly born that day when Janss saw the variety of terrain and imagined a European mountain village nestled below. Active planning began the following year, land was acquired from local ranchers, and in 1961 Janss contracted with the Aspen Skiing Corporation to run the ski area.

By the end of 1967, all was in place on the west side of the mountain, with chairlifts roughly in the same places as today's Skittles gondola, Burlingame, Sam's Knob, Big Burn and Campground lifts. The first three chairs needed to be so close together to carry supplies and trash on and off the mountain, said Jess Caparrella, Snowmass' first lift supervisor who still oversees all the lift equipment and operations at the ski area.

"At that time those were big chairlifts, with big gearboxes and a lot of horsepower, because we were really pushing the elevation," he said.

Caparrella was one of two people working in lift operations in the winter of 1967-68; now there are 20 on the maintenance side, he said.

According to the Snowmass Villager, the Ski Corp. had 50 employees at the new ski area — and seven functioning Snowmass phone numbers — including mountain manager Jim Snobble and assistant manager Hal Hartman. The employees included 18 ski instructors, led by legendary Norwegian Olympic gold medalist Stein Eriksen, who had directed the Highlands ski school. Eriksen's mother in Norway knit all the instructors' sweaters.

Eriksen had moved on to Sugarbush, Vermont for a few years, and had handpicked a group of

instructors, mostly from Norway, for that endeavor. He asked the same group to come with him to start the Snowmass ski school — and out of that original crew, seven are still teaching. Including one Austrian and one Swiss — they're affectionately called the "Norwegian Mafia."

Martin Nordhagen, 67, is one of the Norwegians. He had been at Sugarbush for three years when Eriksen asked him to come to Snowmass.

"I actually liked it there except for the climate sometimes, and I was thinking about should I stay or go, but everybody else was going so I did," he said. And when he got to Snowmass, "it was unbelievable. The most incredible was skiing from Sam's Knob down Max Park and then up on the Big Burn ... we were not used to the wide-open trails."

Ski instructor Magne Nostdahl, 73, another original ski instructor still working today, added "We were enthused about Snowmass because it was a new area and the skiing was very good."

Savvy marketers planned opening weekend to be a huge press affair, with television and print journalists from major national media outlets and large cities across the country being treated to a plethora of local activities, including skiing of course. They promised "something dramatic" for the opening program, according to the Dec. 14, 1967 Aspen Times.

Dramatic it was. Eriksen, with his wavy coifed Scandinavian blond hair and colorful handknit Norwegian sweater, skied down from Sam's Knob with his "merry band" of instructors flanking him on either side, in picture perfect, comma-style European turns.

"It was quite a big deal because there were all these cameras around while we were skiing down," recalls Franz Zedlacher, the Austrian member of the Norwegian Mafia. "One camera man told me to ski real close to him, but he didn't know how close we can actually ski without wiping him out."

When he got close to the mall, Eriksen skied off a jump and through a paper-covered hoop that said "Welcome to Snowmass," according to Zedlacher. A newspaper article prior to opening day had promised a ring of fire for Eriksen to jump through, and nobody's sure why that didn't happen, except perhaps that it was snowing too hard to make that work.

A lift-dedication ceremony was held at 9 a.m., presided over by Ski Corp. head D.R.C. Brown, and the first couple to book a room was given the honorary first chair. The Aspen Times spoke of snowcat and helicopter tours being given all weekend. An opening night party was held at the Timbermill (now the Cirque Bar & Grill) and the banquet included local Aspen luminaries, Janss Corporation bigwigs and the governor of Colorado, among others. Later, articles appeared in Time, Newsweek and major newspapers throughout the country, touting the vast terrain and the famous business and political personalities buying up Snowmass real estate (including U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, one of the primary architects of the Vietnam War).

That first winter, a lift ticket was \$6.50 and a season pass was \$100, recalled Moebius.

Word of mouth had been spreading for years via the cat trips on the Big Burn, and the anticipation and press coverage resulted in a sold-out opening season. Moebius, who was running the Silvertree and planning the next lodging endeavor, skied only seven days that season.

"I think there was a lot of attention on (Snowmass), especially among skiers," said Caparella. "The ski industry was really excited. For some of the people coming on our tours from other areas, it was the greatest thing they'd ever seen."

Still, said Moebius, "It was a gamble. One of the reasons it was named Snowmass-at-Aspen was to identify it as being close to Aspen. Aspen was not pleased that they were taking the name, but it had its best year ever the year Snowmass opened."

The excitement tapered off the following year, and more lodges were built, absorbing the demand. Snowmass eventually settled into periods of ups and downs, depending on snowfall, the economy and other factors, just like every other ski resort.

Zedlacher recalls going to ski on Aspen Mountain on his time off with other Snowmass instructors. Sporting different uniforms and with a different ski technique, they were noticed and teased by the more seasoned Aspen instructors.

“They said, ‘Snowmass, that’s not a ski area,’” he remembers. “They thought there was only Aspen Mountain. They didn’t know what it would become.”

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