



HEAD: Remembering opening day  
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A little over 34 years ago, Snowmass Ski Area opened for business, on Dec. 16, 1967. By the time opening day rolled around, excitement had been generated across the country, condos and home sites were rapidly being sold, and lodge operators and storekeepers scrambled to put on the finishing touches before the first guests arrived. National magazines had already previewed Snowmass in their editorial pages, and the grand opening weekend saw 150 travel members of the press buzzing around for the big story -- while local and national celebrities hobnobbed at the myriad on-snow and apres ski celebrations. The mountain opened with a bang when skiing legend and Snowmass' first ski school director Stein Eriksen, jumped through a ring of fire to wild applause from below.

That high energy December weekend was the culmination of several years of planning, building, earthmoving and other hard work as one of the state's first true ski-in, ski-out resorts was made. Vail had opened in 1962, but many Colorado towns like Aspen, Crested Butte and Steamboat Springs were established towns with ski hills. Skiing as a recreational activity had exploded after the 1960 Olympics at Squaw Valley. Before the season even started, nearly 1,000 people had booked rooms in town.

Bookings exceeded early expectations, and from Dec. 22 to Jan. 1 every room was full. Condominiums and homesites, complete or not, were flying off the shelves, and accommodations were built at a frantic pace for the first few years, even as new lifts were installed and more trails cut.

But despite Snowmass being a planned resort, designed to bring in tourist dollars, it also quickly became a community. Those who came to help build the resort and run it had business savvy but also a great sense of fun. Locals could be found skiing during their time and gathering in the evenings. It's these early shop owners, lodge operators and ski bums that made the community of Snowmass Village, raising families and putting down roots. A number of Snowmass pioneers and their descendants are still around today.

### **The genesis**

A ski resort in the Brush Creek Valley was a strong twinkle in Bill Janss' eye in 1961. At that time, he had purchased seven ranches in the Brush Creek Valley totaling 3,400 acres. The former Olympic skier, who had skied all over the world, came from the Janss family that had made its fortune in California real estate, construction and cattle. Landing a ski plane on Baldy Mountain, he and a team from the Janss Corporation had chosen the site to be a future resort, and in 1961 he contracted with the Aspen Skiing Corporation to operate a ski area around the resort his company would develop, putting a stamp on his

dream.

Experimental trails were cut and snow cat tours began running in 1961. An estimated 5,000 powder skiers got to experience the Big Burn before opening day, helping fill the company's coffers and giving valuable feedback to the developers. Before the opening three private firms would invest \$10 million, of which \$4.5 million came from American Cement Corporation, which first partnered with and later bought out Janss.

Meanwhile, the worker bees had the job of readying the mountain for its promised 1967 opening. Jim Snobble, who still lives in Snowmass Village, was working as the ski school supervisor on Aspen Mountain when he was given the task of assembling a team to do a feasibility study of the future ski area.

"It wasn't unpleasant work," Snobble said of the days when his crew, which included Hal Hartman, Don Rayburn and Tom Marshall, skied the mountain to study elements like wind, exposure and snow depth. "We had to determine what were the best runs to develop."

The grunt work came in the summers of 1965 to 1967, when Snobble's 10-man crew, armed with chain saws and axes, cleared runs and cut trails. The Big Burn was particularly challenging because of all the hard dead wood. "It played the devil with the chain saws," said Snobble. By winter 1967 they had cut an unconfirmed 50 miles of trails and Snowmass was ready with five lifts, almost entirely by hand.

### **The planning**

Snowmass was originally planned to be five to seven pedestrian villages, each entirely ski-in, ski-out, similar to the ski villages in much of Alpine Europe. Chuck Vidal, who was working for Janss, traveled extensively to see what other resorts were doing. Ahlberg, Austria and Zermatt, Switzerland were held up as early models, as was Vail at one point. Master planning began in 1964, and Vidal, who now lives on Missouri Heights, was brought on in 1965 to direct Janss' planning efforts. He contracted agreements for water, gas and electricity, and took the proposal to the Pitkin County commissioners. At that public meeting, he said, nobody showed up, demonstrating the lack of interest among Aspenites over the project.

Aspen was very provincial; as far as they were concerned Snowmass was somewhere by the Utah border," Vidal said. "The county commissioners basically said, 'Look, it's your project. And boy, your hair's growing a little long.' "

According to Vidal it was decided at one point that "we're going to be a Rocky Mountain resort and we're not going to look like anything else." It was a young group that worked for Janss, primarily men in their 20s and 30s. "We were a bunch of young Turks who didn't know what we were doing," said Vidal. "But we had a lot of common sense and energy and that's what we used to build it."

Revered local architect Fritz Benedict designed the new village, select sites with full consideration of views, relation to other buildings, streams, and trees. Janss met John McBride, a ski instructor/builder/camera man living in Vail, and lured him over to be the

commercial development manager working with Benedict. His job was to bring businesses to Snowmass.

“Most people thought Snowmass wouldn’t develop its own identity, that it would be an appendage of Aspen,” said McBride, who eventually brought in 25 to 30 businesses by opening day. “It was a big risk for them.”

The bulk of building in what was then called the West Village took place the year before opening. In 1966, Terry Griggs was hired by Janss as the first salesperson-to-be, at first, he said, “I did a lot of gopher stuff.” Similar to McBride, Griggs brought people out to Snowmass pointing up at future home sites and trying to convince people to invest. “We were selling a lot of blue sky,” he said, battling the prevailing perception in Aspen that the new village just wouldn’t work.

But by the fall of ‘66 most of the Wood Run subdivision was sold, for an average of \$500 per lot, Griggs said, as were several condos throughout the West Village. By November of 1967 Snowmass has all its utilities, five lodges, 120 condominium apartments, a dozen private residences, a conference center with a movie theater, an outdoor ice rink and paddle tennis courts, four heated outdoor swimming pools, 21 shops and boutiques, and six restaurants. Nevertheless, one local source said, the total valuation of Snowmass Village in 1967 was just \$75,000, an almost unfathomable number compared to its value today.

Just a few days before opening weekend, “it looked like a war zone,” said Vidal. “Everybody was doing what needed to be done. If there was trash to be picked up on the mall you pitched in. Luckily, a couple days before opening we got a big snowstorm that covered everything that was still laying around.”

McBride relayed how frantic the mood on the mall was around opening weekend. An Aspen Sports shop girl who had been working for about 20 hours straight, irritated by a tourist, turned around and slapped her, McBride recalled. A group from California called the Sandpipers opened the Opticon theater, and were unused to the altitude. “I had to rush to the hospital to get oxygen for them,” said McBride. “I rushed back, and found out I had brought back CO2.”

Whatever the bumps along the way, when Snowmass Ski Area opened on Dec.16, people were impressed. The Snowmass Villager, a supplemental newspaper produced by the Aspen Times beginning in Oct. 1967, ran a review of opening weekend in its Dec. 21 issue.

“The story here seems to me to be an entirely new approach to living,” editor Louis Newell recalls overhearing a member of the press saying.

Even at the beginning, the roots of a community were showing. The Snowmass Resort Association (SRA) incorporated as a homeowners association in 1967, taking care of municipality chores such as plowing and garbage, and became the de facto government of

about 600 residents.

Many had come to live the dream of working in a beautiful place, but not all were there to make money.

“The average age of the mall merchant was under 30,” said former planning commissioner, mayor and councilman Jim Hooker, who arrived in 1967 to partner with his brother in a liquor store business. “We were all starving but we were having so much fun. The mall was home, and my basset hound had free range of it -- he knew where to get the dog biscuits.”

“The area did so unexpectedly well,” said Snobble, who continued working for the ski company, cutting trails among other things. “We were just trying to stay ahead of it.”