

Post-War Economy & Ski Industry

This article series focuses on history of the 10th Mountain Division, the famous “soldiers on skis” who fought in the Italian mountains during World War II. Throughout the winter, the series will be exploring the forces behind the creation of the 10th Mountain Division, why and how it was founded, their achievements during the war, and significant impacts the veterans had on the ski and wilderness industry after the war.

Upon entering World War II in early 1945, the 10th Mountain Division was able to tip the balance in the Allies favor by the spring. Suffering tremendous casualties, the 10th successfully captured Italy’s northernmost Apennine Mountains from the German stronghold. Rushing towards the Po Valley, the Allied soldiers had opened a gap, and the German Army quickly surrendered.

Without the heroic and crucial accomplishments of the 10th Mountain Division, the Allies would not have been able to break the German Gothic line in northern Italy and put an expedient end to World War II. Those who had survived in the 10th Mountain Division finally went home, for good, and started a life after the war.

Before the 10th Mountain Division soldiers had returned from Europe, they had already impacted the reviving ski industry. The Army had released a surplus of equipment for sale: about 100,000 pairs of skis, bindings, poles and boots. Practically new and at a sharp discounted price, many people who otherwise would never have been able to afford to ski were able to try the sport. Even the original developers of Sugarloaf Mountain in Maine explored the area in the mid-1940s using Army surplus ski equipment.

However, the Army surplus equipment was not the highest quality, and in 1947 Howard Head set out to design “a ski that was easier to use, less breakable and delivered more for the money than a wooden ski.” His first prototype, the aluminum sandwich ski with a lightweight core, broke easily, so he tried making skis with a plywood core and pressure bonded aluminum.

These skis, known as the Head Standard, became the first successful skis that consisted of multiple components and were known as “prestige skis” in Europe due to the high quality – and high price. Wealthy recreational skiers could afford these skis, priced at \$85, and would enjoy that they turned easier, lasted longer and worked better in almost all types of snow.

In a post-war economy, Americans were finally ready to relax for the first time since the early 1940s, and spent 34% of their time in leisure activities. Increased time for leisure, more money and better transportation options helped push middle-class Americans toward the slopes.

The number of cars on the road increased, providing the middle class with easy transportation and an opportunity to consume. Improved roads and highways brought Americans easily to the slopes. As seen in the ski industry of the 1930s, ski areas needed reliable transportation in order to succeed.

Faster and superior transportation, better snow technology, new equipment that reduced the learning curve combined with new ski fashions and ski schools helped make recreational skiing accessible in America after the war – all with the help, directly and indirectly, of the 10th Mountain Division veterans.

Sources:

- David Leach's 2005 senior thesis for Middlebury College, "The Impact of the Tenth Mountain Division on the Development of a Modern Ski Industry in Colorado and Vermont: 1930-1965."
- "Fire on the Mountain," First Run Features/Gage & Gage Productions, 1995.
- "The Last Ridge," Abbie Kealy, 2007.
- Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives

Emergence of Ski Fashion

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As skiing became easier, safer and popularized with improvements to technology, equipment and transportation after World War II, the ski fashion industry also grew. Suddenly skiing was fashionable, and the industry capitalized on the increasing number of female skiers. During the 1930s, men dictated the sport, yet now women were learning to ski, mostly for social prestige.

The ski fashion industry really took off in 1952 when a German by the name of Willy Bogner designed a nylon stretch pant that came in various colors and styles. The new ski pant attracted both sexes for its slim, sexy, fast look, and its popularity soared.

Fashion was now embedded into skiing, and the sport had captured the adoration of Americans everywhere.

As fashion developments in skiing rose, so did the appearance of "snow bunnies" around ski resorts. In 1959, *The New York Times* published an article describing a snow bunny as a woman, typically a beginner, who frequented ski resorts in order to chase men and spend time in hot tubs. Many women only took lessons and learned the sport in order to keep up with men, who were often too concerned with skiing as much as possible and didn't want the extra hassle.

However, skiing was much easier to learn and improve upon in the post-war economy. Both men and women excelled at the sport, including Andrea Mead Lawrence, who won two gold medals at the 1952 Winter Olympics. The daughter of the owners of Pico Peak, part of the Green Mountains in Vermont, Lawrence moved to Aspen in the 1960s.

As Bob Parker, a 10th Mountain Division veteran, recalls, "It was a time when everything was sort of falling into place for the growth of the ski world. There was the Head ski, which was the first ski that was easy to use by the average person; we had the beautiful Bogner stretch pants; we had buckle boots; we had release bindings; the airlines were beginning to promote winter travel..."

Ski, boot and binding technology improved and so did the lifts and ski runs. These changes turned the aspects of skiing from an inconvenience into an easy and enjoyable experience. Even the fashion industry adapted to the popularization of a new sport, with styles that attracted everyone.

This reestablished popularization of downhill skiing helped solidify a post-war recreational activity that the 10th Mountain Division veterans could capitalize and improve upon with their experience and knowledge of the sport. Dick Wilson, a 10th veteran, credits the boom of the ski industry to the many veterans who came back and poured life into the sport: “If it weren’t for the 10th Mountain Division veterans, the ski industry never would’ve take off like it did after World War II.”

Fashion, equipment and technology were improved, but members of the 10th were driving forces behind the entire industry, continuing their lifelong passion – spending time outdoors. Their experience and love for the mountains helped shape the modern ski industry in countless ways.

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- David Leach’s 2005 senior thesis for Middlebury College, “The Impact of the Tenth Mountain Division on the Development of a Modern Ski Industry in Colorado and Vermont: 1930-1965.”
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