

## Aspen

This article series focuses on history of the 10<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Aspen thrived during the silver boom but quickly declined in population by the 1930s. Billy Fiske, a bobsledder in the 1932 Winter Olympics, and Thomas Flynn attempted to build a ski area but failed due to the remote location and lack of capital to ensure transportation, accommodations or marketing.

Shortly thereafter, during his time at Camp Hale, Friedl Pfeifer was part of a reconnaissance mission that marched to Aspen. He was reminded of his hometown of St. Anton, Austria, where he learned to ski in Hannes Schneider’s famous ski school. Pfeifer promised the local residents that he would be back after the war.

Keeping his word, Pfeifer moved to Aspen in 1945 after suffering lung injuries in the war, and Percy Rideout and John Litchfield, both 10<sup>th</sup> veterans as well, joined him to co-direct the growing ski school. Ajax Mountain opened unofficially in Dec. of 1945 (official opening was in Jan. of 1947) and quickly picked up skiing customers.

Many members of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division “were addicted to skiing and came [to Aspen] and made their life here,” as Pfeifer said. These men fell in love with Colorado while at Camp Hale, including Fritz Benedict, who helped design the Snowmass ski area and additions to Aspen, served as the first Planning & Zoning chairman and helped to found the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division Hut & Trail System, as well as Carl Stingel, Pete Seibert and Dick Wright.

Curtis Chase also joined the ranks of Aspen-bound 10<sup>th</sup> veterans. After learning to ski in New Hampshire, he became a Survival Training Instructor for the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, then organized, trained and directed the Aspen Ski Patrol in 1946. As an integral part of the Aspen & Snowmass Ski Schools, Chase also revolutionized the “basic turn” approach to ski instruction, now known as the American Ski Technique.

Additionally, Ted Ryan, another 10<sup>th</sup> veteran, constructed a boat tow for the ski area, helped cut Aspen’s famous Roche Run and built Aspen’s first ski lodge prior to World War II. Wilfred “Slim” Davis, who devoted 40 years to the U.S. Forest Service as a ski-sport builder after serving in the 10<sup>th</sup>, was essential in the ski area’s establishment. And 10<sup>th</sup> veterans Steve Knowlton, Dev Jennings and Bud Phillips arrived to train at Aspen.

In the late 1940s, Walter Paepcke, a wealthy entrepreneur, decided to develop Aspen into a year-round resort. Pfeifer established the Aspen Skiing Corporation but relinquished control to Paepcke for stock shares and control of the ski school. With proper investments and finances, Aspen began building the longest chairlift in the world at the time and drawing more attention.

Attractions such as the lifts, combined with promotions, ensured that wealthy clientele who could afford it would travel the extra distance to Aspen. In 1950, Aspen became an international icon by hosting the World Ski Championships, appealing to top skiers and customers worldwide.

Today, Aspen/Snowmass is comprised of 4 different ski areas: Aspen Highlands, Aspen Mountain, Buttermilk, and Snowmass.

Pfiefer's vision of a ski village and love for skiing, a result of time with the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, combined with the sense of community from other veterans and Paepcke's wealth and connections put Aspen on the map, paving the way for growth of the modern ski industry in Colorado.

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.
- Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives