



America Discovers Downhill Skiing

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, we 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.

In order to fully understand the significance of the 10th Mountain Division, it is necessary to examine the transformation and growth in popularity of downhill skiing before World War II. Wealthy middle and upper class families in the Northeast region of the United States represented the majority of downhill skiers during the 1920s and early ‘30s because they could afford trips to the European Alps, receive expert instruction, and send their children to colleges with ski teams. Dick Durrance, a top American skier during the 1930s, once said in an interview, “Collegiate skiing [in the 1930s] *was* skiing in this country,” emphasizing the importance of college ski teams to promote the early growth of the sport. During the 1930s, many Eastern private boarding schools began skiing programs of their own in order to provide collegiate teams with seasoned skiers.

However, across the Atlantic, ski instructors at the St. Anton ski school in Austria had affected the increase in skiing throughout Europe before bringing more popularity to the sport in America. Skiing became a social phenomenon in Europe by 1925, partly in thanks to St. Anton. Friedl Pfeifer, a young instructor at St. Anton, learned the Arlberg skiing technique under ski legend Hannes Schnieder. When the Nazi Party began to spread across Europe, many instructors, including Friedl, left Europe to teach in America. German Otto Schneibs, coach of the Dartmouth ski team from 1930-36, was succeeded by Walter Prager, one of the world’s best ski racers. Together, Schneibs, Prager, Schneider, and Pfeifer represented a growing trend of ski schools to recruit instructors from overseas, who brought new techniques and provided a safer learning environment. When America eventually joined World War II, many of these European skiers, as well as famous American athletes, entered the 10th Mountain Division.

Although collegiate students are known as some of the finest downhill skiers on the East Coast during the 1930s, many more enjoyed the sport. Thrill seekers cut difficult ski runs, like the Thunderbolt on Mount Greylock in the Berkshires, and while recreational skiing did exist among the lower and working class populations, only those who were completely dedicated pursued the sport. Many of these ski addicts later joined the 10th Mountain Division, organized and bound by a passion for skiing. This unique nature of the ski troops pushed them to continue skiing and jump-start the ski industry after the war.

At the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum, you can learn about the budding ski industry in America during this time period, as well as all of the history on the 10th Mountain Division. Free admission every day – come visit us in Vail Village!



Rope Tows, Chairlifts & Ski Transportation

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As a result of the growing popularity of collegiate skiing and a larger European influence during the 1920s and ‘30s, skiing grew from a local to a regional sport. The Boston and Maine Railroad ran the first “snow train” from Boston to mountains in New Hampshire in 1931. The success of snow trains created a boom in the number of skiers throughout the 1930s, since ski mountains were now accessible. However, many of the passengers to mountains for the weekend were still young, affluent people with an appetite for outdoor recreation, creating a social prestige associated with snow trains and tanned faces. This popularized skiing more widely among upper and middle class citizens.

In January of 1934 *The Rutland Herald* claimed that Woodstock, VT had installed the first motor ski-tow in America, which “ushered in the modern era in American downhill skiing,” according to *Vermont Life* and dramatically changed the ski industry across the country as rope tows, chairlifts, and aerial tramways attracted more skiers. An increase in rope tows across Vermont sharply increased the learning curve for beginners and skiers could complete more runs in a day than they could before the ski tows. As more people took up the sport, a weekend environment developed throughout ski areas in Vermont. Many ski clubs and individuals who built rope tows did it for the love of the sport, not for profitability. Snow trains began carrying more skiing enthusiasts for weekend trips, centralizing the local Vermont ski industry. Small towns adapted in order to capitalize on the increasing number of winter visitors. Resorts were built closer to train stops and the physical composition of the mountain was altered as the idea of “ski areas” capable of making a profit developed. As the influx of new skiers required more qualified instruction, European ski instructors filled the need, greatly influencing the culture of the sport.

In 1937, Vermont decided to make Stowe into a “destination resort” with the best terrain, uphill transportation, and the most comfortable facilities, drawing in the greatest number of skiers. The area turned into a mecca for Eastern skiing. Sun Valley became America’s “destination resort” in 1936 when the Union Pacific railway developed a ski resort only

accessible by their transportation, and the area replaced the Alps as the destination for America's upper class skiers. The same year, Sun Valley revealed the world's first chairlift and became a model for a successful ski resort.

A similar trend towards centralization of ski areas was occurring in the Colorado Rockies. Up until the 1930s, Colorado ski hills were almost exclusively for local populations. As Ralph Lafferty, a 10th Mountain veteran said, "In the wintertime probably there would be maybe 15 to 20 people up in our snowcountry and that was it... To ski we would climb a slope, pack it out, and have short runs downhill – if you want to call it 'downhill'."

Centralization of ski areas in Colorado did not occur until ski areas attracted Denver residents and provided them with easy and reliable transportation to the mountains. In 1936, this is exactly what the snow train in Denver did, and it turned skiing into a regional activity.

While Colorado's mountains held better snow and steeper terrain than the Northeast, it lacked easy accessibility. In 1940 the state set out to create a recreational ski area near Denver: Winter Park. Until WWII began, Winter Park existed as Colorado's most successful ski area without a chairlift or expert terrain.

Throughout the 1930s, there was incredible growth in the American ski industry. Wealthy Northeastern skiers, transportation advances and European ski instructors all helped to produce a modern, centralized ski industry in both Colorado and Vermont. The sport of skiing was promoted and available to young, enthusiastic outdoorsmen, many of whom would soon join the ranks of the 10th Mountain Division, and revive the ski industry after they returned from the war.

To learn more about the history of skiing in the 1920s and '30s, as well as the beginnings of the 10th Mountain Division, come visit the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum in Vail Village!