

# SKIING-THE WAY WE WERE

BY DUNCAN CRAIGHEAD



## WE'RE OFF!

"Skiing held Steamboat together," explained authoress, Jean Wren, "and skiing was its heart. It wasn't commercial, it wasn't for dollars, it was for the love of the sport. Now it's very different."

Yes, skiing probably did hold Steamboat together. In a small town that was almost unheard of, and nearly impossible to get to in the winter, skiing was about the only thing to do. Today, with all the fancy clothes, and Mt. Werner showing itself in the background, some must wonder what skiing was like when they didn't have all these things. That's what I set out to find out about.

Of course, I first went to Jean Wren, authoress of "Steamboat Springs and the Treacherous Speedy Ski", and one of the most knowledgeable people on skiing that you might hope to find. This is what I found.

"Well, skiing has changed radically to me. You still slide down the hill on boards, but the whole philosophy behind it has changed. Now I know other people might not agree with me, but I know Gordy, my husband, feels the same way I do. Gordy was born here in 1919, and his family were pioneers. His father's name was Lawrence, and his mother's was Emma. She died when he was about four or five, and his stepmother's name was Marie. Gordy's grandparents moved here as pioneers in the 1890's and they had a ranch out on Twenty Mile Road.

"His uncle, George Wren, carried the mail on skis in the old days. And what he did was, they skied over Gore Pass from Middle Park and distributed it along the way. They had halfway cabins, and one man would ski up to the cabin from Middle Park, and then another from here would ski to meet him. They stayed overnight, then traded mail, then each one would go back the way they came.

"In those days of course, skiing wasn't for fun. It was a means of getting around, when you couldn't get around any other way. But by the time my husband came along, Carl Howelsen had been here, and skiing had progressed to the point to where you skied for fun. He and all the other boys in town used to build jumps all over town, and that was the big thing.

"There wasn't any ski program or anything like that, they would just go out in the back yard and climb up the hill. They would have wild names (the jumps) like 'The Mankiller,' and 'Ole '47'. He would ski with Bob Wither, Tymmer Hyde, and anybody that was able-bodied.

"In those days, skiing wasn't fashionable or anything, you'd just wear baggy pants, and you had funny old bindings that let your feet wiggle around, and you fell a lot. Everybody enjoyed it, especially the real outdoors people. And they weren't really 'well to do' or anything, all the kids in the small towns enjoyed it, and so did their parents.

"But when skiing became fashionable, and big areas being built, fancy clothes being designed, the whole thing changed. It became a big thing to do, and whether you really liked to get out of doors or not, you did because that was the thing to do. It was the same way with competition. I can remember in the 1948 Olympics, when Gordy was competing. I can remember seeing the men



**JEAN WREN**

coming down the hill, jumping off bumps, yodeling and laughing, and just having a great time. They weren't grim like they are now. They were in it for fun, they loved it. and of course they wanted to win, but it wasn't like it is now where everything is super professional and stream-lined. It's just really gotten grim. These guys couldn't care less. They loved skiing, and they were out there having a fabulous time, and they just happened to be very good, too."

## THE SKIS

"The first skis were about twelve feet long, and were very often homemade. They turned up at the tip a lot, and some pairs were made from oak boards brought from back East. What they would do is, they would steam the tips, and get them very hot. Then they put a weight on them and pulled them down so that they bent properly..

"The early, early skis; had one pole that you sat on if you got going too fast. There was no way that you could turn them. Well, you could turn them in a way, but you couldn't turn on your own volition, just by this rudder that was like a long pole. You would either sit on it to slow down, you would drag it. I can't remember any of this, I'm talking like before the turn of the century.

"I think the better skis, the shorter skis with two poles, originated in Switzerland. An Englishman invented them, and that made it possible to ski for fun.

"In Aspen in the old days, the miners would climb up the mountain on skis in the morning, and ski down the mountain at night with their miner's lanterns on their heads. I'd like to have seen that, I bet it was beautiful.

## "THE FLYING NORSEMAN"

Carl Howelsen came to Chicago first, and when he was there, he helped to found the Norgy Ske Club, which is still one of the biggest ski

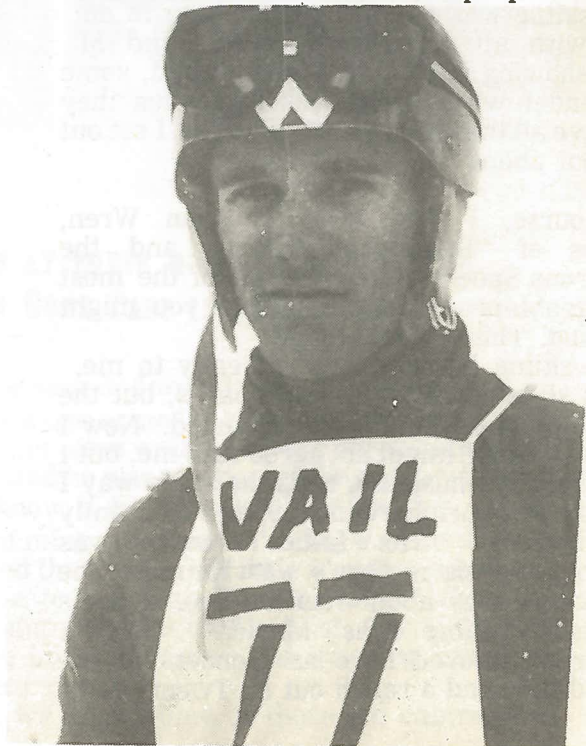
clubs in the country. Then he worked for a circus for a number of years, jumping as "Carl Howelsen, the flying Norseman."

"He then came to Hot Sulphur Springs, and finally he hit Steamboat. He built his own jump, and everybody thought that he was the craziest man they ever saw, and they all wanted to learn. Carl Howelsen was looking for a place to build a jump, so in the places where the jump is now, he built the first jump. He had a jump in Strawberry Park for himself, but he built the first jump for the town at Woodchuck Hill and taught everyone how to jump. I think the farthest anyone jumped at that time was in the Winter Carnival, where the winner had jumped something like fifty-two feet. He taught them how to race cross-country too. They had long cross-country races, Carl was a fine cross-country skier, as well as a jumper.

"Nordic came to Steamboat before Alpine did. Now it's gotten to be such a high fashion thing that it's really gone Mickey Mouse, I think. Although, the past few years have been getting better because they're getting around to the idea where you do what's comfortable for you, as long as you're safe, reasonably graceful, and the rest doesn't matter.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN SKI REVOLUTION

"In the early 1900's, the railroad serviced Steamboat, and passenger trains were the big thing. Then the Moffat Tunnel came through in 1927. So, they decided that the big thing to do was to push skiing as a winter sport and to take the passenger train to Steamboat. This is when the first instructors came in to show people how to



**LORIS WERNER**

really turn.

"In 1937, the railroad sent a man named Graeme McGowen to show the Steamboaters the latest sports: downhill, slalom racing, and the new Kristiana turn. That was really a deal.

"Graeme was the first person to see that Storm Mountain (Mt. Werner) had good potential for a ski mountain, and at the time, he suggested that it would be neat for downhill racing. He said you could climb to the top one day, stay overnight in a cabin, and at a certain time the next day, everyone would ski down. Well, there were no trails or anything, so it was kind of rough.

"The big thing came in 1935, four years later, when a man named Bob Balch came up from Denver. The ski club hired him. They turned their car lights on in a pasture up by the Alpine College, and he would teach them how to ski by automobile lights at night. I think that half the town turned out for that.

"So, that's when everything really started. Now, Mt. Werner started with a man named James Temple, and that was relatively recent. In 1955, he came to Steamboat, and he thought, 'By golly, that mountain is beautiful, and it should be developed! So, he bought the Torian Plum house, and the ranch that went with it. He really went in debt. He bought all the land up, and really did a good job, but he lost because he was not willing to sell stock. He wanted to keep total control. The mountain then went to a group from Denver of which John Fetcher was



## THE "IN THING"

one. They had it for a number of years. John Fetcher used to mortgage his cows every fall to carry them through.

"Temple took the group as partners to begin with. There was also Marvin Crawford and Gerry Groswell in the group. That was in 1958. Then in 1964, they renamed it Mt. Werner.

Bud Werner, who was killed in an avalanche, used to be the mountain director, and Marvin Crawford used to manage the mountain.

"Then in 1967, Marvin Crawford wanted to go into business. So, Gordy Wren, who had been ski coach here for five years and turned out many Olympic skiers came back to work for the mountain.

"Gordy was manager here for several years, then L.T.V. took over in 1969. That's when things began to change radically, because they had more money. Before, it had been a touch and go proposition.

"Howelsen Hill, right downtown was a nice operating ski hill, and you must realize that almost every olympic skier and jumper that we've had has trained on Howelsen Hill. Now, Moose Barrows, of course, didn't, and some of the newer ones, but all the others have. I'd say eight out of ten have trained on the hill.

"It wasn't a commercial venture, though. It was a sport. Everbody went out and had fun. It didn't become a commercial venture until Mt. Werner opened and Jim Temple started clearing trails. At the same time, this kind of thing was happening all over the country, and skiing was becoming very commercial. The one thing that caused the exposure to skiing was the better equipment and the better teaching techniques. So, it was easier for the average person to ski.

"I never think that cross-country will become the big thing, because it's a lot of work, and that sorts people out. The people who do touring, and really love touring have to be the kind of people that love the outdoors. It's not the spectator sport that Alpine is."

Skiing really has become the major industry, and this winter has been hard on our community. The lack of snow caused the economy of the town to go down, stores closed up, the mountain closed for a while then opened, and when the snow storm came, and we reopened the mountain, it was great. But again the beautiful spring weather came and closed us up again.

There was one thing this winter that really made Steamboat a special place. That was when we held the first Winter Special Olympics for retarded and disabled people. It really brought the town together, without it this winter would have made us all really bitter and broke.

"I think this is one of the best winters that Steamboat's ever had," stated Jean Wren, "First of all, people got out and shoveled snow on the mountain, and worked together so it could open. Adversity has its uses. It's made this town closer, and that's good. We've had all sorts of good things happen this year, like the Special Olympics.

So, you can look at this winter from two views. Even though we have had a hard time, we are still striving to be Steamboat Springs, Ski Town USA.