



HEAD: They were there on opening day

By Catherine Lutz, Snowmass Sun Staff Writer

Snowmass the resort opened for business on December 16, 1967, with a grandiose star-studded weekend of celebration, dedications and excitement. The grand opening weekend saw some 150 members of the press buzzing around for the big story; many publications had already generated excitement for Snowmass in their editorial pages. While local and national celebrities hobnobbed at the myriad on-snow and apres-ski celebrations.

Before the season even started, nearly 1,000 people had booked rooms in town, and condos and home sites were being sold like hotcakes. Bookings exceeded early expectations, and from Dec. 22 to Jan. 1 every room in town was full.

But that high energy December weekend was the culmination of years of planning, building, hopes and dreams as one of the state's first true ski-in, ski-out resorts was shaped.

Here are the recollections of two of the founders of Snowmass, one who physically shaped the ski mountain and another who used his already well-known talents to show people how to enjoy it.

Stein Eriksen

Stein Eriksen, the first director of Snowmass' Ski School, probably plays the most remembered role in inaugurating the new resort. It had to be one of the more flamboyant opening ceremonies, Eriksen jumping through a burning ring of fire on skis while a Bavarian band played appropriate music, with the throngs gathered at the base cheering wildly.

"I don't think it was my idea," said Eriksen, who is now the skiing director for Deer Valley, Utah. That one moment, culminating in the dedication of the lifts at 9 a.m., must have dominated the weekend for Eriksen, who claims he doesn't remember much about opening day. What he does remember, though, is that "everybody was groomed and ready to go" in colorful Norwegian sweaters and "beautiful Bogner suits."

Eriksen was a natural choice to head up the fledgling resort's ski school. A former Aspen Highlands employee, Eriksen had often skied Snowmass' fabled terrain when it was being run as a snowcat operation. Known to the locals and possessing that European flair that would match the European-inspired resort imagined by founder Bill Janss, Eriksen was the ideal poster boy for Snowmass. And he considered the position "a prestigious offer of a job."

"Snowmass had been talked about for a long time," he said. "It was for me the combination of a great mountain and connected with the name Aspen" that was such a

draw. "Prior to the opening it was already recognized that it would be one of the major ski areas in the country. We were already on the map."

Indeed the early PR efforts of the planned resort, though minimal, were very effective. By 1961, land had been acquired from local ranchers by California real estate, construction and cattle mogul Bill Janss, a former Olympic skier who had visited the world's ski resorts. Landing a ski plane on Baldy Mountain, he and a team from the Janss Corporation had chosen the site as an ideal location for a future resort, and in 1961 Janss contracted with the Aspen Skiing Corporation to operate it.

An estimated 5,000 skiers were privileged to experience Big Burn powder well before opening day via Janss' snow cat tours, which did the dual duty of helping fill the company's coffers and giving valuable feedback to the developers.

"The best thing in the world was the snowcat skiing, the word of mouth PR," remembered Eriksen. "You can spend all the money on all the marketing and advertising in the world, but if you don't have a product..."

By the time opening day rolled around, Snowmass-At-Aspen, as it was known then, had already pumped \$10 million into the local economy. Eriksen, who had signed a four-year contract with the ski company, recognized the value of the business of skiing, tempered by a heady enthusiasm for the sport. That pragmatic attitude took him to Deer Valley when his Snowmass contract expired, where he helped good friend Edgar Stern build one of the nation's top ski resorts. Looking back at Snowmass' baby years, that same mixture of business sense and emotion applies.

"The mountain was a natural. It had all this pleasant scenery, nice long intermediate and expert runs, and the expansion possibilities ... It was a winner from the beginning," enthused Eriksen.

Eriksen, now a frequent visitor to Aspen/Snowmass, is also able to look back at the early days without rose-tinted glasses. Asked how he thinks the mountain and the resort have changed, he stated matter-of-factly, "It has just grown. Everything changes; it's natural that expansion happens. You need the people. It's a natural progression, and you cannot afford to remain with the old days."

Driving some of those changes, he also explained, is the ski industry itself, the business of skiing, and what people are asking for. "It's too expensive to run a ski area these days, you have to grow. You pay over two and a half million dollars for a chairlift, you have grooming and snowmaking that's very expensive. Sure, if you want a rope tow and a T-bar, you can have it all to yourself."

Eriksen said he has not followed Intrawest and Skico's base village proposal at all: when he visits he's occupied by skiing with Snowmass' veteran ski instructors, "talking about the old days and partying a little bit." But he has some pat thoughts on Snowmass' early development.

"I never thought (the original West Village) was put in the right place; I would have done it differently," said Eriksen. Prime beginner terrain was sacrificed for the lodging and commercial space along Fanny Hill; it would have been better to push the development more to each side, around the lower, gentler slopes of the ski area, because, as a ski developer friend of his used to say, "The money is in the bunny."

"But that's water on the bridge," he said, his tone abruptly changing. "Afterthought is not a smart thing."

And anyway, what it all comes down to is the skiing and the community.

"Snowmass is wonderful," concluded Eriksen. "I love skiing there, and when I come back I ski Snowmass all the time."

Jim Snobble

Now it can be told.

Snowmass' very first mountain manager, Jim "Sneaky" Snobble, said a promotional photograph taken on opening day 35 years ago wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"I do recall (promoters) were going to get a picture of the first people to load on the lift. But rather than taking the first person who went through, the PR people wanted a picture of what they thought Snowmass was about," Snobble recalled with a chuckle.

The result: A distinguished-looking middle-aged couple was chosen for relative stardom over some rather ordinary looking skiers.

Whether that picture, flashed across the country, helped encourage other well-to-do visitors to patronize Snowmass-at-Aspen may never be known. But it probably didn't hurt business.

Early founders like Snobble really had no expectations for the brand new ski area that even Aspenites felt was located way out in the boondocks. Rather, on opening day they were breathing big sighs of relief that Snowmass' five chairlifts operated smoothly and that guests were pleasantly surprised by the variety of terrain.

"We were all proud that we had gotten it done, given the time constraints and lack of heavy equipment to build the trails," Snobble said. "A lot of people were surprised and amazed we did it (though) it was a hell of an effort to complete on time."

Even as keynote speakers were addressing the crowd during an opening party, painters continued to apply finishing touches to the Timbermill (now the Cirque).

"I remember (early Snowmass developer) Bill Janss was speaking and there was a guy painting right next to our table," said Snobble. Feeling a bit mischievous, he gave the painter \$5 for his coveralls and paint can, which were donned by Vail founder Pete Seibert.

The disguised Seibert then needled Janss with, “Bill, where were you when we needed you?”

By most accounts, opening day 1967 offered cause for celebration. “Since everyone was so pessimistic about Snowmass” and Janss’ possibilities, we were delighted to get the crowd we did. Who was ever going to leave Aspen to come to this wilderness?” Snobble said.

As it turned out, plenty of skiers. “In the first year we did far more business than Aspen Mountain and Buttermilk combined,” Snobble remembered. “We were off to a good start and I think we were all grateful we got it opened. There was a great sense of satisfaction, pleasure and pride that the opening was such a success.”

It snowed lightly, off and on, the 16th of December, as skiers schussed down the expansive terrain served by the Fanny Hill, Burlingame, Sam’s Knob, Big Burn and Campground lifts (the same Burlingame and Campground lifts remain in operation to this day). Snobble said, “In order to overcome the reputation that it was a big beginner or intermediate area, we had Campground lift. We offered the Campground because we felt it offered some more expert skiing, which I think it did at the time. Considering the grooming (or lack thereof) it was more expert in those days,” he said.

Former ski school director and hotelier Snobble, along with Hal Hartman Sr. knew the mountain like the back of their hand, laying out ski area boundaries and constantly drawing the line as to where development could encroach.

“We’d flag out our lower limit for skiing,” Snobble recalled, adding that on weekends, developer Janss would get Ski Corp. President D.R.C. Brown “to encroach onto our skiing.” The mountain men would reestablish a boundary line, only to have the developers fuss with it the following week.

Due to Snowmass’ early success, more trails were cut in short order, but not in what one would believe is a logical progression. “We quickly moved over to Elk Camp to expand, then ultimately we went to the middle part of the mountain,” he said.

Double black diamond runs were developed under the watch of Snobble, who retired from the Ski Corp. in 1984. But he has remained an avid skier throughout his golden years. While Snobble agrees that Snowmass needs some upgrades to its base and on-mountain restaurants, he isn’t ready to give a blank check to developers. Snobble also wonders aloud if today’s generation of skiers isn’t just a mite pampered.

“They want more grooming today,” he noted, “but I don’t think they’re as wildly enthusiastic as skiers years ago. (People) are more into shopping and dining, going to Gordon’s for lunch and doing one run down. Generally speaking, I don’t think there’s that same esprit, ‘skiing for skiing’s sake’,” as back on opening day, 1967.