

## Museums

Western SkiSport Museum and Hall of Fame, Boreal Ridge, CA. (Address: P.O. Box 38, Soda Springs, CA 95728.) Director: Bill Clark, tel. 916-426-3313.

Colorado Ski Heritage Center and Hall of Fame, Vail, CO. (Address: P.O. Box 1976, Vail, CO 81658.) Executive Director: Christine Steeg-Scrip, tel. 303-476-1876.

U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame and Museum, Ishpeming, MI. (Address: P.O. Box 191, Ishpeming, MI 49849-0191.) Curator: Ray Leverton, tel. 906-485-6323.

New England Ski Museum, Franconia Notch State Park, NH. (Address: P.O. Box 267, Franconia, NH 03580.) Executive Director: Linda Gray, tel. 603-823-7177.

The four major repositories of the heritage of skiing are geographically distributed across the United States in regions that had unique skiing origins and developments. All have a regional character to them. The Western SkiSport Museum houses the finest collection of skis and artifacts displaying California's gold rush mail delivery and racing. Colorado's development is tied to ski resorts with the emphasis on downhill and slalom. Michigan stresses its Norse heritage, organization, and jumping aspects, while New England is associated with the 1930s Alpine ambience.

The nucleus of the Western SkiSport Museum collection is gold rush artifacts gathered in untiring but haphazard style by journalist Bill Berry, the doyen of modern ski historians. For California, the "land of sunshine and roses," skiing was not of great importance in the 1920s and the museum collection is, naturally, meager for this period. Alpine influence reached California in the 1930s and there was widespread enthusiasm for stem turns and fast schusses. This major shift, often supported by economic organizations like the California Chamber of Commerce, is difficult to display. The Museum has mini-exhibits on the growth of the Badger Pass area in Yosemite, for example, or the development of Sugar Bowl, in Soda Springs. Curiously, there is little information and artifacts from the 1960 Squaw Valley Olympics but efforts are under way to collect material. In the main, the exhibits are static and dependent on gold rush artifacts—a magnificent collection from around 1900.

The Colorado Museum is at Vail, a resort which vies for clientele with



*U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame, Inc.*

Aspen, Breckenridge, Copper, Steamboat, and Telluride. This competition has tended to make the Colorado Museum become more a museum of Vail than of the state. Steamboat Springs has a much longer history, a Norwegian immigrant base, a heritage of jumping. Quite naturally, folk in Steamboat are reluctant to send their memorabilia across the ranges to Vail. The 10th Mountain Division which trained nearby during World War II now has its repository in Denver.

The National Ski Hall of Fame, in its architecturally stunning new building in Ishpeming, is the oldest of the museums, in operation since 1951. It was here in the Midwest that organized skiing started from its Norse *Idraet* base, and it was in Ishpeming that the National Ski Association of America was founded in 1905. The collection is still very regional. Only in the last few years has there been a concerted effort to make the museum truly 'national.' The effort is meeting with slow success.

The New England Ski Museum is the youngest and most vibrant of the four. Its newsletter is widely acclaimed. The museum has a good selection of pre-1920 skis and unsurpassed collections from the 1930s Alpine era, but holds extremely little from the 1960-1990 period.

So much for description. Now for the problems.

First: Money. Nothing new, you will say. It is very difficult to obtain revenues from government on any level. Where states supply funds—Michigan provided about \$300,000 for Ishpeming's new building, the New England Ski Museum pays \$1-a-year rental fee—support is provided to attract tourists.

Second: Preservation and Storage. Amateurs started all the museums.

Interested in saving the old 'stuff' of their memories, they soon found that what they had amassed outgrew the storage, administrative and curatorial capacities of all four museums. Amateur enthusiasm and heroic work of concerned volunteers saved much of the early heritage. But now that era is passing and there is an attempt to provide increasingly professional management. Little by little the museums are acknowledging, if not actually practicing, archival conservation. From the cramped quarters of a Vail-style chalet, the Colorado museum has moved to a spacious exhibit building, and the National Ski Hall of Fame from a suburban house to a most eye-catching structure.

Third: Halls of Fame. I am biased here; I admit to a distaste for Halls of Fame, and three of the museums incorporate not only the title but also the philosophy. Along with nostalgia, the ever present emphasis on finding heroes (annual inductions in some cases), overshadows the less showy need for historical accuracy, efficient cataloging, and other essential bureaucratic systems of management. The one museum which shies away from this is the New England Ski Museum.

Fourth: Documentation. Until five years ago there was a cavalier disregard for collections of letters and minute books. The difficulty now, in all the museums, is accessioning and conservation: neither the funds nor the staff to manage the collections are sufficient. None of the museums has any temperature-controlled space. Space is most critical in the New England Ski Museum where researchers will share the library which already quintuples as office, accessioning area, photo storage, and meeting and lunch room.

With the exception



*New England Ski Museum boot display*

of Colorado, the museums have good libraries containing books, magazines and journals, and all have thousands of photos (many uncatalogued and unidentified), films (often unviewable because of condition), an increasing number of videos, and oral history tapes of varying quality. The New England Ski Museum has a marvelous collection of posters.

Fifth: Location. All the museums are in historically appropriate locations but accessibility is a real problem, particularly for the National Ski Hall of Fame in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Whereas Vail, with its captive audience, will host 20,000 visitors, the National Ski Hall draws only 3,000 a year. All researchers should call ahead and make arrangements: all the museums are 'closed' for certain lengths of time, but access to the collections is usually possible.

Sixth: Proliferation of 'museums.' Increasingly, it appears that many small collections, some private, are being touted as 'museums.' The four large museums propose to try to inventory known artifacts. Serious researchers need to know of these smaller holdings because some of the material is unique. The only examples of skis of unequal length made in the United States can be seen in a small village historical society in Maine, besides two privately held pairs. There are private libraries and collections of prints as well.

There is, then, a serious effort under way to collect America's skiing history, but it is hampered by lack of money and staff. Researchers should be sympathetic to those whose efforts make the preservation of the ski heritage possible.

Plymouth State College

E. John B. Allen