

# Legends of American Skiing

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Leading historical associations have shown concern over the role historical consultants play in films and T.V. documentaries. With increasing media possibilities everyone can become her/his own historian because most in media-land believe history is simply “one damn thing after another.” The consultant, however, does not direct, nor raise money – the two most important aspects which give control over the final product.

*Legends of American Skiing* was over four years in the making, cost \$100,000 from a \$25,000 seed grant from the Vermont Council on the Humanities and Public Policy – all who give want their moment on celluloid. The Council was attracted to the idea that modem

sensationalism in the likes of James Bond skiing off a 3,000 foot precipice had replaced the perceived values of earlier skiers: health in nature, effort, aesthetic form on skis and so on.

From 30 hours of interviewing, 25 minutes ended up on the 1 hour, 18 minute production. This has now been cut down to a television hour and *Legends* has recently aired on PBS.

The problem of using interviewees to tell “history” and also as source material for events and ambience causes difficulties. We allowed Lowell Thomas a narrative role; his prestige, the timbre of his voice, use of expressions – “crack cameraman” – were redolent of the 1930’s, which was exactly what was wanted. But Mr. Thomas’ facts about Peckett’s Ski School are not all correct. It was decided that his presence in the film was more valuable than was correct fact, so the historical record was weakened as the ambience was enhanced. Generally it is historians who do the concocting, but in the documentary it is not only what people say, it is how they say it and how they look. And it has to be managed with staggering swiftness; the section on Midwest jumping is forty-five seconds long, Lake Placid merits half a minute!

The interviewees talk of their experiences. Nostalgia is antiquarianism. Questions which produced answers on elites and economic matters, etc. required analytical answers, and it is those answers which made the difference between strung-together nostalgic pieces and a history of skiing. But much is missed. Tommy Todd’s extraordinary 1,000 feet in 12 seconds was hardly noted at the time; it was more important to know that Todd was the winner, than it was to know that he had won at 86.787 m.p.h.

What films and documentaries seem to be best at, and what you have to go for, is- to use an apt phrase – the big picture. Viewed as such, *Legends*, we are told, is a grand success. However well intentioned, director and donor have more say in the final product than does the historian.