

Gold Rush Skisport: Sierra Ladies on Skis

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The recent rush of scholarship on the history of women's sport seems to have passed skiing by. A couple of investigators have looked at women's participation in the Winter Olympics, and an occasional piece of descriptive history may be found. These works have all been concerned with the twentieth century and mostly from the 1930's on. I find hardly a word about women's skiing activities in 19th century America even though winter sports have received a mild glance in which ice yachtswomen rated a few paragraphs but lady skiers one. This lack of knowledge is surprising given the fervor in searching out women's sporting origins. It is one thesis of this paper that skiing in gold rush California as a recreational pursuit was available equally to women as it was to men.

Another thesis of considerable complexity is that the equality enjoyed by women in the skisport, as skiing was called in those days, was possible because Sierra skiing had no *Idraet* tradition behind it. Skiing in the gold camps was able to develop in a catch-as-catch-can way in which fun and frolic were more important than the serious business of moral, outdoor sport that *Idraet* required.

The utilitarian aspect of women's skiing is analyzed and evidence shows that the use of skis in winter was essential for women. Simply moving about, shopping expeditions, paying visits and the like all required women to be able to manage what were called Norwegian snowshoes-skis. Women also enjoyed skis for recreation for an hour or so after work and to go on skiing parties. In the high Sierras skiing was a social activity. When youth and beauty was able to ski gracefully, the combination of a pretty physique with good technique attracted male attention. But youth, beauty and technique were not enough; women had to be sufficiently spirited to

tackle high country winter in which skis were sometimes the only way into an isolated mining camp.

Speed was also noted. When miners started carnival-like race meetings, events for girls and women were included. Although the top prize for women was usually 25% of the value of the men's purse, the races were serious matters because of mining camp rivalry. Women's races were not merely entre-actes to vary the men's racing calendar. A good ski racer claimed many admirers.

When the silver played out, the mining camps emptied and besides the odd letter, occasional diary entry and obscure memoir, only the local newspapers remain as sources for the history of gold rush skiing. This study-any study of 19th century Sierra skiing-must rely heavily on these newspapers. There is in the columns much on women's role in the skisport; without the newspapers, women's Sierra skiing would have disappeared just as completely as some of the mining camps themselves.