

The Soul of Sun Valley ♦ France's Skiing Superhero ♦ Filming Cross Country's Legends

# SKIING HISTORY

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companies couldn't afford the complex procedures and many immediately stopped selling and making fluorowaxes. Besides, the most common fluorines will be banned in the EU starting in July 2020. It was in this context that FIS imposed the new ban.

For more information on the history of ski wax, see "Grip and Glide" by Seth Masia in the June 2010 issue of Skiing History, or read a variation of his article online: [skiinghistory.org/history/grip-and-glide-short-history-ski-wax](http://skiinghistory.org/history/grip-and-glide-short-history-ski-wax)

## Alf Engen's Idaho Roots

Alf Engen was one of the best—and best known—skiers in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, and won more championships, awards and honors than any other competitor in both nordic and alpine disciplines. Though he is closely associated with Utah, he played a significant role at Sun Valley in the resort's early years.

Alf's first connection with Sun Valley was in early 1936, when he met Count Felix Schaffgotsch, who was sent by Averell Harriman to find the perfect location for Union Pacific's new ski resort. Alf was the U.S. Forest Service Recreational Supervisor in Salt Lake City, in charge of locating and planning winter sports areas in Utah, Idaho, Nevada and Wyoming, at a time when New Deal programs were providing substantial assistance to the fledgling ski industry. Engen took Schaffgotsch to inspect Alta and Brighton. Schaffgotsch

toured six states in six weeks, rejecting many areas that later become successful ski resorts—either their snow conditions or locations were unacceptable—before concluding the area around Ketchum, Idaho, had the perfect combination of snow, weather and hills.

The Forest Service sent Alf to visit Ketchum in winter 1936, when Sun Valley was being built. He met Harriman, who gave him a tour of the area, beginning a long friendship. In spring 1937, Alf and Sigmund Ruud located a site for and designed a ski jump at Sun Valley so Harriman could hold four-way competitions, and Ruud Mountain became the center for ski jumping and slalom events. Alf and Evelyn spent their honeymoon at Sun Valley in December 1937, at Harriman's invitation.

Harriman hired Engen as a sports consultant and Superintendent of Recreational Facilities at Sun Valley, which included representing Sun Valley in skiing competitions, a role that brought substantial publicity to the resort. In 1938, Alf directed CCC crews that cut a downhill course on Bald Mountain, designed for the Harriman Cup by Dick Durrance. In 1939, his crews cut ski runs on Baldy and chairlifts were installed there for the 1939–1940 season.

Alf competed for Sun Valley virtually his entire amateur career, from 1937 to 1948. He battled fellow Norwegians in widely publicized jumping tournaments all over the country, including Birger and Sigmund Ruud, Torger Tokle, Reidar Andersen, and Olav and Sigurd Ulland, winning honors and setting several national distance records. Alf perfected his alpine skiing at Sun Valley, and led the country's transition from nordic to alpine skiing, becoming the national four-way and open slalom-downhill combined champion.

Alf helped to coach the U.S. women's national ski team at Sun Valley in 1939, who were training for the 1940 F.I.S. and Olympic Games (that were cancelled). U.S. Alpine teams for the 1948 Olympic Games at St. Moritz, Switzerland, were selected at Sun Valley. Alf coached prospective Olympians from the Sun Valley Ski Club before the tryouts, and he and Walter Prager, Dartmouth College's famous coach from Switzerland, were co-coaches of the 1948 U.S. Olympic Team. Alf assisted Gretchen Fraser in her dominating performance at the 1948 Games, where she won gold and silver medals, the first American to win any Olympic skiing medal.

Alf, Evelyn and their son Alan moved to Utah after the Olympics, where he took over the Alta Ski School from his brother Sverre in 1949, directing it until 1989. Alf was inducted into the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame in 1959, joined by his brothers Sverre (1971), Karre (Corey) (1973), and his son Alan (2004), becoming the only family with four members in the Hall.

Alf loved Sun Valley, calling it in his 1986 oral history a "great mountain ... difficult to beat." —John Lundin

On March 25, John Lundin will deliver the first John Fry Legacy Lecture following ISHA's opening reception during Skiing History Week 2020. The topic is "Sun Valley's Early Days: Union Pacific, Averell Harriman and Alf Engen."



COURTESY JOHN LUNDIN

Above: Alf Engen and Walter Prager at Sun Valley in 1947, as co-coaches of the 1948 U.S. Olympic ski team.



CHARLES WANLESS

Left: Alf in the air at Ruud Mountain in Sun Valley. Norwegian jumpers and brothers Alf and Sigmund Ruud designed the jump in spring 1937 so the new resort could hold four-way competitions.

heart of the French Alps soon after. Reliable Racing Supply has been (and is currently) the U.S. importer/distributor for VOLA. Included in our first direct-mail catalog in 1969 was a VOLA product called “Colo-neige.” This product was used to identify the placement of slalom poles into the piste (necessary to reset bamboo poles that were often knocked out by the racers). Soon after, we distributed “Durcineige,” an early use of a chemical to harden the snow.

Currently, Reliable Racing offers several VOLA products direct to the consumer, not limited to ski wax, but including FIS-homologated helmets, goggles, accessories and ski-tuning products. In 2019 they introduced E-wax, a 100 percent biodegradable product, made from plant and animal sources. For the 2020-2021 season they have introduced MyEcoWax, a non-fluorinated race wax with excellent gliding properties, in which more than 50 percent is made from plant and animal sources.

VOLA is a major manufacturer with 34 international distributors, and is a big player on the European competition scene. The current CEO, JF Ferreira, attended the University of Colorado at Boulder, and was an NCAA All-American in skiing.

John Jacobs  
Reliable Racing Supply  
Queensbury, New York

### 1898: First Tracks in Zermatt

The recent article on Zermatt (*Skiing History*, January-February 2020) left the impression that skiing began there in the 1928-1929 season. But in the *Kleines Zermatter Brevier*, we read “it was a gloomy and snow-filled day on 29 December 1898 when the first ski tracks were seen in Zermatt.” These were the tracks of Dr. Hermann Seiler and Viktor Beauclair.

In 1905, “certain amateurs simply solved the question of winter quarters by breaking into inns, calling them huts to reassure their conscience,” according to an account in *La Montagne* (March 20, 1905). One “modest little inn” was open in 1908, the year the Ski Club Cervin (the French name for the Matterhorn) was founded. Arnold Lunn—the panjandrum of British skiing—weighed in with the judgment in 1913 that it “by no means follows that a good summer centre will make a good winter centre. Zermatt is a case in point.” After the war, the Cervin Club built a jump on the Steinmatte, about a 10-minute walk from the village.

When the “season” began in 1928-1929, General Wroughton, one of the Ski Club of Great Britain’s stalwarts, commented that “Zermatt’s slopes are too steep and rocky to be inviting,” while others judged them “too precipitous for good ski-ing.” “Incidentally,” wondered an old mountaineer almost a decade later, in 1937, “would the place be much good for ski-ing anyway?”

E. John B. Allen  
Rumney, New Hampshire

### Alf Engen in Sun Valley (Part 2)

I enjoyed the March-April “Short Turns” highlighting Alf Engen’s role in early Sun Valley. The article mentions Alf recalling first visiting Sun Valley in winter 1936, which is interesting because that visit is not mentioned in other accounts. Engen was so well known at that time, one would think the media or correspondence of that winter would have noted it. Rather, the founding skiers who greatly helped to determine the layout of the ski runs and lifts on the hills above Ketchum were Charley Proctor, Count Felix Schaffgotsch, Count Erwein Wilczek, Richard Scott, John E.P. Morgan, and some local boys who could ski.

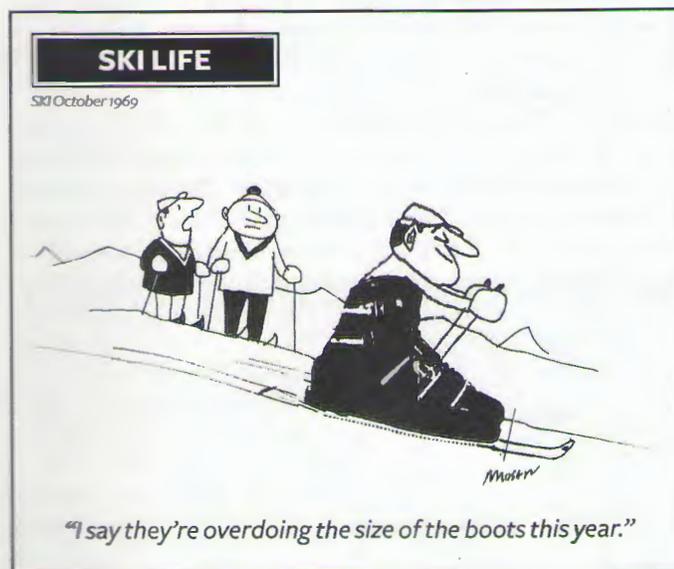
While Alf did direct CCC crews to cut the first runs on Baldy, as the late Mort Lund and others have documented, the trails were laid out primarily by Friedl Pfeifer and Dick Durrance with Alf’s help. It’s also interesting that Dartmouth Outing Club (DOC) members had a role in helping to get Baldy ready. Alf’s CCC crews could not overnight on the mountain, so they could only clear Baldy’s lower slopes in a day’s work. For the upper slopes, Harriman had Dick Durrance hire DOC members to do the clearing and stay in eight-man camps in August 1939. I hope we all get to enjoy the fruits of Alf’s labor when we meet in Sun Valley for Skiing History Week in December! ❄️

Kirby Gilbert  
Bellevue, Washington



COURTESY JOHN LUNDIN

Alf Engen and Walter Prager at Sun Valley in 1947, as co-coaches of the 1948 U.S. Olympic ski team.



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## READERS RESPOND

# Alf Engen in Sun Valley (the saga continues...)

In a recent letter in *Skiing History* (May-June 2020), my colleague Kirby Gilbert raised several questions about Alf Engen's role in Sun Valley's early days. Kirby wonders whether Alf was in Sun Valley in 1936, since his presence was not mentioned in other accounts at the time.

In his 1985 oral history, Alf said he met Count Felix Schaffgotsch in Utah in early 1936, when the Count was searching for a place for Averell Harriman to build a destination ski resort. Alf showed the Count both Alta and Brighton, before the Count visited Ketchum in February 1936, and found the area that would become Sun Valley. According to Alf, "When I found out that he had picked this place [Ketchum], the Forest Service sent me up here just to see what he had actually picked out...There was lots of snow that year, and it was beautiful. And at the end of the road...of the railroad...there was only one building, there was Pete Lane's store...I just came to see what he had picked out."

From 1935 to 1942, Alf worked for the Forest Service as a technical advisor, assisting with planning and developing winter sports areas in four western states. Alf's son Alan provided me with a list of 31 ski areas in which Alf played a role in planning or developing, which included Sun Valley's Bald Mountain.

In January 1939, Sun Valley general manager Pat Rogers told Harriman that the Forest Service released Engen to work at Sun Valley. Count Schaffgotsch, Alf Engen, Dick Durrance and Friedl Pfeifer were on Baldy marking trees to be removed for a new downhill course designed by Durrance, the work would be rushed through, and the course would be ready for the 1939 Harriman Cup. Engen also supervised Civilian Conservation Corps workers stationed at a camp in the Warm Springs area, to clear new runs on Baldy to open the mountain for general skiing in winter 1940, after chairlifts were installed. In his oral history, CCC worker Fred Joswig described working with Alf on Baldy. Joswig said Pfeifer, who had a "good eye for a downhill course," marked trees for removal, and Engen contributed "more than any one person to Bald Mountain's development than anyone I know."

As a part-time resident of Sun Valley, I appreciate interest in the history of our country's first destination ski resort that Durrance said was "the most important influence in the development of American skiing ... Its concentrated and highly successful glamorization of the sport got people to want to ski in the first place."

John W. Lundin  
Seattle, Washington

John Lundin is the author of *Early Skiing on Snoqualmie Pass* (2018 ISHA Skade Award winner); *Sun Valley, Ketchum and the Wood River Valley* (Arcadia Press, June 2020); *Skiing Sun Valley, a History from Union Pacific to the Holdings* (History Press, publication date November 9, 2020); and *Ski Jumping in Washington —A Nordic Tradition* (History Press, publication date January 2021). John and Kirby Gilbert are both founding members of the Washington State Ski and Snowboard Museum ([www.wsssm.org](http://www.wsssm.org)).

## Engen's Son Remembers

I received the latest *Skiing History* and was interested in the short piece by Kirby Gilbert that talked about my father in Sun Valley during the mid 1930s. I can't comment much about my father's early years at Sun Valley working for the Forest Service during summer months. I know he did some early trail cutting. He told me about encountering a wolverine face to face while cutting trails on Warm Springs. Dad backed away without incident, but it was a lasting memory.

I know my father played an important role in the design and construction of the Ruud Mountain ski-jumping hill near the old Proctor Lift. That would have been in 1936–1937 and he did have a good association with Averell Harriman during those years. I used my father's blueprint design of the Ruud Mountain ski jump as a guide for the one I designed on a hill for Bob Barrett, original owner of the Solitude ski area, in the late 1950s. It was used for intercollegiate competitions for several years in the early 1960s, but was torn down and replaced with a regular run in later years.

Alan K. Engen  
Salt Lake City, Utah

## Where Grooming and Geometry Intersect

In his "Paradise Lost" article (*Skiing History*, May-June 2020), Jackson Hogen eloquently explained how carving represents the Nirvana of alpine skiing. I would add that carving stands at the confluence of two evolutions: ski geometry and slope grooming.

Ski designers began experimenting with new side-cuts back in the 1960s. For instance, Dynamic designers moved the waist back about 18cm to take advantage of new racing techniques. Two decades later, alpine races were still taking place on decently prepared but significantly wavy and irregular terrain, making carving choppy and imperfect. As trail grading and grooming improved, resorts created flawless and wide snow ribbons. When shaped skis came of age, they showed their magic power on these smooth new ski runs.

Do all skiers need to carve? I'm not convinced. Many are content with letting their boards skid into each turn. In fact, accomplished carvers account for a small portion of the skiing public. Besides, significant momentum is required to trigger carving. Its maximum efficiency promotes higher speed, but doesn't allow for slow motion. And it often creates stress on the joints that can prove tiring after a full day on the snow.

If carving is one useful skiing skill, skidded turns are essential in countless circumstances like moguls, crud, steep spots, blue ice, deep snow, trees and out-of-bounds skiing. A skier who doesn't master skidding will be ill at ease on surfaces that aren't perfectly groomed. Skidding is in fact a progressive form of edge control while carving is binary; you either carve or you don't. As a result, I use a variety of skills when I ski, depending on the terrain, the snow and the day: carving, skidding and stem-christies (yes, these too!).

Finally, about the danger of rocker and fat skis:



Alf Engen rides Sun Valley's chairlift on Ruud Mountain, location of the jumping hill he and Sigmund Ruud designed, circa 1938. Photo by Charles Wanless, courtes Alan Engen.

Those are part of the ebb and flow of "cool trends" that we've seen come and go in skiing. As the industry pushes them, they grow, stay for a while and falter. Rocker skis are made for the elusive deep snow while fat skis are sluggish and heavy to carry, so when their heydays are gone, they might return to niche status.

J.F. Lanvers  
Park City, Utah

Jean-Francois Lanvers, who capped his ski-teaching career with a stint on the French Demo Team, came to North America as a marketing executive, first with Look and then with Lange.

## Notes on the New Northlands

I want to thank Jackson Hogen for his article in the May-June issue, which brings to light the concept that we built Northland Skis around. Wider rockered skis degrade the true ski turn.

We pride ourselves in making one of the finest all-mountain carving skis on the market. We went against the trend to go wider and rockered by creating dimensions and ski construction not seen in other skis in the industry. To do this, we went back to the original Northland design. The vintage skis were made from hickory that provided strength, snap and durability. With the new Northlands, we make the core from hickory and white ash, strong hardwoods with excellent performance characteristics. To that we add a full-length layer of Kevlar to quiet and dampen the ski bottom and add strength.

I applaud Hogen for stepping out and speaking his mind about products that the industry has dropped on the skiing public that diminish the ski experience. ❄️

Peter Daley  
Steamboat Springs, Colorado