

# Collier's

February 7, 1948: p. 24

## GHOST TOWN ON SKIS

*For Forty Years the Once  
Bustling Town of Aspen,  
Colorado, Was Virtually  
Abandoned. Then Some-  
one Fitted It with Skis -  
Now Everything's  
Booming Again*

BY EVAN M. WYLIE



Night life in Aspen, where the Red Onion bar is a favorite meeting place for skiers, miners and townfolk. Credit it to skiing, which has remade the town

**A**SPEN is a tiny Colorado village tucked away in one corner of a lush green valley ringed by snowcapped peaks rising to altitudes of more than 14,000 feet. It is an old mining community in the midst of a turbulent transformation engineered by ex-G.I.s, ex-Wacs, artists, musicians, small businessmen and a wealthy Chicago industrialist.

Still present are the ghostly vestiges of a dead era—blocks and blocks of houses, weather-beaten, dilapidated, many of them abandoned. Its streets, laid out in neat, rectangular patterns, are dusty, poorly paved and dimly lighted, with cracked sidewalks, and planks thrown carelessly across gutters.

The main street is spruced up but in between the new, gay, freshly painted shops there are still a number of shabby, boarded-up store fronts.

Above the town, on the mine-scarred slopes of the great mountains, abandoned skeletons of rusty mining equipment project blackened, misshapen silhouettes against the snow. But straddling these relics of the past, painted an orange as bright as the buoyant hopes of Aspen's new settlers, is the world's longest ski chair lift, rising almost right out of one end of the main street and traveling 14,000 feet into the upper Rockies.

Moribund Aspen has awakened to an atmosphere of boom, hustle and bustle. The Hotel Jerome, once one of the most famous hostelries of the Old West, has been restored to its former plushy splendor, and a barber-shop and cocktail lounge have been added. Over Clark's garage, new-Aspen citizen Richard Dyer-Bennett, young ballad singer of concert and night-club fame, is teaching his new school of minstrelsy. His dark-haired wife, Mel, a former professional dancer, is completing arrangements for her new dance studio which, combined with the music classes, the Dyer-Bennetts expect to see develop into "one of the largest music-dance studios in the world."



Fred Iselin (left) and Friedl Pfeifer executing a difficult skiing maneuver: a double "tempo" parallel turn. Pfeifer learned skiing in the Austrian Tirol

Near by, in a one-story white frame building is old-Aspen citizen Mike Magnifico's sports shop. A cobbler before the war, Mike now sells ski togs in the winter and hunting and fishing equipment in the summer.

Then there is Joan Trumbull's and Maud Banks' country store. Both girls are ex-Wacs, who stopped off at Aspen "just for a few days' skiing." They stayed on and last summer opened an old store. They have installed a cracker barrel and a pot-bellied stove and sell everything from blue jeans and canned beans to frilly shirtwaists.

Typical of the ex-G.I.s who have made Aspen their new home are Andy Ransom and dark loquacious Len Woods, both of whom were instructors in the Aspen ski school last season. Now they are building The Golden Leaf, a restaurant and skiers' club modeled after the old Swiss mountainside taverns.

### Mountain Meadow Homesites

Up on Red Mountain, overlooking the valley, is soft-spoken young architect Fritz Benedict. After his discharge from the Army, Benedict bought 600 acres of meadowland halfway up the mountainside. A former student of Frank Lloyd Wright, he is breaking it into one- and two-acre lots and designing homes built of logs, stone and glass with long windows and expansive terraces.

The center of the town's social life is the Hotel Jerome. But it is in the Red Onion, a small bar owned by ex-ski trooper John Litchfield, that the contrast between Aspen's past and future is most apparent.

Here on winter evenings the booted, wind-burned skiers predominate. Behind the swinging doors in the back room and in the overheated, faintly steamy atmosphere up front, they crowd around scarred dark tables laden with steak platters and huge steins of beer, their cigarette smoke beclouding the already dim light from the old Victorian chandeliers. Feet planted firmly on the bar rail, they scan the faded photographs of prize

Aspen, from a distance, with its \$250,000 chair lift in the foreground. The little village is ringed by peaks, seven of which rise more than 14,000 feet



## A S P E N



Square dancing in the Blue Room of the Hotel Jerome, center of the town's activities. The Jerome was built in 1889, nine years after Indians began to leave

fighters in long tights that adorn one wall and study the bunches of dried red onions flanking the mirror. Their talk, the mysterious jargon of the *Schuss*, Telemark and stem Christie, waxes fast and furious.

Off to one side, half hidden in the shadows, is a table of old miners in blue jeans and faded Mackinaws. They talk of silver, lead and zinc and fabulously rich mines with picturesque names, and they pause occasionally to toss a scornful glance at the boisterous group at the bar. For some of these old-timers can still remember the heyday of this town on the Roaring Fork, some fifty or sixty years ago.

In 1880, Aspen was a favorite hunting ground for the Ute Indians. Fortune hunters who poured into Colorado in the great "Pikes Peak or Bust" gold rush of 1859 had spent themselves against the eastern slopes of the continental divide. Adventure-some spirits who tried to push farther were soon discouraged by a sea of mountain peaks and by the Utes. But by 1879, little groups of prospectors trickled up through the passes into the unexplored valleys and ranges beyond, and although the Utes went on the warpath, they were unable to stem the tide.

One group established itself on the banks of the Roaring Fork River and held on through the winter of '79. With the first spring thaw their faith was rewarded. Within sight of the settlement, it was discovered, were some of the richest deposits of silver in the United States. News of the strikes spread like wildfire and the rush was on. Up over the divide came a horde of fortune seekers and with them the strange assortment of humanity that made the mining camps famous.

Overnight, Aspen became one of the great bonanza camps of the West. Blocks of stores, saloons, hotels and theaters mushroomed like magic. Miners, prospectors, gamblers, bankers and merchants jostled one another on the narrow board sidewalks and overflowed into the rutted streets. J. B. Wheeler opened his Wheeler Opera House and imported dramatic companies that played nowhere else west of the Mississippi. Lillian Russell, E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe appeared before cheering throngs. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett stopped off for an exhibition of fancy boxing.

By 1891, the onetime Ute campsite had a population of 15,000 and





**Mike Magnifico enjoying life in Aspen. A cobbler before the war, Mike now has a sports shop, selling ski togs in the winter and fishing items in the summer**

site had a population of 15,000 and was calling itself the second largest city in western Colorado. It boasted a courthouse, armory, hotels, churches and three daily newspapers, a roaring half mile of saloons, gambling palaces and sporting houses. Silver poured from the Smuggler, Bonnybell and Little Annie mine shafts at the rate of more than a million dollars a month.

But Aspen's foundation was free silver and soon that foundation was shaking. In January, 1893, a bill was introduced in Congress to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Smelters and refiners cut their purchases of silver. In June the mints of India were closed to free silver, and the Panic of 1893 was on. The Smuggler, Aspen and Durant mines closed down. The largest drygoods store in Aspen failed. The price of silver spiraled downward.

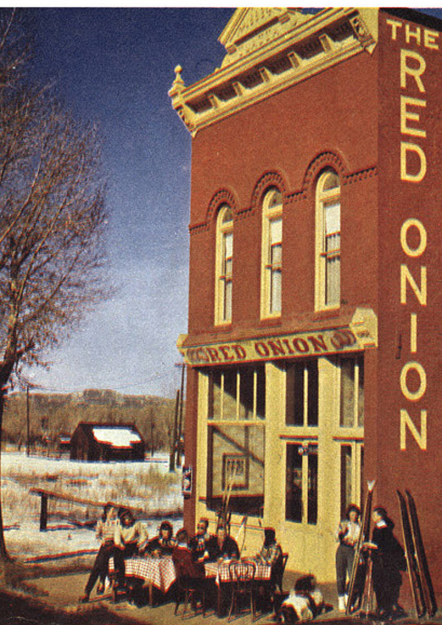
On November 4th, Congress repealed the Sherman Act, and the West's epic of silver—its colossally rich mines and their boom camps—was at an end. As swiftly as it had mushroomed, Aspen declined. Prospectors drifted away, stores nailed shut their doors. By the turn of the century, Aspen was a village of silent, weed-infested streets and deserted dwellings inhabited only by a handful of die-hard prospectors. Aspen stayed that way almost cut off from the world, for forty years.

Then in 1934, André Roche, the Swiss ski expert, spent two weeks skiing in the mountains above the town. Roche marked a trail down the mountain and after his departure, cobbler Mike Magnifico cut out the trail and built the first ski tow of discarded mining equipment from the Midnight Mine. In 1942, the War Department sent its newly activated 10th Mountain Division to train in Colorado. Ski troopers, the division's key unit, were stationed at Camp Hale, near Leadville, and it wasn't long before they discovered Aspen.

Early in 1943, slight, dark Friedl Pfeifer, then a sergeant in the ski troops, got his first glimpse of the valley of the Roaring Fork. Pfeifer, who was born in the Austrian Tirol and has spent most of his life since on skis, caught his breath. "I suddenly realized," he said later, "that here was the nearest thing to Switzerland in America."



# ASPEN



Skiers dining at the outdoor café of the Red Onion, once a livery stable of the old American variety, now a prosperous resort for skiers. The café isn't Parisian, but it's Colorado!

## Ideal Winter Sport Country

When he got back to Hale, Pfeifer talked up Aspen's skiing possibilities with a group of fellow ski fanatics. They saw it for what it might be worth—no longer a silver mine but a snow mine. Its altitude, 7,900 feet at valley level, assured it of steady and dependable snowfalls from November until April, and there were seven peaks of more than 14,000 feet rising practically out of Aspen's main street. Because of the high, dry air, the climate was crisply exhilarating rather than uncomfortably cold and the snow was always a top grade of powder, ideal for skiing.

The G.I. skiers met with the town council and laid before them plans for a postwar ski development, and it was agreed that as many as possible of the group would return to Aspen as soon as the war ended. Some of the soldiers purchased property, and the town councilors set to work to unravel old titles and mining claims to clear the way for a new ski lift up the mountains.

Then the 10th went overseas to fight brilliantly in the final days of the Italian campaign. The cost was high. Among the names on casualty lists were Torger Togle, the greatest ski jumper this country has ever developed, and Ralph Bromaghin, who had been one of those planning to return to Aspen. Friedl Pfeifer came back to a base hospital, barely surviving a terrible wound from mortar fragments.

But the luck of the Roaring Fork continued. Into the picture came wealthy Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke.

On Decoration Day, 1945, he arrived in Aspen for a holiday visit with his wife, who had become interested in the scores of old mining communities which dot the state.

Paepcke was fascinated with Aspen and bought a house and property there that same week end. "I had never seen such a perfectly beautiful, naturally scenic setting for a community," he remembers.

"Hasn't anyone ever thought of reviving Aspen?" he asked the natives.



The Sundeck, at the summit of the 3-mile-long chair lift, the longest in the world

Paepcke was told about Friedl Pfeifer and his ski troopers. Where was Pfeifer now, he inquired. They thought he was in an Army hospital somewhere in U.S. Paepcke made up his mind to find him. But in the meantime, he returned to Chicago and turned loose a crew of experts to tour the Western resort areas and make a comparison report on Aspen's development possibilities.

### **Also for Anglers and Trail Riders**

Their report confirmed everything the ski troopers had told the Aspen town council. In addition, Paepcke learned that the near-by forests were full of tumbling trout streams (1,000 within a twenty-mile radius), which already had attracted anglers from as far away as Texas, and that the mountain trails were a growing favorite with pack trail riders and hunters.

Paepcke shrewdly realized that skiing would play an important part in the development of Aspen. But his major interest was not merely the founding of a new ski resort. He was determined to establish a healthy, balanced community.

"What America needs," he says earnestly, "is more towns that offer a person three things: a livelihood, a healthy, outdoor life, and a good dose of culture for himself and his children. In other words, a balanced community. When I saw Aspen, I wasn't just thinking of starting a place that would attract tourists. Here was a town, an old established place, that had had bad luck because its fortunes were all tied up in one thing—silver. Yet it still possessed all the attributes of a wonderful place to live.

"It seemed to me we might be able to start a new life on the old foundations without having to worry about the value of a metal. With skiing as a permanent industry we could build a new community and broaden it to include its own schools, theaters and places of graduate study."

Meanwhile Paepcke was hot on the trail of Friedl Pfeifer. He finally found him in an Army hospital in California. The two men discovered that their ideas about Aspen coincided. As a result two corporations were formed: the Aspen Company with Paepcke as president, and the Aspen Ski Corporation with Pfeifer as vice-president and general manager. Pfeifer spent his last days in the service rounding up the 10th's Aspen enthusiasts, and early discharges started moving their families to Colorado in the fall of 1945.

Paepcke ran like a star halfback through a battered field of his own friends and fellow industrialists. By letter and long-distance telephone, and across dinner tables in clubs and restaurants, he plugged his plan for a revived Aspen. Altogether, he raised as much of a million-dollar investment as he cared to. The rest he invested himself.

# ASPEN



Deep powder-snow skiing on a slope of Ajax Mountain.

Throughout the winter, Pfeifer and his assistants explored the surrounding territory, cutting new trails and open slopes and enlarging the old ones. Miners and ski troopers worked side by side in the town and up on the mountains. A bulldozer reamed out old mining roads to form a network of connecting trails and runs. Early that spring came the climax of the effort. Up Aspen Mountains, at a cost of \$250,000 was flung the longest ski chair lift in the world, extending three miles into the mountains.

By the fall of 1946, Aspen was a working ski center. Down in the town, rebuilt cottages, new dormitories and a restored Hotel Jerome awaited the first guests. From the Sundeck, a spacious glass-enclosed shelter high up on the mountain, skiers could choose any of thirty miles of trails and open slopes, most of which converged at the foot of Aspen's main street.

The ex-G.I.s went about making Aspen their permanent home. They bought houses and installed their families. Some bought shares in Aspen's already established stores. Others purchased sites on which to erect new ones. Instead of forming a separate new group, they all joined the local Lions Club. As Pfeifer puts it, "Instead of building on top of a local community, we are trying to integrate ourselves into it. We want to work with the local people in the ski business."

## Keeping the Town American

While the ski development was progressing, Paepcke's Aspen Company was at work restoring the town. Paepcke recruited a staff of designers headed by Herbert Bayer, well-known Chicago designer. "I'm tired of this business of everlastingly imitating Europe," he told them. "I don't see why we can't have a community with its own truly American flavor."

Instead of tearing down the old houses, the group set out to renovate and restore them with their gingerbread intact. Free paint was offered to the



Maud Banks and Joan Trumbull, who were Wacs in China and India together, own the Aspen country store. They went to Aspen and stayed, so they could ski



## A S P E N

older residents if they would paint their homes with colors recommended by the planners, and Walter Gropius, at the time head of the Harvard School of Architecture, went to Colorado to confer with the town council about a consistent pattern in the local structures.

Paepcke continues energetically to pursue his grand objective—the balanced community. He has been after writers, artists, musicians and educators. When he has run down his quarry, he invites him out for a visit. "Just come out and look at it," he tells them. Many of those who accept the invitations end up by buying permanent homes in the Roaring Fork valley.

And besides these Paepcke-induced settlers have come the independents such as Maud Banks and Joan Trumbull and C. B. Caraway. Caraway has opened a barbershop on Main Street. "Ought to be plenty of business," he observes with a good-humored wink, "soon as all these long-hairs start getting haircuts."

Paepcke and his colonists continue to bubble with other ideas about Aspen's future. They talk about a jewelry business which will employ local metals, and manufacturing wool and cheese products from sheep and goats they expect to have grazing on the ski slopes during the summer. In his business offices in Chicago, Paepcke is trying out a new desk made of Aspen wood. "It's a beautiful thing," he cries enthusiastically. "I want to see somebody start a furniture factory!"

About the only ones who still view Aspen's rebirth with a jaundiced eye are the old miners. They still consider skiing a new-fangled, darned-fool business and the restoration job has not dazzled them. Most of them continue to believe stubbornly that Aspen's future, like its past, lies underground. "Silver," they mutter. "Let silver come back and you'd see this place amount to something."

But right now it looks as if Pfeifer's skiers and Paepcke's artists might prove a good substitute for silver so far as Aspen's fortunes are concerned.



# Collier's

February 7, 1948

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)