

Ski Patrol

We played hard but taking care of the mountain always came first.

—DARYL AUKEE, SKI PATROL LEADER

FOR YEARS, BISHOP RESIDENT MARC ZUMSTEIN had donated his time as leader of Mammoth Mountain’s “official self-appointed, volunteer ski patrol,” a crazy clan of ski fanatics from Avalanche Ski Club who drove from Southern California almost every single weekend. But near the end of the 1955–56 ski season, the Forest Service asked Dave McCoy to employ at least one full-time ski patrolman to supplement his weekend volunteers.

Later that spring, while traveling through Colorado to check out Riblet Chairlifts, Don Redmon and Bob Bumbaugh found a candidate to accommodate the Forest Service request. Over drinks at a bar in Idaho Springs, after skiing together all day on Loveland Pass, Redmon hired Earl Morris to be Mammoth’s first paid patrol leader. Earl quickly gained local notoriety for indulging his fondness for beer and his passion for reciting poetry at the same time.

Around 1960, Daryl “Animal” Aukee, who had quickly advanced from night crew custodian to ski patroller, took over Earl’s position. Animal’s ski patrol—a group of hard-headed, hard-playing, hard-working individualists who took their job as seriously as they took their recreation—now included a handful of paid patrollers along with the volunteers. “We were there because we wanted to ski,” Aukee reminisced. “Money had nothing to do with it. I can’t tell you how much we loved what we did, like driving CATs at night, alone out there with the snow coming down and the headlights shining.”

“There were phones at each chairlift, but no radios, no snowmobiles,” continued Aukee. “To get a patrolman, people just passed the word down to the bottom. We cleaned ice off the towers, hauled gasoline,

took care of the ramps, fixed lift lines, shoveled out the shacks, pulled ropes, sometimes worked twelve to fourteen hours a day. We’d go in to eat and then go back out until two or three in the morning, driving CATs to keep the road to the top of Chair 1 open. I made about \$250 a month with room and board and when I left I had about \$100 in my pocket.”

In the early 1960s “Animal” headed back to Southern California with surfing on his mind. Wendell “Windy” Carlson, a seasoned ski patroller from Washington, read in a ski magazine that McCoy was looking for a new patrol leader. Carlson seized the opportunity to ski in California. “When I got there in October, two T-Bars were already running,” he recalled. “There were around 24 patrolmen, half of them volunteers. I made a lot of changes...wouldn’t let the patrol wear their jackets to the Tavern, gave classes to update first aid cards, made everyone wear a sport coat and tie to a party once a month at June Lake. I thought if the patrollers didn’t have pride in themselves, they wouldn’t have pride in the mountain.”

In 1967, John Garner took over as patrol leader and expanded on Windy’s policies by writing manuals and developing new training programs. “We had such a good reputation that ski areas throughout the nation sent patrollers here to train for a month at a time,” Garner reflected. “You’re only as good as your people,” he continued. “Our team of about 30 guys included doctors, lawyers, and an Indian chief. We trusted each other. Probably once a week, we placed our lives in each other’s hands.”

During Garner’s reign as patrol leader, a massive avalanche in 1968 and a stormy, four-day search for lost patrolmen in 1969 would challenge everything for which the Mammoth Mountain Ski Patrol had trained.



Dave McCoy and Marc Zumstein. "Marc would be here every weekend without fail, directing the volunteer ski patrol. His wife Ethel sold tickets. They had an upholstery shop in Bishop." —Toni Milici

I always wore this red cone shaped hat until one of the ski patrol leaders told me I couldn't. I was heartbroken. Roma saw me out skiing, and said, "Bob, where's your hat?" I told her what happened. A while later, I heard over the P.A. system, "Bob Clow, come get your hat."

—BOB CLOW



Bob Clow

We saved them tons and tons of work, and a lot of money, never shirked a duty. I think we did a fine job.

—BOB HART



Bob Simpliner wearing the original Mammoth Ski Patrol parka, 1959.

Marc Zumstein and the Volunteer Patrol



From left: Jimmy Burt, Bob Clow, Vance Burcham, and Bob "Bergie" Bergstrom.

We brought a toboggan down Mambo to a woman who was lying with her knees up, skis together, one tail and one tip. Her leg was 180 degrees out of alignment. A paid patrolman says, "What do we do?" I told him we turn the leg around, traction, and splint it. He says, "Which way do we turn it?" I said, "Just straighten out the seam of her pants." The next day her friends complimented us, said the doctor only had to cast her leg.

—BOB CLOW



Bob Hart wearing the new ski patrol parka, early 1960s.



Before Chair 3, we would drive skiers to “The Saddle” in snowcats—they’d strap their skis on their back and climb up a rope we had hanging over the back side of the cliff. The Forest Service said that until we knocked off the cornice, we couldn’t take passengers there anymore. So, I took the ski patrol and ski school—must have been twenty of us—and shovels and we climbed to the top, dug a half-moon trench about 120 feet long. Nothing happened. I said, “Oh hell, this thing’s not going any place,” ran out on the lip and jumped up and down. On the third jump, it let loose. I rode that avalanche all the way down, about 1,200 feet. It had chunks in it as big as a car. I got to the bottom, stood up, and I was fine, stripped to the waist, a bunch of scratches on me from the spring snow. I looked up and saw all these guys on top, laughing. I wasn’t going back up.

—DON REDMON

Avalanche Control 1960s

Avalanche control is a science that is never really perfect.

—DAVE MCCOY

If skiers wanted to climb to the top, they were on their own. After a storm, we’d just block off the back for three or four days, mark it “Avalanche Danger,” and let the snow sit. We didn’t do much blasting. The Forest Service didn’t want us to, because it made the slopes look really bad. They didn’t want us to mark stumps or rocks, but just keep things natural.

One time I was standing on the top of Three about 9:00 a.m. and watched a self-release avalanche come down Dry Creek—it went all the way to about ten feet from the road. When the cornice avalanched in the spring, pieces of snow as large as freight cars came down. We’d just ski around them.

—DARYL AUKEE



Cornice control. A patroller setting a charge near Hangman’s.



The blast.



Stan Bunce coordinating the avalanche search on the radio while volunteers probed for bodies. As ski patrol leader John Garner recalled, "Volunteers came out of the woodwork."



Probe lines moving slowly up the avalanche. Each group leader called out, "probe left, probe right, probe center, two steps forward..." Every two hours, snowcats delivered food to the searchers. Ski instructor Jacque Sarteau passed some brandy around and that night Bobby Cooper sent out warm clothing from the sport shop.

Avalanche on West Face

Sunday afternoon, March 28, 1968, after our club races, eight of us "Ski Wolves" made some tracks in the powder off the top before heading home. On our last run, Scotty went first, as usual, and stopped in the upper St. Anton area. I went next, turned to catch some uncut snow, and stopped about 40 yards northwest of him. We talked a little as we waited for the others. I was facing Scotty when I looked up the slope and saw a huge slab of snow slipping with some of our friends in it. There was no sound. I yelled to Scotty, "Get going," and started down to my left. I looked back over my shoulder and saw a wall of snow coming down like a wave. At that point, I remember thinking it was going to hit me.

—JIM ADAMS

One of our group was traversing and that triggered the avalanche. My son Mike and I were at the end of the group. He saw one end of a ski pole sticking up through the snow and we were able to dig Bob Rhan out.

—AL JORDAN

I was approaching the unloading zone of Chair 2 when I glanced up and saw several sets of figure eights weaving down the West Face. I watched a group of skiers making fresh tracks and then all of a sudden, the ridge from Cornice Bowl to Paranoids let loose. By the time I received a call on my radio, I was already racing toward the patrol room, asking myself what had happened. That was the first season the Upper Gondola operated. There was a cold storm the night before, so we'd ski cut and blasted before opening the top. But by the afternoon a temperature inversion had warmed the air, almost cleared the skies, and made the fresh powder heavy with moisture.

—PATROL LEADER JOHN GARNER