

The Tracks Widen

WHEN DAVE MCCOY WAS CHASING SNOWY slopes on a pair of homemade skis in the 1930s, he could not have envisioned that he would evolve into the figurehead of Eastern Sierra skiing. Yet, with a sphere of influence that became much broader than the sport of skiing, his tracks of passion widened. From wooden skis to superpipes, Roma Carriere to an extended clan, a group of helpful friends to a payroll of thousands, from Harleys to dirt bikes to Rhinos, Dave shared his enthusiasm for life. Along the way, he became the ultimate philanthropist of Mono County, known for keeping tabs on his bottom line by asking one question, “Are you having fun?”

At Mammoth, Dave spent his time on the slopes, rarely in the lodge. He waited in long lift lines with skiing guests, listening to their conversations, taking to heart their unedited critiques of how a ski area should be run. When asked about his ever-expanding plans, he penciled ideas on table napkins. At first he envisioned three chairlifts and perhaps a tramway to the top. Later he wanted to connect Mammoth and June Mountain by a series of romantic ski villages. Dave never spoke of making his ski area like Aspen or Vail. He liked the mountain just the way it was, a place with fantastic skiing and a down-to-earth atmosphere.

Seeing how the welfare of the local populace was financially intertwined with the ups and downs of his “snow-farming business,” Dave reached out to help individuals with medical emergencies and college funds, free firewood, snow shoveling, materials and labor for building houses, ski equipment, bicycles, motorcycles, and encouragement. When he recognized the need to establish Mammoth Lakes as a sustainable community,

Dave prompted his employees to pursue their own passions by providing the emotional support and financial backing to organize bike races, mountain bike parks, snowmobile events, motocross competitions, a specialized ski race department, World Cup ski races, a Hollywood-influenced extravaganza banquet for the Alpine Masters Nationals, and a December night of fireworks. On a broader scale, he donated his time, money, and creative energy to provide Mammoth Lakes with ball fields, a transportation network, a water department, high school, hospital, and a college.

As Mammoth Mountain Ski Area ran its course through storms and drought, avalanches and earthquakes, Dave inevitably saw the positive in what was happening, at least until the 1990s. He was not prepared for the deep pain he felt in 1991 when he had to lay off more than 150 employees. Nor was he prepared for the sadness and frustration he felt in 1996 when five of his children sold their corporate shares, relinquishing any hope of a family business. Much less was he prepared for the emotional reality of selling the ski area in 2005. But not one who stays down, Dave declared on his 91st birthday:

I’m a happy man. Roma and I are still alive and our children have the freedom to do whatever they want—be it ranching or making music, training horses, driving trucks, or flying airplanes. I can still ride my motorcycle and my mountain bike. We’re having more fun than ever exploring dirt roads in the Rhino, taking pictures like crazy. As far as the ski area, I’ll always care. It’s been my heartbeat. It was hard to hand off the torch, but it was time. I hope Mammoth’s new heartbeat is good to the people, because it’s the people that make Mammoth good. No...great!



Rusty Gregory, Philippe Mollard, and Heimo Ladinig setting the upper section of the second tower before the top during the rebuilding of Chair 3 in 1997. The helicopter couldn't carry the weight of a full tower, so the crew set the bottom half, filled it with concrete, then added the upper section. Chic Gladding built the circular platform to stand on.

When we were setting the maze towers at the bottom of Chair 23, a helicopter flew by. There was always a lot of shit going on!

-HEIMO LADINIG



Setting a Chair 23 adjustable maze tower.



Philippe Mollard building the adjustable maze at the bottom of Chair 23, 1982.

Advances in Grooming Snow

We looked at what we had to do, like getting the bumps out of the snow. We considered what materials we had, used common sense and intuition, tried one thing and if it didn't work, tried another. We related it to farming, what you would use if you wanted to level a field. If you wanted to pack dirt, you used a roller. We made various drags, ran hydraulics in between them, so we could lift the blades independent of one another. We started spoiling our customers. The powder skiers would complain we were packing the snow, knocking out their fun. All in all, I think we contributed a lot to the entire ski industry.

—BOB BUMBAUGH



Grooming ski slopes with Tucker Snocats, early 1970s.



Pisten Bullys grooming, 2001. Dave McCoy spared no expense when it came to grooming slopes for the skiers. Total miles groomed each day by Mammoth Mountain Ski Area's fleet of 40 CAT's equals more mileage than the drive from Mammoth to Los Angeles.



The People Mover along Minaret Road. Meant to carry skiers from their cars to Mammoth Mountain's Main Lodge, it was removed in 1996. Similar systems are currently being used in Las Vegas.



A Sierra Pacific plane.

When Sierra Pacific was having trouble, Dad thought it would be good to keep it going. We bought the business in 1972 and made a lot of improvements to the airport. It was financially challenging especially with the drought years, but by 1978 the future looked so good that another company came in to take it over. To our surprise, they moved the business to a different location.

—GARY MCCOY

If you're composing an essay, you write down what you think, then read it, edit it, and make it better. Building things is just the same, learning as you go along. The drive system on the People Mover wasn't as good as it should have been but we could have fixed the problem by replacing it with a cable and sheave assemblies.

—DAVE MCCOY



Russ Johnson repairing snowfence, 1976.



Bill Erb skiing the Wipe Outs.



Joe Magajna and Ned Bair on a morning avalanche shoot on Paranoid Flats.

People have asked me what is it that has brought me back to this ski patrol job for 26 years—all I can say is we came here to ski and we stayed for the people. It's about fun and being made fun of, about laughter and making others laugh, about clashing personalities and pulling together. It's about hard work and easy turns. It's about family, friends, and lovers. It's about the mountain.

—LESLIE MCGRATH

Memorial Service for
Walter Rosenthal,
James Juarez, and
Scott McAndrews
April 14, 2006



Mark Broderick and Yan Kunczynski assessing the storm damage, February 1986. Note 21-foot crown at the fracture line.

After the Storm February 1986

These photographs were taken on February 22, 1986 after a ten-day storm during which avalanches off the top of Mammoth Mountain traveled all the way to the bottom of St Anton. It took only minutes for the slides to occur, days to clean up the damage.

I suspected something might have happened during that ten-day storm. I soloed up toward the bottom of Chair 19 on St. Anton: no deposit. Then I looked up and saw a huge deposit. I wasn't comfortable being where I was so went down and waited two more days until the weather cleared, then went to look around in Rusty's helicopter. The top of the mountain had slid in two distinctive paths. Gary Reitman had shot the Avalauncher and released one slide that went down to Chair 23, buried the bottom terminal, broke all the sheaves. A natural release during the storm had gone toward Chair 11, which is usually safe. It knocked over three towers, damaged the cable and pushed it into the trees, pulled the top carriage forward so that it was just about falling off the structure, and wiped out the original lift shack. The operator house at the top of Chair 18 was totally destroyed without damage to the lift. My crew of 21 mechanics and nine electricians fixed Chair 11 in eight days. We dug 40 feet down in the snow to get the towers out.

—HEIMO LADINIG



Peter Mehrhof catching a little air.



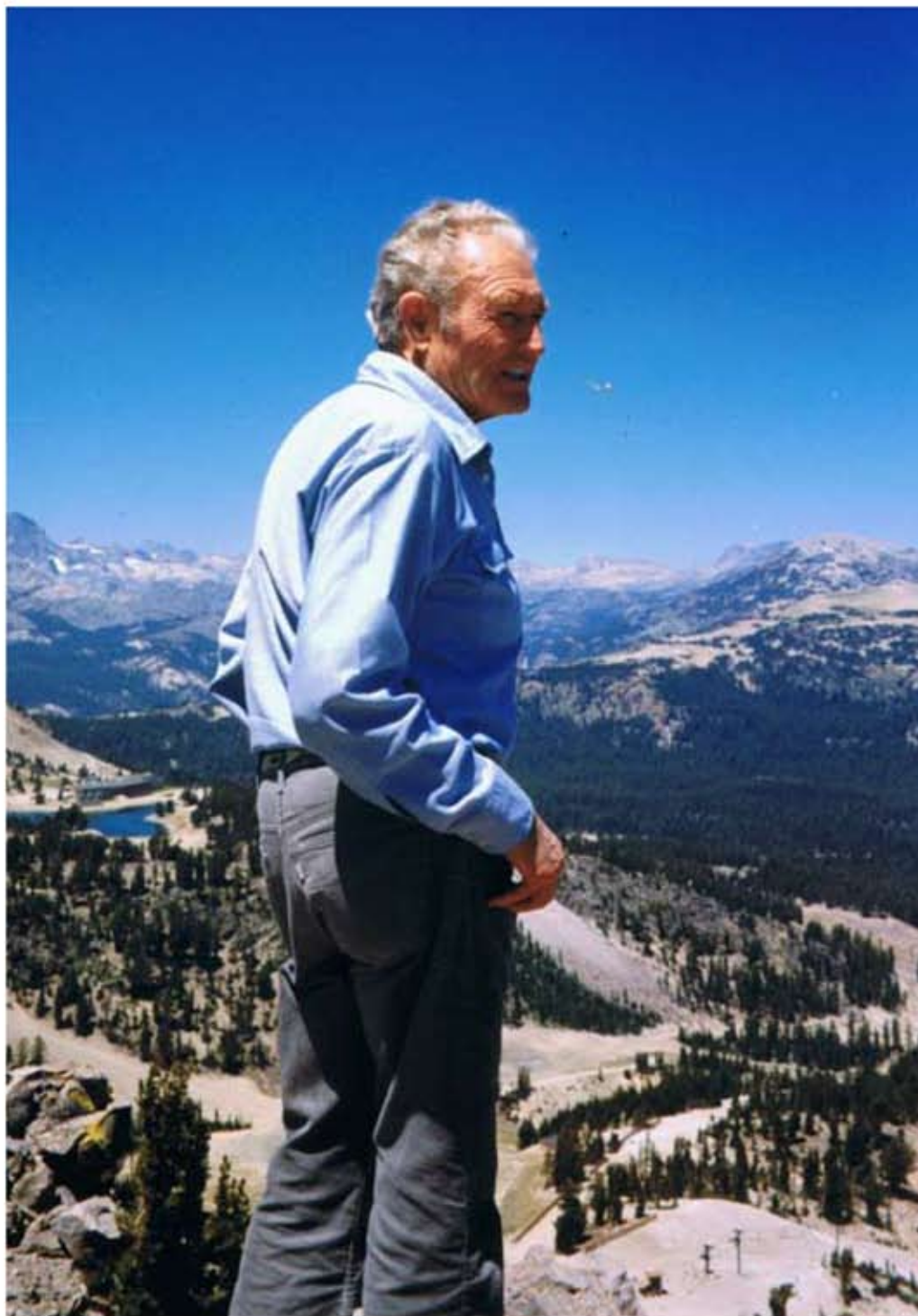
Jeff Anderson in his backyard.



Home-grown Olympian Tommy Czeschin.



Terry Smutney, Disabled Sports Eastern Sierra program.



The Spirit of the Mountain Goes On

*It wasn't a job;
it was a love affair.*

—DAVE MCCOY

Dave McCoy. "I took this photo in the late 1990s at the top of Chair 22 when Dave took my husband and me on a tour of the mountain. He also gave us a few adrenaline rushes whizzing up those dirt roads in his jeep" —former Mammoth racer Lee Hall Delfausse