

## Research Notes, Document

# Sierra "Ladies" on Skis in Gold Rush California<sup>1</sup>

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The ladies too with modest grace,  
Will take their chance to win the race;  
Their hearts may beat with fear or hope,  
But each has got her lightening "dope"-  
The signal's given, off they go;  
Pull wild at starting, scratching snow,  
And if the dears are not experts,  
The air seems filled with snow and skirts.

'A Miner'  
Downieville *Mountain Messenger* (1897)

Much of the recent scholarship on women's sporting activities in the latter nineteenth century has concluded that social convention was responsible for the way women participated in ludic enthusiasms and in competitions of a sporting nature.<sup>2</sup> If social titillations could be felt on the greensward of the croquet pitch, Senda Berenson had to tame basketball for it to be acceptable for women to play.<sup>3</sup> It was boisterous and sweaty sport for women which caused debate.

The most unbridled winter sport in the Californian High Sierra of the 1850-1900 period was skiing. In the gold and silver camps social convention certainly continued to play its perceived role of civilizing society,<sup>4</sup> yet it is clear when "the beautiful" fell six feet deep that strenuous activity by women on skis was not condemned out-of-hand as un-sexing, non-womanly or simply not permitted. Indeed, skiing was an admired quality by many men and women. Women needed skis-as men did-simply to get about once the snows were so

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1. An abbreviated section of this paper was included in "Following in Male Tracks: Women in the First 100 Years of American Skiing," a presentation made at the International Congress on Women's Sports, Jyväskylä University, Jyväskylä Finland, August 1987. An earlier version of this paper was given at the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History, Tempe, Arizona, May 1988. Critiques at both conferences were appreciated, as are those from referees for this journal.

2. From *Fair Sex to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post Industrial Eras*, eds., J. A. Mangan and Roberta J. Park (London: Frank Cass, 1987), p. 7.

3. Allen Guttmann, "The Origins of Women's Sports in New England," a paper presented at the Institute of Massachusetts Studies symposium on the history of sports in Massachusetts, Springfield, Mass., April 21, 1990.

4. For one contemporary view, see Dr Clarence W. Kellogg Diary, p. 74, typed manuscript in Plumas County Museum, Quincy, California.

deep that all other forms of communication were halted. Women enjoyed outings on skis, sported on skis and, from 1861 on, there were races for women at the carnival-like ski meetings.

The words 'ski' and 'skiing,' whether used as nouns, adjectives or verbs were not in common usage in California. 'Snowshoe' and 'snowshoeing' (associated of course with the native and Canadian webbed racquets) were the generic terms whether they were describing skis as utilitarian instruments of locomotion, for ludic activity or at race meetings. Snowshoes of the racquet variety were hardly used in the mining camps.<sup>5</sup> 'Snowshoes' and 'snowshoeing' in Plumas County remained the words for skis and skiing well into the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

The sources for early Californian skiing, which began in 1852 or 1853, are scattered references in the odd diary, occasional letter and memoir. Only in the mining camp press was there constant reporting of two sorts of ski activity once all other communication possibilities had been halted. The winter delivery of mail by men on skis provided one continuing commentary.<sup>7</sup> When the snows shut down mining operations, the press took to reporting the Snowshoe Race meetings held from 1861. The reports were all written by men. What emerges from a study of the local newspapers is that women, just as men, took up skiing as a means to mobility. The ludic quality of skiing appealed to women as it did to men; and in the isolation of the mining camps, women took to recreational skiing if they so chose. At the races, there were events for women as part of camp rivalry. These Californian ski meets-first in the world for women-had, however, no influence in the development of American skiing. Still, skiing played a major role in the mining camps in winter, a slice of social history yet to be recorded.

### *Recreational Skiing for Women in the Mining Camps*

Once the gold and silver played out in the stream beds at lower elevations, the search for precious ores led men ever higher. By 1852 camps were established at snow-line and above. Since claim jumping was common, many men stayed throughout the winter and communities developed. It was in this atmosphere that women joined the men. As the winter deepened they found that they, too,

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5. "The Canadian snowshoe. . . was never used in the mountains," recalled one pioneer in *Charles Kellogg, The Nature Singer, His Book*, cited in Kellogg Diary, pp. 85-86. "The only way of getting about is on snow-shoes, not the great broad Canadian ones. . . but the Norwegian ones," noted a diarist in 1862. William H. Brewer, *Up and Down in California in 1860-1864: the Journal of William H. Brewer, Professor of Agriculture in the Sheffield Scientific School from 1864 to 1903*, edited by Francis P. Farquhar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), p. 435. See also John R. Gilliss, "Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad," *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* (1874): 114, who started with Canadian snowshoes "but soon abandoned them for the Norwegian." As early as 1853, one newspaper commented that "the miners do all their locomotion on snowshoes," *Marysville Herald* cited in *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 24, 1853. See also letter William E. Mills to D. Mills, Norwell, Mass., December 17, 1924, reprinted in *The Skisport* (1924-25): 24. Photographs of winter scenes show skis, not snowshoes. The considered judgment of the most knowledgeable historian of early Californian skiing leaves no doubt of the dominant role skis played in Sierra camp winter activities. See Bill Berry, on film in *Legends of American Skiing*. Director Richard W. Moulton, premiered October 1982, New York, and later aired on the PBS network.

6. Winter Sports (1932): 10; Walter Mosauer. "Skiing on the East Side of the Sierra," *Sierra Club Bulletin* XXI, No. 1 (February 1936): 55.

7. An advertisement for Granville Zacharian's "Snow-Shoe Express" may be found in *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, January 28, 1865. See also E. John B. Allen, "Skiing Mailmen of Mountain America: U.S. Winter Postal Service in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the West* XXIX, No. 2, (April 1990): 76-86.

were only able to travel, socialize and play if they could manage the Norwegian showshoes-skis.

By the end of the 1850s, in some communities almost everyone needed skis to get about, reported the *Sacramento Daily Union*. By that time skiing had become so common that it was taken as a matter of course. Social items, such as Nettie Abbot's expected arrival from Chico, included that she would have to make the final leg from the Stratton House on snowshoes, as snow blocked the roadway. It was equally clear that in some camps skiing had also become such a pleasure that "even the ladies go visiting on them with as much glee as if they were going at the rate of 2.40 [25 m.p.h.]." Here is evidence both of the utilitarian nature of skiing as well as the obvious ludic quality to it. Shopping and visiting expeditions gave ample practice to the women, some of whom became so "expert in their use that they far excel many of the gentlemen traveling over the mountains."<sup>8</sup>

To travel over the mountains was not something to be undertaken lightly in winter. The fame of John A. Thompson-known as Snowshoe Thompson during his lifetime-was built on his ninety mile crossing of the Sierra on skis while carrying the mail.<sup>9</sup> So it is not surprising that when the Stevens family, which included Mrs. Stevens and a sixteen year old daughter, made a thirty-nine mile over-the-range trip on skis, it was heralded as "The Greatest Feat of the Age." The young bloods came out to greet the women "sailing . . . into town with the grace and fleetness of the gazelle." One mixed metaphor led to another as the reporter likened the exploit to swimming the Hellespont. "Byron. . . is quite played out." An impromptu dance was got up and the fun and frolics went on until a late hour.<sup>10</sup>

We can account for the men's enthusiasm by acknowledging that the arrival of an athletic sixteen year old and her obviously game mother was a matter of note-that the aesthetic picture of the grace and fleetness of the gazelle remarked upon was not unusual. It was not only that men associated skiing with youth and beauty, but they also admired good form on skis, whether this was an accomplishment of male or female.<sup>11</sup> Since all the reports were written by males, it is hardly surprising that there was an appreciation of a dashing female figure whose form on skis was much admired. "Nothing on a bright shiny morning can be more graceful and beautiful," wrote one reporter, "than a fair

8. *Sacramento Daily Union* February 9, 1860; *Plumas National Bulletin* December 15, 1892.

9. The literature on Thompson is extensive. Most is hagiographic and the accounts rest on Dan de Quille (pen name of William Wright), "Snowshoe Thompson," *Territorial Enterprise*, February 13, 1876. For a balanced view see Kenneth Bjork, "'Snowshoe' Thompson: Fact and Legend," *American-Norwegian Studies and Records* XIX (1956): 62-88. See also E. John B. Allen, "Demythologizing a Mail Hero: Snowshow Thompson, 1827-1876," *Postal History Journal* 63 (Feb. 1983): 20-24.

10. *Marysville Daily Appeal*, March 17, 1865.

11. Men were quite often described as skiing with flair and style. One mailman, for example, was described as scooting down "leaving a trail of feathery snowflakes like a comet." One race was run in "gallant style" and if many had seen swifter races "none claim[ed] to have seen a more handsome one; both contestants rode their shoes in splendid style," *Nevada Union*, January 29, 1866, *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, February 21, 1863. See also how Henry Hartley's skiing was remembered in the *Overland Monthly* 13, 5 (November 1874): 438, cited in Clarence M. Wooster, "Meadow Lake City and a Winter at Cisco in the Sixties, From the Reminiscences of Clarence M. Wooster," *California Historical Quarterly* 18, 2 (June 1939): 156.

young lassie with sylph like motions over hills and plains on her Norwegian shoes."<sup>12</sup> If occasional seraphs "with crinoline and merino floating in the breeze" lost their equilibrium then there followed much "lofty tumbling in which case and nature predominate over elegance."<sup>13</sup> But these were young women off to a dance in Gibsonville. There is a remarkable lack of criticism by male observers of poor form of young women, the reporter virtually excusing the Gibsonville dance-goers simply because they were young and enthusiastic. What a difference when the reporter exploited the troubles of Biddie O'Who, an over-40 matron with "corkscrew curls . . . a vegetable countenance and calico eyebrows." She launched herself behind someone on skis and there were such disastrous results that "teeth, wigs, gutta percha calves and unmentionable innumerables were strewn in the wildest profusion," much to the delight of the men of Dutch Flat.<sup>14</sup>

If O'Who provided a vaudeville performance on snow for the miners, youth and beauty provided a social haven to High Sierra life. As the snow season began, people staying on "anticipate a jolly time with snow-shoeing parties."<sup>15</sup> Moonlight skiing, for example, offered pleasure "after the cares of business and household duties have been laid aside," as the "fair sex and gallants . . . rush hand in hand . . . down a six hundred foot declivity."<sup>16</sup> Skiing double, too, had its attractions with the woman always in the rear and holding on to her swain's waist or shoulder.<sup>17</sup>

This recreational ski activity had no organization to it whatsoever. There were no club outings or anything of that nature. The La Porte paper caught this community aspect of skiing in the winter of 1861:<sup>18</sup>

Great men, extremely small children and delicate looking females ascend Sugarloaf, a high and very steep mountain á la corkscrew; and how they come down. Everyone who has time to go out in the evening for an hour. enjoys the sport.

Quite evidently the reporter had regard for the zig-zag effort (a la corkscrew) it took to get up Sugarloaf mountain. Men admired a hardy spirit in women who skied. One miner heard that a local school teacher, Mary Condon, had simply put on skis to go the ten miles to her class rather than not to show up because of a snow storm. He dashed off a note to the local paper that he would "marry on sight any girl that could tack up one side of the mountains and down the other." The word from a dozen old bachelors in the Grizzly camp was that if there were any nice young ladies on the marry, "just tell them to get on their snowshoes and ride into Grizzly, and you bet they will be accommodated."<sup>19</sup>

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12. *Marysville Daily Appeal*, March 17, 1865.

13. *Nevada Journal*, May 11, 1859.

14. *Dutch Flat Enquirer*, April 14, 1866.

15. *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 20, 1865; *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, January 27, 1866.

16. *Alpine Chronicle*, February 15, March 8, 1873. See also *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, January 14, 1865.

17. Birdie Hawn in Bill Berry, "Untitled American" file, Western Skisport Museum, Soda Springs, California. For skiing double see also Kellogg Diary, p. 19.

18. *La Porte Union* reprinted in *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 7, 1861.

19. *Nevada Daily Transcript*, April 6, 1882; *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, February 22, 1873; letter Mills in *The Skisport* (1924-25): 25. *Plumas County Bulletin*, January 14, 1892 printed a letter from some "old

In those remote areas, it was clear to the miners that women could provide meals in contrast to rations, a home rather than a bunkhouse: in short a civilized quality. It was this civilizing quality which insured that all women were “ladies.” Since men in the gold rush era had come from afar, distance served to enhance sweet memories of home and, in the words of a 1900 pioneer woman, “hence the female was placed upon a high pinnacle which explains the exaggerated degree to which the pioneer carried his chivalry for the Fair Sex, regardless of the degree of pulchritude and of vocation.”<sup>20</sup> But it was also plain that in camps where snow lay ten feet deep and more, women too had to manage the winter and that required a spirited toughness, something which the miners realized and appreciated.

### *Competitive Skiing for Women in the Mining Camps*

There was one other factor about women’s skiing which men noted with appreciation: speed. On after-work outings, women’s speed of descent was increasingly admired. In 1859 some women were described as going as fast as a sleigh. “Today,” noted a Sierra county man in 1866, “I saw a lady ascend far up the side of a mountain . . . almost an angle of 45° and come down standing upon her snowshoes as straight as an arrow.” Others “with the speed of a falcon sweeping down upon its prey . . . dash by. . . all colors set.”<sup>21</sup>

If men paid such tribute to women’s verve and dash on skis, it is not difficult to understand how ski races for women became part of the carnival meetings which were put on by many of the mining camps starting as early as 1861. That year the La Porte Snowshoe Club was organized with the specific object of holding races down the local hillsides, rather than across the countryside. The hill racing was considered an “amusement,” while travel across country was a “disagreeable necessity.” Three days of racing were announced which included a women’s event. Although money prizes were a serious matter, there was also much frolic and fun when “a waggish fellow passed himself off as a woman winning the race and immense plaudits till the breeze hoisted his skirts and revealed boots.”<sup>22</sup>

By 1867 matters were much more serious. “Our snow-shoe pet,” Lottie Joy of the St. Louis diggings, was pitted against competitors from Sawpit Flat and Secret Diggings. The race was carefully described; she won because she “dropped low, with the pole under her arm and just scooted down the track like an arrow to the mark, while the others carrying too much sail, and with shoes wide, came through all standing, but too late to win.”<sup>23</sup> This description is one of the few we have of a woman’s race and bears analysis. Just like the men’s

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maids” of Crescent Mills who offered themselves to deserving bachelors. “For Bach No. 1. we have a medium light blonde, whose attributes included butter milk eyes, attachment to religious principles, good housekeeping record and who was “expert in but one out door sport-that is snowshoeing.”

20. Letter in Kellogg Diary, p. 74.

21. *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 8, 1859; *Downville Mountain Messenger* January 27, 1866; *Auburn Stars and Stripes*, February 7, 1866.

22. *Marysville Daily Appeal*, January 26, 1861; *Alta California*, March 26, 1861.

23. *Downville Mountain Messenger*, February 16, 26 [sic 23], 1867; *Marysville Daily Appeal*, February 28, 1867.

events, this was a matter of mining camp rivalry and Lottie was the star of St. Louis. But it is the manner of her winning which is most interesting. She had dropped low, copying the men's crouching style, thereby cutting wind resistance. Her competitors, on the other hand, remained upright in the accepted style, their long dresses-the carrying of too much sail-causing them to be slower. What Lottie Joy had actually done, was to win the race by breaking the cultural norm of a skiing style as well as a female requirement; women were simply not expected to use the men's crouch. Some objected to the "delicate creatures" doing this sort of thing but most would agree that "properly dressed we see no reason why they should not participate in what are termed manly sports." The 'proper dress' was a matter of social convention, hence the varied references to women's dress in the poem, in what happened to the unfortunate O'Who, and in the description of this race. Miss Joy's prize was \$25, the same amount as that awarded to the Boys' competition. The Club purse for men was \$100.

At the Port Wine races in the spring of that year, Lottie Joy again exhibited her independence when she refused to compete "not being permitted to start from the same point as the gentlemen." Mary Lloyd won \$15 for first place. The sources do not reveal anything more about that race, but it is clear that something of the same sort must have happened later in March at Howland Fiat; Lottie Joy was again the woman over whom there had been "misunderstanding or dissatisfaction," and she had refused to run for the \$50 Ladies prize. It is unfortunate that the cause of her boycott is not detailed; Mary Lloyd was again the winner. The crowd was disappointed and raised another \$50 to entice Lottie to race the next day. This time Mary Lloyd refused the challenge, so Lottie romped home with the money.<sup>24</sup> These shenanigans were certainly matters of camp rivalry. They appear to be ones of personal rivalry too. But the first race, when Lottie Joy refused to compete because the starting line was not at the same place as the men's, smacks of being a personal statement expressing the frustration of inequality.

In all the winter issues of some sixteen newspapers between 1852 and the late 1890s, only one all-ladies meet was reported. The women of Johnsville, Eureka and Mohawk held a race day on 9 March 1895. The track was equivalent to the men's, some 1700 feet in length and reported to be very steep in parts. The women used either Mr. Dearborn's or Mr. Woodward's dope (wax). There were twelve competitors in all. They ran in four squads of three each for the first prize of \$15. Second and third prizes were for \$10 and \$5. No times were recorded but readers were assured that "it was swift riding."<sup>25</sup> The same competitors entered the races for first and second prizes. For the third prize there was only one squad of three runners. The meet was considered a success; young men and boys entertained between the races by showing off and there was even an impromptu race for which \$2.85 had been collected among the crowd. More women's racing was scheduled for the following week.

24. *Downieville Mountain Messenger*, March 16, 30, 1867.

25. *Plumas National Bulletin*, March 21, 1895.

This all-women's meet was a shortened re-creation of men's racing. The \$15 prize was a substantial amount of money, but nothing in comparison with the \$100 and \$125 first prizes which went with the championship belts. Other men's races were often run for \$40. At the La Porte races in 1869, purses amounting to \$60 were raised so the miners could enjoy the spectacle of "twenty Celestials," providing a "rich, rare and racy scene," as they cavorted hopelessly in the snow falling over themselves and one another much to the huge enjoyment of the crowd.<sup>26</sup> Women's racing provided an interlude to the men's events—sometimes there were no entry fees for the women<sup>27</sup>—but some of those same men appreciated a woman like Lottie Joy whose dash and verve upheld the pride of the mining camp, and they were quite prepared to pay a premium to watch the favored women compete. Cheer after cheer followed the women down the track. If it is true, as one observer noted, that women raced more for the social stake than for the money and "blessed did the man consider himself who was permitted to 'beau' the winning girl to the dances,"<sup>28</sup> it is equally clear that something else was on Lottie Joy's mind. It is frustrating that the sources do not reveal what the future held for her.

With usually only one race for women—often on the last day, along with the men's race for the champion's belt—events for women were one more added attraction to the carnival race meeting. Certainly more serious than the entertainment provided by Chinese labor, women's events were as important as boys' races; prize money was often about the same. Just as men upheld the honor of Poker Flat or Onion Valley, the rivalry between the women was also between St. Louis and Port Wine.

Skiing in the gold rush days has the marks of a modern sport.<sup>29</sup> It was secular in nature, equality of competition was assured in the preparation of the track, votes were sometimes taken whether to race or not and, as we have seen, there were special events for women. Clubs provided a bureaucratic infrastructure—although to date no minute books have been found—rules or regulations were generally agreed upon although, from time to time, they were questioned, results were printed and so on. But modern skiing never emerged from the Sierra high country. It was a proud piece; a local winter necessity was turned into a carnival which filled in the months when mining was impossible. Women, just as men, took up skiing first as the means of winter mobility. The ludic quality to skiing appealed to women as it did to men and in the isolation of mining camps, recreational skiing was equally available to women if they so chose. The competitions, however, were male dominated. Events for women were both an outlet for competition on a personal level as well as being another form of mining camp rivalry. They symbolized the rough and ready instant enjoyment for men and for women in the deep Sierra snows.

26. *La Porte Union* reprinted in *Daily Alta California*, March 14, 1869.

27. *Meadow Lake Sun* cited in *Marysville Daily Appeal*, March 8, 1867.

28. Mills letter, December 17, 1924, reprinted in *The Skisport* (1924-25): 25.

29. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), chapter 2.