

THE SEER OF SENIOR SKIING

by Cheryl Thomas

The earliest and still the only ski club restricted to skiers 70 or older is the 70+ Ski Club, headquartered in upstate New York for the past twenty years, headed until recently by the late Lloyd Lambert. It is far and away the largest of the several elder-skier organizations that have sprung up in the last two decades. How Lambert managed the successful marketing of a once-radical notion says a good deal about the development of the sport over the last two decades.

Alpine skiing was not an elder-skier game when it took hold in the 1930s in the United States. It was the sport of the adventurous, typically men and women in their twenties and thirties, hikers, outdoorsmen and women, amateur athletes. These were the kind who largely made up the group that caught the wave.

Fifty years later, many of the first alpine skiers on the scene had either retired from skiing or had begun to think about easier sport. Lambert led the movement to encourage these skiers to keep on doing it. The substantial presence thereafter of 70-year-olds in the sport was evidence of something new in the standard ski scene.

And the 50-year-olds and 60-year-olds were not far behind.

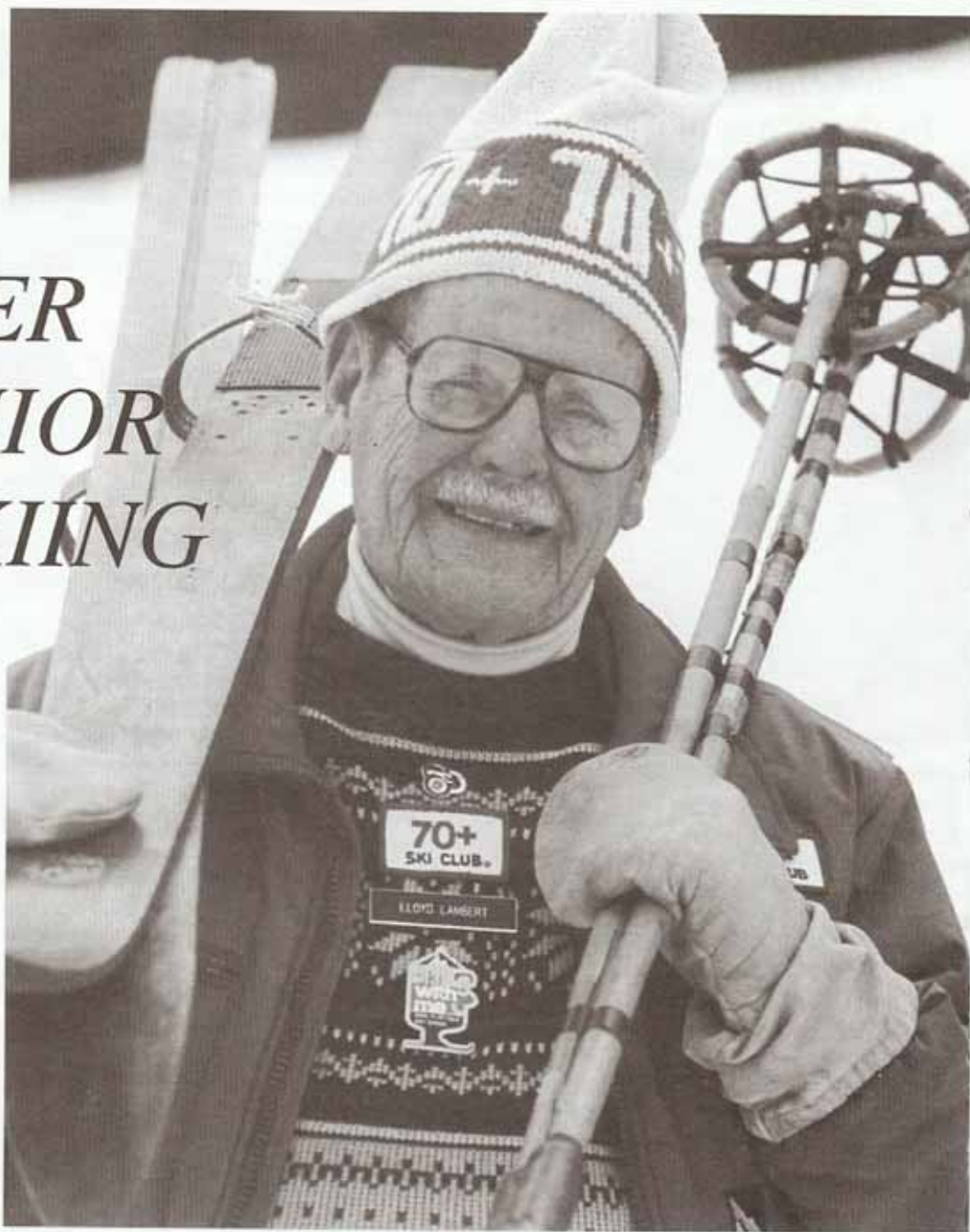
The 1996 National Skier/Boarder Opinion Survey found that skiers 55 and older made up three of every 100 skiers, or

280,000. The number was projected to 380,000, or nearly 20 out of every 100 skiers by 2010. Ski resorts took notice. As a powerful additional persuader, the U.S. National Senior Sport Organization came up with statistics that said that 26% of the general population over 55 controlled 80% of the discretionary income. Baldly, if everyone over 55 stopped skiing, resorts would sustain at least a 3% hit, a diminishment which they can ill afford.

Anyone anticipating the trend to elder-

skiing 20 years ago qualifies as a genius. Into this genius slot stepped Lloyd Lambert, the first man to bring the phenomenon forcibly to the resorts' attention and to start resorts responding in terms of bargain lift ticket offers and classes run at a pace set by older instructors.

Lloyd had been prepared for his climactic accomplishment by a lifetime of volunteer organizing and publicizing in the sport, an avocation unconnected to his department store career. Lloyd became one of the



Ninety-five years young in 1996 when this picture was taken, Lloyd Lambert shoulders pine board skis and bamboo poles standard in the era when he started skiing in 1915; sixty-two years later he founded the 70+ Ski Club



Lloyd in vaudeville, 1920

ers coming west to work in the new entertainment industry. Lloyd's father was a successful clothing store customer's man. One of his early clients was a slender comedian stage-named Charlie Chaplin. He lived in the same modest rooming house—little Lloyd used to wind up the Victrola at Chaplin's parties. Chaplin bought the first of the famed black derbies from Frank Lambert. Lloyd himself ran around with the *Our Gang* kids and grew up knowing Ben Turpin, Mabel Normand, Fatty Arbuckle and Pearl White.

In 1914, Lloyd's parents separated. Lloyd was sent back to live with his grandparents in Binghamton. And thereby became a skier. His first foray came in 1915 when as a 14-year-old, he stepped from his grandmother's back door dressed in watch-cap, corduroy riding breeches and six-buckle Arctics, shoved the Arctics into toe straps on the \$1.98 pine boards purchased at a hardware store and took his first glide into an 82-year passion.

There were few serious skiers around. The only winter resort in the East was the Lake Placid Club, which had begun staying open for sport in the winter ten years earlier. Lloyd nevertheless persisted in skiing and his lifetime of interest was interrupted only for a few years. Beginning in 1918, he enlisted in the New York National Guard at 17 for a two-year tour. Then he took up the stage. He did a stint in vaudeville in New York City in which the high point of his act was an impression of Charlie Chaplin and he wanted to go on with it, to work with Mack Sennet as a silent film comedian. But Lloyd's grandfather would have none of that, "No grandson of mine..." etc.

So Lloyd at 20 went into the department store business in Binghamton, where his sense for the dramatic soon elevated him to store display manager. In 1928, Lloyd moved to Schenectady as display manager for the large Carl Company department store.

Lloyd now rode the first ski trains to Vermont, and the Adirondacks, most often to North Creek Snow Bowl (now Gore

country's first ski columnist, a pioneer ski radio broadcaster, a National Ski Patrolter, a member of the board of the U.S. Eastern Amateur Ski Association, founder of the New York Capital District Ski Council, and a founder of the Schenectady Alpine Ski Club.

By the time Lloyd was 60, his name was synonymous with the spirit of skiing in the East. In 1992, just as I.S.H.A. was getting started, President Mason Beekley enrolled Lambert as Founding Member #2 in tribute to his reputation, influence and industry in the cause.

Lambert was skiing a long time. He was born in 1901 in Binghamton, New York, and, more importantly, spent most of his first 13 years in the Los Angeles suburb of Hollywood, where the Lambert family mingled with the stream of actors and writers

Mountain) in New York. In the decade after Lloyd moved to Schenectady, skiing had begun to take hold in the United States. In 1937, there were, as tallied by a survey in the *1938 American Ski Annual*, 113 ski tows in the United States. Of those, roughly ten were overhead cable lifts. The category included two sling lifts, four J-bars, and three chairlifts: the originals, at Sun Valley.

Lloyd's interest in skiing remained high even after marriage. He married Elinor Lee in 1942. The next year, Lloyd, now 42, joined the North Creek Ski Patrol. He later joined the Alpine Meadows, New York, patrol and the patrol at Bousquet's in Massachusetts.

His circle of contributions widened. In 1944, Lloyd became the ski columnist for the *Schenectady Gazette*. In 1946, he became one of the first to broadcast ski reports over the radio. His *Ski Scoops* over WPTR, Albany went on the air every winter Friday night at 5:00 p.m. with club news, conditions and interviews. Lloyd had become one of the thousands of enthusiasts taking on volunteer or low-paying work which were contributing to the growth of skiing through the critical 1950s.

This was the decade of transition from fad to recognized recreation. For the first time, during this decade, tens of thousands began spending weekends outdoors on skis in winter, the season heretofore relegated to sledding and skating, mostly by tots to teenagers. By 1955, according to a *Ski Area Management* tabulation, there were nearly 200 overhead cable lifts, mostly installed after World War II ended in 1946—and peace finally reigned for awhile.

In 1955, Lloyd moved to WGY, Schenectady. He continued on snow patrol at Bousquet's until 1965, when he retired. He had been 21 years on the roster, a man who sticks to his job. In 1966, he retired from Carl Company after 38 years and had much more time to give to his radio programs. Before long, he was broadcasting ten 15-minute programs a weekend.

In 1976, Lloyd founded the Hunter Mountain Ski Museum, mounting his own memorabilia in rows of glass cases in the huge Hunter Base Lodge. The collection included Lloyd's sealskins from the 1930s and a pair of Norwegian skis circa 1750 which he had managed to acquire.

Having arrived hale and hearty in his 70s, Lloyd began seeing, to his dismay, skiing comrades begin to hang them up. The year was 1977. Lloyd was now 75 and wanted his friends to keep on skiing. He then had the thought that cost was the key. It was wallets that gave out before the legs. As he once told a *Powder Magazine* writer, "I was getting tired of hearing my pals say they



Little Lloyd on his first try at age 14 in 1915 at Binghamton, New York

The Seer of Senior Skiing continued

didn't give up skiing because they were old, but because they couldn't afford the pricey lift tickets."

His decision was to found a senior—very senior—discount ski club whose members were 70 or more, the 70+ Ski Club. The age limit seemed to nay-sayers at the time to put things a bit late in man's biblically-allotted three-score-and-ten, but they were ignoring statistics: any 70-year-old has a decent shot at reaching 80.

The 70+ Ski Club was launched in 1977 with 34 charter members. Initially, they paid a onetime dues of \$5, and had to show legal proof of age to be in for life.

Against the then-popular perception of the seventh decade as the end of active sports, Lloyd threw all the weight he could muster. This was considerable: his ongoing radio show (which moved to WABY, Albany in 1981), his talent at giving persuasive interviews, a lifetime of contacts in the ski world, his boundless energy and genius at volunteer organization. Added up, they proved to have the power necessary to kick into orbit the off-the-wall ski club in which the youngest were septuagenarians.

Hunter Mt. was the trial balloon, the resort where the deep discounts started. "In 1977," recalls Orville Slutzky (still co-owner of Hunter, with his brother Izzy), "we were the first to offer free skiing to the 70+ Ski Club members. And we were the first place to hold a 70+ race." Both came off so well that the 70+ club still holds its annual meeting and championship race at Hunter.

The Slutzkys' original charitable impulse quickly appeared to have some marketing magic. Tickets were free but these skiers had an entourage of kids and grandkids coming right along with them. All of the families ate and drank at slopeside for full price. And bought at full price at the resort shop. The 70-plus skier was not necessarily hanging back waiting for freebies, it seemed. A good percentage had the time and the money. It was the encouragement of skiing with a number of their peers they had needed.

With Hunter as the example with which to persuade capitalists, that very first season Lambert pledged 30 ski areas around the East to discount heavily to bonafide members of the 70+ Ski Club. Twice-a-season, members received a list of participating resorts, showing the offers tendered by each. The numbers rose as Lloyd signed up ever more resorts. Letters by the bagful came into his

Station flyer featured Lambert

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headquarters at his home in Ballston Lake, New York. Today over 200 areas worldwide are offering discounts to the club. In the mid-1980s, membership began to rocket. Elinor Lambert enlisted as secretary as the club grew to 8,000 members and Lloyd was heard to repeat, "If I thought it would be *this* big, I never would have started it." As long as he was alive, he spent thousands of hours a year ministering to it,

taking nary a penny outside of expenses on major trips. And Club trips burgeoned, going to resorts coast-to-coast, to Europe, South America and New Zealand.

One longtime 70+ club member, George Lyons, summed it up by saying, "We had great trips all over the world with him and his son Dick. He took us to places we never would have seen—Bariloche, Klosters and Davos, Courmayeur and Kitzbühel." Beginning in the mid-1980s, the 70+ Ski Club experienced a deluge of sign-ups that went beyond the expectations of even an optimist like Lambert, and certainly beyond that of pundits in the sport. When the club passed the 10,000-member mark, it was a revelation. And new members were arriving at the rate of 500 a year. The radical idea Lambert had had in 1977, now turned out to be terribly appealing. Various enterprising souls founded their own 70+ ski clubs. Lloyd, having registered the club name, promptly took imitators to court.

In his 80s, Lloyd became a national figure in the sport. In 1988, he was given the North American Ski Journalists' Golden Quill Award for contributions to skiing. Europeans gave Lloyd special awards at Klosters and Cortina. He appeared in 60 TV shows worldwide as the leading exponent of senior skiing, and was listed in *Who's Who* from 1992 through 1997.

At age 97, his health declined, and last year Lloyd died after a brief illness. His son Richard became Executive Director, a youngster of 69 not quite yet eligible to join his own club. Dick says that his conversations with members had long since convinced him that community rather than cash was the main motivation for joining. "It was always the camaraderie. People quit skiing when they have no one to ski with." National Senior Games executive Phil Godfrey backs this up, saying that the social aspects of senior sports outrank the benefits of fitness as a draw to joining. "A treadmill can keep them fit, but it can't provide the social connection of sport."

In 1989, the PSIA-E Education Foundation catalogued the desires of senior skiers. In the responses, social aspects were, hands-down, given the most importance. Senior skiers prefer skiing with, and taking lessons from, their peers, no surprise.

The 70+ members are not your once-down-the-bunny slope skiers. They typically have more onslope days each season than the 7.2 average reported by the National Sporting Goods Association



Lloyd wore No. 1 in all 70+ races

for all U.S. skiers. Average number for ten individuals pulled randomly from responses to a 70+ Ski Club survey last spring was 19.

The 70+ Ski Club is not the only club in the movement. The Over The Hill Gang, which skiers can join at the barely adult age of 50, was founded in the same year as the 70+ Club; founder Tom Stein says, "It all started when three of us who worked as weekend instructors at Copper Mountain, and who happened to be over 50, started wondering what happened to all the older skiers. There just didn't seem to be any around.

Each of us invited five older people to come up and ski with us one Saturday. We had a blast. After that...once they found they had others their own age to ski with, they kept coming." Over The Hill Gang International today has 6,500 members.

The Professional Ski Instructors of America Eastern now has a program designed to hold the interest of older skiers. Regional organizations are proliferating. The Ancient Skiers, out of Seattle, founded in 1981, has over 500 members.

But still it is the 70+ Ski Club which most typifies the rationale of skiing on. Club member, Louis Marchiony, says, "The 70-plus patch is a great conversation piece whenever you are off skiing on your own, an instant introduction when you see someone else wearing one. You connect." Lloyd Lambert spent his last 20 years cultivating these connections. Joyce Gephardt, 70+ Ski Club secretary after Elinor Lambert died in 1984, says of Lambert, "He loved to talk and was a great storyteller. He liked to organize and get things going for people."

Lloyd's story, then, answers the historical question of why this man in particular managed to successfully further something looked at as a crazy idea. Lloyd loved skiing, he was a formidable organizer, he had influence in the Northeast—and he had started skiing at the turn of the century. No one but Lloyd would have had the idea, or the will and capacity to make it work.

In a larger sense, Lloyd typifies those thousands of volunteers, diverse but true-blue skiers, who did so much to put the sport on a fast track. Lloyd's tale resonates to the historic chord struck by skiing's postwar sports-builders, volunteer organizers and gung-ho popularizers of the time when skiing was as much about what one could give to the sport as what one could get from it.

In almost everything Lloyd did, he was steadfast, and in for the long haul. Club member Basil Evangelisti recalls, "Lloyd was there at every race. He was always the first down the course, wore number one. No matter what, Lloyd would be there." It was to acknowledge this steadiness, dedication and this spirit that a crowd of Lambert family and friends gathered during the 70+ Ski Club's annual meeting at Hunter in March to witness Lloyd's ashes scattered over the Hunter summit.

A leading ski industry figure throughout the postwar era,

Wolfgang Lert, said, "Lambert was an important personality in Eastern ski promotion—the 70+ Ski Club is an amazing organization."

And Lloyd was an amazing man. His friend Orville Slutzky says, "Lloyd Lambert was skiing right up to the age of 95. You'd never know it, but he told me when he was younger, he had chronic health problems. The doctors suggested his family move out of Binghamton to open country where he could get more fresh air. He got the fresh air. Outlived all those doctors, and then some." *



The 1987 annual race at Hunter on the 10th anniversary of founding the club