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Wandering the West

Never skip a season

by Larry Warren, Park Record columnist
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There's a new sticker on the back of my ski helmet. It says, "Never Skip a Season," with the name "Jack Manning" beneath it.

Joining my usual ski group last Tuesday, a regular brought along three generations of the Manning family from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, who were out on a ski trip. Grandson, dad and granddad were all skiing together. It was fun to watch them.

I learned as much as you can learn about a person in one coffee break and a few chairlift rides. Jack, who is 85, began skiing in the 1930s in upper Michigan, a land mass disconnected from the bottom mitten-shaped lower half of Michigan.

The U.P. is only connected to Lower Michigan by a bridge. And it's connected to Wisconsin, and having lived in Northern Wisconsin for a time, I spent time in the U.P. and learned then that "Yoopers" like Jack are a tough bunch. The fact that Jack was happily sliding from one frozen mogul to the next was proof enough of Yooper toughness.

You feel inadequate hearing the stories of these pioneer skiers. Like others of the 1930s, Jack's first pair of skis were pine planks, with a leather strap pulled through a hole going sideways through the middle of the ski.

"How did you control that?" I asked on the chair ride. He told me the only way to stop was to fall over. That technique also constituted the turn. "You'd fall over to stop and then turn your skis where you wanted to go and get up again." I've heard of that same technique before from the pioneers of Wasatch skiing.

In the old days here, a common ski trip for members of the Wasatch Mountain Club began at the Union Pacific Depot in downtown Salt Lake. They rode the train to Ogden, switched to another train bound for Echo, and switched again there to the Park City spur line that ran to the depot at the bottom of Main Street. They wrapped ropes around their skis to keep them from sliding backward (the climbing skins of their day) and shuffled to the top of Scott's Bowl where they whipped off the ropes, stuffed them in their rucksacks, and made the downhill run to Brighton. Recordings back then were made of wax on a round cylinder and they brought along old wax records to keep their ski bottoms slick.

Jack Manning had made similar trips in the U.P. The guys of that era didn't think there was anything remarkable about what they did. They did it because it was fun, and thought nothing of the cumbersome, smelly and wet wool clothes they wore, and the fact that on long outings they'd be sleeping outside in subzero weather.

Meeting Jack was like seeing the pictures come alive that are now part of an exhibit at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah campus. It's called "At Work: Prints from the Great Depression." Artists of the '30s made sketches of men and women at work which were transferred to wood blocks and lithographs for printing. They tend to show men with massive forearms moving steel beams, welding together skyscrapers, plowing fields and engaging in other manly pursuits. The women are shown hunched over sewing machines in factories or laboring in kitchens. That was the world Jack knew in the U.P., where lumber camps dotted the landscape of trees and lakes and shipyards turned out Great Lakes freighters.

We mused about what artists of today would sketch to show people at work. People in air-conditioned offices with ergonomically designed office chairs staring at computer screens would likely be the dominant theme. Now you can go a whole season on the latest ski gear and never fall once, let alone doing it twenty times each run just to change directions. You can go a lifetime of work without breaking a sweat or straining a muscle.

That tough old generation is about gone. It's an inspiration when you run across the Jack Mannings of the world who are not just alive, but skiing and skiing strongly. I followed him down Jonesy's just to watch. His skis were parallel, his stance perfect, his turns fluid. From the back he skied like a ski instructor. When you caught up to him you saw boyish enthusiasm coming from the face of a weathered 1930s vintage Yooper.

Jack did decide to stop entering his Michigan ski area's "Beer League" races two years ago. "Two ski runs and two hours of beer drinking!" he explained. But Jack says he has "never skipped a season" and was still at it last week in the Wasatch. We should all live such a life.

Writer, filmmaker and author Larry Warren has made the West his beat for the past three decades. He is the general manager of KPCW.

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