

The Beginnings of Snowboarding

Riding boards sideways down snowy hills didn't just originate with the Snurfer and Jake Burton. People have loved to "snow surf" since long before the 1960s. But how old *is* snowboarding, anyway? Well, the short answer is: no one really knows.

Although many inventions never led directly to a snowboarding phenomenon, snow seekers and hobbyists have been riding sideways on snow for a long time. Listen to tales of Austrian miners who have been riding long wooden boards with handles or ropes since the 16th century, and possibly even raced in the 1800s, or a similar invention in the Swiss Alps that allows a rider to sit or stand. Not to mention accounts of U.S. soldiers on barrel staves sliding sideways down snowy European hills during World War I. Or even M.J. "Jack" Burchett, who used a piece of wood or barrel stave as a board and clothesline or horse reins as bindings to fly through the snow in 1929.

Until fairly recently, there was not much knowledge about a snowboard-like sport before the 1960s. In 2008, while working on the film *Legends*, snowboarders Jeremy Jones and Stefan Gimpl traveled to a remote village in Turkey's Kackar Mountains. There, they discovered that residents had been riding *lazboard*, a board comparable to a Snurfer with a rope in front and a stick held by the rider for balance, for over 400 years.

A similar device was patented in 1939 by Gunnar and Harvey Burgeson and Vern Wicklund. Made of solid white oak, the invention was called "Sno-Surf" and had an adjustable strap for the left foot, a rubber mat to hold the right foot, a rope with loop used to control speed and steer, and a guide stick used to steer. Akin to modern snowboarding, the rider would be in a semi-crouch position. The name – Sno-Surf – indicated that this was not another stand-up sled, and the beginnings of snowboarding were becoming more apparent.

The three men formed The Bunker Company and tried to sell the boards during the 1930s but Wilson Sporting Goods turned down an offer to distribute the Sno-Surf and the idea fizzled out by World War II. As a possible precursor to the snowboard, this "lost" or unknown story was unveiled at the 2000 SIA Trade Show by Burton Snowboards, which displayed the original patent, prototype and a video of Vern Wicklund riding the device down a hill in Oak Park, Illinois in 1939. The original Sno-Surf prototypes are on display at the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum, on loan from Gunnar Burgeson's son, Don Burgeson.

More boards were patented after World War II, but single plank concepts did not arise until the 1960s, when Tom Sims made one of the world's first snowboards in a 7th grade woodshop class, calling it a "skiboard." Meanwhile, several patents were granted for very similar-sounding inventions, including: Snow Board (1967); Snow Sled (1968); Snow Ski Board (1968); Snow Surfboard (1971). With the exception of Tom Sims, none of these ever had an impact on the market... except Sherman Poppen's 1965 Christmas Day invention: the Snurfer, and an inspiration for kids everywhere of the 1960s to "surf" on snow.

Sources:

Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives

MacArthur, Paul J. "Snowboarding: It's Older Than You Think." Skiing Heritage Journal. 20.2 (2009): 30-36.

Burgeson, Gunnar; Burgeson, Harvey; Wicklund, Vern. [c.1939] Private collection of letters and artifacts. 1 binder. Owner: Don Burgeson.