

THE WINTER PARK SKI TRAIN

An End to the Denver Tradition

The Winter Park Ski Train announced it was ceasing operations after 69 years in operation. From the dawn of alpine skiing in Colorado, it had faithfully served the skiers of Denver and the Front Range, never having to cancel a trip because of bad weather.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the railroads were instrumental to the growth of skiing across the country. From Sun Valley to New England, a score of trains carried skiers from the metropolitan areas to their snowy destinations. But by the early 1970s, carrying passengers was no longer profitable for the railroads and passenger trains passed into history. One of the very few to survive was the Winter Park Ski Train. As of this writing, it claims to be the only ski train in the country and its 750 passengers make it the largest capacity passenger train in the country. Moreover, Winter Park is the only major resort in the nation served by an Amtrak line.



The historic roots of the Ski Train go all the way back to the turn of the 20th century. At that time, a dependable east-west rail route over the Continental Divide was desperately needed to connect Denver with the resources and markets on the Western Slope. It was impossible to get heavy commercial products like cattle, coal and lumber over the high passes in the wintertime. The Rio Grande line via the Royal Gorge to the south and the Union Pacific line to the north were considered too far away to offer a practical solution.

In 1902, David Moffat Jr., a banker and owner of the Denver Northwestern & Pacific Railway that ran up Boulder Canyon northwest of the city, was successful in finding a rail route west over the Divide. Two years later the first train of the Denver & Salt Lake Railroad crossed the Continental Divide at Corona (Rollins Pass) at 11,660 feet above sea level, thus becoming the highest railroad in the country. But the



over-the-top line ---affectionately called Hell Hill -- was besieged by blizzards and blocked by snowdrifts for days at a time. Forty-one percent of the railroad's operating expense was spent in fighting the elements and clearing the tracks. To make the 23 -mile trip over Hell Hill required 15 tons of coal be shoveled into the engine by the locomotive fireman.

The heavy upkeep expenses sent David Moffat's railroad into bankruptcy in 1911. The pioneer builder died without seeing his railroad extended any farther than Kremling.

The need for a tunnel underneath the Divide was universally acknowledged, but it would be over a decade before the Colorado legislature appropriated the funds to underwrite the construction and another four years for the tunnel to be built.

The story of the Winter Park Ski Train begins in the late 1920s with the completion of the Moffat Tunnel that bored 6.2 miles through the mountainous barrier of the Continental Divide at an altitude of 9,239 feet at its apex.

On February 25, 1928, a Golden Spike was driven at the East Portal. Notable dignitaries made speeches and the first train made its historic way through the tunnel. Railroaders were fond of saying that the tunnel took 23 miles off the route and 23 days off the schedule. Not only did it provide safer and faster transportation for commerce, it also opened up the Western Slope for winter recreation.

Enter **Graeme McGowan, one of the founders of the Arlberg Club, organized specifically to advance the art of alpine skiing rather than Nordic. He had begun to explore and study comparative snow conditions on the Eastern and Western slopes of the Continental Divide and came to the conclusion that the best snow and terrain lay on the Western Slope in the Berthoud/West Portal area. In 1928 McGowan bought the old Moffat Tunnel staff building at West Portal as a warming hut for the new ski club.

So it was that the Arlberg members and other recreational downhill skiers regularly boarded the Denver & Salt Lake train in Denver to access the vast snowy slopes emanating from Berthoud Pass. Jim Creek Ridge, Current Creek slopes and the Mary Jane Trail were popular. At that time travel over Berthoud Pass by car during the winter was slow and dangerous if not impossible. (Berthoud Pass wasn't plowed open on a regular basis until the winter of 1932-1933.)

The only trouble with the train was that it had to maintain a schedule and was averse to making unscheduled stops. Sometimes the conductor could be persuaded to stop the train after emerging from the tunnel, but usually the train simply slowed down and skiers had to jump for it.



1936 ushered in the golden age of snow trains in Colorado. The *Rocky Mountain News* sponsored the first snow train on the Denver & Salt Lake line to the 25th Annual Western Ski Tournament in Hot Sulphur Springs. Over 2,000 tickets were sold at \$1.75 each. The turnout was so great that the *Rocky* scheduled another snow train the following week to Steamboat Springs—this one with overnight Pullman service. Other trains were being called into service also. In 1938 The Denver & Rio Grande Western offered overnight service to Aspen via the Royal Gorge Route. That same year the D&RGW ran 147 skiers from Gunnison to meet 408 skiers from Salida for a days' outing on Marshall Pass. Alamosa ran two special coaches filled with skiers who found good snow near the D&RGW tracks at the summit of Cumbres Pass.

In 1938, the Denver & Salt Lake Railroad built a new depot at West Portal, complete with a waxing room. The following year **Frank Buckley, the Winter Sports Promotion Agent for the Denver & Salt Lake Railway, organized the Eskimo Ski Club so that Denver kids could learn how to ski. Then he made arrangements with the D&SL to carry some 300 of his protégés to Winter Park on Saturdays and Sundays.

The train was discontinued during World War II, but resumed in 1945 with Frank Buckley and **Gordy Wren running the ski school at Winter Park. In 1946 the old steam engines were replaced with diesel and the Denver & Rio Grande Western took over the line.

The railroad ran 33 ski trains during the winter of 1955 –1956, coordinating the departure times to connect with the California Zephyr and the Denver Zephyr. But it was a time when passenger service was being phased out across the country. Carrying freight paid off; passengers did not. Still, as late as 1967 the Winter Park ski trains were turning a profit for the line. But the service came at a price. The '60s kids were one rowdy bunch. Stories are legion about them riding outside the cars, climbing on the roof, having

food fights, littering, and smoking cigarettes. In 1960 one brash youngster pulled the emergency brake when the train was traveling at 40 mph causing a coach to suffer a broken coupler and steam line. A newspaper account described the ski train as a kamikaze mission. Finally three deputy sheriffs were assigned to the train to help out parents and the Eskimo Ski Club supervisors.

Through those years the train unloaded passengers at Winter Park and then continued on to Tabernash where it turned on the wye and returned to the siding at Winter Park for the day. The children were able to return to their coaches to eat lunch and use the bathroom facilities. But the Law Department of the railroad grew increasingly nervous because passengers had to cross the mainline tracks to get to the train. Finally the decision was made to leave the train in Tabernash for the day until it was time for the return trip.



In 1984 Philip Anschutz of AnSCO Investment Company purchased the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad and upgraded the worn and battered ski train with new lounge chairs and high speed Tempo cars. The 50th anniversary of the train was observed in 1986 with some of the 70-year old original cars still in use. They were described as “rusty, beat-up, uncarpeted, steam-heated coaches with original green velvet flop-over seats with narrow brass hat racks overhead.” Undoubtedly some members of the Colorado Ski Museum remember those antique cars with nostalgia.

The next year after 18 months of negotiations between the railroad, Amtrak, the Winter Park Resort, the town of Winter Park and the town of Fraser, Amtrak made its first stop in Fraser. The historic day was observed by a ceremony and ribbon cutting. **Jerry Groszold, president of the Winter Park Resort who had spearheaded the efforts for passenger service, told the crowd, “We are very pleased and excited to become the most easily accessible ski area via train service in North America.”

For the past 25 years passengers sat back in the comfort of their recliner chairs and enjoyed some of the finest scenery in the world. A milepost guide pointed out historic remnants of the old railroad and engineering feats needed to gain 4,000 feet of altitude over rough terrain. The train passed through 31 tunnels including the 6.2 mile long Moffat Tunnel under the Continental Divide. After the 57-mile journey, it emerged from the West Portal to let skiers off at the base of the Winter Park ski area. After an exhilarating day on the slopes, skiers and boarders enjoyed the two-hour ride home without the hassle of negotiating the curves of Berthoud Pass and bumper-to-bumper traffic on Interstate 70. Riders will always fondly remember relaxing in the club car or lounge over a beer or glass of wine capping off a perfect day.

***denotes Colorado Hall of Fame*

SOURCES

The Ski Train by Steve Patterson and Kenton Forrest, copyright 1995 by the Colorado Railroad Historical Foundations, Inc. Available at the Colorado Ski Museum Resource Center.

Also the first edition of this book published in 1984 is also available at the Colorado Ski Museum Resource Center.

Winter Park: Colorado's Favorite for Fifty Years 1940 – 1990, Winter Park Recreational Association, 1989. Available at CSMRC

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