

## 22 Years at Vail

Bob Parker retired this year from a long, distinguished and unusual career at Vail. He looks back on the resort's history and his part in it.

by Pam Conklin

*In a bar in Chamonix, France, members of the press, on hand to cover the 1962 World Championships, are socializing on the eve of the race. Bob Parker, editor of Sking Magazine, is among them and is handed a note by a bell-boy.*

*"Come up to my room," is the terse comment of the note, signed Merrill Hastings, Parker's boss. Hastings had a strict policy against mixing with competing magazine staffs in the ski field.*

*Parker sends a reply: "As soon as I finish my drink."*

*A second note from Hastings follows. Eventually, Parker goes to Hastings' room and, reminded of the company policy, is warned that employment termination could result if he continues to flaunt the rules. Parker quits on the spot.*

*The next morning Parker sends a cable to Pete Seibert who, a few years before, had offered him a job when he was "ready to work for Vail." Seibert had visited the Denver based Skiing offices and told Parker about a mountain he and Earl Eaton had discovered. It had a 3,000 foot vertical drop and 360 degree exposure. There was private land at the base of the mountain, good water and utilities, excellent snow and it was 100 miles from Denver.*

*Seibert cabled back: "You start work on receipt of this cable. Proceed to Lausanne, Switzerland, where further instructions will await you at Bell Gondola." A confirming telephone conversation followed. Bob Parker was to be the assistant general manager and publicity director for a new resort called Vail.*

Robert W. Parker, 61, one of the founders of Vail, Colorado, retired this year from his position as senior vice president/operations. He plans to pursue long-time interests, one of which is archeology (he wants to study Stone Age Man). Parker also would like to work as a freelance writer and photographer.

"Bob's going to work for Vail Associates three months of the year," says Harry Frampton, company president. "He'll continue to chair the Vail Valley Foundation which is responsible for the World Forum and the Jerry Ford Cup. He'll continue to chair and be chief organizer of the annual Aerial Tramway seminar. He'll work as an advisor to Larry Lichliter, who assumes the operations responsibility for Vail Mountain and Beaver Creek. Finally, he'll assist Mark Smith and myself in marketing.

"Bob has been tremendously helpful to me with his incredible insight into the industry, the company and the community. He understands the subtleties of those various groups. He's been almost like a mentor.

"He's a part of the glue that has made Vail Associates and its mountain operations. There's been a lot of turnover in the company and he has remained a stabilizing influence."

### Getting on Skis

It is hard to believe that Bob Parker is leaving Vail Associates. He is the only remaining original employee who has



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been on their payroll since 1962. He has left his mark, both on that resort and on the ski and mountain resort industry.

Parker is a "survivor," in all senses of the word. Some of his peers, who have floated around the ski business, admire his ability to survive in one place for 22 years and four administrations. Some of the young turks deride that quality, but as they bounce even harder throughout the industry, their callous assessment of Parker takes on a hollow ring. Twenty-two years later, Parker is still referred to by his peers and associates as "the dean of ski area marketing," and as the person who "put Vail on the map."

Born in Evanston, Illinois, Parker grew up in New York, Wisconsin and Massachusetts. He attended St. Lawrence University for one year (1940-41) and in 1942 enlisted in the Army, eventually becoming part of the 10th Mountain Division ski troops who trained at Camp Hale, Colorado. He saw action in the Aleutians and in Italy during World War II, was awarded a Bronze Star with Oak Cluster and was discharged in 1945.

While a student at the University of Washington, Parker worked as a professional ski patroller in Aspen and at Stevens Pass, Washington, and as a licensed mountain guide in Washington and Wyoming. Post-graduate work was done at the University of Grenoble, France, where Parker studied French and graduated from the French

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National Alpine School Instructors' course in Chamonix in 1950. He toured and raced in Europe from 1949 to 1954, and worked as an education advisor with the U.S. Forces in Austria. In 1955, Parker joined the staff of *Skiing Magazine* and was the publication's editor from 1957 to 1962.

"Beside my father and uncle," says Parker, "one of my early teachers was Merrill Hastings." Hastings, the publisher of *Skiing* was considered by many to be "difficult." Adds Parker: "Perversely, his insistence on quality, detail and solid research was a factor in my development."

#### Early Vail

On March 2, 1962, Pete Seibert hired Bob Parker as the assistant general manager and publicity director for Vail.

"We really didn't know what we were doing," says Parker. "The existing 'name' resorts—Aspen, Stowe, Sun Valley, Squaw Valley, Alta and Mount Snow—might have had 1,000 to 2,000 skiers on their mountain on any given day. Few had many guest beds. There was no way to project or predict what would happen to the ski industry. If we

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"We expected to operate on a 'cozy' Squaw Valley scale. But something was happening that none of us understood the implications of. There are a serendipity around the early '60's events, starting with the Olympics on TV which gave skiing visibility and glamor. Airlines, realizing that business traffic wouldn't pay all their expenses, got interested in destination resorts in Europe, Hawaii and the Caribbean. The Rockies and the ski resorts offered a viable alternative. We were dealing with the long haul, affluent, businessperson on vacation.

"Bob and Barbara Parker both provided a 'very human' stability to the young community of Vail," says Chuck Lewis, early vice president of Vail Associates who went on to build Copper Mountain and currently is a general partner with Boettcher & Company, an investment banking firm. "Barb worked as hard as he did at that, and I think that was as important a contribution (to Vail) as well."

Parker doesn't talk about the early projects. He talks about the early people in Vail who worked together when the streets were still dirt and Barbara was the postmistress.

"Pete Seibert was a guru. Other incredible people were involved in Vail: Audie Kuehn, Dick & Blanche Hauserman, Bill Whiteford, Larry and Marge Burdick (the Red Lion), Ted (first mayor) and Nancy Kindel, Pepl and Sheika Grams-hammer, Dave and Renee Gorsuch, Roger Staub ("hard to know him and then to lose him"), Paul Bacon ("manager of Vail's racing program who wrote the bible of modern race organization and died two years later"), Earl Eaton ("the little known discoverer of Vail Mountain who was a Kit Carson type"), George Knox who founded *The Vail Trail*, John Dobson (mayor) and Cissy Dobson (who both made the Vail Interfaith Chapel a reality), Gordon Brittain (same for the hospital), Terry Minger (a foresighted and creative town manager who left a permanent imprint on Vail), Bill Brown (who built Vail Mountain) and Don Almond ("the first modern mountain operations manager in the ski business").

But there were some highlights of Vail's early years in which Parker takes pride. Three of five international team races, starting in 1965, were held at Vail; the other two at Sun Valley.

"In 1964, the formation of the Vail Resort Association

was another high. Bringing together people of similar interest has always been my *modus operandi*. No one individual entity and/or resort can go it alone in the national and international marketplace. It's been proven time and time again. Cyclically, individual resorts will say they don't need others. It doesn't work.

"Another high point was the formation of the Town of Vail. The company had to realize we were all involved in much more than our jobs. The cost of maintaining the community infrastructure was tremendous. In 1966 we formed a town when it became clear that we couldn't afford running a town and a mountain as well."

Parker was the zoning chair during the first town board and has continued to be a member of the architectural control committee. Being the liaison between the company and suppliers—power, gas, highway, telephone and post office—led to interesting confrontations.

"I designed the gas distribution service for the town. I didn't like the aesthetics of propane tanks outside buildings, so we set up a central storage system which led to an underground piping system that stands today."

He negotiated, and achieved, the Vail postmark with the U.S. Post Office, when Vail was a substation of Minturn, Colorado. He also negotiated the Vail telephone exchange.

"The growth of Vail was a continuing satisfaction. Hotels came on one by one. LionsHead was a terrific shot in the arm because it increased both mountain capacity and the bed base. We had early financing difficulties, but it

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proved to be a wise expansion in the long run. It was Peter's (Seibert) whole thing and it led to our 'Vail - More Than Ever' campaign."

Parker adds that the Olympic site designation in 1972 was an "incredible high," only to have the Olympics rejected by Colorado voters in 1974. "Primarily we saw it as a recognition of Vail's position on the international racing scene. But, when the voters turned down the Olympics it probably added 10 years to our lives and a lot of quality to our product.

"The Olympics in the U.S. led us to a closer relationship with Bob Beattie's U.S. Ski Team and the USSA. It made promotions possible which resulted in incredible publicity windfalls because no one else was doing them."

#### Problems and Conflicts

Conversely, Beaver Creek, Vail's sister resort, would have been built a lot faster and in an "up" market, he says.

"I drew tremendous satisfaction in the development of Beaver Creek, particularly in turning the situation around when Colorado Governor Lamm declared a moratorium on further ski area development at the time," says Parker. "It was a high point for me because we resolved the Beaver Creek issues in a constructive and cooperative manner by bringing all parties to the table, sitting down and thrashing out the issues. The State, the U.S. Forest Service, the environmental community, the local community and Vail Associates, with Beaver Creek as a testing ground developed the current Colorado Joint Review Process which is utilized in all resort development. We were able to de-

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liver the environmentally sensitive, quality product we said we would. That gave me tremendous satisfaction."

Visibly missing from the host of dignitaries at the Beaver Creek opening ceremony that included Governor Lamm, former President Ford and a new president of Vail Associates, Jack Marshall, was Bob Parker. To those who knew the seven-year history preceding that day and who wondered at the lack of appreciation and acknowledgment, he was his usual gracious, diplomatic self. It is not Parker's style to carp.

But Parker isn't afraid to go against the grain.

"In the early years I frequently was in conflict with the company I worked for. I developed credibility because I did stand my ground on the issues that I thought were good for the product and the community as a whole, rather than the self interest of the company. For instance, I opposed the sale for development of the parking lots in Vail and LionsHead. We would be in real trouble today if that land had been developed."

And it was Parker vs. the U.S. government—a suit that established case law—in a local effort that joined environmental organizations, the Vail community and the ski company in a successful fight to save the Eagles' Nest Wilderness. Vail Associates also joined the effort to keep the I-70 highway corridor out of primitive/wilderness areas. To Parker's knowledge, it is the first time that a ski company joined environmental organizations on one side of major controversies.

Tragedy struck Vail in 1976 when a gondola accident killed four skiers and seriously injured another eight people.

"I felt Vail handled that tragedy professionally—particularly because of the incredible heroism of our ski patrol," says Parker. "That tragedy made the company stronger and more united than before and the public responded with full confidence in us and our facilities. Positive things came out of that accident in terms of lift safety, including the annual Vail Aerial Tramway and Ski Safety Seminar."

#### Joint Efforts

Parker's philosophy of accomplishing common goals through joint efforts resulted in the formation of two of the most successful ski marketing efforts ever developed: the creation of Colorado Ski Country USA and Ski the Rockies.

Colorado Ski Country USA was a joint effort spearheaded by Steve Knowlton in 1963. "We donated the name I had coined to promote Vail," says Parker. "The creation of CSCUSA made us feel a part of a dynamic and forward-looking industry which had up until then been fractionized because it was run by fiercely independent individuals."

Today, CSCUSA is the lobbying and marketing arm of the Colorado ski industry, providing a number of guest services from airport information booths and daily snow reports to daily ski buses and other joint area promotions as well as other trade association functions.

A former chair of CSCUSA, Parker is currently on the board of trustees and recently spearheaded the effort that produced a major economic impact study, "The Contribution of Skiing to the Colorado Economy," prepared for CSCUSA by Browne, Bortz & Coddington and H. Rubenstein & Company. Parker says he had been lobbying CSCUSA to produce such a study for the past 12 years and was told it wasn't statistically possible or within the purview of statistical research companies. Dealing with both the primary and secondary impacts of the ski industry on the state, Parker says the study has proved to be a useful tool in communicating with the state government and the Denver business community. He calls it a landmark in the industry.

"Through his involvement in CSCUSA, Parker gave a great deal of input to marketing and operations activities," says Chuck Lewis. "He was always future-thinking."

In 1968, a group of Rocky Mountain resort represent-

atives who had participated in a Western Airlines promotion tour met in Park City, Utah, to explore the idea of a joint marketing effort.

"Colorado Ski Country was just involved in publicity," says Parker. "It was clear that they weren't the right platform. We needed to become more than a one-airline, one-state industry if we were really going to impact the big metropolitan markets and to compete with Europe."

Herman Kretschmer, one of the early Ski the Rockies' group from Taos, New Mexico, says: "He, along with Ernie (Blake), singlehandedly created the development of Western skiing as a modern recreation by tying marketing with the sport. Both were very much aware that more than a sport was involved. Up to then, it was a rich man's or ski bum's hobby. Bob brought skiing into the travel industry—he's a true pioneer."

"The camaraderie among the marketing people in the early days of Ski the Rockies, thanks to Bob, was special. I don't think we'll ever see it again. Any of us would take over for one of our members on the road and do a job for that other resort because of that close relationship. A lot of the stuff everyone in this business knows about marketing they learned from Bob Parker. He created a new profession—ski resort marketing."

#### Time for Assessment

"Vail can look forward to quality growth that will keep it competing for years to come," says Parker. "Its potential lies in more efficient utilization of existing beds and of the shoulder-seasons—January, low season and summer."

"I think there is a youth, middle age and old age in the community, just as there is in human beings. I don't think Vail has the individual dynamism of its early years but I feel very good about the willingness, will and energy that Vailites currently show with respect to maintaining and improving the quality of the community. The community action plan as managed by the town planning department is potentially a tremendous force for good in terms of arresting the tendency for the community to be self-satisfied and not deal with necessary maintenance and improvements."

Beyond Vail, which has been his primary concern, but not sole interest, over these 22 years, Parker has some words of wisdom about the sport of skiing and the ski industry:

"In the 1960's, people began perceiving skiing as something other than a cold, difficult and dangerous sport. Our sport started to grow."

"Today, it would be a serious mistake to turn our backs on all the things we have going for the sport. We should build on our strengths and not try to change the perception of skiing."

"We have fallen into the trap of thinking about our sport as a product and promoting and marketing it as a product. We had to do that, but in doing so we forgot what the sport is about. We must continue to treat skiing as a product, but we must also continue to enhance those key attractions unique to the sport."

"Skiing means fun, excitement, good looking, healthy, compatible people, comfort, apres ski, fine food and the *gemutlich* spirit of a ski community."

"Those are the reasons people ski. There's always room for the ultimate challenge, but those are occasional special events—skiing Everest, speed skiing—which have nothing to do with the main event—this warm, friendly, fun activity called skiing. There is room for the technology buffs, but the emphasis has to be on the ease, accessibility and the short time involved in becoming a skier."

"If there's one thing that we in skiing must never forget, it is to keep the fun and friendliness in our sport. The first thing that probably attracted all of us—beside the physical exhilaration—was the feeling of being among a special kind of people. The extent that we manage to preserve that feeling will determine our continued success." ■