

## First Ski Ascent of Mt. Whitney

### A First Account

By

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You may have read it in the News Papers or heard it on the Radio, 24 years ago, that Mount Whitney was climbed [sic] on ski's for the first time, yet you never heard the actual account how it felt to ski the loftiest peak on the continental United States... Since I still feel the bone jarring shock I received, when the snow sheet sheered away from the upsoaring Whitney Pass slope, carrying me helplessly downward with ever increasing speed and only an icecapped protruding bolder [sic] stopped me with my outstretched ski's, pain fully- but saving me from the uncertainty of a fatal destination down way below me. The memory is still with me, like it would have happened only yesterday.

Mt. Whitney towers fourteen thousand four hundred and ninety-five [sic] feet high with its rugged structure over the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, reaching with its jagged teeth, like an Alpine spectacle into the blue Californian sky. Not only its enormous height is outstanding, but also the unique location of it's upthrusting peak guarding over the lowest spot of North America, Death Valley Monument, being only thirty miles away and two hundred and seventy nine feet below sea level. Highway 395, connecting Mexico with Canada via the United States, edges along side this sky-scraping rockwalls of the Sierras through the town of Long Pine on the foot of the giant mountain. Outside of Lone Pine the Alabama Hills have lent, for almost half a century, their sun scorched rocks to the "Westerns" of Hollywood movie makers, with Bill Boyd, Randolph Scott and other movie heros blazing their guns at badmen, and belligerent Indian tribes.

At the end of the motor road, which leads from Line Pine up to Whitney Portal, early pioneer ski tow operators tried their luck for winter sports with a make-shift installation, only to have it be taken out the very first year by an avalanche from the unpredictable and abrupt walls risen from the mountain. The contrast of nature is unique and the most extreme of any in the world.

Fresh over from the European Alps I was fascinated by the awesome site of the setting... While driving along Highway 395 and exploring the High Sierra Mountain world for it's beauty and potential for ski resort developments, the lure of the New Worlds highest peak, Mt. Whitney did quickly take hold of me.

..It didn't take me long to find two enthusiastic ski mountaineers from the old country, Ernest and his wife Schatzi Wood, who promised to take the climb with me.... Skiing in those days was still in it's infancy in this country; the only skis available in all Southern California, were about a dozen old pairs displayed in the basement of the late Tyler VanDegrift's Shoe store in Los Angeles. I was fortunate to run into this couple of well seasoned skiers, who had taken lessons from me at McGee and Mammoth Mt. In order to catch up on the latest ski technique I promoted, much to the disgust of the already established Austrian ski instructors, such as Hans Hauser, Friedel Pfeiffer, Otto Lang, Lugi Feuger, Sigi Engel and Hannes Schroll, the latter who called me the stiff English man, because

I didn't rotate, but skied with my hips in comma position fashion, as today, the "New Austrians" do. It was all for fun and arguments at those days and it has never changed since men have given their hearts to the greatest sport of them all, skiing!

In the first week of April 1939, Ernest, Schatzi and myself drove up to Whitney Portal to spend the night in the Cabin of former Whitney Pack Station operator Ted Cook. Schatzi went to work in her greatest skill - - - cooking - - - which unfortunately sabotaged our otherwise well-planned expedition. She stuffed Ernest and me all evening. Ernest and me with her German and Swiss culinaryies to a point that it interfered with our so necessary sleep before the great ascent. And not enough of this sort of treat, she baked her famous cookies, so well known throughout World War Two, since they reached into every barracks to her ski friends, then training at Camp Hale, Colorado and followed up clear up to the Apenin Mountains in Italy where we drove the Germans down into the Po Valley... So at day break, Ernest felt already dizzy and could hardly lift the heavy Rucksack, stuffed with our utmost needs and more cookies. On his shoulders...Only constant coaxing got Ernest to the half way mark, to the 12,039 ft. high upthrusting Whitney Pass slope.... He got stranded on a big boulder so Schatzi and I left him with Rucksack and the remainder of the cookies. We decided to go on higher to see what it would look like up there and to make use of the time we had left of a good day. We side-stepped, up and up, in a steep traverse and kick-turns and soon our sick Ernest became then just a speck in the snow way down far below.... Our time was up, and with a last gasping look at the huge rock pillars which form the jagged teeth of the spectacular mountain we had to decide to take our climbing skins off the bottom of the skis and in no time we were swinging down the immense expansion of the slope to join a well rested Ernest again.... The three of us went in good spirits for the homeward run, sneaking and wedeling between boulders, shussing straight down into transitions and winding turns through the lower heavily timbered canyon.... When night set in, we had reached the cabin and packed up to drive through the peaceful Alabama Hills of badman movie land into the town of Lone Pine. After thanking our friend Ted Cook for the convenience of his cabin and the "cookstove" we parked.

Of course I was not satisfied with this exploration of the mountain, whose height I didn't just want to gaze up, but look down also...Just about ten days later I set out again, this time alone, free as a bird and in a spartanic way...No cookies, just a pound of smoked bacon, chocolate bars, my camera and a sleeping bag. I drove up to Whitney Portal early after noon, parked the car and started to hike up the timbered canyon to each the flat of Outpost camp, a sheltered meadow at 10,350 ft elevation and timber line... Still well covered with a hard snow blanket in April. I rolled up my sleeping bag under a projecting boulder, cut some slices of bacon and deserted it off with a chocolate bar, and slept like a log under the star spangled sky. I rolled out of my bag at dawn, to be greeted by the haircurling cries of some roving coyotes, who were looking for the remnants of early snowstorm-trapped deer carcasses... Since I felt like a million dollars I proceeds, after a little snack the same as my "dinner" the night before, up a couloir formed by a frozen, snowcovered stream through the fractured rocks and boulders.... I shortcutted as much as I could and the snow-gripping furhairs of my seal skin climbers on the bottom of my skis would allow me to do so. Soon I reached the bottom of the upsoaring Whitney Pass slope again, the spot where only ten days before Ernest got stranded.... I started the tedious trek up the enormous slope. A semicircular gauge like a cirques many times as long and much steeper and wider than Tuckermans Ravine, side stepping, foot by foot in a very steep traverse, kickturning and traversing in the opposite way and against the other way... I gained more and more height on recently fallen snow blanket about a foot thick over hard-frozen spring snow...When I gained about nine hundred feet of elevation of the thirteen hundred feet rising incline,

the snow sheet of new snow lost its grip on the hardfrozen base, and my weight and its own made it sheer off, and down I went, snow blanket and all, no grips to hold, spreading my skis in front of me in despair, hoping that they with my extended legs would find some hold or grip...But everything slid, down, down from where I came up.... The helpless feeling was more frightening than the gazing depth. Yet very low down finally a protruding iceglared boulder jarred my skis and bones to a sudden and welcome stop. I took a look at my skis and the fatally looming up bottom of the slope with its strewn boulders about. I was glad my skis didn't break, yet I was hurting. I decided to take the climbers off the bottom of my skis, so I would have the full benefit of metal edges and a thinner ski to slam through the loose snow into the hard surface of the hard snowpack underneath. And of course up I went again. Sidestep by sidestep, more careful and determined. I reached finally the Crest of the slope, some 13,300 ft. high, it's the point where one for the first time looks over into the West side of the mountain massive where it plunges down into a deep cut valley floor.

Leaving the East slopes behind me, the west side of the mountain was already partly bare of snow, on account of the strong sun and warm westerly winds which are carried from the Pacific Ocean over the array of multiple other high Sierra Nevada Peaks towards the pinacled West walls of the Giant itself. I had to follow a small icy snow ribbon, traversing the whole length of the sea-saw jagged ridge towards the final peak. A slip from the ribbon could have landed me into treacherous bare rock pinacles pointing menacingly up to me.

Every so often the jagged teeth would open up, window like, for a most awesome view of depth down the West side of the face and way over to the low, low sand lands of Death Valley Monument. I had to take my skis off at times, fortunately I had at that time Swiss Army experimental skis, which folded up in the middle and I could strap over my back, to have my hands and feet free, to hang on to hard to pass rocks and ice. But soon the Famous Rockshelter 14,496 ft elevation on top of Whitney came in sight. In front of it, I placed my camera on a rock, took my ski pole as means of reaching the release of my camera and got a picture of my feet and the shelter as an everlasting reminiscence. There was still a short ledge behind the Rockhouse, yet a glazed icecrust covered this dome like part with an almost thirteenth thousand sheer drop on either side. Not having brought crampons along for this few more feet to go, I was satisfied where I stood and got ready for the payoff, the descent of the mountain.

The first stretch down along the Crest was not much different from the ascent, skis on, skis off, using hands and feet, yet much faster where ever I could let the skis run freely. But once reaching the crest of the pass slope, the gigantic flight started. Down the unobstructed part of the giant headwall of the cirques, a single snow-wall of 1,260 ft elevation drop in itself. I boomed it in one single continuous set of sweeping turns, having sliding snow and pulvery crystal smoke following and trailing behind me, clear down to the bottom of the pass. Whenever the loose upper snow cover was an extreme hazard toiling upwards, downhill I could outrun the elements and nature, I was faster on my skis, then the sliding pieces of the snow sheet breaking up again under the impact and pressure of my turns.

It may have taken me a good two to three hours up this incline. I never consult my watch while climbing, it takes the feel away from natural movement, makes one anxious and impatient. I go with the sun and shadows, its more important than a time piece, since snow changes its texture constantly with the sun, shadows and freezes of the nights. But my downhill flight seemed like a minute or so of exalting elation. I kept right on going since the sun had left this side of the mountain

long ago, and reached after a long wiefing and wedeling run through the low boulder infested canyon and Out Post Flat where I left my sleeping bag and Packsack. I took another bite from the “balast” left of my provision, packed my bad and pushed through the flats down into the heavily forested, steep canyon. The by this time appearing moon, casted the shadows of the trees and reflected silvery blue on the snow, making the last stretch a fairy tale like descent.

In Memory:

Schatzi Wood has left us all NOW, but she really lives on in out mind like never gone.