Sun Valley Rises

THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN SHANGRI-LA

BY LORI KNOWLES

Photo: courtesy of Sun Valley Resort

VALLEY HIGHS
"Sun Valley is among the iconic sites a skier should visit at least once in a lifetime..."

"WHEN YOU GET TO SUN VALLEY YOUR EYES SHOULD POP OPEN. THERE ISN'T A SINGLE THING THAT I COULD WISH FOR THAT HASN'T BEEN PROVIDED."
— AVERELL HARRIMAN

Clint Eastwood once wrote Sun Valley doesn't have to work hard to be as good as it is. "It's just right there in front of you," he said. "It doesn't have to work to prove something, to prove anything." Eastwood was comparing the ski resort to actors he admired—actors who weren't boastful or arrogant or aggressive. Actors who were—who are—simply *good*.

His words came as part of a foreword to Van Gorden Sauter's splendid, immense tome titled *The Sun Valley Story* written to commemorate the resort's 75th anniversary. The pages display a pictorial history, not just of a skier's own private Idaho, but of pop culture itself. Marilyn Monroe in Sun Valley. Lucille Ball in Sun Valley. Clark Gable and Ingrid Bergman and Gary Cooper in Sun Valley. Even Eastwood filmed *Pale Rider* in the Boulder Mountains, very near Sun Valley.

Eastwood's foreword captures the essence of the place. Visit Sun Valley today—stand in the shadow of its brawny Bald Mountain, look out over the region's vast, snow-laden plains, listen to the current of Big Wood River rush within feet of the ski area's base—and you'll connect with the director's claims. Sun Valley doesn't have anything to prove. It really is simply good.

Sun Valley wasn't always a natural. There was a time when the resort had to push, manipulate and sell itself hard. The work started with a very wealthy man: Averell Harriman. In *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell lists Averell's father as the 53rd richest human being of all time: Edward Henry Harriman, whose source of wealth came from Union Pacific Railroad, is ranked up there with Cleopatra and John D. Rockefeller, and was only three steps behind Howard Hughes. In 1935, at age 44, E.H.'s ambitious son Averell, a Yale grad, was at the top of his game. As chairman of his father's railroad, he was in search of fresh, inventive ways to increase ridership on U.P. Build a ski resort, he must have reasoned. Find a snow-laden whistle stop in the American West not unlike St.Anton, Davos, or St. Moritz. Construct a hotel. String up a ski lift. Invite celebrities. Create a spectacle. Splash the fun on the cover of *Life* magazine. Americans will ride U.P.'s rails to experience it for themselves.

As Sun Valley Resort's current publicity machine tells it, Harriman hired a royal Count, no less, to search out a location for his "American Shangri-La." Count Felix Schaffgotsch, an erect, privileged, moderately-talented skier of Austrian nobility (one who later was rumored to have fought on World War II's Russian Front on the side of the Nazis) somehow convinced Harriman he could—he *would*—locate the perfect place. He rode U.P.'s rails for long winter days in the 1930s, hopping off in Western towns, gliding around on his languid and long, all-wood skis, hoping to make good on his promise. Then, finally, he came upon it: Ketchum, Idaho. He wired Harriman: "This combines more delightful features than any place I have ever seen in Switzerland, Austria or the U.S. for a winter resort."

And so it began. Harriman built a railside ski resort. On the outskirts of Ketchum, he poured oceans of U.P. money into its creation. In seven months he built a pool, a lodge, a dining room serving haute cuisine, a party space for a nightly orchestra, and developed a ski hill—all in the middle of nowhere. "When you get to Sun Valley," Harriman reasoned, "your eyes should pop open. There isn't a single thing that I could wish for that hasn't been provided."

And that's where the pop culture thing comes in. Harriman was *way* ahead of his time. According to author Van Gorden Sauter, Harriman hired Steve Hannagan, a public relations whiz who'd recently put Miami Beach on America's map of *I-must-be-seen-there* places. In *The Sun Valley Story*, the author credits Hannagan as a man who could elevate an obscure resort "from the slightly mundane into a glamorous, vivacious place, a place to feel smarter and better looking and more compelling than you actually were." The Sun Valley mystique, then, was manufactured. Hannagan came up with the moniker *Sun Valley* for its marketability. He convinced Harriman's engineers to invent an easy way to get up the hill—hence, the invention of the chairlift. Then he hammered Hollywood—beckoning celebrities to the backwoods of Idaho, snapping their photos skiing on Dollar Mountain. Bergman, Gable and Cooper were among the first in a mesmerizing constellation of stars to shine on Sun Valley. The next few decades brought Bing Crosby, Marilyn Monroe, Esther Williams, Janet Leigh, John


Photo: courtesy of Sun Valley Resort


Photo: community library

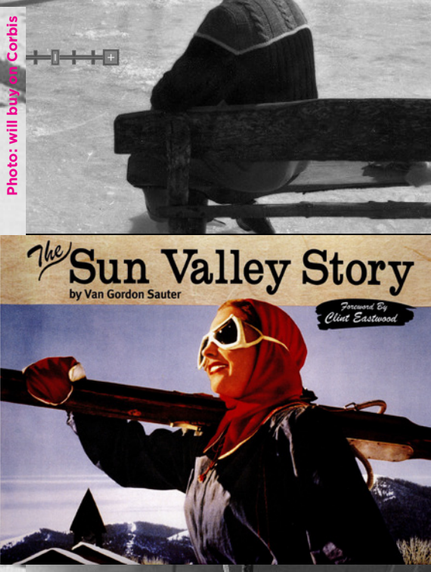

Photo: will buy on Corbis

LOREM IPSUM
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
1. Averell Harriman and Anne Janss. **2.** Lorem ipsum. **3.** Book cover The SunValley Story. **4.** Chair Lift **5.** Poster Union Pacific Railroad. **6.** Circa1946. Mrs. Gary Cooper, Jack Hemingway, Ingrid Bergman, Gary Cooper and Clark Gable.


Photo: courtesy of Sun Valley Resort


Photo: community library

KETCHUM'S WIDE WESTERN STREETS ARE LINED WITH BEAUTIFUL GALLERIES AND SHOPS.

Wayne, David Niven—their early paparazzi photos are visible today in a long hallway at the center of Sun Valley Lodge.

Ah, the Sun Valley Lodge. In 2014 it is much the same as it was when it opened in 1936—a Disney-like collection of snow-draped log buildings. One gets the impression the place was contrived out of someone's imagination as to what a pre-war ski lodge should look like rather than being allowed to evolve naturally. Still, it is wondrous. It is among the iconic sites a skier should visit at least once in a lifetime. Its architecture and grounds ramble much the same way as the outlying Idaho landscape—with log cabins, and split rail fences, and an ice rink that's been hosting ice shows since Steve Hannagan came up with the idea in 1937.

The Lodge is now owned by the Holding family of Salt Lake City. The late Earl Holding and his wife Carol bought it from Bill Janss in 1977. In the Holding's tenure, the family has added spectacles even Hannagan would have approved of—namely the Sun Valley Pavilion, a breezy concert venue capable of hosting the symphony, Garth Brooks concerts, conferences that attract Jeffrey Katzenberg and Mark Zuckerberg. This winter, the Lodge is under construction for updates. Guestrooms, the lobby, the dining room—all of it has gone under the knife. A 20,000-square-foot spa is a new addition, promising relaxation lounges, a yoga studio, and a fitness facility. "Mrs. Holding is personally overseeing the designs for the Lodge renovation," says the resort's website. "No one is more committed to the traditions and history of Sun Valley than she is."

The Lodge certainly has its stories—Ernest Hemingway's final edits for *For Whom The Bell Tolls* in Room 206 being among its most distinguished. But Sun Valley's ski mountains are equally storied. Its alpine facilities have an odd layout. Dollar Mountain was the first to open to skiers—a smooth, undulating, low-rise mountain within minutes of the Lodge that remains unintimidating. Today, beginners go to Dollar, learning how to snowplow and stop on the same terrain that taught Clark Gable.

Those novice skiers eventually graduate to a far more muscular mountain. Bald Mountain—or Baldy—rises to an elevation of more than 9,000 feet, flexing its brawn directly above the town of Ketchum, about 15 minutes by shuttle from Dollar and Sun Valley Lodge. It is a mountain of tree and rock, moguls and glades, bowls filled with dense powder.

This is the Northwest, after all—moisture, moss, and fog mix with the lingering scent of evergreen forest. After a day on the slopes—or perhaps during—skiers fly fish in the Big Wood River that thunders past the base lodge. No wonder Hemingway chose to spend his final days looking upon it. Baldy is a mannish mountain.

Little wonder, too, Baldy has spawned some of America's most ballsy skiers. Dick Durrance, a 17-time U.S. National ski champion, helped cut runs on Bald Mountain. Sun Valley's Gretchen Fraser was the first American to win an Olympic gold in alpine skiing (1948). Picabo Street comes from Sun Valley, a two-time Olympic medalist and the first American woman to win a World Cup Downhill. One can picture Picabo as a precocious, freckle-faced kid, chasing the wind down Mid-River Run—and beating it. Ski movie stars Reggie and Zach Crist cut their teeth on Baldy, too. Reggie, a 10-year U.S. Ski Team member, drove himself hard into the top 20 at the Hahnenkahm, the world's most bodacious race—you do not achieve *that* by skiing green circle runs under the sun.

But there's a genteel side to Baldy, not to worry. Its meandering, old-school ski runs allow you to ski from peak to base—top to bottom—an aspect unheard-of on large-scale mountains, and one that's conducive to loads of practice. There's a slow-skiing zone that flows gently down from Seattle Ridge—a sweet section locals call *Bogner Butte*. The bowls—Christmas, Lefty, Sigi's, Farout—are astounding to look upon as well as to ski. Plus, Sun Valley Resort—owners of both Dollar and Baldy—are in sync with the concept of gracious ski living. Their on-mountain lodges ooze easy Western style and comfort.

Moments away, in the town of Ketchum, it's common to spot a celebrity such as Mariel Hemingway, Barbara Streisand, or Tom Hanks—but few take notice. Wynn Resorts' Steve Wynn has a standing reservation at Cristina's Restaurant. Sun Valley's Intellectual Capital Project recently determined that among Sun Valley's locals there are 136 CEOs, 31 successful venture capitalists, 20 leaders orfounders of tech and internet firms, and 17 leaders of Fortune 500 corporations. The resort is teased for its generous portion of wealthy, age 50-plus skiers. Indeed, Bogner Butte.

Forget captains of industry. There was a time when Sun Valley rose up as a hot spot for, um, *hot doggers*. In the 1970s scores of freestylers hooked up with Ketchum and the ski area. "If you were over 40 you were on your way to the next life," says local Tina Cole. "It was all kids, all the time—doing freestyle contests, building huge kickers, skiing moguls. Everybody was young and it was wonderfully fun. At night we'd wait in line to get into the Pioneer, then we'd get up early and go out and ski and ski and ski."

Cole, then a wide-eyed college-student-turned-ski-pro from Washington state, morphed into a photographer for the hippest of them all: filmmaker Dick Barrymore. Using Sun Valley as a base—scribbling ideas on beer napkins in the Pioneer—Barrymore made some of skiing's grooviest flicks, including *The Last of the Ski Bums*. He filmed the K2 Ski Team hot dogging on Baldy—shorts that now live on YouTube. He married pretty Betsy Glenn, a member of the 1970's Bonne Bell Ski Team. And in his autobiography, *Breaking Even*, Barrymore claimed to have invented the wet T-shirt contest in Sun Valley's Boiler Room bar. In 1972, *Playboy* magazine had fun with that one.

With its number of annual skier visits hovering consistently at 350,000, in this decade at least, Sun Valley is not a busy place. Its Colorado and Utah neighbors in the ski business see much greater numbers. Sun Valley's regional tourism execs seem worried. But while touring the town, one does not get the sense Sun Valley is the spot skiers forgot. Ketchum's wide Western streets are lined with beautiful galleries andshops. Its Knob Hill Inn, a chic boutique hotel, is buzzing with comings and goings. Ketchum's arts community is alive with music and color. Enoteca, Cristina's, Rickshaw, Lefty's Bar and Grill, the Pioneer Saloon—all remain on the very edge of cool. Big Wood skis, MTNApproach and Smith

LOREM IPSUM
Winter
Ketchum
Streets Baldy

Optics call Ketchum home, employing mountain-loving people. And yes, there are kids—loads of them—wearing more Gore-Tex than cashmere.

One of those kids is 22-year-old Wing Tai Barrymore. You'll see him on freeskiing's Dew Tour, or at the X-Games, his loose, casual style in the halfpipe at direct odds with the huge air he can conjure out of nowhere. Born in the hospital on the grounds of Sun Valley Resort, his name, he says, translates to "peaceful forever." Yes, Wing Tai is Dick Barrymore's grandson; he is also rising as a member of Sun Valley's next generation.

And that's the point. Since Sun Valley first rose out of the Idaho wilderness in 1936, this symbolic ski resort has lived many lives; seen many things—swimming pools, movie stars. It has risen, and it has faltered. The cycle is not over yet. Meanwhile, it's at ease. As Clint Eastwood suggests, Sun Valley doesn't have to work to prove anything.

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