Parkite shares American history through skis

For Mark Miller, collection is more than a business. it's a passion for winter

By MONIKA GUENDNER

Of the Record staff

Whatever prompted someone to build a pair of wooden skis almost 20 feet long may be lost to history forever. The skis were used in a parade, pulled behind a horse, and likely manned by two cowboys in full leather

Those cowboys were probably new to skiing, especially the horse-powered variety, which probably gave the parade comic relief, guessed Mark Miller, Parkite, ski aficionado and current owner of the skis.

The long skis are only one of thousands of skis in the Mark Miller Collection, and the history is only one of hundreds that Miller, not of car dealership renown, can retell.

There's the story about one of the world's few metal skis, made by the TEY Manufacturing Corp. in 1948. Three engineers created 1,000 metal skis, smoothing the bottom surface of the ski with electrical tape, said Miller.

The winter of 1947-1948 had notoriously little snow, however, and nobody was skiing. Those first thousand skis became the company's last thousand and they turned their focus to snowmaking.

Miller owns one of only two pairs known to still exist. One ski is on display at the Alf Engen Ski Museum at the Utah Olympic Park; the other finds its home at Southwest

Indian Traders on Main Street.

Chances are, if you're looking at an antique ski in Park City, it went throughMiller.

Miller grew up skiing, strapping on his first pair at four years old. Unlike his sib-lings, however, Miller began to develop an interest in the history and evolution of the sport, encouraged by his grandfather Gordon "Moose" Miller. When Moose died in 1989, Miller's grandmother gave him Moose's 1915 handcrafted skis.

The inheritance turned an interest into a passion.

"After he died, I really went hard core," he said.

It wasn't difficult in his hometown of Orford, N.H. to come across other antique

skis.
"I thought [my grandfather's skis] were the coolest, and then before you know it, I had amassed this collection of hundreds,

His neighbors helped him collect those of the squared-off tip on a pair of the squared-off tip on a pair of



Not all of Mark Miller's collection of more than 3,000 skis, snowshoes, skates, sleds and poles are meant to be sold.

hanging on his wall, they began bringing him Norwegian-made skis or the reason why their old skis and their stories.

"Everybody had a story behind their

I thought [my grandfather's skis]

were the coolest, and then before you know it, I had amassed a collection of

hundreds."

The Mark Miller Collection

Today, Miller is the one who is usually telling the story, whether it's the explanation

bamboo was a popular choice for ski poles.
The stories behind the equipment mean as much to Miller as the antiques

themselves.

Today, Miller has more than 3,000 pairs of skis, as well as a collection of ice skates, snowshoes and sleds. Most of that collection is for sale, but those early skis, from his neighbors and grandfather, are still at - Mark Miller home or on display around the

country, but not for sale.

People gravitate to the rows of antique skis, snowshoes and sleds in Southwest Indian

Traders, where Miller has the largest display of his collection. Individual pairs on display in restaurants, stores, hotels and homes can get just as much attention.

Miller has prepared several displays in stores, summarizing the history of skiing. Everything from a 1910 shaped ski to an old fence post fashioned into a ski recounts the history of a mode of transportation that turned into a sport.

People early in the century understood that a wider shovel could keep them afloat better on the snow, explained Miller, but it was unlikely there were doing any of the carving that parabolic skis are designed for

Miller has been collecting and selling skis and other winter sports equipment since 1990, and one thing is obvious - his collection is a labor of love.

His dedication causes him to shy away from collections that have been over-worked with modern-day repairs or refinishing, and

Please see Skis, A24

of 2003 business stories All things change in Top

Stores left, laws tightened (and loosened) and attitudes brightened as Parkites worked through the past year

By MONIKA GUENDNER

2003 proved to be mostly positive for

Starbucks closed its Main Street location, despite overall growth in the company and a recent expansion to Park Avenue. The company gave no reason for not renewing its

Butcher's Chop House & Bar.

4. Everybody's predicting a great season.

Merchants, across the area started predicting that the 2003-2004 winter season would be the Big One soon after the 2002 Winter Olympics were over. Whether they were stellar forecasters or just lucky is debatable, but they seem to be on arread as forecasters. able, but they seem to be on target - so far

The Utah liquor laws received their first major overhaul since 1990-1991, but that didn't mean that every Park City business owner felt the state was moving into the 21st

Century.
While restaurants and banquet halls saw some improvements in the rules, such as

Wed/Thurs/Fri, December 519 Skis reflect trends, art

Continued from A-23

he refuses to consider buying or sell-

ing reproductions. Dirt, however, doesn't scare him. Many of the antiques were dug out of barns, haylofts and shacks, cov-

ered in grime, dirt and bird drop-

The skis are refinished as close to their original condition as possible, which sometimes requires research and a hunt for early photographs.

After a light sanding, Miller rubs the skis down with an oil specific to the wood used. Miller prefers to leave a ski with its cracks showing than to take a trowel full of wood putty to it.

"I take pride in making sure an

antique is complete without making them less pure," he said.

If he does add something to the ski, he might replace a leather binding, which often disappeared or disintegrated over time. He finds a horse bridal or leather from the same time period to do it. Unlike the bindings of today, leather bindings of early wooden skis were usually one loop that bound the toes to the plank and a second loop that looped around the back of the heel.

"It's fantastic how simple they

are," he said.

Many of Miller's collection already grace the walls of area businesses where they hang, on loan. Part of his collection also is on exhibit at the Ritz Carlton in Colorado, others are on display atbuildings at all three area resorts, Stein Eriksen Lodge and Grand America in Salt Lake City.

Miller recently turned down an order for 800 pairs of skis and 800 pairs of snowshoes from Banana Republic, however, because they would have depleted his collection too fast, for too little money. Besides, he added, he would rather work with individual collectors who have a deeper sense of appreciation.

Exposure, time and trends are keeping Miller busy eight-and-a-half

months out of the year.

The lodge look is very popular right now and it's a look that's not going to go away," said Miller. It's very comfortable, relaxed, warm feeling when you see a pair of skis on the wall."

Antiques in general grow more popular the older they get, he

The end of his run as a antique ski dealer will likely come as the supply of skis dwindles. Already Miller is finding it more and more difficult to find new collections of skis, just at a point when he can support himself full-time with the business eight months out of the year.

I'll never reproduce skis. If 1 can't find anymore, then yes, the collection will dissipate," he said.

For now, he is busy enough that he quit his winter "day job" as a ski instructor at Park City Mountain Resort. He still spends his summers at his family's camp for children in New Hampshire, where he and his sister are learning to be the thirdgeneration operators of the camp.

Miller recently bought a collection of 150 skis in upstate New York. It's not unusual for finds like that to come to him. As one of the country's most well-known winter sports equipment collectors, his name is often mentioned when someone wants information, history or prices on equipment. A family member may call, asking him for information on the collection, said Miller. He has bought as many as 400 pairs of skis this way.

The largest addition to his collection, however, was 600 pairs of snowshoes that were used by the 10th Mountain Division during World War II. The showshoes were manufactured by five different companies, but to specifications that made them interchangeable.

Miller had to work with the Turkish to retrieve the gear - they were found in a government storage unit with rawhide webbing largely

intact

Miller's toll-free phone number, 888-753-7807, and his website, www.antiqueskis.com, are another resource for antique lovers and ski owners. Through the site, Miller offers information on manufacturers, origins, materials and craftsmanship.

The Alf Engen Ski Museum picked Miller's brain when their insurance company had no idea how to value their collection of skis.

The museum got a bonus with their phone call to Miller. Not only did he assess every pair of skis they had in their collection, he noted the historical gaps and lent them some of his collection to make a smooth timeline. Through his connections, he was also able to convince friend Will Dator to donate his pair of Alf Engen-labeled Lund skis that Dator had inherited.

Not everything in Miller's collection is museum quality, however. While Miller will admire a 1920s repair on a ski from the late 1800s, a mismatched set does not hold any significant value. For these instances, Miller has begun to form mirrors, shelf units, "shot skis" (a ski with a row of shot glasses attached to the surface) and other functional items.

With access to so many skis, does Miller ever take any of his antiques out on the slopes?
He answers with an emphatic, "No."

"For the same reason you would-n't take a Model A Ford out on the highway," he adds.