MOUNTAIN WEEKLY TIMES

OLD BOARDS Mark Miller's Passion for Skis of the Past

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In 1979, six backcountry
skiers were at the scene
of an avalanche in Big
Cottonwood Canyon.
In 1988, journalist
Scott Carrier produced a
story about the slide for
National Public Radio.
In 1998, nearly 20 years
later, the story still
serves as a reminder of
what can happen
high in the Wasatch.

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Old Tails and Their Tales

Mark Miller Traffics in Skis and Ski History

By Alex Wells

s a boy, Mark Miller listened closely when his grandfather told stories about sking on "hills without chairlifts" around steir home in Orford, N. H. The old man no doubt appreciated his grandson's interest; when he died, he left his pre-

cious wooden skis to Miller.

One old-timer, a 92-year old known to locals simply as Former Johnson, shored skiing stories with Miller over hat chocolate, then gave him six and one half pair of wooden skis. Soys Miller, "He told stones about how he and his older sister would take a horse-drawn skrigh as high up the base of the mountain as they sould, then like the rest of the way up, and then do bonn!

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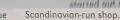
Miller began selling some of his antique skis four years ago, after seeing how visitors to his Park City home enthused over the pairs he had mounted on his walls. To replace ones he sold, he began frequenting antique shows and flea markets in New England and Canada. His largest acquisition came when a San Diego restaurant changed its decor and sold him 100 pairs.

Miller now owns 450 pairs of wooden skis, most of them without metal edges (though first used in 1928, these edges didn't become common until the 1940s), as well as 350 pairs of snowshoes and an array of bamboo poles. Because he trea-

sures the items from his hometown, he keeps them in his permanent collection. Other items are sold at Southwest Indian Traders in Park City and at several locations in Heber City, with the skis costing, on aver-

age, about \$150. Miller stores his extra gear at his workshop in Heber City.

His oldest skis, which date to before the turn of the century, were hand carved from blocks of wood and have only toe loops for bindings. One of Miller's fovorite pairs has loops out from old tires and foot plates made from old molasses tins. Some of his nicest pairs were carved by Scandinavian immigrants who brought the craft to America. In small wood working shops, the immigrants often made skis for their friends, then for friends of triands, until eventually they found themselves producing skis for a living. Miller has a well preserved pair from a Minnesota based company, Strand, which started out as a tiny



Skis from the

sarly 1900s with

bindings made

of old molasses

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Even early in the century, word of innovations spread fast. Because the first wooden skis commonly split up the middle, ski makers began carving a nipple-like tip on the boards. This helped prevent the woodgenerally hickory, pine, maple or ashfrom splitting. Later, many wood-workers started carving a ridge into the top of the skis. This helped direct snow away from the foot and may have contributed to the skis' tortional stability.

Miller owns many pairs of both the nipple-tipped and the ridge-top skis, as well as a rare pair of 80-year-old shaped skis (skis



Miller in his workshop

with a narrow waist, wide shovel and wide tail) similar to the skis in vogue today. Because all these skis pre-dated P-tex bases, wax mixtures known as "dope" were needed to prevent them from sticking to the snow.

By the 1920s, hardware stores in the cold er climes were carrying skis by manufacturers such as Northland Ski Manufacturing and Spalding, and homemade skis had become less common. Miller owns a pair of Spalding Skis dating back to the early 1900s.

ing the heel free, the skier could fix the heel in place by passing the cable underneath hooks on the sides of the skis. Most of Miller's skis have some variety of bear trap binding.

Many of the skis Miller buys have been in attics for decades, and the wood is often dried and cracked. Though he prefers not to alter the skis, he does some times apply a natural stain in order to highlight the grain of the wood.

Even more delicate than the skis are the bamboo poles. The large baskets on these poles were usually made of rattan—a light

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and a pair of department store boards labeled "R.H. Macy's & Co., New York,"

His collection also includes a pair of the first metal skis ever made. Produced in 1948 by Tey Manufacturing, they were heavy and rigid—"terrible skis," says Miller. Just two years later, however, a Harvard graduate named Howard Head introduced an improved metal ski, and by 1960 metal skis dominated sales.

The best clue as to the age of the skis, says Miller, is the bindings. In the early 1900s, more skiers began using heel straps in addition to leather toe loops. By the early '30s, bear-trap-style bindings had gained popularity. These bindings resembled front-throw cable telemark bindings-only, instead of leave

wood that's more flexible than bombon the pole with leather straps. These delicate poles broke often, even when new. Rather than buying new pairs after breaking single poles, frugal New Englanders would mix-and-match sets. Today, matching pairs are rare.

Miller hopes that people who purchase the vintage ski equipment appreciate it as much as he did, back when his grandfather showed him his treasured skis. "What I'm hoping is that people display them with pride like a piece of artwork," he says "They're part of history, so it's a way of giving a home character.

More information is available on Miller's website, at www.antiqueskis.com,



www.arianet.com (801) 571-0016

