



ENTHUSIASMS

The Older Side of the Mountain

Antique skis look great in your lodge. Just don't try going downhill on them.

BY JULIE SLOANE

ÖLKL'S P60 GC RACING SKIS ARE NEW FOR THIS SEASON, and like almost all skis made in the past five years, they're shaped—they flare out at the front and back. Shaping is a big trend in skis these days, but Mark Miller has a secret: The technology isn't new. He has wooden pairs from the early 1900s with a similar design. Miller owns the largest collection of antique winter sports equipment in the U.S.: two warehouses holding

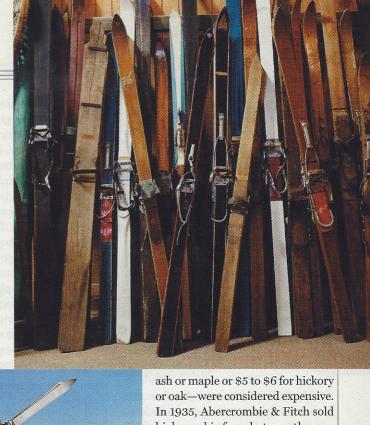
3,000 pairs of skis, 2,000 pairs of snowshoes, 500 vintage sleds, and 400 pairs of wooden skates, all of which he sells through a website (antiqueskis.com) and 20 furnishings and home-decor shops in Utah, Colorado, Oregon, and California.

Skiing is ancient enough to be mentioned in the *Aeneid*, and the earliest existing skis date from 2500 B.C. in Sweden. Miller's oldest are from the early 19th century. Growing up in New Hampshire, he became interested in the subject through his grandfather Gordon "Moose" Miller. For Moose, skiing was less a sport than a mode of transportation. In the 1930s he would strap on his homemade ash skis and collect maple sap for syrup. There were no chair lifts then, so if he wanted to ski down a mountain, he had to first hike up it.

When Moose passed away in 1989, Mark inherited his grandfather's skis and with them a passion for their history.

After word got out about Miller's interest, old-timers in his tiny hometown of Orford, N.H., began to drop by with their old skis. By 1994, Miller had begun buying at auctions as well, amassing some 100 pairs. That year he decided to turn his hobby into a business in Park City, Utah, where he had become a ski instructor.

Once he finds the skis (increasingly in Europe), Miller does all the refinishing work himself. "I'll take the dirt off and expose a ski from R.H. Macy's or a ski that has the Olympic rings," he says. "Or one that was made for the Harvard or Dartmouth co-ops. It's almost archeological." American ski manufacturers have been around since the early 1900s, but prices back then—\$3 a pair for





Mark Miller owns the biggest collection in the country, including gear used by U.S. troops in World War II.

ash or maple or \$5 to \$6 for hickory or oak—were considered expensive. In 1935, Abercrombie & Fitch sold hickory skis for what was then an outrageous \$16.50 a pair. "Thrifty New Englanders were more inclined just to make their own with whatever they had," says Miller, including wooden fence slats or whiskey barrel staves, and using pieces of a saddle as a binding. Today most pairs sell for between \$80 and \$350, and defunct brands like Northland and Strand are most prized. "They had better wood, better craftsmanship, and fine etching," says Miller. "It would be like buying a Burton snowboard or Salomon ski today."

His greatest find came last year in a barn in Turkey, where he turned up 500 pairs of American snow-

shoes used by the Army's 10th Mountain Division in World War II. Miller can't say for sure whether they ever saw combat, but all of them have been used. At \$400, they're his priciest item, yet he's sold 200 pairs already, several to family members of 10th Mountain Division veterans. NBC even used them as a backdrop for coverage of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

While he may sell more than 1,000 pairs of skis and snow-shoes each year, Miller is still more interested in the history behind them than the commerce. He's donated skis to a local museum and helped insurance appraisers value the museum's collection. Ask him about his most valuable skis, and he won't say the \$350 Northlands or Strands. "My grandfather's," he says. "They're priceless."