ANNUAL DECORATING ISSUE

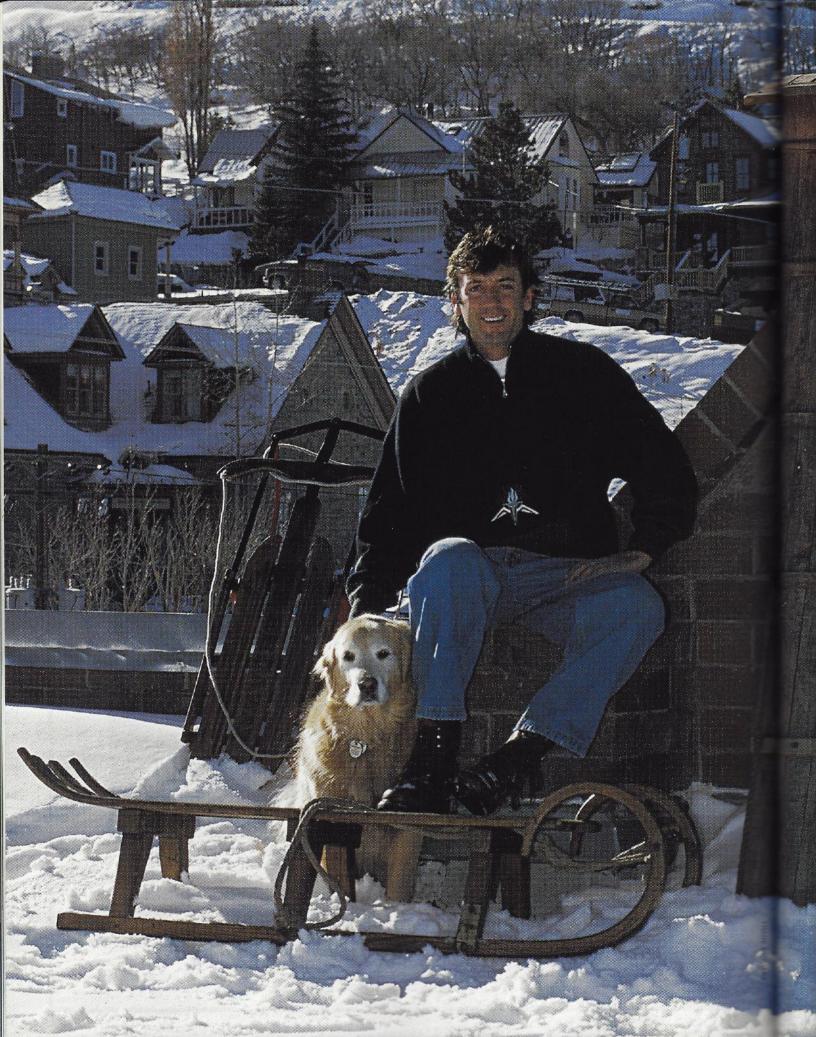
GRENWICH

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By Divya

Mark Miller's winter antiques collection

Blessed with athletic good looks that might make the shyest snow bunneed lessons, Mark Miller has been a ski instructor at Utah's Park Common Mountain Resort for the past twelve winters. But the former Riversident is best known these days for his collection of vintage skis, some from an era when hardy New Englanders used rough-hewn boards transportation instead of recreation.

"That's basically what it was, up until about the 1940s," Miller says. "There was a purpose behind using them. They weren't just for recreation; they were actually used by the local doctor to get to the village or by Farmer Brown to collect maple syrup during a winter thaw."

Miller, who's tall and thirty-six, has parlayed a childhood fascination with skiing history into a thriving career in winter antiques, a specialized niche that encompasses things like nineteenth-century sleighs and original Flexible Flyer sleds. He has over two thousand pairs of wooden skis and at least a thousand pairs of snowshoes, some for sale on his website (antiqueskis.com), where he also answers queries from other collectors.

"Someone may e-mail me and say I've got a pair of old wooden skis, what are they worth? And there's such a variance that it's difficult to say. There are handmade skis, there are machine-made skis, there are skis with leather-strap bindings, there are skis with horse-harness leather, there are skis with hay-baling twine that holds your foot. There's just no such thing as a typical old ski. What I recommend they do is take a photograph, send it to me, and then I can evaluate them and help with the refinishing, if they're genuine."

Miller's own skis range in price from

Opening spread: Mark Miller, collector extraordinaire of winter sports equipment, sits with his dog on the roof of a building overlooking Main Street in Park City, Utah. The 8-year-old golden retriever, Kirby, is an award-winning certified therapy dog. She goes snowshoeing and cross-country skiing with Mark and likes to ride shotgun on a toboggan sled. Opposite page: Mark is always a happy man in his workshop.

\$85 to \$400 and are available at stores like Southwest Indian Traders, an emporium on Park City's Main Street visited by thousands of daily walk-ins during the Winter Olympics two years ago. The Games provided an even bigger boost when NBC asked him to decorate the network's live location sets, which ultimately put a pair of prized World War II snowshoes right behind President Bush during the opening ceremonies.

This, in turn, led to interviews on various NBC morning shows as well as a prime-time appearance with NBC's Olympics host Bob Costas — not bad for a boy whose hobby occasionally drove an otherwise understanding mother to distraction. "She used to ask me if I had enough yet," he says with a grin that conjures up cartoon closets bursting with errant bamboo poles.

Today, he keeps the bulk of his collection in two warehouses — one in New Hampshire and the other in Utah, where he arrived soon after graduating from Keene State College with a degree in business management. He worked at restaurants for a few years in addition to teaching skiing, but his penchant for selling antiques eventually demanded full-time attention. "Initially, I didn't even consider it a business," he admits. "It started off for the love of these old skis, and the fact that every pair was different from the next."

Long before the Olympics put him in the national spotlight, Miller enjoyed a profitable sideline adding rustic outdoor touches to the insides of private chalets and such swank hotels as the Stein Erickson Lodge in Park City and the Ritz-Carlton in Beaver Creek, Colorado, sometimes working with decorators but more often not. "Oftentimes, a hotel give me carte blanche to go in and and And I'll say, 'How about a child's par snowshoes next to the fireplace with old sled, as if the child had just come from the outdoors and is warming with some hot chocolate by the And they'll say, 'Sounds great; go for

His largest sleigh, a \$4,000 two-search made in Pennsylvania between 1915 1925, now hangs from the ceiling of Park City Mountain Resort base lode where it's soon to be joined by an earn large Flexible Flyer sled built for mine And last year the Banana Republic char approached him for eight hundred of skis and snowshoes to decorate stores across the country, a deal decline only because he didn't have that ready. "There's a bit of artistry to refer ishing these antiques because you want to retain the value without destroying them," he explains. "So I research they looked like the day they were make how they came off the assembly line out of the craftsman's shop, then do minimal work to get them back to original condition."

How much time does it take to restain single pair? "Quite a bit." How many of work will it take to finish all of the "Quite a few," he admits, with another grin. "At any time I have about three hadred pairs ready to be sold through varieties. Then I get Banana Republic stores. Then I get Banana Republic stores. Then I get Banana Republic stores. We even discussed their remittems, which I wasn't crazy about. Soldin't work out with them, which is but when something like that happagain, I want to be ready."

A member of the ski club at Green High School, Miller spent weeken



and holidays in New Hampshire, where his family runs a summer camp for girls and he learned to ski at an unpretentious little area that sold hot chocolate for a quarter. New Hampshire was also where he first heard his grandfather and other old-timers talk about the long-ago days before chair lifts, Bogner outfits or Marker bindings. "These New Englanders would tell me stories about how they'd take a plank of wood, just a board, and then take the wood that surrounds those big cheese wheels, cut them in half and tack them on the front. Then they'd slap on a piece of leather, and they had a pair of skis."

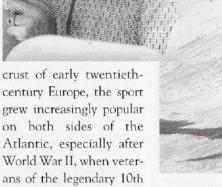
Starting with two or three pairs when he was twelve, he was a regular at the region's antiques shops and estate sales by the time he reached college. Unlike the grander affairs common in Greenwich, the latter were casual community events where old skis or snowshoes might lie hidden in a heap of dusty tools. "At one auction, they had a box of nails that nobody was going to bid on. So they added a pair of skis — and I ended up coming home with a box of rusty used nails." He laughs. "I got to know the antiques shops and the dealers, and I truly liked the winter antiques that had a story to go with them. Those were the ones I cherished the most because I felt I was preserving their history."

On display in a Swedish museum, the oldest ski in the world dates to 2500 B.C., although petroglyphs discovered in Norway and Russia depict tiny hunters setting out on sticks across frozen fjords and tundra around 4000 B.C. or so about the same time the pyramids were built. According to most accounts, modern recreational skiing began in the mid-nineteenth century, when a Norwegian farmer named Sondre Norheim developed an effective heel strap made from birch roots. An innovation that kept local ski jumpers from losing skis in mid-flight, it indirectly generated the export of handcrafted skis and even the founding of ski clubs in the United States by Scandinavian immigrants.

The rage among the adventurous upper

Mark doing a "ski jump" at age 5.

He still has a pair of skis that once belonged to his grandfather Moose (left).



Mountain Division founded Aspen, Vail and other resorts. An elite military unit that fought famously and ferociously in Nazi-occupied Italy, the 10th Mountain is a source of endless fascination to World War II and skiing buffs alike, including Mark Miller, for whom the division became a source of his biggest collecting coup so far.

"I now have suppliers who go to Europe with my wish list for skis, sleds, one-horse open sleighs," he says with a quick smile. "And I ended up with close to six hundred pairs of snowshoes that belonged to the 10th Mountain Division, which were made here in the United States. They were commissioned by the government under strict specifications and had to be fifty-eight inches long, ten inches wide, and they had to have a certain type of rawhide webbing, and leather bindings. When the troops were shipped over in December of '44, these were presumably shipped over along with the troops, and after the war ended in '45, they were stored in a barn in Turkey."

Which is where one of his contacts found them, spurring an obviously thrilled Miller to arrange for all six hundred to be shipped back to the States. (Plans include sending a pair each to Tom Brokaw and George W. Bush.) His Holy Grail of the moment would be a pair of narrow, ten-foot-long, nine-teenth-century touring skis from Norway, which he calls "very desirable and very collectible." He's also on the trail of circa-1909 snowshoes made by the Tubbs Snowshoe Co., which outfitted Admiral Byrd's expedition to the South Pole. "I realize my supply is going to dry up at some point, so I am continually trying to find more and more items, and it's getting more and more difficult."

There are some things he'll never part with, including skis inherited from his grandfather, Gordon "Moose" Miller, who died when Mark was twenty-one. A former physical education teacher at the Horace Mann School, he "was quite a man," his grandson recalls fondly. "He and my grandmother built this camp up in the woods and it's still fully operational. He really knew the value of hard work."

Another treasure is actually half of a pair of the first metal skis ever made, the ALU-60, which were produced by the Tey Manufacturing Company of Milford, Connecticut, between 1947 and 1948. The brainstorm of a trio of engineers, the skis were apparently terrible; even worse. New England suffered a record snow-free