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Sondre Norheim

Born: 1825 Died: 1897

Information submitted in a nomination letter to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame by Jakob Vaage and Edward Milligan

Sondre Norheim was born in Norway, and immigrated to the United States in the mid-eighteen hundreds. He is world renown as the “father of modern day skiing.”

Sondre Norheim, whose contributions to ski sport are memorialized at his birthplace in Norway and his gravesite south of Denbigh, North Dakota, is known as the “Father of Modern Skiing.” Bronze plaques tell the story.

The American memorialization, dedicated in 1866 through the joint effort of the North Dakota Historical Society and Norway’s prestigious Foreningen Ski-Idrettens Fremme (Society for the Promotion of Skiing), reads as follows: “In memory of Sondre Norheim. He introduced ski bindings and the Telemark and Christiania turns and developed slalom and ski jumping. Born in 1825 in Morgedal, Telemark, Norway. Died in the United States 1897.”

Skiing has been Norway’s national sport for centuries, but it was confined to practical uses because of only a toe strap. But it was Sondre Norheim, a courageous and adept young skier of Telemarken who in 1850 decided to take full advantage of his skis. He perceived that skis should and could be firmly attached to the feet. This was accomplished when Norheim took thin shoots of birch roots, soaked them in hot water so they would be flexible, and twisted them together so they would fit around his heel and hold it in place.

Now Sondre had skis that could be mastered. He made slight changes in the shape of the ski, and it took the world only a few years to learn this because people became fascinated by this man who “flew through the air like a bird” and who could twist and turn on his skis. He enjoyed going high on hillsides for downhill runs over precipices and though gorges.

In 1861 with the organization of the Central Association for Sport and Shooting, the growth of skiing, skating, shooting and gymnastics rapidly increased. Skisport soon became Norway’s national sport, an emergence based upon military ski races combined with marksmanship competitions.

Beginning in 1862, ski competitions were held at many places in Norway. First it was downhill racing with small jumps in the track. Then came cross-country competition and ski jumping events in 1866.

The first ski jumping competition in Telemark was in 1866. Sondre Norheim was first, far ahead of other competitors, and was awarded a clock. In commemoration of this event, a centennial celebration in 1966 was staged on the same jumping hill with 2,000 Norwegians attending.

In 1868, Norheim displayed his abilities at Christiania, now Oslo. It was the third ski competition sponsored by the Central Sport Association, with Sondre and a friend having skied the 115 miles to the nation’s capital. Here he had no difficulty winning over the skiers as the Telemarkens’ stiff bindings around the heels were of immediate newspaper interest. Local skiers still used nine-foot-long skis and only toe-strap bindings. They were astonished to observe how Sondre turned and handled his skis, with a newspaper account reporting: “He came downhill like lightning and suddenly he could stop in a second.”

To stop suddenly, Sondre used the turn which became known as the “Telemark,” and he also displayed a parallel turn, the “Christiania.” His home-designed skis also were remarkable, they had curved sides and were of shorter lengths comparable to today’s models. Also out of Telemark came the word “slalom,” a two-syllable combination created from SLA (slope) and LOM (track in the snow).

While protégés of Norheim soon organized the world’s first ski school, the man who developed the ski binding and designed modern-day skis never did discover prosperity on the steep hillsides of Norway. Instead he came to America – the flat country of North Dakota, where he didn’t use skis very much. He died in December of 1897 and was buried in the graveyard at Norway Lutheran Church near Denbigh.

One hundred years after the first real ski jumping competition in the world in 1866 in Telemark, a stone with a plaque was set up on his grave. Flanked by the Norwegian and American flags, this historic marker now links the skiing traditions of Norway and America.

Sondre Norheim was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1974.

