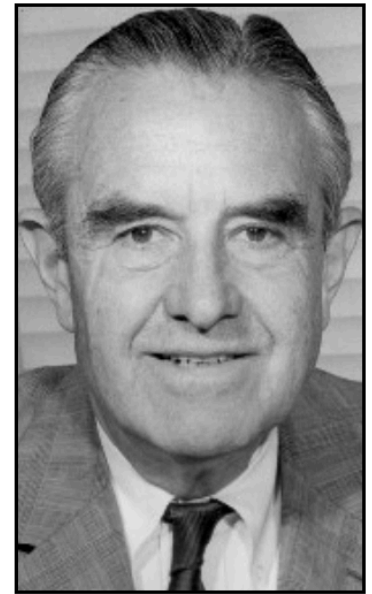


#74

## W. Averell Harriman

Born: 1891 Died: 1986



*Looking for a way to increase passenger load to the West, W. Averell Harriman came up with idea of a first-class winter resort. From this idea, Sun Valley was born.*

With the long list of services to his country and international relations increasing each year, it seems the connection of Ambassador W. Averell Harriman with early-day alpine skiing may have been relegated to the background. On the other hand, however, those who helped in the transitional phase from nordic to alpine and then recreational ski developments have not been forgotten. They remember that he had the confidence in the future of skiing to build America's – in fact, the world's – first resort designed primarily for winter sports; that he founded the Harriman Cup ski tourney which was to gain the highest international reputation of any race in the country; that he gave unqualified backing to competitive skiing in the colleges by holding a four-way intercollegiate tourney at Sun Valley every Christmas for many years.

The Ambassador presented the Harriman Cup to Dick Durrance in 1937 and again to Dick in 1940, when, after winning the cup three times, the Dartmouth skier and Olympian retired it. In the intervening years he came to Sun Valley to present the cup as often as his duties abroad would permit.

In 1936, Averell Harriman, then chairman of the board of the Union Pacific Railroad, built the first streamlined U.S. passenger trains. Looking to attract traffic passenger traffic to his U.P. Railroad business, he hit upon the idea of building a ski resort.

Harriman sent an Austrian alpine expert, Count Felix Schaffgotsch, west to locate the spot for this resort. The Count had to choose a site that promised increased U.P. traffic. A six-week odyssey took the Count to Mt. Rainer, Mt. Hood, the San Bernardino Mountains, Yosemite, the area around Salt Lake City, and the snow fields of Lake Tahoe in Nevada and California. He saw many places in Colorado and crossed the Teton Pass in winter for a view of Jackson Hole. At last he came to Ketchum, Idaho.

Ketchum, a village one mile from where Sun Valley would be built, had been a boom town in the mining days of the 1880s. In 1936, the population, with many residents hard hit by the depression, had declined to 170.

It was in a blizzard late in the afternoon of January 1936 that the Count, escorted by a Union Pacific representative and the county supervisor of roads, reached this hamlet in the wake of the county snowplow.

When one mile north of Ketchum, the Count found the little windless basin surrounded by treeless sun-drenched slopes and with a great wooded Baldy Mountain towering at the end of the valley, he wrote Harriman: "It contains more delightful features than any other place I have seen in the United States, Switzerland, or Austria for a winter sports center."

Harriman arrived ten days later to site-see in his private railroad car. He approved the Count's choice and the Union Pacific purchased 43,000 acres and on this vast snow-covered area, like a blank piece of paper, the architects set out to write the name Sun Valley into ski history. They had perfect terrain, and they also had what was almost a blank check to work with for everything must be uncompromisingly "the best." Almost three million dollars were spent after the depression when a million was a million.

Even more fortunately, the founders, notably Jim Curran who was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 2001 as an Old Timer, could call on the brains of the Union Pacific engineers. These engineers, with no previous experience with skiing, when called upon to furnish some means of uphill transportation, designed the first chairlifts in the world. Harriman approved, and along with the new resort, gave this most important gift to the skiing world.

W. Averell Harriman was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1969.

