

Heading West

In 1936, Charley Proctor arrived in Ketchum to help scout the ski terrain and plan the lifts at Sun Valley. His diary offers a firsthand account.

BY EDDY ANCINAS

From the day a young Charley Proctor skied out the front door and down the snow-covered steps of his childhood home in Hanover, New Hampshire—as his father watched in amazement—he never hesitated to embrace a new technique, try out a new invention or point his skis in a new direction. As Sun Valley celebrates its 75th anniversary this season, skiers can appreciate the story of how a railroad magnate’s vision, an Austrian count’s persistence, an engineer’s imagination and a New England ski pioneer’s wise counsel transformed a remote town in Idaho’s Sawtooth Mountains into America’s first built-from-scratch destination ski resort.

It all began in January 1936, when Proctor received a call at his home in Wellesley, Massachusetts from Averell Harriman, chairman of the board of the Union Pacific Railroad, asking him to come to New York to discuss “a proposed ski resort” in Idaho. Harriman knew that Proctor—the 30-year-old former Dartmouth ski champ, 1928 Olympic ski team member, Harvard ski coach, exhibition jumper, ski school director and trail designer for many New England ski hills—was the person he wanted to advise him on the development of America’s first European-style destination ski resort.

“At that meeting,” Charley wrote in his diary, which was recently made available to *Skiing Heritage*, “I was asked to go to Idaho, look over the country, and teach skiing to a number of local boys.” The goal was to transform locals into ski instructors—as they did in Europe—rather than bringing in outsiders.

Harriman first visited Idaho in 1909 while working for his father at the Union Pacific Railroad. In the 1930s, while traveling on business in Europe, he observed that, unlike skiers in New England, Europeans traveled long distances by train, stayed for days in grand hotels, dined in fine restaurants, bought the latest ski fashions and equipment from experts in well-equipped shops, and skied on acres of wide open slopes down into long valleys. Could such a place exist in the American West?

To find out, in November 1935, he dispatched an Austrian recreational skier and acquaintance, Count Felix Schaffgotsch, to find a place with “big mountains, good snow, sunshine and nearby railway access.” After three months of traveling to every known (and some possible) ski areas from the Rockies to the Pacific, the Count was directed to the rolling mountains outside Ketchum, Idaho. Schaffgotsch



Charley Proctor was a Dartmouth ski champ and 1928 Olympian who trained the first ski instructors at Sun Valley. This photo shows him at the fledgling Idaho resort in 1936, wearing his trademark hat.

had been put off by the cold weather in other places he had visited. In Ketchum, he reported to Harriman that he had found a place that “contains more delightful features than any other place I have seen in the U.S., Switzerland, or Austria for a winter sports center.” The temperate climate that Schaffgotsch loved was to become both the attraction and the bugaboo of the resort in its first years, especially before snowmaking: There was not a speck of snow at Sun Valley by Christmas 1936.

Skeptical but intrigued, Harriman, his daughter and friends traveled by train, in his private car, from New York to Shoshone, Idaho, where they were transported in a covered wagon for 60 miles to the hotel at Bald Mountain Hot Springs in Ketchum. Along the way, Harriman noted that the broad valley would virtually eliminate the threat of road closures during snowstorms. The next day, Schaffgotsch pointed out the wide-open slopes on Dollar Mountain, the quality and quantity of snow, and the mountains that protected the valley.

Skepticism soon gave way to enthusiasm, and Harriman had little resistance when he returned to New York and informed his board of directors that he was going to develop a ski area in Idaho.

Meanwhile, Count Schaffgotsch continued to study the area on skis—often in the company of Roberta Brass Garretson and her sister, whose father, Earnest, owned 3,500 acres of grazing land near Ketchum, and grazing rights from the Hyndman Peaks to the top of Trail Creek Ridge. On one of their outings, the Count told Roberta that he was searching for a warm, windless, sunny place to build a deluxe hotel. She showed him a spot where their cattle huddled in winter—obviously the perfect location for the future Sun Valley Lodge.

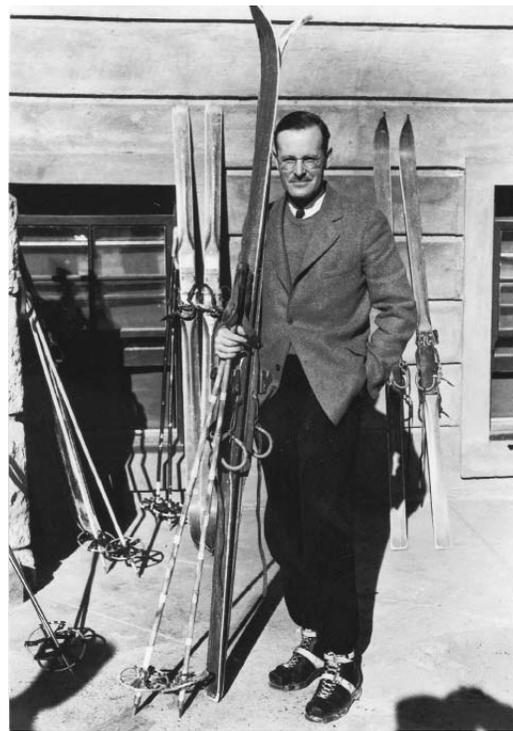
Soon representatives from the Union Pacific Railroad arrived in Ketchum, and negotiations began to buy the ranch and the grazing land from the Brass family for around \$2 an acre. This included the nearby mountains now known as Proctor (to the northeast) and Dollar (southwest).

PROCTOR ARRIVES IN KETCHUM

On March 25, the day Union Pacific purchased the Brass ranch, Charley arrived in Ketchum. He had been advised that the local population skied on 12-foot-long skis with a canvas boot and a long pole (often taken from a pitchfork) to brake. The proper equipment would be necessary to teach the boys the new technique, so skis, leather boots, metal bindings and double poles were shipped prior to Charley's departure. Eight local boys between ages 16–21 quit school

and began their lessons, skiing every morning from 7 to 11 a.m. for 33 consecutive days (except Easter Sunday). “We skied various places,” Charley wrote in his diary, “but mostly on Dollar Mountain on the side facing Ketchum, so that townsfolk and visitors could see them, and ‘understand a little about modern skiing,’ and become interested in the sport.” On weekends, spectators from Hailey and Twin Falls came to Ketchum to watch. As they improved, they ventured into more difficult terrain, climbing up Cold Springs Canyon on Bald Mountain, past the future site of the Roundhouse.

During her spring vacation from teaching school in Massachusetts, Mary Proctor joined her husband and the boys. “The townspeople were horrified that I'd taken my wife up there,” Charley wrote, “but I guess she was the first woman to ski down Baldy.”



Proctor at Sun Valley in 1936 with the skis he had shipped to Idaho from the East Coast.

Proctor trained local boys to be instructors...He disagreed with Count Schaffgotsch's advice to Harriman about where the skiing should be located.

As the snow around Ketchum receded, Charley and his boys explored the higher elevations at Galena, allowing them to record valuable information on snow conditions, vertical drop, weather and terrain. In a report to Harriman on April 26, 1936, Charley wrote: “Generally speaking, the boys did well. They worked hard and kept at it with enthusiasm. For the last ten days, we did all of our skiing between 6:45 and 11 a.m. We had to drive up the Wood River about 17 miles.” Charley notes that they always arrived on time—“proof of their interest.” He goes on to report their performance—from quick learners to

“awkward,” “stiff” and “hopeless.”

He wrote to Harriman that Galena had “short runs and lots of trees,” that the mountains east of Ketchum were “too steep and avalanche prone,” and that an area Count Schaffgotsch favored, above Elkhorn Creek, was “too far from the lodge on a bad road.” He also mentioned that Mount Baldy, as the locals called it, offered a tremendous variety of terrain, dropping off into the valley at every direction, but it would be too advanced for the average skier at that time. Baldy was not developed until the 1940s, but after it opened, only beginners and low intermediates skied on Dollar and Proctor.

PROCTOR PONDERES SKI LIFTS

Later that month, Harriman's friend, John E.P. Morgan—who would later become a figure in the National Ski Patrol—arrived in Ketchum to see how the boys had improved and who would make the best instructors or guides. Morgan, Charley, Count Schaffgotsch and Glenn Trout, chief engineer of the local railroad, discussed the best locations for skiing. They agreed that the mountains closest to the lodge (Proctor and Dollar) were not too steep.

They wondered what kind of lift would be suitable, and considered rope-tows and the Upski sled used in Yosemite. Proctor wrote to Harriman that it would be difficult for people to hang on to a rope tow for the 2,000 feet to the top of the mountain, and that a better solution might be something you could lean against, like a J-Bar, or “sit on....”?

Harriman asked the Union Pacific engineering department in Omaha to work on the problem. After a survey of the mountains, they returned to their drawing boards. Jim Curran, an engineer, had previously worked for a firm that installed devices to load bananas onto fruit boats in South America. He wondered if skiers could be conveyed uphill by a continuous circulating cable hung with chairs, similar to the way he had seen bunches of bananas lifted off the docks. His colleagues doubted the safety of such a contraption, and he was not encouraged to pursue it.

A few months later, Harriman sent Proctor to Omaha to see what the engineers had designed. As they went through the various plans, Proctor glanced at Curran's sketch. “What's that?” he asked. Proctor had almost certainly seen the ski lift installed at Dartmouth the previous winter, the first American J-bar. It towed skiers rather than lifting them, but was otherwise remarkably similar in construction.

When Charley returned to New York, he told Harriman that Curran's plan had the most merit and should be pursued. The chairlift was saved from oblivion: Skiers would soon be traveling like bananas up the slopes of the Sawtooth Mountains.



Proctor tries the new terrain at Sun Valley, with the chairlift visible in the background.

Later that spring, Morgan went to Omaha to test the new invention. Wearing roller skates in place of skis, he waited for a chair hanging from a scaffold mounted on the back of a pickup truck. The truck moved slowly forward, Morgan sat, and they repeated the operation, adjusting the speed to the fastest, safest level.

The world's first chairlift was installed on a mountain near the lodge. The engineers—fearing that skiers might fall out of the chairs and be injured—kept them as close to the ground as possible. The first snow buried the chairs, and a trench had to be dug almost to the top of the mountain. The following summer, the chairs were raised on what is now known as Proctor Mountain, and another lift was built on nearby Dollar. The following year, they started to cut the trees on Bald Mountain. “We knew that was where all the skiing would eventually be,” Charley said.

When asked if he supervised the location of the chairlifts in Sun Valley, Proctor replied with Yankee modesty: “The engineers put them in. I just suggested where they might go. Dollar Mountain was open sagebrush. It was obvious. You want to go to the top.”

In 1938, Charley moved with his family to Yosemite National Park, where he remained as director of ski operations at Badger Pass for the next 20 years. His expertise always in demand, he served as secretary for the California Ski Association from 1943–1946, and as vice president of the Far West Ski Association from 1957–1959, during which time he served on the advisory committee for the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, California. In 1959, he was inducted into the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame. He died in 1996.

In 1986, Sun Valley celebrated its 50th anniversary. Charley and his wife Mary, with daughters Nancy and Peggy, joined hundreds of fellow ski pioneers and enthusiasts at the site of that first chairlift, where Charley spoke to the crowd about its impact. “The lifts were the greatest boost to downhill skiing of anything,” he said. “We were a little skeptical if the general public could handle them, but once they got used to the concept, they handled them readily.” Seventy-five years after Charley Proctor arrived in Sun Valley, skiers still just “want to go to the top,” and the chairlift is still the best way to get there. ❄️