Ski Mountaineering in Southern California

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THIS title may evoke an incredulous smile from distant readers who think of Southern California as the land of all-year bathing beaches, oranges, motion-pictures and occasional earthquakes. Even the residents of Los Angeles are astonished when they behold an automobile, rumble-seat or running-board packed with skis, heading out for a skiing week-end in March or April. The native's surprise is less excusable than that of the easterner, since on any clear day one can easily see Mt. San Antonio (10,080 ft.) raising its snow-covered peak high over the city.

Californians, however, have made heretofore relatively little use of the wonderful opportunities offered by the Sierra Nevada, the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains in Southern California, and, in short, by all the major mountain ranges and peaks in the state. The main reason for this omission, which seems doubly strange in outdoor-loving westerners, was either the lack of information or misinformation on the subject of skiing. Because of the great publicity given ski-jumping by newspapers and newsreels alike, the great public thought of skiing as the acrobatic stunt of dare-devils, to be admired, of course, but not to be emulated. Ski-jumping exhibitions, however, served the good cause quite efficiently in one regard: they demonstrated quite convincingly the existence of snow, usable for winter sports, in the mountains of California, even as close to Los Angeles as a few hours' drive from the City Hall. What the people were not shown by jumping exhibitions was the fact that they themselves could use skis to travel for miles through snowed-in woods, up over sunny slopes to silvery summits, and down again in fluent, swishing, exhilarating gliding. The man, fond of hiking, camping, and mountain climbing, hardly knew that skis would give him a means of penetrating into his beloved mountains and climbing his favorite peak at the time of the year when the beauty of Alpine scenery is enhanced by the soft brilliance of the snow.

Few Californians were acquainted with the development of the Alpine technique of the Arlberg type, which is better suited for ski-touring and ski-mountaineering than was the original

Scandinavian style of skiing. Thus it was only with difficulty that I found companions for my first ski trips from Los Angeles early in 1932. Fortunately I met several students of Pomona College, which is located in Claremont at the foot of the San Gabriel mountains, and found in them my first little community of skiers who shared my ideas and ideals and became faithful followers. It was a great snow season that year, which enabled us to ski on excellent spring snow (*Firn-schnee*) as late as the 8th of May, when we made our fourth ski trip to the summit of Mt. San Antonio and had a delightful descent of about 2000 ft. over the long open slopes.

Such good skiing only made me wish for more, and in June, 1932, I started with one of the Pomona College students northward to Oregon and Washington. We visited Crater Lake and had a delightful day of skiing on the still snow-covered rim of this azure marvel. On the 12th of June we climbed Mt. Hood (11,225 ft.), the highest peak of Oregon, and experienced for the first time the easy, seemingly endless runs over the tremendous slopes above timber-line, which are so characteristic of the cone-shaped volcanic mountains of the northwest. After a brief interval, during which I attended a meeting of the Pacific A. A. A. S., we arrived in Seattle and proceeded to the club rooms of the "Mountaineers," where at once we met a group of experienced and enthusiastic skiers, ready to go out with us to Mt. Rainier the next day. With different members of the club, sometimes larger groups, we spent several weeks of glorious summer skiing in the mountains of Washington. Three times we enjoyed fast, zooming, and swishing runs from the half-way hut on the south side of Mt. Rainier (Camp Muir, 10,000 ft.) to Paradise Valley or Narada Falls (4572 ft.). For several days we played on the steep slopes of Burroughs Mountain on the north side of Mt. Rainier, marvelled at the Alpine grandeur of the panorama in the region of Mt. Baker and Mt. Shuksan, and gradually got into good condition for a culminating ski tour.

From Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier, I had seen majestic Mt. Adams (12,307 ft.) raise his head above the clouds. That it would make an excellent ski tour, all agreed who had climbed the mountain, but to the knowledge of the "Mountaineers" no one had ever made a trip on skis to or from the summit. What a beautiful climax to my belated skiing season it would make—a last adven-

ture before going back to sunny Southern California. I organized a little party: Dr. Strizek, a renowned ski-mountaineer, Dr. Hans Otto Giese and Hans Grage, both winners of many ski races, climbed Mt. Adams with me on the 16th of July from our camp at Cold Spring in 7 hours and 20 minutes. We had continuous skiing on the descent from the summit to about 6000 ft.—an altitude difference of more than 6000 ft. in mid-July! It was with regret that I took leave of my new friends and the glorious peaks of Washington.

Back again in Southern California, I unloaded my boundless enthusiasm for skiing on anybody who was willing to listen and soon I had groups of ski companions in the Sierra Club, which I had joined a year before, and at my University. The Sierra Club whose membership is predestined to favor ski-mountaineering rather than ski-jumping, competitive and exhibition skiing, is fortunate in owning a beautiful mountain lodge at a strategic point in the skiing country near Los Angeles. The ski team of the University of California at Los Angeles which I am coaching is, of course, primarily supposed to compete in tournaments, and has won the intercollegiate winter sports pentathlon of Southern California in the last two years, and has accompanied me on practically all of my recent ski trips. One of the members of the team is Glen Dawson, who has a number of first ascents in the Sierra Nevada to his credit. About these skiers as nucleus has gathered a group large enough and experienced enough in ski-touring that I do not have to worry any more about finding suitable companions for the next week-end trip.

"Where do you take your ski team for practicing?" is a question with which I am frequently confronted by residents who do not yet know that within one to three hours' drive from the serene Pacific along palm-lined boulevards, there are miles and miles of splendid skiing territory in the mountains at 10,000 and 11,000 ft., where the snow lasts from December well into April. A goodly number of mountain resorts and camps, most of them accessible by excellent highways, attract large crowds from the city after a fresh snowfall and to winter sports' programs featuring ski-jumping and ice hockey. Outstanding among these are Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains, the Los Angeles County Mountain Playground at Big Pines, Ice House Canyon Resort and a multitude of others—all good places

to brush up on one's Christies and to get in trim at the beginning of the season, be it on the practicing slopes or on minor tours.

He who likes to get away from the throng and to "own" long miles of shimmering slopes for a fast descent from the summit, looks to the "Four Saints" of Southern California. They are, in order of altitude, Mt. San Gorgonio (11,485 ft.), Mt. San Jacinto (10,805 ft.), Mt. San Bernardino (10,630 ft.) and Mt. San Antonio (10,080 ft.). Of the four, San Gorgonio offers the most magnificent skiing, but San Antonio, or Old Baldy as he is often called, is my oldest and best friend among the group. In February, 1932, my first major ski tour in Southern California took me to Baldy's summit in seven hours' hard climbing from Ice House Canyon (4800 ft.) in what was considered the first ski ascent. Five subsequent times in two seasons I repeated the trip and each one made the good old mountain dearer to me. Usually our party starts from Harwood Lodge of the Sierra Club (6500 ft.); for two hours or so we climb through beautiful pine timber to the foot of a mighty open slope that steeply ascends to the summit ridge. We follow the latter, along which the snow is usually windblown, irregular and crusted, to the rounded summit from which a glorious view encompasses the purple immensity of the Mojave desert and, far beyond, the snowy Sierra to the north, to the west the ocean and Catalina Island, and to the east the bulky massifs of San Gorgonio and San Jacinto. We rattle down over the windblown summit slopes, our skis grating on the rough crust; but soon we dive down into protected gulleys where the sun has melted the crust into that granular consistency which is one of the blessings of spring skiing. In a long series of linked Christies at high speed, we swish down, back into the great open slope over a drop of 45° or more—the acid test of our "tail-wagging" ability—across the mighty snow field and down again into the woods.

Like most other skiing country in Southern California the slopes of Baldy are too steep and too irregular to permit long straight runs. Continuous turning and swinging, with occasional long traverses are necessary to check one's speed on these Alpine mountain sides. In only one place in Southern California are there open slopes long and gentle enough to furnish the carefree zooming *Schussfahrt*, letting the skis fly straight, as fast as they may—Mt. San Gorgonio. In March, 1933, our group climbed

this highest mountain of the region from Forest Home, attacking the peak from the south after camping at 10,000 ft. We had a wonderful view from the summit to nearby Mt. San Jacinto, towering in rocky grandeur on the other side of the Pass which leads to the Colorado desert and to the Salton Sea shining in the distance, to old friend Baldy and all the landmarks familiar from other trips. We had a fine descent that day, but the best was yet to come—a two days' trip in early April to the north side of "Grayback," as San Gorgonio is sometimes called. We repeated the tour twice this last March and found skiing comparable to the famous runs of the Swiss or Austrian Alps.

We usually pack our sleeping bags to a point near the "Valley of the Thousand Springs" (about 7000 ft.) where a pleasant camp is made on a bare spot, close to a rushing stream. The next day we continue on towards the summit, passing to the right of Dry Lake. The summit may be climbed either by going directly up the steep north slope of the mountain, or, perhaps more comfortably, on the route used for the descent. In the latter we follow the ridge, going west (Mt. San Gorgonio being the highest and most easterly elevation of a ridge leading via Mt. Charlton and others to Mt. San Bernardino, the most westerly elevation) until a relatively low pass allows us to drop into a mighty, wide canyon which leads in long runs over open, treeless slopes back to Dry Lake. The transition from the ridge into this canyon is marked a cornice over which we descend on foot, and the slope directly below it shows an inclination of 50° or more, so that we do not put on our skis until 300 or 400 ft. below the ridge. But then we can let the skis run—that is a joy—long, drawn-out, rhythmical, linked Christies and fast straight Schussfahrt bring us, all too soon, back to Dry Lake. From there, some very steep wood running adds zest to the descent to the "Valley of the Thousand Springs."

From the latter point, we use another day to climb the ridge above Dollar Lake and again revel in wide, treeless slopes and some "tail-wagging" through tall timber.

If one craves more variety of skiing country than that available in the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains, he can reach the Sierra Nevada in six or eight hours' drive from Los Angeles. The east side of the Sierra Nevada, sloping steeply down to Owens Valley, has often been described as so rugged and precipitous that one would not anticipate the wonderful skiing

territory that it actually offers. At the end of April, 1933, the U. C. L. A. ski team and I climbed Kearsarge Pass (11,832 ft.), driving up from Independence in Owens Valley, and found excellent skiing. In February, 1934, a group of seven U. C. L. A. students and I visited Norman Clyde, renowned Californian mountain climber, at his cabin in Bishop Creek, and with him we skied up to Bishop Pass (11,989 ft.). Generally speaking, the wide expanses of U-shaped glacier valleys in the Sierra furnish splendid ski fields (heretofore entirely unexploited) on which the snow normally lasts late into spring.

On the west side of the Sierra, Yosemite is the outstanding winter sports center, but for people from Los Angeles, Sequoia National Park is more conveniently located. In late March, 1934, the winter sports committees of the Sierra Club, northern and southern chapters, had a reunion at the park, at which occasion we climbed Alta Peak (11,211 ft.), and had a wonderful panorama of the Sierra and a swift descent over steep slopes.

The prophecy cannot fail that in a few years thousands of Californians will learn to enjoy on skis the beauty of the snow-clad mountains, made doubly interesting by the contrast to nearby desert and southern sea, and that ski-mountaineering, as it did in Europe, will become one of the most popular sports.