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Serving Bird, Indian, Girdwood, Whittier, Hope, Cooper Landing & Moose Pass

# Peaks and Valleys

## *A history of Girdwood and Alyeska*

By Chris von Imhof  
Special to the Turnagain Times

In 1967 when Alaska Airlines signed the Management Agreement to operate Alyeska Resort, it made a big press release in Alaska and the Lower 48 states.

It announced the plans to build a 75-room Hotel, called the Alyeska Nugget Inn with swimming pool, restaurants and cocktail lounges and several new lifts.

I went to my first board meeting to review the plans and asked how these major improvements would be financed. I was advised since Alaska Airlines was subsidized by the Civil Aeronautics Board ( CAB ) that they would not be allowed to invest in any subsidiaries such as Alyeska, and I was told by Charlie Willis Jr. that is my job to get the financing for the proposed Resort projects.

Well, I thought, this is going to be rather challenging, since the ski area was not profitable. I found an Anchorage insurance businessman, Bruce Ficke, who expressed interest to finance and build the lodge and lease it back to Alyeska Resort. So, in 1968, construction started with the first 32 hotel rooms and the center core Sitzmark Bar and Restaurant and on Feb. 1, 1969, the Alyeska Nugget Inn opened, just in time to host the 1969 the Junior National Alpine and Nordic Championships.

The Nugget's interior featured Alaska gold rush decor to match the interior of Alaska Airlines planes. Charlie Willis told me what he wanted was the interior look of a warehouse.

Actually I liked. the red and gold wallpaper. However, the following year, Bruce Ficke and I agreed to build 43 Condominium units next to the Sitzmark, sell them to private investors and when available lease them back to the Hotel for guest rental. This was the first Condominium built in Alaska.



Photo courtesy of Nancy Simmerman



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Alaska Airlines heavily promoted the Hotel in the summer and winter and business started to improve. In the summer, we operated Chairlift 1 for the sightseeing tours to ride up to the Roundhouse. On rainy days, we gave the tourists green ponchos and they looked like a bunch of jolly green giants riding up the chairlift.

In 1970, Alaska Airlines purchased the Alyeska ski area from Francois de Gunzburg.

What we really needed was another chairlift on the upper-half of the mountain. It is difficult to get bank financing, so I started to sell some more real estate and got the Riblet Tramway Company to manufacture Chairlift 2.

We selected a site ( where now Chair 6 is located ), which we felt was safe from avalanche exposure according to all the weather and snow data we had from the US Forest Service.

In the summer of 1972, we started to build Chairlift 2 and used Vertol helicopters to fly in the towers. We had a great construction crew including Al Hampton, Don Conrad that did a superb job building the lift in difficult mountain terrain.

We opened the new Chairlift in December of 1972 and the local skiing population was delighted with great and reliable powder skiing on the upper half of Mt Alyeska and we had the best and first profitable ski season.

Alyeska was always very supportive of ski racing, and we had a chance to bid on a World Cup in February of 1973. I found out there was a World Cup race scheduled in Naeba, Japan and all the racers from Europe would be flying over the Northpole via Anchorage to Tokyo. So we requested that they stopover in Anchorage, and we would host our first World Cup Giant slalom race.

It started from Picnic Rock down the Steilhang and Racing trail. Well it took a tremendous effort to host such a topnotch event with 160 world-class racers, 40 representatives of the media and all the officials.

Our local Alyeska Ski Club and Alaska USSA officials with more than 100 volunteers organized the races with Jay Burnett, chairing the race committee.

Well, we did it and got tremendous good PR around the ski world. I hosted the Austrian ski team including the world famous Olympic Gold medalist Toni Sailer, the coach and took them after dinner to the Bird House Bar, where Hugh Ruikshank the bartender entertained them with old Alaskan stories.

Later in mid-April of that ski season, we had a major snowstorm at Alyeska and the whole Kenai Peninsula that lasted an entire week. It snowed over a 100 inches and we had winds between 70 to 90 mph. We closed the ski area and we're shooting with our 75 mm recoils rifles like a war was in progress.

On the sixth day, my mountain manager Don Conrad called me early in the morning to come to the daylodge parking lot as he wanted to show me something.



*AK Airlines/Bob & Ira Spring*

**Top photo: A crew rests during construction of Alyeska's first accommodation, a 32-room lodge and bar built in 1968.**

**Bottom photo: Patrons lounge at the newly opened Sitzmark bar in 1969.**

Looking up the mountain and canyon, I could see several red towers deposited in the canyon that was the bottom part of chairlift 2 that got wiped out by a huge avalanche.

WOW! My heart sunk, that our popular new chairlift had been demolished. As the weather cleared the mountain the lift crew and ski patrol headed up to where the base terminal of the lift used to be and gave me via radio the report on the damage.

I was in my office reviewing our lift insurance policy and after determining we had insurance coverage, except for a big deductible, I called our insurance broker and ordered half a chairlift including the base drive terminal.

I also called my good friend Sen. Ted Stevens and requested if he could persuade the Ft. Richardson Military command to lease us the much more powerful 105 mm recoiles rifles for avalanche control, so we could have a more effective weapon to shoot down the avalanches during and after major storms. We got the 105 mm rifles the next ski season.

That was the end of that winter season.

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