

Ski Heil!

**The Highand Bavarian Corporation
and the Origins of Commercial
Skiing in Aspen.**

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William J. Convery
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Meditations

--J. M. Leahy

I'm all alone in camp today,
Refulgent with good cheer;
The meadow lark's "orlay, orlay,"
Is the cherished song I hear.

In this rich mineral section
We are sure to make a raise.
Still I've got the same affection
As I had in former days

For that shining root of evil,
The much long-sought-for wealth
That has caused a grand upheaval
In my once robust health.

Yet, today it seems as distant
As in former days so fair,
When patiently we listened
to the eloquent O'Hare.

We dug and delved in shafts and stopes
Until our shapes grew thin,
Just to appease the ardent hopes
Of honest J. P. Flynn,

Who swore Ashcroft would be
The mineral wonder of the West;
That is, if we would all agree
With him, and do our very best

To agitate and advertise
Our hidden treasures great--
In veins of an uncommon size,
The biggest in the state.

And when our grub got seldom,
To Pueblo he would fly,
And would never fail to tell them
Of the famous (sic) "Yellow Boy,"

The richest mine in Ashcroft,
All by himself controlled;
Full of native silver, pure and soft,
And chunks of nugget gold.

He always brought back lots of cash,
Of which we got our share--
But never knew the coming crash
Would bring so much despair.

For not one in the Rockies
Ever realized
That the dollar of our dads
Could be demonetized.

It came and we all felt it--
Some of us feel it yet.
There exists no heat to melt it--
I mean that cold regret

That is felt whenever we think
On former days so fair,
When in Fortune's chain we were a link,
And Lonergan was mayor

Of a city; and society
Was led by gentle hearts,
With naught to disturb our piety,
But gossip's foolish darts.

With inherent exultation we observed
St. Patrick's day.
Famed Roger McAnamara,
Grand Marshal of the day--

There was law and order in his stare,
A mandate in each not,
His baton a shillalah
He brought from the "ould sod."

And how we loved each other
Would make an angel sigh.
Our one motto, above all other,
Was, "Kind words will never die."

How oft my thoughts do wander
Back to A. D. '84--
How memory loves to ponder
On those days, and them adore,

With reverential feeling
While I muse here alone--
With summer zephyrs pealing
Their invigorating tone.

They seem to say "Be hopeful,"
And dame Fortune will repay
You with a ponderous stoepful
Of rich chloride some day.

(Source: Western History Dept., Denver
Public Library. Thomas J. Flynn Papers.)

Aspen, Colorado, is a place where you can indulge in winter sports without having to get a passport, wrestle with the Atlantic, stop in Paris at the expense of your health, and come all the way back again.

Robert Benchley
How To Aspen
1937

The winter of 1996-1997 marks the official fiftieth anniversary of the successful effort to commercialized Aspen skiing, but as the above citation indicates, the roots of commercial wintersport in the Roaring Fork Valley, date back even farther. Ten years before the formation of the Aspen Ski Company, local businessmen combined with outside investors to plan an "American St. Moritz"¹ around the sleepy ghost town of Ashcroft, eleven miles south of Aspen. New York columnists gilded the enterprise in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. California investors introduced a touch of Hollywood. International engineers designed an ambitious ski village of hotels, exclusive shops, tennis courts, and golf courses. Local promoters worked feverishly to remake the town as the brightest skiing spot in the world. The ambitious group of local businessmen and out of state investors doing business as the Highland-Bavarian Ski Corporation provided the spark for commercial skiing in Aspen. The 1930s ski capitalists introduced patterns which were refined during the 1940s and beyond. The designers of the Highland-Bavarian emphasized a refined, European-style atmosphere, combinations of private and public venture capital, and a close connection with Hollywood. Unfortunately, the same factors that contributed to the silver decline of Ashcroft conspired against the blossoming of commercial skiing in the upper alpine valley. Despite an early start, Aspen

¹ Dr. Gunther Lange, "A Professional Opinion on the Choice of Location for the Development of a Large Modern Winter Sports Resort in the Ashcroft Region," unpublished report, 1937, Thomas J. Flynn Papers, Western History Dept., Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado, (hereafter cited as Flynn Papers)8.

skiing would have to wait until the turmoil of the Great Depression and the Second World War were resolved.

While no one has forgotten the contribution of the Highland Bavarian to Aspen skiing, certain aspects of the ski company's growth and failure as they pertain to the timing of Aspen's ski industry have been overlooked. Thomas J. Flynn, the on-location manager and tireless promoter of both the Highland-Bavarian Corp. and the Colorado ski industry, left his papers to the Western History Department of the Denver Public Library. These documents help illuminate the particular opportunities and frustrations experienced by Aspen's local businessmen as they tried to push their small community out of the Depression and into an international spotlight. Flynn's papers also underscore some of the continuous themes of Western development--including reliance on outside capital, reluctant cultivation of federal assistance, and optimistic promotion in the face of sobering economic realities.

The seeds of the Highland-Bavarian Corporation sprouted during the in the summer of 1880 when Jack Leahy homesteaded north of Ashcroft. Leahy, a second-generation Irishman, dabbled in mining, ranching, and law. He served as mayor and justice of the peace in Ashcroft, as well as a union organizer among Aspen miners and unsuccessful candidate for state legislature. Something of a lay scholar, Leahy assembled a library of classical and legal texts in his rude log cabin, and composed sonnets to his beloved valley and town. As a result, he was remembered as the "Poet Laureate" of Ashcroft.

Living in the remote upper Castle Creek valley, Ashcroftians understood the utility, as well as the enjoyment of skiing. Winter snowstorms sometimes left eight feet in the silver camp, requiring everyone to own a pair or two of long "Norwegian snowshoes." Swedish immigrants introduced homemade skis to

Aspen.² Miner George Cornwall recalled the "regular ski trails between Ruby and Crested Butte;" Ashcroft's neighbors over Pearl Pass.³ Ashcroftians probably relaxed with their counterparts in Crested Butte, who organized their own competitive ski club as early as 1881.⁴

The prospector-poet Leahy related a legend about skiing the taxing route over Pearl Pass. As a young man of nineteen, he claimed, he endured Ashcroft's first harsh winter with a handful of hardy souls. Isolated in the drift-bound camp, the miners assembled in Paddy's Gambling Hall to stave off boredom. Reading material was at a premium, and the snowbound citizens yearned for the irregular mail delivery. One wintry day, Leahy claimed, a stranger entered the saloon. Shaking snow from his boots and overcoat, the stranger described his recent crossing of Pearl Pass from Crested Butte. On the way, he passed the mail carrier laboring up the pass with his bundle of mail. When the stranger reached the pass, he heard an elemental roar behind him. He looked around in time to witness the mail carrier engulfed in a cascading avalanche.

According to Leahy, the letter-hungry miners clamored for a rescue mission--provoked more by the loss of the mail than the loss of the messenger. Due to the danger it was decided that only one man should go. The rescuer would be chosen by random selection determined by the spin of Paddy's roulette wheel. Fate, in the form of Paddy's gaming table, chose Jack Leahy.

Strapping on his cumbersome "Norwegian snowshoes," Leahy poled his way towards Pearl Pass. Upon attaining the summit, Jack was clobbered by a ferocious snowstorm. The blasting wind, Jack claimed, threatened to blow him

² Anne Gilbert, "Re-creation Through Recreation: Aspen Skiing From 1870 to 1970," master's thesis (University of Colorado, Boulder, 1995), 8.

³ E. John B. Allen, *From Skisport to Skiing: One Hundred Years of an American Sport, 1840-1940*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 119.

⁴ Gilbert, 7.

off the pass. Unstrapping his skis, bent against the gale, he grasped the cold rocks in his numb hands and lay prone on the ground. When the storm did not abate by nightfall, Jack gave himself up for dead. Lying on the windswept rock, Jack began to sing against the storm in his lilting Irish tenor. He sang a "come a' ye;" a song of challenge to the blizzard. He claimed he sang all night.

In the morning, Jack was surprised to discover that the storm had blown itself out. The only noise Jack heard was his own voice echoing back from the silent peaks. He hopped up and strapped on his skis to finish his mission with a new confidence, for, as he claimed, no mere blizzard was a match for a fine Irish tenor!⁵

Leahy's whimsical tale suited the community personality of early Ashcroft. Like Aspen, the silvery young boomtown thrived on optimism and speculation. Miners and merchants who were too late to break into Aspen and prospectors from the Gunnison country flooded to the rumored strikes at the headwaters of Castle Creek. Travelers, like merchant Henry P. Cowenhoven, were buttonholed on the Ashcroft's streets and exhorted to forget Aspen. Cowenhoven recalled Ashcroftian enthusiasm, "They thought they had the greatest mines in Colorado."⁶

By no stretch of the imagination was this platitude correct. Ashcroft's mines were remote, unproductive, and costly. The ore was low grade and packed with expensive-to-remove sulfur dioxide. Ashcroft's greatest producer, Horace Tabor's Montezuma Mine, yielded \$40,000 during its best month--far short of the fabulous Smuggler and Molly Gibson mines in Aspen. The fact that the Montezuma was located over eleven miles away from and two thousand feet above Ashcroft only served to further complicate production. By 1883,

⁵ Jack Leahy, radio interview with Thomas J. Flynn, transcript, KLZ, Denver, Colorado. Sept. 8, 1938, Flynn Papers.

⁶ Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) , 25.

Ashcroft was in mortal decline. When the railroad reached Aspen in 1887 most of Ashcroft's remaining population decamped as quickly as they had come.

A few, like Leahy, remained.⁷ Over time, Ashcroft was forgotten by all but Aspen's locals. Leahy remained in his cabin, drinking beer, composing poetry, and trying to stir up mining investments. He gradually acquired title to the ghost town as residents died or relocated. Nevertheless, he was so cash-strapped by 1930 that a doctor urged him to move away for treatment of his malnutrition. Leahy moved out, but doggedly held on to the ghost town in the hope that mining would revive.

By the 1930s, Aspen was known as "a pretty dead town." The 1930 population was a mere 750--down from the silver-era crowd of over 14,000. Nevertheless, a few ambitious locals still looked for the main chance. Thomas J. Flynn was one such person. Flynn's father, Joseph P. Flynn, had been Jack Leahy's partner during the 1880s. Like his father, T. J. Flynn still believed in the mining prospects of the Aspen area. Flynn rode into Ashcroft on his father's buckboard at age six and grew up in the hills and valleys of the Roaring Fork River. Like most Aspen boys, he learned to ski at an early age. His interest in the Aspen region led him into mining development as a career. Flynn worked in several Canadian mining ventures, then went to California in pursuit of development capital for some of his father's Aspen mines. Wherever he went, he nostalgically remembered his boyhood home.⁸

One of Flynn's partners was William "Bill" Tagert, an Aspen merchant and rancher, and part-owner of the Montezuma Mine. Like many Aspenites of the

⁷ Leahy was often called "the last resident of Ashcroft," but other candidates include miner Henry J. Fitzpatrick and his family, miner Joe Sawyer, and a seasonal resident known to the locals only as "The Whispering Swede;" Bill Steiner, "The History of Ashcroft," master's thesis (University of Colorado, Boulder, 1978), 123.

⁸ Theodore S. Ryan, "The Beginnings of Alpine Skiing at Aspen: The 'Highland-Bavarian' Story." Radio interview by George W. Madsen, Jr, transcript, WSNO, Aspen, CO. Mar. 23, 1965, Flynn Papers, 7; Sally Barlow-Perez, *A History of Aspen* (Aspen: WHO Press, 1991), 37; Gilbert, 15.

1930s, Tagert dabbled in a wide range of pursuits, but he also appreciated the significance of Aspen's scenery and outdoor potential. Writing to Flynn in 1936, he predicted the Aspen real estate arrangement of the future. "This spot of mine [a ranch near Snowmass Lake] would be a wonderful setup for people of means, people who could afford to build summer homes and come out here for vacations...[I]t has everything, plenty of trout on the premises and can be made as private as you would wish."⁹ Tagert also predicted the Hollywood connection: "I have often thought [Aspen] would be a wonderful setup for a motion picture concern...There has never been picture company in here but they could sure get their Switzerland scenes."

Scenes of Switzerland and skiing occupied Tagert's thoughts. As a landowner with real estate near potential ski mountains, Tagert recognized the fortune to be made in winter sport. The 1932 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, drew American attention to the commercial possibilities of skiing. In 1936, Union Pacific Railroad magnate Averill Harriman began construction on the elite, well publicized Sun Valley ski resort in Idaho. With Austrian instructors, and the first American chair lift, Sun Valley began promoting itself as the "American St. Moritz." Observing the development of the Sun Valley resort, Tagert excitedly wrote to Flynn, "the place does not compare with this country...but just think of that million and a half dollar hotel!"¹⁰

Flynn, in the meantime, continued to peddle mining investments to Los Angeles financiers. Among Flynn's new acquaintances was William "Billy" Fiske, an associate with the investment banking firm of Dillon and Reed. Fiske was a formidable advocate of winter sport development, although Flynn didn't realize it at first. An American graduate of Cambridge, the young financier Fiske

⁹ William Tagert, letter to T. J. Flynn, June 2, 1936, Flynn Papers.

¹⁰ Tagert, letter to Flynn, June, 1936, Flynn Papers.

had been the daredevil captain of the United States bobsled team in the 1932 and 1936 Winter Olympics. Described as a "rugged, brave young man," Fiske held the world speed record on the perilous Cresta bobsled run at St. Moritz, Switzerland.¹¹ Fiske had previously approached Theodore Ryan, a self-described "Connecticut cattleman," state legislator and grandson of the mining scion Thomas Fortune Ryan,¹² with the idea of developing a winter resort in America. Both men were keeping eyes peeled for prospects.

Flynn stumbled into the right man at the right time. Ryan later claimed that Fiske's "love for the mountains and...real heart for outdoor sports" was smothered in the stale offices of Wall Street. Therefore, Flynn received a brush-off when he approached Fiske at a California cocktail party in early 1936 with plans for a mining investment. It was Flynn's photographs of the slopes surrounding Aspen caught Fiske's attention. According to historian Sally Barlow-Perez, "the long, snowy sweep of Little Annie Basin, with its wonderful reaches of untouched power, struck a chord" with the young bobsledder.¹³ He asked Flynn to consider the potential of commercial skiing in Aspen.

When Tagert heard the news in Aspen, he quickly recommended that Flynn "show his California friends" a small ranch just south of Aspen, on the site of the ghost town of Highland. The ranch, owned by Tagert, sat at the junction of Castle and Conundrum Creeks within easy reach of both Little Annie Basin and the slopes of 14,000-foot Mount Hayden.¹⁴ Tagert and Flynn rounded up support of local merchants, including Flynn's boyhood chums Frank and Fred Willoughby, owners of the Midnight Mine; John Herron, owner of the Smuggler Mine; Laurence Elisha, owner of the Hotel Jerome; Mike Magnifico; Francis

¹¹ Ryan, 5.

¹² Gilbert, 17.

¹³ Barlow-Perez, 37.

¹⁴ Tagert, Letter to Flynn, June 8, 1936, Flynn Papers.

Kalmes, and even Aspen Mayor Mike Garrish. Flynn also solicited support from Denver investors such as John Evans, Jr., Joseph and William V. Hodges, Frank Ashley, and George Berger.¹⁵

By midsummer, Flynn arranged for an inspection tour for Flynn and real estate developer Robert Rowan. Fiske, Rowan, and two Cambridge classmates crammed into a single engine Stinson airplane for the flight into a valley still nestled comfortably in the railroad era. Discovering no recognizable airstrip, the pilot landed on "a kind of golf course" in Glenwood Springs. There they were met by Flynn for a three-day stay. Fred and Frank Willoughby loaded the potential investors into a jeep for the rugged back country drive. Their path wound past the Midnight Mine, up Richmond Hill, and over the back side of Aspen Mountain. The younger men raced excitedly up the last five hundred yards to the summit, with the stolid broker Rowan following calmly behind. At the highest point, they were struck by an impressive view of Mount Hayden and the surrounding peaks. Hayden's gentle, flower-strewn meadows fell away like a skirt down into the flowing junction of Castle and Conundrum Creeks.¹⁶ Even the veteran Flynn called the view "the thrill of my life:"

The terrain is rolling offering every imaginable kind of ski travel...I had thought that the picture gave me some idea of these basins but I am frank to tell you that all of our pictures are absolutely inadequate...I had to lay face down for a few minutes to steady my reeling sense because we were looking down three thousand feet...it is like going to the top [of the Empire State Building] and really seeing New York...Hayden seems to be in the center of a vast ring...long series of peaks appear in one line after another...razor edged and pointed and at least a thousand of them in every direction [with a] magnificent variety of coloring in each of them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Barlow-Perez, 37, 40; T. J. Flynn, Letter to John Evans Jr., Aug. 7, 1936, Flynn Papers.

¹⁶ Ryan, 10.

¹⁷ Flynn, Letter to Evans.

As Flynn pointed out, the view impressed the Californians like no photograph could. Fiske reportedly turned to Flynn, and declared, "Tom, you have it, this is the place."¹⁸ Before Fiske and Rowan left Aspen they formulated a plan of attack. They agreed to form a company in order to develop the land and encourage investment. The new company would buy an option on Tagert's ranch, and start building a winter lodge. Additionally, the company would hire experts to survey the slopes of Little Annie Basin and Mt. Hayden in order to develop runs. Rowan and Fiske would fan the "early sparks" of interest on the West Coast, bringing Pasadena attorneys Alfred Wright and Gordon Hall, Jr., onto the board of directors. Partner Ted Ryan would tend to business on the east. Flynn would oversee construction, cultivate Denver investment, and manage the daily operations.¹⁹

Before any of these schemes could be executed, the Californians had to make their harrowing departure from the valley. Their plane was towed to a cramped polo field bracketed by high voltage power lines. As the plane taxied out, it quickly became apparent that the Stinson could not achieve enough lift in the rarefied atmosphere. The three veteran bobsledders began calmly jettisoning luggage, but Robert Rowan was not made of such stern stuff. He begged off at the last minute, pleading for enough time to call the power company and arrange for the temporary removal of the lines. A quick phone call to an obliging local manager resulted in a clear path long enough for the plane to embark "They rose west," Ryan recalled, "with a big burgeoning thought...about alpine activities in the Aspen area."²⁰

¹⁸ Gilbert, 17.

¹⁹ Ryan, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

By early fall, 1936, the Highland-Bavarian Corporation was in business. Flynn recruited twenty carpenters and stone masons from Glenwood Springs to build their new facility. Fiske and Rowan hired Pasadena architect of the Santa Anita Jockey Club G. B. Kaufmannof, as well as Walt Disney Company designers Mr. and Mrs. James Bodrero.²¹ The Bodreros adapted the Bavarian motif that was fashionable in pre-war ski circles. Jimmy Bodrero painted upon the gable a trio of *lederhosen*-clad musicians dancing and om-pahing under a smiling sun. A dove hovered above their heads holding in its mouth a banner with the twin slogans: "*Willkommen*" and "*Ski Heil.*"²² As a further enhancement of the atmosphere, a German couple served as cook and housecleaner.

Kaufmannof connected the living and dining rooms of the main lodge with a stone fireplace. Guests slept in one of two gender-segregated eight-bunk dormitories.²³ The lodge retained primitive features but also cultivated a rugged elegance. Initial guests were supplied with mattresses but had to bring their own sleeping bags. Within a year, guests nestled into double-decked bunks of Philippine mahogany on box spring mattresses piled high with wool blankets and patch quilts. Each bunk came with a linen privacy curtain and personal reading lamp. Each dormitory boasted a shower, lavatory, and toilet, and was heated by a Heatolator furnace as well as a fire place. Guests were further assured that their drinking water was filtered through a gravel-filled shaft by an electric pump. The Highland-Bavarian grounds also included a barn and hayloft suitable for two four-horse teams and the company sleigh, living quarters for employees, and a work room for the surveying team.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² *The Ski Bulletin*, (VII:10) Feb. 19, 1937: Cover.

²³ Flynn, Letter to Dr. Frank Henius, Aug. 24, 1937, Flynn Papers.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Working at a speed which astonished nearly everyone, the carpenters finished the lodge by December. The Highland-Bavarian Lodge officially opened with some ceremony on December 26, 1936. In addition to the proud new owners, six paying guests checked into the lodge at its posted rate of seven dollars per person per night.²⁵ Out-of-town guests were picked up at the Glenwood Springs train station in the company station wagon "at no additional charge."

In addition to lodging, the Highland-Bavarian provided the first organized commercial skiing in the region. Bill Tagert personally operated the ski lift--a four-in-hand sleigh which carried skiers to the top of Aspen Mountain or up Mt. Hayden for a mere fifty cents, (or less than 1/100 of a 1997 Aspen lift ticket.) Once on top of the mountain, the skiers had only a few choices about their destination. Those dropped off on Aspen Mountain could ski back into town or down the backside in Little Annie Basin. Fiske and Ryan had also helped cut a trail down Mt. Hayden back to the lodge.²⁶

If early conditions were rustic, Flynn, Fiske, and Ryan had ambitious plans for the future. Before construction began they hired two well-known engineers to reconnoiter their ski runs and assess future plans. Andre Roch was a Swiss-born, American trained mountain climber, avalanche expert and civil engineer. Gunther Lange, from a Balzano, Italy, was known as an extraordinary skier and mountaineer. The pair tackled the job with gusto. At times, the surveyors' paperwork and blueprints threatened to engulf the main lodge. Local guides showed them every gully and prominence. They observed the weather, terrain, flora, and altitude with an eye for skiing. Their reports radically changed the course of development at the Highland-Bavarian.

²⁵ The guests, all from Denver, included William V. Hodges, Jr., Joseph Hodges, Martha Wilcox, Polly Grimes, Frank Ashley, and Gretl Arndt. William Hodges' daughter Anne is a current trustee of the Aspen Historical Society. Barlow-Perez, p. 39.; Flynn. Letter to Henius.

²⁶ Ryan, 13; Flynn, Letter to Henius.

The steep, rocky, east-facing slopes immediately around the existing lodge discouraged both engineers. Viewing the surrounding terrain, Roch commented, "we did not look forward with enthusiasm to the winter we were to spend here." Nevertheless, when Roch and Fiske climbed Mount Hayden in May, 1937, his opinion changed. He called the expedition, "the most magnificent ski trip of the winter...clouds of powder and snow rise behind you, making the skier seem like a rocket shooting along the ground."²⁷ During the next six months, after the engineers climbed Mt. Hayden and Castle Peak an additional three times, both recommended Ashcroft as the site of further development.

Indeed, their reports read like promotional brochures, perhaps not coincidental to the concurrent drive for private and public support. In his official report, Andre Roch dismissed the vertical drops at Conundrum (2,000 feet), Richmond Hill (1,500 feet), and Tourtelotte Park (2,000 feet) as "too small" or "too short." The peaks and passes forming a bowl around Ashcroft swooped steeply down into the Castle Creek valley in vertical drops of 3,500 to 5,000 feet. Even better, Ashcroft formed the crux of a potentially vast network linking Hayden, Castle, and Taylor Peaks, Pearl and Taylor Passes, and Gold Hill. Ashcroft, Roch reckoned, "presents tremendously better [skiing] possibilities than any other places directly around Aspen." In Roch's opinion, no other site was "nearly so varied or interesting as around Ashcroft."²⁸

Lange, too, preferred Ashcroft's prospects. He noted the "ideal dry powder texture" of Mt. Hayden's midwinter snow pack, and the abundance of the two "essential prerequisites of a first class wintersport resort: *Snow* and *Sun*." Lange declared Ashcroft suitable for several reasons, including its wide

²⁷ Cited in Gilbert, 19-20.

²⁸ Andre Roch, "Practical Data about the Building and Organization of a Winter and Summer Resort in Ashcroft." unpublished manuscript. Highland-Bavarian Corp., March, 1937, Flynn Papers, 2-3.

valley bottom, "gradual and uniform" slopes around the base, and the natural disparity between the "lower, plateau-like introductory range" around American Lake, and the "first rate ski mountains" among the higher reaches of Castle and Hayden Peaks. While not as scenic as St. Moritz or Zermatt, Switzerland, Lange concluded, Ashcroft's winter sport potential "can easily be placed on par with the best and most famous Alpine resorts."²⁹

Both engineers recommended immediate, aggressive, and total development of the valley. Lange urged that the Highland-Bavarian buy the land and build a temporary hotel of 50-60 beds for the 1937-1938 season. Rather than wasting a year in construction, the resort should spring to life with full publicity, sponsoring competitions as soon as possible. Where there existed a tranquil sub alpine meadow and scatter of dilapidated false-fronted buildings, Roch envisioned a commercial Mecca. He outlined a plan for two hotels (one 400 bed facility for fat cats and an 800-bed economy inn), an indoor swimming pool, two artificial lakes for summer recreation and power, and a 9-hole golf course. The resort village would include:

[A] Bank, Post office, Traveler's Office, Infirmary (sic), Resort Direction Office, Ranger Station, Two Ski Shops, two Clothing Shops, Photo Shop, Shoe Shop (Mike [Mercurio!]), Drugstore, Grocery Store, Novelty Shop for Antiques!, Jeweler, Coiffeur, Laundry, Art Exhibition and Sport Museum, Tea Room and Pastry Shop, Caffè (sic), Two Restaurants with Dancing, Bowling, Movie Theatre, Garage, [and] Stables, (The stables must be far away because of the stinking smell of them!!)

Roch generated a vivid mental picture of winter activities in his report. In his ski-city of tomorrow, bobsledders, slalom artists, and ski-jumpers took a lift to the competitive runs, and shushed back into a world-class stadium. Hockey

²⁹ Lange, 3-5.

players, figure skaters, and curlers twirled across a skating rink shaded against the intemperate rays of the sun. Beginners rode a special ski lift for "Children and Old Girls" to the gentlest of slopes. Adults and young girls, apparently, would have access to a cable tramway, (variously referred to as the "telefrique" or "funicular") which whisked them from Jack Leahy's cabin to the top of Mt. Hayden, with stops in between. If built, the tramway would be the longest in the world to date. From there, skiers could hurtle down one of fifteen downhill runs, and even more during cross country season.

Roch suggested a heavy summer schedule as well. In his projected resort punters, fishermen, and canoers skimmed across the twin lakes. More ambitious anglers took the telefrique to American and Cathedral Lakes. White-suited athletes smashed tennis balls across the courts. Sharp-eyed hunters stalked their game through fiery orange aspen trees.³⁰ His enthusiasm infected the *Aspen Times*, which predicted a complete, ski-based economic revival, "Aspen may again rise to the glories that were hers as the 'Crystal City of the Rockies.'"³¹

Against these heady visions of Alpine perfection stood some drab economic realities. Construction, access, and even acquisition were not going to come cheaply. With no developed road, Ashcroft was barely accessible in the best of seasons. During the winter, heavy snowfall and avalanches completely isolated the valley. Even without transportation woes, the cost of construction more than matched the ambition. Ryan and Flynn were "staggered" by tramway manufacturer American Steel and Wire's estimation of \$1,250,000 for the record-breaking aerial tramway.³² When approached about

³⁰ Roch, 5-6.

³¹ Cited in Gilbert, 17.

³² Ryan, 18.

selling his holdings, the aging sourdough poet Jack Leahy coolly demanded \$50,000.³³

Despite such setbacks, the 1936-37 and 37-38 seasons were successful. The company acquired title to the Ashcroft basin through the offices of Glenwood Springs attorney Frank Delaney and Shaw & Garlington. Roch and Lange gave locals their first formal ski lessons in Highland Basin. The Highland-Bavarian Company sponsored the Aspen Alpine Senior Trophy race, Aspen's first official ski competition, on March 27, 1937.³⁴ While such an event created good publicity, the directors looked for national outlets of promotion. To that end, Fiske convinced an acquaintance, *New Yorker* columnist Robert Benchley to help out. Benchley's brand of cocktail-sipping reserve created an interesting timbre in the selling of the rugged resort. Benchley's pamphlet, "How to Aspen," consciously promoted Aspen as the Europe of the West--a refined place for outdoor fun in America's backyard. No skier himself, Benchley wrote, "You can have just as good a time falling down there as you can on any of the European slopes. If, by any chance, you want to stand up, you can go just as fast as you could down an Alp."³⁵

Hoping for goodwill to help with both customers and investors, Flynn arranged for special junkets from the Colorado Mountain Club, the Junior Colorado Mountain Club, and the Dartmouth and Bavarian ski teams. Each returned ringing recommendations, although none so giddy as the Colorado Mountain Club's:

³³ Flynn, Letter to Edward C. Flynn. Oct. 6, 1937, Flynn Papers. In 1937, the Ashcroft valley was divided into four private land holdings. From north to south were a ninety acre ranch owned by Mike Brand's widow (on "the old cemetery site"), the ninety acre Jack Leahy ranch, the Ashcroft Townsite (Castle Creek Placer U. S. Mineral Survey No. 2016) also owned by Leahy, and a two hundred acre ranch owned by the estate of Henry J. Fitzgerald and the Anaconda Copper Company. Beyond the Fitzgerald Ranch was "PRIMITIVE [i. e. Federally owned] FOREST."

³⁴ Ryan, 14; Barlow-Perez, 39.

³⁵ Robert Benchley, "How to Aspen," pamphlet (Aspen: Highland-Bavarian Ski Co., 1937)

Ski Heil! and Heil to Aspen! Highlands--the great high country or Space, and the twelve clean winds of heaven-- Bavarian--all that is Tyrolean, and picturesque-- and skiable! In other words--Skiing at Aspen! ³⁶

Flynn also worked the political circuit, requesting endorsements from Colorado Governor Teller Ammons, Denver Mayor Benjamin F. Stapleton, Denver City Parks commissioner George E. Cranmer, the Denver Chamber of Commerce, the Salida Chamber of Commerce, the Denver Convention and Tourist Bureau, and officials from the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, Denver and Rio Grande, Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific, and Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroads.³⁷ Flynn courted Colorado ski clubs, and began broadcasting his own weekly ski-oriented talk show on Denver AM radio station KLZ.³⁸ Through John Evans Jr., the indefatigable Flynn solicited money from Spenser Penrose (who apparently didn't bite), and elicited a pledge of \$225,000 from Texas investor Dr. Frank Henius (although Flynn admitted that Henius' casual promises and questionable references made him "sweat blood"). Flynn also assuaged and recruited local investors, maintained the Highland lodge, and toured local Lions and Kiwanis clubs touting films of ski highlights.

When private capitalization proved insufficient, Flynn and Ryan lobbied extensively for state and federal assistance. Flynn marshaled Benjamin Stapleton, Governor Ammons and John Evans Jr. to assist with the passage of a bond issue through the state legislature for the purpose of assuaging hotel and tramway expenses.³⁹ On the federal level, Flynn received special use permits to use Department of Forestry lands. The company petitioned the

³⁶ Evelynne Runnette, Colorado Mountain Club, Letter to Flynn. Mar. 1, 1937, Flynn Papers.

³⁷ Flynn, Letters sent to each organization on Oct. 21, 1938, Flynn Papers.

³⁸ Flynn, Letter to Don Lawrie. Dec. 2, 1938, Flynn Papers. Flynn's program ran on Thursday evenings at 10:45. It became a staple program "for furthering statewide winter sports activity."

³⁹ Barlow-Perez, 39.

Forestry Department for a road to Ashcroft. On a larger scale, Flynn and Ryan looked to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) for help. The Federal Public Works Administration Grant for the Winter Park ski area was not lost on Flynn. He swallowed his Western revulsion for "New Dealers" and began agitating for federal aid.⁴⁰

Through 1937 and 1938, more and more of the daily responsibilities were falling on Flynn's shoulders. Fiske was transferred to Dillon and Reed's London offices in 1937. As director of the Highland-Bavarian, Flynn's duties required him to simultaneously manage the lodge in Aspen and round up political and commercial support in Denver. When not glad-handing Denver politicians, railroad men, and chieftains of commerce, he shuttled back and forth between the two locations. The strain of the job, along with chronic underfunding from his partners, began to tell. Flynn complained to Bill Tagert that he wasn't paid "a Confederate penny" for his efforts:

Of course the fact that I have incidental bills and that I have only two suits-- one six years old and one four years old and both ragged--does not seem to ripple the waters. Of course I am only going down to get one million two hundred and fifty [thousand] dollars to add to the assets, but the fact that we have a flock of bankers, etc., in our crowd does not matter. As long as I can stagger along and bring in the bacon, it is find (sic) and dandy--JUST SO LONG AS I DO NOT NIBBLE THE BACON.⁴¹

It turned out that there was very little bacon to nibble in the late Depression years. To Flynn's dismay investment capital was slow in coming. The Highland lodge opened only erratically during the 1937-38 season due to insufficient operating funds. Without adequate cash reserves, the lodge's

⁴⁰ Flynn, Letter to Tagert, June 5, 1938, Flynn Papers.

⁴¹ Flynn, Letter to Tagert, Jan. 14, 1938, Flynn Papers.

insurance lapsed, bills fell into arrears, and creditors began examining the company's assets in Aspen. Worse, the directors faced the headache of a potential lawsuit over the boundary lines of their existing lodge. Flynn experienced another bad moment during the summer of 1938 when he arranged for an RFC committee member to stay at the Highland Lodge for a few days. To his horror, he discovered that the local power company refused to fix a downed power line at the lodge until certain overdue bills were settled. Without power, the lodge was bereft of heat, cooking facilities, and drinking water at the very moment that a federal representative was coming to inspect their plans. He frantically wired the company offices in California, and used local connections to help alleviate the crisis.⁴²

In response to Flynn's ever urgent complaints, the directors responded by calling a special stockholder's meeting in April, 1938. The corporation's present financial condition, claimed the directors, was "extremely precarious," despite the pending state bond issue, and aggregate loans from Robert Rowan, William Fiske, Jr., his son Billy Fiske, Edwin Earl, and Theodore Ryan amounting to \$34,247.06. Just where this capital went was a mystery that no one seemed to question. The directors issued six hundred new shares of capital stock at \$25 per share (down from the original value of \$27.59.) Part was used to cancel \$15,000 in promissory notes. The rest was allocated to operating costs. Rowan, the Fiskes, Earl, and Ryan were asked to risk whatever else they could to keep the venture afloat.⁴³

While Flynn waited impatiently for funding, competitors moved in quickly. Former Dartmouth ski coach Otto Schniebs, who had previously endorsed the Highland-Bavarian runs, entered into an agreement to build guest cabins on

⁴² Flynn, Letter to Gordon Hall, Jr., June 6, 1938, Flynn Papers.

⁴³ "Notice of special meeting of shareholders of Highland-Bavarian Corp." Gordon Hall, Jr., secretary. Apr. 4, 1938, Flynn Papers.

Mike Brand's ranch at the northern end of the upper Castle Creek valley and develop nearby Montezuma Basin. The move effectively bottled Ashcroft.

When Flynn heard about Schniebs' maneuver, he lost his temper:

Nice going. We will do all of the heavy pioneering--pay the way to build...a road--sit on our fanny for the lack of a few dollars to move around and make a deal while the going is good for us--and some other sap who has not turned a hand will step in and make the money. Here I am sweating my heart out trying to move in behalf of the whole crowd--and put in a position where I have to suck these fellows down here for a few dam (sic) dollars so that I can give them an empire...I am thoroughly fed up on sissyfooting..."⁴⁴

Exasperated as he was, he still kept his miner's belief that fortune could smile any time. The board of directors issued enough stock to hold off the creditors. Benchley's publicity was generating good response. American Wire and Steel granted long term credit for the tramway, and Flynn's RFC feelers responded favorably. "Gougiers and chislers are everywhere," Flynn guardedly wrote Tagert, "but Bill--it may seem nuts to you--but I think that we are going to win."

It was nuts to Flynn. The summer of 1938 passed with very little resolved. By November, Flynn notified Fiske, Rowan, and Ryan that the Borquin Insurance Company and various creditors had brought suit against the Highland-Bavarian Corporation for lack of payment. Flynn listed the litany of grievances still outstanding from the past two years, including repair problems, competition, unpaid bills, inadequate transportation routes, lack of power, and lack of a decent cook. Fiske, still in London, and still busy in other pursuits, barely acknowledged the situation.⁴⁵ With inquiries on rates and

⁴⁴ Flynn, Letter to Tagert, May 22, 1938, Flynn Papers.

⁴⁵ Flynn, Letter to Tagert, Nov., 26, 1938, Flynn Papers.

accommodations piling up, but with no operating funds, Flynn sent out a hopeful form letter:

Due to the lack of transportation to the slopes of Mount Hayden, we have decided not to open Highland-Bavarian Lodge this season. We are bending every effort to have a passenger tramway erected at Ashcroft that will reach the crest of Hayden. This will open up the worlds greatest ski slopes. Until that time we have just ordinary terrain to offer.⁴⁶

The Highland-Bavarian lodge would not open regularly again. On September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland, drawing England into war. The daredevil Billy Fiske volunteered as a pilot in the Royal Air Force's "Defense of London" Squadron. During the Battle of Britain, he became the first American casualty in the R.A.F.⁴⁷ In spite of this blow, the Highland-Bavarian Corporation kept struggling. In September, 1941, dozing aspirations were revived when the Colorado state legislature finally passed a special appropriation of \$650,000 to help defray the expenses of the telefrique.

Ryan immediately retained Ellery Husted to assess Ashcroft's design potential. The New York architect was charmed by the rustic romance of the ghost town, and proposed a slightly more preservation friendly design plan. Rejecting Roch and Lange' Bavarian-style village, Husted recommended restoring the indigenous silver-era buildings. Noting the intrinsic historic value of the site (and clearly buying some of the more exotic tales of the old timers), Husted advocated "a Williamsburg of the Old West [with] a jail that held Jesse James, a barroom with gun shots, a fancy house and the home of old Tabor." "This," Husted concluded, "is something that money can't buy, and all there

⁴⁶ Flynn, Letter to K. G. Fuller, Dec. 9, 1938, Flynn Papers.

⁴⁷ Ryan, 19.

already."⁴⁸ Husted was the first to suggest that the ghost town was more than anything but in the way of progress.

The remaining senior partner, Ted Ryan, only had three months to mull this over before America entered the war. He deferred the question, leasing the valley to the government for \$1 per year. Ashcroft served as an occasional training site for the Tenth Mountain Division, whose members would form the spearhead of postwar ski development in Colorado.⁴⁹ Following the war, Ryan held onto the Ashcroft site, but didn't try to compete with the fledgling Aspen Ski Company. In 1947, Army veteran and environmentalist Stuart Mace leased five acres from Ryan on which to build the Toklat Lodge and Gallery. Over the next fifty years, Mace successfully restored much of the valley, including the ghost town, to its pre-development condition. Inspired by Husted and Mace, Ryan returned much of the valley to the United States Forest Service between 1951 and 1985. Thanks in large part to the efforts of Ryan and the Mace family, the valley today is a gem of environmental preservation, resistant to the looming developmental pressures on all sides.

Before he died in 1985, Ryan found a way to incorporate skiing with Mace's ideal of preservation in the Castle Creek valley. In 1974, Ryan and Stuart's son, Greg Mace, incorporated the Ashcroft Ski Touring Company and Pine Creek Cookhouse. The popular Ski Touring Company still rents cross country skis, grooms back country trails up Pearl and Taylor Passes and into Montezuma Basin, and maintains overnight huts for winter sports enthusiasts still looking for the St. Moritz of the West.

⁴⁸ Ryan, 24.

⁴⁹ Barlow-Perez, 44.

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