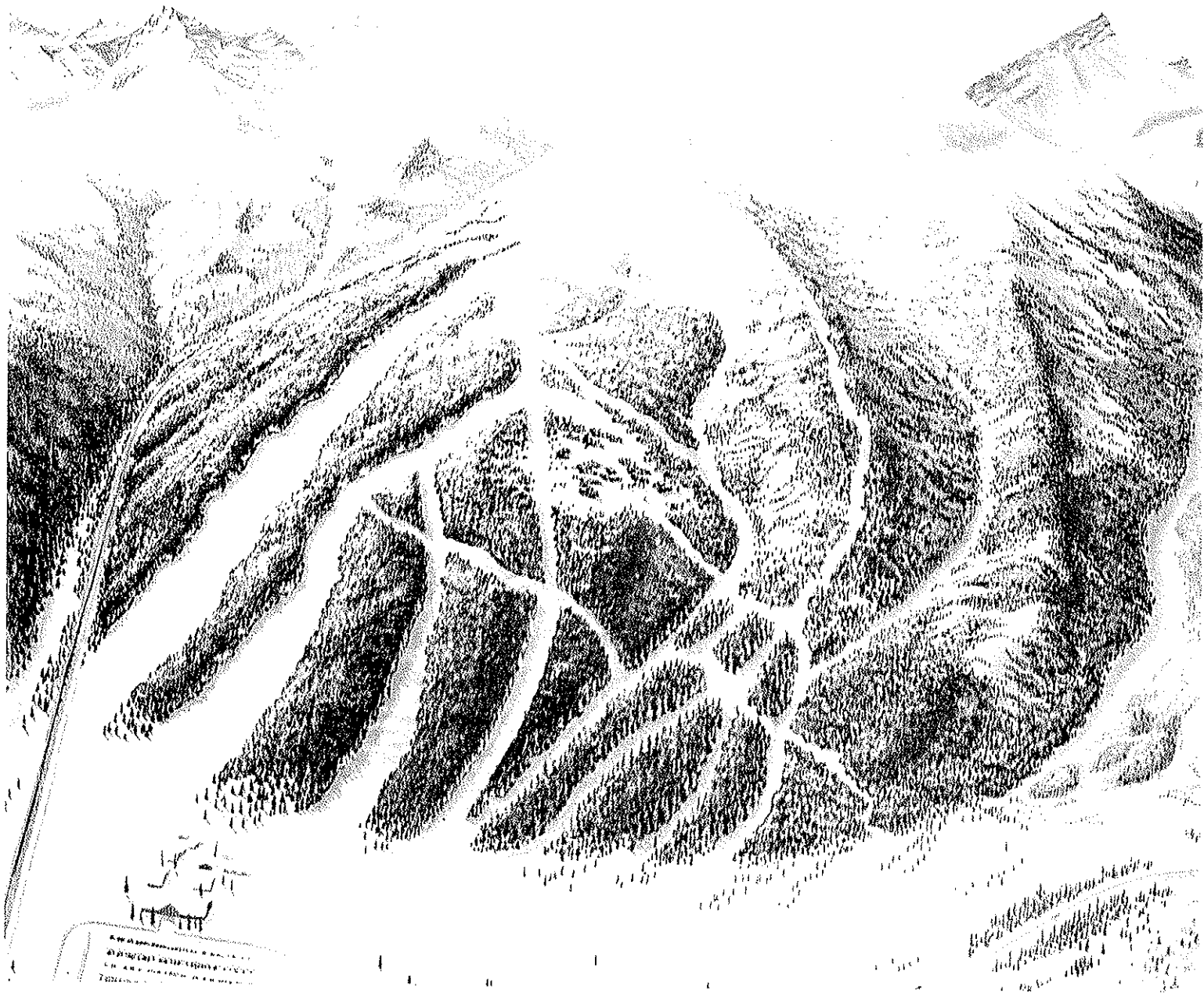
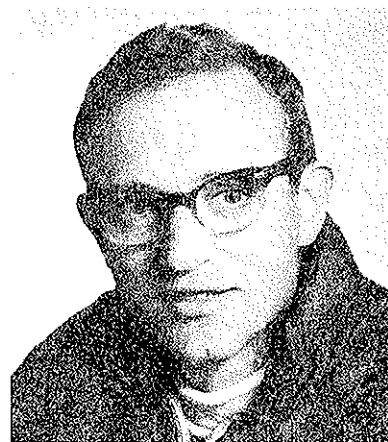


SKI '71



Story by Charlie Meyers



He'll make it go

READY, ASPEN? ALL SET, VAIL? The world renowned resorts that now stand uncontested at the pinnacle of skiing in Colorado may soon have company at the top.

The new entry scheduled to burst like a shooting star upon the skiing scene in 1971 is Copper Mountain, an almost flawless expanse of ski terrain located 20 miles east of Vail on the main road from Denver.

Long known for its potential, Copper Mountain remained untapped until an adventuresome Colorado educator and his associates uncovered the key to one of skiing's golden opportunities. The story of the planned development is the behind-the-scenes story of today's ski industry. It is an account of the birth of a brand new ski area soon to be enjoyed by thousands. It is also a narrative of a financial empire whose worth will quickly run into millions of dollars.

Copper Mountain could well turn out to be the hub of what may become the world's most expansive recreation complex. With the completion of Interstate 70 from Denver westward, planners foresee the growth of a 100-mile-long band of ski areas and resorts extending from Loveland Basin on the east to the Eagle Valley on the west. The strategic location of Copper Mountain is apparent since it will only be 75 minutes drive from downtown Denver when the auto tunnel under the Continental Divide is opened in 1971.

Perhaps even more impressive is the mountain itself. Representatives of the US Forest Service have called it the most outstanding undeveloped mountain in Colorado.

Just what is there about Copper Mountain, other than location, which makes it so desirable?

"It's a great skiing mountain. It has something for everyone," says Paul Hauk, a renowned snow ranger who is one of the nation's leading authorities on ski area potential. "It amazes me that no one has done anything with it until now because I started getting inquiries on the area as early as 1960. It has ample private land, easy access and good ski slopes. It's a natural.

"When Colorado first started talking about going after the 1976 Winter Olympics, this area was my recommendation. It still is my choice for the Alpine ski events, but the Denver organizers apparently feel they should promote the Games closer to the city."

In total agreement is Willy Schaeffler, new President of the Professional Ski Instructors of America and perhaps the world's premier authority on mountain development.

"The slopes at Copper will handle all types of skiers and, better yet, do so on a horizontal basis," Schaeffler explains. "The whole mountain is arranged terrain-wise from west to east. Moving in that direction, one goes from beginner to intermediate to expert. This way there is no problem of each getting in the other's way.

"It is a superior mountain," Schaeffler concludes. "If Denver gets the Olympic bid, they should consider it for the ski events anyway."

But any Olympic conjecturing is of no consequence to Chuck Lewis, former general manager of Vail who is now serving as ramrod for the Copper Mountain Development.

"We're building for recreational skiing," he

says emphatically, "and the Olympic trails would be over a part of the mountain we wouldn't use at first. The exposure would be nice, but that's about as far as the benefits go."

The initial direction for Copper Mountain (which is named for an old mine near the summit which turned out low-grade copper) will be up, and up to a point some 12,000 feet high on the 12,481-foot peak. With a 9,650-foot base, the verticle drop will be some 2,400 feet.

Initial capital outlay on the mountain has been projected at \$6,000,000 before opening, but Lewis concedes it "could go to \$10,000,000."

Lewis feels himself becoming more infatuated with the mountain with each passing day.

"When I first looked into the matter, I could find no one who had a negative comment about the mountain. At first this worried me, because I knew there had to be a fault somewhere. Now I feel they weren't far from wrong."

Copper primarily is a rolling mountain on the order of Aspen's Snowmass, except that the skiing will be better. It's open terrain, the result of a long-ago fire and early timber cutting, and lends itself to very broad, long runs. The fall line rolls nicely, and the natural terrain route follows areas which require little work to develop. Rock outcroppings are almost nonexistent. The mountain faces north, assuring the typical light, powdery Colorado snow conditions.

But Copper Mountain will be more than just skiing. Like Vail and Aspen before it, the impetus for today's Western resort centers around a real estate development of staggering proportions. With the construction of a complete 300-acre Alpine village and the companion improvements to the mountain itself, the investors will plunge over \$40,000,000 into a wager that the crest of the national recreation boom is nowhere in sight. Appreciated values will extend to a figure which borders on the astronomical.

This dizzying progression of the financial structure began in June of 1969 when Copper Mountain Associates negotiated the purchase of 279 acres of land at the foot of the slopes from Denver entrepreneur Eugene H. Sanders for about \$1,400,000 and stock considerations.

But that is getting ahead of the story which has a beginning as remote from Colorado and the ski industry as a New York meeting of a Virginia coal mining company. At the December, 1968 meeting was Chuck Froelicher, headmaster of Denver's Colorado Academy and an avid skier and outdoorsman.

There Froelicher learned that Pocahontas Mining Corporation, of which he was a director, had a problem — an exceedingly pleasant one. The corporation had a surplus of capital and was seeking an avenue of investment. Would the directors please be alert for possibilities?

The trail from New York to Copper Mountain since has been spiced with the maneuvering and intrigues befitting such a project. It would not have been completed without two intangibles — timing and circumstance.

Cognizant of the ski industry's rapid growth in Colorado, Froelicher's thoughts turned immediately to the expansion of land values near ski areas. Here, he thought, was real investment potential. Using his vacation house at Dillon as a base, he began a Christmas holiday tour of what he considered prime territory, the Eagle Valley west of Vail.

"I found nothing of immediate interest," Froelicher relates, "but then a cousin who recently moved to Vail, Bob Righter, came to dinner one night. The conversation turned to my search, and I learned that he, too, was investigating a ski business opportunity.

"We decided a good starting point would be to check with the Forest Service to discover which areas they had under study. We had no intention of beginning a ski area. We simply were seeking a land investment."

At Dillon, the pair talked to ranger Jerry Covault, who suggested Copper Mountain. The problem, Covault explained, was no one could successfully approach the owner of the land at the base. The property simply was not for sale, despite varied tactics and many promises.

"We took a look at the property and the mountain and liked what we saw. We learned that it had been selected as a potential Olympic site, but had no idea of the cost. We did know that any such development would take far more than either of us, along with Pocahontas, would be able to invest."

Next in the sequence of fate was a social call by Louis Polk of Minneapolis, who had just been nominated to reverse the sagging fortunes of Metro Goldwyn Mayer. The men had become acquainted through the Outward Bound Program, which Froelicher founded. Polk, in turn, had started up the second such school in Minnesota. The MGM president expressed interest in the Copper Mountain scheme, but made no commitment at that time. Froelicher's interests now included himself, his wife and Pocahontas Mining.

Now it was Righter's turn to proliferate. He brought in both his father, Volney Righter of New York, and brother, James Righter of New Haven, Connecticut. But this was only the beginning of Bob Righter's contacts. He was an heir to the estate of the late Leander McCormick, farm equipment magnate, an association which led to the involvement of the McCormick estate itself and George B. Agnew, Jr., of Greenwich, Connecticut, another McCormick relative.

"We didn't know Eugene Sanders who owned the land," Froelicher says. "And it took a lot of getting acquainted. We didn't get very far at first. It was touch-and-go for about four months. We were never sure until the contract actually was signed. We had no real inclination as to the price until late in the game. We came out of each meeting scratching our heads, wondering if we should keep going or give the thing up.

"But he gradually got to meet our partners as they happened through town. I think he began to like what he saw."

Copper Mountain Associates still needed one thing — a ski-business expert who could make the whole project go.

In his search for such a person, Froelicher came upon the name Chuck Lewis.

The 33-year-old Denver native, an expert skier and a Dartmouth graduate with a master's degree in accounting from the University of Denver, Lewis served as assistant general manager of Vail starting in 1965 and later became the executive VP and treasurer. He left in 1967.

"Everyone to whom we talked about Chuck gave a glowing recommendation," Froelicher recalls.

As for Lewis, it was the kind of opportunity he'd been seeking. "After being out of the industry, I found I had an even keener feeling for it than when I left. To me, the ski business still is in its infancy. I felt the time was ripe to get back in."

By now, talks with Sanders

were progressing and the list of partners was growing.

"The farther we went, the more we learned about others who were after the property — people of formidable reputation and resources," Froelicher recalls.

But Sanders, who realized a neat 500 percent profit in the resale, knew what he wanted and was content to be patient.

"I could have sold that property to different people and I didn't solicit any of them," Sanders points out. "But I was looking for people who would develop the land well. I want this whole area to be a credit to the resort industry. From the standpoint of location, this area is the best in Colorado. I bought it with a good ski development in mind, and I had no real interest in the Olympic plans. I told the Denver Olympic people they might make use of the property provided it was handled properly."

"We didn't dicker over the price at all," Froelicher remembers. "Since Sanders wanted a piece of the operation, we felt if it was a good deal for him, it probably was for us as well. It's been an excellent relationship from the first."

Lewis knows that since the area will be the nearest major ski resort to Denver and the Eastern Slope population centers, it will attract many single-day visitors. He projects a rough 50-50 balance between such skiers and vacationers. Facilities will be planned accordingly.

"Our initial outlook is for 8,000 people per day, which would mean we'd need beds for 4,000," he reasons.

Lewis has not arrived on any architectural style as yet, but feels that "when it's settled, it's going to be unique — not quite like anything others have done. We're putting more into a feasibility study than many ski areas do in their entire operation. We hope to avoid many of the mistakes with which other resorts have been plagued."

Indeed, the price of some \$5,000

per acre is steep enough, but when one considers that a 30-acre plot within Vail recently brought \$40,000 per acre of raw land, the appreciation of ski area real estate values is readily apparent.

Copper Mountain Associates hope to enhance this value by emphasizing the year-round qualities of their resort. A major asset is that the property commands both forks of Tenmile Creek.

"We'll devote much of the land to the formation of small lakes and other water projects," Lewis states. "We also are very close to Dillon Reservoir and have access to some really fantastic back country, including the Gore Range-Eagles Nest Primitive Area.

"A dude ranch with a good outfitter will be an early installation in the area. This could be one of the few places where a dude ranch can enjoy winter income.

"We feel the addition of Copper Mountain will dovetail with planned expansion at Vail and be a commanding factor in the growth of a giant all-season recreation complex along Interstate 70. Certainly the opening of the road tunnel under Loveland Pass, combined with the arrival of 400-passenger airplanes and the continued expansion of the recreation industry, can do little but help."

Copper Mountain appears to be a very sound gamble on the continued recreation boom.

"There's no doubt our timing has been exceptional thus far," Froelicher says, "but who knows what the climate of the country will be 10 years from now. Can we say this ski explosion is indefinite? How long will it continue and who will be left holding the bag? We feel very strongly about the future of the ski industry.

"Our group includes a number of people of almost unlimited resources. Others of us are wagering very heavily that Copper Mountain will succeed. I know it is very important to my family. The kids are particularly excited about it. They figure this way they'll get free lift passes." □