

THE FINISH LINE

Wayne Poulsen: He Loved Squaw the Best

by Eddy Ancinas

photographs courtesy
Sandy Poulsen

Wayne Poulsen was an extraordinary, courageous and committed Western ski pioneer. His life was deeply embedded in the sport. His ski friends were legion. He was the first to realize the immense resort potential of the then remote Squaw Valley; he initiated its development. And though Squaw Valley became the site of America's first alpine Olympic Games in 1960, Poulsen's passion remained the same: to share the valley with his family and his friends, taking them out fishing, hiking, camping, riding and backcountry skiing.

Poulsen grew up in Reno, Nevada, and developed into a young ski mountaineer. He became a nationally ranked jumper, California's four-event champion. He founded the University of Nevada ski team, was its first captain and coach, leading the team to the 1939 national collegiate championship. Poulsen excelled in so many dimensions of the sport, it would be hard to find his equal on the scene today.

In 1926, when he was eleven, young Wayne made himself his first pair of skis, fashioned from Oregon pine—seven feet long, four inches wide with home-made bindings and tips bent into shovel shape after softening in nearby Steamboat Hot Springs. Characteristically, young Wayne made several more pair for his grade school friends, as well.

Poulsen was a passionate outdoorsman, beginning with outings of Troop No. 1 to Zephyr Cove on Lake Tahoe where he was introduced to wilderness camping. As an Eagle Scout and a Scout leader, he climbed every major peak around Lake Tahoe and built two cabins out of lumber left over from mine flumes. His Scout troop perennially won the regional skill champion-



Wayne Poulsen in 1948.

ships—Poulsen was the fire-by-friction champ. His son Craig says, "Dad was the only fisherman in the group, and a master pancake-maker."

In 1929, Poulsen entered high school at Reno in the class of 1934 and was asked to assist pioneer snow scientist James Church, a professor at the University of Nevada in Reno. The two of them carried out an annual snow-depth survey that enabled Church to predict the spring runoff vital to California agriculture.

Church and young Poulsen's annual winter circuit traversed miles and miles of back country around Lake Tahoe, Poulsen carrying a 35-pound camera, tripod and a twelve foot snow-sampling tube that whistled when he skied downhill.

Poulsen liked everything about skiing. He loved jumping.

He and his best friend Marty Arrougé

jumped from snow ramps they built in Truckee Meadows. At 16, Poulsen, jumping on ash skis with one broken tip, went off the scaffold jump at Hill Top in Truckee—a serious jump. Poulsen managed to land four in a row. He then entered his first competition, the 1931 Far West Championships at Olympic Hill in Tahoe City; he failed to place but saw the big boys jump—the meet was the 1932 Olympic Jumping Team tryout.

In the summer of 1931, Arrougé took Poulsen on a long fishing trip into a vast ring of mountains west of Truckee where Arrougé had often camped with his father, a Basque sheepherder who grazed flocks in the meadows. The granite peaks surrounded an immense meadow, and the mountain stream meandering through it had superb trout fishing.

It was called Squaw Valley.

In the winter of 1932, Poulsen became a serious jumper, idealizing Roy Mikkelsen, who had taken a job at a lumber mill in Auburn owned by Wendell Robie, founder and president of the Auburn Ski Club. (Mikkelsen had twice been national ski jumping champ and had been named to the 1932 Olympic Team.) He taught Poulsen enough so that Poulsen placed third in the junior division of the 1932 National Ski Jumping Championships in Tahoe City.

Squaw Valley stayed on his mind: in the summer of 1932, he hiked back in. Although he was turned back by a gun-toting cowboy from the Smith Ranch, on the way out he caught his limit of 25 trout. The more he saw the valley, the more he fell in love with it.

In the fall of 1933, Poulsen entered the

Copyrighted material

FALL 1995

SKIING HERITAGE, PAGE 41

University of Nevada in Reno. In January 1934, he took part in the first ski tournament held in the Bay Area—on the University of California campus in Berkeley. Some 50,000 people crowded as close to the jump as they could get while fifteen of

and coach. He hatched the idea for the university's first winter carnival and attracted enough volunteers to run the California Four-Way Championship (slalom, downhill, jumping and cross country), which Poulsen won. Later in the season,

involved America: Marty Arrougé left Poulsen behind in Reno to instruct at the Sun Valley ski school. Among his pupils was Irving Thalberg, Jr., son of the movie star Norma Shearer, newly a widow.

The high point of Poulsen's winter was



Wayne Poulsen jumping at Badger Pass in Yosemite during the 1930s.

California's best jumpers soared above the crowd. Rolf Wigaard of Auburn Ski Club made the longest standing jump—31 meters—but Roy Mikkelsen won on style points. Halvor Mikkelsen took class B; Poulsen came in sixth.

Alpine skiing—slalom and downhill—was coming into its own that year, and Poulsen took to alpine as nimbly as he had nordic: in February 1935, at the California Ski Championships at Cisco, with 161 entrants competing in jumping, cross country and slalom, Poulsen finished fourth.

He got better every year. In the winter of 1937, a college junior, he organized the university's first ski team, both as captain

he captained the team to its first Pacific Coast Intercollegiate Championship.

Poulsen was now a young man of 22 and had begun to look seriously at the future—it would be in skiing.

He put together enough to buy an option on 1,200 acres of the Smith Ranch in Squaw Valley.

Graduating from the University in 1938, Poulsen started a small ski area at Grass Lake on Mt. Rose with a rope tow, ski school, restaurant and ski shop. He coached the university ski team to two Pacific Coast Intercollegiate Ski Union Championships.

In the winter of 1940, World War II had already begun in Europe but had not in-

taking part in the San Francisco World's Fair jump exhibition. And that was followed by the low point: when a scheduled team from Utah failed to show up, Poulsen filled in by making three additional jumps. On the first, he sprained an ankle, taped it, jumped again and sprained the other ankle. He taped the other ankle and jumped again, breaking a leg on landing.

In the summer of 1940, the war in Europe began to spread. Marty Arrougé became a flight instructor for the Air Force during the off-season and advised Poulsen to start doing the same. Poulsen took lessons at the Reno airport and discovered a

(continued)

Copyrighted material

SKIING HERITAGE, PAGE 42

FALL 1995

THE FINISH LINE

(continued)

Wayne Poulsen...

second passion in life—flying.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December, drawing the U.S. into the war. Poulsen signed up with Great Britain's Royal Air Force hoping for an early chance to fight the Germans. But he had to wait to be called for training. And so, in February 1942, he asked Arrougé, back at Sun Valley (Marty was now courting Norma Shearer), to tell Lang he was available for the ski school while waiting to be called to England.

There, ski school co-director Otto Lang assigned him as private instructor to Stavros Niarchos. The Greek shipping magnate loved to gamble and normally stayed late at the Christiania casino in Ketchum, rarely showing up for a lesson before noon. Poulsen's mornings were paid for, but not taken.

Enter Gloria Alexandra ("Sandy") Kunau.

Sandy grew up living in her parents' penthouse at the Sherry Netherland Hotel on Fifth Avenue, New York. By now more than a little bored with skiing at Lake Placid, New York, which was socially acceptable, but often icy, Sandy had recently asked Betty Harriman, a classmate at Miss Hewitt's, where else to go on a ski vacation. The answer had been—Sun Valley, of course. It was owned by Union Pacific Railroad of which Betty's Uncle Averell was chairman. The resort in fact had been started at Averell's insistence. Then Sandy saw the newly released *Sun Valley Serenade*—that clinched it.

At Sun Valley, Otto Lang who had directed the skiing sequences for *Sun Valley Serenade*, never one to miss a chance to please a pretty girl, offered Sandy free morning lessons with Wayne Poulsen—as long as Niarchos stayed in bed.

Wayne and Sandy fell in love almost at once. They were engaged just about the

time the U.S. Navy Air Force officially requested Poulsen's services by the end of August 1942 as a flight instructor at the base at Twenty-Nine Palms, California.

That meant Wayne and Sandy had to be married in a hurry. Marty Arrougé and Norma Shearer, also newly engaged, postponed their own wedding a week to give Wayne and Sandy a wedding reception at Shearer's Hollywood home. Wayne and Sandy were married the second week of



Sandy and Wayne at their wedding reception 1942.

August 1942. Marty Arrougé and Norma Shearer were married the following August 24 at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Hollywood with Otto Lang as best man.

After a year as a flight instructor, Poulsen, restless, jumped at the chance for a more exciting mission. The Navy had newly requisitioned Pan American Airlines' planes to fly supplies into the Pacific. Transferring to Pan Am in 1943, Poulsen was soon flying ammunition and men into the battle zone. He survived two hazardous years of doing just that sort of thing in spite of Japanese fighter pilots who saw transport planes as juicy targets.

Poulsen saved enough to purchase 640 acres put up for sale at the head of Squaw Valley where the ski area now stands. (He

postponed the purchase of the optioned 1,200 acres.) Whenever he could get home on leave, he took Sandy camping in the valley, driving in as far as they could—often getting stuck in the mud at Squaw Creek. They usually forded the creek on foot, hiked to a grove of aspen at the base of Squaw Peak to set up their tent. In the winter, they skied the five miles, took off their boots and pants, waded the icy waters of the creek, which often was not frozen solidly,

and climbed around on skins to get warm again.

One of their explorations went down a slope so steep and in snow so heavy it forced Sandy to make 22 standing kick turns to get to the bottom. Wayne, standing there counting, gave the mountain the name it still has: KT-22.

Poulsen was working out a master plan for trails and lifts in his head, imagining the vast slopes with skiers descending them in all directions. The war was finally over in 1945 and Poulsen pioneered air routes for Pan Am over China, Burma, Malaysia and India while he and Sandy were building their

home in Squaw Valley.

To build the fireplace, they rolled rocks down Shirley Canyon and loaded them on the station wagon tailgate. To mix cement, they filled an oil barrel in the creek and again carried it back on the tailgate. The plumbing was a pink portable toilet called Petunia. Even before they installed windows, Sandy cooked 1947 Christmas dinner in the fireplace with snow blowing through the house.

The Pouslens bought an army-surplus snow tractor, or weasel, naming it the "Clipper Reindeer" for the famous Pan Am Clipper planes and used it to tow into their valley their friends, Olympic skiers, pilots and fishing buddies—anyone who might be interested in investing. They had great par-

Copyrighted material

FALL 1995

SKIING HERITAGE, PAGE 43



Alec Cushing's first visit to Squaw: towed by a weasel (4th skier from right).

ties but no tanks.

The next winter, 1948, they found an investor.

They met Alex Cushing, an East Coast lawyer, skiing at Alta, Utah. He was towed into Squaw Valley while the weasel to look at Poulsen's holdings. Cushing was impressed.

Cushing, his wife Justine and several friends invested \$400,000 (\$50,000 from Lawrence Rockefeller) to buy majority shares in the Squaw Valley Development Company, with Poulsen as president. Poulsen contributed his 640 acres to the company, keeping for himself the optioned 1,200 acres which he now bought outright.

It was a doomed partnership: Poulsen had a deep emotional bond with the valley and favored slow development. Cushing had another agenda, another approach and different goals. The two disagreed on just about everything. In October 1949, while Poulsen was away on a flight, Cushing called a stockholders' meeting and took over as president. Poulsen was out of the ski company for good. But he still owned most of the floor of the valley.

On Thanksgiving Day 1949, Cushing

opened Squaw Valley Lodge and one chairlift. Emile Allais was installed as ski school director. During its first decade, Cushing was hit with a series of disasters. Avalanches knocked out his lift towers three times. The lodge flooded twice. In 1956, it burned to the ground. But Cushing recovered his fortunes in a startling coup. Gaining the full backing of the State of California and helped by ski school director Joe Marillac, who convinced the *Federation Internationale de Ski* the slopes were sufficient for a full international competition, Squaw Valley won the bid for the 1960 Olympic Games by two votes over Innsbruck.

California took some of Poulsen's acres by eminent domain to acquire space to hold the Games but the Pouslens fought back against the official plan to pave 150 acres in the meadow for parking and a huge sewage plant with open sludge beds. After a long, costly, lonely battle against the state and the Olympic Organizing Committee, the Pouslens blocked the construction of the plant and forced a switch to compacted snow mixed with sawdust for parking. It worked fine. The meadow was saved.

Squaw Valley's Olympics was an aesthetic and technical success, acclaimed for its perfect snow from opening to the closing ceremonies. Athletes still recall these Games as having the ideal Olympic atmosphere. Athletes were housed within walking distance of each other. Competitors from all the different countries ate together and attended competitions together—something that has not happened since.

The Olympics turned out to be an interlude between wars. Poulsen found himself freighted rockets into Saigon for Pan Am, parking his plane far from the terminal—if enemy fire hit it, his cargo would have blown up a good portion of the airport. On his last flight out in 1968, half of Saigon was in Vietcong hands.

In December the next year, Poulsen was taking off in a 707 from Sydney, Australia, when a flock of seagulls hit the engines. Poulsen instantly applied full brakes and full reverse engines. The plane broke through the barrier at the end of the runway, but Poulsen brought the plane, its 125 passengers and eleven crew members to a safe stop in a swamp, saved by Poulsen's

(continued)

Copyrighted material

SKIING HERITAGE, PAGE 44

FALL 1995

THE FINISH LINE

(continued)

Wayne Poulsen...

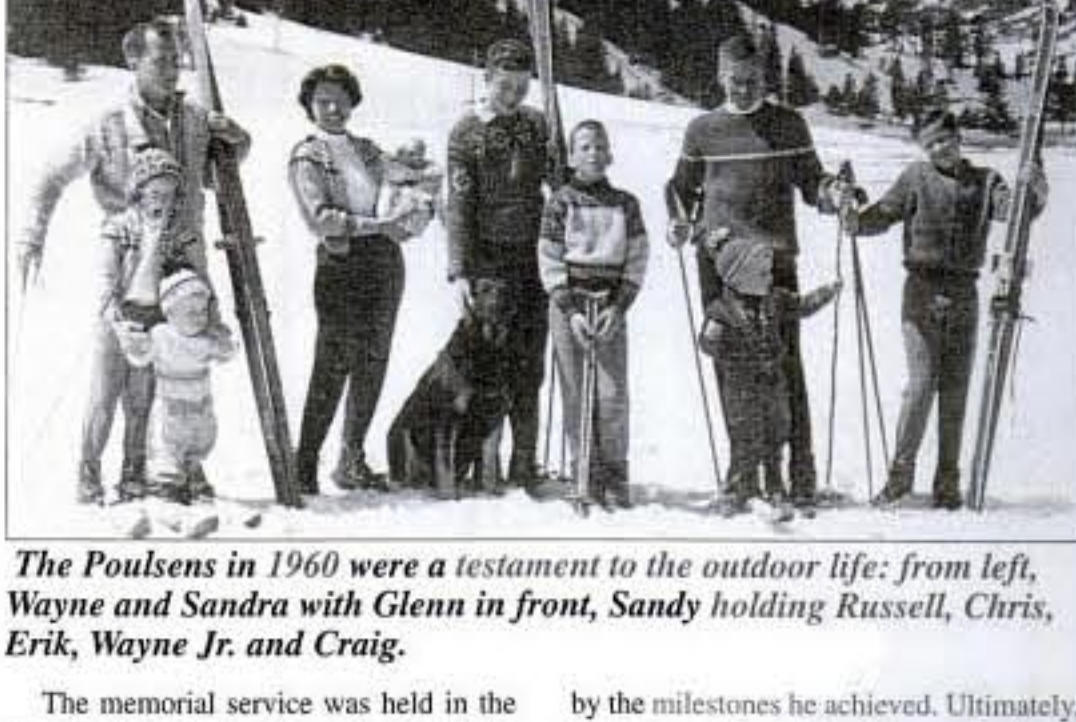
split-second reaction.

The Pouslens slowly developed their land at Squaw into a community, setting aside parcels for public purposes. The meadow became grazing land for cattle and horses running free after a day's work in the stables. They built Papoose, a children's ski area next to the Olympic jump where all eight Poulsen children and the rest of the valley's kids carved their turns in the annual "Easter Bunny Race." Four Poulsen kids went onto various national teams; Eric and Sandra made the 1972 Olympic team.

Poulsen retired in 1974 after a career seldom equaled among airline pilots. In 1980 he was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall Of Fame. Then he and Sandy built their dream house facing Squaw Peak. It was soon the scene of weddings, birthdays and anniversaries as the children grew up, married and had kids—fourteen grandchildren, all told.

Then, a few years ago, Wayne Poulsen contracted a virulent form of Parkinson's Disease. Last year, he was told he would become totally paralyzed. This vital, active, humorous, playful and loving man did not want to live life on those terms. Last March, at 79, he took his own life.

Hearing of his father's death, the youngest Poulsen—"Russell"—wrote his mother from Paris, "Did he know that I respected him, and considered him my ideal in character, my mentor, my rock, my home, my true north?"



The Pouslens in 1960 were a testament to the outdoor life: from left, Wayne and Sandra with Glenn in front, Sandy holding Russell, Chris, Erik, Wayne Jr. and Craig.

The memorial service was held in the Queen of the Snows Church in the valley. Sandy and the children—Chris, Wayne Jr., Lance, Eric, Sandra, Craig, Glen, Russell—and 14 grandchildren filled the front rows. Friends from all over the country and Europe filled the church to overflowing. People stood on the steps and in the street.

Craig Poulsen said in his eulogy for his father:

"The essence of his dreams was never compromised. He knew in his heart what really mattered—his passions, his family and his friends. He never measured his life

by the milestones he achieved. Ultimately, he measured his life by the experiences he had and the friends and family that he shared those experiences with. There was always room for a friend at his hearth and a child on his knee."

After the service, there were long embraces and many of those gathered shared recollections of outings with Wayne on skis, on horseback, hiking, camping, fishing with him. Everyone had been touched by Wayne Poulsen in some way, even if only to live in this valley and to love this place as he did. ☹

SKIING HERITAGE

International Skiing History Association
The Parsonage, 499 Town Hill Road
New Hartford, CT 06057

Forwarding and Return
Postage Guaranteed.
Address correction.

Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #28
New Hartford, CT
06057

Copyrighted material