

Sahalie Historical Note #11: The “Silver Skis” Races on Mt. Rainier

The Silver Skis. One of the classic races in Northwest ski history. An essential note in the understanding of the growth of skiing in the 1930s, and of Sahalie’s involvement.

The concept was simple: an epic downhill race, not unlike a thoroughbred horse race, from Camp Muir at 10,000 feet on the side of Mt. Rainier, down to Paradise at 5,400 feet. Mass start, first one to the finish line wins. Various local ski enthusiasts, including **Hans Otto Geise**, who started skiing at Snoqualmie Pass in the late 1920s and who probably had a hand in the formation of the Commonwealth Ski Club, promoted the concept, and Royal Brougham, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer’s* sports editor, took up the cause with gusto.



Image borrowed from Kandahar Lodge, Whitefish, MT; origin unknown.¹



General path of the original Silver Skis race in 1934, from a brochure provided to Lowell Skoog by John Woodward (borrowed from Lowell Skoog, 2005).

The first race was set for spring of 1934. In build-up to the first race, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* beat the drum with a series of lead-in articles including front-page hype, beginning on February 2, 1934,² and continuing weekly until the event. Royal Brougham described it as the “Kandahar of the Northwest” (after the obscure term that was first used in Europe to describe a downhill ski race)³ and the “Kentucky Derby of downhill racing.”⁴ The Pacific Northwest Ski Association endorsed the event.⁵ The *Seattle Daily Times* reluctantly noted the event sponsored by its rival; in details about prospective racers to watch, it described **Hans Grage**, racing for Commonwealth Ski Club, as “short, sturdy, familiar with Mount Rainier and the course in prospect and, because of his previous victory [two weeks earlier in the McClure Rock to Paradise downhill], a favorite

in this one.”⁶ The same article also noted a second Commonwealth racer to watch: **Harry Loners**, “who has already run the long course from Muir to Paradise, knows where to apply the heat, and how to conserve strength.”

The race was held on April 22, 1934. It involved a mass, or *geschmozzel*, start of 60 racers lined up across the slope at Camp Muir. **Otto Sanford** of Commonwealth Ski Club was the race official who yelled the count-down and shot the starting gun. In addition to **Hans Grage** and **Harry Loners** mentioned above, Harry’s brother, **Ed Loners**, also competed, as did **Hans Otto Giese** and **Don Fraser**, who were associated with Commonwealth but not competing for the CSC.

Based on an interview many decades later, Lowell Skoog writes about Wolf Bauer’s recollections: “The first Silver Skis race had a mass start and just three control gates, at Anvil Rock, McClure Rock and Panorama Point. Loudspeakers were set up at Paradise and an announcer called the action. With the mass start, it was just like a horse race. After a fast schuss at the start, the racers hit washboards and all but a few leaders fell. Wolf fell and broke a ski, which was held together by a homemade steel edge he had installed by a machinist. Don Fraser, a cross-country skier, won the race on a pair of jumping skis⁷. ‘Those were rip-roaring days,’ Wolf recalled.”⁸

Glenn Drosendahl’s on-line biography of Wolf Bauer notes, “In the 1934 Silver Skis, a stampede of a race down Mount Rainier, he had the lead when he did a high-speed somersault. He broke a ski and lost both poles and his goggles, but still managed to finish fifth in a field of 60. ... He was good enough that Eddie Bauer, the sporting goods retailer (and no relation) gave him skis to race on....”⁹

Don Fraser, associated with Commonwealth/Sahalie as a ski instructor, won this first Silver Skis race in a time of 10 minutes, 49.6 seconds. **Hans Otto Geise**, one of the core group of race promoters, finished sixth. **Hans Grage**, racing for Commonwealth, was tenth. Only 44 of the 60 starters finished. Both **Harry** and **Ed Loners** were among the DQs, for missing one of the three (!) gates in what was described as a 3.6 mile course¹⁰. The *P.I.* concluded that the Silver Skis race was



Fraser finishing ahead in the first Silver Skis 1934

Photo from *Ski Heritage*, March, 1999, p. 13.

“destined to take its place among the great winter sports events of the world....”¹¹

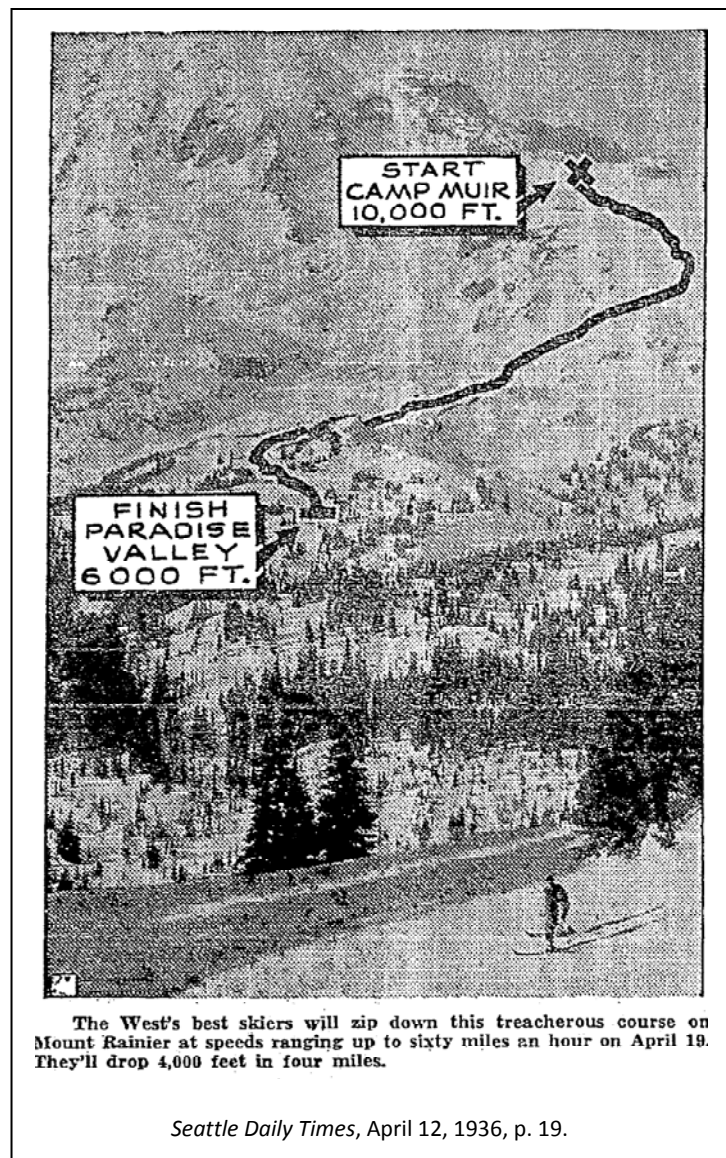
Races were run intermittently through 1948, with a lull for the war in 1943-45 and many adjustments made year-to-year due to weather, snow and other conditions.

The 1935 race was “adjusted” to make way for the U.S. National Downhill Ski Championship race, run at Mt. Rainier and boosted by the same group who organized Silver Skis. This was a modified downhill of 2.3 miles instead of the full 3+ miles of the original. It was run on April 14, 1935. Hannes Schroll of Austria was the winner, in 2 minutes, 35 seconds. The Silver Skis trophy was awarded, even though it was not the full deal.¹²

The 1936 race was run on the full Muir-to-Paradise course, on April 19, 1936, with an adjustment to change the

geschmozzel start to a staggered start at one-minute intervals. Weather was perfect: “spring snow under a blistering sun.”¹³ **Carl Neu**, Sahalie member then 17 years old, ran in the Junior category. Hannes Schroll, now a professional and ineligible for the trophy, ran “hors concours” (outside of the competition), setting a time-to-beat. **Hans Grage**, skiing for the Washington Ski Club, was among the elite racers, as were Hans Otto Geise, John Woodward, Scott Osborn, Don Amick, Wolf Bauer and many other top skiers of the day.¹⁴ Hjalmar Hvam from Portland won this event in a time of 5 minutes, 38 seconds,¹⁵ less than 8 seconds behind the time set by Schroll, after Hvam hit a large patch of open moss over a knoll near the bottom! He was clocked doing 58 miles-per-hour on Panorama Point.¹⁶

“A spectator at that race [the 1936 Silver Skis], Otto Lang, No. 1 man on the staff of the Ski School Hannes Schneider of St. Anton am Arlberg,



Austria, watched it closely. 'Much courage,' he said. 'Now, when they are taught to ski....'"¹⁷

The 1937 race, scheduled for April 18, 1937, was postponed day after day and finally cancelled altogether due to poor weather conditions.^{18 19} In an earlier run-up to this race, **Randall Zimmer**, representing Sahalie, came in fifth in the McClure Rock to Paradise downhill race in March, 1937.²⁰ Randall was signed up for the 1937 Silver Skis and given starting position #45 out of the 51 adult men registered. **Frank Buhler**, who raced for Sahalie in the early 1940s and was part of the legendary U.W. ski team with Carl Neu and Bill Redlin, was registered to race in the junior category (he was 17 at the time).

Randall Zimmer, Bob Link, David Wood and Lyle Campbell, all representing Sahalie, and **Ed Link**, Sahalie member skiing for Seattle SC, were listed as entrants for the originally-scheduled 1938 Silver Skis race in March, which was postponed by bad weather.^{21 22 23} The rescheduled race ran on May 1, 1938; **Ed and Bob Link, David Wood and Lyle Campbell** entered for Sahalie.²⁴ Ed came in 15th in the main race, Lyle 15th in the junior category. **Don Fraser** became the first two-time Silver Skis winner with a time of 6 minutes, 12.3 seconds. **Carl Neu**, member of Sahalie but racing that day for Penguin Ski Club, finished third. **Hans Grage**, formerly of Commonwealth SC, finished fourth. Olav Ulland, just in from Norway and known as a jumper, not a downhill skier, came in fifth. Gretchen Kunigk, the future Mrs. Fraser and Olympic gold medalist, won the women's shorter course.²⁵

Hannes Schroll, 1935 winner, was quoted after crossing the finish line in the 1938 race with what he thought was an unbeatable time: "'I would give,' said Hannes Schroll, wiping smarting eyes with a borrowed handkerchief, 'ten bottles of champagne...GOOD champagne...to the man who comes down there faster than me. Why, I am flying!'"²⁶ Don Fraser proceeded to come in 3.1 seconds faster. It was not reported whether Don ever got his champagne.

Austrian skier Peter Radacher, then of Sun Valley, won the April 15, 1939 race in a time of 4 minutes, 51.4 seconds.²⁷ No skiers raced that year representing Sahalie, although **Carl Neu**, skiing for U.W., **Don Fraser** and **Hans Grage** all had connections to the club.²⁸ **Dick Luce**, 17 years old and skiing for Queen Anne High School in the Junior competition, raced for Sahalie in the early 1940s.²⁹

The 1940 Silver Skis race was marred by tragedy. It was run on April 13, 1940, amidst icy slopes and foggy weather. Sigurd Hall, a 30-year-old Norwegian immigrant considered one of the best ski racers in the Northwest at that time, died when he veered off course a half mile from the top and struck rocks.^{30 31} Paul Gilbreath won the race in 5 minutes, 24 seconds. Tony Matt, of Tuckerman Ravine fame³², came in second, two seconds behind Gilbreath.³³ **Herb Lonseth** from Sahalie was part of the PNSA committee charged with the grim task of investigating the death of Sigurd Hall in that 1940 race.³⁴



At the seventh running of the Silver Skis race, scheduled for April 5, 1941, only one racer from Sahalie, **Stan De Bruler**, registered for the Junior downhill.³⁵

After being postponed a day due to high winds, the race was run on April 6, 1941, shortened by a half-mile. Conditions were said to be the trickiest in the race's history, with new snow and flat light. Nobody made it down without a fall. Bill Taylor of Tacoma won in 4 minutes, 51.4 seconds (identical time to Radacher's full-course record in 1939). John Woodward, who had taught skiing at Sahalie in recent years, came in fourth, representing the U.S. Army.^{36 37}

Herb Lonseth of Sahalie was an official of PNSA and on the organizing committee for the 1942 race. **Otto Sanford**, formerly of Sahalie and the one who opened the original race in 1934,

was also on the 1942 race committee.³⁸ **Stan DeBruler**, Sahalie member racing for Syverson Ski School, and **Hans Grage**, racing for Penquin SC, were the only entrants with Sahalie connections.³⁹ After a day's delay due to weather, the race ran on April 12, 1942. The list of entries was dominated by members of the U.S. Army ski troops who were training at Paradise at the time, which included some of the top skiers in the country; 13 of the top 20 finishers were members of the mountain troops. Matt Broze, a Seattle fireman skiing for Seattle Ski Club, upset this field, winning in a time of 4 minutes, 57 seconds, just two seconds ahead of the favorite from the Army ski troops, Walter Prager of Dartmouth fame.^{40 41}

World War II resulted in cancellation of the races for 1943, 1944 and 1945. Troops were training on Mt. Rainier, the Paradise facilities were taken over by the war effort, and races of all kinds were curtailed due to a combination of fewer competitive participants, closed ski areas, and gas and tire rationing.

After the war ended, attempts were made to revive this classic race. In April, 1946, the race was delayed twice due to high winds, snow and fog before finally being cancelled for that year.^{42 43}

ARMY SKIERS ARE EXPERTS

Mountain Troops Outpace Collegians



These members of Uncle Sam's Mountain Troops, who have been working on the slopes of Mount Rainier, showed the collegians their heels when they raced without competing officially in last week-end's Pacific Coast Intercollegiate championship ski tournament. Left to right: Olaf Rode- gaard, F. I. S. instructor from Mount Hood; Charles McLane, former Dartmouth captain; Don Goodman, downhill star formerly of Sun Valley Ski Club; Dick Cochrane, assistant instructor at Mount Hood; Paul Townsend, former captain, University of New Hampshire.

Seattle Sunday Times, March 29, 1942, p. 6.

In 1947, **Don Fraser**, formerly associated with Commonwealth/Sahalie Ski Club, was chief of course. The race was run of May 3, 1947. Only 20 men competed, down from 60+ in the pre-

war races. Tony Matt and Hugh Bauer were national names racing in the event. Willard South of Sun Valley Ski Club won in a time of 5 minutes, 16 seconds. Don Amick, top local racer at the time, was third.⁴⁴

In its final year, 1948, the race was postponed three times before finally being run on May 9, 1948, in foggy conditions over a shortened course. **Don Fraser** again was course setter. Paul Gilbreath became the second racer to win a second Silver Skis trophy, in a time of 3 minutes, 27.3 seconds.^{45 46}

Post-war changes, growth in skiing at commercial ski areas, and challenges of hosting a large event in a spot with such unpredictable weather all conspired to bring the Silver Skis race on Mt. Rainier to an end. Beginning in 1956, the name “Silver Skis” was taken over by the Cascade Ski Club of Oregon for an annual Junior Championship race on Mt. Hood.

Jim Patchell, Sahalie member beginning in the mid 1930s, is said to have raced in one of the Silver Skis downhills, but I haven’t found his name in any of the old newspaper lists. His son, Jim, Jr., relayed the story his dad told. He was skiing in such thick fog high up on the Muir Snowfield that he had to slow way down, finally stopping just inches from the edge of a cliff that loomed just off the tips of his wooden skis. A few seconds more and he might have been dead. That was Patchell’s last Silver Skis race!

Lowell Skoog, Northwest ski historian extraordinaire, wrote a wonderful article on Silver Skis which formed the basis for my Sahalie note here. Please take a look at: <http://www.alpenglow.org/skiing/silver-skis-2005/index.html> . A special part of Skoog’s article is his description of a reenactment of this race that he organized through word-of-mouth back in 2005. It is a fun read, and gives one a renewed appreciation for the amazing early skiers in our Northwest history, considering the equipment they were using at the time.

[I’d like to recognize the incredible resource available through Lowell Skoog’s “Alpenglow.org” website for historical information on Northwest skiing. While Lowell’s focus is on ski mountaineering, he has collected a wealth of information, citations, interviews and links that overlap with ski racing, ski clubs, the mountain troops and related developments in the last 100 years. I used Lowell’s work as the basis for this Silver Skis’ article, as well as many of the other articles I’ve been writing for Sahalie. My ski hat is off to Lowell for his yeoman’s service to those of us interested in Northwest ski history.]

And last, I'll end with some "frosty cheesecake,"⁴⁷ courtesy of the enthusiastic publicity that the Seattle P.I. put into promotion for Silver Skis back in the day.



Silver Skis publicity photo taken at Paradise, Mt. Rainier, on March 5, 1941; from the Richards Studio Collection Series D11057A, #30661; image borrowed from Tacoma Public Library's image archives.

- Dave Galvin, February, 2011

[updated 2-23-2011]

¹ "Kandahar Race" photo borrowed from the Kandahar Lodge, MT, website:

<http://www.kandaharlodge.com/History-of-kandahar.htm> .

² "Post-Intelligencer to Stage Thrilling Downhill Race," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 2, 1934.

³ For a wonderful explanation of the origins of the term, Kandahar, referring to ski racing, see

<http://www.kandaharlodge.com/History-of-kandahar.htm> .

⁴ Brougham, Royal, 1934, "The Morning After," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 11, 1934.

⁵ "Post-Intelligencer Ski Race Endorsed," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 18, 1934.

⁶ "Ski Stars Set for Long Dash," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 19, 1934, p. 21.

⁷ Kirby Gilbert disputed the contention that Don Fraser used jumping skis in the first Silver Skis race. Writing in a letter to the editor in the March, 1999 *Skiing Heritage*, p. 13, he noted that the photo of Don coming across the

finish line appears to show him using the regular mountaineering skis of the day, plus that Don was not known as a jumper in the early 1930s and so it would be highly unusual that he would have used jumping skis for such a race.

⁸ Lowell Skoog, 2005, Taped Interviews with Wolf Bauer (the one on Silver Skis race conducted by Morris Moen on 8/3/1992), on-line history published at: <http://www.alpenglow.org/ski-history/notes/comm/bauer-wolf.html> .

⁹ Glenn Drosendahl, 2010, "Bauer, Wolf G. (b. 1912)," HistoryLink essay, on-line at: http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.historylink.org/db_images/Wolf-Bauer-Winning-Ski-Race-1933.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm%3FDisplayPage%3Doutput.cfm%26file_id%3D9440&h=391&w=260&sz=28&tbnid=YNqbRSdFfbqhwM:&tbnh=123&tbnw=82&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dwolf%2Bbauer&zoom=1&q=wolf+baur&hl=en&usq=tDr-W3y_OUmn4MRW0l0koBu7CYY=&sa=X&ei=437tTKnTBIf6swOgluS4Dw&ved=0CCYQ9QEwBQ

¹⁰ The early Silver Skis descriptions talk about a "4-mile" course and a "3.6-mile" course. A few years later the park service actually measured it with steel tape, and determined that it was 3.16 miles.

¹¹ Mike Donohue, 1934, "Great Future Seen for Big Rainier Race," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 4, 1934.

¹² Royal Brougham, 1935, "Schroll Wins Downhill Ski Race; Schroll Defies All Obstacles to Win National Downhill Ski Title," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 14, 1935.

¹³ Ken Binns, 1936, "Skis to Hvam – Muir Race Time Almost Half," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 20, 1936, p. 15.

¹⁴ "50 Competitors Eye Schroll, Hvam on Eve of Race; Muir Ski Dash Due Tomorrow at Mt. Rainier," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 18, 1936, p. 4.

¹⁵ Royal Brougham, 1936, "Cascade Ace Makes Clean Title Sweep," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 20, 1936.

¹⁶ Ken Binns, 1936.

¹⁷ "Hvam Ski King of Northwest; Year Recalled," *Seattle Sunday Times*, December 27, 1936, p. 19. Otto Lang took up residence as a ski instructor at Paradise, to great acclaim. Subject of a future article, perhaps.

¹⁸ Royal Brougham, 1937, "Storm Cancels Big Silver Skis Races," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 20, 1937.

¹⁹ Ken Binns, 1937, "Fog at Rainier Forces Cancellation of Silver Skis; Engle Races to Top Honors in Slalom Event," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 19, 1937, p. 13.

²⁰ "Don Fraser In Downhill Race Win at Rainier," *Seattle Daily Times*, March 1, 1937, p. 11.

²¹ "Silver Skis Entries," *Seattle Daily Times*, March 24, 1938, p. 20.

²² Mike Donohue, 1938a, "Wind Spoils Silver Skis," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 28, 1938.

²³ "Muir Race Hangs in Air; Skiers Almost Blown Off Mountain," *Seattle Daily Times*, March 28, 1938, p. 9.

²⁴ "33 Men Entered in Muir Ski Run," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 26, 1938, p. 18.

²⁵ Mike Donohue, 1938b, "Don Fraser Defeats Schroll in Silver Skis," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 2, 1938.

²⁶ "Fraser Speeds to Victory in Rainier Event," *Seattle Daily Times*, May 2, 1938, p. 15.

²⁷ Mike Donohue, 1939, "Peter Radacher Wins Silver Skis – Record for Course Falls," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 16, 1939.

²⁸ "Fraser Figured Unlikely to Repeat in Silver Skis; Title Defender to Lead Parade at Mt. Rainier," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 14, 1939, p. 25.

²⁹ "Two More Competitions Remain on Ski Program," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 17, 1939, p. 14.

³⁰ "One Killed, 2 Hurt in Ski Race – Seattle Man Dies After Crashing into Rocks," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 14, 1940.

³¹ For more information about Sigurd Hall, see Lowell Skoog's article at:

<http://www.alpenglow.org/climbing/sigurd-hall-2006/index.html> .

³² The East Coast version of this madness, the American Inferno downhill race, was initiated on Mt. Washington in New Hampshire in 1933. (It was named for the original "Kandahar" Inferno downhill race staged in Murren, Switzerland, beginning in the late 1920s.) The Mt. Washington course came over the headwall of Tuckerman Ravine, but skiers checked their run at that point to compensate for the sudden steep break. In 1939, Tony Matt ran the headwall straight and lived to tell about it, creating one of the enduring legends of American amateur skiing. It is a treat for me, who often heard the tale of Tony Matt's epic race while growing up in New England, to learn that he came west the next year and competed in the Silver Skis course in 1940 as well as after the war.

³³ Mike Donohue, 1940, "Seattle Ace Upset Victor," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 14, 1940.

³⁴ "Skiers To Meet in Hall Hearing," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 14, 1940, p. 26.

³⁵ "Silver Skis Draw," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 4, 1941, p. 33.

³⁶ Mike Donohue, 1941, "Major Upset on Mountain – Many Spills Feature P.I. Classic; New Snow Makes Course Difficult," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 7, 1941.

³⁷ Chick Garrett, 1941, "Taylor Tumbles Down Mountain For Upset Silver Skis Victory," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 7, 1941, p. 16.

³⁸ "Committees Set for Silver Skis," *Seattle Daily Times*, March 22, 1942, p. 6.

³⁹ Rita Hume, 1942a, "54 Will Race in Silver Skis Test," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 9, 1942, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Royal Brougham, 1942, "City Fireman Wins Silver Skis Trophy," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 13, 1942.

⁴¹ Rita Hume, 1942b, "Matt Broze Captures Silver Skis Classic," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 13, 1942, p. 19.

⁴² Mike Donohue, 1946, "Silver Skis Off; Weather is Rough," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 22, 1946.

⁴³ "Silver Skis Put Over Until 1947," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 24, 1946, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Mike Donohue, 1947, "South Speeds to Silver Skis Win," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 4, 1947.

⁴⁵ Mike Donohue, 1948, "Gilbreath Wins Silver Skis," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 10, 1948.

⁴⁶ "Silver Skis Race Is Won By Gilbreath," *Seattle Daily Times*, May 10, 1948, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Tacoma Public Library, Image Archives, accessed at:

<http://search.tacomapubliclibrary.org/images/dt6n.asp?un=11&pg=1&krequest=subjects+contains+Paradise+Inn+and+Wash.+&stemming=&phonic=&fuzzy=&maxfiles>