

Skiing With Kids

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May 2022

Like our friends Richard and Maggie Silbar, my wife Helen and I learned to ski at the Pajarito Mountain Ski area, just outside the town of Los Alamos. We were very unlike them however in important ways. They were short, slender, and athletic. We were tall, heavy, and klutzy. We also had three young children to include in our plans.

Skiing would become a Sternheim family sport for many years.

I was on sabbatical leave for the 1971-72 academic year and spent the time as a visitor at the Los Alamos National Laboratory Meson Physics Factory (LAMPF), a proton accelerator designed to produce secondary copious secondary beams of short-lived pi mesons or pions. It was a very enjoyable year in many ways. We rented a beautiful house with views of three mountain ranges; at night, if you had good eyes, you could see the light atop a mountain located outside Albuquerque, 60 miles away. We made friends we have kept in touch with for decades. I had a highly productive research experience, publishing a large number of papers in collaboration with Richard Silbar or my graduate student, Justus Koch, who was there with me at the Lab. Learning how to ski was a highlight of the year.

Skiing was convenient and inexpensive at the Pajarito Mountain Ski Area. Weather and snow conditions permitting, it was open weekends and Wednesdays. The access road is a 20-minute drive from downtown Los Alamos. The altitude at Los Alamos is 8000 feet. The ski lodge is at 9200 feet, and the peak is about 1200 feet higher. At the time we were there, the area had a rope tow serving a short, wide, gentle beginners area. There were also a T-bar and chairlift accessing the mountain top. Skiing on Pajarito had started years earlier by WWII Manhattan project staffers. Initially they climbed up and skied down; later they added a rope tow. Today the area has additional lifts and an expanded lodge.

That January, Laura was 7, Amy was 4½, and Jeffrey was turning 3. We outfitted the whole family with ski equipment and warm clothing. With a mix of adult and kid lessons plus babysitters, we managed to get on the slopes many times that season.

Laura remembers:

In New Mexico you would leave us three kids at lessons and would go skiing. Amy, Jeffery, and I were on the kiddie hill which was more like a mountain and Jeffery liked to go where he wasn't to go. And yell "cowabunga!" One time I had to take my skis off and climb down to go get him after he got in a spot he wasn't meant to go into.

Helen and I progressed to an intermediate level and could safely ski from the top. We all had a lot of fun. Some observations:

- Skiing and other winter sports can make the long northern winters much more enjoyable.
- The views from the mountain tops and ski slopes can be spectacular.
- Being stuck on a steep icy slope can be terrifying for a non-expert skier.

We took the opportunity to ski other areas. The Santa Fe Ski Area was much larger than Pajarito, with more and longer trails and slopes. Less than two hours away, we went there a couple of times. We hired a sitter for a few days, and went to the Crested Butte, Colorado Ski Area with Paul and Mary Ellen Tallerico. (Paul was an engineer working at the meson factory.) Crested Butte is a large ski resort in southern Colorado, a five-hour drive from Los Alamos.

Paul managed to create a memorable experience for us. He considered himself to be an advanced skier, while Mary Ellen, Helen and I were intermediates at best. We did a few runs together, and then at some point Paul announced that he would ski ahead to the lodge. When we three slowpokes got to the lodge there was no sign of Paul. We waited a half hour and began to get worried. Mary Ellen spoke to the ski patrol, and they brushed her off, suggesting that he might be in the bar. She said that Paul was cheap, and he would drink the beer we had in our condo if he was thirsty. They still were unhelpful.

I went back up on the slope, and as I skied down, I cautiously peered into the bordering woods looking without success for an injured Paul. We bugged the patrol again. It was now not long to nightfall, and they took us seriously. Searching the slope we had been on, the patrol found a place where somebody had gone into the woods. They followed the tracks down a long and steep mountainside and eventually found Paul at the bottom. A snowmobile brought him back to the lodge.

What was Paul's story? He thought he saw the lodge through the trees, and that there was a shortcut. Once he had skied some distance downhill, he realized that he was looking at a distant shack, not the lodge, but he had no choice but to continue on down. He skied a while at the bottom and found no sign of civilization. He was thinking about breaking into the shack or digging a snow cave for shelter when he was rescued. The final insult was when the patrol skier referred to his track as that of an inexperienced skier.

Back home in Amherst for the next ski seasons, we had three small nearby areas, and many larger ones to our north. Our favorite local area was the Berkshire Snow Basin, an hour to the west. It was a small, family friendly place, with a vertical drop of only 550 feet. We would take the kids with us on weekends, and we all took lessons there for a few years.

Another area we liked was Mount Tom, just 20 miles away from Amherst. It offered a 680-foot vertical drop, and a variety of lifts and trails. It also had snow-making. Most importantly, it had lighting on many trails, enabling night skiing. This drew many after-work skiers from the nearby Greater Springfield area. Helen and I often went there on weekday mornings on days that I didn't teach. We would share the mountain with a handful of people and leave by mid-afternoon when more skiers started to arrive.

Both of these ski areas are long closed, victims of the economic challenges faced by small ski areas. The remaining nearby area, Berkshire East, is an hour from Amherst. It faces north and tends to have icy slopes. We went there only a few times. It is still in business.

The Mount Tom ski area was the scene of a family legend. One day Laura went there with a group of children on a school outing. I was along as a chauffeur and aide. When it was time to leave, I loaded my station wagon with kids and skis. Laura was not in sight, so I assumed that she had gone in one of the other cars. Wrong! The phone was ringing when I got home. "Daddy, where are you?!" I heard. She had been inside the lodge when we loaded up and missed her ride. Fortunately, it was only a short drive back to the area to rescue her.

The UMass and school vacations were aligned, so for a few winters we took the opportunity to rent a large, comfortable house in North Conway, NH during that time. The aptly named Wildcat Mountain Ski Area was nearby, and the gentler Bretton Woods area was a bit further. Bretton Woods had a lot of well-groomed slopes and trails and was our favorite

area. Once were we joined by my friend and colleague David Webb, his wife Elizabeth, and their young sons, Christopher and Russell. They went back to their Australian homeland after a few years and continued skiing until David's recent death. Another year we shared the house with our old friend Sandy Rothberg, her partner Roy Scharf, and her children Michael and Madelaine. A couple of times Helen and I stayed in North Conway motels by ourselves and skied Bretton Woods. We also skied some Vermont area with friends or alone.

Laura remembers:

The house we rented with the Webb's and Sondra and kids - we loved the bunk beds and the weird party line phone. My favorite skiing was those spring family vacations.

At some point we added cross country skiing. We could ski virtually right out of our door. There was a short trail through the woods across the street. Two blocks away a more interesting trail went through forests for miles. A golf course offered smooth and gentle slopes.

As our bodies aged and our calendars filled, we eventually gave up skiing. Pleasant memories remain.