

Way We Were
February 24, 2016
Park City's Snowball Express
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Thanks for coming back to learn about the history of "ski trains" in Park City.

Preparations for the first ski train in twenty years - the "Hootspa Special" - were all set. The date was December 4, 1965. For Park City this was an important event - both to promote Utah and the town as a viable candidate for the 1972 Winter Olympics and to enjoy the immediate economic benefits of 300 visitors.

Station agent Faye Dearden had his hands full. In his tenure with the Union Pacific, this special excursion was to be one of the largest and most important passenger trains that he would accommodate. Local merchants were also looking forward to the influx of people. Red Banjo Pizza, the Snow Palace, Pop Jenks', the Cozy Tavern and other merchants expected strong business.

The excursion departed Union Pacific's Salt Lake station at 1pm and made stops in Ogden, Morgan and Echo to pick up additional passengers. It arrived in Park City at 5:30pm and was greeted by local politicians, United Park City Mines executives and the high school band. Utah Governor Calvin Rampton delivered a fine speech highlighting the advantages of hosting the Olympics in Salt Lake City and the important role Park City would play. Forty travel agents were introduced to the advantages of Park City as a ski resort destination.

Entertainment celebrities Vic Morrow and Jack Palance visited Pop Jenks at his 450 Main Street location for coffee and a cheeseburger (one of Pop's specialties!). They were congenial and signed autographs.

Lee Grosscup - University of Utah All-American QB, NFL and AFL QB, noted author and Frank Gifford's broadcasting partner for College Games on ABC - stopped in the Snow Palace for dinner and also graciously signed autographs to all who asked.

The Hootspa Special was a big success. The 1972 Winter Olympics were eventually awarded to Sapporo, Japan but plans were made to host another ski train the following year. Renamed the "Snowball Express," the excursions would run until 1971.

After the first year, subsequent ski trains coincided with the "Lowell Thomas Classic" ski event hosted by Park City. Over its six years, the popularity of the Snowball Express increased - peaking at over 500 people. Participants remember good times, excellent service provided by Union Pacific and the gracious hospitality of Park City.

The formation of Amtrak in 1971 signaled the final chapter for Park City ski trains. As per Amtrak's charter, Union Pacific was not allowed to operate passenger trains for the general public. On February 27, 1971, the last Snowball Express departed Park City, ending a tradition of ski trains that spanned almost fifty years.

My appreciation to Gary Kimball, Alan and John Dearden, and Steve and Dennis Leatham for sharing their memories of when the Snowball Express came to town.

We appeal to our readers to share any photos of the Snowball Express that you may have. Contact David Nicholas at dmn1954@gmail.com or (770) 842-5426.



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Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Park City Mountain Resort Collection

Caption: Treasure Mountains Resort, pictured here shortly after opening in the mid-1960s, welcomed skiers coming to town on the Snowball Express excursions.