Vail, Colorado, as a Voluntary Culture Region

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Introduction

Chapter One

I will never forget the moment when I fully came to appreciate how special Vail, Colorado, was, and is. The epiphany occurred while on a return flight to my rented apartment in Eagle-Vail, a small "down-valley" community just west of the famous resort. I had been living off-and-on in the Vail Valley for the past year and a half, and was returning to finish the remainder of my current seasonal employment. Our small aircraft from Denver was providing a breathtaking view of the snow-covered Rocky Mountains below. The flight was pregnant with spring vacationers, and as we made our way west, passing over the Front, Gore, and Sawatch ranges, their awestruck reactions to this visual display grew in animation and volume. As we neared our destination, the pilot wished everyone on board a happy vacation. He then added ". . . and if any of you on board happen to be lucky enough to live here, welcome home, we're all jealous of you."

The stark transmutation I was experiencing regarding place and my identity was astounding. Having grown up in the small town of Ellinwood in central Kansas, enveloped by wheat and sky, I never mentioned its name when asked where I was from. No one would have ever heard of it anyway. The contrast between this past anonymity and my fellow passengers' interpretation of Vail was a revelation, a moment when I realized how different my life had become. No longer did I live in a place where you had to leave to "do anything." Incredibly, my new town was one

where people longed to go to, an international place of destination. Suddenly, I was the "lucky one," and everyone else was on the "outside."

It goes without saying that I had been appreciative of the beauty that surrounded me in Vail even before my airplane experience. It is truly an exceptional place. To spend a day ambling through its winding streets, surrounded by Tyrolean architecture, a festival of lights sparkling on freshly fallen snow, is to feel that you have entered a winter paradise. The feel is almost otherworldly, with handsomely dressed people passing by high-end boutiques and gourmet restaurants, skis hoisted over their shoulders, and speaking an assortment of tongues. The aura of the place is amazing--cultured yet relaxed, where the subscribed philosophy is that work, if one had to do so, must conform to one's schedule of play, recreation is paramount, and pleasure is taken very seriously.

Several unique circumstances have made Vail into the social phenomenon it is. Whereas most of Colorado's mountain communities date back to railroad or mining booms of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, Vail was not even dreamed of until after 1945. Before 1960, only a few sheep and lettuce farmers inhabited its site within the valley of Gore Creek. Vail, then, is a remarkably new entity, even by American standards, one that afforded its founders an opportunity to conceive and construct from a nearly blank canvas whatever their hearts' desired. Vail's story is that of place creation, not re-creation.

The dreams of Vail's founders were, from the beginning, incredibly ambitious: a lavish "community planned and built, from the ground up, wholly for the

tourist trade" (Philpott 2002, 302). Vail was not the first destination ski resort constructed in the United States, but the area instantly became the concept's "most notable archetype" (Phillips 1986, 119). As early as 1968, Vail was already recognized as "the model" for the booming development in "instant villages." (Freeman 1968).

The recentness of Vail (it opened for skiing in 1962) means that its entire history corresponds with that of modern media. Americans thereby have been able to watch in detail its birth and growth. Scarcely has such a thing happened before, the entire existence of a place occurring in the age of comprehensive visual documentation.

Vail functions as a world apart in nearly every sense, a cultural island if you will. Attitudinally, its people march to the beat of their own drummer, seemingly oblivious to the cares of the world outside. The superior skiing on Vail mountain plus elegant resort facilities have attracted a unique society of like-minded yet demographically diverse individuals. Multimillionaires and struggling laborers alike (both domestic and international), congregate here in close physical proximity. Each group depends on the other in order for the community to work, yet each exists in a separate social world, with scarcely any serious exchange.

The village itself serves as a cultural center, somewhat analogous to an American college campus (Gumprecht 2003). It attracts world-class entertainment and prominent artists unheard of in communities of similar size. Pete Seibert, the resort's visionary planner, always intended for Vail to be more than a ski resort,

maintaining the position that "our market is the nonskier . . . . These are the people who want to take part in the ski resort activities, but they do not ski" (Wallace 1969, 16). Vail's attention has always been family focused, based on the belief that to attract extended-stay customers, the community had to provide entertainment for all.

Lastly, paramount to the success of Vail and of great interest to the cultural geographer, is the local material landscape. With Tyrolean architecture and winding, pedestrian-only streets, Vail symbolizes escape, an exotic, otherworldly sense of place that satisfies the desires of the paying customer. Vail is a classic product of consumption-driven culture, and as such, deserves attention for its place in the history of American culture.

The Concept of Voluntary Culture

In 1973, geographer Wilbur Zelinsky attempted to explain the continuing social diversity of the United States. He maintained that the contrast between forces working for convergence and divergence in the culture found regional expression in two classes of culture areas, based upon the nature of their origin.

The oldest and most abundant he labeled the *traditional region*, with its origins driven by economic factors. Such areas are not unique to the United States, he said, but perpetuate a pattern already well in place in Europe and elsewhere at the time of colonization. The traditional region, in fact, is the very likeness most Americans picture when thinking about established areas: "relatively self-contained, endogamous, stable, and of long duration. The individual is born into the region and

remains with it, physically and mentally, since there is little in- or out-migration by isolated persons or families" (Zelinsky 1973, 110). The traditional culture region is the product of time and stability. People and place have a reciprocal relationship that tends to create local distinctiveness. Zelinsky went so far as to describe these culture regions as "based upon blood and soil" (1973, 111).

People who grow up and remain in traditional culture areas are shaped by local realities and values. They are products of their environment, influenced by, and in turn, acting to maintain the existing culture. Paramount to the understanding of traditional culture areas is a realization that their inhabitants, by and large, did not decide where they were to live. That decision was made for them, as Zelinsky stated "by accidents of birth" (1973, 134).

Before the birth of modern transportation systems, the expectations of people toward travel and relocation were very different than in the twenty-first century. Most people were born, lived, and died in the same area, just as their ancestors had before them. Such realities inherently created cultures of stability, with defined traits and values. Nothing short of a complete revolution in society would alter this pattern. By nature then, the development of any other type of culture region would not easily occur until mobility increased.

I (and Zelinsky) do not want to imply that traditional culture areas are static. In- and out-migration and an exchange of ideas have always occurred, no matter what the region. Zelinsky, for example, acknowledged that all traditional culture areas are in some sense "hybrid creatures" (1973, 112) with multifaceted personalities. Yet, in

spite of this, once such an area is established, time usually solidifies its cultural characteristics. Interestingly, the instance of a resident leaving a traditional culture region may, in fact, help to confirm the cultural values already in place. The person who departs typically does so because he or she maintains economic or cultural values that differ from the established norms. This departure leaves a more homogeneous community behind.

The second, more recent type of culture area according to Zelinsky is the *voluntary region*. In 1973, when developing his thesis, he based it upon trends he observed at the time. Because of this he was compelled to write with at least some measure of hesitancy, stating in his introduction that "a new geometry of cultural space *may* have begun" (1973, 134). He further stated that such areas were "so novel and recent that few observers have consciously recognized or described them" (1973, 134).

What makes voluntary areas culturally distinctive is their self-selective nature, a product of a wealthier and more mobile age. Voluntary culture regions have foundations in economics, but what most struck Zelinsky was their tendency to become social creations. Whereas traditional culture was one where decisions of where to live were typically decided for a person, voluntary culture was inherently one of choice. In these latter places, some facet of their nature, be it economic, physical, or cultural had been perceived as desirable to a certain type of person. As such, this place began to attract such people, and a unique culture of like-minded individuals is born.

Residents in voluntary culture areas are citizens by their own volition, by conscious decision, and not by accident of birth. By their very nature, these places tend to be comprised of mobile, often adventurous types, seekers, risk takers, and those free of, or seeking freedom from, responsibility. When enough such individuals have come together, no matter what the drawing mechanism, a unique culture begins to develop. These areas can grow to be large (e.g. Southern California), but often are small "islands" existing in stark contrast to the surrounding society.

It should be noted that, although the rapid growth of voluntary culture areas in the United States is a recent phenomenon, Zelinsky did see evidence of it as early as English colonial settlement. In his words, early immigrants to this continent were "gravitating toward those places perceived as best fulfilling their aspirations, and where they could hobnob with many strangers, of widely scattered origin but with similar tastes and proclivities" (1973, 111). As those areas became established, however, roots were put down and they grew to resemble the traditional model.

Whether in colonial America or now, the coming together of previously unconnected individuals in search of their own physical, emotional, or spiritual white whale, can create a dynamic and culturally fascinating new environment. Although no place is a perfect example of modern voluntary culture, a utopia filled with like-minded people, it is now easy to find good approximations.

Zelinsky, for example, described four subtypes: military towns, educational centers, pleasuring places, and latter-day Bohemias and utopias (1973, 137-138). In each case, he wrote of their special nature—with undeniable excitement about their

meaning and impact on the future of America. Equally striking, however, is the brevity of his comments--further evidence of the subject's novelty inherent in 1973.

Thesis

Since the time of Zelinsky's text, the veracity of his assertions has been realized. My objective in this thesis is, in a phrase, to give legs to Zelinsky's theory of voluntary culture by way of example. The concept is important, but has received surprisingly little attention from the scholarly community.

Vail, of course, is an example of what Zelinsky termed a pleasuring place, one that exists economically and culturally because of some mechanism of human recreation. In academia the tendency too often has been to judge such places as "artificial," faux communities and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. Consequently, much of the scholarly writing on American ski towns focuses on the industry's negative consequences on the environment or on how big corporations are destroying what once were quaint, family-owned ski hills. Although resort towns certainly have been irrevocably altered (in some cases for the worse) in the face of remarkable growth, I contend that residents and tourists alike still feel that Vail and similar communities possess something cherished and unmatched elsewhere.

My study attempts to understand Vail as a place, to show through archival work, statistical evidence, and personal experience (having lived in the Vail Valley for parts of three years) that this town and others like it are worthy of greater academic attention. Consider, to begin with, the immense impact these places exert

on modern society. Writer Annie Gilbert Coleman, for example, has observed that Colorado's ski industry "redefined the social, physical, economic and imaginary landscape of the Colorado Rockies at the same time it made them the focus of a national leisure industry, ethic, and style. Places like Vail and Aspen have become powerful cultural icons as well as economic models" (2004, 3). In the years prior to World War II, skiing had existed only as a local and regional activity. In contrast, 290,000 skiers took to Vail's slopes during the 1967-1968 ski season (just five years after Vail mountain opened to the public), nearly seventy percent of those being from outside Colorado (Rothman 1998, 232). By the mid-eighties over a billion dollars a year was being made in ski-related retail sales in Colorado alone, making it the largest single industry west of Denver (Fay 1984, 71). That number had climbed to over $2 billion by the 2003 (Walsh 2004).

The building of new homes and infrastructure, tourism, and tax revenue are making pleasuring places increasingly important places at the state and national levels. In Colorado the numbers are staggering. In 2001-2002 the ski business alone generated between two and two and a half billion dollars in revenue. Over 6.8 million out-of-state skiers visited Colorado resorts in 2002-2003, along with 4.8 million from within the state (Walsh 2004). Resorts similarly helped boost Colorado population growth rates to triple the national average since 1990 (Maslin 1996). Eagle County, which includes the town of Vail, had a ninety percent increase in its population, from 21,928 in 1990 to 41,659 in 2000. Today, it remains one of the nation's fastest growing counties (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

Using Zelinsky's theory of voluntary culture as a point of departure, the following chapters examine the real-life development, characteristics and implications of Vail. Chapter two chronicles the resort's history, emphasizing the importance of founder Pete Seibert's vision for a destination on par with any around the world and also the favorable social climate for resort areas after World War II. Chapter Three examines with the cultural landscape created in Vail and the ideals and values that one may infer from this material culture. Chapter Four focuses on sense of place and attempts to articulate those "indentifying, particularizing characteristics" that make Vail what it is (Ryden 1993, 210). In a conclusion, I discuss social implications of volunteer culture regions as I found them in Vail, generally supporting Zelinsky's theory that such regions are the product of the evolution in American values.

How Vail Came to Be

Chapter Two

A synthesis of several factors around the time of World War II helped create modern volunteer cultures, especially in the western half of the United States. Fueled by a postwar economic boom and subsequent cultural changes, a climate of consumption developed. This mushroomed through the 1950s and 1960s. America's culture and geography were in the midst of a revolution. Places in the American West once dominated by rural economies and rural values abruptly became tourist destinations. More specifically, the "montane" pleasuring place (Zelinsky 1973) flowered, being the beneficiary of aforementioned factors as well as from the remarkable impact made by a group of men serving with the U. S. Army in the Tenth Mountain Division. Vail could be considered the quintessential voluntary culture region, sprouting up in an area of Colorado's Rocky Mountains with little cultural history.

Post World War II America

At the end of World War II, the United States found itself in a new position politically and economically. As a result of the heavy price England had paid in its victory, America irrefutably became the most powerful and influential nation in the Western world. By the late 1940s, a period of strong economic expansion and technological growth pushed the economy to unprecedented heights. Between 1947 and 1960, the nation's gross national product more than doubled, growing from 238.2

to 529.8 billion dollars. By the mid-1950s, America was producing half of the world's goods (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2008).

The thriving economy brought dramatic change to many lives. Upper and middle-class Americans saw an unprecedented rise in prosperity. By 1960, average income had increased 35 percent from what it had been in 1945. By 1959, working Americans were also taking over one week of paid vacation (Clawson and Knetsch 1966, 16-17). Along with having more free time and larger incomes, these Americans also became more mobile, aided, in part, by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 which initiated construction of today's Interstate highway system. Americans took to the road en masse, and the highway became the lifeblood of an exploding tourism industry. In the first decade following the Act of 1956, annual vehicle miles in America mushroomed from 6.8 million to 99.3 million (Federal Highway Administration). Not only travel, but also internal migration became the norm in the society. Areas such as Southern California boomed as many from the Midwest exchanged small-town or farm life for new opportunities and a favorable climate.

By the 1950s, the beginning of what many have called the golden age of skiing, a culture of consumption was already in full maturation in the United States. The hallmark of this culture was attitudinal. More and more, Americans were looking to possessions, experience, leisure, and travel for satisfaction and self-fulfillment, rather than work and family. Historian Hal Rothman has described consumption as "an emphasis on the status rather than on the utility of goods . . . an

end in itself . . . using and enjoying the largesse of American economic development, a concept foreign when industrialization began in the United States" (Rothman 1998, 18). The cultural and economic impact of this change in American society is hard to overstate. The climate was right for volunteer cultures. The war and its cares now behind them, Americans were ready and willing to spend their time and money on tourism and entertainment. Likewise, a collection of profit-minded resort entrepreneurs were ready to oblige.

During the second half of the twentieth century, newly developing cultural regions became based even more on what geographer James Vance has called "the search for lifestyle" (1972, 203). Many Americans during this time were searching for new ideals, tired of the pace of urban centers or with their current realities. This search often involved travel, but could also include permanent relocation or the acquisition of a vacation home in some utopian landscape. In some respects, then, Vail is the quintessential postwar voluntary culture region, symbolizing new possibilities afforded in postwar America.

America's Embrace of Recreational Skiing

The ski industry was one beneficiary of the postwar tourist boom. According to journalist Richard Needham: "Skiing took on a new glamour in the postwar years. People suddenly had a few dollars to spend and yearned to try the winter sporting life previously reserved for the adventurous rich" (1987, 46). Before the war, skiing was largely regional in nature, characterized by small, remote, locally owned operations.

To be accurate, however, skiing as a recreational sport had already exhibited signs of growth. The first ski school in America opened in 1929 in New Hampshire (Needham 1987, 18). More so, the birth of Sun Valley, "the nation's first 'destination' ski resort," in 1936 signified the sport's new significance in the American conscience. Patrick Phillips, in a study of recreational development, called Sun Valley "a true novelty on the American scene" (1986, 113). Similar to the development of a resort culture at remote Hot Springs, Arkansas, skiing proved it could literally draw the world to equally isolated Ketchum, Idaho. The resort soon became a playground for the stars of Hollywood and high society, which, consequently, brought interest in skiing to the larger public.

The 1932 Olympic Games in Lake Placid, New York, and the 1936 Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany have also been credited as catalysts for "pushing off an avalanche in skiing excitement in the United States" (Fay 1984, 1). The 1936 games were the first to recognize Alpine skiing as an event and to showcase an American ski team (Needham 1987, 22). By the end of the 1930s, ski slopes were opening across the country, including such now legendary resorts as Alta, Jackson Hole, Winter Park, and Stowe. By 1947, roughly ninety ski areas existed in the United States (Phillips 1986, 113). Likewise, the sport was growing beyond its regional scope. As noted by historian Annie Gilbert Coleman: "As early as 1957 Colorado ski areas did over 30% of their business with skiers from out of state." New cultural attitudes and economic realities "created a context within which people no

longer had to belong to an elite club or live in a mountain town in order to ski" (1996, 189-190).

Tenth Mountain Division

Beyond the Olympics, the country's embrace of skiing was also influenced by the heroic service of American soldiers of the Tenth Mountain Division in the North Apennines Mountains and the adjacent Po River Valley of Italy during World War II. The adventure and bravery inherent in their mission (the Tenth suffered the most casualties of any division in the war: 4,154 wounded and 992 casualties), and their ultimate success against the German army captured the public imagination. June Simonton, in her history of the Vail Valley, said that: "It was during [the late 1940s] that Americans fell in love with skiing. The Tenth Mountain Division ski troopers brought glory and romance to the sport, *après-ski* added the spice of social adventure, and fashion replaced the skier's lumpy, woolen look with sleep, slim, stretch pants. Skiing boomed, bringing smiles to travel agencies and retailers" (Simonton 1987, 60). Coleman echoes this interpretation, saying that: "relieved of war-time stress and presented with a cheery future, white, middle-class and wealthy Americans who had never worn skis before traveled to the mountains for vacation and took up the sport" (1996, 182).

The importance of the Tenth Mountain Division to the resulting ski boom was not simply in the positive response it generated with many Americans. It also was the direct impact that many of the Division's returnees would have on the industry.

During the war, the "Ski Club Boys," as they were called, were trained for service at Camp Hale, Colorado, a newly established alpine Army base located just across Tennessee Pass from the town of Leadville. Their mission was a difficult one. Severe conditions and isolation made Camp Hale an exceedingly difficult place to train. Nonetheless, the remarkable setting greatly impressed many of the recruits, being for many their introduction to the beauty and quality of Rocky Mountain skiing. The result for the Colorado ski industry would be phenomenal. At war's end numerous Division veterans relocated to the state and many played "a seminal role" in the subsequent ski boom (Benson 1984, 174). According to Hal Clifford: "ultimately, sixty-two American ski resorts were founded, managed, or had their ski schools run by these men" (2002, 13). Colorado always had the potential for being a skiing mecca, but now, through Camp Hale, thousands of young men had experienced its excellence first hand.

Pete Seibert

Arguably the most influential veteran from the Tenth Mountain Division and paramount to the story of Vail was Pete Seibert. Seibert had trained at Camp Hale and suffered serious wounds in Italy during a battle for Mount Terminale in the winter of 1945 (Needham 1987, 88). He was later awarded a Bronze Star for his service on Riva Ridge. Seibert is testament to the capability of one individual, equipped with vision, to exert extensive and lasting influence on a place and a culture. Vail Village was his creation, and his dream and vision live on, still dominating

decision-making philosophies. Vail's story is Seibert's story, and the two cannot be separated.

Pete Seibert's roots were not in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, but rather the slopes of New England. Born in 1924, he was raised in Sharon, Massachusetts, and later moved with his family to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Seibert referred to this move as "a boon to my skiing," having a rope-tow in a field behind his house (2000, 49). He volunteered with the Tenth Division in 1943, and was sent directly to Camp Hale. After release from the Army in 1946, he decided to start

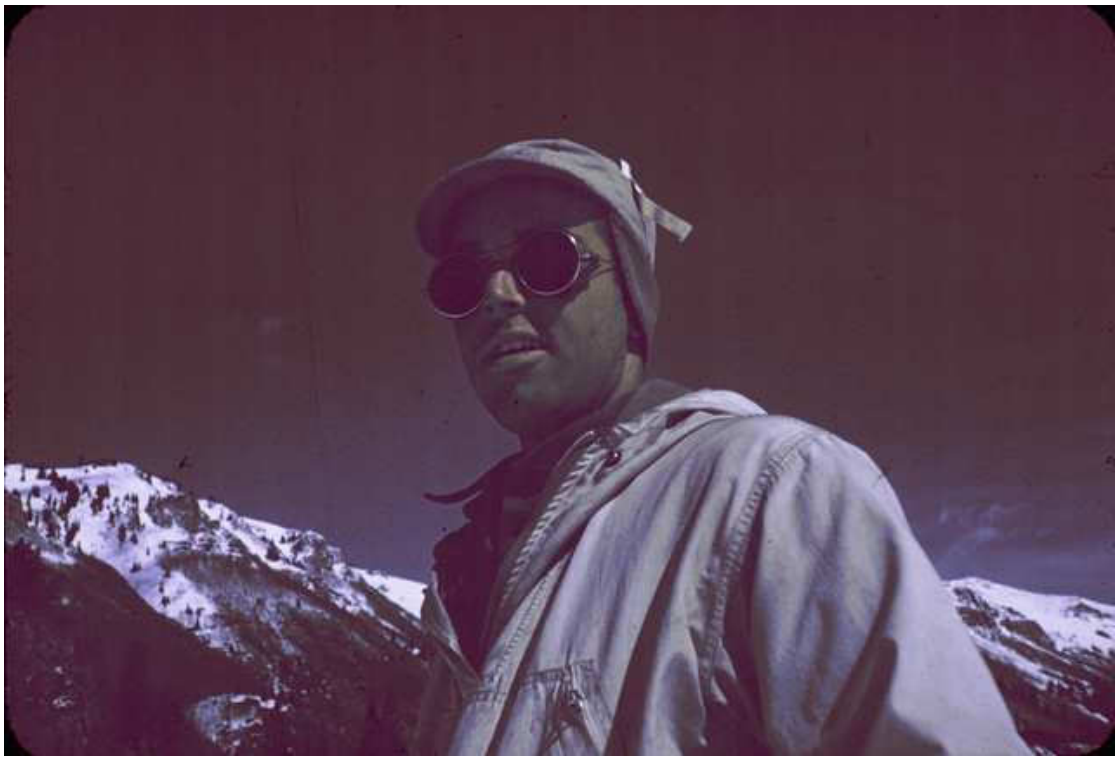

Figure 1. Pete Seibert, founder of Vail, as a member of the Tenth Mountain Division. Courtesy of tenthmountain.org

his own ski resort. First he worked the ski patrol in Aspen, Colorado. Then he went to Europe to study hotel management at L'École Hôtelière de Lausanne in

Switzerland. It was during this period that Seibert developed an understanding and appreciation for Swiss style and architecture. This experience shaped Seibert's vision, and he later claimed that the town of Zermatt was the mental model he used while developing Vail Village. In 1954, he moved back to Colorado, took work in the resort field, and began to seek a location for his dream resort. This search story would later become so familiar to his peers that he earned the epithet of "the Brigham Young of skiing" (Seibert 2000, 33).

The "Discovery" of Vail

While working at Loveland Basin, Seibert became friends with Earl Eaton, a native of Colorado (growing up in Edwards, just a few miles west of present-day Vail) who likewise shared the dream of starting his own ski resort. Eaton would routinely spend summer days tramping through the mountains of Colorado, prospecting for uranium. Although the uranium pursuits ultimately proved to be fruitless, his time was not in vain. For it was on one such venture that Eaton first recognized and began to consider the skiing potential of a then-unnamed mountain. He confided his thoughts to Pete Seibert, and in March of 1957, Eaton led Seibert on a hike to the summit of the mountain. That hike, up what is now called Vail Mountain, would change the region, the state, and the face of skiing forever (the full story can be read in Pete Seibert's autobiography, *Vail: Triumph of a Dream*, 2000).

A day skiing at Vail routinely impresses current visitors with the remarkable sense that this mountain was made to be skied. Yet, in the 1950s, no potential was evident to travelers along Highway 6. From the valley of Gore Creek below, the mountain projects south in a manner that obscures its peak. Seibert himself had passed by it numerous times without giving a second thought. From atop the mountain, however, Eaton and Seibert sensed the possibility for greatness. As Seibert would write in his autobiography:

> We looked at each other and realized what we both knew for certain: This was it! Besides the sheer impact of the vistas from the summit, I was also struck by the fine quality of the snow: light, powdery, and undisturbed by wind. There were great snow caps on the rocks and tree stumps, a sign that destructive winds rarely blew up here. And the trees grew in a consistent, symmetrical shape, meaning that the summit, facing away from the prevailing wind, was rarely hit by gales. The mountain was beyond perfection (2000, 33).

While the lion's share of surrounding peaks are too rugged for recreational skiing, Vail Mountain is gentler, favorably fashioned by rainwater, runoff from melting snows, and landslides. The front (north) side offers slopes of varying degrees, suitable for skiers of any skill level, as well as fantastic views of the adjacent Gore Range. Its positioning shields it from high winds. Doubtless, however, what has made Vail Mountain world famous is its vast, open bowls to the south, beautiful and welcoming to all, but also challenging for even the best skiers. The four thousand acres of open glade there were unintentionally created by Ute Indians who set "spite fires" after being removed from their lands by miners and ranchers. These idyllic "back bowls," which overlook the Mount of the Holy Cross, awarded Vail an

enormous amount of skiable terrain and soon became the thing of legend. Seibert would say later in life:

> I knew that we had the best mountain that I had seen here in the United States regardless of the location . . . .We had what we wanted: a mountain that was below timberline, 11,500 feet and down, and we had a base elevation that was above 8,000 feet, so we'd have pretty good snow. And of course there's nothing like the back bowls . . . (Williams 2002).

Accounts of Vail's genesis abound because the story is a truly a remarkable one. What needs to be emphasized here, however, is the revolutionary time in which this all took place and Vail's importance to the broader American culture. People in this new age of consumption had an appetite for experience and adventure. Ski resorts in general were built with this attitude in mind, but in the words of Annie Gilbert Coleman: "The most spectacular example was Vail." The resort's opening season in 1962 was modest by any measure, totaling just 310 skier-visits. By 1966, however, it had become the hottest new destination in North America, with visits reaching 189,000 (2004, 122). Vail changed the very nature of the ski resort. Its success meant the eventual death of family-owned and operated ski enterprises. Vail also changed the expectations of visitors. By offering the most modern and luxurious accommodations and facilities, a ski trip no longer meant roughing it. "With new expectations of their landscapes, skiers forced areas to invest increasing amounts of their money in the built environment from which skiers enjoyed the 'wilderness'" (Coleman 2004, 144). Because of places like Vail, visitors now expected the experience to include an organized après-ski environment, fine dining, and entertainment for the entire family.

Vail was the first resort to focus on condominium-style housing. With developable land in the narrow Vail Valley being at a premium, the idea made perfect sense. The founders also recognized the profit-maximizing nature of the condominium, viewing skiing as "an adjunct of real estate development" (Clifford 2002, 17):

> Tailor-made for ski areas, condos could be built at higher densities than traditional single family second homes, thereby conserving scarce land at a mountain's base. Attractive to both users and investors, they could be easily rented for short-term intervals during the ski season, thus ensuring a steady supply of customers to the slopes and to the attendant restaurants, bars, and shops (Phillips 1986, 119).

The relationship between real estate and skiing is an obvious one. Although the concept may not have originated with Seibert, it was he who demonstrated the genius of the idea, forever altering the landscape of tourism in the United States.

Lastly, Vail's patriarchs had a keen appreciation for the importance of image. Seibert, beyond being a business man, was an inventor of place. He understood, as Vance has written, that "internal migration, which has always been more a norm in America than elsewhere, has fed upon images" (1972, 194). To distinguish their resort, Vail's founders decided to employ a European theme in everything from architecture to promotional advertisings, believing in its inherent sophistication. "European images were historically tied to class, because rich people had made famous the alpine resorts that Colorado area mimicked" (Coleman 2004, 171).

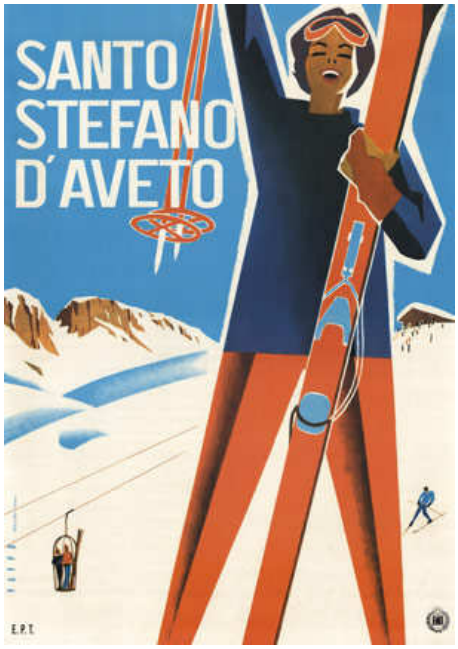

Figure 2. Vintage European ski poster, by Mario Puppo. Obtained from the thevintageposter.com

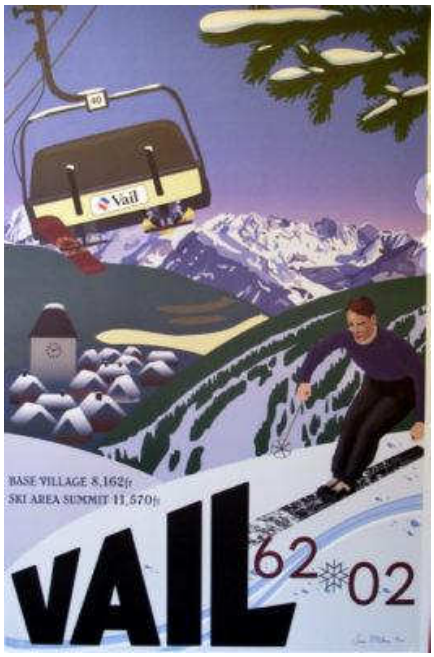

Figure 3. Vail Resorts poster, 2002, by Sara McClure. Obtained from christopherco.com

Seibert carefully thought through every decision he made concerning how his resort would be experienced by visitors. Such overt and premeditated place creation is of obvious interest to the geographer, as it speaks to the power of perception and the influence of image upon society.

The Cultural Landscape

Chapter Three

"Nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way. There are almost no exceptions" (Lewis 1979, 18).

Understanding Place through Material Culture

To the cultural geographer, the physical evidence of a place can be a useful lens for understanding local attitudes and values. Historian Thomas Schlereth calls such evidence material culture and defines it as "that segment of humankind's biosocial environment which has been purposely shaped by people according to culturally dictated plans" (Schlereth 1985, 22). It encompasses houses, toys, cemeteries, skyscrapers, and more, and when carefully considered, can provide a useful supplement to documentation provided by standard written sources. Together, the totalities of these constructs constitute the cultural landscape.

The cultural landscapes of pleasure regions such as Vail have, until recently, failed to win much attention from geographers. Stacy Warren has seen such neglect as "merely echoing sentiments widespread throughout the social sciences," a resolute dismissal of these objects as "dangerously mindless 'mass culture'" (Warren 1993, 175). This attitude is in the process of being reversed, however. Like it or not, as Warren says, "the popular culture represented by landscapes of leisure and entertainment is the backcloth against which almost all our everyday cultural

geographies are lived" (1993, 174). Such trends are too important economically and culturally to ignore.

Although not discussing Vail in particular, James and Nancy Duncan's work *Landscapes of Privilege* helps one to understand Zelinsky's idea of the pleasuring place. They emphasize, for example, "the role that aesthetics plays in the production of place and identities . . . the ways people produce their identities in and through places" (2004, 3). The relationship actually is reciprocal, for individuals also seem to want their environments to speak to whom they are. Built landscapes, then, also influence the observer and aid the creation of a sense of place.

I will focus for this study on Vail's architecture and how it is atypical within the Colorado landscape. My thesis, following Peirce Lewis, is that when two places look "substantially different . . . chances are very good that the cultures of the two places are very different also" (1979, 15).

As an image-conscience resort destination, Vail is analogous to many other places where a place is seen as a cultural symbol. The classic college campus, for example, works in much the same manner, as it attempts to symbolize "the college as a place apart" (Gumprecht 2006, 25). Whereas campus design is "meant to instill in students an appreciation for beauty and refinement," however, Vail's Tyrolean style was intended to transport tourists into a fantasy world, leaving the stresses of reality behind them. In addition, just as officials at the University of Oklahoma made Collegiate Gothic the style for all campus buildings so as to establish an "immediate

tradition" (Gumprecht 2006, 27), the developers of Vail hoped for the same result with their selection of Tyrolean architecture.

To be certain, Vail village is the product of a logical and systematic plan for place creation. Pete Seibert and his partners understood that appearance and perception would be paramount to success, far more so than in most communities. Aesthetically, Vail had to appeal to its guests or else it would fail. Again, it is important to remember that the resort rose from a nearly blank canvas. With no mining history or "wild west" imagery associated with the Gore Creek valley, Vail's creators enjoyed creative freedom. The community's built landscape then, in a more obvious way than many places, has the fingerprints of its founders all over it, revealing their values and beliefs. It is, therefore, particularly insightful to examine its material culture and the information it can provide.

Tyrolean Architecture

Vail represents (along with Snowmass, also in Colorado) "the earliest culmination in meditated, planned, and constructed ski resorts . . . specifically to meet the needs and wants of America's skier-tourists" (Coleman 1996, 227-228). In light of its almost instant economic success, the village then became the model for other new ski areas during the 1960s and 1970s, setting the standard as a year-round, destination resort (Phillips 1986, 119). Still, despite the number of imitators, Vail has somehow remained matchless since its opening in 1962. Experts continue to regard it as the finest and most distinctive example of a stand-alone resort. Although the

mountain itself and Vail's quality of snow are paramount in this success, the cohesive feel created by the original village is important too.

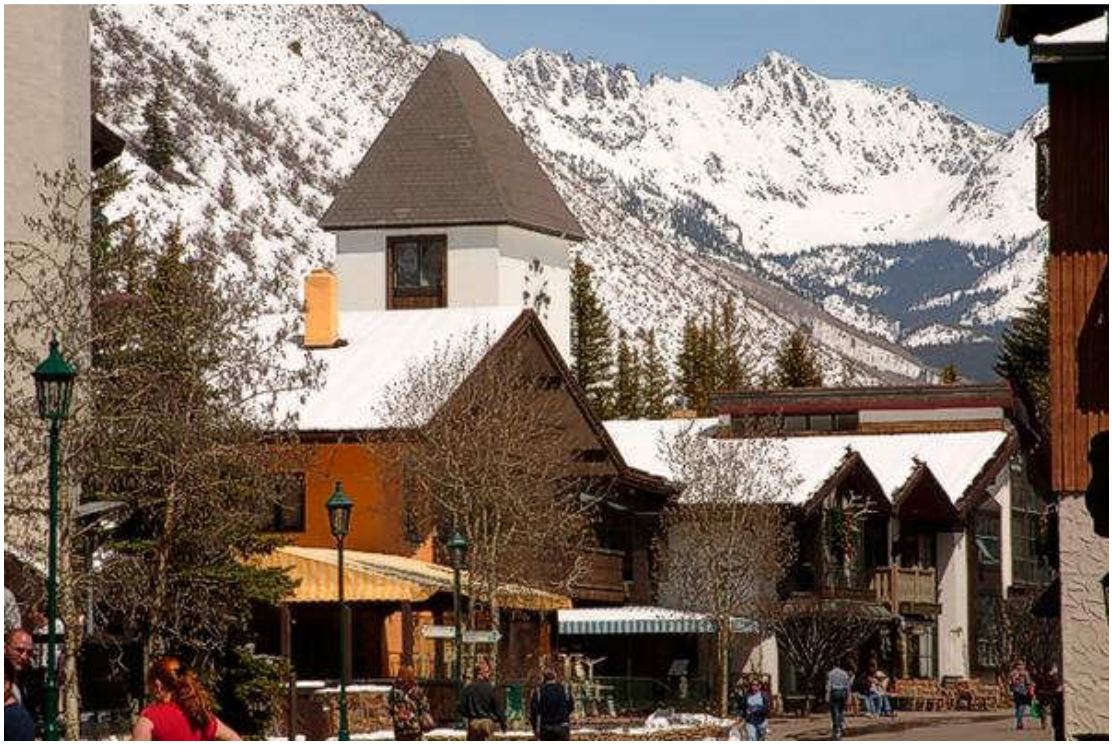

Figure 4. Vail Village.
Photo by author

Seibert's vision for how Vail should look, work, and feel was driven by what he perceived to be desires of the tourist. The resort was, after all, first and foremost a business venture. As mentioned earlier, Seibert's taste for Alpine architecture originated during his time working and studying in Europe after World War II. His autobiography states:

> Vail Village grew out of raw wilderness and bare grazing land. I knew from the start I wanted a town that contained pieces of several ski resorts in the Alps: St. Anton and Kitzbuhel in Austria; Meribel, France; and Zermatt, Switzerland, the classic Swiss village at the bottom of the Matterhorn. I had visited Zermatt several times and admired it so much that I eventually memorized the town blueprints, with the idea of bringing Zermatt to

> Colorado. I even measured the length and width of its streets and took photos of buildings that were especially appealing (2000, 98-99).

Using Alpine Zermatt as inspiration, Seibert and his architect partners, Fitzhugh Scott from Milwaukee and Fritz Benedict from Aspen, developed village plans that made two strong statements. First, the profit motive prompted a heavy consideration for tourists rather than a possible permanent population. Seibert also fully committed himself to Tyrolean architecture feeling certain that the sense of adventure and fantasy he perceived in it would be shared by many other Americans.

The original Vail village is compact, both by design and the physical necessity of the narrow valley of Gore Creek. Seibert was impressed by the pedestrian-only ski towns he had seen in Europe and wanted Vail to function in similar fashion. Some of his investors had concerns with this idea, considering America's love affair with the automobile and Vail's remote location, but Seibert pushed ahead, insisting guests would come to appreciate a temporary severing of their ties "with the mechanical, pressure-filled outside world" (Seibert 2000, 46). In the end, a compact village proved convenient for the visitor, with everything within walking distance eliminating the necessity for automobiles. The result served both to enhance a resort-island atmosphere and to further distinguish his village from other ski destinations in Colorado. Knowing that the surrounding landscape was his greatest economic asset and would essentially sell itself, Seibert essentially wanted to get people out of their vehicles and into the extraordinary mountain environment. William Philpott has noted the concerted effort Vail's originators made to create a place that would "convey comfort, coziness, and charm" (1994, 39). Indeed, inherent in alpine

architecture is a modest, more human scale that does not "overwhelm the pedestrian feel" (1994, 41) or obscure the mountain vistas critical to harmonize with the village design.

Another factor in favor of Tyrolean design, seemingly forcing Vail to adopt an overtly European feel, was the area's extreme shortage of usable space. As articulated by David Lowenthal, American culture has been greatly influenced by the sheer vastness of space. He has contended that such a large mass of land overwhelmed its inhabitants, creating a "ragged, indefinite, and confused" landscape, compared to the "casual chaos" of Europe (Lowenthal 1968, 69). Such was not the case in the valley of Gore Creek.

Early on, Vail Associates created an Architectural Control Committee to develop building guidelines. One aim was a set of Alpine characteristics that "while contrived, would look and feel like the real thing" (Philpott 1994, 40). Another was to ensure a degree of homogeneity within the village core. "'Alpine' in the eyes of the committee included the liberal exterior use of stone, stucco, used brick, or wood; an emphasis on 'natural,' earthy, or subdued colors; attention to landscaping or planting; generous overhangs; and roof pitches that were neither too flat nor too steep, like an A-frame" (41).

Figure 5. Hotel Gasthof Gramshammer. Built in 1964, this marvelous example of Tyrolean Style is run by former Austrian ski racer Pepi Gramshammer and his wife Sheika.

Fitzhugh Scott's designs not only incorporated a European building style, but also narrow, winding streets. Once again, as Philpott noted, "the layout bore a strong resemblance to the irregular, ad-hoc style so commonly identified in the popular understanding with quaint old European towns" (1994, 40).

We all know the power a landscape can have on our psyche. Areas of natural beauty, such as Yosemite or the Grand Canyon, evoke strong emotional responses. So do a few dramatic urban environments. Vail is the product of rare natural beauty married to a dynamic man-made environment.

Figure 6. Vail Interfaith Chapel. Because of high land values almost all businesses and organizations have been forced to adapt. Six religious congregations share this structure. Photo by author.

Living in Vail afforded me the opportunity to experience first-hand how the village landscape influences its participants. Whether on a brisk evening in December amid holiday lights and a soft glow emanating from fine restaurants or on a sunny, low-humidity day in June spent milling among a tangle of tourists and Labradors, the village buzzes with a tangible energy. Direct experience in this landscape can make the humblest of ski bums feel as though he or she was actually one of the wealthy. Philpott has described this as visitors indulging in their fantasies (1994, 51), and I concur that this is a very easy leap to make.

As a Vail employee, I possessed some of the cultural capital of an insider. I was free to snowboard on the mountain at my leisure and I knew people in the

village, experiences that provided a measure of understanding about Vail. This can be true for the visitor as well. A compact village is quickly digested. Furthermore, employees go out of their way to make guests feel that their happiness and satisfaction are paramount. I contend that Vail is in the business of fantasy indulgence. Vail is a created place, carefully posturing a premeditated image. For the most part I reveled in this ambiance. Like many other people, I used Vail, as it used me, to meet a temporary need. If a person longs to see something different, to experience another world that offers unique opportunity and that inflates his or her own sense of distinction, Vail does this better than any place that I have ever known.

Sophistication and a Sense of Apartness

Seibert believed that the Tyrolean model for Vail Village would convey a sense of conspicuous sophistication. Setting such a tone was important, too, for it was an integral part of his goal to make Vail set the standard for winter resorts, to be able to boast the best skiing, the best facilities, and the best service. He accounted for his motivations in one simple, telling statement: "Mass follows class" (Philpott 1994, 49).

Beyond sophistication, Seibert also believed that European architecture would bestow a sense of adventure and spectacle to domestic visitors. This conscious alignment with things European carried over into Vail's marketing scheme. Advertising posters in the style of European prints of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s harkened back to a more refined age and played upon existing American perceptions

and predilections. Undoubtedly, these advertisements were also employed to combat Vail's lack of history.

Since Vail's inception, many people have praised Seibert for his exceptional understanding of image creation and its importance. He reasoned that, for the place to succeed as a destination resort, it had to be an aesthetic triumph. Tourists would expect not only for a resort to be attractive, but for it also to look *different* than most places. Resorts, in other words, would be seen (especially for urbanites) as places of escape, and the expectation was for exotic, otherworld experiences.

The literature on Vail repeatedly speaks to a sense of the exotic, identifying the resort as a retreat from "the unpleasant reminders of the real world . . . a sort of refuge from the darker side of reality" (Philpott 1994, 57). According to one scholar, "these fantasylands are in part places of escaping from drab, corrupt, inefficient reality; they are also places of inspiration . . . utopias made real" (Relph 1976, 97). Tyrolean architectural design and skiing seemed to be a happy marriage in the Rockies, and Vail quickly gained popular favor. As Martin Arnolds favorably commented in 1969, ". . . to many people who feel beset with urban problems and the vague malaise produced by the lack of physical challenge, skiing and the atmosphere around it has become a philosophical balm" (1969, 49).

Vail's unique landscape communicates to its participants that something different is happening here, regardless if this is true. The resort's obsession with aesthetics, its European façade and its holiday lights shining throughout the entire ski season are all intended to capture the psyche of the individual and transport him or

her away from day-to-day realities. Economic numbers point to its success in doing so. Vail is routinely voted the number one ski resort in the United States. A self-fulfilling prophecy is also at work, for it is my contention that Vail works differently than other places, in part, because of its unique appearance. Vail was "dressed" for the place its founders wished it to become.

Place images are not universal among participants, however. Duncan and Duncan, for example, contend that landscapes such as in Vail can actually evince hostility toward certain outside elements. They propose that ". . . such a high degree of attention . . . to the visual, material, and sensual aspects of place and place-based identity leads to an aesthicization of exclusion," and that this "can act as subtle but highly effective mechanisms . . . [for the] affirmation of class identity" (2004, 4). The authors go on to argue that such "lifestyle island(s)" (Dorst 1990) come with clear windows, awkwardly displaying their fears and insecurities. Is this true in Vail? The limited amount of available space has wildly driven up the price of local living, effectively restricting the tourist and resident population of Vail Village to a nearly homogeneous elite.

Vail certainly has never tried to hide its beliefs and values regarding business success. The resort was designed and marketed toward wealthy families and away from what Seibert deemed the "far out" element. Employees must always look presentable and behave respectably when on the mountain. Vail has a reputation as the conservative resort, the anti-Aspen in its values and mode of operation. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that Vail's architectural preferences--the high priority

placed on aesthetics--might well be judged uninviting by particular elements of society.

A high degree of architectural unity suggests an equal measure of cultural unity. In the sense that Vail works as a pleasuring place, comprised largely of people with relatively similar goals and values, a positive correlation does exist. The majority of people you happen upon in Vail are enjoying themselves, and relating tales of victory from their day on the slopes to strangers on the bus or at the pub comes naturally. A sense of commonality in purpose and outlook is apparent and assumed. In the next chapter, I will examine the cultural makeup of Vail and its sense of place in more detail, testing whether Vail's architectural unity does indeed echo its population.

Beyond Pete Seibert's affinity with the Alps, another consideration in how Vail came to look the way it does is competition with another Colorado resort, Aspen. From the very beginning, in fact, one finds the simple tenet that Vail was "not Aspen" (an example of the theory of "other" presented in Edward Said's *Orientalism* [1978]). Vail's founders recognized an inherent rivalry with Aspen from the beginning, and went to great lengths to differentiate Vail and project the image that it was somehow superior. Since Aspen's roots were in Colorado's mining history, Vail had to find other inspiration. Aspen was laid out in the typical American grid pattern, so Vail's streets became narrow and winding. Aspen's architecture was heavily Victorian, so Vail turned to something more fanciful. Again, referencing Lewis's statement on

"regional corollary," the fact that Vail looks "substantially different" from Aspen is no accident (1979, 15).

Aspen was a near ghost town before being resurrected by Walter Paepcke, a Chicago industrialist. His vision was to create a center for American intellectuals and business leaders with the aim of fostering cultural reform. Like Seibert, Paepcke also saw the economic promise inherent in tourism and recreation, although for him skiing was almost an afterthought. Paepcke's efforts, driven by the idea of building community, went into buying land and pouring money into refurbishing derelict Victorian architecture. Aspen was far different at this stage from the tourism-first mindset at Vail. Gradually, of course, the two resorts became somewhat similar, with great skiing and up-scale clientele. Condominiums, for example, transformed both places in the 1960s. "Tailor-made for ski areas, condos could be built at higher densities than traditional single family second homes, thereby conserving scarce land at the mountain's base" (Phillips 1986, 119).

As stated earlier, Seibert, from the beginning, understood that skiing was only one element of the mountain resort industry. "No ski area can thrive on skiing alone; a commercially viable village at its base is a must" (Seibert 2000, 98). Vail was one of the first such places to create year-round recreation facilities. Seemingly overnight, in fact, there rose from the valley of Gore Creek an "instant village" of condominiums and second homes. With it, as Hal Clifford has noted, "skiing became an adjunct of real estate development, and this reality has informed much of the ski business ever since" (2002, 17).

Another cultural insight from Vail's architecture is its "other-directed" nature. Edward Relph, in *Place and Placelessness*, has defined such buildings as "deliberately directed towards outsiders, spectors, passers-by, and above all consumers" (1976, 93). Relph himself was unreservedly disapproving of such architecture, stating that the structures "suggest almost nothing of the people living in them . . . declaring themselves to be 'Vacation or Consumerland'" (1976, 93). Other-directed landscapes generally ignore local history and pre-existing cultural tradition, thereby deeming the needs and wants of outsiders as superior. This "self-conscious and deliberate" decision to look to other cultures or histories for inspiration Relph (employing support from Nietzsche, Satre, et al.) proclaimed as inauthentic (1976, 81).

Certainly, the anomalous nature of a Tyrolean village situated in Colorado's Rocky Mountains is obvious. Vail's founders eschewed more obvious images of the American West in favor of an unabashed "emphasis on the abstract, economic interest" (Relph 1976, 89). In addition, the disproportionately high number of condominiums in the valley also points toward transient or temporary values rather than community development. In Vail's defense, however, it seems fair to ask how important an authentic, built landscape really is and what exactly would that entail? The reality is that the Gore Creek valley had a remarkably small cultural biography before 1960. Never had more than a handful of people lived there. Even employing a theme based upon the Ute Indians would have been a cultural stretch.

Still, Relph's assertion of a negative, "other-directed" attitude does have merit. Because architectural design, street configuration, services, accommodations, and nearly everything else in the cultural landscape has been created first and foremost for the visitor, a sense of community is hard to find. Vail is a collection of people (a large number being transient) who individually share and enjoy a physical location, but who function little like a traditional community. The predominance of second-home construction in Vail is one big reason. As of 2005, roughly half of the real estate in Eagle County was owned by nonresidents (Johnson 2005, 1). Vail itself is even more extreme, with about seventy percent of homeowners claiming full-time residence someplace else.

Infrequency of residency proves fatal for community development, even among the most intentional of individuals. Condominium-style housing breeds an insular lifestyle. Few public places exist for residents to meet and become acquainted; few traditional networks exist to bring people together. In many small towns, for example, the athletic contests of the local high school serve as the lifeblood and unifier of individuals. These sports generate strong positive identification not only with the institution, but also the larger community. A high school exists in the Vail Valley, but its activities are lost on people with few connections to the area and with myriad other entertainment activities available to them.

Also working against community development is housing prices. Vail has simply become too expensive for most of its employees, forcing them "down valley" to communities such as Edwards, Eagle, and beyond. Vail has grown from its small,

pedestrian-friendly core into a decentralized string of residential neighborhoods. Many full-time residents in the Vail area have come to feel like second-class citizens whose needs and wishes will forever play second fiddle to outsiders and the resort economy. These things wear on locals, and many residents of the valley express discontent over a sensed lack of community, the state of local schools, and the cost of living.

Within the ski-bum population, that necessary but to-be-invisible faction of the Vail landscape, the act of community is markedly challenging. With few public areas available and without the economic capital necessary to participate in most of the cultural performances, resort employees congregate largely in employee housing, sharing a small pocket of community within the larger context. Such circumstances tend to unify individuals, and these groups can come to function as a surrogate family. Such pockets of community, though real and important to their individual members, are also entirely atomistic, and have no lasting affect on the area as a whole. They flower and fade within only a few months time as members go their own ways. This is how Vail works; it is its sense of place, but it does not progress toward sense of community.

Vail is meant to symbolize sophistication, adventure, and retreat, and many people think it has succeeded. To other analysts, however, what is intended may not always be what is perceived. Vail has also been described as resembling "a movie set, with its Disneyland-Swiss chalets and self-consciously quaint little shops" (May 1982, XX40). So, what appeals to one person as charming smacks as inauthentic to

another. Vail has been satirized as “plastic Bavaria,” “gingerbready,” and “pseudo-Alpine,” presumably being too uncharacteristic of the region and too perfect to be taken seriously.

Certainly, places like Vail have taken considerable persecution from academics who dismiss them as faux communities, cultural absurdities of little significance. Regardless of individual taste and preferences, a definite image was created in Vail’s original village that clearly stirs strong feelings in the beholder. The meaning and viability of the built landscapes in pleasuring places deserves more scholarly attention. Do they work in the sense that they achieve what their creators intended them to do? In what way are participants in these places influenced by their surroundings? It is my belief that pleasuring places have something important to say about our culture, and to dismiss them as naïve is to suffer in our understanding of culture from our own naiveté.

Sense of Place

Chapter Four

Although the material culture and montane environment are vital contributing elements to Vail's personality, the town's inhabitants are its life and true essence. This chapter explores the cultural makeup and sense of place in this fascinating community. What began as a dream for Pete Seibert and his friend Earl Eaton has developed into a wildly successful and complex resort. Its citizens and visitors come from every corner of the globe, all bringing their individual backgrounds, beliefs, and attitudes with them. The product is a destinational fairyland, a "heady mix of urban and mountain cultures" (Reifer, Buchanan, Lovitt, Kerig, et al. 2000, 96), and Wilbur Zelinsky's "pleasuring place."

This chapter will attempt the formidable task of using mere words to describe and interpret the unique character of the Vail Valley. What encourages my audacity in such a mission is the thirteen months I spent living there (not including prior and subsequent visits), working, visiting, and snowboarding with and among its tourists, residents, and laborers. Although some notions of place can formalize in relatively short periods of time, it is undeniable that a longer residence is required to ingest and process what is occurring all around. Kent Ryden has asserted that: "a sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines" (Ryden 1993, 38). During my time in the Vail Valley I fell in love with its inspiring beauty, and embracing attitude toward life and adventure. Vail also was for me (but far from

unique to me) a place of reflection and experience, where I became more catholic and yet more secure in my convictions. In the pages that follow I hope to convey that this is a common experience for many during their time of residence in the Vail Valley.

I approach this endeavor with considerable reluctance, for I am almost certain, even before I begin, to never feel completely satisfied with the finished product. As Tuan had expressed: "Intimate experiences, whether of people or of things, are difficult to make public. Apt words are elusive; pictures and diagrams seldom seem adequate" (Tuan 1977, 147). I take comfort, however, by the words of Isaiah Berlin (as paraphrased by anthropologist Keith Basso) that "it is better to write of things one believes one knows something about than to anguish in high despair over the manifold difficulties of knowing things at all" (Basso and Feld, 1996, 58) .

Many possible angles exist for understanding and describing the culture of Vail. What impressed me most, however, is the existence of three separate assemblages of people, who, while physically sharing the same valley and existing in a state of mutual dependence, function in completely separate spheres. Thinking of Vail in this context also emphasizes the important question of community in such a place. My approach is to define and examine each cultural subfield individually, and then, collectively, to synthesize the place they create--Vail's sense of place. Following this analysis I explore the culture of Vail as a whole, delineating its positive and negative aspects as they pertain to shaping and being shaped by the individuals who reside there.

The People of Vail

One category of people at Vail includes both year-round residents of the Valley and those who have made it their second residence, splitting time with at least one other location throughout the year. The second category is the so-called ski-bums, people stereotypically in their twenties and thirties who work various jobs within the ski and resort industry, but possess a "live-to-ski" mentality. This group includes not only young Americans, but also a substantial number of exchange laborers from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and other places. The third category is a burgeoning contingent of unskilled foreign workers, both legal and illegal, who come mostly from Mexico to fill the demand for cheap, behind-the-scenes labor inherent with the resort industry.

Vail is not comprised only of the three resident groups, of course, whether temporary or otherwise. At any given time, a large number of the individuals shopping in stores, dining in restaurants, and skiing on mountain slopes are tourists. I have chosen to include these people within my first category, believing that tourists are close to this group demographically and functionally within Vail itself. According to a recent report done by Vail Resorts, for example, 34 percent of its visitors claim an annual salary of $200,000 or greater (Vail Valley Tourism and Convention Bureau, 2003). I have observed them as being similar to residents in the way they interact and experience the area and in the way the resort views and strives to accommodate them.

The town itself has always accommodated its tourists and residents to the neglect of temporary employees and working-class residents. In June Simonton's history of Vail she observed that: "From the beginning, two Vails existed--one a posh and polished ski resort with celebrities and cocktail parties, and the other a community of people who did without phones and running water. Two Vails, separated, but inseparable. One built the other" (Simonton 1987, 90). Rest assured, the days of suffering without running water are over for those in the Vail Valley. Yet, providing housing for the resort's labor force has historically been done begrudgingly and always with great pains toward making it as invisible as possible. Shopping and dining in Vail are overwhelmingly geared toward the wealthier factions of the community. Lift ticket prices ($85 per day for an adult in 2007) effectively squeeze out any worker who does not have an employee pass as part of his/her benefit package. Workers are forced to find their own enclaves. Though able to get in on some of the benefits through association and proximity to the resort's resources, they are yet always on the margins, so to speak, unmistakably outside Vail's inner ring.

An interesting paradox to this naturally occurring disunion among Vailites is the reality that each group is dependent on the others for the very existence and lasting success of the resulting culture. Without a throng of minimum-wage workers fulfilling the countless roles and responsibilities needed to make the resort run, Vail as we know it would come to a screeching halt. Likewise, without the inflow of business and capital from residents and tourists alike, there would be no employment for workers by the thousands. The sum is an unlikely and unique assemblage of

people who, by happenstance, create a cultural "island" within the rarefied air of the Colorado Rockies. Although sharp class divisions are commonplace in many communities, they are especially intriguing to study in Vail because of their forced intimacy. The cultural distinctions among the three groups, often stark and sometimes fleshed out in humorous fashion, strike even the most casual of observers.

Residents

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported Vail's population to be 4,531 (the census classifies a resident as belonging to the place where they make their "usual" residence). This seems ordinary enough, but of the town's 5,389 housing units, 2,888 (53.6%) were classified as being for "seasonal, recreational, or occasional use" (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008). More over, 33.8% of local households reported annual incomes over $100,000 (Tables 1, 2). These statistics illustrate two definitive aspects of Vail (and of pleasuring places in general): the looseness of community ties and the inherent wealth of many inhabitants. Pleasuring places are transient by nature, with many residents (not to mention tourists) in an almost constant state of "just returning" or "soon to be leaving." Pleasuring places also are typically located in areas of physical beauty. Being highly desirable places to live or visit, demand acts to inflate the price of real estate and costs of living beyond what the majority of Americans can realistically afford, making them havens for only a select few.

Table 1

CENSUS DATA FOR VAIL, COLORADO, 2000

Population	Number	Pct.	CO %.	US %
Total	4,531			
Male	2,644	58.4	50.4	49.1
Female	1,887	41.6	49.6	50.9
By Age				
15 or younger	387	8.5	21.3	21.4
16-24	734	16.2	14.3	13.9
25-44	2,172	47.9	32.6	30.2
45-64	1,024	22.6	22.2	22.0
65+	214	4.7	9.7	12.4
By Race				
White	4,265	94.1	82.8	75.1
Black or African American	13	0.3	3.8	12.3
American Indian and Alaskan Native	22	0.5	1.0	0.9
Asian	75	1.7	2.2	3.6
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	4	0.1	0.1	0.1
Some other Race	65	1.4	7.2	5.5
Two or More Races	87	1.9	2.8	2.4
Hispanic or Latino	281	6.2	17.1	12.5

Note: Hispanic ethnicity is a separate data category from race. This number should not be added to race totals.

Education (highest level)	Number	Pct.	CO %	US %
Population 25 years or older	3,382			
High school graduates (includes equivalency)	353	10.4	23.2	28.6
Some college or associate's degree	842	24.9	31.0	27.4
Bachelor's degree	1,519	44.9	21.6	15.5
Master's, professional or doctorate degree	540	16.0	11.1	8.9

Housing	Price	CO	US
Median price asked for vacant housing	$1,000,001	$155,300	$89,600
Monthly cost, with mortgage	$1,901	$1,197	$1,088
Monthly cost, without mortgage	$548	$277	$295

Birthplace	Number	Pct.	CO Pct.	US Pct.
Born in the same state	762	16.9	41.1	60.0
Born in another state	3,164	70.3	49.0	27.7
Born outside the U. S.	64	1.4	1.3	1.3
Naturalized citizen	144	3.2	2.7	4.5
Foreign born, not U. S. citizen	366	8.1	5.9	6.6

Source: U. S. Census Bureau

Table 2

CENSUS DATA FOR EAGLE COUNTY, COLORADO, 2000

Population		Number	Pct.	CO %	US %
Total		41,659			
	Male	22,813	54.8	50.4	49.1
	Female	18,846	45.2	49.6	50.9
By age:					
	15 years or younger	8,347	20.0	21.3	21.4
	16-24	6,183	14.8	14.3	13.9
	25-44	17,539	42.1	32.6	30.2
	45-64	8,341	20.0	22.2	22.0
	65+	1,249	3.0	9.7	12.4
By race and ethnicity:					
	White	35,558			
	Black or African American	142	0.3	8.28	75.1
	American Indian or Alaskan native	296	0.7	3.8	12.3
	Asian	342	0.8	2.2	3.6
	Native Hawaiian and other Pacific islander	30	0.1	0.1	0.1
	Some other race	4,498	10.8	7.2	5.5
	Two or more races	793	1.9	2.8	2.4
	Hispanic or Latino	9,682	23.2	17.1	12.5

Note: Hispanic ethnicity is a separate data category from race. This number should not be added to race totals.

Birthplace	Number	Pct.	CO Pct.	US Pct.
Born in the same state	11,571	27.8	41.1	60.0
Born in another state	22,101	53.1	49.0	27.7
Born outside the U. S.	413	1.0	1.3	1.3
Naturalized citizen	1,234	3.0	2.7	4.5
Foreign born, not U.S. citizen	6,340	15.2	5.9	6.6

Source: U. S. Census Bureau

Vail's resident population includes a sizeable number who came there because of a very specific place image that fit their personal dreams of more control over life and for escape. Through the 1960s, as Vail quickly grew from "just another ski resort" into an international destination on par with any resort in North America, this appeal became especially attractive to urbanites. As Martin Arnolds stated: " . . . to many people who feel beset with urban problems and the vague malaise produced by the lack of physical challenge, skiing and the atmosphere around it has become a philosophical balm" (1969, 49). Later in the same article, Vail developer Pete Seibert commented on the trends in American society that were making places like Vail viable economically: "People have a need to get away as pressures build up, and the whole philosophy has changed. When I grew up people saved money. Now they borrow money to go on vacations" (94). Factors working to make Vail an enticing haven were, thus, twofold: a pull of the inherent beauty and promise of a new beginning in Colorado's Rockies and a push felt by many of rich people to escape "pollution, crime and overcrowding in the cities" (Wren 1973, 35).

And, as detailed in chapter two, Vail's timing was impeccable, entering the resort landscape as America's taste for recreation and consumption were fully maturing. The condominium, perfect for the land-scarce market of Vail, was finding a niche in the American housing industry; skiing was experiencing unprecedented popularity in America; and middle and upper-class America was freer and richer than ever, and ready to spend.

Ski Bums

The ski bum is integral to the general conception and image of American ski towns. The term dates back to the late 1940s and refers to "college-aged people who put their regular lives on hold, moved to resort towns, and took whatever jobs they could in order to ski" (Coleman 2004, 173). While seemingly wholly different from the typical Vail second-home owner, an interesting common element exists between the two. The same things that attract the wealthy to Vail--powerful positive image association, escape from the "real world," attractive lifestyle, etc.--apply equally to ski-bums. As comical or unbelievable as it may seem, shared aspects of lives or personalities leads them both to this place. In reality, however, this commonality largely goes undiscovered on both sides, and individuals tend to stay among their peers, one symbolically passing through the door held by the other.

According to Vail Resorts, around eighty percent of the jobs in "the Vail area" are tourism related (Vail Valley Tourism and Convention Bureau 2003). This faction which matches in size the 4,531 permanent population of Vail, is less conspicuous than in many resort towns, for Vail leaders clearly have expressed a belief that ski-bums do not mesh well with their carefully maintained image as a sophisticated, family-oriented resort. This point was made well by journalist Hal Clifford, who compared British Columbia's Whistler resort to Vail. Clifford noted that 80 percent of Whistler's employees lived within the town's limits in 2000, compared to only 38 percent at Vail (Clifford 2000, 124). "[For] if Vail no longer is a hotbed of ski-bums, it has become something else: a name with distinction, on par with Scarsdale and

Beverly Hills and St. Mortiz" (Clifford 2000, 124). Although the town itself may not be for ski-bums any longer as land values have effectively priced them out (in 2000 the average home sale price in Vail was $1,437,071 (U.S. Census, 2008), the valley still teems with them, benefiting from what the location offers while likewise contributing to the feel of Vail and the Vail Valley.

First and foremost Vail represents to many a place of adventure. Away from family and familiar surroundings, most young ski-bums see the resort as a magical, disconnected "in-between" where a person just out of high school or college can "have some fun before entering the real world." Vail feels so autonomous, so isolated from the outside that people have a tendency to lose their sense of responsibility. The environment also seems to breed an adventurous spirit as beautiful mountains, blue skies, and mountain streams beckon people to experience the nature around them.

Equally legitimate and appealing for both the ski-bum and others is the hope of reinventing oneself, or perhaps simply to be truer to oneself in an adventurous, pleasure-seeking environment. For many young people Vail functions as a place of self-discovery, similar in nature to the traditional college setting.

From my experience, there is truth to the notion of the ski-bum as an icon, with a certain intrinsically romantic lifestyle. While I was living there, I remember several conversations with visitors who were fascinated with my circumstances. They saw a lack of responsibility with the life, a sense of adventure, and an outward perception of "fun all the time." Possibly the environment is just so radically different and beautiful that they can hardly believe it to be true. Possibly they lament

not doing similar things in their younger days. Whatever the reason, I know from experience that ski-bums themselves derive a significant sense of pride from the envy of such people of wealth.

Foreign Labor

The most recent demographic layer in the common perception of Vail is a burgeoning legal and illegal immigrant labor population coming largely from Mexico. This "invisible work force" is vastly different than the roughly 14,000 employees temporarily working in Vail each year via an H-2B work visa, largely coming from South America, Europe, and Australia (Moore 2006). They most certainly did not come to the Rockies for its skiing or an escape from reality. Rather, they are here to better their own economic situation or that of friends or family in their home country. Male and female, younger and older, alone and with families, they often work two or three jobs and cram into small apartments and to save more of the money they earn. They are Vail's anomaly, one that receives mixed reviews locally and across the state.

While constituting the least-considered faction of Vail to outsiders, Latin laborers constitute the fastest growing demographic unit in the valley. As such, local people are being forced to take notice. The Hispanic population in Eagle County, where Vail is located, rose an estimated four percent between 2000 and 2006 to 27.5 percent, a total of roughly 13,500 (U. S. Census Bureau 2008). Such unskilled job opportunities are appealing because wages are higher here (roughly $8 to $10 an hour) than in most of the country and few of the positions require English-speaking

ability. The assumption (as employers will not admit to the practice of hiring illegals) is that business people willing to hire illegal labor feel that they will be rewarded with dedicated employees who will work hard and complain little.

Many business owners contend that their operations would not survive without "unauthorized migrant" labor. Although Vail Resorts claims not to have hired illegal laborers to its knowledge (National Public Radio 2004), other employers overlook the problem. "They come to work every day on time. They're never late," said one superintendent at a local golf course. "My guys have to be at work before dawn every day. They're more dependable than the white people I've hired to do this job. They're too lazy" (Barber 2001). Eva Landriff, an executive housekeeper for East West Resorts has echoed the same sentiment: "We will hire Anglos and we always interview whoever applies, but most of the time, the work is just simply too hard—they're not used to working that hard and they last a couple of weeks. I've had them in my office crying with their little fingers red and I've never had anybody from Mexico come crying because the work was too hard" (National Public Radio 2004).

An often-heard argument affirming the practice of hiring illegal labor contends that young Americans are no longer satisfied with low-status jobs, essentially that today's collegians are different than those of generations past. Resort businesses, in turn, are being forced to look elsewhere for employees.

The immigration issue, of course, has two sides. Representative Dave Schultheis of Colorado Springs is frustrated with the blind eye he considers local and national governments to be taking toward illegal migrations. In an interview he stated

that: “We need to put the squeeze on employers. The ski areas may not like that, the Mexican restaurants, some parts of agriculture. But it’s a myth that no one else will do the work” (Miller 2005). The state’s reliance on illegal immigrants has created a “slave wage” in his view that acts as a disincentive for U. S. citizens to take certain jobs

Vail’s large “invisible work force” is having no small effect on the Vail Valley. During the 1990s, Eagle County experienced a ninety percent increase in population, ranking it among the top ten counties in the country in that regard. Although not all of those moving into Eagle County are Hispanic, this increase does coincide with the spike in Hispanic employment throughout the valley. Twenty-three percent of Eagle’s population claimed Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, a number roughly twice the size of the population of Vail. Over fifteen percent of the county’s population is classified as foreign born and not holding U. S. citizenship (U. S. Census Bureau 2008). Just as the ski-bum has been an afterthought and effectively priced out of the town of Vail, most Latinos do not reside within Vail itself. Only 6.2 percent of the town’s population claims Hispanic affiliation. In contrast, at Eagle (roughly twenty-five miles west of Vail), the population has increased 41% from 2000 to 2005, and 17.2 percent of its residents claim to be Hispanic (U. S. Census Bureau 2008).

The effects of the Latin demographic surge are widespread. Creating affordable housing in a nearly developed-out valley is a major issue, and so is water availability. Cultural implications are equally challenging. For some residents,

especially those who have seen the birth and evolution of Vail over the past forty years, the changing face of their community is difficult to swallow. People in this new demographic live differently, speak a different language, and are not there for the skiing. An extreme view was expressed by Mike McGarry, who lives in Aspen and is a spokesman for the Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform: "Our alpine culture is not being replenished with the kinds of people that made this place the way it was and the way it needs to continue to be. They're not interested in that" (National Public Radio 2004).

In one sense Vail was created with a very specific clientele in mind. On the other hand, the intrinsic nature of the place, having some degree of isolation, its mountains beckoning recreation and adventure, have worked, as Zelinsky put forward, to draw people with a commonality.

The Beneficial and the Injurious

Will places like Vail and Aspen, with their ever-increasing diversities of population and gravitations toward a placeless, large corporation-type environment, trade their original identity for something less definitive? This is a fundamental question for any student of sense of place. Geographer Edward Relph has written that geographical adaptability is an ancient human ability, that "as a taught skill . . . has always aimed to grasp both what is good and what is bad in places, [and] then to argue critically for changes that are just and enduring, yet responsive to diverse environments and cultures" (1997, 209). This particular approach toward place

seems to me an appropriate direction for examining the personality of Vail. I assert this because Vail tends to generate one of two polar reactions from visitors. For some, it really is that place of self-actualization, where the environment brings one to life and conveys the sentiment that paradise has been found. For others, Vail is a farcical enclave of individuals running from, or out-of-touch with, reality. Quoting Relph again, this latter emotional response to the landscape may be explained as a sense of "placelessness" (Relph 1976). Certainly Vail exhibits both positive and negative qualities. Several recent studies of pleasuring places have highlighted only their ills, focusing heavily on environmental abominations or the trend toward globalization. Any attempt at painting an accurate picture of Vail must acknowledge and consider both positions, but not end there. To simply gush over it as heaven on earth or to only deride it for its shortcomings would be an act of negligence. Vail is not unique in this respect, yet so much attention has been given to it and other pleasuring places that oversimplifications abound.

Although Vail has always been a ski town and resort destination, its culture has changed from earlier days. Residents who have spanned the town's history recall a less complex place where skiing, and not its ancillary activities, drove the culture. In the 1960s, for example, it was a place where "everyone in the community skied, and everyone skied just about every day" (Cowan 2002, 264). Today, Vail has developed into a mega-resort, growing itself and also driving the growth of many surrounding communities. These circumstances have led to cultural and economic diversification. Unimaginable in 1948 or 1963, the valley today is generously

populated with residents who have never even been on Vail Mountain or who ski no more than the average American. A sampling on any given day would find the majority of skiers to be visitors or resort employees. This and the aforementioned fact that so few of Vail's homeowners are full-time residents saddens many long-time denizens of the area. Vail is still one of the truly great places to ski in all North America. Yet, with each passing year, it becomes a little more "resort" and less ski town. Early leaders always envisioned this transition, thinking that the resort would attract visitors and their money no matter what the season. Now it has come to pass. Vail incorporated independently in 1966 and now has many of the services and headaches of any American town.

As pleasuring places have bloomed in popularity, their individual character has become increasingly apparent. Some have consciously strived to deemphasize size for quality or cultural cohesiveness, employing and holding fast to a vision set early on. Vail is somewhat different. Its direction was set during the boom of the 1970s and 1980s when the profit motive and the desires of wealthy residents were allowed to steer many cultural decisions. As previously detailed, success drove property values beyond what was affordable by many local businesses and residents. This did not create a crisis, however, because more land was available for such uses farther down valley. Vail resorts and the town proper were thereby freed from acting with a vision of unified community development. By ignoring employee housing during this time, Vail was greatly homogenized demographically. "We didn't do a very good job over the years of dealing with affordable housing," Vail town manager

Bob McLaurin said in 2000, “and as land values force people downvalley, it began to erode the sense of community” (Clifford 2000).

In regard to Relph’s discussion of sense of place, Vail’s evolution away from the fanciful image of the quaint, classic American ski town has been asserted to be complete, lamentable, and culturally detrimental (Clifford 2002). Many journalists have echoed this sentiment. Although I agree that such assertions have validity, I also feel (stemming from my time as a resident there) that they are too absolute. By focusing heavily on negativity in order to win over their audience, such writers sacrifice accuracy in description. Wishing to gain a more evenhanded understanding of Vail the rest of this chapter will focus on the area’s personality. I will note both positive and negative attributes inherent in pleasuring places and then try to explain the contradictions. The negative aspects of the Vail mentality, touched upon earlier in the discussion of wealthy full- and part-time residents, center upon a tendency towards self-absorption. This is a predictable outcome, given that people go there with the paramount and overt goal of self-enjoyment. I also contend, however, that to its credit, Vail continues to retain an overarching vitality and a spirit that somehow persists amid constant change and transformation.

As a side note, when analyzing Vail as a type of voluntary culture I am intrigued by the question posed by Wilbur Zelinsky about such places: “whether the implied distinctiveness of the migrant’s preference pattern resides in his intrinsic personality or derives from the act of moving and the impact of novel surroundings, or from both” (Zelinsky 1974, 163)? When considering the characteristics (both

beneficial and detrimental) of Vail's culture, are these the consequence of individuals of like mind and values gravitating to share a common place, or does the environment (in the greater sense of the word) encourage their occurrence? If one aspect is more responsible than the other I cannot say (doubtless anyone could), but I feel confident in asserting that both are at play to some degree. Remember that Zelinsky noted the self-selecting nature of pleasuring places. This self-fulfilling trend, begun in Vail's early days as a destination for the adventuresome, is still working to determine its cultural makeup.

The phenomenon of land shaping man is visible throughout volunteer culture regions, regardless of their orientation. One need only consider the college town or the retirement community as examples. Moreover, other people have argued that this shaping force is at work universally. The British writer Lawrence Durrell once argued, for example, that: "I believe you could exterminate the French at one blow and resettle the country with Tartars, and within two generations discover to your astonishment that the national characteristics were back at norm–the restless metaphysical curiosity, the tenderness for good living and the passionate individualism: even though their noses were flat. This is the invisible constant in a place . . ." (Durrell 1969, 157). Edward Relph has crystallized this idea nicely, saying ". . . human beings are expressions of their landscape . . . . In short, the spirit of a place lies in its landscape" (Relph 1976, 30).

The Positive

As for a defense of what is good and noble about Vail culture, journalist Jay Cowan may have stated it best in a 2002 article for *Ski Magazine*. He contended that the incredible wealth of many in the Vail Valley, the astronomical real estate prices, the success of Vail Resorts, and the area's disproportional tendency toward catering to its "gilded clientele" have created in the collective mind of the general population a "tendency over the years to disregard Vail as a real community. It's easy to dismiss the place as Disney on snow, a purpose-built resort with no *there*, there" (Cowan 2002, 264). The common perception of Vail, unfortunately, becomes the product of short-term visits where guests see only the glossy and the commercial, that is, the highly contrived and calculated image created by its designers and marketers. Additionally, I would argue that a common sentiment of segregation, snobbery, or jealousy by outsiders toward those of higher economic status fuels this perception. To some observers the lives of Vail's wealthy clientele smack of elitism and create an awareness of being outside of an inner ring that they at once despise and envy.

Place perception is tricky business, since why and how individuals derive their particular images of places are as complex as the brain itself. Whatever the origin of such ideas, the reality is that the general perception of a place is (in many ways) more important than its reality. A self-fulfilling prophecy is involved whereby decisions made on the basis of an image will help that image become true. But what is the true situation for Vail? Is it the perception of Cowan when he exhorted his ski-enthusiast readership not to "dismiss the true soul of this place" (Cowan 2002, 264),

implying that something real and important is alive in Vail's culture? My experience living there affirms this belief that substance exists behind the glitter.

The laudable aspects of Vail's culture continue to center on the elements that first made it an icon among resort destinations: its inherent ability to inspire, awaken, and rejuvenate an individual's soul. The out-of-doors orientation of the area, and the high priority placed on physical activity and adventure foster many positive attributes in people. Yet, more is at work. As discussed earlier, Vail's physical location deep in the Rockies, its architecture, and layout contribute to make this a singular and compelling place.

The positive effects of fresh air and sunshine to the human psyche are well documented, and so the simple, out-of-doors nature of the Vail Valley clearly contributes to its character. By this I mean that the time spent in the crisp mountain air produces a positive psychological response in most people, creating in them a sense of enjoyment, all the while, consciously or unconsciously, associating these feelings with this place. In addition, snowboarding and skiing in the winter and mountain biking in the summer generate an exhilaration and sense of freedom rare to modern adults entrenched in the working world. Although I do not want to be associated with environmental determinism, the influence of climate, weather, or simply just fresh air in the case of any montane or amphibious region (to use Zelinsky's terms) on culture and sense of place should be far from dismissible. As an individual makes the association between these sensations and this place, an affinity

and sense of wonder develops. The environment then shapes its inhabitants, and Vail becomes how they feel and respond to this place.

Throughout this study I have taken special care to avoid the word community in regards to the town of Vail or the Vail Valley as a whole. To go beyond the most general of definitions of community, past being merely a group people sharing a general locality, and to claim that Vail is a place where people have common interests or shared identity would stretch that word too far. Still, I have observed there a continual blossoming of small, temporary subcommunities that may look and function much like Vail as a whole did in its early years.

June Simonton has described Vail's first years in this way: "Rich, poor, or somewhere in between, Vail's first residents shared one common trait: they were all from somewhere else. No one could brag that his grandfather had owned the grocery store or the bank. Strangers in a new land, they formed strong attachments to one another and to the little village not yet on the Colorado map" (1987, 83). This still occurs every day in Vail. Because the vast majority of people residing in the valley originally came from somewhere else, cliques and estrangements within the demographic groups of wealthy resident, ski-bum, or immigrant laborer, are rare. Rather, what tends to happen is that these individuals--traditionally located in Vail for the primary purpose of seeking pleasure--enthusiastically social and eager to include any and all persons of like mind. In my experience and observation, these groups quickly begin to feel and act like small, intimate communities. Shared experience and dense, intimate living and work environments have their effect. Names or at least

faces soon become recognized by all, private details of their lives become public information, and people who have only known each other for a short time begin looking out for one another, sharing, and performing small acts of generosity that look and feel very much like community.

These small subcommunities are ever evolving, of course, because of the transient nature of valley inhabitants. With a people in a continual state of coming or going, the civic impact of these pockets is insignificant beyond perpetuating the culture of fast-paced, pleasure seekers. The motivations of these groups are largely personal rather than outward directed. Their influence is lasting and significant only to each individual involved. The environment exists for their benefit and pleasure, a place to take from rather than contribute to.

Perhaps the most obviously recognizable and fascinating cultural feature of the Vail Valley is the spirit present in the landscape in spite of (or possibly because of) the fluidity of its population. Returning to the aforementioned idea of people being "expressions of their landscape," I believe that the natural and material culture of Vail and its environs molds, shapes, and creates a distinctive spirit in its inhabitants. Although one can argue for the existence of such an influence in many places, the character of, say, the American Midwest or the South developed and galvanized through relatively long periods of time. Given this observation, it might seem logical that the personality of Vail would be schizophrenic, elusive to definition, and in a constant state of flux. What I observe tells me otherwise. I do not mean that Vail functions like small-town America. It does not. It does, however, have an aura,

a strong like-mindedness that survives, even flourishes, almost in spite of itself. Visitors and seasonal residents pick up on its unique *modus operandi*, find it attractive, and adopt it nearly at once. No doubt, this is so because the people who migrate to Vail tend to have rugged, free-spirited dispositions.

Vail, continues to be a place where individuals come for a change and an adventure. To paraphrase what I have seen and heard while living there, at Vail time stops for a season or two, and those within its fold exist happily unaware of the rest of the world.

Several rare, if not unique, elements of how individuals understand Vail also influence the existing culture. With thoughts from Tuan's book *Space and Place* in mind, consider how individuals experiencing Vail Mountain directly via snowboard, skis, or snowshoes develop a greater knowledge and intimacy with it. Tuan has commented that "a tool or machine enlarges a person's world when he feels it to be a direct extension of his corporeal powers" (1977, 53). Compounding this are the emotions of freedom and exhilaration inherent in such activities. A snowboard, similar to his examples of a bicycle or sports car, "opens up a world of speed, air and movement" (Tuan 1977, 53). During their time on the mountain, skiers and snowboarders are free to explore at their own pace and their own whim, the act of choice leading to the development of preferences, opinions, and a sense of understanding and control. These feelings of interaction and relationship with place are powerful.

As previously mentioned, the compact nature of Vail Village was designed for intimacy. Buildings constructed to human-scale and in close proximity to one another (before the addition of Lionshead to the west) allowed guests the chance to know this place easily. Within a residency of three days a person could have entered every shop in Vail Village and have refreshed themselves in a large number of bistros, restaurants, and night clubs. In this way the Vail experience differs drastically from, say, a visit to the island of Manhattan or Los Angeles, which visitors find overwhelming and where intimate knowledge, even over the period of many years, is not realistic.

The Negative

Among the many aspects of the Vail landscape and culture that are vulnerable to criticism, I already have mentioned placelessness (the other-directed nature of the resort) and how this works against a sense of regionality or community. I have also noted how a trend away from locally owned businesses is exacerbating this quality and the inherent cleavages among the valley's three major subcultures. These themes have been considered, in one way or another, with Vail in mind by other writers and scholars. Here I want to push beyond these points and address several other negative effects that pleasuring places and the pervading mentality prevalent within these places have on their inhabitants.

The pleasuring place is a byproduct of America's developing culture of consumption. Its emergence was fueled by the post-World War II generation that

enjoyed sizeable disposable incomes and great amounts of free time. Viewed as places of retreat, especially for those disenchanted with urban life, pleasuring places blossomed in areas of natural beauty or faultless climate. The attitudes developed or fleshed out by individual migrants to such places, however, sometimes fall short of admirable.

The overriding reason to relocate to any pleasuring place, Vail included, is "separation-driven." Just as geographer James Vance, Jr. observed in "California and the Search for the Ideal," many Vail migrants act on an attitude, subconscious or otherwise, that has "accepted that 'individual rights' of self-actualization may be asserted largely in disregard of social concerns" (1972, 206). Vail has thus become a tangible example of changing American values.

Vance's observations on twentieth-century migration to the American Far West have obvious parallels with Colorado and Vail. This quest for "'the geography of the ideal' expressed in social detachment and the cult of the wilderness" (1972, 185) has been discussed by others in academic circles, but I feel it has a direct relationship with pleasuring places. Sociologist Philip Rieff, in his work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, also saw a shift in American culture away from institutions that had shaped and then restrained people (1966). The culture of the therapeutic, Rieff wrote, acts in an opposite manner of our traditional culture, making our desires the defining aspects of our being. The pursuit of personal freedom and the emancipation of desire have, when linked with consumerism, more often than not left us disengaged and depressed. If this self-obsession wins out in society, he argued, we

would have not a culture, but rather an anticulture. This concept seems starkly relevant to Vail and returns us to the basic question of community. Does it exist in Vail? Many Vailites, and academics alike today, question that it does. The nature of the pleasuring place would seem to agree with Rieff's posture toward modern culture.

As previously stated, I have observed pockets of microcommunities within the Vail Valley where connections are made among individuals and senses of association and unity develop. Yet, the overriding nature of the place is toward isolation as individual pursuits produce an outcome of division. I find it interesting that a place based upon the common goal of leisure and inhabited largely by individuals adhering to that goal exhibits little social cohesion.

In a similar vein to Reiff's observations, *The New Pantagruel* editor Caleb Stegall has contested the nobility of the popular quest for individuality and personal liberation. His argument is that this pursuit has left us "a confused assortment of individuals cut off from family, community, and every other meaningful connection" (Stegall 2004, 75). Whereas he sees this condition to be widespread, certainly his words are not a giant leap from the criticisms heaped upon Vail by academicians in the past. Inherent in the phrase "pleasuring place" itself is the ideal of personal liberation and self-satisfaction. In fact, I see the attitude of the pleasuring place crystallized in Stegall's characterization of "the mindset of individualists" as "consumption over charity . . . license over self-control . . . freedom without responsibility" (Stegall 2004, 77). Humans have the capacity to corrupt any good

thing, in this case allowing the morally neutral elements of a place to work toward the degradation of society.

Living in Vail can become one's identity. Nature and recreation can become a sort of idol, to the hazard of community and responsibility. We must understand that it is the attitudes and forces of modernity that are creating pleasuring places such as Vail. They are only constructs, outcomes of liberating and yet sometimes "corrosive features" such as mobility in the present age (Stegall 2004, 76). Individuals do not necessarily come to Vail as misanthropes. Their motives for relocation actually can seem innocent enough. The consequence of their migration, however, as Reiff and Stegall argue, can be one that is detrimental to both civil society and the individual. Stegall has appealed to a different notion of pleasure: "The good human life does not end with individual liberty, but proceeds on to responsibility" (Stegall 2004, 78).

Who is In and Who is Out?

"No one is from Vail" is an statement heard often throughout the valley. Although this remark obviously is not true, its meaning is not lost on the observer. Truly, it can be a challenge to actually find someone who was born and raised in the Vail area. Several important cultural implications derive from this fact. For one, a near absence of natives convolutes established thinking toward the notions of insider and outsider. Can anyone in Vail really be an insider? Or does the "other-directed" nature of pleasuring places serve to make the town open to all, blurring the line and in some strange way making everyone an insider? The valley is small (approximately

thirty miles in length), and so are its individual communities. With only a little effort it is easy to develop a sense of familiarity and fluency.

My own experience in Vail included the feeling of straddling a line between legitimate and counterfeit. I had worked on Beaver Creek Mountain for a ski season, labored behind the scenes as a ski-lift operator, walked the village streets day after day, developed a personal relationship with many of the shop employees, and snowboarded nearly every inch of the mountain's terrain. On the one hand this collective experience developed in me a feeling that this was my mountain. My sense of place toward Vail steadily grew keener, and I ultimately felt a real sense of ownership, understanding, and pride. After all, Vail consistently ranks among the best ski resorts in North America and it is natural for individuals to want to be a part of something so successful and enviable. I believe these feelings to be common among many Vail inhabitants, even temporary ones. Still, my positive feelings were muted every afternoon when I took a bus down from pristine Beaver Creek to the bare earth of its employee parking lot. The gated community of Beaver Creek contains many multimillion dollar second-homes on its mountainsides. These homes, I realized, were ones I would never enter, owned by people I would never meet unless I was unknowingly assisting them onto a chairlift. One wonders, with a population largely consisting of temporary employees and second-home owners, who really can feel native?

The answer to who is an "insider" and who is an "outsider" in Vail is that most people are neither. Vail welcomes and seems to impart (as was the intention of

its founders) some sense of insiderness to all who interact with its infrastructure. Tourists, through skiing and snowboarding, connect with the natural landscape. The relative ease by which pedestrians move through Vail Village (although enlarged by the Lionshead development, accessible by foot or public bus) also provides enough direct experience to develop this feeling of being "inside." Further complicating the issue is that affluent local people and tourists, using their monetary resources, can open some experiential doors (e.g. restaurants, special events) that others cannot, thus putting another spin on just who is in and who is out. In response, ski-bums find alternate entertainment, gathering in rented apartments, public houses, and inexpensive restaurants. Such happenings have their own personality, and the argument can be made that they are just as local as those of the rich.

Volunteer culture regions are transient places, providing for many people an element of personal and spiritual search. Vail attracts visitors and residents who are running away from things in their lives, looking to nature and a change in life-style to provide some type of inner peace. The result is a heady group of people who are active physically and socially, hoping to find what they believe exists in Vail or what Vail can bring out from within themselves.

On the surface, it would seem that Vail has historically attracted individuals with nothing in common. In some cases, this is absolutely true. Almost paradoxically, however, Vail also is most certainly a voluntary culture region in which "self-selected groups of like-minded people" have created a place having "a high degree of cultural coherence" (Gumprecht 2003, 55).

Conclusion

Chapter Five

In an attempt to define Vail--how it behaves or feels as a cultural entity--it is easy and obvious to elaborate on its many distinctive qualities. For certain, there are few places like it. For a total of eighteen months, Vail was my home and the scene of many happy memories. Sentimentality aside, however, Vail is also a phenomenon of interest for its oddity and its significance as a cultural marker. Something unique and exciting exists in Vail. Its energy and life are tangible, and with time, the magnificent setting and quality of life there are capable of reaching even the most reluctant visitor. Whether derived from the environment, the commonality shared by residents, or combination of the two, Vail's confident personality is salient to the beholder.

The motivations for this study were many. For one, places such as Vail, while not lacking in publicity, rarely are given a voice from the inside. Good regional studies, I feel, should act as a representative for those people and places that might otherwise be forced to exist under the descriptions placed upon them by outsiders. Personally, Vail offered a time and place for me to stretch my identity as well as to enjoy and experience life in a way that I contend is not readily possible in most of traditional culture. The market for such pleasuring places in contemporary society is obvious. My inspiration to contribute to this literature was fortified by the tendency within academia to focus heavily on the negative. Vail especially has proven an easy target for those addressing issues related to the environment and corporate America.

Perhaps it requires the perspective of someone from the inside to understand its humanity.

The growth of pleasuring places in modern American culture has been rapid and needs to be better understood. Wilbur Zelinsky's hypothesis about volunteer culture has proven accurate (1973). Today, regions centered less on traditional foundations and more on a common interest, goal, or world view are prevalent in many countries. Despite such growth, however, these places have failed to capture the imagination of academicians. This attitude must and will change, because voluntary culture is neither a flash in the pan nor a trivial collection of individuals. The popularity of Vail, in fact, makes one wonder if the desire or need for such places has always existed or if pleasuring places are the product of a culture of consumption.

My experience in Vail persuades me that pleasuring places do have an important role in society. Early Vailites, whether ski enthusiasts or others, routinely described themselves as escapees from a modern life that was almost too fast and the motivations not totally fulfilling. Skiing and the Rocky Mountains were healing agents for those individuals and the resort evolved from there.

Personally, the lifestyle, natural beauty, and detached, inwardly focused attitude of Vail were positives at a certain stage of my life. I found joy and inspiration there and could argue that my sojourn positively shaped what I now deem to be important. Could I have reaped the same benefits in a more traditional community, one less geared toward recreation and enjoyment? That is a difficult question, but the act of retreating in order to find inspiration or clarity has a long

tradition. Thoreau borrowed an ax and headed off for Walden Pond because he was convinced it was necessary for him to actively engage in "the experiment of living." While Vailites do not align themselves with his attitudes toward simplicity, a commonality in spirit exists among seekers no matter the age.

The potential danger of retreat, of course, is self-obsession. The quest for self-actualization can lead to isolation and the destruction of traditional institutions that unite individuals, leaving what some have described as an anticulture. Even seemingly innocuous quests to become a better skier, to hike every 14er mountain, or to escape the evils of home can themselves become insidious to the self and to culture at large. Vail, Colorado, and the West in general are places that currently enjoy extremely positive associations. Residents of these places, are largely delighted to find their identities in them. Identities are tricky things, however, and that which gives meaning for a while may eventually become just another thing that fails to satisfy.

While wishing to affirm the superb qualities of Vail, I also have attempted to demonstrate that its ills are better treated not with snobbery, but with the realization that this place merely reflects trends and values of the time in which it exists. Moving beyond the benefits and evils of voluntary culture regions, future studies need to concentrate on meanings and impacts. Are voluntary culture regions in the process of becoming the norm in this country or are they merely a temporary step in the evolution of our general culture? Pleasuring places are extremely vulnerable to

changes in the economy. How would dramatic changes in transportation costs or unemployment rates alter their future?

Vail is just one of many remarkable stories that could be told about any voluntary culture region. Additional case studies would be interesting and valuable contributions to the better understanding of modern society. Comparing pleasuring places with new Bohemias, college towns, and other subfields of voluntary culture outlined by Zelinsky would be especially valuable through multiple vantage points and juxtaposition. They are natural subjects for regional and cultural geographers, and the possibilities are rich, ever expanding, and ready for the taking.

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