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The Ski Pioneer – Walter W. Haensli

About five months ago I received an email from a school friend in Switzerland with an obituary of one "Walter W. Haensli – Ski Pioneer on both sides of the equator." This message was read and filed.

Mid-August this year my wife and I were invited to join a friend for a couple of days skiing at Ruapehu. We stayed at the Ruapehu Ski Club hut. Upon walking into the hut lounge, I felt like I was stepping into a Swiss ski hut. A cowbell was hanging off the rafters, a Steinbock (ibex) trophy posed above the fireplace, a collection of Swiss ski resort badges was framed and hanging on the wall and there was plenty of Swiss influence on the very full trophy shelf.

I found this most interesting and thought the story behind it was worth sharing with you.

Here are a few words about this remarkable man:

Walter Haensli was born in Klosters CH in 1921. Ski sport and ski tourism were at their infancies. Although Walter's father was a very keen skier he never believed one could make a living out of it. In typical Swiss tradition he wanted Walter to learn the painting trade and start working in the family business.

As luck would have it, Walter ran third in the world famous Lauberhorn downhill race in the late forties. After his success in this event and with the help of the founder of the Lauberhorn downhill race, Walter ended up as trainer of the USA Olympic ladies skiing team leading up to the 1948 Olympic Games. One



Der Vater des Skisports in Neuseeland: Walter W. Haensli in den fünfziger Jahren.

of his team members ended up with a gold and silver medal and Walter was offered a paid job as trainer of the USA youth development squad. He also became a very famous and sought after ski instructor with the US high society. A thank you letter from the then US president Gerald Ford, hung in Walter's office for the rest of his days. It was during this time that Walter coached a Kiwi by the name of Brian Todd who asked him to come to New Zealand and help him establish a ski field operation on Mt Ruapehu. This all made good sense as it was going to be in the US off season. Walter came to New Zealand in 1948. His early task was to train ski instructors and open a ski school, ski hire centre and shop.

Frustrated with the lack of progress made with the Park Board and government departments, he founded RAL (Ruapehu Alpine Lifts) together with Brian Todd - the money man. In 1954 the first chairlift and T bar was opened and Sir Edmund Hillary was the honorary guest for this event. A program was set up in the early days by Walter to bring out "quality instructors" from Walter's home town, and this tradition is still alive with the RSC supporting instructors coming from Davos/Klosters to work on the mountain.

The Ruapehu Ski Club staged a downhill race in 1951 to honor Walter's achievements on the field. This race has been held annually and this year it was held on the 20th August on the Ruapehu slopes with a Memorial Lantern Run on Sunday 21 from the Knoll Ridge café to the RSC hut at 7pm.

Walter broke his ties with NZ, went home and became instrumental in developing the first metal ski in conjunction with an American aeronautical engineer by the name of Howard Head. Guess what? The ski brand HEAD was born and proved to be very successful indeed and spelled the end of the laminated wooden ski era.

Walter never became as rich as he was famous, but he did leave a huge impact on the skiing industry on both sides of the Equator.

Walter passed away early this year at the grand old age of 94 but his legend will live on in Switzerland and here in New Zealand.

I enjoyed skiing down that black run called "Haensli's slope" at Ruapehu on a stunner of a day.
Rest in peace Walter.

Text and photos by Hans Vetsch,
President Swiss Society of New Zealand



This new chairlift recently replaced Haensli's 1954 one!!!