

THE COUNT OF SUN VALLEY



The cross-continental friendship between an Austrian Nazi nobleman and a millionaire New Yorker brought Sun Valley to life, but a mere six years later their alliance crumbled on the muddy battlefields of World War II.

Jennifer Tuohy reveals the untold story of Count Felix Schaffgotsch, the man who discovered Sun Valley.

One winter morning in 1936, Marvin Obenchain strapped on a pair of large wooden skis and made his way from his home on the corner of Sixth and Main in Ketchum, Idaho to the town's post office. There the 21-year-old helped the mail carrier load his heavy parcels and drive them to the depot to wait for the train. Winter was a quiet time in Ketchum, employment was scarce and Obenchain hoped the train, arriving after an eight day hiatus, would bring with it some opportunity. As the engine pulled into town, disrupting the silent white landscape, Obenchain watched a tall young man step down into the deep snow. While he didn't know it then, opportunity had indeed arrived—both for him and the small mining town he called home.

"He asked the depot agent if he could call a taxi," recalled Obenchain in a three-page memoir he wrote before his death in 2005. "The agent said there's no such thing but the mail carrier would probably give him a ride to town." Obenchain loaded the man's luggage, which he noted included some very unusual-looking skis. "As we drove toward town he was really looking at the surroundings," he said.

Leaving the stranger and his bags at the town's only hotel, the Bald Mountain Inn & Hot Springs, Obenchain went home wondering why he had come here. The next day the man asked if anyone could go with him on skis to tour the area. Obenchain obliged. "The first morning we climbed the back side of what became Dollar Mountain," he wrote. "He looked the area over, and we skied down across Elk Horn and up the mountain toward East Fork. ... The next morning we hiked on the hot water line to Guyer Hot Springs and skied the area below Dollar Lake.

"Then it was back to the top of Dollar Mountain before sun up [to] watch where the first rays hit the valley or field below. After a few mornings of doing that we skied down and as we crossed Trail Creek he asked me to find a good sized piece of tree, which I carried out into the field. It was placed where he thought was where the first rays of sun hit each morning."

The man never told Obenchain what he had in mind, but he found out later that the tree marked the location of the foundations of Sun Valley Lodge. The man was Count Felix Schaffgotsch. Tales of his first visit to Ketchum vary wildly, depending on the age and perspective of the teller, but one thing is certain: the count arrived in Ketchum on January 16, 1936, and changed the sleepy little town forever.

Born in Enns, Austria, on February 16, 1904, Schaffgotsch was descended from the 17th-century Bohemian Count John Ernest Schaffgotsche. He was part of the last generation of the Bohemian Schaffgotsche family, one of the oldest noble Silesian families, Silesia was a historical region of Central Europe, located mainly in Poland. Schaffgotsch's parents, Franz de Paula and Aglae Witt gt von Dorring, were part of the Lower Austrian line of the family, the second wealthiest in the region before World War I. After World War II, most members of the ethnic German Schaffgotsch family were expelled from their homes in Austria.

Schaffgotsch grew up in Altmünster, a small market town in Upper Austria. It was here, probably in the 1920s, he first encountered Averell Harriman. The millionaire playboy from America rented a hunting cottage from the Schaffgotschs to shoot chamois—a goat-antelope species native to mountains in Europe.

By 1930, the Schaffgotschs were either in need of some distraction for their exuberant second son or he had determined to strike out on his own. Either way, they called upon their wealthy American acquaintance to find the 26-year-old count some gainful employment. On December 3, Schaffgotsch sailed into New York on the S.S. Majestic from Southampton, England. The passenger list from that voyage lists his occupation as "nil," but he quickly became ensconced as a clerk at the private banking firm of Brown Brothers Harriman in Manhattan.

It's easy to picture Harriman in the gentlemanly confines of a private bank relaxing with a brandy and cigar in hand, listening to the enthusiastic count tell tales of the fantastic sport of skiing that was sweeping the Alps. Harriman, who never set foot on skis until he built Sun Valley, was first and foremost a businessman. Newly installed as chairman of Union Pacific Railroad, his interest was piqued by the dashing count's



Felix Schaffgotsch and Averell Harriman stand in front of Sun Valley Lodge in 1936.

stories of railroads that ran special ski trains, transporting passengers from the English Channel to Austria's ski towns. Harriman was intrigued enough to have Union Pacific commission a report on the viability of such an industry in the United States.

Through an analysis of the increased sales in ski merchandise from department stores, the report determined that there was a clear appetite for skiing among Americans. However, people weren't skiing in America. In the 1934-35 winter the report found 8,600 Americans had traveled to Europe to ski, in part because "snow conditions, weather conditions, terrain, and hotel accommodations are generally unsatisfactory at practically all existing American resorts." It went on to conclude that "it is practically impossible to find first class skiing conditions at any existing winter resort in the U.S."

Harriman was sold. His first big venture as chairman of America's largest rail company was to be building the country a world-class ski resort. But first he had to determine where to put it. Logically, he turned to the man who had told him of the wonders of the ski industry in Austria.

By all accounts, Schaffgotsch was a dashing, handsome and charming man. Fashion photographer Toni Frissell wrote in her memoirs of a chance encounter with the count while skiing in the Alps. "Good morning," the young Austrian said from his prone position on top of me," she wrote. "I was so fascinated watching your skiing gyrations that I forgot to get out of your way. You could have killed us both. My name is Count Felix Schaffgotsch."

U.S. Forest Service Recreational Supervisor Alf Engen, who toured Schaffgotsch through the Wasatch Mountains in Utah, recalled him as "very personable. Arrogant, or very, I would say, brilliant, yes. And he was a count. ... He wore his title well."

That he was an impressive man is clear, but his talents as a skier were less so. Contemporary newspaper reports described him as a "famed international sportsman," "an expert skier" and "one of the greatest known ski riders among his people." None of that was true. Harriman spelled it out in an oral history recorded by The Community Library in Ketchum in 1983. "I employed Count Felix Schaffgotsch, who was an Austrian, not so expert in skiing, but he'd had a lot to do with development of resorts in Austria."

Friedl Pfeifer, who took over the ski school at Sun Valley in 1938, posited in his autobiography *Nice Goin'*, that Harriman got Felix confused with his younger brother, Count Friedrich, an experienced ski instructor at St. Anton (the famous Austrian ski school where Pfeifer trained). "Somehow the wires got crossed," he wrote. "Instead of the very qualified Count Friedrich, Harriman acquired the very sociable Count Felix." However, Harriman knew Felix from his time at Brown Brothers Harriman, and it is probable he got the brother he wanted. Harriman's oft-repeated reasoning behind the idea for Sun Valley was that "I found my banker-friends went off skiing in the wintertime to places like St. Moritz, and in Austria in the mountains." Felix

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Schaffgotsch was certainly one of those banker-friends.

However it came about, the now 31-year-old count—who had returned to Austria following his spell in private banking—left his home in Altmünster for Harriman once again, arriving in New York on November 23, 1935. From New York he journeyed to Union Pacific Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, where he began a six-week, 7,000-mile odyssey, zigzagging across the mountains of the western United States. He carried with him a mandate from Harriman to find “A place close to Union Pacific tracks but far enough from a city to prevent it being overrun by weekend skiers arriving in their automobiles. ... A valley with sun pouring in, a dry climate with not too much snow, and yet enough for skiing. ...” Of course it had to be powder snow and “not too wet or too much of it.”



Schaffgotsch, fourth from right, stands with the ski school he created, including Hans Hauser, Alfred Dingl, Franz Epp, Roland Cossman, Joseph Schwenighofer and Sepp Benediktör.

The first stop was Tacoma, Washington. Arriving at Mount Rainier’s Paradise Lodge on December 2, Schaffgotsch spent two days skiing before traveling south to Portland to inspect Mount Hood. In typical Portland style, it rained. A lot. So much so that the Count never even left his car. “It was beautiful,” he said of Portland. “But nowhere was there any snow except slush.”

Next he traveled inland to Yosemite National Park in California, where his friend Hannes Schroll was in charge of the ski school. But the weekend crowds pouring in from the nearby cities, which had blighted Mount Rainier for the count, were equally prevalent in Yosemite. “You can’t take the mountain from the people,” he said to Schroll. And off he went to explore the

San Bernardino Mountains in Southern California, spending Christmas in Los Angeles. Next it was north to Lake Tahoe on the California-Nevada border, where he determined the non-stop blizzards would keep skiers indoors. Then over to Reno, Nevada, across the desert to Utah’s Zion National Park and up to Cedar City (not enough snow). From southern Utah, he journeyed to central Colorado where he explored Rocky Mountain National Park near Denver, Berthoud Pass (too cold and windy), Steamboat Springs (too high) and Aspen (too many trees).

So, Schaffgotsch returned to Utah empty-handed, and set out hopefully to investigate the mountain towns around Salt Lake City, including Brighton and Alta (too close to Salt Lake City), Ogden Canyon, the Caho Region and the Uinta Mountains on the Utah-Wyoming border. On New Year’s Day 1936, he wrote to Harriman from Salt Lake’s Hotel Utah, “After I have seen all the developed resorts, as Rainier, Hood, Yosemite, and Lake Arrowhead, I was a bit nervous that I would not be able to find the right place, because all these resorts are not offering much in the way of skiing. But I certainly am confident now, since I have seen this country here, to find you a perfect spot, which will compare very favorably to all the resorts we have in Switzerland and Austria.”

But by January the perfect spot still eluded him, and he headed dispiritedly to the last state on his list, Idaho. William Hynes, a Union Pacific freight agent (who said later he hadn’t known “a damn thing about what the hell a ski resort was”), met the count in Pocatello. They traveled to Victor and took a sleigh through Teton Pass to see Jackson Hole in Wyoming. The count was thrilled with what he saw. “Up there are the best snow conditions I have seen in all my life,” he said to Harriman. Sadly for Wyoming, the state refused to keep the pass open in winter, and any other approach was too far from a Union Pacific railroad.

After a brief trip to Spence, Idaho, the count parted ways with Hynes and prepared to return East, failed in his quest. But his parting words to Hynes—“If you find anything, let me know”—stayed with the weary railroad man. Retreating to the Locker Club in Boise for a drink with his friend Joe Stemmer, director of Idaho’s Highways Department, Hynes told the tale of his adventures with the Austrian. Stemmer considered for a moment and then said, “Did you look in the Hailey and Ketchum area?” Hynes, who, according to Maury Klein’s *Union Pacific: Volume II, 1894-1969*, had only been to the area once, in the summertime, exclaimed, “By God no, I forgot.”

He immediately wired Schaffgotsch, who was at the Brown Palace in Denver, telling him to meet him in Shoshone. From there the district engineer of highways Matt Johnson attempted to get the travelers up to Ketchum by road. According to Dorice Taylor’s *Sun Valley*, as the trio descended Timmerman Hill into the Wood River Valley they skidded off the road into a snowdrift. An hour later, as they followed the plow that pulled them out into the southern Wood River Valley, the count’s disappointment was palpable. “This valley is too wide. Too wide,” he said.

Arriving in Hailey they were forced to wait out the storm for the night. A young girl, Roberta Brass, also waited in town, hoping to get back to her family’s ranch just east of Ketchum. The next morning, January 16, 1936, Roberta boarded a northbound bus. “There was a very good-looking gentleman sitting next to me,” Brass later recalled. He “had quite a foreign accent.”

Whether Schaffgotsch arrived by bus, as Roberta remembers, or train, as Obenchain recalls, the fact is he arrived and found what he was looking for. On his last day in Ketchum, returning from his explorations to wire Harriman the words

“A handsome and affable Graf, he was also a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi.”

—David Niven



Schaffgotsch, who was adept at charming Hollywood’s elite, escorts actress Madeleine Carol into the lodge, January 1936.

“You can’t take the mountain from the people.”

—Felix Schaffgotsch

“Place perfect,” he ran into Miss Brass once again. Sitting on a corral fence between her family’s ranch and the town of Ketchum, she watched the count ski up to her on his fancy, skinny skis. “I found just the place to put the Lodge,” he said. “This is the most beautiful valley I’ve been in and I’ve been to Canada, I’ve been to Colorado. This is it, this is where Union Pacific is going to put in a ski resort.” The valley he referred to was her family’s ranch. The look on Brass’s face was likely priceless, especially when the count continued on, “Next year at this time there will be a thousand people here.”

Eleven months later, on December 21, 1936, Sun Valley Lodge opened its doors.

He may have succeeded at Harriman’s request, but Schaffgotsch’s journeying days were far from over. Harriman immediately sent him back to Austria to recruit for Sun Valley’s first ski school. There he hand-picked Joseph “Sepp” Benediktör, Hans Hauser, Alfred Dingl, Roland Cossman, Franz Epp and Joe Schwenighofer. On the return journey Schaffgotsch met the British actor David Niven, who recalled the meeting in his autobiography *The Moon’s a Balloon*. “He was on his way to Sun Valley, Idaho, where, at the request of Averell Harriman, he had designed and built a new ski resort. A handsome and affable Graf, he was also a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi. He spent hours extolling the virtues of Hitler, sympathizing with his problems and enthusing over his plans.” Despite their political differences, Schaffgotsch and Niven struck up a close friendship. Niven promised to come visit the count at his new resort and meet the fabled ski instructors, whom Schaffgotsch assured Niven were “all Nazis too.”

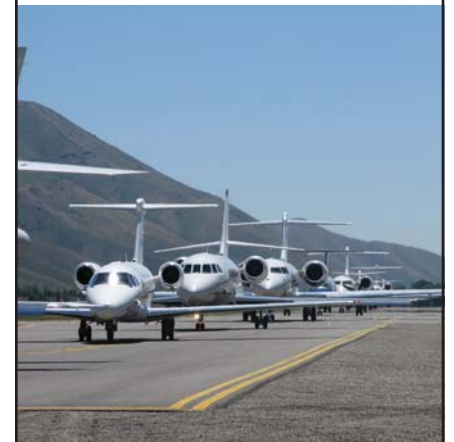
Harriman put this affinity with celebrities to good use, dispatching the affable count on a recruiting trip to Hollywood. This telegram, sent to Gary Cooper, went out to many a member of Hollywood’s royalty: “I have asked Count Schaffgotsch, the boy who discovered ‘Sun Valley,’ to get in touch with you while he is in Hollywood and tell you about recent developments at our new Idaho winter resort,” Harriman wrote.

Niven made good on his promise to Schaffgotsch, visiting Sun Valley the following winter. “The skiing was perfect and I had a wonderful six weeks. Felix had made a huge success of it,” wrote Niven. “Given half a chance he was still liable to lay down the law about *Lebensraum*, but he was a most agreeable companion.” This was late 1938, and as the world hurtled toward World War II, Schaffgotsch’s political propensities and that of his friend and boss, Averell Harriman, were on a collision course.

Having successfully launched America’s first destination ski resort, Harriman now turned his abundant energies and unlimited resources to pulling America into the war, despite the established view in Washington that any venture into Europe’s war could be disastrous and financially crippling. Harriman quickly insinuated himself into Roosevelt’s

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THE
COUNT
OF SUN VALLEY

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administration and landed a position that would lead to becoming ambassador to Great Britain in 1941. Winston Churchill said of him, "I believe he was the one most responsible for getting the Americans to support us during the war." The friendship between a U.S. ambassador and a Nazi Austrian count was destined to crumble.

Schaffgotsch worked at the resort for one more winter, 1938-39. His main duty was to manage the ski school. Wendolyn Holland wrote in *Sun Valley: An Extraordinary History* that his management style was somewhat abrasive, and he received a gentle reprimand from Harriman for grumbling that Proctor lift was misplaced and Marjorie Duchin had stolen the ski room from him for her clothing store. "Working with an organization is a new experience for you," Harriman wrote. "A certain subservience of individual ideas is essential for each in order to make a team win a football game."

But as Schaffgotsch prepared to return for Sun Valley's fourth season, the rest of the world went to war. On September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. This presented a dilemma for the Austrian count. If he returned to America he could see out the war in relative safety, but as an Austrian he would be under intense scrutiny and suspicion, and he might never be able to return home. However, if he returned to Austria now he would have no other option but to fight.

On the day war broke out between their two countries, Schaffgotsch called up his friend Niven, who faced a similar dilemma. Niven recalled the conversation in his autobiography, "Hello, enemy,' he said gaily, 'what are you going to do?' 'I'll go back, I suppose,' I said, very gloomily. Felix sounded very bright. 'I'm leaving the day after tomorrow. Let's go together.'"

The two spent their last week as civilians enjoying the considerable delights of a Europe not yet devastated by the war, spending their final night together in Rome. "Alone in a little bistro in Trastevere, we drank Vino di Frascati as though they were never going to make it anymore," wrote Niven. "Felix talked about the new ski lifts he was planning for Sun Valley, and I talked of the pictures I was going to make. A long silence enveloped us. We watched the newly awakened swifts

wheeling and darting and miraculously missing each other in the darker-blue sky. Suddenly, Felix slammed his glass down on the table and jumped to his feet. 'Let's say goodbye now,' he said almost angrily. I stood up. I think we both wept anyway. We embraced and parted quickly. A few hours later, Felix headed northeast for the Brenner Pass to join the S.S. and I headed northwest for the French border at Modane to join God knew what."

Niven assumes Schaffgotsch headed straight to fight for his country, but Averell Harriman's papers, housed at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., reveal a different story. A few weeks after he left Niven, the count sent entreaties from Italy to his boss hoping for a place at the resort that winter—perhaps preferring a ski school uniform to that of an SS officer. But he was no longer welcome. A telegram dated October 23, 1939, from Harriman to Schaffgotsch stated: "This winter's organization completed including [Don] Fraser and [Dick] Durrance therefore no position open. However, if you are coming over at your own expense glad [to] have you as our guest for a month at Sun Valley." That is the last record of any interaction between Schaffgotsch and the resort he helped to found.

In the final months of 1939, with little option—though based on his professed politics, not against his will—Schaffgotsch became a first lieutenant in the Florian Geyer division of the Waffen-SS, a cavalry outfit made up of ethnic Germans from outside Germany. On August 11, 1942, he was killed at Kurgannaja City, fighting on the Russian front line. He was 38. A few hundred miles away, while his "heralded discoverer" perished on a muddy battlefield, Averell Harriman arrived in Moscow, accompanying Winston Churchill to a conference with Joseph Stalin. Six months later the Russians decimated the German army at the Battle of Stalingrad, an event most historians agree led to the defeat of Hitler.

In December of the same year, far away from the death and destruction of World War II, the resort that the two friends founded closed its doors. The FBI arrested three of Schaffgotsch's treasured Austrian ski instructors—Hauser, Pfeifer and Sepp Froelich—and the ski lifts the Austrian was so proud of ground to a halt for four long years.

Today, the count is merely a footnote in the history of Sun Valley. And a hill just north of Baldy that once bore the name Schaffgotsch Mountain stands nameless. ❧

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