

# Aspen Daily News

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Preserving Aspen's unique history

Writer:

Chad Abraham

Byline:

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

A few months ago, when a man stopped by Aspen's Thrift Shop with items that belonged to his parents, a longtime employee realized that many of the donations should not be sold.

Old skis — including a very unusual single Head plank — hand-knitted sweaters, a traditional Bavarian dress, artwork and tap-dance shoes pointed to a decades-ago era of the town.

So the woman did what many thrift shop volunteers have done over the years and called the Aspen Historical Society.

“We really keep an eye out for things like that,” said Nancy Chromy, a longtime local and worker at the volunteer-run shop.

And the historical society is greatly appreciative of the Thrift Shop staff's alacrity to reach out, said the organization's archivist Anna Scott.

“I think it's very important,” she said. “We laugh because a lot of times people say, ‘We're on our way to the dump, and we thought of you.’”

Many times, people simply don't know where to take something that they no longer wish to own, leading them to the landfill, the Thrift Shop or, ideally, the historical society.

Of course, not every aged item ends up in the society's archives. A lot depends on how Aspen-centric something is, who it belonged to and other factors, Scott said.

“The person they go with makes the story,” she said. “They're the important thing, and it's a representation of those people.”

And this time, there proved to be a rich story behind the skis, clothes and shoes, and the society quickly arranged with the son to take possession of them.

The process, from cleaning out a storage space to the Thrift Shop's alertness and the historical society's detective work, shows how Aspen's past is preserved, sometimes a few phone calls at a time.

## **The ‘Mono Uhl’**

“My parents got here in 1953,” said Anton Uhl, the son of Gretl and Sepp, a beloved couple in Aspen's long history of colorful characters. “Aspen was in full swing. The rich and poor would ski together, live and eat together.

“There was no demarcation like there is today.”

Anton was born and raised here, recalling hopping on a train a mile outside of town and riding it to where Clark’s Market is now.

Life then, as now, revolved around the mountains, where Gretl ran her namesake restaurant at the current site of Bonnie’s on Aspen Mountain, and where she became renowned for her heavenly strudel, sausage dishes and other fare. Sepp was a ski instructor, as was Gretl, and he was also a dedicated inventor and painter.

One item that ended up in the historical society is something he called the “Mono Uhl.” It consists of two, second-generation Marker bindings on a wooden platform. The binding platform was then mounted on a single Head ski, marked by Sepp as “experimental” and denoting the year as 1968.

“It was kind of a disaster to ski on the thing,” said Anton, 59, who recently moved from the Emma area to Boston. “He did make a couple of short runs on it.

“The first thing that revealed itself is you wouldn’t come out of those bindings.”

The “Mono Uhl” and a few other incidents reveal just how passionate Sepp was about skiing. One summer, he affixed furniture wheels to the bottoms of a pair of skis, and the family headed up Independence Pass, Anton said.

They towed Sepp down the pass behind their car.

“We hardly got going and there were literally sparks flying,” he said. “He was always inventing stuff like that.”

Anton said he saw his father fall while skiing only once. His tumble was immediately followed by a blood-curdling scream: Sepp had broken his leg.

He received a plaster cast, and as soon as it was dry, “he was back skiing on one leg,” Anton said. “You couldn’t keep him off the mountain.”

As they prepared to move to the East Coast, Anton and his family cleaned out their storage space and headed into the Thrift Shop.

Among the items he had with him were his mother’s tap shoes and two pieces of paper with dance instructions.

When Gretl was growing up in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria, Germany, she secretly bought a pair of tap shoes and would sneak out for lessons, Anton said.

But her mother found them and, appalled, threw them into their wood-burning stove. Gretl never forgot, and in her 50s, “Mom bought herself some tap shoes,” Anton said. “There was no one to hold her back, and she took lessons. It gave her such joy.

“She finally had turned that sad story around.”

Her purple dirndl dress, a garment Gretl wore during her annual summertime garden parties, is also now in the society’s archives.

The Thrift Shop ladies (no men are allowed on staff) recognized right away the Uhl name and the importance of many of the items.

“They said this needs to be where people will see it,” Anton said. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

### **History, then and now**

The historical society’s Lisa Hancock, who is vice president and curator of collections, connected with Anton, and he signed a deed of gift that relinquished ownership to the nonprofit.

In this instance, the historical significance was easy to discern. Other times, the staff has to be patient as they wade through boxes of material, Scott said.

“It’s hard because sometimes some small little bit is actually very important,” she said. “We were looking in a photo album that somebody gave us. A lot of the photos were like, meh, and then as we’re pulling out the photos — we were seeing if they said anything on the back — we pulled out a ticket to the World’s Fair in 1893.”

That was the year residents sent the Aspen Silver Queen, an 18-foot-high Victorian statute, to Chicago for display at the fair.

“That little ticket has huge meaning to us,” Scott said.

Like the ticket, historic items are usually collecting dust for years before their importance becomes known.

The society recently took in letters, found in the Motherlode building, from young men bound for World War II that were sent to William Shaw, an Aspen judge.

“If you wanted to enlist, you had to show a birth certificate, and most people didn’t have birth certificates,” Scott said. “So they had to write to the judge to get proof that they were born in an area and get a birth certificate. That was neat.”

The society also keeps abreast of history-making news. In March, when two dispensaries sold legalized marijuana for the first time in Aspen, Scott and other staff members saw it as a historic moment.

“It’s state history and marks local history and United States history,” she said.

Staff took photos and obtained some items from Silverpeak Apothecary, including a T-shirt, a grinder, a menu and some receipts from their initial sales.

On the other end of the business spectrum, Scott said she hopes people behind firms that close for good will also keep the historical society in mind. “We may want something of theirs” to mark its place in Aspen’s timeline, she said.

As evidenced by the eagle-eyed ladies at the Thrift Shop, “We rely a lot on the community’s help to recognize that items should come to us,” Scott said.

Anton Uhl said that while his parents had a strong work ethic, they knew enough to knock off their labors and “enjoy this beautiful valley.” If there was no work to be done, picnics in Aspen’s meadows were common.

“They were hard workers, but they were not crazy,” he said. “They knew how to enjoy their life.”

Through the historical society and its help from the Thrift Shop and others in the community, future generations will now be able to enjoy a glimpse of their life as well.

*chad@aspendailynews.com*

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Photo Caption:

Anna Scott, archivist at the Aspen Historical Society, stands with skis that once belonged to Gretl and Sepp Uhl. Donated by their son, Anton, the one on the right was Sepp's invention, known in its day as the "Mono Uhl."

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