

History of Sandia Peak



Robert J. Nordhaus was the driving force responsible for the creation and development of Sandia Peak Ski Area and the Sandia Peak Tramway. It was his vision and persistence that made it possible to develop the first ski area in New Mexico and the creation of the world's longest tramway.



Bob was born in Las Vegas, New Mexico Territory in 1909 and as a child, moved with his family to Albuquerque in 1912. His father, Max Nordhaus, was a pioneer in the New Mexico mercantile business, running the Charles Ilfeld Company after it moved its headquarters to Albuquerque. Bob became familiar with the Sandias while growing up in downtown Albuquerque and graduating from Albuquerque High School.

The sport of skiing started slowly in the early 1930s in NM with a few hardy souls driving as far as they could on the primitive dirt road on the east side of the mountains, and then hiking up from there. They would ski down through the trees wherever they could.

After graduating from Yale Law School in 1935, Bob returned to Albuquerque to practice law and help run the Ilfeld Company. He had experienced a little skiing while back east, and took it up in earnest upon his return. In 1935, he organized the Albuquerque Ski Club. The Ski Club became the hub of social activities on and off the slopes for years to come and aided the development of La Madera Ski Area with volunteer help. That same year, Graeme McGowan, a Forest Service engineer, made a study of the Sandias and other mountains in the state, and mapped out some ski trails. In 1936, a small slope was cleared at Tree Springs in the Sandias and another at Hyde Park above Santa Fe. Amenities for skiers were few with just a lean-to and a surplus tent for shelter and skiers still had to hike up the hill in order to ski down. In 1937, they moved a short way up the mountain to La Madera Canyon where the Forest Service cleared another slope and the Ski Club installed a 1500 foot rope tow using a Chevrolet engine and Model A wheels to carry skiers up the hill.

In 1938, another rope tow was installed and a trail was cut all the way to the top of the mountain, but this still required several hours of hiking to gain the reward of a fast trip down the trail. The Civilian Conservation Corps built a lodge at the base of La Madera out of trees cut from the slopes and the New Mexico Winter Sports Council was formed to promote skiing around the state.



In 1939, the first downhill ski race in the state was held at La Madera. Interest in skiing was growing, but then the advent of World War II closed the area for the duration of the war. Bob Nordhaus, Neil Foley and Foster Murphy, all members of the Albuquerque Ski Club, enlisted and were assigned to the 10th Mountain Division and reported to Camp Hale in Colorado for military training. In 1944, the 10th was sent to Italy where it spearheaded the final attacks that broke the German lines at Riva Ridge and Belvedere in the Apennine Mountains.

In 1945, Bob returned to Albuquerque and intent on bringing La Madera back to life, bought the assets of the Ski Club. In 1946, a 4200 foot-long Constam T-bar lift was installed, the log lodge was remodeled, bunk houses and a restaurant were built along with an ice rink. A

ski school and rental shop were operating and more trails were cut. Daily winter operations began and La Madera became a community meeting place.

Several bad snow years around 1950 led to La Madera being run by the City of Albuquerque. Bob Nordhaus refused to give up and by 1952, he was back running La Madera. The Ilfeld Company had sold a ranch and began shopping center development under its new name, Alvarado Realty Company. It would eventually become a land developer through joint ventures with Sandia Peak. Shedding the responsibilities and duties required with the ranch gave Bob more time to concentrate on La Madera and his law career. During the 1950s, improvements were added to the ski area and interest in the sport of skiing continued to grow.

Ben Abruzzo, a young lieutenant in the Air Force stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base, became interested in skiing in 1952. He took over as manager of La Madera from Gerald Martin in 1957 and the following year he bought one-half of the assets of La Madera and joined Bob in the Alvarado Realty Company. One major change occurred in 1959, when the state paved the old road up the east side of the mountain. The old road tended to be either snow-packed or muddy and frequently chains were required to reach the ski area. Paving the road greatly increased the ease of access.

Bob had for years envisioned a way to link Albuquerque, on the west side of the Sandias, to the ski area on the east side. Paving the road to the ski area helped make it easier to get to the area, but Bob had bigger plans. Between 1955 and 1960, Bob made several trips to Europe. While there, Bob visited various ski areas and decided a tramway would be the best way to bridge the gap on the west face of the Sandias. In 1962, preliminary work began on the tram idea, with land for the base terminal purchased. Bob and Ben now had to come up with about two million dollars in credit. Banks were skeptical of the project, but after a stock offering and much negotiating, a loan was secured.

While plans for the tramway were being drawn up, Bob and Ben formed a corporation and changed the name of the ski area in 1963, from La Madera to Sandia Peak. A new Stadelli double chairlift was installed from bottom to top and the Summit House Restaurant was built at the top of the ski area.

After reviewing plans from five or six competing companies, a bid was let to Bell Engineering of Lucerne, Switzerland to design and build the tramway. Construction of the tram started in May of 1964. Bell Engineering supplied the plans, some of the equipment and tram engineers. A local company, Martin and Luther, was hired as general contractor. Gerald Martin, who had been associated with La Madera since high school and who had installed the chairlift, was in charge of the tram construction. In addition to the two terminals, two towers had to be built, one about half-way up on a ridge only accessible by helicopter.

First, the tower footings had to be drilled, rebar grouted into the rock and concrete poured. Then came the job of erecting the steel towers. All the equipment, supplies and manpower had to be flown into a tiny landing zone at tower 2 by helicopter. A giant drill was used to drill holes for the 40-foot-long anchor rods. All the concrete had to be mixed and poured by hand. There was no power source available at the remote site so a 1.2 mile-long 4-inch compressed air pipeline was laid up the mountain to the second tower. The air was used to run all the necessary tools during the construction of tower 2. The lower tower was accessible by a steep road, but the helicopters were still necessary to carry steel and supplies during its construction. At the same time, the upper and lower terminals began to take shape. A 70-foot deep pit to house the massive counterweights for the tram was excavated at the lower terminal. The upper terminal had to be anchored into the mountain-top and the steel support towers erected.

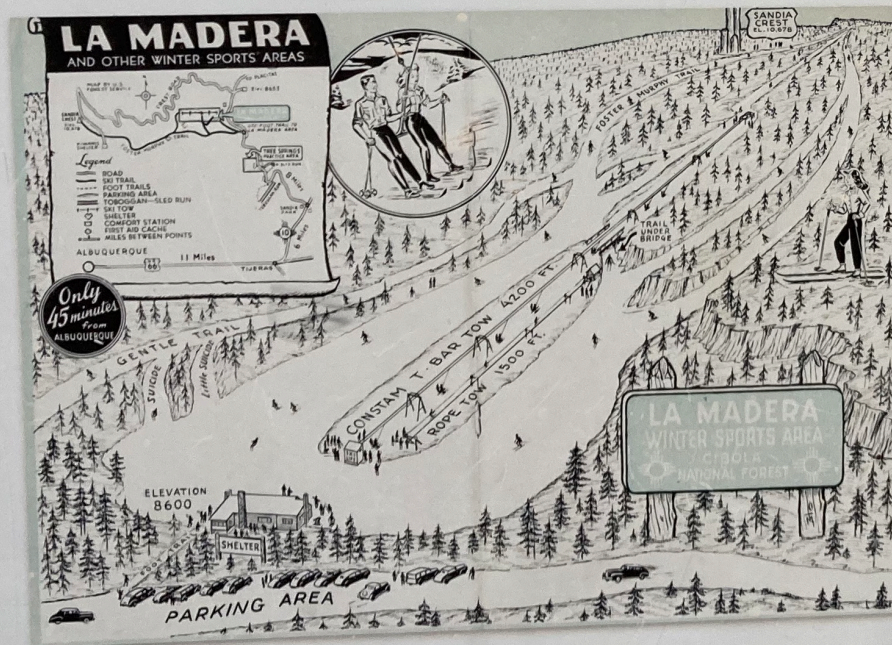
The cables, tram cars and machinery all were built in Switzerland and traveled via ship, railroad and truck to the base of the tram. With the terminals and towers in place, the massive job of installing the cables started. A small cable was flown part of the way down from the top by helicopter and the manually pulled the rest of the way. Successively larger cables were winched up to the top. After five long months, the cables were in place and the tram cars could be attached. After testing by the Swiss engineers, the tram officially opened in May of 1966.



Alvarado Realty developed the Sandia Heights property adjacent to the tram base as well as other areas and was successful with shopping center development and property management. 3 additional chairlifts were added to Sandia Peak Ski Area over the years, along with mountain bike trails for summer use and the old log lodge was replaced by a larger modern building in 1982 and the Summit House was renovated to become the High Finance Restaurant. The Santa Fe Ski Basin was acquired in 1985 becoming Ski Santa Fe area. The original Old West Museum at the base of the tram was transformed into the Firehouse Restaurant and was completely remodeled in 2001 to emerge as Sandiago's Mexican Grill. New tram cars were installed in 1986 and new cables replaced the originals in 1997. More upgrades have taken place over the years to both the tram and ski area with a newly renovated upper terminal building and new counter cable installed in 2014.

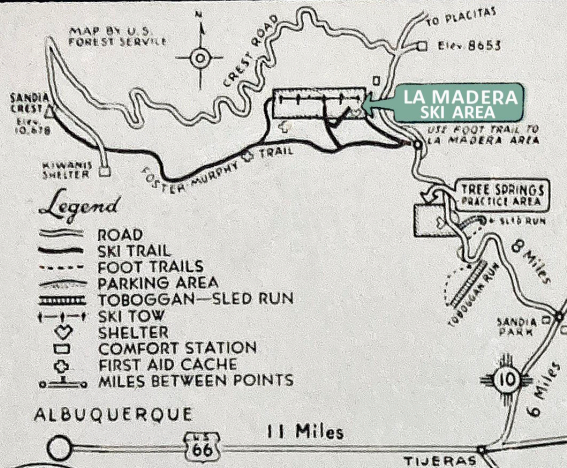
Ben Abruzzo, as president of the Sandia Companies spearheaded the development of the Sandia Heights subdivision and other investments and became a world renowned balloonist, piloting the first successful crossing of both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in helium balloons. His career was cut short in 1985 when he and his wife, Pat, were killed in a plane crash. Richard Abruzzo took up where his father left off setting numerous ballooning records, but died along with his co-pilot, Carol Rymer Davis during a Gordon Bennett Balloon Race off the coast of Italy in 2010. The Abruzzo name lives on at the Anderson Abruzzo International Balloon Museum and the Abruzzo family continues to operate the Sandia Peak Tram and Ski Area and Ski Santa Fe. Ben was inducted into the New Mexico Ski Hall of Fame in 2003.

Bob Nordhaus became chairman emeritus of the Sandia Companies in 1983. He published several books after retiring from his law practice in 1987. Tipi Rings in 1995, an account of his successful battle representing the Jicarilla Apache tribe in their effort to gain compensation for land lost that went all the way to the Supreme Court and A History of Sandia Peak in 1998. Bob was honored as a New Mexico Living Treasure in 2002 and inducted into the New Mexico Ski Hall of Fame in 2003. Bob resigned from the Executive Committee and Boards of Directors of Sandia Peak Ski and Tram Companies in 2005 at age 96. Robert Nordhaus passed away in 2007 leaving a lasting legacy.



LA MADERA

AND OTHER WINTER SPORTS AREAS



SANDIA CREST
EL. 10,678

Only
45 minutes
from
ALBUQUERQUE

GENTLE TRAIL
SUICIDE
Little SUICIDE

CONSTANT T-BAR TOW 4200 FT.
ROPE TOW 1500 FT.

LA MADERA
WINTER SPORTS AREA
CIBOLA
NATIONAL FOREST

ELEVATION
8600



PARKING AREA

Sandia Peak Tramway



Sandia Peak Tramway



Sandia Peak Tramway



*Sandia Peak
Tramway*



Sandia Peak Tramway, Albuquerque



Sandia Peak Tramway

