

WINTERSKÖL™ KING AND QUEEN



Photo courtesy of the Melville's

Ralph & Marian Melville

Wintersköl King and Queen made for each other and for Aspen

BY BETSY FURTH

Ralph and Marian Melville were each drawn to Aspen and the romance of living and working in a ski town in the 1950s.

Ralph, who had grown up in a town near Boston and attended Dartmouth, came out to be a ski bum in 1951 on the advice of a friend whose experience in Aspen while racing in the 1950 FIS competition had left a lasting impression. Ralph had already decided that he wanted to run a ski lodge, having worked in one right after college in the Northeast. His friend urged him to visit Aspen before deciding on a final location to set up his lodge.

Ralph's trip out west in the winter of 1951 coincided with Aspen's first Wintersköl celebration and although he liked the area, he initially had some doubts about the location. But by 1953, Ralph was back. He purchased a piece of property on the corner of Durant and Monarch, which included a house and a log cabin. He tore down the house and lived in the log cabin while he sketched out plans for his future lodge. By 1954, building began on the Mountain Chalet and the lodge opened for the Christmas season that year with just three rooms ready for occupancy. By the time the original structure was completed, there were nine guest rooms and Ralph was living on site in one of the rooms.

Marian grew up in Pennsylvania and graduated from Bucknell. She came to Aspen in the winter of 1955 to "ski bum" with a college friend who was up for an adventure—so, as it turned out, was Mar-

ian. It was a pretty bold move for a young woman in those days to travel half way across the country on her own. Had it not been for the urging of her friend to join her, Marian admits that she "probably would never have left Pittsburgh."

While in Aspen that winter, Marian lived in the Prince Albert, now the Independence Square hotel. She worked at the Golden Horn (the current location of Takah Sushi) and at the Sundeck.

After the 1955-56 ski season, Marian's new friends encouraged her to stay and experience Aspen's gorgeous summer and that was the best suggestion she ever received. That June she met Ralph and as he said "We had a quick courtship - we met in June, got engaged in July and married in August." It was a whirlwind by any measure.

However, the run up to the wedding hit a frightening snag when Ralph was seriously injured in a climbing accident on West Maroon just weeks before the big day in Pittsburgh. Falling nearly 400 feet, Ralph broke many bones and spent several weeks in the hospital encased in casts, seriously banged up. But love and determination prevailed, and Ralph flew East just in time to make the 3-day waiting period required at that time before a marriage could go forward.

After the wedding the Melvilles came back to Aspen and moved into the Mountain Chalet and got to work. Over the years they were blessed with six children (Julie, Frank, Nancy, Susan, Karen and Craig) and two foster children (Riley and Kai) while their beloved lodge grew along with their burgeoning family.

As the lodge flourished and was enlarged, adding rooms and wings to the original structure, the busy pair still found time to be actively involved in the community: Ralph was a timer for almost all of the races on Aspen Mountain, he served on the Aspen City Council in the mid-60s, was a member of the school board for nine years, a charter member of the Aspen Rotary and helped found Mountain Rescue.

Meanwhile, Marian, in addition to mothering six children, was the head timer for the Woody Creek sports car races, has been a volunteer at Aspen Valley Hospital for 30 years, has led a bible study class at the Aspen jail for 20 years, headed the Easter Seals Society of Colorado, taught Sunday school and worked as a waitress at the hospital benefit dinners that were held annually. In their characteristically understated way, Marian admits, "Those were pretty busy years."

Now, many years later, the Mountain Chalet comprises 55 individual guest rooms and four two-bedroom apartments and the Melvilles, who lived in the lodge until 1979, moved to the Cemetery Lane neighborhood. Most of their children live nearby in Colorado and they delight in seeing them and their 16 grandchildren regularly. Their youngest son, Craig, now runs the lodge, but Ralph and Marian are never far from their life's occupation and devotion.

Says Ralph with a twinkle in his eye, "Our duty now is to come in to the Mountain Chalet in the morning to eat breakfast and drink coffee with the guests."

