



Mom on Patrol

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When my brother Gene and I were moving our mom into assisted care a few years ago, I came across her National Ski Patrol jacket.

Myra Toussaint (Slusser) Devine fought her way onto the all-volunteer – and nearly all-male – National Ski Patrol in 1959. It was quite a battle. Myra, who learned to ski in her 20s, had to learn how to tackle steep terrain in crusty, windy and bitterly cold conditions. She had to be able to handle steel-and-wood toboggans that weighed far more than her 105 pounds. And she had to skin up from Arapahoe Basin's 10,780-foot base to the Midway, well over 12,000 feet, in a timed and competitive climb. It took several seasons for her to finally rank well enough against the boys to make the cut.

But make it she did, joining a pretty elite group of women ski "patrolmen." (That's what they were called back then.)

The first woman patroller was Jerry Nunn, who joined the National Ski Patrol in 1944. After working with the Sugar Bowl patrol, she was accepted to the Squaw Valley patrol in 1954 – but only after completing several intensely physical demonstrations that other recruits didn't have to perform. In 1957, when Nunn showed up for the Intermountain Forest Service Snow Ranger certification course, Supervisor Felix Koziol was surprised to discover that "Jerry" was not male. After he informed her that the Snow Rangers didn't take women, Jerry tartly replied, "You already have."

Since my mother was a registered nurse, Gene and I were well coached as volunteer victims. We knew the difference between sprains and broken bones and how to act if we had gotten a concussion from hitting a tree. We got to sit on the idled chairlift while patrollers threw a rope up over the chair and then hoisted a wooden-bottomed canvas bag up to us. We would jump inside and be lowered to the ground. That was almost as much fun as riding in a

toboggan, or on one of the new, lightweight aluminum akia sleds that Myra handled so confidently.

It was because of Myra that I learned to ski before I could walk – or at least before I could walk well. I was extremely pigeon-toed, and at three, still tripping over my own feet. Our family doctor prescribed leg braces, but Myra hated them almost more than I did. Her prescription was a pair of skis (cross your skis and you fall).

That led to a remarkable Colorado mountaineering childhood. I have fond memories of winning blue ribbons at kids' slalom races at Climax before the ski area and town closed in 1962. We cheered skijoring races on Leadville's Main Street. Myra splinted my leg when I broke it at Winter Park, and she held my hand all the way to Kremmling, where the spiral fracture was set by Dr. Ernest Ceriani, a physician made famous by a 1948 *Life* magazine photo essay.

Nothing matched my mom's aplomb when we had to hang out on Loveland Pass, waiting for the Seven Sisters avalanches to be shot down with howitzers and plowed off the road. When that happened, Mom would knock on the windows of nearby cars and invite folks into our homemade camper for hot chocolate and Chinese checkers.

My mother died last January at the age of 88. By the end of her life, dementia had robbed her of most of her memories. She knew me, but she couldn't summon my name.

But that's not how I choose to remember her.

The Myra I recall is the one captured by an old snapshot taken at Breckenridge. She's standing in her ski boots, smiling and wearing a dalmation-spotted fake fur hat that she made. (No Cruella De Vil, Myra was against wearing real fur long before that became politically correct.) She's turned slightly away from the camera, perhaps to show off the big, yellow ski patrol cross on the back of her rust-colored parka.

I don't know what happened to that snapshot. But I will always know where to find it among my memories.