

Ray Panella

Ray Panella was born in 1922, to Italian Immigrant parents, in an anthracite coal-mining town in upstate Pennsylvania. Ray's father, an illiterate coal miner, died of black and rock lung when Ray was twelve years old. That same year Ray started his first business delivering newspapers at six o'clock in the morning and again at four in the afternoon.

Twelve years later, in 1946 Ray purchased his first pair of wooden skis; bear trap bindings, aluminum poles and leather tie boots for forty-five dollars.

In the 1950's Ray became a ski instructor at Big Boulder Ski Area, teaching Arlberg Technique (rotating shoulders). The ski area had bear trap bindings on their wooden rental skis and single lace leather boots.



Ray, forever the entrepreneur, decided to open his first ski rental shop in 1958 on the road to Big Boulder. He bought double lace leather boots, wood skis, and release bindings. The rent for the shop was twenty-five dollars per month for four months. It had neither heat nor toilet facilities. Two years later Ray opened his second ski shop in North Philadelphia. He slept in the shop and had an electric frying pan to make his meals. When he sold a pair of ski boots, Ray put the empty box back on the shelf to make it appear as more stock. The rent was ninety-five dollars per month in the winter and sixty-five dollars per month in the summer. Two years later, he secured a nine thousand dollar mortgage to buy the store and above rooms. From these humble beginnings began a career in the ski industry that is still available force in the market place today.

Ray, being a realist, knew that making the public aware that skiing was here to stay was important for the future of the industry. His first effort was in 1960 and 1961 when Ray wrote the column "Ski Tips" for the Philadelphia Inquirer appearing every Tuesday and Friday through the ski season. They were the first ski articles to be published in a Philadelphia news-paper. Ray was also the first to report ski conditions to a Philadelphia television station. He did this for Dr. Francis Davis and the weather on WFIL/6 now WPVI/6. In 1987 Ray appeared on WCAU-TV Channel Ten's Pocono Challenge, skiing with morning anchor Steve Levy, for whom he demonstrated his trademark, skiing backwards on one ski with the other in the air.

To continue his efforts to bring skiing to the public, Ray produced the Philadelphia Ski Show in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. from 1970 to 1984. This annual show featured the largest indoor ski deck in the U.S.; Emo Henriche and the Stratton Mountain Boys, Suzy "Chapstick" Chaffe, demonstrations by local ski instructors and complimentary display booths to EPSC ski clubs. Bill White, announcer for the NY Yankees, later President of the National League, interviewed Ray on the NBC Today show.

Ray was very interested in the technology of the equipment that passed through his shop. Ray and Larry Grebb (of Mitchell and Ness Ski Shop) were the only two Pennsylvania members of ASTM, the society that sets standards for ski equipment, from 1972 to 1979. Ray hosted the ASTM meeting at Lake Harmony, Pennsylvania in the mid-seventies at which time he was elected to the executive committee for a 2-year term. In 2001 he presented a paper on a 3-year study on parabolic skis (aka shaped skis) to the ASTM committee in Burlington, Vermont.

The Ski Industries of America and Doc Roches, a Director, endorsed the Ray Panella Travel Agency to book airline and hotel reservations for 700 ski retail buyers, who flew out of eight airports from Chicago to Bangor, Maine, for the first two years of the Las Vegas Ski Buying Show.

Ray initiated a program in the early seventies to bring affordable skiing to teens. Through selling inexpensive name brand ski equipment and clothing at 27 area high schools he has put skiing within the reach of teenagers who might not otherwise afford to ski. The program is still in force and widely embraced by the schools in the Delaware Valley.

Ray operated the ski shop at the Camelback ski area in Tannersville, Pennsylvania for seventeen years from 1980 through 1997. During that time he financed, relocated and expanded the original small store into a high volume ski shop.

A patron of various ski related organizations, Ray has been a repeat co-sponsor of numerous Eastern Pennsylvania Ski Council activities over the past 40 years. This past year he received a Certificate of Appreciation for outstanding contributions for the benefit of the members of the Camelback ski patrol.

Ray's career in the retail ski business has spanned over four decades. At one point he had four ski shops and a travel service in operation simultaneously. Today he operates one ski shop in Wilmington, Delaware. It is the oldest ski shop in the U.S. with the founder still active in the ski shop. Being in top health, he claims that he will never retire as he enjoys the ski business and skiing. In the winter you might find Ray at Camelback where he still skis about thirty days per year. In the summer when he isn't paddling his kayak or water skiing on Lake Harmony you might find him in-line skating along the bike path between Norristown and Valley Forge.