

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SUN VALLEY SKI LIFTS

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SIGNIFICANCE

The Proctor Mountain Ski Lift is significant for its historic connection with the development of the technology associated with skiing. Built in 1936, it was the earliest known chairlift in the world, the invention of James Curran of the Union Pacific Railroad's engineering department.

Sun Valley was started in 1936 by W. A. Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad, who felt the slopes of the western United States could rival those of Europe in attracting an increasing number of American winter sports enthusiasts. The area around Ketchum was chosen for the site of the Union Pacific's resort by Austrian Count Felix Schaffgotsch after he toured the entire West in the winter of 1935. Publicity man Steve Hannagan, known for his Miami Beach project, renamed the area Sun Valley and urged that "mechanical devices" be installed to carry people to the top of the "slides." This transportation problem was turned over to the Union Pacific's engineers who considered several ideas including the J-bar that Fred Pabst had installed at Bromley, an up-ski toboggan similar to that employed at Yosemite and even a cable car. Finally James Curran's chairlift idea, which at first was considered too hazardous, was adopted.

Prior to working for the Union Pacific, Curran worked for Paxton and Vierling Iron Works in Omaha, which had engineered installations for loading bananas on fruit boats. Curran took the mono cable tram idea and replaced the banana hooks with chairs. Thus he created a machine with a greater capacity than the up-ski toboggan or cable car and more comfortable than the J-bar. His basic design is still used for chairlifts today.

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