

FEBRUARY 2012

# sierra

## HERITAGE

**Warren Miller**

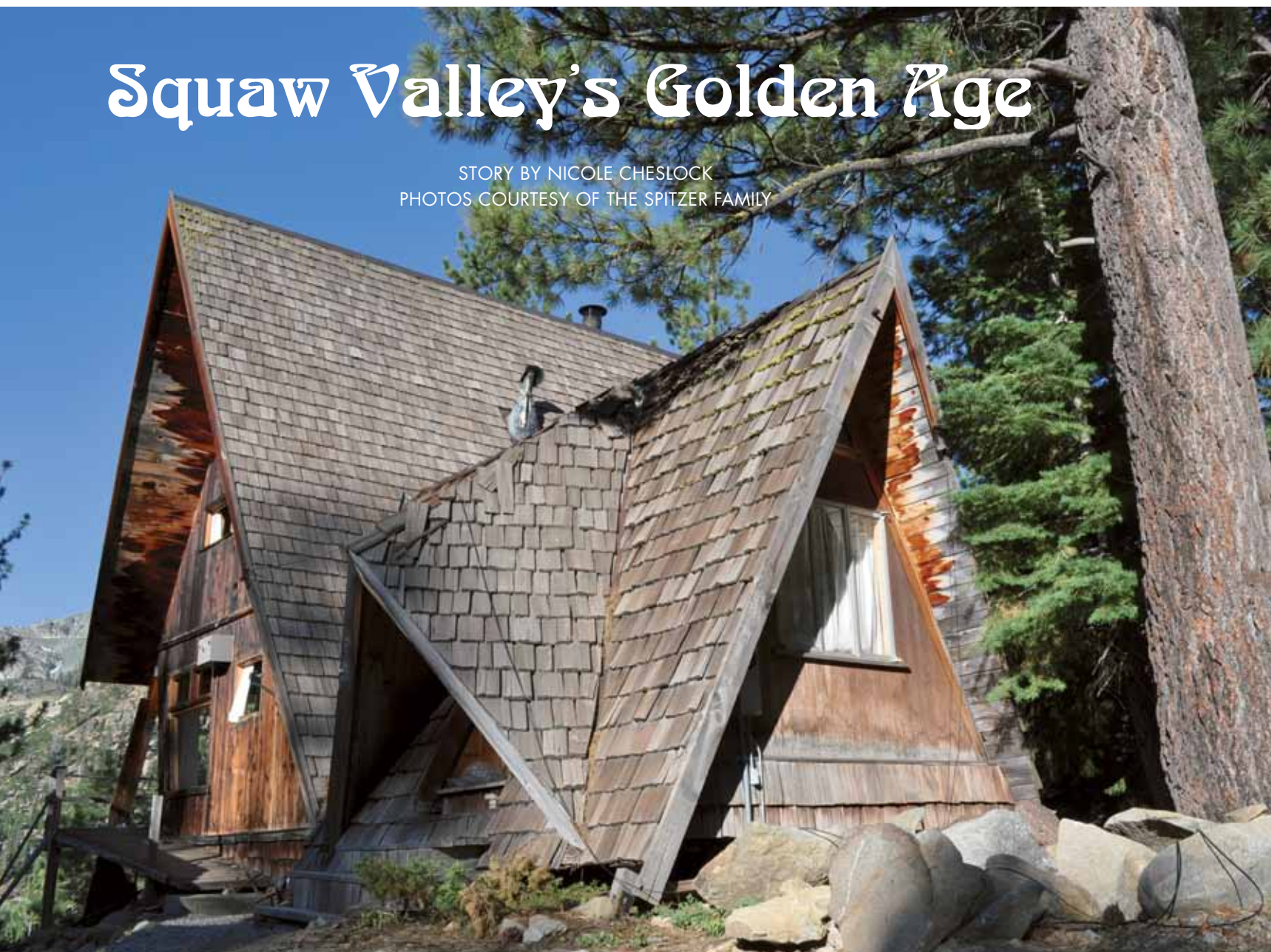
The **Donner Party**

**Winter** *in the Foothills*



## Squaw Valley's Golden Age

STORY BY NICOLE CHESLOCK  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SPITZER FAMILY



**The Spitzer family cabin was a cherished winter weekend getaway and summer retreat built on the end of Washoe Drive in 1956. The cedar beams, siding, doors and even dining room table were sourced from a pencil factory in Berkeley. A few pieces of the original cabin remain and will, no doubt, be put to use in a new home featuring the same phenomenal views that captivated Norm and Jean 60 years ago** photo courtesy of John McCabe Construction

Growing up in Berkeley, California there was a young man who skied near Donner Summit, visited Lake Tahoe and, undoubtedly, heard about excursions to lakeside resorts via the narrow gauge railway line from Truckee to Tahoe City from his mother.

As a young teenager in the early 1930s, he reached out to the world as a HAM radio operator, one of many hobbies that would consume Norman Spitzer in addition to his vocation. An avid photographer, traveler and

skier since a young age, Norm was drawn to the Sierra. He designed an intricate A-frame cabin from balsam wood. The model, standing approximately nine inches tall and a foot wide, was more than a compelling design with a removable roof that provided access to the interior. It was the beginning of a dream. Twenty years later, Norm and his wife would build the cabin on lot one in subdivision one in Squaw Valley.

Around the same time, in the early 1930s,

Wayne Poulsen was an emerging ski resort pioneer embarking on a competitive ski career. He was a high school student in Reno and spent countless days fishing, skiing and studying snow throughout the region. He dreamed of turning Squaw Valley into a European-inspired village and skier's paradise.

Fast-forward a decade. Wayne and his wife Sandy purchased significant acreage throughout the valley from Southern Pacific, and formed Squaw Valley Land and Livestock

Company (today, Squaw Valley Realty). There were very few year-round residents and even fewer homes in Squaw Valley in the 1940s and throughout the 1950s.

Wayne and Norm, both veteran World War II pilots, flew for Pan Am Airlines after the war. This is where, in 1947, Jean Iverson, a Pan Am stewardess, met Norm. Shortly thereafter they were married and would have two daughters, Susan and Tina. "He was smitten on their first date," Tina says, remembering her father's stories.

On Wake Island, a stopover between San Francisco and China, Jean recalls, "Wayne was there on another crew. He was selling shares of Squaw Valley Lodge. Soon enough the majority of owners were Pan Am pilots. People used to call it Pan Am Valley!" Jean and Norm purchased shares in Squaw Valley Lodge and soon enough were talking to Wayne and Sandy about a lot. They drove up the rutty dirt road into Squaw Valley, fished in the Truckee River and camped at the entrance to the valley.



Jean and Norm pose ready for a fishing outing in 1967

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Susan and Tina Spitzer posing with their Dad's catch in 1961

The first time Jean and Norm viewed a prime site at the end of Washoe Drive, they walked through four feet of snow. Jeans explains, "I just stood and looked out at the magnificent view. There was no one. Just beautiful mountains and Squaw Valley below."

Norm and Jean purchased the site, lot one in subdivision one, in 1952. Squaw Creek and the meadow extended far into the valley in those days. There were dozens of dairy cows, and the horse stables, closed just a few years ago, flourished. This was a time when Basque sheepherders brought their animals to the lush meadow to graze. Summertime meant leisurely family picnics amongst the buttercups, hiking up Shirley Canyon and lots of fishing in the Truckee River. Winters were challenging. Snowstorms and the mere accumulation of snow made it difficult to get in and out of the valley. Power outages were frequent.

Overlooking the expansive meadow, winding creek and steep granite walls, Norm and Jean's site would soon become a winter weekend

retreat and summer sanctuary. Conceivably the most scenic lot in the valley, Norm and Jean began building shortly after Susan was born. It was 1956. In fact, given the incredible view from the end of Washoe Drive, Norm saw flames envelop Squaw Valley Lodge below when he was working on his roof in late August. He immediately called David Perlman at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The next day the news made the front page of newspapers across the country.

The cabin's siding, doors, cabinets, interior walls and even the dining room and coffee tables, were made from reclaimed cedar that Norm had sourced from a pencil factory near their home in the Berkeley Hills. It was the real life version of the balsa wood cabin Norm had built, and it connected him to two of his greatest passions: skiing and fishing.

Most winter weekends the Spitzers packed up for the drive to the Sierra, winding down the Lincoln Hwy around Donner Lake. Tina recalls running down to the movie theater and watching three movies a night with her big



Scooping endless bowls of snow in 1968, Tina's love for Squaw Valley winters only grows year after year




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Tina and husband Reed at the top of Gold Coast at Squaw Valley in 2010

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sister and skiing down Mountain Run sitting on top of “Big John’s” shoulders with her long red hat, the signature of Squaw Valley Ski School, trailing behind. The rowdy Bear Pen, housed in what used to be a garage, served drinks into the wee hours. The girls recall not being allowed to step a foot inside the only pub in town.

On clear summer days, Norm would fly the family to Truckee in his Bonanza or twin engine Piper. The long days of sunlight meant lots of roaming and hiking. Tina explains,

**“For thousands of years the ancient tribe of the Washo made this valley one of their summer camping grounds. While the men hunted at upper elevations, the women remained below in the meadow. For this reason the first white observers of Indian life here called it Squaw Valley,” writes Jane Fiedler in *A History of Squaw Valley*.**

“We got to run free. We’d go fishing in Boca and other nearby reservoirs and hiking. ... It was such a lovely, bucolic respite from Berkeley in 1960s.”

No doubt the cherished bluebird days, majestic snow falls, incredible skiing, hiking and fresh mountain air that attracted the Spitzers to the valley, when there was little more than a lodge, some friends and a chairlift, will continue to inspire generations to call Squaw Valley home.

Eric Poulsen, almost certainly the longest full-time resident living in Squaw Valley today, remembers the early days with his parents and seven siblings. He tells stories about horseback trips into the backcountry, and, of course, skiing because that was “the only thing to do in the wintertime.” Eric fondly describes the big jump his father, an accomplished hunter, built behind their house. Wayne shot deer, quail and other game that was especially welcome on the dinner table during the winter months. Eric says that his mother ran nearly everything in the valley at one time or another. Over the years, Sandy could be found running the ranch, developing subdivisions, at the post office, driving the school bus and

managing the Papoose ski area.

With the 1960 Olympics, Squaw Valley was transformed from a small, rural mountain community to the internationally recognized destination it is today.

The Spitzer family reluctantly took down the A-frame cabin, because the old home posed a severe fire hazard. Old pieces of salvaged cedar now hold cherished family memories of idyllic days exploring the valley on foot and on skis. Norm’s ashes grace the extraordinary place

where he and Jean built their cabin so many decades ago. The key is at rest.

Jean will turn 88 on the Fourth of July, and she looks forward to returning to Squaw Valley. With a smile, she says, “I still love Squaw. I plan to go up this summer, and when I go up and the house is no longer there, I will look out and it will be like the way it used to be.” SH

✚ Map reference, page 3: G-6

*Special thanks to John McCabe of John McCabe Construction in Truckee for alerting us to this story of early Squaw Valley.*

*Nicole Cheslock is a freelance writer based in Truckee-Tahoe. She recommends visiting Wayne and Sandy Poulsen’s first Squaw Valley home (Graham’s Restaurant, 1650 Squaw Valley Road, Olympic Valley, 530.581.0454) and thinks their second home, closer to the entrance of Squaw Valley, is a treasured historic vacation home: antlers and a massive bear pelt honor Wayne’s hunting days, family photos line the walls and a trophy room has no less than a hundred awards. (Contact Squaw Valley Realty at 530.583.3451 for availability and rates.)*

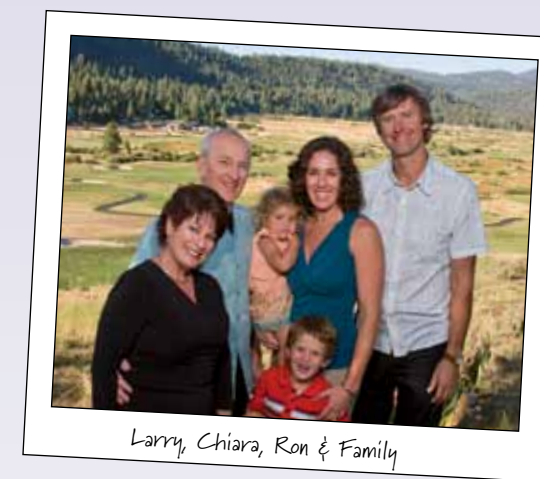


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