

# The Man Who Came to Dinner and Stayed a Year

*The peripatetic ski life of Marquis Nicolò degli Albizzi, a minor Russian aristocrat whose adventures—and misadventures—led him from the Rockies to Lake Placid and the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec.* **BY E. JOHN B. ALLEN**

DOROTHY CLAY ALBUM/NEW ENGLAND SKI MUSEUM



Opposite page: The Marquis and Erling Strom in March 1928 on their way to the newly built Assiniboine Lodge, 30 miles south of Banff in the Canadian Rockies. Right: The Marquis in his element. Never one to avoid showing off his prowess, he got great enjoyment out of skiing on the perfect snows of Assiniboine Mountain in the spring of 1928.



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In 1920s America, what sort of man would “come for dinner and stay for a year?” What sort of man would, by total chance, meet a trail-riding party in the Colorado Rockies and be asked to lead that party, followed by an invitation to oversee skiing at the exclusive Lake Placid Club, some 2,000 miles to the east in New York?

Besides these American experiences, this man also helped to turn Assiniboine in the Canadian Rockies into a spring-skiing paradise and was a key figure in the development of skiing north of Montreal, at St. Sauveur in the Laurentians. One answer to these questions is simply that horses and skiing were his two major passions, but that’s not the end of it: The Marquis Nicolò degli Albizzi was a mix of charmer and bounder, of sporting excellence and entertainer, of enthusiasm for a project and total disinterest once it was running. He was a man of unending vitality, versatility, talent, bravado and courage, for whom wealth was an aristocrat’s birthright as well as something that wasn’t worth dealing with. A disdain for managing money runs through the decades Albizzi spent in North America, even as he begged for financial help from his friends. He had a dark side, as well.

Of noble Florentine and Russian ancestry, Albizzi was born in 1891 and sent to the Nicholas Cavalry School in St. Petersburg prior to the Great War (1914–1918), a normal

progression for young aristocratic bloods who would then qualify for the Tsar’s cavalry outfits. Albizzi was known for his fearless riding, along with high jinks like jumping onto food-laden mess tables dressed in his boots and spurs, with not a dish out of place, not a drop of wine spilled... or lighting a cigarette from a pistol. He probably learned to ski with the Yukki Ski Club at the hills a few kilometers out of the capital.

After adventures in the Italo-Turkish war, he returned to Russia for World War I, and in 1916 he was in Italy again, this time joining the Savoy Cavalry. Finding little action, he moved to the skiing *Alpini* on the Adamello front: *Il Tenente Russo*—the Russian Lieutenant—had arrived. “With superb contempt for danger, leading his own platoon of *Arditi* over very difficult terrain,” reads one of Albizzi’s medal citations for bravery, “he attacked and brilliantly conquered several armed enemy positions, capturing prisoners and machine guns. Continuing on with splendid spirit, initiative and sacrifice, he assisted other detachments to obtain the most important objective.” He was awarded three of these medals for valor. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Russian army withdrew from northern Iran and Albizzi served with the British Dunsterforce against the Ottoman forces there. He was in charge of 50 percent of the armored car detachment (all three of them). He then served as interpreter in the Italian *Spedizione*

with the uncoordinated Archangel-Murmansk inter-allied intervention, supporting White Russian forces against the Bolsheviks.

In 1919, he was posted to the Caucasus as some sort of military attaché to the Italian representative, and it was there that he met Mary Kifer, an American aid worker for the Near East Relief who was handing out clothes and looking after three orphanages. She must have caught the Marquis’ eye while riding a horse to work, and even more so when she met him at a ski outing in the hills near Erevan (today’s Yerevan, Armenia). They became engaged in May 1920. Mary Kifer returned to the States after her year of duty and continued to work for the Near East Relief by giving talks around the country, but in January 1921, she was on the pier in New York City to meet the Marquis on a Wednesday. They were married on Saturday and returned a few days later, travelling first class to Europe on the SS Rotterdam and intending to continue their work in the Caucasus. But by that time, the Bolsheviks made their return impossible. The couple went to Rome and then up to Lake Garda, to the home of one of Albizzi’s relatives. On July 21, while they were boating, a storm suddenly blew up. The boat capsized, the young bride drowned and Albizzi almost succumbed. There is some truth, but not all, in an old friend’s observation: From then on he was “immune to women.”

(continued on page 28)

(continued from page 27)

## ALBIZZI ARRIVES IN AMERICA

Albizzi came to America to visit his in-laws. He then traveled to Denver, where he met the Cranmer family. He “came for dinner and stayed a year,” according to an oral history conducted with Cranmer’s daughter. Wealthy outdoorsman George Cranmer had learned to ski with Steamboat Springs’ legendary Norwegian, Carl Howelsen, and would later become Denver’s parks director and a founder of Winter Park. He had the pulse on Colorado’s ski developments. Albizzi made his mark immediately by being hired by the Denver Rocky Mountain Ski Club as the club’s factotum-cum-star. He set the cross-country course (and won the races!), and he trained the boys in “fancy skiing”—meaning they would show off fine telemarks in powder snow—at Genesee, Denver’s own developing venue, 20 miles west of the city. At the upcoming meet of late January 1922, the club was sure “he will be the star performer,” even though the reputed Canadian champion from Revelstoke, Hans Hansen, was coming, as was world professional titlist, Henry Hall, as well as the Haugen brothers, Lars and Anders. The National Parks Report of 1922 singles Albizzi out as having “much to do with the stimulating interest in skiing.”

Now we run into one of those Albizzi moments that is hard to believe. On meeting a horse-trekking party near Estes Park, he exploded with equestrian knowledge equaled only by charming explanations, so much so that the leader invited him to continue as the party’s guide. Then, perhaps even more unbelievably, upon realizing that this same leader—unfortunately unnamed—was a Lake Placid regular, Albizzi started spinning his ski tales. That led to an invitation to the Lake Placid Club in the Adirondacks of upstate New York. He skied at the Club in the winter of 1922–23, working well with the resident ski maestros, Norwegians Ornulf Poulsen and Herman Johannsen, later to be known as Canada’s “Jackrabbit.” Albizzi took over as Winter Sports Director in 1925–26,



Above: Norwegian Ornulf Poulsen on the left with the Marquis degli Albizzi at his side while working together at the Lake Placid Club, New York in the mid-1920s. Right: *Il Tenente Russo*—the Russian Lieutenant—on the Dolomite front in the Adamello Mountains in 1917.

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AQUILEA IN GUERRA 3 (1995)

and the following year he had help from his friend from his Colorado days, another Norwegian, Erling Strom. During his six-year tenure at the Lake Placid Club, he demanded disciplined attention on his ski outings; this is what wealthy, white Americans seemed to enjoy, especially when controlled by such a superb skier and in such beguiling English, one of Albizzi’s five languages.

The Lake Placid Club membership was drawn from established, Christian, well-to-do East Coast families. Albizzi also supplied a summer skiing experience for them in western Canada, far from their industrial and citified purview. He had camped under Mount Asiniboine in 1926 and took a trial winter run with four clients, staying in the old hunting cabins. This was a rugged trip; the camps were about 30 miles south of Banff. With the stupendous backdrop of the spiny mountain, Canada’s answer to Switzerland’s Matterhorn, the group had a marvelous ten days of skiing in the wild. The following March

1928, he and Strom skied in with a party of ten to stay at the newly built Lodge. Albizzi had persuaded the Canadian Pacific Railway that he could fill the lodge winter and summer; it was his “dude ranch.” This appealed to the CPR officials who were eager to open up the region to tourism. The stay was a grand success for the group, helped no doubt by “two luxurious appurtenances for smoothing out life’s difficulties”—a guide and a maid. The artist Dwight Shepler, painter of ski scenes, who knew Albizzi well, commented in 1935 that his adventure stories multiplied in the telling and that legendary tales, often “tinged with a certain vagueness,” preceded him.

(continued on page 30)

BOTH IMAGES: DOROTHY CLAY ALBUM / NEW ENGLAND SKI MUSEUM



Above: Albizzi and Erling Strom with their guests, two men and two women, both Lake Placid regulars, on the first guided trip, at one of the cabins on their way into Assiniboine. Left: Albizzi leading the way and pointing to the summit of Mount Assiniboine, with Naiset Point in the background.



He would sell his inn to his cousin, Duke Dmitri, in 1938.

## RELOCATION IN THE LAURENTIANS

In the Laurentians, Albizzi dabbled in various financial affairs, seeming always to do not quite the right thing. One time, for example, he could not be located just as Canada's largest-producing gold mine was being sold. He stood to lose the 5 percent commission. He was agent for the Makaroffs of Long Island, who had a summer estate in St. Sauveur, and more importantly for the Atlantic & Pacific (A&P) grocery store heiress, Marie Josephine Hartford, whom he had known in his Lake Placid days. He oversaw the making of a private ski area, complete with bob run and haul-back as well as a skating pond: a mini-St. Moritz which became known as Mont Gabriel (*for a brief history of Mont Gabriel, see page 29*). As at Lake Placid, we find Marquis N. degli Albizzi with the title of Vice President of the Mont Gabriel Ski Club.

An adventurous girl, Kortryc Collier from Cardiff, Wales, came to work for him at the inn in St. Sauveur and began a romance that

led to the altar in May 1936. But all was not well; Albizzi was obsessed with her, locked her in her room and probably physically abused her. She managed to escape with one of the guests, a member of a Russian family firmly established among the elite of Washington, DC. The guest introduced her to a U.S. Olympic 1932 and '36 field hockey team member and up-and-coming FDR lawyer, Lawrence Knapp. They married in 1940, one week after her divorce from Albizzi was notarized.

In the late 1930s, Albizzi moved where money, lodging and new projects could be investigated. He could be found variously in Europe, in the Laurentians at a Lac Tremblant borrowed house "worse than Siberia," out west in Banff and in and around Lake Placid—a peripatetic life dependent on friends, jobs, and on his interests. In 1940, Lowell Thomas, the commentator who had made his name publicizing Lawrence of Arabia and had become America's radio voice in the 1930s, persuaded the Lake Placid Club to lease some of their land to make a ski area on Mount Whitney. The idea was to have Albizzi as the man on the spot to oversee the clearing of the trails, the construction of a day lodge and tow, and the creation of a private ski club. The new club would be somewhat akin to the Lake Placid Club's own in-house sports club, the Sno-birds, but it would be just for members interested in skiing, as Thomas wrote to Albizzi in 1941.

In that year, during the construction, Albizzi clashed repeatedly with Samuel Packer, the general manager of the Lake Placid Club. He would say one thing, Albizzi wrote to Thomas, and do another, "a Jew trick. Scratch a Russian, and you will find a Tartar"—an old Russian saying that could be better rendered now as "scratch Packer and you will find a Jew." This blatant anti-Semitism was quite in keeping with the decades of such views held by the Deweys, owners of the Club and, by extension, many of its members. It was all very frustrating to Albizzi, especially because Low-

Eventually he was fired from the Lake Placid Club because he beat up an employee who, he judged, was not pulling his weight. After this dismissal, he joined his cousin, Duke Dmitri of Leuchtenberg (despite the German title, he was related to the Romanovs, too) at fashionable Peckett's Inn on Sugar Hill in Franconia, New Hampshire, as ski instructor and equestrian trainer. He was offered trail-clearing work in the area, but that quickly paled and he appears to have simply quit. He left for his own St. Sauveur schoolhouse-turned-*auberge* in the Laurentians north of Montreal, a property he had bought in 1927. Albizzi charged \$5 a day and was "snooty about whom he takes," according to the December 15, 1931 edition of *Vogue*. This meant a select clientele of friends, the sort of people he'd met at Lake Placid and who might well join his trail rides in the Rockies.

ell Thomas' idea was "to have the whole thing revolve around your personality." The weather was uncooperative, too. There was "a good base of frozen mud, stumps and roots with 1/15<sup>th</sup> of an inch of fresh face powder," he wrote to Thomas. "You could sweep through asparagus and artichoke patches, ripping turns in a cloud of steel edges, roots and hickory splinters." No snow in December, none in January 1942 and not until mid-February did Mount Whitney provide enjoyable sport.

The coming of World War II gave Albizzi a hope he might serve. Turned down by the Canadians (in spite of citizenship and friends in high places; he had written to General Panet, with whom he had skied), he put great hopes in Lowell Thomas' wide-ranging connections in Washington and elsewhere, such as General George Marshall, various generals and officers connected with the formation of American ski troops. "Flurish (sic) a bit of Colonel here, a Major there, Russian Cavalry, Valor medals..." he suggested to Thomas, adding that he had six pairs of skis so they wouldn't have to supply him with any equipment. But nothing came of this, in spite of many other foreigners being inducted into the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.

Eventually, Thomas did find him a job as a ski instructor for a rehabilitation program for American flyers. The Air Force had requisitioned the Pawling School for Boys, 45 miles north of New York City, and brought shell-shocked airmen to the school. One of the programs was to teach them skiing nearby, at Thomas' private ski area. It was reported that "the Markee did more for them than any other activity."

After the war, with the influx of 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain veterans determined on finding a niche in the burgeoning ski industry, Albizzi must have found himself out of place. He did advise on a would-be area near Taos, New Mexico in 1947 called Tres Ritos (now Sipapu), but nothing came of it at that time.

And then he simply disappears from the record.

Albizzi had already sensed that

new skiing forces were at work. On a trip to Pico in Vermont with Thomas in January 1942, he had a grand time but also met the Eastern gurus, alpine skiing experts with all their technical terms. He was afraid of looking childish, he admitted to Thomas, "after all those academic touches of Acker-Rybizka" (he was referring to Karl Acker, the Swiss resident instructor at Pico; and Benno Rybizka, the first Austrian director of the Hannes Schneider Ski School at North Conway, New Hampshire). Albizzi seems to have recognized that the whole notion of camping and skiing alone in the wilderness was giving way to commercial skiing, with its prescribed "alpine" techniques, those "academic" touches. After a time in Europe, he returned by air to the U.S. in 1957 but no information has been found of his whereabouts or activities.

From a letter to his old friend and Banff trail packer, Pat Brewster, we learn that he eventually returned (date unknown) to northern Italy. After an illness, he lost his memory. He would disappear for days until someone found him, unable to remember where he had been or who he had met. Evidently this sort of dementia held him in thrall. He died in 1975 and is buried in the churchyard of San Felice del

Benaco, overlooking Lake Garda.

The centerpiece of any action, Albizzi played on his skiing expertise and social spriteliness; for the most part, he was a charming man perfectly suited to ski with the experts, mostly at their expense. He had another side that was not unusual for people of his class: his anti-Semitism and his disdain for money were transferred easily from Tsarist Russia to the wealthy Lake Placid Club. Right away, Erling Strom recognized that Albizzi had a cruel streak. That he managed to keep it all under wraps, even to someone who knew him as well as Lowell Thomas, is almost unbelievable. He was, evidently, a tortured soul, who lived a sporting life of his own making on the inside and outside of wealthy society. He could come for dinner and stay a year because, wherever he landed, he inspired a love for virgin white snow. ❄

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PERMISSION: ANNE THOMAS DONAGHY



Albizzi (left) and Lowell Thomas (right), entertaining Joseph Pew Jr., president of Sun Oil Company and his wife Alberta, at the Thomas estate in Pawling, New York c. 1943.