



Snoshu on the Ukulele



Swim, Golf & Ski Medals and Pins, part of Snoshu's Awards

Don “Snoshu” Thompson - 1929-2021

Don S. “Snoshu” Thompson passed away peacefully surrounded by family on September 17, 2021, due to complications from pneumonia. Born in San Francisco on Nov. 22, 1929, he moved back to his family’s native state of Nevada in 1943 with his mother and two sisters. Snoshu was a 4th generation Nevadan, as his grandmother and mother were both born in Nevada. His great-grandfather, Mark T. Coats, owned a restaurant in Washoe City in 1862. He will be remembered - depending on how and when you knew him - as a musician, singer, bandleader, athlete, ad man, Sheep Dip director, ukulele player, business college president, restaurateur, sportswriter, or entrepreneur, but most of all a dear patriarch to his family.

This memoir is dedicated to a Reno icon who was a vibrant, creative and adventurous man who created six careers for himself, all while working to make a better life for himself, his family, and the community he so loved.

Don had a deep love of music that originated from generations of musicians before him, and that became career #1. He played violin in a youth quartet on the radio in Oakland when he was 7. He earned second chair in the Oakland National Institute of Music Orchestra at age 9. He became a paid musician in Reno at 17 and continued playing in bands while at Reno High and UNR. He formed a band with pianist/singer Jan Savage, and they performed for years at school and social gatherings across the state and even in the show rooms of the Mapes, Riverside and Harold’s Club. He created a weekly music show with a band on KZTV (which became KOLO-TV) that lasted for almost two years.

Many parties at the Thompson home – be it Christmas, a Nevada Opera cast party, or someone’s anniversary or birthday – was enlivened by his ukulele sing-alongs. He performed in UNR plays and Nevada operas, often with his daughter Cami. His love of singing in the Opera led him to become President of the Nevada Opera for several years in the 1970’s. His musical talent and passion were shared with his all three of his daughters, with Cami forging her own professional singing and acting career.

A natural-born athlete, Don played baseball, table tennis and tennis and he loved to water ski. He learned ballroom dancing, as his mother was an instructor. He taught roller skating, ice-skating, skiing and gymnastics. He joined the Red Cross Aquatic program and became a lifeguard and swim and dive instructor at the Idlewild pool in Reno. But winter sports became his life-long passion.

During his time at Reno High, Don learned to ski at Sky Tavern. He went on to teach at Sky Tavern and became such a good skier he made the ski race team at UNR. Ski racing was a passion that lasted until age 76. He competed in collegiate, regional, national and senior championships races. He was a Class A-rated ski racer and Cal-Nevada ski jumping champion in 1956. He competed in senior racing until 2007. He skied his last day at Mt. Rose at age 86 with his kids, grandkids and great grand kids.

After a tour of duty in Korea, Thompson graduated from UNR in 1953 with degrees in Business Psychology and Economics. During his time at UNR he was an SAE; a head cheerleader; a member of band, orchestra and choir; a member of the ski racing, boxing, cheer and tumbling team; and a Sergeant Major for the ROTC. His Sigma Alpha Epsilon brother, Roger Bissett, suggested Don take the nickname “Snoshu”, as his name was similar to the famous John “Snowshoe” Thompson who carried the mail through the Sierra in the snow in the 1860’s. Though no relation, Snoshu did a presentation about John Snowshoe Thompson for decades, keeping his legacy alive.

Don met Norma while he was a lifeguard at Idlewild pool, and they were married at the SAE fraternity house in February of 1954.

Don went to work as a salesman at KOLO, eventually becoming sales manager for both KOLO-TV and KOLO radio. This was the start of career #2 as he soon started his own advertising agency. He was

named the first “Ad Man of the Year” by the Reno Ad Club and became a founding member of Sheep Dip. He was a creative salesman and his daughter Corrin has successfully carried on that torch in the advertising and insurance world.

Career #3 began in 1964 when one of Don’s advertising clients, the owner of the Reno Business College (RBC), sold the college to Don. Don and Norma saw a rare opportunity to provide real world training for high-demand jobs. They created a unique curriculum that provided hands on training for medical transcription, paralegal, stenography, court reporting, and travel agencies. Many women came to the RBC after graduating from UNR, saying they could not find a job as they had no useful job experience or skills. After a year at RBC, most went on to great careers. Hundreds of foreign students learned English at RBC, before going to UNR and on to a successful career. Don saw the chance to help people find careers, not just “a job.” His leadership at RBC changed lives for the better.

Career #4 as a restaurateur happened when Don purchased an old ranch house near the college and eventually converted it into “The Holcomb House” restaurant in 1976, creating the first restaurant management courses in Nevada. After the tragic shooting of their bartender in 1978, Thompson leased the building to what eventually became Reno’s 1980’s hangout: Bailywicks. In 1996, they lease-holder left, so Don created Snoshu’s Historic Tavern, where many family members worked and enjoyed sharing the history of Nevada. In 1999 Snoshu sold the property to David Silverman and Trent Schmidt, who created Silver Peak Restaurant & Brewery, now Huntsman Brewing.

Also in 1980, Thompson sold the business college, which allowed him to focus on career #5 as a ski writer, under the pen name “Snoshu Thompson.” The start of this career actually dates back to 1965 when Snoshu began a small ski reporting service, “Snoshu’s Tracks Ski Report” covering conditions and events at ski resorts in the West. He would send it out to each resort, the media and ski shops. Before the Internet radio stations would read the reports so folks knew what was happening that coming weekend. This report lasted 41 years. Ironically, the local website design firm 12 Horses, helped create one of the first websites for Snoshu to post his reports online in the early 1990’s!

Snoshu joined the newly formed Ski Writer’s Association in 1980 and eventually earned an honorary lifetime membership in the West’s division of the North American Snowsport Journalists Association. His reporting skills enabled him to cover four decades of ski racing World Cups and Olympics, attending Squaw Valley in 1960, Sapporo ‘72, Sarajevo ‘84, Calgary ‘88, and Barcelona ‘92 – all with his wife and sometimes kids.

To keep busy in the summertime, Snoshu picked up golf in his late 40s, becoming a writer for San Francisco-based tourist magazine KEY, and later the Regional Editor for Golf Today Magazine. This formed career #6 as a Golf Writer. He wrote about and competed in golf tournaments around the world, traveling to 14 countries and over 350 courses. He earned podium status and many trophies in Left-Handed World Championships across the US and in Europe and Asia. For many years he served as an officer for the Northern Nevada Seniors Golf Club.

In an independent effort to promote Reno-Tahoe outdoor sports, in 1998 Thompson created a marathon where he would tee-off from 43 golf courses in a 12-hour period. All the courses were within a two hour drive time of Reno. With daughter Randi as chauffeur, they made 40 courses, as three private courses refused. The “stunt” created international news, with both Randi and Don fielding media calls from across the US for a week and the RSCVA (Reno-Sparks Tourism) booking golf outings from as far away as China.

The positive attention spurred Don to create an even grander marathon in 1999! He skied one run at 13 ski areas and teed off a golf ball at 26 golf courses in 12 hours. These marathons helped promote interest in northern Nevada’s outdoor sports.

Don's love of skiing and golf has been passed down to kids and grandkids, inspiring grandson Josh to coach high school golf.

Don was always looking for the next adventure and that even included politics. His love for promoting Reno and its great outdoors led him to run for mayor and city council several times. While politics was obviously not his thing, his desire to make his community a better place to live inspired daughter Randi to become active in politics.

All these careers gave Don and Norma the ability to travel the US and world, writing about skiing and golfing. Regrettably, he usually brought his ukulele. So, while we likely owe people around the world our apologies, we bet many of them remember Snoshu fondly.

Snoshu's vibrant health and creative mind began to decline about 2 years ago as the restrictive COVID shutdowns made life challenging and very constricting for both Norma and Don.

This legendary citizen is survived by Norma, his loving wife of 67 years; sister Audrey; daughters Corrin Keck, Cami Thompson (Scott Lenau), and Randi Thompson (Steve Trollope). Grandchildren Josh Keck (Melinda) and Kristine Keck Great grandkids Kaelem, Dylan, Avery, and Abigail.

Don was a loving, caring husband and father who always put his family first. Even with his very busy life he always took time to make sure they had an abundance of recreation, entertainment, cultural events and travel to enjoy.

Thompson summarized his life with this quote: "I was fairly good in many things, but never great in any; except to marry Norma and help raise three great kids."

In lieu of flowers, please consider a donation to Sky Tavern, to continue to help kids of all abilities learn to ski: skytavern.org, 21130 Mt. Rose Hwy Reno, Nevada 89511. If you want to support local athletes, consider the **UNR Ski Team** c/o Doug Ball, P. O. Box 3216, Reno, NV 89505-3216. If you are a golfer, then consider **First Tee**, www.FirstTeeNorthernNevada.org, 3550 Barron Way #10b, Reno, NV 89511.

A memorial is being planned for later this year.