



# A SHERWIN BATTLE

## MAMMOTH SKIERS FIGHT FOR FRONT-COUNTRY ACCESS

IN THE SOUTHWEST CORNER OF TOWN, THERE IS A QUIET STREET. INTERSECTING OLD MAMMOTH Road at Snowcreek—a behemoth development encompassing million-dollar subdivisions, a golf course, and an athletic club—it runs a quarter-mile south toward the base of some of the best easy-access backcountry in the West: Sherwin Ridge.

Since Mammoth Mountain Ski Area founder Dave McCoy arrived in this patch of the Eastern Sierra in the mid '30s, skiers have been making the short hike to slash turns down the Sherwins.

"It's really the only place you can go backcountry skiing pretty safely without specialized gear," says local Hans Ludwig, a central figure in the fight to preserve access to this part of the Inyo National Forest. "It's all moderate angle and it tends to be relatively safe, avalanche-wise."

And since the installation of Ranch Road in the late 1980s, getting out of the Sherwins has never been easier or safer: Almost immediately, skiers began using it as a shuttle point, skiing across a section of golf course to their cars or a nearby bus stop. The only other viable route, via Tamarack Street, is an avalanche zone that leaves skiers far from parking or public transportation.

In recent years, the vacant lots bordering the golf course have been rapidly built out. The ski-town relationship between longtime residents and monied Johnny-come-latelies is often tolerant at best, and disputes have flared between Sherwins' users and new homeowners. Stories circulated about beer-drinkin', foul-mouthed locals littering yards with trash, parking in private drives, and being downright confrontational. "It became a problem with the people who live in that area," says Town Councilman Skip Harvey. "So to resolve that, the homeowners decided to block automobile access."

Problem was, Ranch Road was officially public. So, on September 26, 2005, the Fairway Ranch Homeowners Association (HOA) presented a plan to construct a remote-controlled gate that would require the town to relinquish part of the road. On December 7, the town council voted to vacate the public right-of-way, effectively criminalizing the standard exit from the Sherwins.

The stone-and-ironwork gate—featuring, ironically, a silhouette of the very ridge to which it bars access—was erected within weeks of the September resolution's passing...before the road vacation was official. The initial resolution promised: "Pedestrian access shall be provided with the vehicular access gate improvements." Which sounds well and good, but the fulcrum of the issue rests upon one omitted word: "public."

"There was no intent in the beginning, when they built that gate, to allow anyone to walk around it," says Harvey, who had initially voted against the request. "It was like a dog door. Anyone wearing a pack, carrying skis and coming off the Sherwins, wasn't going to be able to get through it."

Ludwig partnered with John Wentworth, an eccentric Hollywood producer turned passionate backcountry skier, to organize a petition drive to force the town to reconsider the issue. Some 792 signatures later—443 more than needed—the council was given the option to either rescind the resolution, vote on an alternate, or do nothing, which would put the item on the town's June 6 ballot. It was overturned unanimously on February 1, reopening the road to public use. Since then, the HOA has sufficiently met the town-mandated pedestrian access, creating a two-foot-wide walkway by the gate's western pillar.

"Skiing the Sherwins myself, I know that if you give people the proper direction on how to get out, they will follow that route," says Harvey. Suggestions for the future include marking a trail to a golf course that extends to the town side of the gate, or building an addition to Sherwin Creek Road ending in a winter staging area.

Though access out of the Sherwins is somewhat protected for now, the larger question of the town's border permeability remains unresolved. "We're still living with the hangover of Manifest Destiny," sums up Wentworth. "At some point you run out of land...Jurisdictions and ambitions and economic realities are bumping up against each other, and now we have to make choices. It's going to be an interesting process."