

it's personal

Mashed Potatoes, Poor Circulation, and Al Gore

When an avid skier sets out to discover the truth about climate change, she ends up learning more about herself.

By Megan Michelson



The writer's parents, Steve Michelson and Evans Phelps, enjoying abundant snow in Alta, Utah, February 1977.

When my mom talks about mashed potatoes, she's usually not referring to the buttery, starchy side dish that most people eat with meatloaf or on Thanksgiving. She's talking about snow. "We skied until noon," she'll say. "But then it just turned to goopy mashed potatoes." Sometimes she'll call it "slop" or "gunk" or "mush," but I always know what she means. I grew up skiing in Lake Tahoe, where by late March the midmorning sun bakes the spring corn to a nearly liquid consistency. At low elevations it can feel like waterskiing, where you lean back and glide through it. I always assumed this was an age-old spring condition, something generations of skiers in California had grown up with. I was wrong. "We rarely had mashed potatoes when I was little," my mom says. "The snow was more like vanilla ice cream or, on good days, like powdered sugar."

Scientists have given us a bleak outlook on our warming planet. They've said that in the next 50 years, if we don't drastically change our carbon footprints, Aspen will have the climate of Amarillo, Texas; the snowpack in the Rocky Mountains could be reduced by 37 to 70 percent; New Mexico's Taos Ski Valley could lose 89 percent of its snow; and low-lying European resorts like Austria's Kitzbühel could shut down entirely due to lack of snow.

But it's discouraging listening to Al Gore and people with PhDs talk about the dire climate crisis. So I decided to conduct my own research to find out if winter is really that different now than it was, say, 50 or 75 years ago. I didn't exactly set about doing this with the most accurate scientific methods; I used only two sources for this project—and neither of them knows a thing about science (although one was married to a brilliant chemist for many years). But I trust them. And, besides, they've seen winters come and go for many more years than the 25 that I've been around.

My grandmother Peggy Phelps is 81 years old. I called her not long ago to ask if she'd noticed any changes in climate or snow conditions or the length of winter since she was a little girl. She laughed. "Megan! I grew up near Buffalo, New York," she cackled. "I live in sunny Southern California now. Of course I've noticed a difference!" Scientific roadblock number one: inconsistent case studies.

"Oh, right," I said, feeling defeated. "Well, what were winters like in Buffalo back then?"

"I lived in the countryside. In the 1930s it was very cold. I can remember snow piled up on the side of the driveway. There were days we couldn't go to school because there was too much snow. And we couldn't wear pants. We always had to wear plaid skirts. Although if it was really cold, we could wear leggings under our skirts."

I jotted this down in my official-looking reporter's notebook: Leggings. Plaid skirts. Snow on the driveway. This study was not off to a great start.

"Changing gears," I said. "Tell me about a ski memory from when you were younger."

There was a pause on the other end of the phone, then she continued: "Your grandfather and I went for a weekend to Mont Tremblant in Canada. We were having breakfast in the lodge, and I looked out the window and there was a thermometer. It read 26 degrees F. I said, 'Well, it won't be too cold out today.' We went outside and nearly froze. We couldn't breathe; it was so cold. Then we realized it was 26 below zero. That was 1948. We used wooden skis and lace-up leather boots back then."

Now we were getting somewhere. "I skied once when it was about 10 below zero," I responded. "It was my freshman year at Middlebury College in Vermont—2001. We went to Mount Snow for

a weekend, and at the end of the day I cried taking off my ski boots because my feet hurt so badly."

I made more comments in my notebook. 1948. 2001. Subzero temperatures then and now. "Do you remember snow being slushy?" I asked her.

"The East Coast has always had firm snow," she said. "We'd go to Aspen each year with the kids, and that's when we'd get soft, powder snow. But slushy snow? What does that mean?"

I explained the mashed potatoes theory to my grandmother, jotted down No slush in my notebook, thanked her for her help, and said good-bye. Then I dialed my mom, 57-year-old Evans Phelps, who's been a skier her whole life.

"I remember in Aspen when I was a kid in the 1950s: you went up chair number one, and they'd give you a wool blanket for the lift ride. It was that cold," she said, when I asked her to recall a ski day from her youth. "But come to think of it, it was probably that cold because of our equipment. I'd wear a wool sweater. Nothing was

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windproof or waterproof. And it took 45 minutes to get up those old chairlifts. I'd cry sometimes, taking off my boots at the end of the day."

Sounds familiar, but this wasn't exactly helping confirm global warming. Wool sweaters, 45-minute-long chairlift rides, cold feet. "Mom, do you remember there ever being a lack of snow?"

"Sure I do. I skied in California," she answered. "Early season and late season, the snowpack would dwindle and we'd get deep gouges in our skis. But they didn't make snow back then like they do now. There was usually enough natural snow to get the job done."

No snowmaking. Plenty of natural snow. Snow guns churning out manmade flakes have always been a part of my skiing experience. So have dirt patches and Januarys with so little snow I'd hike over rocks to reach powder fields.

"When would ski season start and end, typically?"

"Resorts would stay open till April usually, much like they do now," she said. "And if we were lucky, they'd open by Thanksgiving."

"So you'd ski, then eat mashed potatoes?" I kidded.

"Right. But not ski mashed potatoes," she smirked back. "We only do that now."

I scribbled more notes. Mashed potato snow now. Not then.

In the end my study was a bit of a joke. But I did learn a thing or two about my family (bad circulation in our toes), about changing fashion (wool skirts and wool sweaters were hip), and, surprisingly, about climate change (slushier winters, less snow, increasing temperatures). Which is why I've circled and highlighted the last barely legible scratch in my notebook, written in a fading black pen after I got off the phone with my mom. Al Gore is right. **!?!!**