

The Alta Experience

Alex Kelner

Interview Transcript

Alexis Kelner

My name is Alexis Kelner.

Joey Prokop

Moving right along we'll skip way ahead and go into talking about some of the early skiing activities in Little Cottonwood Canyon.

Alexis Kelner

Well to understand skiing in Little Cottonwood Canyon, you have to know that it was basically inaccessible during winter. There was no real major road going up the canyon, let alone one that could be traversed in the wintertime, so the only way you could get into it in the 1920s was to come into it from Park City. You'd have to go... Big Cottonwood road was also not open, so you would go in from the mines in Park City, cross over Scott's Pass, get into Brighton, spend the night there. The next day you'd go up over Twin Lakes Pass to Alta and spend the night there, and they did that. There were some fairly tough individuals that did these trips, primarily members of the Wasatch Mountain Club.

Joey Prokop

So when they would get to Alta would they hike up a little and ski, you know, make downhill runs or was this kind of a touring kind of thing?

Alexis Kelner

No, I think this was a touring type of a thing. In those days, in the 20s, the ski equipment isn't the type that would lend itself to what we call today as "yo yo skiing." You didn't go up and ski down and go up and ski down. The photographs I have of 1920 skiing rarely show a turn, let alone a linked turn, so it was quite fascinating. The equipment was very crude by today's standards. You had basically a toe strap and a heel strap and that was about it. For climbers they would use rope underneath the ski that they would lace underneath, sort of like you would a boot. It was called roll locking.

Joey Prokop

When did I guess people realize that there might be a destination in skiing, or turn it into an avocation that a lot of people might want to partake?

Alexis Kelner

Again, it was mostly the Wasatch Mountain Club people. In 1928 they thought that they should build a lodge there, and so they started putting together a lodge for their members and they're still working on it actually. It's an excellent... it's on the National Historic Register now as the place where skiing and recreation first became popular in the Wasatch Mountain, but they did a lot of trips to the lodge. By 1935 the lodge had become the ski center of Utah and there are a lot of articles about the Mountain Club inviting the skiers to come there. Skiing in those days was a fairly elite... it was among the elite people that skied and you could tell that from the clothing. They'd wear ties and that was dear gear in those days, so, it started fairly humbly. At Alta... people started going to Alta in about 1935 and '36. A lot of it has to tie in with the Forest Service that, up to the late '20s, they were basically a farm for wood products. Recreation wasn't part of it. In the mid '20s they started noticing that people were using the forest for recreation. By 1935 they had developed basically philosophies for how to manage recreation, and this is where Utah came in because one of the major Forest Service officials promoted Utah Skiing--his name was Koziol. He became Supervisor of the Wasatch National Forest, but before that he had a lot of other high positions, so he influenced skiing phenomenally in the Wasatch.

Joey Prokop

How did they start? I guess to get people up the canyon... at some point they had to start maintaining the road, and improve the road. When did all that happen?

Alexis Kelner

Well that happened in about 1936 they started building the roads. Big Cottonwood Canyon was the first place where they started actually a ski area--I think in 1937--up in where today Spruce's is. They built a ski jump there and they had an ice-skating rink and a little day shelter, and then they went up to Brighton and did basically the same thing. Alta came about in 1937-I think is when Alta started. I can't give you the exact dates, but I think that's roughly when things started there.

Joey Prokop

Do you know the story about Alf Engen and how he was hired by the Forest Service to kind of map out places that might be suitable for skiing?

Alexis Kelner

Oh let me go back a little bit more because this ties in with Alf Engen. Alf was hired by the Forest Service to help build a road up into Snow Basin and he didn't really get... he was... really didn't do much in the way of promoting development of Alta until about 1938 when he and a guy from Sun Valley both hiked into Albion Basin and they came and wrote a report for the Forest Service.

But before that in 1935, one of the major Wasatch Mountain Club ski tourers, who was also a weather forecaster/meteorologist for the U.S. Weather Bureau, he wrote a very lengthy, very comprehensive newspaper article, which took about two pages, describing how important the two canyon... tops of the two canyons would be and they ought to consider them for recreational areas, so he was really the first person to promote it. Engen wrote his report, I think in 1938, and it was mostly involved with Alta.

Joey Prokop

Alta was known for a place... when did it turn into venturing higher and higher?

Alexis Kelner

Well, as skiers started doing cross-country, it expanded that way, but also the Forest Service started building a public shelter at Alta around that time; around 1938 or somewhere in there, and it took them a long time to build it because an avalanche tore it down after it was half completed. Today it's the Snow Pine Lodge.

Joey Prokop

Are you familiar with Major Watson and his activities up there?

Alexis Kelner

Well he was a real promoter of mining stuff. I talked to Helen Goodrow, who was his niece, and she said that he could transform his personality to fit the occasion.

Joey Prokop

Lets go back to that, but actually refer to George Watson.

Alexis Kelner

Well George Watson proclaimed to be the Major of Alta. He was about the only resident who lived there season long, but according to his niece, Helen Goodrow, (and Helen's husband was a very prominent Alta skier)... according to her, Major Watson could transform his personality to fit any occasion, and she said that basically that when it required selling stocks, mining stocks, he had the coat with the fur collar and everything, and even at one time apparently had a private railroad car at his disposal, but ultimately he wound up... I'm not sure how he wound up. He wound up having to give up rights to a lot of mining claims that he had because he was forced to by his creditors.

Joey Prokop

He did work a little bit with the Forest Service to retire that debt?

Alexis Kelner

Ya, he gave the land to the Forest Service to be maintained in perpetuity as a ski area, and a lot of people don't understand that today, that all of that area was at one time private mining claims, and the reason it's now under Forest Service supervision as a ski area is because of Major Watson and his forced donation.

Joey Prokop

Do you know the relationship between how the Salt Lake Winter Sports Association and Major Watson... how all these forces combined...?

Alexis Kelner

The way I understand it is the Winter Sports Association was formed by a bunch of skiers who were also... also one of them happened to be a mining executive for I think American Mining Smelting, and they all wanted a ski area and they all actually tried to get the government to build a lift up through the WPA (Works Progress Administration), and I have a letter from a WPA official saying, "No if we build it... if we have the government build it there would be too many strings attached. Why don't you just go and get your own funding set up and then have your own control over it?" and that's what they did. They sold shares, and that's how they financed the first lift.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk a little bit about that lift. That was the Collins single chair? Lets talk about what it was made out of.

Alexis Kelner

It was made, as I understand it, from mining cables from a mine that was up in Grizzly Resort. I'm sorry... As I understand it, the first lift--the machinery for it, the cables and that--came from an old mining tramway in Grizzly Gulch, and there was a place called Michigan City up there, and as the mining died, I guess they salvaged what was left of their cable tramway and utilized it for building the lift. It didn't work very well for the first season--I mean it operated very sporadically. And then there was a fellow who was a Wasatch Mountain Club guy who had come from Austria. He was on his way to somewhere else and his car broke down in Utah near Salt Lake and he got it fixed and discovered that this really was the place for him to be, and he joined the Wasatch Mountain Club, and having been a good alpine skier, he really dazzled people with his skiing skills--a lot of pictures in the newspapers doing gellande and things of that sort, and his name was Fred Speyer, and he ultimately got a job. He was also a professional engineer by training, so he got a job with Alta as their manager, and he did a lot of redesign of the lifts and made them function, and he remained their General Manager for about 20 or 30 years... until he was replaced by Chick Morton.

Joey Prokop

We think about the modern ski lift we get on today. Contrast what that contraption might have been like.

Alexis Kelner

Well the... I remember it was a single chair lift. It was... when they first built it they had it suspended with a cable suspended on poles that weren't tall enough for the Alta snow, so they actually had to dig a trench so that the chairs could go through the snow, and one of the things that people would do as they came up to Alta to ski, they would volunteer to dig this trench or else they wouldn't get up the hill, and there's some nice pictures of people with ski... or riding the chair with a wall of snow six feet on each side, so it was quite a challenge in that sense. Eventually, and again a lot of photographs show it, they added to the top of the poles extra length and raised it, so that solved that problem. I don't know how their cable systems worked, or how their mechanics worked, but I'm sure Speyer did a lot of redesign because that lift worked through the '50s and when I was skiing it was still the same lift, when I learned to ski at Alta.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk about learning to ski at Alta. I know that when you came here, when you emigrated here did you ski at all or did you just pick up skiing when you came here?

Alexis Kelner

When I was in Bertsgarten, Germany my dad gave me a pair of skis that were old army surplus skis that he put steel edges on, and I did a little skiing... nothing, there weren't any real hills there, so then when we came here we didn't have the funds or the money, you know, just setting up after moving from one country to another until about 1956 or so when I was in high school and my dad gave me a pair of Head skis for Christmas with Cubco bindings and we went up to... initially we started going up to Little Mountain up by... up at... up the top of Emigration Canyon, then we went to Brighton, and I didn't like Brighton because they played loud blaring music on their speakers on the public address systems, usually shotishes and waltzes and things of that sort. It was horrible. Then we discovered Alta. It was a little more modest and it was quite nice, but me and my friends we didn't spend a lot of time skiing the lifts. We somehow naturally gravitated to the backcountry, and that meant basically going up Albion Basin. By then skins were available, army surplus skins, which broke very often, and so we'd just go up Albion Basin. There was a ski hut at the top that you could have lunch in, so that's how I became a backcountry skier.

Joey Prokop

Do you know much about the hut system that they had up there?

Alexis Kelner

Yes. I wrote a long comprehensive article for the Historical Quarterly on it.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk a little bit about the hut skiing that went on up there.

Alexis Kelner

Ya... it's really fascinating. The huts actually were proposed... well we have to go back to the mid-1930s when the Forest Service was developing a philosophy for managing of winter recreation. One of the things that they wanted to do is to put in trail side shelters and in 1936 the forest supervisor of the Wasatch National Forest proposed this series of huts which would go into American Fork Canyon that would allow people to cross ridges and of course by the time, you know the bureaucracy moved very slowly and they didn't really start pushing hut skiing until around the war. During the war, Alta Lodge and James Laughlin, who operated the Alta Lodge, he was a very strong promoter of hut skiing and in fact Alta Lodge advertised that they had a mining cabin in American Fork canyon that you could spend the night in and do guided cross-country ski tours. This was about 1942. By then the war economy had kicked in and you could not get any kind of building materials unless they were related to the war effort, so the hut program languished until after the war, and again the Wasatch Mountain Club came in and proposed the hut system of some 12 or 13 ski huts in the Wasatch, including in Red Pine Canyon and up in Alpine Canyon, Dry Canyon up above Alpine, one at Scott's Pass, one at Twin Lakes Pass between Brighton and Alta, another one at Catherine Pass, and so the Intermountain Ski Association, which was by then called Intermountain Ski Association, was basically placed in charge of developing the hut system, and they asked the Wasatch Mountain Club to build the things, and they went before the... Mountain Club members went before the Salt Lake County Commission and proposed that the County Recreation Department give them \$3,000 to build three huts. Well the County Recreation Department and the Commission felt the \$3,000 wasn't enough, so they gave them an outright grant of \$5,000 to build three huts out of the twelve or so proposed, and so they built one at Snake Creek Pass, one at Germania Pass, which is the place basically east of Mount Baldy that was on the ridge between American Fork Canyon and Collins Gulch, or I'm sorry... Albion Basin. Then they built one on Nudist Flat, of all places, above Catherine Pass. So then came the time of naming them, and it was decided to name them after the geographical locations. Well Nudists Flat hut didn't sound very appealing so they changed it to Albion hut, and so that's what it has been named since.

Joey Prokop

Is that the only one that's still...?

Alexis Kelner

That's the only one that's still there. The hut, the Germania hut that would have led to American Fork Canyon, was torn down... after Alta built all of its lifts up to the top ridges. These huts became the hangout for people with drugs and things of that sort, and marijuana smoking, so the Forest Service's Lift Company, everyone wanted to get rid of them, so they had the hut... the Germania hut was torn down, and today it serves as a roof in Bountiful over a garage, and the salvage was done by Bob Shane, who is brother of Jim Shane, and Jim Shane is the guy that built the Goldminer's daughter. The Snake Creek hut burned down after a Boy Scout troop was there.

Joey Prokop

That's usually what happens after boy scouts.

Alexis Kelner

That's what I've heard. I have not been able... I haven't even traced down the day that it happened. There were vandalism problems with those huts and a number of things. Can we go back to the huts while I'm thinking of it? One interesting aspect of the huts was that they were designed in a way to house people. The county commission insisted that they have a partition, a big orange cloth, between the men's and the women's part of the building, so they had about eight bunks on one side for men, and one side for women, and the people I've talked to say that that was the first... they would always pull off to the side and (not)... totally ignore. Another aspect of it was that they needed to get the mattresses in, and the mountain club people had some connection with the International Guard, and they asked the International Guard to drop these bundles of mattresses to the huts, and so they got a C-47 and flew it over the huts, and the mattresses were bundled seven or eight per bundle, and they kicked them out the door. Well it was a very windy day the day that they were flying, so they couldn't go low over the pass and so they flew about 1,000 or 2,000 feet above the pass and dropped them. The bundles broke apart and each mattress acted like a big frisbie. These things went down American Fork Canyon and all over, so people spent many weeks looking for these mattresses. Another interesting aspect of these ski huts is that the people that built them said they very rarely used them. The Mountain Club had these ski hut trips where you'd spend the night at the hut and go into American Fork Canyon the next day, and I did a couple of those things. They became a... people were not too clean with those huts and they really became the trash dump, so they were not a pleasant experience to go on a ski hut.

Joey Prokop

The tragedy of the commons as they say.

Alexis Kelner

Ya, they were not well maintained.

Joey Prokop

I guess on a different note, you know... Alta... If you look at the difference between Snowbird down the canyon--the large hotel, condo etc... You don't really see that at Alta. Why do you think that is?

Alexis Kelner

Well I think a lot of that has been the philosophy of the owners who were the original people that bought stock in the company, and they've... the Laughlens were very strong conservation-minded people that did not want to see Alta go into a big real estate development project, and I think that philosophy has pretty well been perpetuated by Chick Morton, who followed Fred Speyer as a president, and I think Onno today does the same thing. I think that they're very conscientious of maintaining a low... they want skiers, they don't want necessarily partiers.

Joey Prokop

I think that's kind of interesting, as a skier... I mean I go up there and I see my friends and I ski at Alta all the time, but the whole reason that I go up there is to ski, and so it's kind of... it's a different philosophy to me as opposed to a destination place.

Alexis Kelner

You know I do a lot of after-skiing speeches up at Alta on the history of Alta, and I talk to these people and they are all skiers. There are some that are 70 years old, and 75 years old and have been doing this... coming to Alta to ski, and that's all they're interested in is skiing, and that's the part that attracts me to the place.

Joey Prokop

Lets move on and talk a little bit about the snow safety and some of the developments that have happened up there starting with Felix Koziol and Sverre Engen, those guys and building on that into almost the modern day avalanche forecasting.

Alexis Kelner

Back in about 1936 or so the Forest Service actually hired a person to watch over the snow conditions at Alta, his name was Wadsworth and I've forgotten his first name, but he... I would classify him basically as the Forest's first snow ranger. Then after that--after they started doing a lot more touring there--Sverre Engen came in and became a ranger and he experimented with some things like planted charges. Avalanches would close the road sometimes for three weeks at a time, you know it took the... the snow clearing equipment wasn't geared up

to do 30 foot deep snow drifts from the avalanches, so there were periods where even five or six weeks would go by before the road would be opened again, but Sverre tried some pre-planted charges for blowing some of the major slides. I don't know how well that worked. It took a lot of effort to place a charge up on Superior and then hike up and find the fuse after its been drifted in, light it. After that the Forest Service initiated an avalanche program after the war where they hired Monty Atwater, and he was actually trying to be a journalist and a writer, but he came out of the 10th Mountain Division and was looking for a job, and here comes an offer to start an avalanche control program...

Joey Prokop

Lets talk about Monty Atwater.

Alexis Kelner

Monty Atwater was a WWII veteran of the 10th Mountain Division. He was trying to be a writer and he somehow was invited to come to Alta and be a snow ranger and to handle an avalanche control program, so he did. He went into it heart and soul, and he wrote one of the first avalanche books that the Forest Service published, and he worked out a lot of parameters that create avalanches that are still quite valid today, like storm intensity of snowfall, the water content of snow, various parameters--whether its a warm snow that's falling, or a cold snow that's falling--so he worked out a lot of things, and then he was convinced that what really was needed was a true scientist. He was not a true scientist, and he never made a... never claimed to be, you know. He just was a seat-of-the-pants type of avalanche professional, and so they discovered a fellow by the name of Ed LaChapelle, who had studied snow physics in Switzerland and he had been with the Swiss Institute of Avalanches, as I recall, and he was just the perfect person to do avalanche research, and Monty Atwater referred to him as the quintessential scientist. He said he even looked like a scientists. Well LaChapelle arrived there in about 1951 or '52, and it happened... and he set up a lot of some of his equipment, and it happened to be one of the worst snow years that Alta had, I mean it came down, and avalanches everywhere. He took out his research equipment and he really learned about Avalanches because that was a very severe period of Alta, and he did a lot of research in... Well there were three facets to the avalanche program at Alta, and this was sort of really the nation's lead place to do avalanche work--there was another place in the Pacific Northwest and one at Berthoud Pass in Colorado, but this was where most of the real action took place. They did... tested out various means of setting explosives to detonate, or to trigger avalanches. One of things they tried was a French ceremonial cannon that they happened to have around the state capital.

Joey Prokop

Lets start again...

Alexis Kelner

One of the things they tried was to use a cannon--an old antique French ceremonial cannon to shoot avalanches. Another thing is they got the Army to come in and demonstrate mortars because the Swiss used mortars for some of their avalanche control, and they had... at one point they were demonstrating... the Army was demonstrating a mortar firing and the thing was a short round, and it fizzled out just a couple hundred yards from where they were standing, and so they refer to that as, "It flew out of the barrel as a crippled duck!" and so that was always referred to after that as a "crippled duck" experiment. LaChapelle went a lot further than that. He contacted the Air Force to see if Air Force could provide something, and it's really fun to read his reports of his various trips to the various agencies. At one point he said, "Well the Air Force was willing to provide bombers on a scale that could level a city but would not be practical for day to day avalanche work." They also... Monty Atwater had connections with the U.S. Navy and so they went and looked for ship to shore rockets, and again all of these things proved somewhat impractical, and the final place that LaChapelle went to was to the... it wasn't NASA at that time, perhaps it was NASA, anyways, no it was an oceanic experiment... NOAA ya, and he looked at what was called the "low key missile." It was a high altitude missile that cost \$100,000 a shot and it was a weather observation rocket that would fly 50 miles into the air, and "The cost" he said "would be very prohibitive" (besides not needing to fly to 50,000 feet).

Joey Prokop

What about some of the pack-howitzers and some of the recoilless rifles...

Alexis Kelner

Ya, they actually eventually settled down to the pack-howitzer, which they still use today, and also recoilless rifles both. I think originally they started with 75 millimeter and went up to 105, and these became available after the Korean War, although a lot of military ordinances are no longer available, they have troubles with barrels wearing out on the recoilless rifles, so today I think there's a lot of emphasis on hand-placed charges either out of helicopters or out of what's-it-called? Avalauncher, which is a pneumatic tube-type of a device.

Joey Prokop

The avalauncher was developed at Alta?

Alexis Kelner

No, the avalauncher was developed somewhere else. It was a spin-off from a baseball throwing machine that they used for training pictures and I'm not sure to what extent Monty Atwater was involved in that, but... I was present at one of

the early avalauncher tests at Alta. I was photographing their research program, and it was kind of interesting to see because what you did is you would insert a projectile... first of all these charges are like dog food cans... in fact that's what they used for practices, they would shoot dog food cans at the various places, but the real charge was like a series of dog food cans screwed together so you could have one or two or three dog food cans worth of explosives, and then you'd screw a cone-shaped nose piece and some tail fins and then you would insert this whole thing. You would reach inside the barrel of this gun, pull out a chain and clip the chain to the tail fin and then you'd lower the whole thing and inside the fin was a hand... was an igniter. It worked sort of like a match being struck on the... you know it was an automatic thing that when you pull on it, it would ignite the fuse. Well it took a little bit of time to do all of this. Well the test I was observing is the fellow put in the charge into the barrel and they were ready to fire it, and then the barrel suddenly decided to droop down, but as it was drooping down, the guy pulled the lanyard to trigger the shot. It went sailing directly towards a cabin. I mean... and it hit an aspen tree just 20 feet short of the cabin and deflected, but it would have been interesting to see what would have happened to the cabin if it had exploded. They were aiming at the Emma Ridge so... and there were some other problems with the avalauncher over the years.

Joey Prokop

... do you think that goes back to the saw mill they had in the 1860s?

Alexis Kelner

I don't know.

Joey Prokop

... the vegetation has increased or decreased?

Alexis Kelner

I think that it has... denuding the hillsides probably caused a lot of the early avalanches during the mining era because we've had in the 1870s and 1880s we had as many as 16 people killed in one night by avalanches, and that would not be one avalanche, it would be a series of four or five, so I suspect... well trees do hold the snow in place, much more so than just an open slope, so I think there is a correlation with that.

Joey Prokop

Talk us through the effects of snow, wind, days without snow, steepness of terrain in that Rustler Mountain side all the way over to Toledo Bowl and that kind of thing... Mount Superior... it's kind of in a natural occurring place.

Alexis Kelner

The whole Little Cottonwood Canyon is one big avalanche slope. If you look at that whole ridge between Twin Peaks and Alta, which is about five or six miles long, there are about 10 or 12 major avalanche paths there; most of them cross the highway, or at least reach the highway, and on severe winter days they cross it. Alta has got the added (which is an advantage to skiing) is that it can get three or four feet of snow in one snowstorm. Well that might be an advantage when they have to groom these things, but the reason we have such good skiing is because they get sometimes up to 600 inches of snow a year, but also being a high thrust mountain range, it creates wind patterns that move snow from one slope to another slope and in that sense they create wind slabs. Wind-driven snow is usually very dense and compacted, but it's also very brittle--it shatters like glass, and so it doesn't take a lot to trigger a wind slab avalanche. Also we get... a lot of times we get an early season snowfall followed by cold temperatures and a period of no snow deposition for a month at a time. Well this creates a change in the snow crystallography, which makes... snowflakes normally are like little six-sided flakes that interlock, but after sitting on a ground for two or three weeks in cold temperature they sort of turn into a sugary type substance that has absolutely no cohesion at all, and we can have that characteristic stay on the slope for the rest of the season, so you have a very weak layer on bottom followed by 10 feet of snow, or eight feet of snow. It creates a real hazard.

Joey Prokop

At Alta I guess they just keep constantly shooting and maintaining and observing in order to keep the ski area safe.

Alexis Kelner

Ya, the ski area safety is... I mean under circumstances where you get really a bad case of early snow with formation depth where they go there and actually foot pack it, just like packing the snow in your backyard. They go and foot pack it and then they watch it very very carefully, so they have an excellent record. I don't recall Alta having, you know, maybe one or two fatalities over the years due to avalanches. Most of the resorts have excellent avalanche control programs. There are number of things that do worry some of the environmental community, and that's that a lot of these explosives that are used when they detonate, the residue from these explosives may be hazardous to your health, and when these residues get into the water supply it needs to be looked at and tested.

Joey Prokop

One thing about Alta really is that people have an affinity towards the place. What do you think is the affinity people feel towards Alta? Why there?

Alexis Kelner

Well I think it's the nice secure cabin in the mountains in the blizzard, and you know you go into the Alta lodge and it's snowing outside and they have a nice warm fireplace and a nice place to sit back in an easy chair and read a book, or go have a nice dinner. I think a lot of that is part of the mystique. Another one is that it's a dead-end canyon and there is always the possibility of being snowed in for a day or two. You know, if you're coming from the back east and you get snowed in for two days due to a seven foot deep snowfall, you've got a lot of bragging rights. I think a lot of that mystique is present at Alta. It's also a very friendly place. I've never seen the cattle-prod mentality of crowd management on the lift lines. They're generally very very pleasant, polite. I enjoy skiing there. Some of the other resorts are more like a big factory or a big business. Alta still has that... I mean Alta I'm sure is a big business, but it still has the aura of a family type of a mom and pop operation.

Joey Prokop

If you go in the area and you're skiing Alta, where is your run of choice? It all depends on the snow, but say if this place had the best snow...

Alexis Kelner

My runs of choice vary with my age. You know when I was 18 I would be skiing Gunsight Notch down into Greeley Hill. That was one of my favorite places because there are not too many people who would do that long traverse from the Germania lift, and so it was always available for us, and we'd be there early in the morning and do that thing. Another one that was fun was what's called Jock Strap, and Menopause. These were runs that went off the ridge where the gun tower is as you ride up the Collins lift. They would start on that ridge and go down into Peruvian Gulch. Menopause is where Delores LaChapelle had a serious avalanche incident. Jock Strap is a little bit further towards the... it's a little bit further east in and among the cliffs. If you go look up towards the cliffs you'll see why it's named what it's named. That's the 18, 19 and 20 year old thing. Now I'm skiing mostly Albion Basin and Collins Gulch and staying on Main Street and places like that.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk a little bit about powder skiing. There's something about it that really... I mean once you see and feel the magic you really can get hooked on it.

Alexis Kelner

Ya you can get hooked on powder skiing, and it's even more fun if you're in the back country and you're heading towards some unknown destination. That's what attracted me mostly to back country touring is the ability to ski powder in places that no one else has been. Now, of course, every one has been there.

Joey Prokop

It's crazy out there.

Alexis Kelner

And the equipment they have now is more conducive to good powder skiing. But I've enjoyed all aspects of snow at Alta. I've enjoyed it in the springtime when you ski spring corn off Cardiff Pass. A lot of time when we were in college we'd go up there in the morning and do two runs off Cardiff Pass, then come back and be ready for afternoon classes, so I've enjoyed all aspects of snow in the back country.

Joey Prokop

What do you think makes a person become a skier as opposed to somebody who maybe goes skiing?

Alexis Kelner

I don't know. I think the wind through the hair and the fact that you're doing something... it's like skating too. You know skating is a fast thing, you're moving fast. I think there's a lot of that to it. It's self-satisfaction of being able to do something that's totally unnatural and doing it well. You know I can't do it well anymore at my age, but I still get the same enjoyment.

Joey Prokop

I think that is interesting how you kind of ebb... it's almost like an arc, where you're learning to ski you're not very good, and then as you move along the mind writes checks that the body can't cash.

Alexis Kelner

Ya. Right now my philosophy is... I used to do all of these very difficult ski tours, you know, like Bells Canyon from Alta and we'd start at two in the morning at Alta and hike up to Mount Baldy then cross over to Peruvian and then cross over to White Pine and Gad Valley--all of those things--and wind up down in Bells Canyons up at Granite. That's a long ski tour, and we used to do this on a fairly regular basis, once a year but you know it was one of our trips that you would do. You know now days... and when we did these things we were exposed to all kinds of avalanche danger. We all had some degree of training. You know I had a Forest Service avalanche certificate back in 1963, but we always, you know managed to survive avalanches. We never got involved in any of them, although, I'm sorry I did get involved in one. On my birthday... we were going to celebrate my birthday on top of Mount Superior and we were... and I brought a magnum of champagne. That's one of those big bottles of champagne, not a regular little bottle. So I had it in my pack plus I had my camera so I was way behind the rest of the group. There were four people ahead of me. We were just... they were two thirds of the way up to Cardiac Pass and I was right at the bottom of the slope ready to start up when the thing

went. It was a big wind deposit and all four of them were on it, and within about two seconds they were all at my feet, none of them buried. It was not a very deep slab. It was maybe about a foot, and it's fanned out rather than converging on itself so it fanned out and I think one fellow was momentarily buried completely, but popped out right at the end.

Joey Prokop

Ya, that's the good feeling... my buddy had three different people with different vantage points.

Alexis Kelner

Ya, lets triangulate. We lucked out. Well I don't think it was all luck. I think it was a lot of good management. I mean we used to come up and do Lake Blanche and Cardiff and Mineral Fork so often from Alta that LaChapelle or Perla or both of them in their research station had a barometer that was calibrated by having a little label that says "kellner, no kellner, or possible kellnered" to see whether I would arrive there or not arrive there. I think Ron Perla has a photograph of that. I'd like to get a copy of that one of these days.

Joey Prokop

Perla... did he work for Alta or did he work for the Forest Service?

Alexis Kelner

He started out... well I think he worked at the Forest Service as a Snow Ranger initially and then when LaChapelle left, Perla became the Director of that Avalanche Research Center, and Perla wrote a whole bunch of excellent papers and he worked on and did the Forest... well he did rescue manuals for the Forest Service on how to rescue things, and then when the Forest Service, for some stupid reason, moved avalanche research to Fort Collins, Colorado he wound up writing the Forest Service's avalanche handbook, and he wanted me to co-author it but I was not with the Forest Service so I wound up being the illustrator. In fact, the Forest Service didn't even want me as an illustrator, but... they had an in-house illustrator who couldn't do a damn thing, according to Ron, and he pressured them. Now my illustrations have appeared in many many avalanche books; the McClung... a thing that mountaineers published. They used my illustrations, and I tried to block that, but they had gone into the Forest Service basement and recovered my art and used it and because I had not insisted that they be one-time use only for the Forest Service, I was out of luck. There were other people that copied that. That's been... my artwork in that avalanche book has been copied more times than I care to even think about.

