

The Alta Experience

Gordon Allcott

Interview Transcript

Gordon Allcott

My name is Gordon Allcott. A lot of people know me as Gordy, but it's Gordon Allcott.

Joey Prokop

Gordon you were a ski patroller up at Alta.

Gordon Allcott

Well, ya, ya. I finally graduated into being a ski patroller.

Joey Prokop

Tell me how that came about. What year did you start in?

Gordon Allcott

(audio upcut) ...cardboard boxes and cut them up roughly to size and try and keep a supply in each toboggan we had on the mountain at the time so that you didn't have to haul them around to the toboggans, but they weren't supplied by anybody, they were just scavenged cardboard boxes, bread boxes, pieces of mattress cover and anything you could get that was corrugated, compliments of Walter Papke you know, that had early patents on corrugation.

Joey Prokop

How about the concept of... when you were patrolling was it on the weekends or when you could get away from school?

Gordon Allcott

Well ya I was up there weekends and couldn't get out of school to do it, but weekends and when I could get a ride up then I could ski volunteer and they'd give me a lift pass to help them out.

Joey Prokop

What got you interested in ski patrol and skiing in general?

Gordon Allcott

Well I like to ski. I started skiing as a young kid on home-made skis my dad made, about seven feet long and I was three feet tall and played around with them and kept playing and graduating up to a little better ones and kept breaking them and whatever. Even in elementary school I was skiing oh a mile

and a half up cross-country through the farm lands and from my place up to Bonneville Golf Course and turn around and ski back. That was an all-day trek for me.

Joey Prokop

So you lived over at 15th and 15th when you were growing up?

Gordon Allcott

Ya, that's where I was born and raised. I could walk down one block to 13th and hitchhike, go skiing. I'd only hitchhike with the cars that had skis on them. I think I only missed once in all the years I tried hitchhiking. I was one of the early hitchhikers.

Joey Prokop

Talk a little bit about that. You'd stick you're thumb out and get a ride with people?

Gordon Allcott

Ya. If they were going skiing... it didn't matter to me where they were going, Alta or Brighton because I just wanted to go skiing and both places recognized the Salt Lake Metropolitan Ski Patrol and appreciated their efforts, so when I first started out it was any place anybody was going skiing, I was going skiing.

Joey Prokop

That's great. It reminds me of my experience. When I lived in the dorms here I didn't have a car so I'd literally do the same thing right basically across the road from here, sit out there with my skis and stick my thumb out and I'd always get a ride right from the dorms right up to...

Gordon Allcott

Well they took lessons from me.

Joey Prokop

What kind of accidents would you see on the mountain with the older non-releasable bindings?

Gordon Allcott

Anything you want to talk about we saw it in those days, but it was a lot more broken legs and lower legs than now days. But you'd have people running into trees. You had people... trees running into people, people running into people and ski pole injuries and puncture wounds in the abdomen, scrotums, you name it.

Joey Prokop

We're used to a world now where there's a groomed run and people could go and there wasn't any machine packing and that kind of thing. Talk a little bit about the snow conditions.

Gordon Allcott

Oh great snow conditions. Ya there was no mechanical equipment on the mountains. Everything was done with shovel or side-step or just ski packed and it was... a lot of times they'd encourage you to go up and help ski pack. They'd encourage people to go up and ski pack and make it better for them on the limited amount of runs that they were trying to ski on, particularly when the snow conditions were a little... not the best conditions, a little heavier. So we used to do a lot of side-stepping and go up and side-step down instead of ski down, then go up and ski down and see what it was like.

Joey Prokop

How about when you'd always see those signs about filling your sitzmark. What's that all about?

Gordon Allcott

Well a sitzmark is when your butt hits the ground and plows a hole like the size of a bathtub depending on how fast you're going and how big your butt was, it would make a pretty good depression in the snow and we tried to encourage people to smooth the edges and take the abruptness out of it. They'd drive in on one side of a great big sitzmark and skis would not climb out the other side and they'd go over forward. It caused a lot of accidents. They... you know you get three feet of snow, new snow and then side step on it. It isn't very well compacted so they could make a pretty good hole in it. It's about like a current day bomb when they throw a bomb for avalanche control it blows a pretty good sized hole in the snow. It's about like skiing into one of those.

Joey Prokop

I guess that could present some problems when you tip's stuck in the other side.

Gordon Allcott

Ya, it almost always... an expert skier can rear back and hit it with his tips unweighted mostly and then climb out of it, but not everybody can do that.

Joey Prokop

How about the concept of the snow snake. Are you familiar with the snow snake?

Gordon Allcott

The snow snake... geez they come and get ya. It's just a term that has been used as an explanation for a fall. You're either dodging a snow snake, or ran over one, or it bit ya or something. That reminds me about the one about the grouse that overnight in the brush and the snow would still be falling and they'd be completely covered over. There may be two feet of snow and they're down inside there, and they got out chasing the powder, skiing and they won't come out of the snow until you're right on top of them and they blast out right under your ski tips, and that gives you heart failure. It just... it really is a shock. You're not expecting them, you can't see them. There may be four or five of them there together. They come out of that snow and just really give you a heart attack. That's not a snow snake... that's a real heart attack.

Joey Prokop

I've had that happen to me before... it was a gully at Park West and that grouse flushed up in front of me and just scared the living hell out of me and then I managed to stay aboard and I followed it down that little gully for a good three turns before he split off one way or another.

Gordon Allcott

Did your heart stop? Not very many people have had that experience but it's an interesting one... speaking of snow snakes.

Joey Prokop

How about the... what did it take to... after you made a rescue on the hill and you had to take someone down on the toboggan? That toboggan had to go back up that Watson's chair. Tell me a little bit about how you got that toboggan to go back up the chair.

Gordon Allcott

Well we didn't have a Watson's chair, but it was Collin's lift.

Joey Prokop

Let's start over again... so loading the Collin's chair with the toboggan, kind of talk me through that.

Gordon Allcott

Well it was always interesting. The early toboggans were just an eight-foot toboggan with a wooden sort of a cradle just to add weight I guess to cradle the body, and it was loaded with some blankets and tarp to cover the person and ropes to tie them in, or straps, and they were all.. the early ones were equipped with four ropes, one on each corner of the toboggan so you could put four people on it or how many people you could get or needed to have or whatever,

and you'd have to wrap it all up and tie it all up, then it would go, oh 150, 180 pounds I would guess. You pull it up parallel to you to the loading station and they would, depending on the expertise of the person that was taking the toboggan, they'd stop the lift or slow it way way way down and you'd... they'd help you get it up and across your lap with the blanket sides across your lap sticking out one side and out the other side. All you had to do was make sure it stayed with you and it didn't snag on one of the cross-arms on the old Collins lift, or any one of a number of other hazards, but you'd proceed on up the hill. It wasn't too bad. You weren't muscles carrying the load, but it was across your legs, not perpendicular across, but diagonally across. The arm of the chair allowed it to be diagonally across, and in the big snow days there was trench in the snow near the top of the Collins face and going into the upper terminal. The snow would be so deep and the towers were so short you had to actually shovel out a trench. It was a little strained getting through there sometimes with the toboggan, not without incidence on occasion, but...

Joey Prokop

How long was that lift ride from the bottom terminal to the top terminal of the old Collins chair?

Gordon Allcott

How long was it? 2600 feet.

Joey Prokop

And how much time did it take?

Gordon Allcott

Well I better say I don't remember. I've timed it a million times but I don't remember.

Joey Prokop

Did that chair... you read some accounts that it was fairly reliable and you hear some accounts that it was very unreliable. What's your assessment of that--the reliability of that Collins chair?

Gordon Allcott

Pretty darn good after Fred Speyer got there and got his ingenious works done and maintenance and everything else it took to make it work. So it was pretty reliable. They had a back-up diesel engine on it. It was electrically powered, but they had a back-up diesel. The diesel was slower, but it would work unless there was something in the power train that had failed or the bull-wheel or something like that where they couldn't put power to it, and that created other problems. You had to evacuate the lift then.

Joey Prokop

When you evacuated the lift... so at this point the chair's not running and you can't get it on the backup power so you have to evacuate the lift? How was that accomplished?

Gordon Allcott

Oh, about as primitive as anything you could do... try and get a rope up to the chair and get them to sit in the... slide off the chair into the noose, or put the noose around their legs, or something, and hope everything stayed put...

Joey Prokop

...and then try to belay them down?

Gordon Allcott

...belay them down. It was... in the early days it took a lot of experimentation and it's matured over the years--the techniques that are used and different areas use different techniques, but it's definitely safer now than it was then. At one time we had a failure. I started working up from the bottom. I happened to be at the bottom, so I was working up from the bottom, and the upper lift operator was working down from the top. Well the old Collins lift was a two-cable lift; there's a traction cable and I don't know what they call the other one...

Joey Prokop

...the grip cable that the chair rode on?

Gordon Allcott

Oh ya, the chair didn't ride on a cable. It was... well it did. I'm sorry.

Joey Prokop

Oh wait a minute so there is the cable on top. Each chair had the two wheels on it, the shim wheels, and then that cable was stationary...

Gordon Allcott

No... Down below... ya that was stationary with the chair. Down below there was a traction cable that pulled it along, so there were two cables up and down. Well the upper lift operator in those days was Rummy Roy or Bob Card or one of those interesting characters that come down and I watched one come down and we had a whole bunch of oh maybe seven year old kids strung out over the Collin's face. He was coming down and I was working my way up to there and I was throwing the rope up and over and talking him down and this guy was coming down from the top and he wasn't a skier, he was a mountain climber and a whatever, and he's coming down and walking on the traction cable and holding onto the other cable going from chair to chair, come down and he'd tie-

ac it in picture mount, and get em untied and he'd go down to the next chair and he worked his way down the mountain that way.

Joey Prokop

...and right down Collin's face that way?

Gordon Allcott

Well ya, down the lift line, ya.

Joey Prokop

So the lift line at some points was probably low enough that people could jump off the chairs?

Gordon Allcott

Well ya, sometimes, depending on the conditions and the time of year...a lot of factors, but we didn't encourage it.

Joey Prokop

Bill Ridding told me a story about a chair stopping one time and he was low coming out of the bottom terminal and the chair stopped and he jumped off and Fred Speyer caught him and he incurred quite a wrath. Let's talk about what kind of a guy Fred Speyer was.

Gordon Allcott

Oh he was a great great hard-headed Austrian. I was going to say a German, but I think he was an Austrian, but well he was great and he was very protective of his equipment. He was hired to make that lift run and keep it running and he did everything in his power, including keeping the chairs on the tracks and the people in the chairs and sitting in the chairs and not jumping out, and not cutting the lines. He was adamant about everything that was going on. The first few years he was just a real Austrian dictator, and that needed to have that there to make everything come together and run. The first operator they had wasn't as demanding and wasn't as good an engineer or as well educated or whatever it took to be that. He didn't smoke the right kind of cigars or something, but Fred was a... I thought he was a great guy always, I had to because he was my boss, and when I went to work as a full-time patrolman he'd ream the customers and rant and rave and stomp his feet and tear off passes and everything under the sun. Well after the first couple of years somebody got him into a public relations course or something and got him to where he would settle down quite a little bit, both with the employees and the paying customers. You could just see the summer after he'd had some training or education, he took it to heart. He was smart and intelligent. He took it to heart and you could see the change. It was very obvious to me, but what do I know about anything?

Joey Prokop

Let's talk a little bit about physically riding that single chair.

Gordon Allcott

It was always interesting. It looks pretty innocent just going by clinkity clankity, clinkity clank, it comes by and you go out and it goes clank over every tower because the wheels have to go up over some solid pieces and then back onto the cable, but unloading the operator basically just had to guide it and make sure you were lined up with chair. It was only two-thirds the width of this chair I'm sitting in, and an arm on one side upright, open on the other two sides and a backrest on it, and his job was to make that final little tweak adjustment to get your but into the seat and it wasn't to necessarily slow it down, because he couldn't slow it down...

Joey Prokop

...just to line you up?

Gordon Allcott

...line the chair up, and you up, and the new people didn't line up too well. The old experts were pretty good, but it was always an interesting challenge. They'd... somebody would cross their skis and flop on their face and you had to stop chair lift. He'd try and keep the chair from hitting them in the back of the head if they stood up.

Joey Prokop

I got hit in the back of the head with the Germanean chair when it was a triple. And I was wearing a helmet. Everyone made fun of me for wearing a helmet, you know, it saved me.

Gordon Allcott

Well it reduced the consequences.

Joey Prokop

Ya... so lets talk a little bit about, so as they swing the chair.

Gordon Allcott

They don't swing the chair.

Joey Prokop

Well they grab the chair.

Gordon Allcott

Well they ease it... they hold back of the chair just... they can move it laterally

three or four inches you know and just try and get it centered on them and it scoops them up and if they sit down in it all is well. If they fail to sit down, it just pushes them off the end of the ramp, and depending on the snow conditions, it's maybe a ten foot drop, or maybe no drop--you're going into a tunnel at the old Collins lift. It just... there are a lot of variables involved season after season and the time of year of the season, but his basic job is to just line it up.

Joey Prokop

You mentioning a story of a nap with Fred Speyer. Lets here that story.

Gordon Allcott

It isn't just a story. I was in the early days of what later turned out to be narcolepsy and I'd require a nap at the drop of a hat. I could go out and work hard and everything else- ride up the lift, get up to the top and the thinking of time was, or matured into this is that there ought to be somebody on the top who could start out with a toboggan if there's an accident reported down below, so they'd try and keep somebody... later on they'd try to keep somebody in the upper terminal, which was built for just the operator, lift operator. They'd improvise a bench in the back of the operators area and I could... when I was working there full-time I could go in there and be at the top of a lift and I think Fred designed the upper terminals just to prevent people like me from sleeping in them--narrow and confining and a 2x6 bench across between the walls. Well I put a shovel up one side and a fanny pack up the other side and back down on the bench and I could sleep there like a log. It was alright as long as there was nothing going on. I was available. I could go out and hit the mountain, but I think the early concept, Fred's early concepts were "no no that's not acceptable." You've got to have a wide awake people on the job. Well they finally conceded or I just kept one step ahead of him or something. I never got fired for it, but I've had a lot of naps. Later on they started building a separate building for the patrol to be on top. They put a heater in and windows, a telephone. That's another one you ought to hear about is the crank telephones sometimes.

Joey Prokop

Was that the communication line?

Gordon Allcott

That was the communication at Alta was the old G.I. field phones--World War II field phones--the crank variety magneto in there to energize the bell on the other end. There were wire lines running up the lift towers. Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't work and there was one line from the bottom of Alta lodge I think, maybe there was a line over to the Snowpine lodge. I can't remember that for sure, but...

Joey Prokop

So it was a classic party line with two rings?

Gordon Allcott

Oh ya, that was it and they'd try and describe where there was an accident or what was going on or watch out for some klutz that's coming up on the chair. He's got no skis on.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk about powder skiing.

Gordon Allcott

Powder skiing? That isn't something you find at Alta is it? (laughs)

Joey Prokop

Every now and again.

Gordon Allcott

Well it comes down on occasion. They've had a big snow year this year, but it hasn't been traditional excellent skiing because there's been too much wind and too many other variables involved in it, so there's a lot of snow, but it hasn't been all primo and in the early days it wasn't all primo. It was good, bad, indifferent. You talk about the good stuff and suffer through the bad stuff.

Joey Prokop

Tell me a little bit about the feeling of skiing the primo really great great days.

Gordon Allcott

Oh that's a day when you had a good, good base underneath that was smoothed out, maybe it was good corn snow or anything, that didn't matter, but it was smoothed out fairly decently. You get 18 inches, two feet of primo light powder and that was some of the best. You'd stand up and you blow and you could blow almost down to your skis, it was that light. Now that was a primo best kind of snow--best kind of conditions. You got them once in a while, not every time. The rest of the time it was something less than primo. It might be four feet of new snow that wasn't primo a light, and that was not good light powder, that was heavy, dense powder, and it took a lot of effort to ski in it, and the light, primo stuff you could just cavort in that and not have any trouble at all if you had any expertise.

Joey Prokop

Talk about maybe some of the techniques that it would take to be able to ski in all conditions, but a lot of people come out here and say, "oh that powder is too

hard to ski in." Talk about what it takes to maybe get those big boards to turn in that.

Gordon Allcott

One of the things that's sort of interesting--a lot of skiers come to Alta and they've been skiing some place else and they come to Alta and they can't make the turns the way they did last year. They only ski two weeks a year, and they were getting pretty darn good over some place else. "Oh I heard about Alta" and they come to Alta and they wonder why their skis don't... why they can't ski the way they used to. Well part of it is Alta's terrain is is not uniform. It's very un-uniform, and they got used to skiing on something that was designed to make the skis turn in back to the center. The runs all curve and concave into the center, and that made their skiing so easy that they didn't have to learn how to ski, they just would relax and the skis would turn down the hill and they'd turn them out of the downhill part of it. Well at Alta, everything is ups and downs and side wards and not that shape... not all of the runs, but a good share of the runs. So you have to be a skier to ski Alta, and you have to be able to ski and weight and un-weight your skis and anticipate what's coming up before you get to it because it's not going to be the same as it was ten yards ahead or behind. So that makes a difference. Ski techniques was basically... when I started at Alta it was mostly the Jarlsberg technique; counter-swing and wedge with a weight change that originated the turn and followed through to a shoulder swing, which is very effective and works fine. That was the epitome of turning and the rest of us were klutzing around until we learned how to do that--doing snow plows and just stem turns and closing them up between the turns and opening 'em up with the edge and turning them and that sort of thing, and it matured and then the stem part of the skiing in powder is not as easily done as it is on a groomed slope so parallel turning is almost a must for the powder snow... that depending on a lot of weight and un-weight skiing, dropping down and let them float up and make your turn, skis turn at the top part of the float, come down again, soak it up to your chin or eyeballs or something and be ready for the next one.

Joey Prokop

How about the fact that when the snow is deep and light and nice like that and you've got that good flat base on it, you can ski some steep stuff.

Gordon Allcott

If it will hold the snow...

Joey Prokop

Lets talk about a little bit about... did you enjoy skiing on steeper pitches and letting them run a little bit?

Gordon Allcott

Sure... steeper pitches and let them run 'em. We used to run steeper pitches at Alta mid-week, not during weekends, but from the top of the Peruvian lift. The old Peruvian lift went west up to the ridge up above the punchbowl, twin power poles up on top there. Well we used to make time runs from the top down through the punchbowl and down through the meadow and down through Nina's Curve and out the bottom... no turns chutes run, and that was always fun. We'd always have people down in the meadow that would hold up traffic and say, "Hey, we got a couple of high-ballers coming through, will ya stand by for a minute?" And we could cut them lose down through there. Management didn't ever encourage it, but didn't ever get fired for it either.

Joey Prokop

Out on west Rustler, somewhere out where there aren't as much skiers, you know, you even see patrollers out there.

Gordon Allcott

Pretty cranking them up, no that's the story of our lives as cranking them up.

Joey Prokop

When you say, "cranking them up" talk me through that.

Gordon Allcott

Just let them run. And we used to do it with bear-trap bindings, the oldest leg breakers that were around, and it would be a 65, second run from the top of the Peruvian lift down out through Nina's Curve and to the bottom of the Collins lift, and your heart would always go into your mouth when you hit the bottom of Nina's Curve because it changes transition and drops off steeper and you think I just can't go any faster and that drops out under... ohhhh and you're going 60 or 70 miles an hour I guess down through there. It was always fun.

Joey Prokop

Let's talk theoretical. Let's talk about skiing lifestyle. You've lived a skiing lifestyle. What was the attraction to make you just always want to ski? How does it get into your heart and soul?

Gordon Allcott

I guess just paddling my way up to Bonneville Golf Course and back. In elementary school somebody... I went to Uinta Elementary School and somebody's family had an interest in skiing and a lot of kids liked to go skiing and they chartered a bus and anybody that wanted to go skiing, they took them. If you had a dollar or something or other we could ride the bus up to Alta. Well that was the first time I went to Alta in my little old paddle(ee) skis and me in elementary school. Well, I had fun paddling around in the snow and digging in the snow and snow up to your kazoo and that was my first visit to Alta and I

don't know what year it was but way back.

Joey Prokop

Did it seem... it sounds like you were just smitten with it immediately...

Gordon Allcott

It didn't intimidate me. I enjoyed all of it. The only one intimidator was the Baldy Chutes. When I was on ski patrol I used to have a nightmare every once in a while about having to rescue somebody broken and smashed into the rock up in the Baldy Chutes and I had to get up there and get them evacuated out of there, and this was in the early days when there was no mechanical equipment, no... Nothing except grunt and groan.

Joey Prokop

Did they control that as far as opening access to it...?

Gordon Allcott

Not well controlled, but there weren't all that many people interested in going up there and trying to ski the Baldy Chutes. It was an elitist skier thing that most, even the top notch Alta skiers, most of them would never go to the effort of doing that. These are people that had skied all of Europe and a lot of places come in and it's there and they figured we've gotta go ski that, so it grew in popularity over the years. Elfrieda and Jim Shane and people like that would go up there and have a party and picnic and ski the chutes out, but my nightmares were having to go up there and evacuate somebody. I never had to do it but that was one of my worst fears was having to go up there and do that.

Joey Prokop

At least it was never realized.

Gordon Allcott

Never realized it!

Joey Prokop

Let's talk a little bit about the high traverse. It's kind of the main highway to get out to Greely; you know you get out to High Rustler, to get out to Stone Crusher and things like that. Right now you see people whipping out there so fast... has it always been kind of a...

Gordon Allcott

No, it's always has been there. The mountains haven't changed, and the traverse around to there was done in the early days to get to High Rustlers, but it wasn't a groomed super-highway or anything like that--it was hope you're

following the right traverse and elevation and gradients to get through the hazards of rock cliffs and trees and things like that along the way. Later on it became more and more popular but in the early days, ya you'd go out there, but not everybody. It was like the Baldy Chutes--it was a pretty special time and place and not skied up with moguls the way it is now days, so it was entirely different. Patrol nowadays has to do grooming work out there and I don't know how elaborate they go now days, but we didn't used to have to worry about that too much. I took an interesting ride out of Stone Crusher one time on a sweep.

Joey Prokop

How did that go?

Gordon Allcott

Interesting. I was on a sweep. I was supposed to be going out beyond there. On the traverse you have to stop periodically and make calls and look down the mountain and make sure everybody's off down below you, then continue on around. I got into Stone Crusher and pulled up for a stop and one ski got on the tree limb or something or other and the uphill ski got under my downhill ski and I fell over uphill and sitting on a ski that was facing down the hill with a ski that was still on my foot, so I was falling and sliding down the hill riding the one ski like a toboggan. The other skiing trying to get me stopped but it couldn't bite into the snow all the time, so it was an interesting ride down there. I got stopped and called in and said, "Hey, I didn't finish my sweep around the high traverse."

Joey Prokop

Oh, so you were going to go from the top of Stone Crusher around to Rustler... so you fell off the rocks and down into it?

Gordon Allcott

Ya... so that was an unusual... no damage done or anything, but it was a... well an interesting ride. The only other time I had a bad experience on Stone Crusher... I was up there with Monty Atwater hauling powder up. Instead of being concave, it was convex with a big snow pillow built up in there. He wanted to shoot it out and that was the day before the avalanchers and the recoilless rifles and so on, and so we hauled this powder up there and he set the charges and he was with the Forrest Service. I was just a grunt helping out, contributed by the lift company, and he had a... they wanted to film it and didn't know what they were going to get, but they wanted to film it. He had a little 16 millimeter camera and I was holding the camera and I got around the corner a little bit from the explosion, and there was another cameraman down at the the top of Schuss Gully some place, looking up. They were going to film it from down there and well they shot it and it was a good shot, and boy it did everything it was supposed to do. My camera--I had it running--and I got sky

and I got snow and I got trees and more sky and snow and trees. Finally I got snagged onto a tree and looked down the canyon with the camera and took the rest of it, but the sliders were clear down at the bottom and you couldn't see the bottom photographer. He had disappeared in a snow cloud. That thing had broken around the hillside and into the snow where we were standing in the trees, and I'd rattled down the trees, you know, two or three tree lengths before I got stopped and the camera kept running, but I didn't get much of the down-the-slope action, but...

Joey Prokop

So basically you weren't taking the time to focus the camera... you were taking a ride?

Gordon Allcott

We got all through and said, I don't know about the cameraman down on the far end. I don't know if we wiped him out or not. That's one of those things, you know, he was right in line with the slide. When we got through the slide had gone down and filled up most of Cork Screw and jumped over into Nina's Curve and just the snow cloud, snow dust, covered up the cameraman on the far side. But no one ever knew until we got down out of there. There were blocks of snow in there the size of D8 cats down in Cork Screw. Again, it was no mechanical equipment that would go in there and try and pack it out and smooth it out and make it a run again... hard work.

Joey Prokop

How about some of the people who were involved in some of that... Sverre Engen. Did you know him well at all?

Gordon Allcott

Well, ya, ya, his first year he was a snow ranger there when I started. He proceeded Monty Atwater. He was a snow ranger, and Louis Engen his wife-- she's the one who taught me out to knit in the Goldminers Daughter after hours. I didn't do a lot with Sverre, but I knew him and knew the whole family, then he left that job and started working on the Peruvian Lodge I guess--partnership up there. Alf came in and of course I knew Alf and Evelyn over the years extensively.

Joey Prokop

One thing that really strikes me is you see old movies of Alf and it seemed like the like was always having fun...

Gordon Allcott

Oh ya, that was his forte was to smile and have fun... broke my leg but just go out and have fun. I skied with him and watched him do things that were pretty

astounding and I'd try and emulate him and so on, but he was a true athlete in his day and just rock solid and he could take an ear fall and break a bone in his ankle and not fall and continue right on down and tape it up and he'd be back out skiing. I mean that's the way he was... that's the way he always has been. In his later years I taught for him one year and decided teaching wasn't my bag of worms and went back to patrolling and in the later years he'd be out skiing with some old duffer that came in and had to ski with Alf Engen and they'd ski a little bit and have to stop and take a breather. I'd always ski up and stop and he'd introduce me as "Mr. Alcott" to whoever he was skiing with, he'd say, "He's an old time skier from Alta."

Joey Prokop

So he had that Norwegian lilt to his voice? An accent?

Gordon Allcott

Oh ya, a strong accent, ya. But it didn't matter if it was Lowell Thomas or somebody else, he'd always say, "Well I don't know whether you remember Mr. Alcott." And he called me by "Mr. Alcott" for years and years and years.

Joey Prokop

You skied at Alta for all those years and met so many people over there it's almost like a fraternity or brotherhood or friendship. What do you think of that? I guess Alta is a friendly place in a way. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Gordon Allcott

What can I say? I'm part of the friendly people. You mentioned you knew Rick McClain, or I mentioned you knew Rick McClain. The first time I ever ran into him was I was doing some amateur photography and along with patrolling I'd always carry a camera in my side of my coat and I saw him come off the lift... saw him a couple of times there and come off the lift one time and he was the mangiest looking hermit you ever wanted to see: a beard, and snot in his nose, and hoarfrost all over everything and just really mangy looking. I just stopped him when he got off the lift and I said, "Hey, would you let me take your picture just for my own personal use?" "Ya" he said, "I'd be glad to." Well, that was beginning of an acquaintanceship that lasted over the years. We'd get together and I'd ski with him once and a while, here and there, he and some of his buddies, and they'd always invite me to join them after skiing up to Gold Miner's Daughter, have a beer, and that was sort of a traditional thing... let the parking lots unload and get rid of the people and then they'd go down the canyon, but... so ya there was a good group and mish mashed and people came and go over the years and an interesting bunch of people. Well I can't remember what are their names, but there was Tina, she was the young gal that skied with them, and I never knew her other than Tina. It was always Tina and Tina Tina. Another one was Barbara... oh two sisters... Yamada. Interesting people join us quite

often after hours. People would come over the years: nurses, secretaries, high-school drop-outs and college drop-outs and college graduates. They just all seemed to flock together. Out on the mountain it was, "Hey, let's go over here!" "No I can't I gotta go over here, I'm working." "Oh you're working?" (ha ha ha). "Well, o.k." But we'd ski together some, but it was always a good, friendly relationship. If you ever needed some help with a toboggan or anything else and they were around, they could dive right in and help you out. I mean when you're working on somebody sometimes you didn't have enough muscle power to accomplish what you needed to do, and these kind of people would always dive in and help ya. Sometimes it was only family that would help because they were the only ones around. Sometimes it was all sorts of volunteers. One of the worst cases I ever worked on, (hardest working) way back in the early days grunt and groan with a four-rope toboggan and three feet of new snow and out on Wild Cat face, six-foot six guy and 225 pounds... he broke his leg like you would not believe... just really mish mashed it. Well I got the toboggan out there and and got down to him and got him splinted up--card boarded splint--wrapped him up, and he was big enough that he was almost hanging over both ends of the toboggan. It was not a big problem getting him down off of the mountain, but then you got down to the flats and you had to go clear from the bottom of the Wild Cat, which is over by Rustler lodge, way west there, and you had to grunt and groan and get clear over to below the Alta lodge through that deep powder snow, breaking trail with that load and then take him up the rope tow to the lodge, which was all uphill. You had to grab onto the rope and pull that load up. Got him in and thawed out and check out and decide what we're going to do with him. Then we had to get him from there out from the basement of the Alta lodge up the ramp to the roadway, and that was more of an uphill climb and grunt and groan. Well it's more than a one-man-job... BELIEVE YOU ME!

Joey Prokop

I guess we have to make that distinction that the road didn't... there isn't the parking lot down there...

Gordon Allcott

There was no parking lot. There was no snow machines. There was no cats. There was no nothing mechanical except the rope tow and the ski lift, so everything else was muscle power and it took a lot of muscle power to handle cases like that and get them up to the road, get them into a vehicle and down to the hospital. If you didn't have an ambulance come in that was... the ambulance was typically the Salt Lake County Fire Department, off-duty fireman or something manning the ambulance. They weren't very well trained and...

Joey Prokop

So occasionally was there an ambulance that was stationed up there ready to

take people down?

Gordon Allcott

No. Well, I'll say no, but Camp Kearns was still active and they were giving troops R & R they'd issue ski equipment to troops that were ready to go over seas from Camp Kearns. Some of these people from the Deep South had never seen snow in their life, let alone ever learn how to ski. They'd load them up in these trucks and bring them up to Alta and turn them loose. Well we were picking them up all over the mountains, all different shapes and conditions. They may have had army ambulances there, I don't remember whether they did or whether they just put them in the backs of trucks and hauled them back down, but we hauled a lot of them out that way. There was one that I... a guy came up to me and he said, "My buddies up there in the trees and he's done broke his leg. I think it's broken." I put a splint on it with pine bows and the bindings off of my skis, but I couldn't get him out of there. Can you come help me get him out of there?" Figured out where he was and ya, we can go get him out of there. That was a funny one.

Joey Prokop

On those kinds of things back in the day when you first starting skiing up there Alta was fairly rustic.

Gordon Allcott

It's fairly rustic, ya. We had an army cranked telephones, top of the lift, the bottom of the lift and into the lodge you know--three rings is you and four rings is you and one long one is 'get the heck out of here' or something, I don't remember, but that was all the communication there was--smoke signals or runners and things like that. Telephone line into town was one circuit--went over to Brighton and Park City and down through the country that way, not fully dependable.

Joey Prokop

How about the road, how that has progressed over the years. Was that road somewhat treacherous at times?

Gordon Allcott

Well it's like it is now--snow-covered and icy, or not snow-covered and icy or any one of a number of things--slides across it. There wasn't the major emphasis there is now to get it cleared off, keep it cleared or control avalanches on the road in the early days. It was catches catch can, and it was steadily improved over the years. There's no question about that. There was a time that Coal Pit came down the slide, the cirque up above there, the whole cirque must of come out--came down through Coal Pit down at the mouth of the canyon down across the highway and up the other side, packed full of timber and snow

and they'd bring snow plow equipment up there and try and chisel on it. It wouldn't work. They'd bring a rotary plow up and try and cut into it and it would hit logs and timber. That didn't work. I mean it took them two weeks to get that road opened up. So that's what you had to face in the road conditions, and there were people that hauled fire wood from that slide in the summer for two or three years. They'd go up there and load up all of their winter firewood, all delivered down in a relatively close area. I don't think it's ever come down as big as that one since that year in 1948 I think.

Joey Prokop

What do you think makes Alta the most special?

Gordon Allcott

What makes it the most special? Snow conditions, mountain conditions, and the management of the lift area. I've known Fred Speyer--didn't worry too much about the mountain, some but it wasn't his primary responsibility. Chick Morton's his successor a lot of improvements in mountain management and mountain conditions. And then Onno Wieringa, he graduated. I taught him everything he knew about ski patrolling, well not quite, but got him through ski patrolling and graduated and migrated and assistant to Chick and then took over when Chick retired from general operations, so I've known him for a lot of years. But their management, their philosophy is... it's changed over the years, but it's still pretty basic skier, Alta for the locals and everybody else is invited to come along.

Joey Prokop

Can I get you to say that again for me?

Gordon Allcott

Alta is for the locals. That's their philosophy. That's why they started the Salt Lake Winter Sports Association. Everybody else is welcome to come along and enjoy the good snow.

Joey Prokop

When you were on patrol did you have to do a lot of... you talked about that one slide up on Stone Crusher where you were hauling powder around? Did you do a lot of hand charging and ski cutting and that kind of thing?

Gordon Allcott

That was all there was for avalanche control in the early days. Let it subside and study it and figure out what it was going to do naturally and then they started doing more and more hand-charge work, but that meant climbing up and putting a hand charge out in the area that you wanted to see if it was going to move or not move, which is a little hazardous. Some of the smaller areas you

would ski cut--check it that way to see if it would go, and if it didn't go then they could open it up--the Forrest Service would open it up, so I did a lot of ski cutting for the snow rangers. Basically that was skiing down from high down into the middle of the snow pack and making a check turn and then head for the trees on the other side to see if you made it--see if it went or not.

Joey Prokop

Did you have any close calls in those?

Gordon Allcott

Oh you'd touch off some on occasion, not... I didn't ever ride any out then, but I've triggered quite a few little... if you were down in the bottom of it and upside down it would be traumatic. We used to do that quite regularly.

Joey Prokop

I guess that's pretty wild that people kind of do this... it's fairly dangerous work but it seems like fun work.

Gordon Allcott

Oh it's... you got to like doing it or you shouldn't be doing it. Some people can't do it.

Joey Prokop

What made you like doing it?

Gordon Allcott

Just inborn into me I guess... just sort of adventuresome. My dad was, but he used an old Model T and an old Model A Ford touring around all over the country before there were paved roads in a lot of the country. He was sort of an adventuresome kind, so that characteristic I think I got from my father. Outside of that, who knows. He's the one that made the original skis that were hand-made wooden skis. I never saw him on skis but he made them...

Joey Prokop

I guess he wanted you to go out side and play hu?

Gordon Allcott

...get the heck out of here. No, I don't know what he wanted.

Joey Prokop

I think you've covered a lot of ground here. Are there any last remarks you'd like to make regarding skiing Alta?

Gordon Allcott

Oh no, just go ski it and have fun. Keep out of the avalanches. Obey the closed area signs. They're really serious and they know more about it than we ever did in the early days. If they say it's closed, it's for a reason.

Joey Prokop

So when you say that they know more about it, in the early day's maybe they've built on the body of knowledge that a lot of people have built up over the years. Who are some of these people that really kind of pioneered...?

Gordon Allcott

You mentioned Perla up on Mount Baldy. When I first met him I think he was a school teacher at East High School, and he found out I'd had some early experience with the slides and avalanches and he wanted to know everything that I knew about slides and avalanches. Well he later went on and got a doctorate degree in glaciology or something, and he's an international slide expert. Monty Atwater was an artilleryman in the military and he had explosives background and experience. He built on it. Sverre Engen did a lot of the early research on the snow storms and the wind patterns and everything else. Alta actually was quite a renowned place for known avalanches... still is, but it's not an exclusive thing. It can be any area.

Joey Prokop

How about Ed LaChapelle. Did you know him?

Gordon Allcott

I didn't know him long. He already had his expertise started and was there and I'm sure he built a lot of the information and so on. Recoilless rifles... oh the guy that re-started the ski area up in Pine Dale, Wyoming the last few years for skiing the year 2000 was a military artilleryman and he developed a reputation and traveled as an expert on setting up blind firing so that during the fog and the storms and all the bad conditions, they could do blind firing for avalanche control and known slide areas. He did that for railroads and mining companies and stuff around, and this is the same thing that Monty Atwater did. He developed the avalauncher and did his consulting work doing avalanche control for mines and things around South America, U.S... Stuart Thompson was the one that started the ski area, or re-started the ski area in Wyoming and his expertise... he got, you know, international reputation for doing that work in Canada and Alaska, and he got an invite to go over to Russia and study their records, and he went... traveled, traveled, traveled clear into the middle of Siberia where all their records were kept. He said he walked into this records room and there over the door was a quotation from, I think it was Monty Atwater, a quotation from Alta, Utah hanging over the doors. I don't remember what the quotation was. He says it was amazing that the records that they had,

none of it was on a computer. It was all on paper. They had an amazing amount of records there, and he was allowed to go in and research different things and translator and work with them.

Joey Prokop

You mentioned before that Alta is for locals and everyone else is allowed to kind of come up and enjoy it. You've traveled the world with your Alta ski patrol jacket on. Have you... has that opened doors for you?

Gordon Allcott

Oh ya... in Europe the National Ski Patrol I was earlier affiliated with... I got a national number, 963. That won't mean anything to anybody but ten people out there nowadays. I maintain my affiliation with the National Ski Patrol even though I was a professional at Alta, and National had an exchange program that they worked out... the National did, which was all over the U.S., and we went to Wengen, Switzerland and spent a week over there. We had seminars every day on some aspect of the way they were doing things: demonstrations and so on, lift evacuation, avalanche control, toboggans, helicopters, wire line rope repelling and things like that where they're head and shoulders ahead of us. Very very very interesting, but it opened doors for the law enforcement--they all knew of Alta. The ski school instructors knew of Alta. Everybody would comment, "Oh geez Alta... we'd chase you down and ski the powder." We had some excellent, excellent powder contrary to the normal for that ski area, which is new snow... is usually pretty heavy. They use all of the tourists that are skiing there... wait until it gets packed out with the groomers (grooming machines), then they'd go skiing, though we had had good light powder and it stayed light enough to ski, and we skied areas--went up one area and everybody was skiing on the right while we went to the left and made new tracks in the powder... went down and we were going to do it again and I said, "Oh no, can't do it again. That's closed for avalanche control." Things like that. We had a good time there. Then we went to ideal skiing for a week and we went to Innsbruck, Austria and it was the year before the Olympics there. We had the same thing, uh different experiences with the rescue groups from there and where the auch head toboggans were made and their use and development. Very interesting--got to see all of the Olympic venues. There was a downhill race on the men's downhill course. I got to go there on the day they were having a race there, and the women's downhill on another venue that they were going to use in the Olympics. I got to see all of that. I wanted to run that women's downhill course, not the men's. That one was a little bit hairy, but women's downhill course I would have given my eye-teeth to go and run that one, but we were able to see it from the ridge on the opposite side from where the racecourse was so we could see the whole length of the downhill... very very interesting. I would have liked to have run that. But it opened doors every place we went. We had one side trip to Saint Anton... Saint Chrisophe? One day we rented a van and went

up there and walking through the parking lot people would say, "Oh there's a guy from Alta, we'll follow him and learn how to ski in the powder." They were skiing on ice. Don't follow me. Follow some of these eastern skiers that know how to ski it. So ya, its opened doors, but I haven't skied extensively all over the West because when you're affiliated with Alta why go someplace else? I mean I'm not spoiled or anything, but Targhee is the closest I've had to Alta powder. They've sort of chewed up the mountain and contaminated it with people, so it's not as good as it used to be.

Joey Prokop

You said that the mountain hasn't changed anything.

Gordon Allcott

No the mountain stays the same basically. It's Forrest Service land. They can't tear up the mountain too much. Trees grow and they cut them down and people look so scant because you're cutting down trees, but it's... the mountains are still basically the mountains. The snow basically comes and some years are horrendous snows and some years are scant snows and that doesn't change--it just cycles around and around. Old skiers become obsolete and new skiers take their place. That's about it.

Joey Prokop

That is it. Perfect.