

11 caught; 5 partly buried and 3 buried; 2 injured

Weather Conditions

The weather on Sunday, January 15, was clear and reasonably warm for January in the Wasatch Mountains. The temperature in the Alta parking lot at 0930 was 24°F. Winds were gusting between 15 and 20 m.p.h.

Several days earlier, strong northwest winds had built up considerable wind slab at higher elevations. On Saturday, several avalanches were shot down at Alta, and several more were brought down at both Alta and Brighton on Sunday. The avalanches at Brighton, however, were much larger than those at Alta, signaling a higher instability in the Brighton area.

Accident Summary

A party of 13 skiers assembled at Alta on the morning of January 15 for a ski tour that would take them over Flagstaff Ridge and end at Silver Fork Lodge in Big Cottonwood Canyon. Before leaving, one member of the party called the Forest Service to check on avalanche conditions. He was told that the slab conditions created by recent west and northwest winds were still present. There was no widespread avalanche danger, but there was a very definite localized danger on high, lee slopes due to the heavy wind drifting during the last two days. He was also advised to stick to the ridges as much as possible and to avoid any deep drift pockets on lee slopes.

This was a group of well-experienced, well-equipped Wasatch Mountain Club members. All had experience in ski touring, but to different degrees. Two of the members had recently taken the National Ski Patrol Circle A Avalanche Course, and another member had received first aid training. The group's equipment included adequate clothing and food, climbing skins, avalanche cords, six avalanche probes, six first aid kits, and an Austrian portable toboggan.

The group climbed to the ridge, reaching it just west of Flagstaff Peak. Avalanche cords were used on the steeper slopes, but snow conditions appeared to be stable along the route that was followed. Party members

were advised to maintain a reasonable separation during the climb.

Once on the ridge the group traveled toward the east. Snow conditions varied from loose and reasonably light in wooded areas to extremely hard crust in the open areas. Except when traversing around Flagstaff Peak and around another minor peak about a half mile farther east, the group remained on the ridge. At the lowest point on the ridge above the head of Silver Fork, the group stopped for lunch.

The Silver Fork slope directly below the point where the group ate lunch faces a northeasterly direction. This slope, as well as those to the left (west) were devoid of trees. However, to the right (east) were several clusters of fairly large trees. To gain the protection of this vegetation, and to get farther away from the lee slopes of the recent winds, it was suggested that skiers who preferred not to ski down the fall line take a traverse to the right (east) toward the trees. The time was 1430.

Two of the first three skiers to leave the ridge, Milton Hollander and Lee Steortz, skied straight down; the third, Peter Hovingh, went to the right a short distance and then straight down. Several others left the ridge and headed to the right. Then, as if the enthusiasm to ski suddenly struck the group, all but two, Charles Keller and Ernest Katten, of the remaining skiers left the ridge. One turned to the left (west) and four others followed. They had proceeded 40 to 50 yards and were skiing very close together when the shot-like sound of the fracture was heard. The snow on the slope immediately broke into large slabs and began to slide. Of the two remaining on the ridge, only one, Keller, was able to witness the entire slide. It was impossible for one person to keep track of 11 people below. When the snow stopped sliding, the location of more than three or four of them was very uncertain. The five who had skied to the left (west) remained standing during most of the slide, but when three of them finally fell, they were lost from view.

Rescue

Because the fracture was just several feet