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Total snowfall had been normal in the Wasatch for the winter of 1969-1970. April snowfall, however, had been considerably above average assuring a lingering, deep snowpack at high elevations as spring stretched toward summer. Exceptionally warm weather made the weekend of May 16 and 17 excellent for hiking in the mountains. Both days saw the temperature reaching into the upper seventies even at higher elevations. A warm, dry wind blew in from the west across the Great Salt Lake.

**Accident Summary**

On Sunday, May 17, four young people were picnicking up Big Cottonwood Canyon east of Salt Lake City. They had picked a spot along a stream near the Storm Mt. Picnic Ground and near the mouth of Stairs Gulch.

Around 1500, the four picnickers watched as three hikers walked by and headed toward Stairs Gulch. A short time later the four young people were amazed to see the stream in front of them suddenly stop flowing, quickly being reduced to a mere trickle. Curious, they walked around a huge boulder upstream from their picnic site and saw that an enormous wet-snow avalanche had slid down Stairs Gulch and dammed up the stream. The avalanche had missed the picnickers by little more than 100 feet, piling debris 50 feet deep across the streambed. They quickly remembered the three hikers that had gone into this area only a short time earlier. No sign of the hikers could now be seen anywhere up the canyon. One of the picnickers then hurried to the nearest telephone to alert the Sheriff's office.

**Rescue**

The Sheriff's Search and Rescue group responded by rounding up a crew of men and sending them to the avalanche area. Probe poles were sent down from Brighton Ski Area, and a total of 17 men began probing the

debris. At the same time a check of vehicles at the picnic ground parking lot was established to check for any missing persons in the canyon.

As the probing continued, U.S. Forest Service District Ranger Ames Harrison climbed to the top of Stairs Gulch seeking the missing hikers. At about 1830 while at a safe vantage point at the top of the gulch, Harrison saw the remaining snow in the catchment basin suddenly break loose! He instantly radioed to the rescuers at the bottom that another avalanche was on its way.

The rescuers scattered, some fleeing across the stream and others clawing up the rock sides of the gulch. The wet snow avalanche was not fast moving, and all men made it to safety; three men, however, were caught but not buried by the moving snow.

After this narrow escape, the rescuers regrouped to determine whether anyone was missing. It was ascertained that all the men were accounted for. Meanwhile, the car check had revealed neither unattended cars nor any reports of missing persons in the canyon. In view of the unsafe working conditions, it was decided to suspend the rescue operation unless some evidence turned up indicating that someone might be buried in the avalanche.

No missing persons report was ever filed, and finally when the snow melted out weeks later, no victims were found. Although no one had been buried in the first avalanche, the rescuers did not know this and were forced to search for possible victims. The rescue effort narrowly averted a disaster of its own.

**Avalanche Data**

Both avalanches running out of Stairs Gulch were classified as WS-N-4. Warm air temperatures and strong solar radiation had greatly weakened the deep snowpack in the starting zone, bringing it to an isothermal state. This finally resulted in failure. The slides were wet, heavy, and slow moving. Both ran about 1½ miles in length, dropped approximately 3,500 feet vertically, were 150 feet in width, and deposited snow about 50 feet in