

him. Larson was extremely lucky, few buried avalanche victims—especially traveling alone—ever get to tell their story.

84-15 **OCTOBER 17, 1984**

Mt. Kelso, Colorado

2 backcountry skiers caught, 1 buried and killed

Weather Conditions

The season's first snows fell at the end of September and the shallow snow never melted from the shaded north-facing slopes. Almost daily light snows fell in October, but the shallow snow was subjected to a strong temperature gradient. By the middle of October the lowest layers had changed into well-developed, faceted snow grains—depth hoar—on the high elevation, north-facing slopes.

At nearby Berthoud Pass, less than 10 miles north of Mt. Kelso, 46 inches of snow had fallen from late September to October 16. The most significant snow was 10 inches that was reported on the morning of the 16th.

On the morning of the 17th, another 2 inches of new snow was reported at Berthoud Pass. Skies were overcast with occasional very light snow falling. The temperature at 0940 was 21°F.

Accident Summary

The new season was off to a terrific start with fresh mountain snows, but no ski areas were open so two Summit County men, Dale Einstahr, 31, and Dan Johnson headed into the backcountry in search of powder. On the morning of the 17th, the men pulled into Bakerville, a very small mountain hamlet on Interstate 70 about 5 miles east of Loveland Ski Area. They were able to drive most of the way up the Stevens Gulch road. Just past the abandoned Josephine Mine they left their vehicle and bush-whacked up to the north-northeast ridge of Kelso Peak. They followed the gentle wind-blown ridge to the summit of the 13,164-foot peak. After a brief lunch break the pair were ready to start down the north face, a shallow bowl-like feature that ends in a long and very narrow gully.

At 1300 hours, in swirling clouds, snowfall and winds, Johnson pushed off the summit. Wanting to get a feel for the snow and potential avalanche conditions he ski cut the slope making several "Z's" and stopped about 100 vertical feet below the summit. Excitement and expectations ran high, it looked like their goal of several thousand vertical feet of deep-powder skiing—in October—was to be a reality. Einstahr then skied down and past Johnson. About 100 feet below Johnson, Einstahr hit some buried rocks. He stopped and did a kick turn. Suddenly a fracture tore across the slope at Johnson's feet, tipping him over onto bare ground. When he scrambled back onto his feet, Einstahr was gone and the avalanche had increased in size.

Johnson struggled down along the bare ground, stripped clean by the avalanche. A little over 1,000 vertical feet from the summit the debris started where the moving snow had funneled into the narrow gully. From that point debris filled the narrow gully—in places only 20–30 feet wide—for another 1,000 vertical feet. Lacking rescue equipment, all Johnson could do was kick and scuff the snow as he searched the debris. The only clue he found was Einstahr's backpack. It had been ripped off his back and was carried to the very end of the debris.

After 2 hours of searching and finding no other clues, Johnson gave up his search. He returned to their vehicle and drove down to the Bakerville Inn to report the accident.

Rescue

Shortly before 1600 hours, the Clear Creek County Sheriff's Department notified Alpine Rescue Team of the avalanche. While the rescue team responded, the rescue leader asked for assistance from nearby Loveland Ski Areas. The patrollers were busy getting ready to open their area the next day. The first rescuers arrived at Bakerville around 1700 hours, and the first rescue column, consisting of Loveland ski patrollers and Johnson, headed out. In a four-wheel-drive pickup with all the wheels chained, they were able to drive to within a quarter-mile of the avalanche. They walked in the rest of the way and reached the base of the slide at 1755 hours. An additional column of five rescuers from Alpine and one friend of the victim followed closely behind. Other rescuers were dispatched as they arrived.