

than usual, and the control team simply tossed their charge too high in the gully to be effective. The slab was only waiting for a trigger. Billington was lucky that only the lower portion of the gully released. The small slide enable him to swim in the flow of the avalanche. And once again swimming motions—he said he did a crawl-type stroke—proved to be effective and enabled Billington to get to the surface. Even in this small avalanche he was very lucky that he wasn't injured or even killed. Years earlier another skier was less fortunate (see accident 80-14).

85-8 FEBRUARY 21, 1985

Alta, Utah

1 out-of-bounds skier caught and buried

Weather Conditions

After 6 days of dry and sunny conditions, snow started to fall at the Alta Ski Area late on February 19. By the morning of the 20th Alta had received 10 inches of new snow and the light snow continued to fall through the day and into the night. By morning of the 21st skies had cleared, and snow stake showed another 5 inches of new snow had fallen. The water equivalency of the storm total was 1.87 inches. At 0530 the temperature was 13°F, and it would warm to 32°F that afternoon.

Accident Summary

On the morning of February 21, Utah skiers turned out in droves at the local ski areas to enjoy the fresh powder and sunny skies. One of those skiers, Ron Gregory, 34, of Salt Lake City, headed up Little Cottonwood Canyon to Alta. He had brought with him climbing skins and his avalanche rescue beacon, but intending to ski only within the ski area he stowed his gear in a locker at the base of the ski area. Gregory managed only one run off the Wildcat ski lift when the crowded lift lines soured his desire to ski the ski area. Wanting to ski less crowded slopes Gregory decided to venture into the backcountry. He returned to the base area and retrieved his skins and beacon.

Gregory took the rope tow to the Albion Lift. While riding up Albion, Gregory spotted a backcountry skier traversing a steep west-southwest facing slope. With skins on his telemark skis Gregory headed to Sunset Ridge. Alone, he was afraid to ski off the ridge until some other skiers arrived. Gaining confidence with the arrival of other skiers he asked if they would watch him ski down. They agreed, and Gregory skied off the ridge toward the bottom of Catherine's Pass.

Gregory took off his skis and hiked up Catherine's Pass and headed to the north and west toward Mt. Wolverine (10,795 feet). In a small bowl off Wolverine he met a family from New York on their first trip to Utah. About 20 tracks snaked down the bowl. Looking over toward the Solitude Ski Area a southwest-facing backcountry bowl had been skied from "side to side." The only avalanche activity he saw was off East Cardiff, and that avalanche he thought had been triggered by explosives the day before. At this point Gregory decided to ski down Patsy Marley, a southwest-facing mountainside to the east of Albion Basin, back into the Alta Ski Area. At about 1330 hours he skied off Mt. Wolverine by traversing to the west and downward through the scattered trees. Along the way he occasionally jumped up and down with as much force as possible just to see if he could initiate any local failures. He got nothing.

Gregory stopped his traverse at the last sure safe spot to survey the slope below. He felt a small triggered release was possible. He thought that such an avalanche would be very small and that he could ski out of its way, and such an avalanche would not reach the ski area below. There were no skiers below him, so he started down. His skis carved through the fresh snow, spraying snow up onto his body as he linked his first few turns. By about Gregory's sixth turn something was wrong; he tells what happened next: "I saw the snow cracking on my right side and ahead of me. I looked further to the right, and I could see snow fracturing into sections about 3 square feet and then into smaller sections. I then looked left and in back I saw my last few tracks disappearing and the fracture line forming above and all around me. The avalanche didn't start at the fracture line and move down, but seemed to all move in unison—the snow above me, below and on both sides of me began moving instantly. I thought of skiing