

**TWIN LAKES RESERVOIR, WEST OF BRIGHTON SKI AREA,**

19870215

**UTAH** | February 15, 1987

One sidecountry skier caught, fully buried, and killed. Organized rescue arrived at the scene within 20 minutes of the accident but could not locate the victim alive.

**SITE**

Twin Lakes Reservoir sits at the base of a steep, northeast-facing cirque between Brighton and Solitude ski areas in Big Cottonwood Canyon. The cirque's proximity to the two ski areas and the towns of Brighton and Alta make it popular with backcountry and side country riders. A northeast-facing slope above the head of the lake is locally known as "Figure 8 Hill." At the time of the accident, Brighton's Millicent lift, which ended on the north ridge of Mount Millicent at 9,850 feet, provided easy access to northerly slopes above the reservoir and the ski area sold a one-ride ticket.

**WEATHER AND SNOWPACK SUMMARY**

A distinct layer of faceted snow formed in Utah's Wasatch Mountains during clear weather in December. Numerous avalanches occurred on this layer when it was loaded by several feet of snow in early January. The faceted snow persisted through several weeks of cold, dry weather that followed, creating an "uncharacteristically thin snowpack for the Wasatch."<sup>45</sup>

This set the stage for the storm that began, appropriately enough, on Friday, February 13. Between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning, the day of the accident, between 15 to 25 inches of new snow were reported from the nearby ski areas of Alta, Snowbird, Solitude, and Brighton with densities between 10 and 16 percent water. This added 1.5 to 3.3 inches of snow-water equivalent to the snowpack in the 48-hour period before the accident. In addition, wind instruments at nearby ski areas reported winds from the west to northwest between 20 and 40mph, gusting to 55, during much of the precipitation period.<sup>46</sup>

The load of storm and drifted snow led the UAFC to rate the avalanche danger on February 15 as High. They expected "large and deep avalanches on slopes with the December TG layer remaining."<sup>47</sup> The center also recommended that riders stick to southerly slopes, where "the pre-existing snowpack there was quite stable and the skiing was just as good."<sup>48</sup>

**High  
avalanche  
danger**

**ACCIDENT SUMMARY**

On February 15, Steven (37) and Susan (31) VanderVoort bought one-ride tickets and exited Brighton Ski Area at the top of the Millicent Lift, where the day's avalanche report was posted. Steven, an experienced backcountry skier, planned to teach his wife some ski touring basics. Because his wife did not have a beacon, Steven left his beacon turned off in his pack. The couple traversed under the north side of Millicent Peak, skied north-facing slopes down to flatter terrain around the lake, then switchbacked up a northeast-facing slope above the head of the lake. From a bench at about 10,000 feet, they skied a short, low-angled slope to the top of Figure 8 Hill.

**Inadequate  
rescue  
equipment**