

The Alta Experience

Transcript

Gus Gilman Interview

Joey Prokop

I know you go by Piney. Is that how you want to be known, or do you want go by your real name?

Gus Gilman

My real name is Steven, and there's nobody left in the world that calls me that. Well, my mother still calls me Steven, and even my brothers and sisters call me Gus more often, which is a name I picked up in college, and then when I came to Alta I worked at Watsons for a couple of weeks scamming on... I didn't have a seasons pass, and then finally they were onto me on the lift crew and said we gotta get this guy, so they wouldn't let me on the lifts anymore, so I had to go get a job so I went to the Snowpine Lodge and got a job and worked there for one day, and then the guys who I had already been staying with for three weeks at Watsons as a guest employee said you gotta come back to work here, and then a couple of guys started calling me pine-man--man from the snow pine, pineman, so pine-man, Piney kind of morphed into that, and Piney is pretty much how I'm pretty much known at Alta.

Joey Prokop

And what's your position?

Gus Gilman

I'm the Ski Patrol Director.

Joey Prokop

How long have you been working for the Ski Lifts Company?

Gus Gilman

Oh I started in, I like '79, '80 was my first year of ski patrolling part time, and then the next year I got hired full-time and I worked for the lift company seasonally until 1985, and I came back to visit in the middle of summer in '85 and they had a big project going on--the sewer line to Alfs, or Alpenglow back then, and I had laid pipe in college so it was like, you know how to lay pipe? Why don't you come to work here for us? And at the end of the year I ended up getting hired full-time year round, and that was a big deal for me. You know a lot of people that can do the seasonal thing for a while, but then at some point you gotta like say, o.k. I want to stay in one place, stopped having two televisions and two stereos and two sets of clothes and two of everything if

you're traveling to two different places, so working at Alta year round happened then and it was a big deal for me and a big change in my life to start working one place all of the time.

Joey Prokop

Right. So you came out from New Hampshire? What kind of... What made Alta a destination?

Gus Gilman

We had come to Alta the year before on spring break from college and we'd driven out, you know, driven 45 hours out here, skied for four or five days and drove back to New Hampshire again, and thought it was really fun, and the next year one of my buddies from college had come out--he had graduated at Christmas time, and he came out and got a job working at the Watson Shelter, and I talked to him on the phone a few times, and he said, "Ya, you out to come out." And if you remember the winter of '77 back in New England there was a big snow fall, so I had always worked plowing snow for the town of Durham where UNH is, and I had a bunch of money, so I was like, I can afford to go on vacations, so I came out West with a friend of mine who was driving to San Francisco and we stopped in Colorado and skied a little bit and I had a guy I went to high school with who ran the race crew at Veil. His name was John Garnsey, and he's the President of Veil Corporation now, and I said, "Johne, you know..." (I skied with him at Veil), and I said, "This is pretty good John. Could I get a job here and stay here?" He goes, "Oh ya. You can get a job here anytime, but you're going to live in Edwards and work in Veil." And I said, "Should I get a job here in Veil or should I go to Alta?" He said, "Oh, you should go to Alta. It's way better there." So I never hesitate to remind him of that every time I see him at some kind of convention. John, it's your fault that I'm at Alta, and you're still at Veil.

Joey Prokop

So you're at Alta and you think it's better here. What do you think makes it so good here?

Gus Gilman

Well the skiing is better if you're an expert skier and, you know, the snow quality and terrain you can't even compare it to between here and Veil. I mean Veil is a great intermediate mountain. They have some advanced skiing, and they have significant advanced skiing, but it's not Alta you know. Where in all the places that I travel (and I've been to a lot of ski areas), you know what I look for is East Greeley and the High Traverse. Where is the East Greeley of Veil? Where is the High Traverse at Veil? Where is the, you know, the bread and butter expert terrain, which the High Traverse, you know, I would consider, and if you don't have that... I mean some places have it accessible sometimes, but not all the

time the way the High Traverse is at Alta, and I think that's what really separates Alta from a lot of other ski areas.

Joey Prokop

With the High Traverse, over the years has the kind of... has it changed much as far as the speed of people flying out that think, whereas West Rustler seems likes it gets skied a lot more now than it did maybe ten years ago.

Gus Gilman

Fat skis man. Fat skis are the... I mean the High Traverse was almost inaccessible to people ten years ago never mind intermediate or older clientele that now can put fat skies on them and they can go out the High Traverse. The amount of traffic that goes out to High Traverse now vs. ten years ago, never mind 20 years ago is incredible, you know. Anybody can go out on the High Traverse with some fat skies, and we do a lot more work on it now, but it's a function of there's more people so you have to do more work, and you know, it's more accessible so we do a lot more to get people out there, and like I said, it's the best skiing at Alta. When the High Traverse is going off, there's no better place to be.

Joey Prokop

Sort of when it's buffed out on the West face...

Gus Gilman

A little southwest wind and a little bit of gropple... and you know as well as I it's as good as it gets, and you know, our clientele is, you know, more people can ski powder and they do. People come to Alta to ski powder you know.

Joey Prokop

How about the customer loyalty. You know there's some people that it's like Alta or nothing.

Gus Gilman

Ya, it's like, you know I think they have a powder alert. The powder alert system you can sign up on the website and I think they send out 7,000 emails whenever it's going to snow ten inches or something like that. I don't know the specifics of it, but whenever there's a good storm forecast, 7,000 want to know across country that it is potentially a good time to go to Alta. That's quite a following, I mean I think... You know you could get these statistics from somebody else and it's not really fair for me to throw them out, but I think that Alta's website was like eight million hits last season on Alta's website, and that's like over a million a month, you know. So many people... I mean so many people you talk to... What's the first place that you look in the morning when you look at your computer? The weather! The snow stake at Collins, you know. I fire up my

computer, it goes to the Alta website. I find out what the weather is. I make my plans from there.

Joey Prokop

I think a lot of people do that for sure. In Salt Lake people will change their plans, you know. All of a sudden if it's a big storm, people will drop what they're doing and go skiing.

Gus Gilman

You know we notice that. You'll see that on a storm day, it doesn't matter what day of the week it is anymore, if it's storming and it's good skiing, Wildcat parking lot is full, and it's probably mostly season pass holders, but with flex time and people's schedules, it's like if it's going off at Alta, where else are you going to go? Are you going to go to work and listen to your friends tell you how good it was? You know people will go to Alta. You know we cater to that, I mean we really really work hard. I can't tell you how hard we work at it. It's not that tough a job to go out, but keeping the ski area open when it's snowing really hard up here, it's a trick and we do it, and we really are proud of how we do it, and we put a lot of effort into it. You know you see things like closing down Supreme Lift. Well that's... people go, why is Supreme closed? It's really good skiing over there, but sometimes when it's snowing really hard at Alta, we can't spread our customers that far out. We need to keep our customers and our controllers in a more confined area just to keep the snow skied up so it won't build up and be an avalanche problem.

Joey Prokop

With that avalanche control work that you have to do, how much do you look back at... you know in the past some people that have laid the groundwork even starting with Sverre Engen on through the years, you know, has there been kind of a torch that gets passed?

Gus Gilman

Very much so. Very much so. From starting in the '50s when they first began avalanche control work really. It was essentially developed by the forest service and the Alta Ski Lift Company, you know throwing explosives. This is the first place that somebody came up with the idea of throwing explosives to control avalanches, and then starting to use the military weapons to control avalanches. That was an idea that I think Monte Atwater gets most of the credit for it, but you know he was a snow ranger here for the forest service, and you know, an old military guy and he came up with these ideas and, you know here it is 50 and 60 years later and we're still using the basic premise of what they used 50 years ago, and the avalanche paths are still the same. I mean physically the mountain and the canyon hasn't changed, and you know we are still dealing with the same problems that he dealt with in the '50s. Our trick is that we want

to stay open. Back then they would just close things down and wait or the snow to settle out and then open things up--check things and open it up, whereas we have to be much more aggressive, and we can be and it's the right thing to do because a slope that's skied with regularity is not going to be a... you're dealing with current snow conditions rather than deep slap instability which, you know, we deal with more on the road and places that don't get skied as hard as the main ski area.

Joey Prokop

Right, there's no compaction.

Gus Gilman

There's no compaction.

Joey Prokop

You know you look back when the ski area started skiing was side-stepping and packing it down and then being able to turn those wood boards on it, and now it's, you know, pretty much you get the little ants out there doing...

Gus Gilman

...they're doing the work for you. We even... I don't know if you worked here or were in the town, even in the early '80s we would keep the High Traverse closed until there was enough snow on the High Traverse to make it passable, and one year Onno, who was the general manager, said, "We're going to open the High Traverse day one." I don't care if they... You know as soon as it's passable enough to walk, even if you're walking on rocks and dirt and stuff like that, at least they're getting out there and they're skiing it from day one. They're packing it in. They're breaking up the layers from day one, and the exposures around the north side of the mountain, North Rustler and East Greeley and places like that there's usually more snow there than even on West Rustler or the High Traverse, and people eat it up. I mean we opened the season with ten inches of snow and lift line Freds. People were there. They were skiing it up. They have rock skies, you know, they're willing to sacrifice an old pair of skies to get a few turns in in November and December.

Joey Prokop

Well the resort doesn't even have to be open anymore, you know. As soon as there is four inches of snow people are hiking it.

Gus Gilman

Well and I think there was a day in October this year we had 20 inches of snow. I came up here with my kid to go sledding. There's no place to park. There must have been a thousand cars up here, and people walking to get in shape for skiing, you know get some skiing. Of course it all melted after that, but it's a

problem in the ski area business is that, you know, you can't print lift tickets fast enough in October and November, and you can't give them away in April or May, you know, when you have full coverage and the skiing can be pretty decent that time of year, but everybody's on to the next sport. I mean they're riding their bikes already.

Joey Prokop

With that, when you talk about the various challenges of the seasons as far as getting the mountain open, you know, what happens in October is going to be a lot different than what's happening in the high snow season.

Gus Gilman

Yeeeahh. You know... From a ski patrol standpoint, you know, you got to be ready to go as soon as there is enough snow, and from a business standpoint, you know, getting open early is very big for any ski area because the words out, Alta's open, the first weekend in November Alta's open, make your reservations for March, make your reservations for February. That's the time of year, you know, that you kind of... by about Labor Day you start getting the word out that hey we're doing it up here. You got to start thinking about your trip, your season. Get your pass. So the challenge early season is to be... have people ready to go as soon as there is enough snow to open, we want open. We want to get it skied in. We want to get, you know, I mean lots of times my boss says, "Well, it snowed 40 inches and we're going to open in three days and we got to have at least (this this and this). We've got to have at least Wild Cat, Collins and Albion Piney, and lets get it going here." And we, you know, we just go pretty hard that time of year as soon as we have enough snow to stick signs in, as soon as we have enough snow to pack it, as soon as we have enough snow to get going. That's where snowmaking... you know, I mean people are somewhat aghast that we have snow making at Alta where it snows 500 inches, but early season, Thanksgiving used to be a big deal for us. It's not so much lately, but Christmas is a really big deal and we got to have it. We've got to have good skiing for people early season, you know because they expect it, and I remember seasons when we didn't have great snow pack going through Christmas with picking rocks out, you know, and those kind of things. It's hard for people, you know, and they... people change their reservations at the drop of a hat. You know Alta doesn't have it? Lake Tahoe has it. Lets go there.

Joey Prokop

With that, how much... I mean you have to look at the safety factor of when you can get going obviously, and then obviously it's a business decision when you're going to open. Does that come from upper management? Does it come from the ownership?

Gus Gilman

Well management, you know, is... you know the owners of Alta have never... They're a pretty hands-off group of people. They... I think in my overall impression is they let the managers of Alta run Alta as good as we know how and all of the managers of Alta here have at least 20 years experience. I mean we have one of the most experienced staffs out there, and you know we know how to do it, and you know, so everybody wants to get open early. There's a saying in the ski business, "How much snow do you need to open?" Well, it depends on how close to Thanksgiving you are. If it's the first of November you need a lot of snow. If it's the week before Thanksgiving you don't need that much more.

Joey Prokop

How about when you started here, was Chic still the general manager?

Gus Gilman

Yup.

Joey Prokop

What kind of guy was Chic Morton?

Gus Gilman

I knew him well enough. You know, dealt with him plenty. He was a lot like Onno, our general manager is now. He's a fairly hands-off guy, you know, he wants to know what's going on but he leaves a lot of things to your judgment. He doesn't like to waste money or time, and those are, you know, any business owner wants that. He saw the beginning of a significant change in Alta and that was an effort to keep the ski area open more and the road being open more, but... and he saw the... he presided over the beginning of a lot of expansion and a lot of summer work at Alta. You know I don't think that Alta did a lot of summer work before the mid-'80s. They pretty much fixed the lifts and, you know, did what they could with the equipment that they had, but the real big projects, it seems to me, have taken place since then--a lot of re-grading of Devil's Elbow, for instance, and re-grading of almost all... trying to have a... our goal is a top to bottom groomed run, summer groomed and snow-made off of every lift, and that's kind of a goal we've worked towards, you know, trying to get so we have a season like last year. We opened on man-made snow, you know, from the top of Collins to the bottom and from the top of Sunnyside to the bottom, and that was almost an epiphany for us that we could do that.

Joey Prokop

I know when I have friends come to town, they want to ski that groomed run. You can always manage to... I can go out here and we can ski something a little more advanced while you're skiing the groomed run and we can all kind of hook up and ride the lift together essentially.

Gus Gilman

Right, and that's a real feature of Alta that the customers love. I mean they love the fact that, you know, say an older middle-aged woman can ski a groomer down to the bottom of the lift and her son can go ski Extrovert or the High Traverse and still meet her family for the ride up, and that's a really nice feature, terrain features of Alta, and you know Alta's beginner area is, you know, people come to Alta because it's advanced skiers and advanced skiers paradise here, but we got one of the best beginner areas in the country in Sunnyside. It's a nice, easy terrain, you know, you'll find that out when... I'm out there with my three-year old every day, every week.

Joey Prokop

And it seems that there is an attitude up here... this is a family ski destination, I mean the ski free after 3 is kind of brilliant. You know... you can see the line go up. I'm just going to up there to get the kids on it and try to get them going. I think that was kind of a... I don't know who came up with the idea, but...

Gus Gilman

I think Onno and Connie might get a lot of credit for that. I don't know if they heard about it somewhere else, but Onno came up with it and it's a great thing, you know, to get people thinking about skiing, you know even people that are either beginner skiers or there are people who are coming back to the sport that have been out of it... giving them a little taste, it's like wow this is pretty cool, and you know I ski with my three year old and an hour and a half and he's cooked, and that's just about what we give him for free, and if you can get people to make the conversion to buying a season pass or buying day tickets, you succeeded.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk the biggest controversy with Alta--the no snowboards policy. And you can talk about it as much as you want. Is there a stated, you know... what's that all about?

Gus Gilman

It's really just a business decision. It's not a prejudice or anything like that. I mean Alta was the first place that allowed snowboards. We allowed snowboards when nobody else did, and then we had a hard time with... the early snow boarders, it was a developing sport. There were no edges on snow boards, there was no... snowboards are really only good for powder skiing, and then the advent of Burton's first board with metal edges and, you know, hard bindings and things like that really took snow boarding to a level where it became acceptable at other ski areas, and in that time Alta had had snow boarders for awhile and that we couldn't keep them out of the closed areas and

they were constantly... because the boards were suitable for... weren't really suitable for hard snow, and so Chic got mad one day and said, "That's it. No more snow boarders." And then now we have... I bet we get ten letters a week from people that really like coming to Alta because there are no snow boarders here. There's not the blind spot that people talk about, and there's not the... you know there's just a different attitude from people, and you can go to another ski area and get that feeling, or you can come to Alta and go... and a lot of people don't know that there's no snow boarders, and then about half way through the day they realize, man there's no snow boarders here, and it's a great deal for them, and now we sort of have a customer base of people who prefer to ski where there's no snow boarding and, so it's a selling point just like fast lifts and powder snow are.

Joey Prokop

What's pretty interesting is that that no snow boarding thing really falls in line with like who would the typical season pass holder might be. There are people who have been coming up here for 20, 30 years who have their version of the mountain, and everyone's version of the mountain is a little different, but what do you think like a typical skier experience... why Alta? What makes a customer so loyal to Alta?

Gus Gilman

Well the snow quality and the scenery are by far the biggest selling point of Alta. You know we get a lot of snow and it's a beautiful place and we as a company have taken an attitude as those are the two most important things about Alta. Don't screw them up. Don't put up giant signs and don't put up buildings that compete with the scenery for your attention. You come to Alta, you come here to go skiing. You don't come here because you really want the hamburger that we serve in here. It's probably a good burger, but it's not the reason you came here. The reason you came here is to go skiing, and so we really try to keep an eye on the skiing experience and, you know, by virtue of being mostly a ski lift company, we keep our eye on the ball, which is keep the skiing experience, you know, I don't have to worry about filling hotel rooms or filling mid-week slots. I mean I worry about it because it's a business thing, but my job is to make sure that people come to Alta and have a good experience, and you know it's sort of like... We're just like any other entertainment dollar. We compete with Disney World for your entertainment dollar and we got to do the same things they do-- customer service, and we got to make sure people are happy when they're here, make sure people are getting the services that they need, making sure they can find their way from one part of the mountain to the other, and it's a challenge for people because, you know, there are a lot of really experienced skiers and they take care of themselves, but the inexperienced person, from the time they leave the Salt Lake Valley and they get on the snowy canyon road, they're in a foreign environment. They're going slow. It's slippery. They got to wear these stupid

boots, you know, around. They got to put skis on. They're going to go way up there where I guess I do need the hat and goggles that I left in the car or I left at home. A lot of those things are, you know, just trying to get them to have a good experience, and we work pretty hard at that.

Joey Prokop

What do you think your favorite... What do you love about your job? Obviously... I get the impression that you love your job. A lot of people love their jobs, but you have... it seems like a pretty great job. What do you love about it?

Gus Gilman

Would you trade jobs with me? Probably... (laughs). I come to the ski area at least five days a week and go skiing for as much or as little as I want. You know, it's a great job. I mean I have the best office in the country. It's kind of an epiphany when you realize that, you know, you go to work every day and your main goal is to help people have fun. You know if you just approach it with that... my job is to come to work here and make sure that Joe from Kansas City comes here and he can find his way around and he can come skiing at Alta and he can have a good time, and if he has a good time he's probably going to come back here again, and that's... I mean that's Alta's word of mouth is how Alta's reputation is built, and you know we try to stay true to that--give everybody that comes here a good a time as you can, and hopefully they'll come back, and they do. And they come back in droves!

Gus Gilman

(upcut) ya... they give the customer's a hard time or they get bummed or the employees get a little bummed if a customer (non-season pass holder) gets, you know, in front of them on the High Traverse for instance. But you know the season pass holders and the employees, I mean they get it. They're getting it every day. You know there is no better way to spend a season, a ski season than working at a lodge in Alta and skiing here everyday. It's a life changing experience for anybody that does it, and you know they'll always come back to Alta. They always do. I hear about a lot of them haven't been here in twenty years, but boy it looks just like I remember it.

Joey Prokop

How about the fact that although, I mean the snow is pretty elastic, you know, it's always changing with the effects of the sun, the wind, more new snow, no snow. Talk a little bit about how the mountain changes, but also things kind of stay the same, I mean once a whoop-dee-doo is formed in a certain spot, it kind of stays there for the rest of the season, and you know in that blind corner there's a whoop-dee around the corner. A local is going to know that, but a tourist isn't necessarily going to know what's around that corner.

Gus Gilman

Ya things do pretty much... but the skiing powder is almost the same. I mean the whoop-dee-doo, if it formed last year it will probably be there this year if you have an equivalent amount of snow. You know one of the great things about Alta is there's almost always something to ski. If you come up here even if it's, you know you're working downtown and you come up for two hours in the afternoon, you'll find something good to ski, whether it's... it can be a powder shot that only you know about, or ten turns in the trees that, you know, you reliably know about, or you know a groomer that didn't get that much traffic. I mean there's almost never a time that there's only bad skiing at Alta. There's enough exposures, there's enough snow, there's enough grooming that it's pretty rare that, you know, you can't find good skiing at Alta.

Joey Prokop

Talk a little bit about maybe developments that you've seen. How much terrain has expanded in your time here?

Gus Gilman

I think about that sometimes.

Joey Prokop

Supreme was here already?

Gus Gilman

Supreme was... I was here before Supreme. We were talking about this recently about... so the terrain at Alta hasn't changed that much, I mean Germania, well the old Germania unloads where the Collins unloaded. Now I wasn't here for the original Germania, but the High Traverse is still in the same place, I mean I go out there in the summer and you can still find old signs and bamboo from when the High Traverse where the entrance to Ballroom is. I mean it's still in the same place. You know pretty much the mountain dictates, you know, 85% of what goes on around here. I mean where the snow falls, the exposures, you know, the lifts have been updated, but the mountain is still the same. You're never going to change... you know you can change a few groomers here and there, but the small percentage of what you can change is, you know, is insignificant compared to what the weather and the wind can do for you up here. You know I would say... the way I look at it is what, you know that we just didn't used to have that many customers that went to the backside. I mean the backside wouldn't be open as much as it's open now, but fat skies, more aggressive avalanche control work, and we're getting it and we can keep it open into... significantly into a weather event, and we try to because that's really good when it's that way, and sort of we were talking about Devil's Castle. When I see, you know 150 people lined up for the opening of Devil's Castle or Baldy Chutes, I mean that never happened in the '80s when I was originally. Devil's Castle was

sort of like Patsy Marley is now. It was sort of extraneous terrain that was opened when we had a few nice days and when we, you know, could get there and we didn't have other things going on and we'd open the Castle and it was safe. Now, I mean people show up here and lets see, the day after the storm the backside Ballroom the shoulder, the next day it's going to be the Castle, the day after that it's going to be the Chutes, I mean that they fully expect, and if they come up here and it's like, what do you mean it's two days after the storm and the chutes aren't open, and they're looking... when are the chutes going to open Piney? It's like, well you know the wind blew really hard up there and, you know the skiing is not that good, but... Ya but it's three days after the storm. Usually you're on the chutes by then, and you know it keeps you honest having the questions thrown at ya, but people will always find, especially the advanced skiers that come to Alta and live in the Salt Lake Valley, they'll always be pushing to the next level. Their pushing to Patsy Marley now. I mean... and theoretically if we had a lift up Patsy Marley, they'd push into Wolverine Cirque or they'd push into north-facing Patsy Marley. They're always going to go to the next step because there's always going to be the younger crowd, the strong skiers, you know, I mean Randenee are being what it is now, I mean people on Randenee throw on their skins and they'll do a half day outside the ski area, half day inside the ski area, you know, get home and... be home by 4 o'clock.

Joey Prokop

Rocky Point is pretty much part o the ski area now. Sunset Peak...

Gus Gilman

Sunset Peak... it gets trashed just like Point Supreme south-facing and Dry Fork, you know. All of that stuff, I mean as soon as there's enough snow on it and the avalanche dangers is low, people will go there, and it's almost a competition now between the snowmobilers, whether the snowmobilers get to it before the skiers get to it in a place like Dry Fork.

Joey Prokop

With that... Alta has the great terrain, the great snow. Talk a bit about the people and the camaraderie. I mean you meet some quality folks up here.

Gus Gilman

You do! You know for a business that's built on essentially word of mouth advertising, you know I have an Alta hat and wherever I travel in the world there is somebody that recognizes that snowflake. I mean I was in China and I ran into these guys from Europe and they're like, "Alta, you go to Alta?" And I'm like ya, I work at Alta. "You work at the greatest place in the world." And I'm like, ya I know that. And you know it's really... the Alta snowflake is an internationally recognized brand and pretty widely respected, I mean there's been a lot of people through Alta, almost too many to name, but you know the people that

built Alta and have gone on from Alta are, you know, they're from Onno to Chick and Fred Speyer to Ed LaChapelle, you know, even people who went from Alta to Snowbird... Bob Bonar, President of Snowbird was an Alta ski patrolman. I mean we have attracted consistently a fairly high-caliber employee and, you know, we try and keep doing that, and they've moved on and they... but know where do you go and have people say bad things about Alta other than perhaps we should have snowboarding here and we don't. That's really the biggest gripe out there in the world if you're a snowboarder. If you're a skier you're like, don't bother. So it's a... it's doing o.k.

Joey Prokop

... things don't change overnight as there's a huge infusion of money where we're going to build the new lodge over where the ticket office is...

Gus Gilman

Ya, I mean they've... I imagine that's the case. I'm not in that end of the business, but I, you know, it seems like it's incremental improvements. I don't think Alta, for the owners has ever been about making money because if it was really about making money, they'd charge more for lift tickets, they'd let snowboarding happen here, they'd try to squeeze us harder than they do, I mean we operate efficiently but Alta has never been about making money for any of the owners. I think they like Alta for what it is and want to improve it and look at it as a good thing and not only as a source of revenue.

Joey Prokop

I've read quotes from Joe Quinney that he said Alta is a public resource for the people of Salt Lake and the state of Utah, and we just happen to allow the foreigners to come in here, and it almost seems like that theory, you know, whether it's overt, or whether it's on purpose, it seems like it still carries on because you know, because you can get a discounted pass if you have a valid Utah driver's license. They make concessions so locals can afford it.

Gus Gilman

Ya, and we do. Locals in Salt Lake are spoiled, I mean there are eight major ski areas within a 45 minute drive of the Salt Lake Valley and we compete very hard for their business. You know you could go to Snowbird for the same amount as Alta. You could go to... I mean every ski area, I think they still offer like a \$200 seasons pass if you're under 18 years old, I mean if you live in the Salt Lake Valley and you don't jump on that, you're crazy, but we have to compete very hard and what has happened in the last, you know, 15 years with the ski industry is, you know when early season Alta used to have a lot of snow, we used to get a lot of customers from Park City and stuff like that, but Park City has, you know, they've been pouring money into snow making, and they can make a lot of snow in Park City in a really short period of time, and that early

season dollar, skiing dollar is competed for very hard amongst the ski industry. Ski pass dollars are competed for very hard amongst all of the ski areas, and you know we hold our own, but it comes down to sometimes to some people it comes down to the dollar. You know the snow total and the dollar. The lift ticket's cheap and if they got the most snow, that's where we're going honey.

Joey Prokop

How about the fact that, you know, you have two young kids. You've obviously loved your life. Talk a little bit about what you love about skiing and how you're pretty excited to introduce your kids to that.

Gus Gilman

You know I look back, my father died in the mid-80's, and I was already making the transition to live full-time at Alta out west away from my family, and skiing with my parents is really the only thing that we did as a family when I was in high school and college, and even after college, you know, my family came out here to go skiing with me, and you know that is one of the great things about skiing is that, you know, you can do it as a family, and will do it as a family and enjoy it as a family activity virtually your whole life. You know I have a three year old. I'm 54 years old. When I'm... when he is 16 I'm going to be in my '70s, and you know I hope I can ski with him, probably not in the same places, but maybe ride the chair with him occasionally, but that's a... I look at people I work with, people I know, I mean sometimes the only activity they do together as a family is skiing, and that I think is really really a cool thing. You know I can't play tennis with high school kids, but I can go skiing with them, and you know that's really important that as a ski area you offer terrain for everybody, and a good family experience like that, that's really big for anybody. People say how do you like skiing with your kid? It's like, man I can't wait. I can't wait to go skiing with my kid. I'd rather... I don't care if it snowed 20 inches, I'm going skiing with my kid, and we're going on Sunnyside, and now we're going on Sugarloaf daddy, and ooooh boy we love that, and french fries. Don't forget the french fries.

Joey Prokop

How about... if you get up in the morning and any one run, the light's perfect, the snow is deep and you got it all to yourself. What's that run?

Gus Gilman

I would say the best... my favorite run at Alta is probably the buttness on the backside. That's where I go when conditions are the best. The buttness Eddies, you know they're as good as vertical that you can get at Alta, you know the lights usually on that side of the mountain first thing in the morning, and that would be my favorite. Everybody has their favorite poke in Alta and they, you know I like that. If the back side is not open, you know No Name is my favorite, you know it's just... that's where I go. No Name and Jitterbug, one of those two.

That's where I'm off looking at the High Traverse. That's where I am. And everybody in Alta has a almost an intimate relationship with a ski run or two, or an area that... I'm sure being an Alta skier you have a place that... o.k. I'm going to my honey hole right now, I know I'll get three untracked turns right there, and that's a really... and that's... the sense of loyalty people feel about Alta, having your favorite spot in Alta, having your favorite... skiing with your favorite people at Alta just builds a loyalty that makes Alta special, and maybe part of it is so many people are returning, I mean I know people here that... I never see them the rest of the year, you know, but I'll look over there and I'll see that hat or that pair of goggles and you know that's Chris Bangerter because he's a... you know I never see the guy except during ski season, but I see him a lot during ski season and we're friends.

Joey Prokop

It's funny that way, I mean... we finally got to the point where we started calling them out at ski season, and now they're probably some of our closest friends.

Gus Gilman

There's a whole fraternity of people that are just Alta season pass holders. Those people in the locker room at Goldminer's--what's the waiting list for a locker at Goldminers? Some seven, eight, or ten years that people are trying to get lockers at Goldminers because, you know, that's the kind of loyalty we... they'll get on the list because I'll still be skiing here in ten years, so I'm going to get that damn locker some day.

Joey Prokop

What's funny too is that I'm always trolling for people that are like, if you're not going to use your locker next year can I just sublet your locker because I want tow.

Gus Gilman

Especially if you get married, you need two.

Joey Prokop

Well we have two, now I want four. How about the pressure that does happen. There is kind of a limited resource of powder. It's like people will stand in line 150 deep to wait in line for Castle. Talk a bit about the growing pressure. Maybe it is about the fat skies, and maybe it is about the technology, but also it's a limited resource and once that gate drops it's a free-for-all.

Gus Gilman

It's a perishable commodity just like any kind of fresh vegetables, you know, you have, especially later in the season when the sun is a factor and, you know, we got to get going and get the back side open because Yellow Trail is going to

turn to, you know mush if we don't get it opened pretty soon because that's a southeast facing thing, and people pay a lot of money for that commodity, I mean I go to work regularly, you know at 7 o'clock in the morning on a snow morning, dumping morning, and there's ten people standing up there. They haven't even got the maze up at the lift yet, but they got their skies right so they're in line and they want to get it first, and you know I could name you those same ten people. It's the same ten people every... it's different by about eight then the more regulars show up, but there's guys that are out there at 6:30 in the morning ready to go, and they stand there until 9:15, and it's a bit of a frenzy now because it is a commodity and everybody wants it and, ya what do you? You try to give it to them and try to hope they're civilized to each other getting it, but people are blown away at how fast the backside gets skied out, or the shoulder gets skied out. The Castle less so, but still the Castle is open at 10 or 11 o'clock. By 3 o'clock you're looking or that untracked line out there because there are so many people that are getting it, and they're good at it, they want it and they can get out there and have a great one. Even if you get two or three runs if there's 3,000 people here and 2,000 are going to the Castle, you're only going to get two runs, and it's a... you know that's where the back country comes in.

Joey Prokop

Well that's amazing too. I've kind of done the reverse... basically all the important things that you need to do in the back country I kind of got really lazy about it... I'm like hey, over there they're controlling it. They got that lift that takes you up. I'm o.k skiing crud, you know.

Gus Gilman

This isn't on the subject of Alta, but when we first came here in the late '70s, early '80s, there was hardly anybody that skied across the street, I mean the only people that were over there was the winter stickers, skiing across the road, and now back country skiing has gotten so accessible. The equipment is better. The knowledge is better. The Avalanche Forecast Center--you can't say enough good about those guys, I mean people come from other ski areas, patrol directors and mountain operation folks and stuff like that, and they are blown away, it's like is there a lift over there? Or they look over at Cardiac and go, what's going on over there? And even if the helicopter isn't running it's still getting shredded, and they're like, how is this? And I say, there's a million people eight miles down the road and they want it. They're getting it, and they want it, and sometimes when the avalanche danger is really high, I'm just amazed we go through weeks without killing people, without people dying, but the level of competence of the back country skier in the Salt Lake Valley is incredible. I mean, they are good, they're smart and they aren't killing each other, and that is a testimony to people learning their craft and learning their recreation. When Jackson... Jackson used to have closed boundaries forever,

and they decided they wanted to open their boundaries up, and we talked a lot, the patrol director up there and I talked a lot about having open boundaries and what it was going to do to them and how it was going to affect them, and I said, "The first thing you gotta do, is you guys gotta organize an equivalent of Wasatch Back Country Rescue, which is essentially volunteers from the ski patrol under the supervision of the Sheriff's Department that are going to deal with things that go on outside the ski areas. And you get a good rescue group together and you get a good education group together, and you won't have the problems that you think you're going to have." And they had a few problems the first couple of years, but you know it seems to have settled out, you know, they've thinned the herd enough--the people that don't have the knowledge and they've scared enough people that they aren't having a lot of issues outside their ski area, and they're essentially by opening their borders, they tripled the size of their ski area without doing less, not doing more, and the customers are happy, they're visiting their national forest. They're using the public lands, and it's a good deal for everybody all around.

Joey Prokop

It seems like there's a pretty good respect... do you have much problem with people poaching?

Gus Gilman

Oh not... we have problems with it, but to a less degree than other places do because we don't keep something closed so we can ski it, and I've seen that at other places, and other people have seen that, and they'll call you on it here, you know, how come you guys are making laps on the backside and it's closed? You know that just doesn't happen here. We respect, you know, their right to ski in our terrain and we respect them to, you know it's sort of a mutual thing. If the patrol's not going there, it's probably a reason for it, and it's probably, you know... and you'll have an occasional tourist who will come here with the Colorado state of mind that, you know, or the European state of mind that those ropes don't apply to me or I'm going to take my own chances, and you know we try to educate them as to the reasons why things are closed and try to get things open so you don't have to fight that battle.

Joey Prokop

What would your closing statement be about why Alta is special?

Gus Gilman

Why Alta is special? And sum it up in one paragraph or less? Well let me think for a second. Well Alta's got the features that you look for, I mean you and I we live in suburbia and we ski at one of the best ski areas in the country, and we're able to have jobs. People wouldn't say I have a real job, but you might say you have a more real job than me, and they, and you know we can live in suburbia in

the city and have all of the access to the airplanes and auto parts and all of the stuff you need that, you know, you can get right now in the valley, and we can come up here in 45 minutes and get two hours of skiing in and go home and that is a way undervalued part of skiing in Utah. You know some of these ski areas, like Jackson Hole or Sun Valley having to subsidize airlines to come and, you know, pay for seats that are flying and empty during the week to keep the airline service going, that's a tough nut that the ski areas in Salt Lake don't have.

Joey Prokop

Well it took Jackson Hole 40 years to become a winter destination. People didn't realize that you could go there in the winter and there would be stuff to do. It was kind of the go up there and visit the Tetons and visit Yellowstone and...

Gus Gilman

Wow they got a ski area here too? But conversely, you know, this is off the Alta subject, but the Snowbird model... you know Snowbird, they have a lot of hotel rooms down there at Snowbird, and trying to fill them and occupy them in the summer is a tough row to hoe for them. They don't have a golf course. They don't have a white water rafting. They don't have a lot of the things that...

Joey Prokop

The mountain biking isn't particularly fun there.

Gus Gilman

Mountain biking is very very difficult there. I mean they compete against Sun Valley, and they compete against Jackson, and they compete against maybe the Lake Tahoe region resorts for the convention business, which is a bread and butter in the summer, and they just don't have some of the amenities that the Colorado resorts... You know the reason Deer Valley is such good mountain biking is because it's only o.k. skiing. Sorry Chuck.