

The Alta Experience

Nic Nichol

Interview transcript

Nic Nichol

(pickup) Oh ya, they're skiing things like Superior, which you know, I asked Alf one time if he'd ever skied it and he said, "No." He had never skied that. And I said, "Why not?" His comment was, "I don't want anybody else to ski it because Alf Engen skied it," and so he never did ski it, but nowadays with all of the equipment changes that have taken place, those kids can hike up there and they can ski anywhere. They're skiing much steeper terrain than we ever skied before. You know you look at these guys who are competing in these extreme skiing things. Those guys are skiing stuff that's nuts, you know, so it has been an interesting change.

Joey Prokop

How about the idea of when you started skiing you were how old?

Nic Nichol

Well when I started skiing I was seven in 1950.

Joey Prokop

Was Alta the destination then?

Nic Nichol

Ya, well my dad was teaching here at that time, and so he dragged me up here and put me in some skis and they were old wooden skis and, you know, the old bear-trap binding, and... The first skis I had didn't have edges and then a couple of years later they came up with edges and so you could buy these edges in sections and so my dad being a carpenter, what he did was he took the old wooden ski and took a router and routed out the edge and then embedded the steel edge onto the ski, and boy when that happened we thought, you know, we thought that was the best thing that ever happened since sliced bread.

Joey Prokop

A little more control?

Nic Nichol

Oh ya, a lot more control, you know, with that sort of thing. But the problem was we didn't have the flexibility that we have with the ski today, I mean literally flexing the ski and being able to bend it and making it able to turn easier.

Joey Prokop

So with that, talk a little bit about basically your family and its connection to skiing. I mean it has been a family affair for you.

Nic Nichol

Oh ya, very much so. Ya, at one point in time back in the... I guess the early '70s I had 13 members of the ski school who were directly related to me--either my dad or three brothers of his that also taught here along with cousins and that sort of thing. The whole thing started because of Deseret News Ski School, and Alf was looking for people to help him out, and uncle Wayne, who is literally my uncle, dad's brother, said, "My brother's are pretty good athletes. They can do it." So the first Deseret News Ski School that my dad and his brother's taught was that he... Alf got everybody together and he said, "Here's what we're going to do for the first day. We're going to walk around a little bit and we're going to side-step and we're going to learn how to do a kick-turn, and if we get good enough we may be even do a little edge. That's what we're going to do." So my dad and his brothers and everybody else did that, then Alf, after the lesson was over, took them out and said, "My guys, here's the next thing that we're going to teach. We'll practice a little bit this afternoon," and he gave them the next lesson. So they were getting the lesson just before they were teaching the students, which was kind of an interesting thing. And that's the way it all started, and dad and all... and of course my family was also in construction, and Alf and Sverre and Correy to be built. They had acquaintances, so my dad and his family built their houses--the ones down on 62nd south.

Joey Prokop

So in the construction too, were they involved in some of the construction of the buildings up here?

Nic Nichol

Oh yes, very much so, ya in fact there are still probably three cabins up here that were built by my dad and his brothers, ya, that are still in existence up here now, as well as... see they also helped Sverre. Sverre was ahead of the ski school until '48, so for two years he was the head of the ski school, then Alf came and took over from him and he was in the process of starting to build the Rustler Lodge, and so... and that's who built the Rustler Lodge, but my uncles and my dad all helped him during the summertime build the Rustler Lodge. In fact I have a funny story if it's alright. They... Louis is Sverre's wife and she just loved my dad for some reason, you know, it's just, they loved one another. It was a great friendship, and she was living in the lodge, in the Rustler Lodge and they were working on the stairs, and she came down from the bedroom down the stairs and dad stopped her on the stairs and they were talking to one another and visiting and all of that, and Wayne was down on the stairs pounding nails.

Well while he was there, he just quietly nailed her shoes to the stair, and of course then after dad was finished talking to her, you know, he moved out of the way and she went to, you know, make another step and both of her feet are, you know, nailed to the stairway, so... Of course they caught her and that sort of thing, but I'll tell you, they gave her... she gave them a bad time for that one, so they were doing that kind of stuff all of the time.

Joey Prokop

You look at the old pictures of those brothers skiing and especially in the old movies, you know, those guys are just having fun.

Nic Nichol

They are.

Joey Prokop

Tell me how important the concept of fun in skiing is.

Nic Nichol

Well it's the most important thing. Alf used to say when I first came on... even before I was on the ski school, that this was his... success was this. You got to be safe first, fun second, and then you learn third. That's because if you're safe and you're having fun, you can learn. So that has always been the thing that I have tried to pass on to the new ski instructors that come on our ski school is that we can have a good time. We can learn something. We're safe and it's great fun, you know. And I have to tell you an interesting part to me was, you know, I was teaching for Alf for over 25 years. He took me on as a project because he told me, he said, "Nic you're not going to be the fastest skier on the mountain, and probably not going to be the best, but by gosh I can make you the prettiest." And so he took me on as a project to make me the prettiest skier on the ski school, and you know, not bragging for myself, but I think that that's what he did. But everything he taught me he taught me on green runs. People get all excited about going up and skiing the black runs. You know, "I skied this black run." No, that isn't where you learn things. All you learn is to survive up there. You learn things where it's easy, and if you can do it where it's easy and you keep practicing it, then you can perform it when you get up on the more difficult terrain.

Joey Prokop

And so over the years I don't think that has really changed as far as ski instruction goes.

Nic Nichol

No. We've done our best. We have a few students who come and are resistant to going to a little easier terrain to learn something, but in reality they need some

of that practice, and Alf wouldn't make... wouldn't let me practice just one day on something. I would practice for a week or two weeks on the same thing on Albion on Crooked Mile.

Joey Prokop

What I'd like to get at is... (inaudible)

Nic Nichol

That's a good question. I think it's a combination of things. I think it's a combination of the snow, which is fantastic. I've skied a lot of places in the world, and this snow here is the most consistent I've ever skied in my life. I think it's the mountain, the shape of the mountain, the way its set up, but I also think it's the people that are here. I think that's the reason why I stay here because I enjoy the people, and I'm not just talking about the people I associate with in the ski school or the ski patrol or, the ticket sellers, but I'm talking about the people who keep coming back who ski here. I've skied with one couple since 1972. They're in their 80's now and they keep coming back year after year after year, and they have become friends, not just clients, and they call me, and I have another family that they invited me to go to their wedding with my whole family because we were friends, not because we were, you know, a pliant instructor, and so I think the people do a lot of that too. That's a combination of all of that sort of thing. I was planning on being here for five years. Five years and I was going to do something else, so I started in '67, you know. It's now 2008--my 41st year teaching here. I can't account for it. It's just great fun.

Joey Prokop

How about the concept... you know there are some people who go skiing, but there are some people who are skiers. What do you think the difference is?

Nic Nichol

I think the difference is in how much we enjoy what we're doing. It's the outdoors, you know, I love being here. There are some people, and it's kind of unfortunate... (interruption)

Nic Nichol

I think we better start over on that one. Where were we before we got so rudely interrupted? (laughs)

Joey Prokop

There are some people that go skiing, but some people are really skiers. It gets into their blood. It kind of becomes who they are. Let's talk a little bit about that.

Nic Nichol

And I think that has to do with whether we enjoy the outdoors or not, and I see some people who come out here and it doesn't matter what the weather is, they're skiing, and I find some of the best skiing when it's snowing as hard as it can snow, but a lot of people come out here and they're not skiers, they just ski, you know, and so on a bad day they stay inside, and they miss all of that wonderful snow first of all. They miss the opportunity of being out in what I consider tremendous weather. I mean there are days when the wind blows up here, as you know--you've been here, and it blows so bloody hard you think you're going to be blown off the mountain, and yet some of those days are some of the funnest days I ever have because you're out here and you're challenging mother nature, and that's cool, you know, and of course, you know, you have to be reasonable about the whole thing, but that's what I think makes a skier vs. someone who just skies. And it's not as much here at Alta, I don't think, as it is other places, and I'm not going to name any other places, but I think there are some places where people go to be seen rather than to go skiing, and Alta doesn't happen to be one of those places. We don't care what you're dressed in. We don't care if you're a movie star. We don't care about any of that sort of thing. We're here because we love this mountain, this snow, and sliding down it.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk a little bit about the mountain... (cut off)

Nic Nichol

(upcut beginning) ... always tried to keep their price reasonable. It's the only company I know of that always has run in the black. There has only been like three times that they've ever borrowed any money. They borrowed money when they built... well the first time, of course, was the initial investment in 1938, but then when they built the Germania chairlift in 1954? I think it was... '52 or '54, they sold \$100 bonds and they said they'd pay them back in two years, and they were all paid back within a year, and then the only other time was in 1968, '67, when they built the Sugarloaf chairlift. They borrowed money from First Security Bank and they figured they could get it paid back in a couple of years. Six months after that lift was running, it was paid off, and ever since then they have never done anything to the area unless they had the money, the cash to pay for what they did, and you know, I never had a paycheck bounce in 41 years working on this job, so it's wonderful that way.

Joey Prokop

Do you think that fiscal conservative nature comes from Joe Quinney? Did you know Joe very well?

Nic Nichol

I did know Joe.

Joey Prokop

Lets talk about Joe a little bit.

Nic Nichol

Ya I think that Joe Quinney, who I knew not real real well, but I knew him... I skied with him a few times and he's, you know, when he was here later on, and I think also J. Laughlin, who I skied with a lot. I taught him and his wife how to ski and two of their boys who are now helping, you know, run this area, but I think the conservativeness comes from Joe and Jay. They're not the kind of guys who want to go out and take a big risk, and so that, I think, has been a very positive thing rather than a negative thing. In some ways (audio interrupt)

Joey Prokop

I think for me one of the interesting things I've learned on this documentary is J. Laughlin's story. I knew the Laughlin family had a controlling interest in the resort. Yes I knew they were related to the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company, but once I started doing some research and found out the whole New Directions Publishing Company, and I actually found that ski with Sverre book and then when I found out his whole connection with Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein...

Nic Nichol

And all of that was really quiet. I mean he wasn't one of those guys who came out and, you know, talked about that sort of stuff. He was a very very nice man to ski with. I enjoyed skiing with him. I probably skied more with Jay and his family than anybody else just because I happened to be here, I guess, and that was lucky and fortunate. I remember one time we uh... he said to me, (we were riding up the chair lift) uh and he said to me, "Nic, what do you think the ski school needs?" And I was a supervisor at that time, but I was teaching he and his family, and I said, "I don't know." And he said, "Well think about it." So we got off of Wild Cat, skied down to the old Germania chair lift, got on that lift, and he said, "Have you thought about it?" And I said, "Ya, I thought about it." And he said, "What do we need?" I said, "The ski school needs a good radio system. Our communication is so difficult; we need a good communication system." He said, "Well, I'll see what I can do. We have a board meeting tomorrow." So they had the board meeting, and the next day the board called Alf and said go buy a new radio system and make it a good one, and so, you know, he was one of those guys who was thinking about what was going on. Things perhaps moved a little slower at Alta than perhaps somewhere else because they were conservative, but I don't think that's hurt us at all, in fact I think it has helped us. We think about what's going on and what we're going to do and where we're going to put things before we do it, so we don't make quite as many mistakes as other people do.

Joey Prokop

Expensive mistakes too. Do you think the relationship with the forest service also effects how decisions are made?

Nic Nichol

I think to some extent, yes, and part of that is because the forest service controls most of what goes on here, so they're the ones who say yes we can do this or no we can't do this, and sometimes they have to be convinced that that was the appropriate thing to do, and that sort of thing, but that's o.k. I mean, again I think we need balance. You know we need the tree huggers, excuse the expression, but I mean I certainly feel like I'm an environmentalist myself and, you know, I don't want to cut anything down that doesn't need to be cut down, but at the same time, if we went the other direction it would be like Alta was when we first started skiing here--there would be no trees on this mountain. It was completely denuded by the miners putting their timber in the mines and in their houses and that sort of thing, so we have to have some balance, and that's where I think it's o.k. to, you know, have conservative and liberal people. That's o.k.

Joey Prokop

I think what's nice about Alta too... lets talk a little bit about the fact that, and you did touch on this before, that this is a place you come to ski. You don't come here to get a massage. I mean you can probably get one.

Nic Nichol

You can.

Joey Prokop

... But the whole reason people come here is to ski and they ski hard.

Nic Nichol

Yup, and I think that's because of the snow and because of the mountain, and I think if you really ski Alta and ski it well, you're not going to have any energy to go out and party at night. You're going to want to sit down, have a drink, have a nice dinner, visit with people and go to bed, get up and get ready to ski the next morning, and that's the fun part to me about Alta.

Joey Prokop

You can have any run you want... your favorite run, the conditions are going to be perfect, the light is going to be right. Tell me what that run is and talk me through it.

Nic Nichol

Greeley Bowl down to Greeley Hill, and I think part of the reason for that is because when I first came here on the ski school that run was the most difficult run for me to ski. I couldn't ski down it without falling down, and I know it was psychological, but I couldn't, I'm just, man I don't know what's going on, particularly the soft snow. I love the powder and that sort of thing, and that's a lot of what has kept me right here, but going out there I remember when I finally skied the whole thing without falling down, and it was such a great experience. I mean it was just so exciting that it was really, like the kids say, "cool!" It was just... then the next year when I skied it, I remember skiing down Greeley with about 20 inches of snow and I skied, I made 8 or 10 turns, couldn't breathe, had to stop so I could get some air, got out my handkerchief, tied it around my nose and face and then started skiing again and could ski just fine, but I had to just keep looking where I was going because the snow was going over my head every single turn and I had to be careful with it, but that was such a thrill--such an exciting thing, and skiing powder is like almost not being connected with the earth--it's just a floaty sensation that I love dearly, and it doesn't take any more energy if we do it correctly.

Joey Prokop

With that, talk a little bit about change... they still remain the same. It's still the mountain. When you go to ski Punch Bowl, it's the same Punch Bowl that Alf Engen skied.

Nic Nichol

That's right. Even though we've got high speed quads and high speed triples and that sort of thing, the skiing hasn't changed, the snow hasn't changed, the mountain hasn't changed. We've got a few more trees here and there. We have a few less trees here and there because we've opened up something up, but as far as the snow and that sort of thing is concerned, it's still the same challenge. It's still the same psychological affect that you get standing up on top of, you know, Gunsight and looking down and going, "Wow, this is quite an interesting experience that we have." And what's really interesting is that even the kids today who come here and ski with our instructors when they get up to the top of something like that, they go, "Wow!" because it is really awesome. I have to thank my dad for stopping every once and awhile and looking around and saying, "Look at how beautiful it is. Look at how the snow is on the trees. Look at (this or that or the other). Look at how the light reflects on that mountain peak."--that sort of thing, and even though I have been here basically all of my life, I still am in awe at how beautiful this place is, you know, and Alf... I remember when someone said to Alf one time, "Well when are you going to retire?" And Alf's comment was, "Me retire? When I got the best office in the world? Why would I retire? Because every place you look is a picture postcard." And it's true, when you look around no matter where you look you

can take a picture and it would be a postcard, so that's why I think it's such a... I don't know, it gets in your blood. I think Robin Christiansen who is our children's supervisor said to one of our instructors about four or five years ago who was just going to be here for a couple of years, uh "You better be careful because Alta is a tremendous seducer," and I think that's what it really is. It seduces us to stay here rather than go somewhere else.

Joey Prokop

Well that's me, you know I'm on a one month ski trip and it just happens to be going on 20 years now.

Nic Nichol

There you go. I'm on a five year skiing teaching, and that's 41 years now.

Joey Prokop

Are there things you want to talk on and people you want to talk about that maybe I haven't touched on?

Nic Nichol

As long as you've touched on Alf, you know, because that's the catalyst. That's what keeps our ski school together. The one thing about Alf... and that's the one thing... we've always tried to keep his spirit alive in the ski school. You know his comments about... (he was such an interesting guy), uh such a great sense of humor, things like, that he would say like, "My gosh, you know, any turn standing up is a good turn." That's the way he approached life. That's the way he approached teaching skiing was in a very positive way, not in a negative, a very positive way to do that sort of thing, you know, so that is something that I have tried to keep alive and aware of in our ski school so that we're still trying to give that same product, that same service, that same care to those who come to our ski school. I have to tell you one really interesting thing. One day we're out there--afternoon line-up and we've got everything taken care of and the wind is blowing about 50 miles an hour and the snow is going horizontal and Alf is one of those guys who can ski in any kind of weather and does, and he came to me and he's really interesting because his space... he gets a little closer than most people do, which is fine. I was very comfortable with that, but he came up to me and he said, "My gosh you know Nic, I think we need to go inside and talk about how good we are." That sort of attitude, that sort of humor that he always had was what I want to keep alive at Alta because it's part of Alta. You know he came here and basically in 1935 I think it was, and looked the area over for the forest service and said it would make a great ski area except he was worried about the avalanche problem because there was no trees, so all of the trees you see now have been planted since that time, but he's just that kind of a person you know. Other things about him that are interesting... you follow him and it's like you're not even touching the ground. I've had so many people say to me,

"You know I skied with Alf, and when I skied behind him I could not make a mistake, and as soon as he left, I couldn't ski," and that's the kind of aura I guess you might say, that he possessed.

Joey Prokop

I don't know if this is an expression that Alf came up with, but "in Alta day."

Nic Nichol

Well sort of ya, I mean his saying was, "Boy, you know, it's a great day in the Wasatch, great day in the Wasatch, we have a great time," but an Alta day was just because everything was exactly right. There was good snow, new snow, sun was shining and you know it was like God was shining his light on us so that we could enjoy his great creation, and he was certainly very much a religious man and he loved... one of the things that he always said, "By gosh, you know, don't ever miss the chance to tell somebody that you love them, because they may be gone the next day, so you better make sure they know that you love 'em," and that's the kind of man he was. That's the kind of sensitivity that he had, and we want to keep that alive.