

The Alta Experience

Jim Head

Interview transcript

Joe Prokop

You were saying that Alta was at one time in your life extremely important. Why is that?

Jim Head

Why did it shape the way I view the rest of my life? I mean you know when I got there it was a place that had a lot of challenges. You know I felt like I was a pretty athletic person, and, you know the feeling that skiing gave me I knew was something special and I wanted to take that, and I saw there was people that were capable of handling the snow and, you know kind of focusing and perfecting that feeling and I didn't really know that I was doing it at the time, but I wanted that. You know that was my first wish at Alta is to be able to go out and handle the snow conditions with... you know I didn't particularly focus on Alta, but there were people around me at Alta lodge who could go out and do it, you know, Ray Conrad was one of the guys. He was a chef at the Alta Lodge at the time, and he had been on the ski patrol and I knew for a fact... you know he... to get in shape he'd climb to the top of Superior and run down, you know, and he had kind of burned out on it at that time, but still there were people out there, you know, who could do it, and just the type of people that were there, and one of the things that was available is if you worked at one of the lodges, you basically could get free ski lessons, you know, any time that you were off, and they were running, and I took advantage of that. I was down at the ski school, you know, every spare minute that I had, and I took lessons and I figured that if I learned some technique that it might help me, you know, put my athleticism to good use and actually start learning to ski, and at the same... you know that kind of brought me in contact with some of the ski school personalities who were my first circle of friends. You know my first circle of friends wasn't in the lodge where I was working, it was in the ski school, you know, where I was learning about the skiing, you know, which at that time it was lucky probably that I didn't discover that half way through college because I would have never finished college. I'd have gone to the ski area and stuck there, and it just, you know, continued to grow after that and I knew at the end of the year... I went down to Bill Moss, the ski patrol director, and told him that I'd like to be on the ski patrol and at that, you know, it would be ridiculous for me at my point in learning how to ski to apply to the Alta ski patrol, but then it was possible. You know I went down there and basically he said I needed an advanced first aid card and I was good to go, and so I took advantage of that and then I just... I was on the ski patrol for four years and felt like I was starting to come around to where I wanted to be about the fourth year that I was at Alta. You know I felt that every year up to that, as far as the skiing aspect of it, was

developmental years, but in the, kind of in the same fell swoop, I'd been on the ski patrol for one year, and Reed Sederlof, who was the assistant patrol director got offered a job with Mel Daleboot with the Daleboot Company. He took that and I don't know if it was because of my enthusiasm or my willingness to work or because I was so interested in the game that Bill Moss asked me to be his assistant patrol leader. Two or three weeks later Bill Moss was working for Daleboot too and it left me as the ski patrol leader with one year experience, you know, and probably an ego that it needed to be, but I started running the ski patrol by the seat of my pants.

Joe Prokop

And with that, you think about what the ski patrol does--snow safety. At that time was the ski patrol pretty much focused on just rescuing people off of the mountain that got into trouble, or talk about, compare and contrast how it was done then and how it is done now?

Jim Head

Well you see most of our work was involved in first aid and helping get the mountain in shape after storms, but we would get a call from the snow rangers that they needed assistance firing the cannons, you know the recoilless rifles or the pack howitzer and usually my first year the assistant patrol director would call out three or four of us to help with the shooting, and sometimes all it entailed was helping those guys break trail to the guns, you know, that was it, and they did... the snow rangers, which at that time were Binx Sandahl and Will Bassett, would do all of the hand charge routes, which at that time it was pretty simple. It was lower Peruvian Ridge and it was Chartreuse Nose and Slot and every once in awhile we'd lob one into Glory Hole because we were pretty sure we could get a fun slide to watch out of there, and then that was the extent of it, and all of... the whole north side of High Rustler through North Rustler over to Greeley Hill, that was all shot with the pack howitzer, and everything... The ridge gun would shoot everything from Stone Crusher clear up through West Rustler across Sun Spot, over to Ballroom, all the way across Ballroom and Baldy Shoulder. That stuff was all shot with artillery.

Joe Prokop

So that was shot and is that the gun tower that's on the top of Wild Cat ridge?

Jim Head

Exactly. We called it the Peruvian Ridge gun, and the thing was that I was entranced by that process, and kind of in combination with that, every time there was a day where there was a lot of control work to be done, the process compared to today, took a long time. We had two snow rangers, you know, basically leading the show and part of it was nervousness on the ski areas part. You know they were worried a little bit about liability because the forest service

had kind of, you know, with Monty Atwater and LaChapelle and all those guys that kind of got things going, you know the forest service kind of had that responsibility, and I think Salt Lake City Winter Sports was worried about, you know, the risk involved to their company with us doing it, but what kind of got it going was that it may have never really heated up except, you know I saw that as the most fun thing to do on the ski patrol. You know that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to go out. I wanted to go with them. I've always just had a natural ability with firearms and shooting those guns was just an extension of that, and you know back then if you were interested, you know they'd kind of bring you in, you know Binx especially. He liked to help people learn to do that kind of stuff, and it wasn't until I guess... lets back up. Kind of during that process, one of the things that I noticed, especially when I became patrol director was there was a lot of compartmentalization in Alta. There was a lift crew, there was a ski patrol, there was a ski school, you know it was kind of us, us, us, us, and I guess I've always been kind of a team builder. You know I saw that if we were working on problems together, you know if we came to the top of a lift tower instead of just going off and skiing, you know, if we helped the lift crew shovel out, you know it just helped them. It just made them feel better about what was going on and we'd go up with the ski school and we didn't have the good grooming equipment. We'd side-step places like Bear Paw and Punch Bowl and even Sun Spot and Race Course because we knew after it got cut up if we didn't side-step it, it would gunk up and get basically un-skiable. You know I kind of worked on getting a little more cooperation going and it also occurred to me that the harder we worked with the snow rangers the shorter the lag time was. You know the lifts were supposed to open at 9:30, and oftentimes on big patrol days it would be 11, 12 o'clock in the morning before we put people on the lift, and people didn't like standing down there. You know they figured we were up there having a good time doing the avalanche control and they wanted to get up there and ski it.

Joe Prokop

Think about even now. People freak out if the road isn't open. It could snow four feet and people almost feel that the highway should be open up the canyon--you know 9 o'clock in the morning so they can get there for first chair at 9:15, and I guess that feeling is kind of the same that if it took until 11 o'clock to get the lifts dug out and the control work done and people skiing, I don't know if, from a business stand point in this day and age, you could even survive, but I guess what the question is, is you have to know it's safe before you put people on that mountain.

Jim Head

Ya, and Pete Lev, who I later became a snow ranger with, made a very astute comment, and I think it was in John Krakower's book about Mount Everest, and he said, "People pay guys to keep them safe, but in fact what really happens is

in their minds they're paying the guy to get them to the top of the mountain." So there's a difference there, particularly you might think of people with season passes thinking that they want to be up there at all cost, almost, but you know they also want it to be safe, but they're basically paying for skiing, and later on in my ski patrol story that... we make a transition from on big control mornings getting things open and operating, you know, at noon to actually being very consistent with our 9:30 openings. You know there were several factors that happened to make that possible, and things are so much more sophisticated today than they were even then, but there was kind of a sequence of events, one had to do with Pete Lev coming from Jackson Hole as a snow ranger. In Jackson Hole the ski patrol did all of the hand charge routes and the snow rangers still fired the artillery up there, but the ski patrol basically did the hand charge routes, and Pete understood that and he... up there they had complete trust in their ski patrol to do that. Well Alta really hadn't gotten to that point yet, but I was pushing for it, and, you know I had a sense... you know I had stood in the lift lines when I worked in the lodge and I knew how frustrating that was, and I thought if we could get more organized, you know we could cut into that and shorten it up, but so we had Pete Lev showed up and I think about the same time the ski patrol leader, which was me, and my assistant leader began leading the route out Peruvian Ridge and we also started leading the route out to Chartreuse Slot and Nose, which basically relieved the snow rangers, you know that was one thing that relieved them. You know they could be working with the artillery control and sometimes that took longer than we really wanted it to, but it was just one more... if we could be running hand charge routes while they were up shooting the Peruvian Ridge rifle, it just shortened the process by running Peruvian Ridge route took, you know, half an hour to 45 minutes. It just brought us that much closer. But the big change... the really big change came when I had been the ski patrol leader for two years. I think the biggest thing I did was, or one of the things that I was most proud of was that I got the weekend ski patrol and the professional ski patrol, which was pretty antagonistic when I got there. I got us working as a team instead of being weekenders and professionals, it was ski patrol. You know I feel like I sort of instigated that and basically cleaned up the clicks and made that happen, and that was pretty cool, but Binx, Binx Sandahl knew that I was really interested in helping, you know, get the process going and doing it professionally and doing it safely, and he also knew that I like getting, you know, I just felt like it was cool getting the operation underway and getting those people up there because I actually got a kick out of seeing people ride up the lifts to... you know we had kind of a commodity and I like... and my personality was that I liked sharing that with people. You know if I could be a piece of making it available, it gave me satisfaction.

Joe Prokop

Kind of explain to somebody who might not get the concept that what you have up there is no different than a truck load of strawberries coming from Mexico, right? Up on there, that is a perishable commodity that if you don't get on it and

ski it while it's still fresh powder it turns into something else.

Jim Head

Well that's a perfect analogy because it is best when it's fresh, and you know say getting the first harvest which equates to the first turn down a run like High Rustler or East Greeley. Even back then if you got first tracks in Ballroom it was something that you could take with you and tell people that, you know, it was an experience that you had that was special, and particularly first tracks on High Rustler. I mean that was... there weren't that many people that could handle it well, but being up there and having the chance to try it, to me it was worth a lot and I think a lot of other people felt the same way that, you know, if they had the opportunity to ski on the high traverse after an opening or to ski in Ballroom after an opening, and later on that expanded to East Greeley and even the Baldy Chutes. You know those were the big prestige runs and if you had a chance to partake in that, that was a cool thing, but even, you know, there was just lots of skiers that they'd get off of the top of Wild Cat then they'd... you know they'd make a 400 yard traverse and they'd still be thrilled, I mean... but in addition to the great feeling that you can get skiing, the fact of just being up there, you know Alta is a beautiful place and it does something to your senses that I think intensifies your existence. I think that's the best way that I can put it.

Joe Prokop

When you think about... you have an intimate knowledge of the mountain as, you know, a ski patroller. Think of the feeling that you get maybe if you're standing on the top of Rustler and maybe it's the end of the day and it's a spring day and you had a great day of skiing, but you're seeing that alpine glow out over on Grizzly Gulch, or you know you can see the sun going down... the sun's coming behind Baldy. Think about that feeling. Can you explain why that's such a magical place up there?

Jim Head

I guess, you know, looking back on it at the end of the day, if... kind of back then there wasn't a big paycheck at the end of the day, so obviously that wasn't the reason for being up there, but to me looking back at the end of the day if I was tired and had some good runs and saw other people up there enjoying and experiencing that same feeling that I had, you know, that was enough for me, and particularly early on there's a certain amount of, at least with me, I'm sure there was ego involved. To me, in addition to all of the other things, it was a huge ego trip being able to be up there and ski a day at Alta and be at the forefront of openings and being a piece of that and when people got in trouble, bailing them out and I know there's people that ski up there today who kind of guard their secret stashes and so forth, but it was fun to me to know where the stashes were so I could tell somebody about it, you know, so they could go get it. You know once I experienced it, I was willing to share those kind of

experiences with the people that came up there, and I think that was part of the gratification was it, you know, sending someone up for that kind of experience, and then, you know, because for some reason when people experience Alta the proofs in the pudding when they come back and you see same person year after year after year and they come back and they remember the places that you sent them to ski, or you dropped the hint... you know wait a couple of minutes because we're about to open East Greeley, you know, so they hang on and the signs are popped open and they go out there and... Sometimes skiing one of those runs is an experience of a lifetime for someone. You know, and for me, and I think you understand that too, that the more you're up there... if you're having an experience of a lifetime every single day, I mean why would anyone leave? Of course I did leave but that's... I think that's why that place feels like home because I had so many of those experiences, and I think some of the philosophers and those kind of people that refer to those as peak experiences, and I think skiing in Alta, if you want to maybe race car drivers peak out rushing around a track, but I think as far as a sport goes, I think Alta provided the opportunity for more peak experiences than anything else that I can think of.

Joe Prokop

Well what's amazing to me too... we love, I mean it's one of our top things, I mean skiing at Alta. You know we love skiing everywhere, but when we're at Alta it's like we're in our element, you know... There is something about Alta that... what do you think is the cache of skiing Alta? The fact that you get these peak experiences... What do you think makes that loyalty of the Alta skier--the season pass holder that has been up there for 35 years and that's how they identify themselves--I'm an Alta skier?

Jim Head

Ok, basically line up a, say a certain number of opportunities to ski Alta and have that peak experience happen. Well none of them are exactly the same. You know every time is... even though you may wind up having the same thrill, it's different. Sometimes it comes at you in a different way, and sometimes in a surprising way, and some times it's not the best days that give you the best feelings. You know, and some of that has to do with pitting yourself against a challenge, you know, steep slopes, deep snow, or possibly steep slopes, crappy snow, you know, that looks really good, but I think there's a certain amount of self-development that happens and I think what I was reaching for when I was up there skiing was that I wanted to be able to make the not-so-good days just as good as the super days. I'm not sure if you follow that, but being able to handle the tough conditions in the same manner as a good condition, you know, that probably describes the real challenge of hitting it day after day.

Joe Prokop

When I think about what you just said, you know, are you familiar with (his)

skiing? Have you ever seen him ski?

Jim Head

He can ski.

Joe Prokop

He can ski anything. It doesn't matter if it's breakable crust, if it's deep powder, if it's marginal, if it's sun baked... it doesn't matter. You see him from across the hill and there goes Sam Howard. It's a bad day. It's his day off, and he's out here you know.

Jim Head

And he makes it look perfect. Well there were... there has been different really really good skiers come through. I don't know, Eddie Morris was one of the guys, you know, he had a technique that enabled a lot of people to be able to ski powder who weren't, you know, super athletes, you know he had a just a tight little system. He tucked his elbow in and did the early pull and stuff and he got a lot of people up there having fun and Pete Lev is an Eddie Morris type of skier, but, you know, he's really good and really consistent and he skis that way. I think a lot of us, when we're up there, there are other techniques that were just as effective. Alf Engen was just so absolutely strong that he was like Sam. It didn't matter what he was skiing, he never looked different, and really the very best skiers were... you know that... kind of one of the ways that you can tell the best guys is they never vary. The conditions vary, but their skiing doesn't vary. They look like they're having a great time, and it looks like it's really easy every time you see it. The skier that most influenced me in Alta was Max Lundberg, who was Alf's assistant, and he... a lot of people don't know it, but he was the head of the United States Demonstration Team for year after year after year. You know his technique was, you know, just really pretty, you know, and he was a physical phenomenon other than... because it really didn't change, but there's other guys that fit that category and one that comes to mind is Pepe Stiegler who skied up at Jackson Hole. You know at 4,000 vertical feet, you know, you would see him ski and people would stop and their mouths would flop open to watch him ski and it didn't matter what the conditions were, and I kind of wanted to be that way. I don't think I was ever one of those kinds of big guys, but I worked hard at it. You know that was a challenge to me to be able to handle the different conditions like that and, I don't know, I think I came close a few times, but... and I know that I was able to ski and have people stop and watch once in a while, and I sure wish I could do it again, but I'm not young anymore.

Joe Prokop

You were talking a bit about your first time that you came up Little Cottonwood Canyon. Can you remember what it was like to...? Where did you grow up?

Jim Head

Well I grew up in California.

Joe Prokop

So you come from California. So you'd seen mountains?

Jim Head

I'd seen mountains and, you know, I skied once or twice when I was a little kid, and then my last year at Oregon State where I got a degree in Wildlife Biology, I skied a couple of times and I had the itch, but I had a... I started college at Cal-Poly and, you know, you get interested in girls and it sort of changes your focus and it can change your direction. Well, this girl that I particularly liked came and visited, being my last year at Oregon State, and she had finished... I think mid-year, you know she finished winter semester and she was done and she actually went from... I think she was going to University of Wisconsin. She basically drove out to Alta, and I don't know how she heard of it, but she wound up there and spent the rest of the winter there. Well they closed up and to my luck she came and visited me at Oregon State and told me about Alta, and when I graduated from college I was, you know, still at loose ends. I thought I was maybe going to go to graduate school, but you know I was going to have to pay for it and I kind of took a cross-country trip and I went to visit her and I visited my relatives in Illinois, and kind of bounced around. Well on the way back from that trip I basically stopped in Salt Lake City and I guess to back up, on my way out I had met a Mormon family camping in Grand Teton National Park and we, you know, we tubed the Snake River together and they had a great bunch of kids and a pretty daughter of course, and so on my way back from Illinois and Wisconsin, I stopped at Alta, and... But the way I got there is I stopped in Salt Lake City and visited these folks who I kind of got along with and spent a few days with them and told them I was really interested in Alta. Well they drove me up the canyon and I went to the Rustler Lodge where my friend had worked and it was vacant. There was know one there, and it was kind of seedy looking. But anyway, I went down and I saw some people coming in and out of the Alta Lodge ramp so I walked down there and, you know, there was some people in the lobby and they had just opened their summer restaurant for the first time, and told them... you know, I told them I was kind of interested in the place and they said, why don't you wait a few minutes, the manager will be here. The manager's driving up the canyon right now. And it was Bill Shorter. I don't know if you know Bill or not. He's a pretty good skier in his own right, but anyway, Bill Shorter drove up the canyon, came down the ramp and introduced himself and I talked to him for 10 or 15 minutes and was hired on the spot. That was my introduction to... that's how I got my foot in the door, but like I told you earlier, I looked across the way at low Rustler and Wild Cat, Collins face and Schuss Gully. I couldn't imagine people skiing that terrain, you know I'd never

seen terrain like that and I was totally amazed that people skied it and I had skied just enough that I had the bug already and there wasn't even a snowflake on the ground.

Joe Prokop

When you think about the mountain, the skiing powder has changed a little bit with the new lifts and the new equipment, but the mountain is still the same, you know, if you go down Stone Crusher, its still Stone Crusher. The trees might be a little bit taller but it's still the same pitch, and it's a little bit different because of the skier compaction that happens on it. Can you talk a little bit about how, although Alta may have changed a little bit over the years, when you come up there, does it still seem the same Alta as when you showed up in 1967?

Jim Head

I'm not sure why, you know it's a combination of factors, but when I drive up the canyon to Alta I feel like I'm coming home, and I think I had the same sort of feeling the first time I drove up there. It was, you know there was an attraction to the place that fit my personality, and, you know, my needs and I saw challenges there that I was interested in making an effort for, and when I drove up the canyon last Friday with my daughter, I felt the same way. You know I had... I felt totally at ease. I felt like I was in exactly the place I wanted to be, you know, bar none there was no other place that I could think of on the planet that I would rather be, and when I got there I climbed out of the car and looked around and it was just, you know, basically everything I saw reinforced that feeling.

Joe Prokop

Think about some of the great people that you've met over there. I mean you're staying over at Bill's house. I think one thing that makes Alta special to me is some of the great friends that I've met up there--people that, you know I have a friend of mine who, I don't know what your politics are, but he's a republican, and I'm a democrat, but he and I ski together great. We don't talk about politics, we talk about this run or that run, but its people you know. I mean to me it's really special, so think about some of the people that you've known over the years up there and maybe some of those people who have really made a big impact on you.

Jim Head

Well my first hard circle of friends were ski school people, and it was the three people that I basically hung with were Marv Casey, Bill Haskins. Neither one of those guys are still alive, but also Robin Claire who runs the children's program up there who I'm still very fond of, you know, she's just... I don't know, she just had kind of a sparkly personality. And the other guy that was close at hand, of course you know is Ron Kane who just recently retired, and he and I have been

basically super good friends since we worked as handyman at the Alta Lodge. You know later on he worked for me on the ski patrol and stayed there and was, you know, just an anchor to the place, you know he had lots of interest. He's a heck of a musician and, you know, we camped in Southern Utah together, we went to the Olympic National Park together, we played music together, you know and he's just the kind of person that... there are people that if you're around they bring out the best in your personality, you know I think that there are people, for some reason their influence on your character just makes you a better person, and you know, Ron was one of those guys. One person that people tend to forget about that was a huge influence up there was Dave Hamring. He now does avalanche control for Alaska Highways, but he was the guy that figured out the hand charge routes for the front side, and he did... the year that I went to the forest service as a snow ranger, he... there was really not a defined position as snow safety specialist for Alta, but he was the guy. You know and he figured out those routes on the front side and it was a startling accomplishment. I mean it was really something, particularly from the standpoint that it happened at Alta because it was hard to make progress there. You know they were kind of an old time outfit and, you know, arch conservative and I think one of the reasons that I felt compelled to go into the forest service was it was just hard... it was hard to buck the management and there were things that I wanted to do that I couldn't do, you know, I didn't get permission to do, you know I wanted to... the Keyhole used to just be a monstrosity. We'd pick up 30 or 40 cases there every year. I wanted to go up there with 500 pounds of dynamite and fix it, and instead I painted lift towers, but I think the way Alta was, you know, I got along with Chic fine, but I had a hard time... my feeling was he was kind of pulling back on reins all of the time instead of giving us directions that would improve the place, you know, he was kind of holding things back, and Dave Hamring just took it upon himself to go out and do that, you know. Nobody asked him to do it. I don't think he got a lot of praise for doing it, but it was an amazing thing, and then the other two guys that were stand outs and progressive was also the year I became a snow ranger. Onno Wieringa, who is now the area manager, and Darwin Stoneman came on the patrol, and those guys, if anything, were just like me but with a lot more tact, and for some reason I think I went in there and, you know, it was like... I work with horses a lot, and if you take your time and let the horse figure out what you're asking for and don't push them too hard they'll try as hard as they possibly can to do what you want, but if you push them too hard they get confused and you basically lose them. You know you push too hard and they get confused and they might act out or they might try anything to figure out what you want, but usually they don't quite get it, and I think the difference with Onno was he'd go in and talk to Chic and for some reason he had just the right combination of persuasion that didn't sort of threaten the status quo, and he was able to start sliding things, you know, bring things along, but that first year that I was the snow ranger... I was the Snowbird Snow Ranger. It was a brand new area. They were just open, and I was way over my head, I mean I was just

about a goner down there, you know confused. I was trying to do a good job but, you know, I just didn't have enough experience, but we survived it. The next year they brought back Ray Linquist who had been earlier on a snow ranger up at Alta, and he kind of calmed things down there and it was a good deal, and I went back to Alta as kind of a... I was kind of the rotating snow ranger. But I got on my feet and things started to work and I wasn't... You know I just didn't feel so overwhelmed. I kind of got my feet back on the ground and Binx was up there mostly, and Pete Lev was up there, and you know we were a good combination.

Joe Prokop

(upcut) ...think of the innovations that they started, like Felix Koziol. Wasn't he one of the first people that figured out that we might be able to use artillery to control slides?

Jim Head

I think he... wasn't it Kozy and John Herbert? You know those guys were the instigators. Those guys... I consider those guys the pioneers. You know they were up there figuring out how to make it work, you know, we'd had a world war there and some of those guys had been in the army and they'd seen artillery used, and the Italians had used artillery to protect their own troops and to create havoc for the other guys, and the Austrians as well, so even if those guys weren't exposed to it, you know, they'd kind of heard about it. You know they'd heard about making big noises to make an avalanche and that was a little bit bunky, but those guys went out and tried stuff, and they were kind of the pioneers and you know they were trying a lot of stuff and they were figuring it out. And the Engen brothers were... you know they had grown up in Norway and they knew about avalanches and mostly about avoiding avalanches, but they were in there and they were all kind of figuring it out. You know so they're considered the grandfathers, and then kind of after them there was a kind of status quo for awhile, but Binx Sandahl was the guy who, you know kind of... you know he kind of saw the potential of integrating the ski patrol and the avalanche control and the thing about Binx is he knew a lot about snow and a lot about snow safety--he just had a natural instinct for them, and he also had a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for the area. He was one of the guys who was always an optimist. He always had a smile on his face. He was happy to see people, and yet he was willing to put his shoulder to the stone to make things happen to get things going, and you know he liked to be out there first in line to ski the powder, but he was also willing to work super hard to do it, and he was a social character. He interacted with the people in the lodges, and the government liked to talk a lot about conflict of interest. Well if Binxy hadn't gotten a lot of dinners at the Alta and Rustler and Peruvian lodges, and the Goldminer's Daughter, the way Alta is would have just taken a lot longer time to develop, but Binxy by himself was a flagship, you know, for the avalanche

control program, and I think that he had a combination of characters. Pete was really good with the science of snow safety. When Pete Lev first go to Alta he was kind of considered slow because he talks kind of slow and he takes awhile to explain things, but Pete's really a smart guy. You know he kind of kept track and he knew... he really knew what was going on with the snow pack, and so that... I saw the scientific end of it was his main strength and so Binx had that kind of support, but where I fit in, I was the logistics guy. I knew how to coordinate all of the canyon entities to get the process started. I knew that the gun crew had to go at six o'clock and I knew that the routes started at 7:30, and I knew, you know, how to coordinate that even when we had road and village control I knew how all of that stuff worked and I was able to organize it in my mind and just get it going, and that's actually when... You know when we started doing that we had the support of Onno doing snow safety down at Alta and we had Liam and Hoopy down at Snowbird. When we started getting that coordination going, you know, people started getting to the parking lot at nine o'clock and they knew they had a real good chance of getting on the lift at 9:30. That's kind of when that happened, and I think that was... you know if anything, that was where we made our mark is that we got the logistics started, but when we first started doing that the ski patrol at Alta still didn't have radios. I mean that... so after that we sort of set the stage for that and then, you know, I kind of drifted on with my forest service career and since I've left the areas, you know they have an amazing communication system. They have, both Alta and Snowbird have their radios and phones, and I mean it's just... every patrolman out there has a radio and is in contact, plus the weather forecasting, you know back in our days it was 40 or 50% at best and as the storms came we flew the storm by the seat of our pants, now they predict, you know, how long it's going to snow, how much, what the water content is going to be and, you know they've got it all figured out and it's extremely sophisticated, I mean way beyond what I remember and I'm just amazed at the job that those guys do and they're calling road closers. You know we thought we were good if we could get the canyon closed down and our leeway was we wanted to have the canyon closed 30 minutes before slides hit the road, and these guys... the slides still hit the road, but these guys I think are, you know, with all of the technical data they're able to collect with the weather stations and all of the gear they have, it's way beyond the capacity that we had.

Joe Prokop

Ya that's amazing... with a computer in my hand I can look at the doppler radar and see, you know, well a big part of it is still over Tooele. It's not quite coming here yet. This one looks like its going north; you know... just being a layman I can almost predict the weather. It really is amazing. I guess what I'd like to switch gears a little bit with you and we've covered your personal history. You've got some great quotes in there about why you think it's special and why it feels like home to you. That's the meat of what I'm getting at. Some of the management type people, you know Chick Morton... what was he like? Did you

ever know J. Laughlin at all?

Jim Head

J. was a peripheral character. We didn't deal with J. You know if there was a policy at Salt Lake Winter Sports, you know Alta Ski Lifts, it was, you know J. was kind of back there. I think he was a fairly conservative guy, but I don't really know, you know. I certainly met him and talked to him, but he was way in the background. Joe Quinney was... we felt like Joe Quinney was the guy who pulled the strings on Chick; you know set the stage for... If Chick was reluctant it was because Joe Quinney was a conservative guy and he didn't want Chick taking chances, and Chick was really happy with that. I've been to... after the season ended, I've been to Southern Utah with the whole Alta gang and Chick would be down there and, you know, he was a great guy to go on stuff like that, and he was... I actually had a better relationship with him as a snow ranger than I did as a patrol director. You know we always felt like he was in control and he was the director, but my feeling was I wanted him to be more innovative. There was stuff that I wanted to do that I thought would be good for the area and progressive and I thought he kind of dragged his feet on that, but to his credit, the area was very financially very successful under his direction. I mean, you know basically they had the mountain, they had the skiing, and the lifts were paid for. If they wanted to put a new lift in they basically wrote a check. They just didn't have to worry about the financial end of it, so that piece of it must have been working out fine. And we did laugh about some things and we saw eye to eye on some... you know there was plenty of stuff we saw eye to eye on, but I felt like some of it was an uphill battle for me, and I think if anything, I think he could have done more to integrate the different entities at Alta. You know I think again I have a real team-builder personality, and I wish there had been a little more of that coming down from management, and it seemed like the lift crew were probably the most conservative element at Alta. Russ Harmer was in charge of grooming and cat crew and clearing the parking lots. He was a progressive guy. He was real interested in his job and he'd... any innovation that came out of the grooming industry he was on top of and when I first got there we had snow cats that pulled rollers. I drove them. That was one of my jobs is when things stacked up I got in a cat and packed, and those things were hard to control and it was hard to pack right, and each little improvement he was on top of that stuff and he was really good with dealing with Chick. Chick, you know, he knew... he saw that piece of the puzzle. I think there were other pieces of the puzzle and I guess one of the reasons that... I think one of the things that would have made me happier about the situation is that when I became patrol leader I had a handful of guys. It was almost an entirely new patrol. I didn't hire those guys, but they were all brand new and some of them were really really good and some of them were skates, but what I wanted to do is I wanted to improve the conditions for the skis patrol guys so that we could start keeping the best guys and we could attract more good guys, and my big brag is that I hired Bob Bonar who is now... runs Snowbird, and I hired Randy Troper who is now snow safety

at Snowbird, and you know I hired Ron King and a bunch of the guys that were on the part-time patrol, who turned out to be really really good support, were hired on my shift. You know so I feel really good about that. I guess that's why one of the reasons of going into the forest service was attractive to me, but the most attractive part of the job was the hazard forecasting and control. You know I just really love that aspect of it. I'm probably starting to fall asleep now because it's night and it's past eight o'clock, but I had no problem getting up at two, three in the morning and checking on the weather, getting things organized, getting up early, getting out with the crew, and you know I just lived to get out there and do that work.

Joe Prokop

Plus you get to play with explosives and big guns.

Jim Head

Ya, I loved it. Artillery and explosives... you know some things I think are in your blood. I have no idea if it's genetics or... You know I grew up and my father was a professional dog trainer and very successful, and as soon as I could, when he was training dogs I would shoot birds for him. That's what I grew up doing, so when I got up on the 105 it was just like... I already knew what I wanted to do with it and I knew how to do it.

Joe Prokop

Talk a little bit about the firing sequence of the 105--how that whole thing works.

Jim Head

Well back then the recoilless rifles are actually a pretty dangerous piece of artillery because half of the charge comes out the back to balance the recoil, so if you're within 120 feet of it and behind it, you're basically hamburger, I mean you just can't be there. People have been killed by them, but the sequence goes...

The sequence of firing the 105 is there's two ways, #1 is when there's good visibility you use a direct fire sight, and the other is when there's no visibility you use the indirect fire sight, which is just a little bit more complicated because you're using a fixed point that you're focusing on and you adjust the sight so that the sight doesn't focus on the point unless you have the gun set at the right elevation and the right deflection, and the direct fire is kind of the most fun because you get to look through the sight and you see right where you want to put the round. You get the gun lined up, you say "ready to load" and your loader pops the artillery shell out of its container and he says... you know when he gets it out of the container he says, "loading" and he shuts the breach and then you recheck they lay of the gun and if it's still on... if your cross hairs are still on you say, "ready to fire" and the loader says, "all clear" and then you go ahead and fire the cannon. Back then in the '60s and '70s we were... generally

a gun crew was three people and we were right next to the cannon. Now they get down off of the cannon and fire it remotely, which is safer but it takes a longer time. Usually what we would do is we would fire a shot and wait to see the results and basically radio the results to... as you're firing if you radio the results then it's just another thing that you don't have to do to freeze your fingers because it can get cold up there. I would say a good sequence... When we could see it wasn't unusual to put a round out a minute, you know one minute between rounds, so it was pretty much boom boom boom boom through a sequence. We got going one time... we had a situation where we knew there was a lot of build up and a lot of hazard, couldn't see a thing, big storm on, and typically when we fired the highway it was especially important to... usually Binx would be down on the road and he would monitor if the slides came down or not, well he couldn't see so it didn't really matter, and we did a blind firing sequence. We fired I think 22 shots in 9 minutes. I think it averaged 40 seconds a shot, and you have to remember that we're using the blind fire sight, but we'd been up there so many times and I had most of the shots memorized and typically what would happen is the assistant gunner would read the elevation and deflection and the person running the gunner would read the data back to him as he set the sight. Well most of the time I would fire a shot and I would swing the gun to the next position almost by memory and so when we read the data and I looked through the sight, usually there was very... almost hardly any adjustment I had to make to line the gun up, so it was basically bangity bangity bang.

Joe Prokop

When you say bang, just how loud is that gun?

Jim Head

Well I don't have any high frequency hearing left. It's loud, you know. You know if you don't have hearing protection and particularly if you weren't ready for the... you can compensate almost like divers do by blowing a puff of air to equalize pressure inside your ears. You know that's a big thing, but having good hearing protection helps some too, but if you're not ready for the shot and your ears aren't protected, it will... one shot will damage your hearing. You know it will make your ears ring, and it's... those recoilless rifles have a particular crack to them I think which is hard on your ears, and I think the 75 millimeter rifles was worse than the 105. The 75 has a real crack to it, whereas the 105 was a crack but it was also more in the boom range, so I don't know, and we were pretty crazy. If we got up there and there wasn't hearing protection up there we would hold our ears. It's really not good enough. That was one of the lessons that we kind of learned the hard way, and I think it's better for those guys. You know, to fire the gun remotely I think is a lot safer for them.

Joe Prokop

Is there anything that I'm missing that you want to talk about? Is there a key piece of information that you'd like to tell me about that I'm kind of not getting?

Jim Head

Well there's so many pieces, you know, of living a life at Alta. It's hard to put it all together, you know, in one night or one interview, and I'm sure there's going to be things that I think about. You know it would be fun... and again it's part of my interest in sharing the pieces of Alta--some of the things that we went through and some of the learning processes that we had up there, you know, dealing... and I think part of the panache of working up there that I forgot to mention earlier too is that living and working at Alta, particularly in the avalanche control and the ski patrol work is similar to a war-time experience where you're up there, you're challenged by physically dangerous situations and you're working through that process as... mostly with other people on your teams so there are special bonds that happen when you're going through that process and when you're experiencing that process together. Once that happens, you know you've been through the war with these guys, it's like, you know when I come back and talk to these guys it's the same as talking to war buddies.

Joe Prokop

Some people, you see them on the mountain and you know they go skiing. They have their brand new skis and their brand new clothes, and then you look at some other people on the mountain and you see, and you know, "That guy's a skier." What do you think the difference between people that go skiing and like a real skier is?

Jim Head

I think it has a lot to do with that particular skier's attitude and his approach to the game, to the sport. People develop images of themselves and the guy that looks like the crusty old Alta skier that can go up and handle any situation, you know, may come out in... say their clothing may somewhat resemble the people that work up there. And there's also guys that go up there that are... you might call them "gear heads" or maybe they just like to ski in flashy stuff, they like to draw attention to themselves, but everybody has their own image of themselves. Actual skiing ability--it really doesn't matter what you're wearing or what kind of gear is on your feet, if you go out there and get the job done, you know, people are going to notice, and I might not notice all of the best skiers on the mountain now because there are so many of them, but back when I was skiing, I knew which ones they were, and some of them... there were blue jeans and sweatshirt guys who were pretty good, but there were also some guys that came out with the latest stretch bogners who were equally as good, and really that piece of it... it's all about self-image, you know what kind of image they wanted to project, and some people like to... I think like to appear pretty low key and understated, and other people like to be overstated. I don't think there is any really any

correlation to skiing ability. I see myself as kind of an understated character, but it doesn't bother me if somebody wants to blow his horn as long as he can get the job done. You know the proof is in the pudding, and of course if somebody comes out with the latest gear and falls all the way down Ballroom, you know that's just fodder for big laughs for the real skiers. They say jeez if you want to deck it out like that maybe you want to learn to ski a few turns first.

Joe Prokop

I think I'm pretty much done. Thanks so much for sitting down with me. This has been great.

Jim Head

This is great fun.

Joe Prokop

I think what's pretty funny to me too is that up at the resort you see people that are, like you said, gear heads, whereas my friend Ron Martin likes to say, "Well that guy's the best skier in the bar."

Jim Head

Well that's kind of the truth, but if there weren't guys up there doing that... I mean that's part of the amusement. That's another piece of the puzzle. There are some guys that... that guy looks like he can't even walk and chew gum and I just saw him ski High Rustler and the son of a bitch killed it. You know he was on fire coming down through there and jeez, I don't even know if he can make it to his car.

Joe Prokop

Actually I'll ask you one more quick question. On one given day, perfect snow conditions, the perfect, you know you can pick any run at Alta and the snow's the best. The light's going to be great. What is that run going to be?

Jim Head

If I was going to go for a thrill in the best conditions... Baldy Chutes bar none--the main chute. You know it just comes to you as the perfect ski run. It's perfectly formed and when the snow is in there as good, it's a great pitch. It's a great rhythm top to bottom, I mean it doesn't vary that much. I've gone in there, and you know it has been a catastrophe, but when it's right, there's nothing like, particularly if Ballroom hasn't been skied underneath it and you can ski it from the top of the chutes to the bottom of Rock Garden--you know then you know you've got something, and usually you have to let your legs pant a while when you get done with it.

Joe Prokop

I got a buddy of mine and his thing is... first we do a thing called the triple crown--we go upper Sunspot, ski those six or eight turns to the traverse, traverse out to third entry to Greeley, go up there, ski up and over Greeley, make six or eight turns down there then traverse out to High Rustler, and then when we get to Rustler, we stop and shoot the sh*t on the top and then when you ski Rustler though you got to ski it top to bottom, so once you get going there's no stopping on Rustler and it doesn't matter if it's bumped out or crappy snow. It's always the last run that we always do. One time we were on top of baldy and we were sitting on top of the weather station and we had lunch and we said... and we did it, and by the time I made it to Main Street, it was just like standing on those skies, just like.

Jim Head

Your legs are shaking, ya.

Joe Prokop

One time we made it past Germ and then down to... over to Collins face and I was like I can't do Collins face. I'm taking the cat track.

Jim Head

Ya it's like, what kind of a shout have I called.

Joe Prokop

We made it though.

Jim Head

I think one of the reasons that High Rustler never really marked high on my list was that I've skied it when it's really good, but most of the time when you go out there it's not that great. There's a little bit of wind on top or it's scratchy underneath, but I'd say Main Chute first, Eddies High and Nowhere second, you know East Greeley because it's got such a long fall clear of the creek, but also I also like Gunsight, you know getting into Gunsight when it's full of snow and there are no tracks. That's also an extremely nice run to take to the creek.