

THESIS

SPENT A LITTLE TIME ON THE MOUNTAIN: BACKCOUNTRY SKI TOURING IN
UTAH AND COLORADO

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Alexander Miller

Department of History

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Michael Childers

Leisl Carr Childers
Tony Cheng

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ABSTRACT

SPENT A LITTLE TIME ON THE MOUNTAIN: BACKCOUNTRY SKI TOURING IN UTAH AND COLORADO

Backcountry skiing has continually grown as a recreational activity since alpine skiers began leaving developed ski area boundaries in the late 1930s. Placing individuals in a less managed, sometimes hostile, winter landscape creates a significant management issue for the U.S. Forest Service. This thesis examines this issue by looking back to the sport's emergence as a popular winter recreation activity. It asks how ski tourers from the 1960s through the 1980s understood the way they used land. To answer this question, it examines the development of avalanche research and growing avalanche awareness in the Mountain West, the experience backcountry skiers sought and the mentality that created, and how that mentality established an advocacy framework aimed at protecting access to the backcountry—the area outside ski resorts and away from signs of the “works of man.” Through this investigation, it highlights how the U.S. Forest Service facilitated this new form of land use, what exactly it is backcountry skiers are using, and how this use informed environmental politics. Finally, it argues that through understanding how the growing backcountry skiing community used mountain landscapes in the past, skiers, land management agencies, and the broader outdoor recreation community, can begin to come to terms with the impacts of this use and how to mitigate them.

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Were it not for the Colorado State University History Department, this product would be incredibly stale. Within this community, I would like to thank all of my professors for providing a learning experience that I only dreamed of before attending this university. Additionally, I'd like to thank the Public Lands History Center staff and faculty who helped me develop my ideas as a research fellow there. Ruth Alexander, a PLHC council member and now Professor Emeritus of the department, deserves specific recognition for her insight, advice, and sharing of sources throughout this project. I also want to express my gratitude to my graduate cohort. It has

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PROLOGUE

When one thinks of Colorado alpine skiing, towns like Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, or Breckenridge often come to mind. The now-defunct Berthoud Pass Ski Area wouldn't register on a list of these heavy-hitters; after all, there's no longer a functioning lift or lodge. Founded in 1937, Berthoud Pass Ski Area served as an early outlet for urban recreationists hoping to enjoy the newly discovered sport of alpine skiing.¹ Initially equipped with a rope tow to drag skiers uphill, it gained Colorado's first two-seater chairlift in 1947 to more efficiently transport skiers to the top.² Two years later, in 1949, construction of a permanent lodge helped provide the full skiing experience to recreationists from cities along Colorado's Front Range.³ Where larger resorts have current name recognition, Berthoud Pass is one of the early havens for connecting urban Coloradoans to the state's mountains.

Alta Ski Area, several miles up Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon just outside Salt Lake City, would certainly register on a list of "great Western ski resorts" alongside Aspen or Vail. In a 1930s survey of potential ski areas for the Intermountain West, nationally-renown skier Alf Engen recommended the land Alta sprawls across as an excellent venue for this new recreational experience.⁴ In 1939, after the construction of the resort's first chairlift, Alta opened to the public, providing a space for Salt Lake City residents to enjoy what many have decreed to be the "best snow on earth." The snow, the 2,614 acres of skiable slopes it falls on, the resort's

¹ Michael Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg: Ski Resorts and the Environmental Movement* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 31.

² Sawyer D'argonne, "A Golden Beacon: The Life and Death of the Berthoud Pass Ski Area," *Sky-Hi News*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.skyhinews.com/trending/a-golden-beacon-the-life-and-death-of-the-berthoud-pass-ski-area/>.

³ *The History of Buildings at Berthoud Pass* (Georgetown, CO: Clear Creek County, 2012), <https://www.co.clear-creek.co.us/DocumentCenter/View/2533/The-History-of-the-Buildings-at-Berthoud-Pass?bidId=>.

⁴ U.S. Forest Service, *Ski Us, Your National Forests: The Evolution of Skiing on the National Forests*, brochure, (Washington, DC).

continued status as a “skiers only” destination, and the many amenities at its base all create a unique experience that visitors refer to as “Alta Magic.”⁵ This experience draws myriads of visitors each year up Little Cottonwood Canyon to the resort.

Alta and Berthoud Pass have more in common than one might think. With founding dates in the late Thirties, both were among the first ski areas to appear in the United States after the nation discovered the recreational joys of alpine skiing. After Berthoud Pass built their lift in 1947, both ski areas boasted the first chairlifts in their respective states. Their proximities to major metropolitan areas provided a steady flow of visitors in their early days—for Alta this occurs into the present. Also, both of these ski areas were located on federally owned public lands. Given their placement in the forested regions of the American West, both Alta and Berthoud Pass were managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Founded in 1905, the Forest Service managed newly established forest reserves across the United States. Emerging out of Progressive conservation as a response to rampant exploitation in the nineteenth century, presidents at the turn of the century set aside these reserves from the public domain for forest and watershed protection, and to be sustainably harvested for multiple generations thereafter. Many of these publicly-owned forest reserves, called national forests, were located in the West in areas overlooked by homesteaders for their inhospitable geography—areas such as the rugged, densely forested Rocky Mountains and similar landscapes. In the early years of the agency, the management style of national forests seemed simple and utilitarian: use them for the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This mission initially did not account for recreation, and instead favored resource conservation, sustained yield forestry, livestock grazing, and mining.

⁵ “Mountain Stats,” About Alta, Alta Ski Area, last modified 2021, <https://www.alta.com/about>. Alta is one of three remaining ski resorts that doesn’t allow snowboarders to ride their chairlifts. The other two are Deer Valley Ski Resort, in Park City, Utah, and Mad River Glen, in Waitsfield, Vermont.

It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that the Forest Service began managing national forests for recreational use. The agency slowly began creating recreation opportunities following the advent of auto tourism, which increased visitation to western forests adjacent to urban areas. They did this by improving summer access to mountains near urban areas and other small projects throughout the national forest system.⁶ Arthur Carhart, hired as the agency's recreational engineer in 1919, envisioned expanding these projects into region-wide recreation plans, but was met with stiff resistance by those in favor of maintaining the Forest Service's prioritization of extractive uses over recreation.⁷ Though a humble beginning to what is now a major economic outdoor industry, the agency continued to develop piecemeal recreational projects throughout the 1920s to meet a growing desires of tourists in the region.

These projects provided recreational opportunities for three-seasons, but tourists' appetite for leisure time in the mountains did not end when snow covered them. Skiing was an attractive, new form of winter recreation. Following Engen's 1930 survey, in which he "prospected, investigated, and studied proposed winter developments on scores of suggested places on the Intermountain National Forests," Forest Service administrators heeded his recommendations and began issuing permits to develop some of the nation's first ski resorts.⁸ By establishing these ski areas, the Forest Service provided four seasons of recreational opportunities to the new population of tourists seeking experiences unique from those provided in the city. By introducing a new form of land use into the national forest system, the agency also introduced a new use to manage.

⁶ Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg*, 20-23.

⁷ Ibid, 26-27.

⁸ Felix Koziol quote from *American Ski Annual 1940-41*, quoted in Joseph Arave, "The Forest Service Takes to the Slopes: The Birth of Utah's Ski Industry and the Role of the Forest Service," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 344.

Managing winter recreationists within defined ski area boundaries proved to be relatively straightforward for the Forest Service. They hired snow rangers to serve as early ski patrollers and assure the safety of the gleeful visitors. Outside of personal injury, snow rangers were responsible for managing the environmental hazards that existed in the Mountain West—first and foremost being avalanches. Along with developing spaces for winter recreation, the Forest Service played a primary role in developing avalanche knowledge in the United States. Snow rangers gained this knowledge primarily through observing weather at ski areas and used it to protect recreationists through area closures and hazard mitigation.

Alta and Berthoud Pass came into existence through this early system of national forest ski areas. Along with this and the similarities listed earlier, the two ski areas have something else in common. Where waves of new skiers flocked to the slopes at both resorts, Alta and Berthoud Pass also served as jump-off points for a specific type of skier looking for a different winter experience: ski tourers. Ski tourers were individuals, or more commonly groups of individuals, who left the patrolled and managed ski area boundaries to venture deeper into the snow-laden mountains of the national forest system. These unmanaged mountain landscapes, the antithesis of the ski area, are what is known as the “backcountry.”

This study follows ski tourers out of the ski area and into the backcountry of Utah and Colorado. In Utah, it focuses on the hub of the state’s backcountry ski touring: the central Wasatch Mountains just east of Salt Lake City. In Colorado, it focuses on the Front Range just west of Denver, but follows the state’s backcountry skiers to a variety of subranges of the Rockies, such as the Sawatch and Elk Mountains of west-central Colorado and the San Juan Mountains to the southwest. It travels up from the prominent western metro areas of Salt Lake City and Denver, into the surrounding national forests that blanket these ranges. It keeps the

resort in its sights but takes place in the backcountry of the central Rockies, in the dense conifer forests and the steep, wide open bowls above.

Though this study begins after Engen's 1930 survey of the intermountain region of the Rockies, it largely focuses on backcountry skiing's development from 1960 through 1985. During this time, ski touring grew in tandem with resort skiing as a new form of land use in national forests. Technological advancements made backcountry skiing more efficient, and a growing number of practitioners evolved it from a niche activity done by the few to a bustling backcountry community. Along with technological advancements, information on avalanches and other environmental hazards grew over this period and provided ski tourers with the knowledge needed to safely travel through the backcountry and return home after a day of skiing. Also, during this time, a preservationist ethic emerging out of the wilderness movement of the 1950s took hold among the backcountry skiing communities of Utah and Colorado that shaped their view of this recreational activity and the lands they practice it on. Despite growth in knowledge, access, and popularity, and a reliance on national forest lands and infrastructure, backcountry skiers between 1960 and 1985 did not view their recreational activity as a form of land use, let alone a consumptive form of land use like forestry, ranching, mining, or even ski area development.

This study traces the development of this view across three chapters highlighting discovery of environmental knowledge and awareness, development of a unifying experience backcountry skiers sought, and political engagement to preserve access to this experience. It begins by examining how Forest Service personnel managed avalanches, the main environmental hazard afflicting skiers in national forests. Though initially focused on protecting resort-goers, the growing popularity of ski touring and backcountry recreation demanded that land managers

also account for this form of use when developing avalanche knowledge and awareness. The research community of Forest Service snow rangers and an array of environmental scientists developed knowledge of avalanches that disseminated throughout the backcountry skiing community in constantly evolving ways during this study's timeframe. The first chapter shows this call-and-response manner of growing avalanche awareness in both Utah and Colorado.

The second chapter describes the specific experience backcountry skiers sought that couldn't be found within resort boundaries or through different types of recreation. It does so by first examining common themes highlighted by author-skiers recounting ski tours. After establishing the basics of the experience, it dives into how one "masters" backcountry skiing through efficient and continual consumption. It then turns to the side effects of mastery and how collecting backcountry experiences relates to the broader society skiers live in. By examining who backcountry skiers were, how they accessed the backcountry, and the mentality they developed through backcountry skiing, this chapter illustrates a backcountry identity that ignored their dependence on cities and infrastructure and amplified their lack of impact to landscapes during brief retreats into national forests.

The last chapter examines how backcountry skiers maintained their access to the mountain landscapes that held this specific backcountry experience through political action. It first links the sentiments of backcountry skiers in Utah and Colorado to the broader wilderness movement of the 1960s before discussing the specific environmental issues in which the community engaged. It then introduces the advocacy framework backcountry skiers used to respond to the threat of backcountry development. Similar to the second chapter, it examines the broader implications of backcountry skiers' preservationist views. Responding to consistent

growth and change from the 1960s onward, this chapter illustrates how recreational desires shaped environmental politics.

By looking at backcountry skiing as a consumptive form of land use instead of an impact-less recreational activity, this story places the sport within the multiple-use ethos the Forest Service adheres to. Through avalanche awareness, it discusses one of the most important ways Forest Service officials manage and inform this specific type of recreational land user. Portraying the backcountry experience as an extractable resource obtained through progressive consumption highlights backcountry skiing's role in Western development. Preservation of this resource through supporting wilderness designations and limiting access to other stakeholders was an effort to create personal playgrounds instead of a conscious effort toward preserving areas for the greatest good. To further illustrate this understanding of backcountry skiing, these three chapters are divided into the three stages of the extractive boom-bust cycle that plays out far too often on Western landscapes: discovery, development, and collapse.⁹

Gearing Up

At its core, this story examines the commodification of experience and how that changes a community's understanding of the landscape. In *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, Hal Rothman highlighted how the tourism industry replaced traditional extractive industries in rural Western towns and experience became the main economic driver.¹⁰ Out of this discussion, historians focused on how the emergence of alpine skiing and the mountain experience affected Colorado's rural development and community identities, and how

⁹ For more on the boom/bust cycle and how communities formed around Western landscapes, see Michael Amundson, *Yellowcake Towns: Uranium Mining Communities in the American West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Hal Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 17-21.

the state marketed this rebranding.¹¹ Where changing identities and subjugation to the whims of exterior interests represented the downside of the devil's bargain of tourism, economic windfalls through amenity consumption were the upside.¹² Since they often recreated close to home, backcountry skiers seldom booked hotels, but as chapter two will show, the sport required a large amount of material possessions and use of fuel to access the experience itself.¹³ For backcountry skiers, consumption of material goods occurred in-town, while consumption of experience happened in the backcountry.

Richard White, in his 1996 essay "'Are You an Environmentalist or do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," introduced the idea of "knowing nature" and how this differed between natural resource workers and recreationists.¹⁴ Subsequent historians have nuanced these differing understandings of landscape by examining how laborers "know nature" and use that knowledge to survive.¹⁵ Along with adding nuance, historians have blown out this idea to illustrate the broader implications differing understandings of landscapes have.¹⁶ Examining

¹¹ Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), and Michael Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg*.

¹² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003) highlighted the culture of mass consumption that emerged in the United States after World War II and how the consumer mindset affected communities within the nation.

¹³ James Morton Turner, "From Woodcraft to 'Leave no Trace': Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America," *Environmental History* 7, no. 3 (July 2002): 462-484. Turner discusses how consumption of the backcountry shifted from bringing minimal gear and using what nature provided to purchasing immense amounts of equipment to minimize visible impacts after the rise of twentieth-century environmentalism. Rachel Gross, "From Buckskin to Gore-Tex: Consumption as a Path to Mastery in Twentieth-Century American Wilderness Recreation," *Enterprise & Society* 19, no. 4 (December 2018), 826-835 builds on this, showing how consumption of material goods became a "path to mastery" for backcountry recreationists.

¹⁴ Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. By William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-185.

¹⁵ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Persistent Callings: Seasons of Work and Identity on the Oregon Coast* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2019) examines this idea in his discussion of subsistence natural resource labor in Oregon. Diana Di Stefano, *Encounters in Avalanche Country: A History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013) illustrates this by highlighting a framework for survival used among nineteenth century miners and railroad workers in the avalanche terrain of the Mountain West.

¹⁶ Joseph E. Taylor III's *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) links Yosemite rock climbers to the society they emerged from. Leisl Carr Childers, *Size of*

backcountry skiers reaffirms the disconnect between “knowing nature” through work and through play. By understanding mountain landscapes as playgrounds instead of complex ecosystems that humans influence, backcountry skiers developed a skewed understanding of their form of land use and its implications.

Both of these ideas, the commodification of experience and how time spent extracting commodities from landscapes shape how communities know nature, highlight the two common themes of United States environmental history. Roderick Frazier Nash, in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, introduced two opposing views of undeveloped land, utilitarian and preservationist, that dictated much of our understanding of the natural world.¹⁷ Though the trouble with wilderness as an idea has since been highlighted and extensively discussed, Nash’s utilitarian view of wilderness highlighted the process of prescribing value to landscapes and then consuming them.¹⁸ The trend of commodification and consumption of landscapes, and its consequences, are visible in numerous works in American environmental history.¹⁹ Through

the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015) discusses how Great Basin cattle ranchers were subjected to the land use desires of the federal government and other stakeholders of the region’s public lands.

¹⁷ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind, Fifth Edition* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 2014), 23-25.

¹⁸ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1966): 7-28, critiques the idea of wilderness through highlighting its social construction and who it excludes.

¹⁹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Mark Fiege, *Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), Lincoln Bramwell, *Wilderburbs: Communities on Nature’s Edge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, Admunson, *Yellowcake Towns*, Carr Childers, *Size of the Risk*, Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg*, and Taylor III, *Persistent Callings* all address waves of commodification and consumption of land in the West. Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Chad Montrie, *Making a Living: Work and Environment in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

looking at backcountry skiing and the commodity of the backcountry experience, this study highlights the value recreationists placed on undeveloped landscapes, the resources they consumed through this commodification, and the community's efforts to maintain access to the landscapes that held the unique value they placed on them.

By discussing backcountry skiing in this light, this study aims to build on the field of applied history as well. David Lowe, in an article discussing the roots of applied history, states that it began as a means for statemen to create sound policy by contextualizing the present through looking to the past.²⁰ Fear of capture from lobbyists, politicians, and constituents, however, led historians to diverge from policymaking. In following history's past with informing policy, Lowe highlighted how the field is currently trying to return to its roots, providing context to produce sound legislature and rules. One of the avenues applied historians do this through is as "activists."²¹ Though many historians hesitate calling themselves activists, Thomas Cauvin defines historic activism as using history to intervene in political conversations.²² Through this approach, applied historian "activists" are using the past to inform the present and provide insight to future trajectories. This study examines backcountry skiing's consumptive past and the ways the community's use and mentality affected more than just skiers and more than just the backcountry. By discussing this, it calls for a change in the way backcountry skiers understand

2008), Coleman, *Ski Style*, and Di Stefano, *Encounters in Avalanche Country* highlight how these two threads of American history affect laborers and local residents across the nation.

²⁰ David Lowe, "Applied History Today," *Journal of Applied History* 1 (2019): 44.

²¹ Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (London: Routledge Press, 2016), 230-231.

²² For an example of this, see Center of the American West, *Atlas of the New West: Portrait of a Changing Region*, ed. William E. Reibsame and James J. Robb (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), and Patricia Nelson Limerick, Andrew Cowell, and Sharon K. Collinge, eds., *Remedies for a New West: Healing Landscapes, Histories, and Cultures* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009). In *Atlas of the New West*, Reibsame and Robb use maps paired with essays to highlight changing demographics, resources, and views of the interior states in the American West. In *Remedies for the New West*, Limerick et al address many of these issues through engaging essays that provide historical context and posit potential solutions.

their sport in order to assure that generations to come can enjoy the physical climbs and euphoric descents that draw them to the mountains.

To illustrate backcountry skiing as a consumptive use and highlight the production that goes into it, this story relies on four main sources of information. Much of the knowledge developed on avalanches referenced in the first chapter is communicated through Forest Service reports, publications, and texts published by Forest Service-affiliated researchers.²³ The backcountry skier's perspective on avalanche awareness, the backcountry experience, and preservation is largely found in monthly periodicals from the Colorado Mountain Club and the Wasatch Mountain Club.²⁴ Mountain clubs served as hubs of backcountry skiing activity in Colorado and Utah during the sport's earlier years. To supplement mountain club accounts, articles from *SKIING Magazine*, a popular skiing publication for much of the late twentieth century, and oral histories from Utah backcountry skiers were also used.²⁵

Along with Forest Service reports, magazine articles, and oral histories, this study also draws from personal experience. I have split the past six years of my life between Colorado and Utah, skiing and snowboarding in both the Front Range and the Wasatch Mountains. Growing up on the east coast, moving to Park City, Utah felt like I was entering the big leagues of recreation. In a sense, I was: the town I moved to rested at a higher elevation than the highest point in my home state, the snow was more abundant, and the resorts and recreation areas dwarfed those that

²³ Many of these reports are accessible online through Alta Avalanche Collection, Utah Ski Archive, J. Willard Marriott Digital Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?facet_setname_s=%22uu_altaav%22&q=alta+avalanche+studies. Hard copies, as well as additional sources, are located in the Papers of Whitney M. Borland, Subseries 1.6, "Snow and Ice Articles, 1912-1985," Water Resources Archive, Colorado State University.

²⁴ Issues of *Trail and Timberline*, the Colorado Mountain Club's periodical, are located at the American Alpine Club Library in Golden, Colorado. Past issues of *The Rambler*, the Wasatch Mountain Club's periodical, are available online at <https://www.wasatchmountainclub.org/the-rambler>.

²⁵ Digitized copies of *SKIING Magazine* articles were accessed through interlibrary loan. Recordings and transcripts of oral histories from prominent skiers and preservationists were accessed through the Everett Cooley Collection, Utah Ski Archive, J. Willard Marriott Digital Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, <https://campusguides.lib.utah.edu/c.php?g=160500&p=1051737>, and by email from Matthew Green, a PhD candidate at University of Utah.

I learned to ski, fish, and climb in. Around Utah's popular recreational hubs, one could spit in the air and it would land on someone with an outdoor brand sponsorship or a segment in one of my favorite ski movies. It is no secret that the Rocky Mountains are a recreational paradise. After years of learning about the issues facing public lands and outdoor recreation and observing an apolitical sentiment toward them from people who recreate on public lands daily, I began to question what it is about outdoor rec, especially backcountry skiing, that led the detached idea of "escaping to the mountains." Through this study, I looked to when backcountry skiing began to gain popularity to examine whether the sport had always been this way in hopes of gaining an insight into how it can break its trend of willfully ignorant consumption. Though critical of skiers, it never loses sight of how fun skiing is. Where reading about backcountry skiing may feel foreign, unrelatable, or downright intimidating to some, I will guide you through a typical day in the mountains doing my favorite winter activity. So, grab your skis, boots, poles, and backpack, and join me on a journey into the Rocky Mountain backcountry.

CHAPTER 1 – Discovery

Little Cottonwood Canyon, located in the Wasatch Mountains abutting the Salt Lake Valley's eastern extent, is home to some of the best skiing in the United States. But getting to Alta or Snowbird, the canyon's two ski resorts, can be a bit of a drag if you're not prepared. Separated by a ridgeline protruding from the northwest face of Mount Baldy, these resorts draw crowds from around the world that produce a frustrating amount of downcanyon traffic on snowy days. Being stuck in traffic, however, provides an excellent opportunity to take in the awesome magnitude of the canyon itself.

While idling in the line of cars locals call the "red snake," my touring partner and I took note of our surroundings. Tall, snow-covered peaks, visible in the distance from Salt Lake City, towered overhead. The sharp S-curves in the road permitted a quick glance at the chilly torrent called Little Cottonwood Creek that runs alongside the road. Further up the canyon, in a particularly steep section that is void of trees, we passed a sign stating, "No Parking or Stopping November 1 to May 15." Why is this sign there? Because that specific stretch of road runs through an avalanche path.

Avalanches, cascading piles of snow, ice, and debris, are natural events in the mountainous regions of the United States and in similar terrain around the world. Because of their destructive capabilities, researchers in the fields of meteorology, glaciology, and hydrology have specialized in the study of avalanches and established a wealth of knowledge on the factors that create snow slides. Today, this research largely benefits winter recreationists like those heading up Little Cottonwood Canyon. Participants in the sports of skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling are all safer from the work of avalanche researchers. This, and

the continued engagement of researchers in back- and front-country recreation, is celebrated through fundraisers, sponsored talks at craft breweries, and ski movie premiers throughout the mountainous regions of the U.S.

Outside of winter recreationists and a handful of industrialists, avalanches are relatively absent from the minds of many who live in western mountain states. If you told a random passerby that roughly 100,000 avalanches occur in the United States annually, they might be surprised at the magnitude of this destructive force.²⁶ Despite this large number, these natural occurrences are responsible for as few as one fatality a year and no more than thirty-six. The upper end of this fatality count is not the result of an increase in avalanche activity as much as it is of more people spending time in avalanche terrain. After winter recreationists realized the delights of skiing light, untouched snow, commonly referred to as powder, in the mid-twentieth century, they began traveling further and further into America's national forests to find it. Early avalanche expert Montgomery Atwater described and quantified this meeting of humans and avalanche-prone terrain as the "avalanche hazard."²⁷ It was out of this increase in human contact with the steep canyons of the Mountain West that a need to understand avalanches emerged.

Prior to the advent of winter recreation in the 1930s, the West's avalanche hazard was an occupational one grappled with by nineteenth century fur trappers, miners, and railroad workers. Without funding from their communities or their employers for scientific research, rural towns developed localized frameworks for surviving mountain winters that shared the universal traits of avoidance, smart travel habits, and community assistance during disasters.²⁸ After the decline of

²⁶ Betsy Armstrong and Knox Williams, *The Avalanche Book, Revised and Updated* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992), 17-18.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, *Avalanche Handbook*, by Montgomery M. Atwater and Felix C. Koziol, Handbook (Washington, 1953), 5.

²⁸ Diana Di Stefano illuminates this framework through her examination of 19th and early 20th century avalanche accidents in *Encounters in Avalanche Country*.

the silver industry brought miners out of the mountains and railroad companies began using structures to protect their trains, the avalanche hazard declined. When the U.S. Forest Service began leveraging winter recreation on public lands, particularly through its leasing of this terrain to ski resorts in the mid-twentieth century, the agency encountered the avalanche hazard in a way that impeded resorts' plans for creating an expansive "winter playground." Instead of finding safer locations to develop and avoid the risk and impacts of avalanches, which would severely impact the caliber of experience ski areas could provide their patrons, the Forest Service established a diverse scientific community, based around the reduction of hazards and protection of lives in avalanche-prone areas, that still exists today.

This chapter follows growing awareness of the recreational avalanche hazard through its establishment as scientific knowledge by early avalanche researchers. Unlike the act of skiing, which is an individual experience, avalanches created community cohesion between the two separate spheres of scientists and recreationists that emerged out of the peopling of avalanche terrain post-1930. While avalanche researchers mastered their craft initially to protect skiers, the landscape backcountry skiers recreated in required them to develop an avalanche awareness that mirrored the growing pool of knowledge these researchers created. Avalanches, naturally occurring phenomenon that are wholly indifferent to whether humans study them or play in their path, served as an early linchpin in connecting backcountry skiers and scientists.

American avalanche research builds on concepts of necessity, community, and location introduced by historians of science. Where necessities typically meet material needs, action gets taken. The necessity in avalanche country was to make it out alive. Throughout this study, community refers to groups of people organizing themselves around a specific need and a shared interest. Where communities in the valleys below ski resorts organized around different material

needs, this story revolves around the intellectual need to understand avalanches and the material need to survive them. Skiing's rise as a leisure activity also helped build this community, as the need to understand avalanches emerged to protect people traveling from various cities into avalanche country to ski.²⁹ The locations where researchers accumulated knowledge on avalanches varied, but they always focused their research and observations on the mountain landscapes of avalanche country.

Nathan Reingold, in his collection of essays titled *Science, American Style*, introduced necessity as a distinction between American and European scientific research and highlighted that the needs of a community dictated what knowledge they pursued.³⁰ In the case of American avalanche research, the recreation community's desire for winter leisure activities complicated the definition of necessity by establishing a scientific field to mitigate a recreational hazard. Prior to recreationists occupying avalanche terrain, researching the phenomenon wasn't profitable for stakeholders and therefore wasn't formally pursued. The field of American avalanche research also broadened the communities involved in research through its spread of knowledge into the backcountry skiing community.³¹ As avalanche awareness grew among recreationists, so too did the tools used to keep skiers safe if disaster struck. Since avalanches are hyper-localized, their research and awareness also connected field observations with centralized research centers.³²

²⁹ Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 293-94, calls these "communities of affinity" in his description of Las Vegas suburbs. Due to the transient nature of the city, communities formed not around proximity to each other, but around shared interests and activities.

³⁰ This distinction raised questions of location and reagitated an ongoing discussion of community's role in science. Robert Kohler and Jeremy Vetter expanded on these topics by extending scientific community to financial backers, complicating location's role through juxtaposing lab and field research, and enforcing the importance of place-based research in our daily lives. For more on the United States' propensity for applied science, see Nathan Reingold, *Science, American Style* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

³¹ Kohler broadens the view of scientific communities in *Partners in Science: Foundations and Natural Scientists, 1900-1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³² Kohler and Vetter discuss the dynamic between field and lab research in Robert E. Kohler, *Landscapes and Labscapes: Exploring the Lab-Field Border in Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), "Practice and Place in Twentieth Century Field Biology: A Comment," *Journal of the History of Biology* 45, No. 4 (Winter 2012): 579-586, and Jeremy Vetter, "Labs in the Field? Rocky Mountain Biological Stations in the Early Twentieth

Avalanche research's development in protection of outdoor recreation places it among a long list of endeavors initiated to improve the tourist experience of western mountain towns. Where ski lodges, extravagant housing developments, gift shops, and gas stations heightened the tourist experience off the ski hill, the work of avalanche experts assured a favorable experience while on it. Authors have addressed how the pursuit of experience, the backbone of twentieth century tourism, shaped the identity and built environment of the American West.³³ Avalanches also play a role in the identity of western mountain communities that has remained largely unchanged in the twentieth century. Since articulation of the avalanche hazard, avalanche experts and recreationists that developed an avalanche awareness created communities distinct from the flashy socialites of Aspen and Vail. The common interest of untouched snow, be it to ski or to study, brought geographically spread out scientists and recreationists into avalanche country, while the need to make it out alive connected them.

Previous research on avalanches focuses largely on the industrial avalanche hazard.³⁴ Works such as Diana Di Stefano's *Encounters in Avalanche Country: A History of Survival in the Mountain West, 1820-1920* illuminates ways that avalanches and the mountain environment

Century." *Journal of the History of Biology* vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter 2012): 587-611.

³³ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, examined how experience drove a form of economic colonialism in rural western towns which drastically changed their identities. Building on this, Annie Gilbert Coleman's *Ski Style* and Michael Childers' *Colorado Powder Keg* discuss how skiing specifically changed the identity of Colorado's mountain town and created a rift between the state's nascent ski industry, environmentalists, and the rural communities affected by these changes. William Philpott's *Vacationland* provides a thorough analysis of how Colorado's mountain landscape has been marketed as the ultimate venue for tourist and leisure experiences and the role this played in the state's changing identity.

³⁴ Along with Di Stefano, who provides a legal and labor history on the role avalanches played in the lives of nineteenth-century miners and railroad workers, John W. Jenkins synthesizes nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspaper accounts on avalanches in *Colorado Avalanche Disasters: An Untold Story of the Old West* (Ouray, CO: Western Reflections Publishing Company, 2001). Anthony Will Bowman's master's thesis "From Silver to Skis: A History of Alta, Utah and Little Cottonwood Canyon, 1847-1966" briefly discusses the Utah equivalent of these accidents. Joseph Arave's "The Forest Service Takes to the Slopes: The Birth of Utah's Ski Industry and the Role of the Forest Service" addressed early methods of avalanche control the U.S. Forest Service employed to support the state's young ski areas. Works from other fields, such as Bernard Mergen's *Snow in America*, touch on Americans' perceptions of avalanches. Numerous texts from avalanche experts cited in this study provide sections on the history of avalanches before shifting gears.

have affected working-class communities in the West. With the rise of outdoor recreation in the 1930s though, the communities affected by avalanches and their collective identities are drastically different than nineteenth century mining towns. This is visible in the publications and correspondence among both spheres affected by the recreational avalanche hazard.

Since the United States Forest Service funded much of the avalanche research between 1960 and 1985, agency reports and handbooks illustrate what aspects of the avalanche hazard researchers examined and how they understood them. Early experts from the 1940s and 1950s, tasked with identifying and minimizing avalanche conditions, established a solid base of knowledge on avalanches that succeeding generations grew and evolved. Along with displaying knowledge gained, publications from these experts also show how the scientific community interacted with each other and with those interested in their work. As a fast-growing community in avalanche country, backcountry skiers fell under the latter category and displayed their interest in avalanches through several avenues. The popular skiing publication *SKIING* Magazine featured numerous articles on avalanches and avalanche awareness during its time. Though not accounting for everyone traveling into the backcountry on skis, mountain clubs like the Colorado Mountain Club and Wasatch Mountain Club also spread avalanche awareness through articles and regular programming in their club newsletters and publications. These scientific reports, stories, and community announcements illustrate a growth of knowledge and awareness among both prominent communities in avalanche country.

This chapter starts by examining the scientific knowledge created by early avalanche researchers. Research necessitated by the Forest Service's growth of winter recreation opportunities solidified an understanding of where avalanches occurred, their causes, and how to respond to them. This knowledge flowed from avalanche researchers to backcountry skiers

throughout the 1960s and can be seen through shifts in how skiers viewed and discussed avalanches. After examining the characteristics of early avalanche awareness in the backcountry community, the chapter returns to the scientific field of avalanche research and analyzes how information age technology transformed the ways researchers engaged various stakeholders in avalanche country. It then turns to the backcountry skiing community to see how these evolutions in communication affected the awareness of a steadily increasing number of backcountry skiers. This chapter ends by discussing the creation of avalanche centers and illustrating that, though relaying information from geographically distant locations, a sturdy infrastructure of avalanche forecasting and education lessened the gap in understanding between researchers and recreationists. Through this, it illustrates the important role avalanches and their awareness played in connecting two separate mountain communities: backcountry skiers and snow scientists. Had they not been a point of cohesion for early experts and subsequent recreationists, the annual death toll of avalanches could be much higher today.

Learning the Hazard

Both good skiing and avalanches are predicated on steep, open slopes. Where snow on these slopes may appear stable on the surface, avalanches occur when excessive weight fractures a less stable layer buried within the season's snowpack. These unseen instabilities posed a serious threat to those trying to escape to the mountains and became the subject of the scientific field of avalanche studies. The Swiss, longstanding experts of surviving in avalanche country, began formally studying avalanches in the 1880s to better understand how to sustain a permanent population in the mountains.³⁵ In the United States, avalanche researchers learned their craft to protect leisure seekers who exercised an abundance of free-will in their ability to recreate in

³⁵ Armstrong and Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, 201.

avalanche terrain and leave when they pleased. Along with this, where Swiss researchers addressed a national problem, their American counterparts experimented with ways to protect a small percentage of their population that had access to winter recreation in a relatively small portion of the United States. These differences in necessity and geographic scope mark the two key distinctions between Swiss and American avalanche studies and highlight the unique “necessity” that established the American field.³⁶

The Forest Service chose the old silver mining town of Alta, Utah for their initial foray into avalanche research. Along with its proximity to Salt Lake City, Alta had incredible ski terrain, a lot of snow, and plentiful avalanche activity.³⁷ Here, the agency began monitoring weather, snowfall, and avalanches during the winter of 1937-38. While early observations continued through World War II, observers established minimal scientific knowledge on the causes of avalanches during this period. This changed when Montgomery Atwater became an avalanche observer for the Forest Service in 1945 and published his methods of hazard recognition, reduction, and research in the 1948 technical report titled “The Alta Avalanche Studies.”³⁸ In 1953, Atwater and Felix Koziol, the supervisor of Wasatch National Forest, which encompassed the Alta area, published the first *Avalanche Handbook* as a continuation of the groundwork established by the “Avalanche Studies.” The narrative between the two publications was largely consistent, but in the *Avalanche Handbook* it’s clear that Atwater and his colleagues gained a strong understanding of avalanches through almost ten years of observations and research. With what appeared to be carte blanche beyond the consequences of an avalanche

³⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Avalanche Handbook*, by Montgomery M. Atwater and Felix C. Koziol, 7-9.

³⁷ Armstrong and Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, 203 and Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, 9.

³⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, *The Alta Avalanche Studies*, by Montgomery M. Atwater and Felix C. Koziol, Handbook (Utah: Wasatch National Forest, 1948).

accident on their watch, early avalanche experts set a precedent of free-form, avant-garde research for the field.

One of the most groundbreaking concepts shared with the field between “Studies” and the *Handbook* was that of “alpine zones,” an observation made by Swiss mountaineer and scientist André Roch during his 1949 survey of western ski areas.³⁹ Through analyzing differences in snowpack, elevation, and weather patterns across the West, he introduced three distinct mountain climates: the “Coastal” alpine zone—defined by low elevation, moderate temperatures, “considerable” winds, and consistent, heavy snowfall—the “Middle” alpine zone—elevations from 8,000 to 11,000 feet, medium temperatures, strong winds, and frequent, heavy snowfall—and the “High” alpine zone—elevations from 10,000 to 13,000 feet, low temperatures, very strong winds, and sparse, moderate snowfall.⁴⁰ Avalanche hazards in each alpine zone had distinct characteristics, which prompted the establishment of two additional observation stations in 1949 and 1950 at Washington’s Coastal alpine Mt. Baker, later moved to the more accessible Stevens Pass, and Colorado’s High alpine Berthoud Pass.⁴¹

Snow rangers in these locations made observations by monitoring changes in both weather and snowpack. They recorded sky conditions, wind direction and force, temperature, hourly and daily snowfall, water content of snow, snow settlement, depth of the snowpack, and avalanche occurrence and size.⁴² Through digging snow pits or using resistance-gauging penetrometers, rangers monitored various snow layers within a snowpack and learned of any changes that occurred within them.⁴³ They then compared data between the three observation

³⁹ André Roch, *Report on Snow and Avalanche Conditions in U.S.* (1949).

⁴⁰ Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid*, 13.

⁴³ The ram penetrometer, or “ram sonde,” was a Swiss creation that used pressure to gauge the strength and cohesion of snow layers within a snowpack, Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, 107-118.

locations, the coastal Stevens Pass, middle alpine Alta, and high alpine Berthoud Pass, to learn of discrepancies between each snowpack that informed localized ski area closures.

The establishment of stations in each alpine zone and comparison of data between them highlighted an emerging community cohesion within the field of American avalanche studies. This tight-knit community was embodied by the Alta Avalanche Study Center (AASC). Managed by Ed LaChapelle, a snow ranger who joined Atwater in 1952, the AASC acted as a clearing house for research and provided structure to the early field.⁴⁴ With Alta as its nucleus, researchers from ski areas across the West shared observations, updates, and new knowledge through progress reports and miscellaneous studies circulated by the forum.⁴⁵

This early communication between researchers helped build community consensus in the field. An example of this is the principle of contributory factor analysis.⁴⁶ Introduced as a method to produce accurate avalanche forecasts, contributory factor analysis addressed the ten weather and climate factors that created an avalanche hazard. Among these factors are old snow depth and surface, new snow depth and type, average density, snowfall intensity, moisture content in new snow, snow settlement, wind speed and direction, and temperature.⁴⁷ This methodology first appeared in the “Alta Studies,” was reiterated in the *Avalanche Handbook*, continuously reappeared in successive reports, and eventually found its way into avalanche class curriculums.⁴⁸ Another example of consensus is seen in the actual formatting and content of reports like the *Avalanche Handbook*. Along with contributory factor analysis, the structure of

⁴⁴ Armstrong and Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, 205.

⁴⁵ Several of these reports are located in the Papers of Whitney M. Borland, Subseries 1.6, “Snow and Ice Articles, 1912-1985,” Water Resources Archive, Colorado State University, accessed on March 19, 2020.

⁴⁶ Armstrong and Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, 205.

⁴⁷ Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, 46-50.

⁴⁸ Atwater and Koziol, *The Alta Avalanche Studies*, 29-31, Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, 46-52, and “Outline for Ski Patrol Avalanche Course: Denver Metropolitan Patrol,” 7, in the Papers of Whitney M. Borland, Subseries 1.6, “Snow and Ice Articles, 1912-1985,” Water Resources Archive, Colorado State University, accessed on March 19, 2020.

most general articles, reports, and texts on avalanches followed a narrative that included basic causes of avalanches, their characteristics, protective measures and safety plans, and avalanche rescue.⁴⁹

Contributory factor analysis provided a framework to forecast the dispersed avalanche hazard of the Mountain West, but the art of avalanche forecasting was in the localized forecasts relevant to each ski area in the national forest system. By becoming a hub of research and literature distribution, the AASC connected this dispersed network of Forest Service snow rangers and paired community knowledge with their local data to provide accurate avalanche forecasts. By establishing this avant-garde approach toward research at Alta and spreading it throughout the West, Atwater, LaChapelle, and their peers examined avalanches in the field and received immediate feedback on hypotheses from the environment. But the AASC was directed by the Forest Service to produce “administrative studies,” and no matter how pertinent their research was to skiing, the center was systematically phased out between 1966 and 1971.⁵⁰

The research conducted through the AASC not only benefitted the Forest Service and ski resort personnel, it kept resort skiers safe. While researchers were out making observations, outing clubs like the Colorado Mountain Club (CMC) were organizing group trips to ski areas like Berthoud Pass, Winter Park, and Steamboat Springs.⁵¹ At Alta, skiers like Dolores LaChapelle, renown mountaineer and Ed LaChapelle’s wife, were experiencing “the greatest snow on earth” and pushing further and further toward resort boundaries to access untouched powder.⁵² Along with resort skiers, the population avalanche experts focused on protecting, were

⁴⁹ Examples of this format in professional texts can be seen in Atwater and Koziol, *Avalanche Handbook*, and “Outline for Ski Patrol Avalanche Course: Denver Metropolitan Patrol,” 7.

⁵⁰ Armstrong and Williams, *The Avalanche Book*, 207.

⁵¹ Colorado Mountain Club Records, Boxes 19-20, “Trip Reports,” American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15, 2020.

⁵² Dolores LaChapelle, *Deep Powder Snow: 40 Years of Ecstatic Skiing, Avalanches, and Earth Wisdom* (Durango: Kivaki Press, 1993), 23.

another group of skiers of which Atwater stated he “cannot advise... they pursue their deathwish [sic] in the back country and have little effect on skiing as a whole.”⁵³ These skiers, many of whom were members of the CMC and Wasatch Mountain Club (WMC), began to develop their own understandings of avalanches based on the knowledge established by AASC avalanche researchers.

Backcountry Awareness, 1960-1971

While having “little effect” on the sport of skiing as a whole, ski touring nevertheless grew as a form of winter recreation in national forests throughout the 1960s.⁵⁴ Recognizing this trend, Atwater provided a warning to ski tourers in a 1964 *SKIING* magazine article, stating “Remember that once you leave the developed area, you’re on your own.”⁵⁵ Where ski areas and resorts provided staff, quick access to roads, and the presence of other people to witness an incident, the backcountry provided distance from all of these. Early backcountry skiers needed to learn the knowledge developed by researchers like Atwater and LaChapelle to assure their safety while skiing as well. As such, information from the avalanche research community, paired with a recreationist’s view of the phenomenon, quickly filtered through to many in the backcountry skiing community.

Mountain clubs and recreational magazines discussed this information in a similar way as the scientific community. Without delving as deeply into the science, articles in the CMC’s *Trail and Timberline* from the early 1960s followed the same narrative arc as texts like *The Avalanche*

⁵³ Monty Atwater, “Amateurs and Avalanches,” *SKIING*, November 1964, 123.

⁵⁴ Though no sources quantified this use during this time, both Atwater and Milt Hollander, a former WMC Ski Touring Director, highlight growing number of this form of land use in the Wasatch. Atwater, “Amateurs and Avalanches,” 126, and Milt Hollander, “Avalanche Safety Course Scheduled,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1967, 6.

⁵⁵ Atwater, “Amateurs and Avalanches,” 126.

Handbook. After emphasizing the importance of being aware of one's surroundings, John V. Amato's "Avalanches, or How to Reduce the Possibilities of White Death" delved into the causes of avalanches in the context of "what to look for," what to do if caught in a slide, and how to perform a successful rescue if one's touring partner was caught.⁵⁶ A 1960 article simply titled "Avalanches," while following a similar structure, provided a more technical analysis of where avalanches occurred before highlighting their ten contributory factors.⁵⁷ Both of these articles put special emphasis on avalanche rescue, since outside of identifying terrain to avoid this was one of the most important skills one needed in the backcountry. Based off the knowledge developed by experts, *Trail and Timberline* contributors echoed the points of highest importance for backcountry skiers that were on their own in the woods.

Despite leaving developed and managed ski areas, backcountry skiers still depended on direct interaction with Forest Service experts to further assure their safety. Throughout the 1960s mountain club publication writers and editors emphasized the importance of consulting with snow rangers or ski patrol before embarking on a ski tour.⁵⁸ These interactions consisted of a professional, with knowledge of the current avalanche conditions, advising for or against entering avalanche terrain that day. Advice beyond conditions, such as suggestions on where to find the best, safest snow, was outside of a snow ranger or patroller's purview and was left to club members like the WMC's Ski Touring Director. This position acted as a liaison between club recreationists and snow rangers to provide options to backcountry skiers based on avalanche

⁵⁶ John V. Amato, "Avalanches, or, How To Reduce the Possibilities of White Death," *Trail and Timberline*, January 1962, 5-6, and Kenneth R. Wright, "Avalanches," *Trail and Timberline*, February 1960, 15-20.

⁵⁷ Kenneth R. Wright, "Avalanches," 15-20.

⁵⁸ John V. Amato, "Avalanches, or, How To Reduce the Possibilities of White Death," 6, Cal Giddins, "Other Ski Tours," *The Rambler: Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1960, 11, and Dave Hanscom, "Avalanche!," *The Rambler: Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1972, 18.

conditions. Though less formal, these bits of advice provide another instance of scientific and recreational spheres overlapping on the avalanche hazard.

Dependence on Forest Service officials as the sole purveyors of information on avalanche conditions demonstrated the extent and limitation of the backcountry skiing community's avalanche knowledge. Contributory factors were being discussed among Colorado recreationists, but in Utah they appeared wary of making their own judgement calls and instead yielded to the experts. Part of this may be due to the geographic proximity between the WMC and the avalanche experts at Alta. Where Berthoud Pass, one of the more prominent venues for avalanche research in the field's early years, is located roughly forty miles from the urban centers of the Front Range, Alta is only fifteen miles from Salt Lake Valley. Another reason may be the way recreationists in Utah viewed avalanches.

In a bulletin for WMC members titled "Ski Touring 74-75" the author stated, "There is a very real reason why the Forest Service has placed an Avalanche Study Center at Alta. The Wasatch is famous for Avalanches."⁵⁹ Addressing club members ahead of the 1974-75 ski season, this statement echoes a sentiment that was initially stated by early avalanche experts: the Wasatch Mountains are perfect for avalanche research because there is a lot of snow and a lot of avalanches. While this bulletin occurred after roughly a decade of growth in avalanche awareness among WMC members, backcountry skiers in the 1960s held a less nuanced understanding of avalanches and avalanche terrain that leveraged spatial awareness and observation over concrete standards and measurements.

The general way avalanches were discussed by recreationists at this time paint their occurrence in a romantic light. In a collection of trip reports from WMC members in April 1960,

⁵⁹ Dwight Nicholson, "Ski Touring 74-75" *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1974, 6.

two members highlighted their efforts to witness avalanches on their tours, with one account describing the “very nice” avalanche they saw in Little Cottonwood Canyon.⁶⁰ A 1966 editor’s note to the WMC recounted the “Special Avalanche Film” a Forest Service staffer and club member showed that included “spectacular avalanche shots and... worthwhile advice” to make for “some mighty fine entertainment and instruction in avalanche problems.”⁶¹ Even the title of Atwater’s memoir, *The Avalanche Hunters*, illustrated avalanches as a natural phenomenon that is pursued by humans. While still discussing contributory factors and safety techniques, the view of avalanches as spectacle shaped a somewhat relaxed approach to backcountry travel.

The lack of seriousness surrounding avalanches can be seen in the retelling of a January 1964 tour that resulted in two WMC members being caught and carried downslope in an avalanche event.⁶² During this outing near Cardiff Pass, an alpine pass located between Little Cottonwood Canyon and a side canyon that drains into neighboring Big Cottonwood Canyon, the group involved arrived at a steep slope and began to cross it one by one. This is the appropriate travel practice in avalanche terrain, however, it doesn’t prevent an avalanche-prone slope from sliding. When the fourth member began to cross, she triggered an avalanche that quickly engulfed her and the skier ahead of her. When the slide settled yards below, one victim was partially buried and the other fully buried outside of a boot and ski. The partially buried victim freed himself and checked on the other’s exposed boot which, luckily, was still attached to her

⁶⁰ Jen Giddins, “Alta-American Fork Canyon (March 6),” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1960, 9, and Bob Ream, “Alta-White Pine Canyon Trip-March 20,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1960, 10.

⁶¹ Jack McLellan, “EDITORAMBLERIZING,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1966, 8. It’s important to note that the two communities weren’t necessarily mutually exclusive. The reason a lot of avalanche researchers got into their field is because they enjoyed skiing. Ron Perla is an example of an avalanche researcher who was also an active member of the WMC.

⁶² Mel Davis, “Cardiff Pass (Avalanche Bowl)-January 12,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1964, 4-6.

person. The remaining members of the group helped quickly dig out the buried victim and, after gathering dispersed skis and gear, the group continued their tour.

Today, an incident like this would cause some reflection on risk and backcountry decision-making. However, the trip report discussing it and responses from other WMC members played it off as a mild embarrassment and opportunity to tease fellow club members. The report itself ended with the statement, “At the after-ski social that night, June said that except for the avalanche it was a nice trip.”⁶³ Along with this, the report noted that the trip schedule for March of that season, which included a tour to be led by the second victim, mentioned that he was “a man with avalanche experience.”⁶⁴ Numerous issues of the WMC’s publication show its light-hearted and comedic nature; if anything, though, a close call with an avalanche would have seemed like a time to set that aside.

Despite the downplaying of the event, the trip report of this tour highlighted that mistakes were made. The author mentioned that “we joked about avalanches but as none of us knew a potential one when we saw it, we didn't take the situation seriously.”⁶⁵ He continued on, stating, “Apparently, the entire bowl was ready to slide, and just waiting for someone to trigger it, when we came along. At least ten similar slopes around the bowl broke loose and went down when we started ours going.”⁶⁶ *The Snowy Torrents*, a compilation of avalanche accidents published by the Forest Service, mentioned the avalanche hazard that day was “very high,” and a postponement of the tour might have been a safer choice.⁶⁷ The trip report from the group involved demonstrated awareness in hindsight, but this incident enforces the less nuanced form of awareness at the time.

⁶³ Mel Davis, “Cardiff Pass (Avalanche Bowl)-January 12,” 6.

⁶⁴ “Trip Schedule,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1964, 2.

⁶⁵ Mel Davis, “Cardiff Pass (Avalanche Bowl)-January 12,” 5.

⁶⁶ Mel Davis, “Cardiff Pass (Avalanche Bowl)-January 12,” 6.

⁶⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1910-1966*, edited by Dale Gallagher, Technical report, (Alta, UT: Alta Avalanche Study Center, January 1967), 93.

This is also seen in articles published by both clubs that transmitted knowledge established by the scientific community emphasizing awareness of one's surroundings. Spatial awareness was initially predicated on a sense of the contributory factors of avalanches and a liberal interpretation of slopes that could produce a slide.⁶⁸ Skiers were urged to constantly keep their eyes peeled for nature's warning signs of rapid snow fall, strong winds, and drastic temperature changes.⁶⁹ These variables paired with an open, slidable slope meant danger for an unassuming touring party. Spatial awareness has been a constant thread into the present with backcountry skiing, however, as the sport progressed, skiers gained more tricks and tools to strengthen their understanding of the avalanche hazard.

Because of the more black and white view of the avalanche hazard held by backcountry skiers, the WMC cancelled and postponed numerous planned tours to keep their community safe. Eventually, the club began scheduling "avalanche-proof" trips, but the 1960s were ripe with full months of cancellations due to an existing hazard. The first and most glamorous instance of this was in 1961, where the editor of *The Rambler* described a satirical trip report full of "billowing powder" before stating, "As you know by now our cross country tours were cancelled because of avalanche danger and we don't have anything to talk about in this column."⁷⁰ February 1963 also brought unstable snow conditions that threatened cancellations of the club's "spectacular high country" tours.⁷¹ The entire 1966 season did not fare much better, as the December 1967 issue of *The Rambler* mentioned the lack of events throughout the winter due to avalanches.

⁶⁸ Generally, avalanches occur on slopes ranging from 30-45 degrees. A specific type of avalanche can occur on a slope mellow than 30 degrees, but other factors are required to cause this. Articles in the 1960s define avalanche slopes as ranging from 22-60 degrees. Kenneth R. Wright, "Avalanches," *Trail and Timberline*, February 1960, 15-20, and Chuck McConnell, "Avalanche Awareness," *Trail and Timberline*, February 1971, 32.

⁶⁹ John V. Amato, "Avalanches, or, How to Reduce the Possibilities of White Death," *Trail and Timberline*, January 1962, 5.

⁷⁰ "February Frolic," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1961, 3.

⁷¹ "Trip Schedule," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1963, 2.

Lack of concrete avalanche awareness in the 1960s was not due to complacency among the backcountry communities of Utah and Colorado. Along with knowledge on how to both improve chances of survival and perform a rescue if an avalanche occurred, skiers began to carry rudimentary protective equipment to aid in a rescue situation. Avalanche cords, long lengths of brightly colored rope or ribbon, acted as a high-vis breadcrumb trail for rescuers when deployed.⁷² Avalanche probes, long poles that helped rescuers locate a victim buried in an avalanche, became more transportable during this time and also began appearing in backcountry skiers' packs. Without community standards or industrially designed and marketed products, these tools had a variety of appearances and served as early devices to keep skiers safe.

Along with safety tools, outing clubs began hosting avalanche classes that taught the basics of avalanche safety. In January 1967, the WMC president and their Ski Touring director attended an avalanche course hosted by the National Ski Patrol (NSP). The course followed the scientific community's recurring format which was laid out in Ed LaChapelle's *The ABC of Avalanche Safety*, the required reading.⁷³ Students learned about avalanche terrain, characteristics, safety tips, and rescue procedures, along with information on the differences between winter and spring avalanche dangers. On the second day, they travelled to Alta for a field exercise on probing and avalanche rescue.

A month after this course, an avalanche in Big Cottonwood Canyon's Silver Fork caught eleven WMC members. Larger and more catastrophic than the Cardiff Pass incident, the Silver Fork avalanche put the club on high alert and solidified their efforts to establish sound avalanche

⁷² Lou Dawson, "Avalanche Cord: String of Life or Placebo of Sad Demise?" *Wild Snow* (blog), September 14, 2017, <https://www.wildsnow.com/23132/avalanche-cord-history-safety-rescue/>.

⁷³ Charles Keller, "From the President," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1967, 13.

awareness among their members.⁷⁴ This prompted the WMC to host their own course in March 1967.⁷⁵ Following the same format as the class attended by club board members, the inaugural WMC course saw 33 attendees for two days of lectures and exercises.⁷⁶ After the success of this class, the WMC began hosting annual classes every January and strongly urged all members to attend.

National Ski Patrol courses taught from a curriculum created by avalanche researchers to assure resort staff and snow rangers shared professional knowledge on avalanches. Though the WMC began hosting courses taught by NSP instructors, these courses also occurred in other metropolitan areas in the West. Since the NSP courses were geared more toward the professional and research communities, they delved deeper into the science behind avalanches and into mitigation efforts.⁷⁷ Along with course curriculums, articles in the CMC's *Trail and Timberline* continued to echo the scientific community's structure for sharing their knowledge on avalanches into the 1970s. A short bibliography included in one of these articles shows that the field of avalanche studies continued to expand their understanding of avalanches throughout the 1960s despite the shifting status of the research hub at Alta as it was phased out and a new initiative in a new location took its place.

Avalanche Research in the Information Age

One of the largest changes in Forest Service avalanche research's transition from AASC to their Alpine Snow and Avalanche Research Project (ASARP) was geographic. Instead of

⁷⁴ Charles Keller, "Silver Fork Avalanche," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1967, 9-10.

⁷⁵ "Club Activities for March 1967," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1967, 1.

⁷⁶ Milt Hollander, "Avalanche Safety Course," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1967, 11-12.

⁷⁷ "Outline for Ski Patrol Avalanche Course: Denver Metropolitan Patrol," 7.

having a centroid of avalanche information nestled in the mountains among prominent avalanche paths, ASARP began at the Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station in Fort Collins.⁷⁸ This project continued to add to the reports and records coming out of Alta and the weather stations at Berthoud Pass and Stevens Pass while also expanding the existing network of mountain weather stations in Colorado.⁷⁹ Stations recorded all of the pertinent factors for avalanche forecasting, such as snowfall, moisture, temperature, windspeed, and wind direction.⁸⁰ In order to facilitate weather monitoring at these stations, the network of avalanche experts also grew.

Run by Pete Martinelli, ASARP bolstered Colorado's own lineage of avalanche experts. Along with Martinelli were Richard Sommerfeld and R.A. Schmidt, two snow scientists, and Arthur Judson, a former snow ranger who managed the data flowing in from forecasters at observation sites.⁸¹ Forming the backbone at the Fort Collins station, these four were also joined by former Alta researchers Ron Perla and Ed LaChapelle. In Colorado, LaChapelle worked with the University of Colorado's Institute for Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR) in the San Juan Mountains on a project observing the effects of winter cloud seeding on vegetation and wildlife.⁸² As veteran forecasters, these researchers became mentors for subsequent waves of avalanche experts.

Three prominent researchers in this new generation were Betsy Armstrong, Richard Armstrong, and Knox Williams. The Armstrongs were glaciology researchers with LaChapelle

⁷⁸ National Research Council, Commission on Engineering and Technical Systems, Division of Natural Hazard Mitigation, Committee on Ground Failure Hazards Mitigation Research, *Snow Avalanche Hazards and Mitigation in the United States*, by Betsy R. Armstrong, Richard L. Armstrong et al., edited by Barry Voight (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1990), 21.

⁷⁹ Armstrong, Armstrong et al., *Snow Avalanche Hazards and Mitigation in the United States*, 21.

⁸⁰ Arthur Judson, "The Avalanche Warning Program in Colorado" (paper presented at the 45th Western Snow Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 1977), 4.

⁸¹ Armstrong and Williams, *Avalanche Book*, 207.

⁸² Betsy and Richard Armstrong, phone interview by author, Fort Collins, October 13, 2020.

in Washington. They moved to Silverton, Colorado, in 1971 to collect data from remote study sites around Red Mountain Pass, later focusing on one site at the pass itself.⁸³ They recorded wind speed, wind direction, temperature, and snow depth to inform the INSTAAR project. After working on this project for several years, the Armstrongs moved to the Front Range to continue researching avalanches and glaciers. Meanwhile, the INSTAAR project in the San Juans continued building on the dataset and conclusions developed by the couple well into the 1980s.

In 1970, Knox Williams graduated from Colorado State University in Fort Collins with a degree in atmospheric science. He was bound for Miami to work as a tropical meteorologist until, at the last minute, he received a job offer from the Forest Service in Fort Collins to set up and manage a database of weather and climate data for avalanche forecasting.⁸⁴ Weather and snowpack data recorded at these stations consisted of the same information the Armstrongs and previous researchers had observed. The database that held it, called the Westwide Avalanche Network, stored avalanche observations from throughout the Mountain West.⁸⁵ The goal of this network was to serve as a central location for historical avalanche data used to illuminate past trends and inform avalanche forecasts across the Mountain West.⁸⁶

The process of collecting weather station and site data and relaying it back to Fort Collins connected the research community in a new way. Researchers didn't observe avalanches and their causes in the avant-garde manner of the early field; rather, they traveled to prescribed locations to collect recorded weather data, assess the snowpack, and record any additional observations along the way. After collecting this information from their remote locations, they

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Knox Williams, phone interview by author, Fort Collins, April 2, 2020 and "Short Talk on the History of the CAIC," attachment on email message to author, March 28, 2020.

⁸⁵ Williams, "A Concise History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center," attachment on email message to author, March 28, 2020.

⁸⁶ Armstrong, Armstrong, et al., "*Snow Avalanche Hazards and Mitigation in the United States*," 48-9.

then communicated their findings to the hub of this system. From there, hazards could be assessed and broadcasted by other specialists. While still addressing the need of accurate avalanche forecasting, this shift in the field also strengthened it as a community of affinity. By incorporating new technology of the day, avalanche experts came together from not only Colorado, Utah, and Washington, but throughout the entire West to discuss the avalanche hazard. Since they had a strong understanding of what caused avalanches by this point, scientists instead focused on collecting localized data from across the West to inform and create understandings of local avalanche hazards.

An example of this can be seen in the local understanding of Silverton's avalanche hazard that the Armstrongs helped develop. By recording winter weather data and pairing it with when and where avalanches tended to occur, they noticed the role wind played in triggering avalanches at Red Mountain Pass. Prior to these observations, the state highway that crossed the pass wouldn't close until an avalanche blocked it. By pairing general avalanche knowledge with localized data and observations, the Silverton community began to understand their local avalanche hazard and forecast closures before a slide.⁸⁷

These observations in the San Juan Mountains happened parallel to the development of Westwide Network, but they still illustrate the combination of remote fieldwork and data analysis from a central location that created the direction avalanche research was heading. Researchers and specialists in Fort Collins collected these observations from observers across the state of Colorado. They then paired present information with historic data stored in Westwide, using a computer model, to gain a holistic sense of local avalanche hazards. This process, with the Westwide Network as an avalanche repository, was the first step toward a grander vision of

⁸⁷ Betsy and Richard Armstrong, phone interview by author, Fort Collins, October 13, 2020.

an avalanche warning center that could efficiently identify avalanche hazards in Colorado and notify the public of them.

This idea came to fruition in 1973, when Arthur Judson founded the Colorado Avalanche Warning Program (CAWP).⁸⁸ With the assistance of Williams, who was still coding and analyzing information from Westwide, Judson began this process of data synthesis and analysis to administer “avalanche danger ratings” across Colorado.⁸⁹ They issued “avalanche warnings” when they expected “10% or more of the avalanche paths in a specific region” to naturally produce medium to large avalanches.⁹⁰ Forest Service staff wired these warnings through the National Weather Service’s communication network and reached the public by way of roughly fifty media outlets throughout Colorado.⁹¹ With the CAWP, Judson, Knox, and their fellow Forest Service specialists used accessible technology to inform residents and visitors to avalanche country of existing avalanche hazards. Among those listening was the steadily growing community of backcountry skiers.

A Growing Community with Growing Awareness

While the information hub of avalanche research left the mountains, backcountry skiers were moving further into them in larger numbers and seeking the skills to understand localized avalanche hazards themselves. From the late sixties onward, contributors to *The Rambler* noted the increase in backcountry users and the role WMC members played in setting an example as

⁸⁸ Information on the foundation of CAWP in Arthur Judson, “The Avalanche Warning Program in Colorado,” 1, and Knox Williams, “A Concise History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center,” attachment on email message to author, March 28, 2020.

⁸⁹ Williams, “A Short Talk on the History of the CAIC.”

⁹⁰ Judson, “The Avalanche Warning Program in Colorado,” 8.

⁹¹ Ibid, 8.

safe, responsible community members.⁹² In 1977, a contributor to *SKIING* magazine highlighted growing trends in alpine and cross-country skiing, stating, “More people than ever before are subjecting themselves to avalanche danger.”⁹³ During this time period, victims of avalanche fatalities changed from largely being resort skiers entering avalanche zones in pursuit of untracked snow to ski tourers and those deliberately leaving ski area boundaries.⁹⁴ The unfettered growth in backcountry skiing’s popularity made space for an evolution in the community’s avalanche awareness toward independent hazard assessments based on the new tools the research community created.

Avalanche awareness in the 1970s leveraged safe travel decisions, less dependence on snow rangers and ski patrollers to relay information, and the incessant understanding that skiers are on their own in the backcountry and must act accordingly. The general spatial awareness of the previous decade shifted toward an emphasis on reading the landscape and recognizing red flags. Among CMC members, this consisted of recognizing wind-affected snow and likely avalanche paths through gullies and trashed trees.⁹⁵ Building off their regular avalanche education programming, the WMC expected members to use the knowledge gained in classes and an awareness of conditions throughout the season to determine whether areas were safe. They also provided discounted literature to supplement their knowledge.⁹⁶ With a more

⁹² Milt Hollander, “Avalanche Safety Course Rescheduled,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1967, 6, and David Hanscom, “Avalanche Safety,” *The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1973, 5.

⁹³ Michael Lahey, “Avalanche!,” *SKIING*, February 1977, 76.

⁹⁴ Reported avalanche accidents from 1967-1979 are compiled in United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1967-1971*, edited by Knox Williams, Technical report, (Fort Collins: Rocky Mountain Forest and Range Experiment Station, 1975) and *The Snowy Torrents: Avalanche Accidents in the United States 1972-1979*, edited by Knox Williams and Betsy Armstrong, Technical report, (Jackson, WY: Teton Bookshop Publishing Company, 1984).

⁹⁵ Franz Mohling, “Wind Slab Avalanche,” *Trail and Timberline*, October 1972, 215, Fred M. Johnson, “Forecasting an Avalanche,” *Trail and Timberline*, March 1973, 68, and Bob Boblett, “Avalanche!,” *Trail and Timberline*, January 1974, 19.

⁹⁶ David Hanscom, “Avalanche Safety,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1973, 13, “Avalanche Safety,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*,

established sense of what to be aware of while on a tour, backcountry skiers in both Colorado and Utah demonstrated exponential growth in avalanche awareness to accompany the growth in participants in their sport.

Increased awareness can also be seen in WMC trip reports during this time. Two reports from March 1972 specifically highlight group decisions to stay near trees and cross avalanche terrain one at a time on their tours.⁹⁷ *Trail and Timberline* contributors from the CMC also highlighted understanding and using safe travel techniques in their articles and reports. In a member's retelling of an avalanche rescue his party participated in, the author discussed observing and identifying that the victims were on a dangerous slope from afar.⁹⁸ Along with discussing areas to avoid traveling in, another CMC contributor highlighted the crucial choice of turning around when no safe route is available.⁹⁹

Growth in individual knowledge and awareness resulted in less dependence on Forest Service staff to provide touring parties with avalanche conditions. Along with abundant literature coming from the research community, regional skiing guidebooks also began discussing avalanche awareness tips and what to look for in their respective areas.¹⁰⁰ In Utah, the WMC Ski Touring director also provided advice and guidance on where to ski during a given avalanche hazard. In a 1977 letter between Wasatch National Forest officials and the WMC, club members requested more thorough avalanche bulletins while the National Forest staff requested ski tourers

December 1973, 5, "Avalanche Conditions," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, February 1974, 17, and "Ski Touring Issues," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, January 1977, 10.

⁹⁷ "Lake Desolation," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, March 1972, 11, and "Snake Creek Pass," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, 11-12.

⁹⁸ Dave Walker, "Avalanches Aren't That Loud," *Trail and Timberline*, May 1979, 91.

⁹⁹ Bob Boblett, "Avalanche!," *Trail and Timberline*, January 1974, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Geery, "Wasatch Tours: A Review," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1976, 9, and Tom and Sanse Sudduth, *Colorado Front Range Ski Tours* (Beaverton, OR: Touchstone Press, 1975).

stop bothering Alta snow rangers while on the job.¹⁰¹ Be it due to limited capacity from the Forest Service or an over-abundance of backcountry skiers in the Wasatch, by the late 1970s the backcountry skiing community grew beyond their dependence on snow rangers and ski patrollers for in-person avalanche information.

New developments in avalanche awareness were accompanied with new avalanche safety equipment as well. In 1971, ski poles that could be converted into an avalanche probe by attaching one on top of the other were introduced.¹⁰² These probes, along with another design that was affordable and more compact than prior models, introduced uniformity at least among WMC skiers.¹⁰³ Shovels also became a suggested safety tool to help skiers dig out avalanche victims faster. In 1976, electronic avalanche transmitter-receivers, which allowed skiers to locate victims buried in an avalanche, entered the scene and quickly became popular among more advanced WMC skiers.¹⁰⁴ Once these three devices, a transmitter-receiver, shovel, and probe, became more uniform and easier to access in the 1970s their popularity surged; today, they're necessities for travel in avalanche country.

By the 1970s, establishing a thorough knowledge set among backcountry skiers started in the classroom. January, considered "early season" in most states in the Mountain West, became the month for annual avalanche programming from the WMC and CMC.¹⁰⁵ Still following the format laid out in NSP course curriculum, which taught avalanche principles followed by rescue

¹⁰¹ Dave Hanscom, "Ski Touring Issues," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, January 1977, 7-10.

¹⁰² Andy Schoenberg, "Instant Avalanche Probe," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, March 1971, 11-12.

¹⁰³ WMC board members discuss buying probes in bulk to cut costs for WMC members in an effort to make carrying an avalanche probe a consistent habit in "Avalanche Safety," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, December 1973, 5, and Andy Schoenberg, "Ski Touring Safety Equipment Purchase," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, January 1977, 15.

¹⁰⁴ "Club Activities for January 1976," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, January 1976, 1.

¹⁰⁵ This trend started in the 1960s by the WMC, and the CMC started publishing avalanche information during this month shortly thereafter.

techniques, the WMC shortened their class to a day in order to keep costs low and accommodate more participants. Club members, their friends, and residents of Salt Lake City were invited to attend the course, and by 1979 class attendance reached 130 people eager for avalanche knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Along with the WMC and NSP courses, the American Avalanche Institute, founded in Wyoming, began teaching courses in a similarly standardized format.¹⁰⁷ Much like the 1960s, these courses served as a key connection between the research and recreation communities as platforms for experts to disseminate their knowledge to skiers.

Avalanche Forecasting Centers

Though these communities grew in distance geographically, classes, literature, and an avalanche forecasting infrastructure in the flavor of the CAWP lessened the intellectual distance between them and strengthened their bond around skiing in avalanche terrain. What used to occur when snow rangers answered recreationist's questions in person was replaced by avalanche forecasting hotlines that provided forecasts easily accessed through phone, wire, or radio. Around the same time as the CAWP began providing avalanche warnings for Colorado, the WMC began publishing a phone number for the Wasatch National Forest Winter Sports Information Recording that provided avalanche information for club ski tour leaders.¹⁰⁸ Both the CAWP and the Wasatch National Forest recording grew to provide complete forecasts throughout the mid-1970s, providing reliable locations for up-to-date avalanche conditions.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Dave Hanscom, "Avalanche Course," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, February 1979, 12.

¹⁰⁷ An advertisement for this course appears in the December 1976 issue of *The Rambler*. In an interview with the author, Betsy Armstrong mentioned that the AAI course eventually became the industry standard for avalanche education.

¹⁰⁸ "Club Activities for December 74," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, December 1974, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Betsy and Richard Armstrong, phone interview by author, Fort Collins, October 13, 2020. For advertisements of the Wasatch National Forest recording, see "Club Activities for December 74," *The Rambler: The Official*

To better meet the needs of recreationists in the Wasatch Mountains, the Wasatch National Forest Winter Sports Information Recording became the Utah Avalanche Forecasting Center in 1980.¹¹⁰ The goal of the forecasting program, as stated in a 1980 article in *The Rambler*, was “to provide the general public with accurate weather forecasts and related avalanche advisories.”¹¹¹ Like the CAWP, the Utah center recorded information from mountain weather sites that was analyzed and turned into forecasts at their facility in the National Weather Service’s office at Salt Lake International Airport. Avalanche advisories from the center were classified as follows: “Low Avalanche Hazard” meant that avalanches were unlikely and backcountry travel was relatively safe due to a mostly stable snowpack, “Moderate” signified that avalanches were possible and “backcountry travelers should use caution,” “High” hazards signified avalanches were likely and travel in avalanche zones wasn’t recommended, and “Extreme” hazards meant that avalanches were certain due to widespread instabilities in the snow and backcountry travel was ill-advised.¹¹² Forecasted to the general public through VHF broadcast, the NOAA Weather Wire, or by phone, the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center provided important avalanche information for the Wasatch Mountains. Unlike the CAWP though, the winter recreation community was the Utah center’s highest priority.

Though the CAWP provided pertinent information to the Colorado backcountry ski community, this niche form of recreation did not pay the bills for the nascent forecasting center. Stakeholders in the ski resort, transportation, and mining industries loved the work they were

Publication of the Wasatch Mountain, December 1974, 1, and “Club Activities for January 1976,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, January 1976, 1.

¹¹⁰ This transition may have been a response to the requests of the WMC, who mentioned more complete forecasts that included thorough information on wind speed and direction, weather, snow conditions at varying elevations, which slopes to avoid, and potentially dangerous incoming weather in a 1977 letter to the Forest Service. Dave Hanscom, “Ski Touring Issues,” 7-10, and “Avalanche Forecasting Program,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain*, December 1980, 6.

¹¹¹ “Avalanche Forecasting Program,” 6.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 7.

doing, but like most research, financial security was not guaranteed.¹¹³ Rampant budget cuts for federal agencies under the Reagan Administration virtually wiped out funding for the program.¹¹⁴ Until then, the Forest Service backed the CAWP through research-funding avenues. The agency's recreation budget was a second option for funding, however efforts to secure this were unsuccessful.¹¹⁵ Like the Alta Avalanche Study Center before it, personnel cuts and funding issues dissolved the CAWP in 1983.¹¹⁶

The end of the CAWP initiated a brief unmoored period for the idea of a Colorado-centric avalanche forecasting center. Talks on seating the program in either the Forest Service Regional Office in Denver or the Colorado State University system both fell through.¹¹⁷ The program was eventually able to find a home with the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, and the Colorado Avalanche Information Center (CAIC) began with office space in Denver the same year as CAWP's dissolution.¹¹⁸ There was one caveat, however: the CAIC had to find its own funding. Administrator Barbara Welles, Director Knox Williams, and Deputy Director Betsy Armstrong joined the ranks of non-profits across the nation in the perilous venture of fundraising.¹¹⁹

This provided some serendipity, however, as the CAIC received the recreational funding from the Forest Service that the CAWP struggled to obtain while seated in the agency. With grants from Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Ski Country USA, the state ski industry's trade association, and Forest Service recreational funding, the CAIC gained

¹¹³ Williams, Phone interview by author.

¹¹⁴ Williams, "A Concise History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center."

¹¹⁵ Williams, phone interview by author.

¹¹⁶ Williams, "A Concise History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center."

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

both financial footing and strong industrial relationships.¹²⁰ With offices and money to operate, the CAIC hired Nick Logan as a third avalanche forecaster and picked up where the CAWP left off.¹²¹ Still physically removed from the mountains, this original group successfully established the nation's first independent, state-specific avalanche forecasting organization. With their collective knowledge, they continued to relay hyper-local avalanche conditions to the state's ski areas, mines, highway workers, and public from downtown Denver.

The strong relationship between forecasters and ski resorts is visible throughout the history of avalanche forecasting. This was the easiest relationship to maintain in the early years, but CAWP founder Judson noted the need for Colorado forecasters to bolster avalanche awareness among recreationists and the public.¹²² Along with their forecasts and literature being released, CAIC forecasters played a role in public outreach through avalanche awareness presentations at guide shops, REI stores, and community centers. These provided information on Colorado's avalanche hazard not only to uninitiated recreationists, but also to individuals who may not have known or cared about the hazards of living in a mountainous region. Where books and warning broadcasts didn't assure information was received, increased outreach strengthened relationships among all the stakeholders in avalanche country.

Prior to the establishment of the CAIC, many of the stakeholders in avalanche country remained relatively insular. CAIC Director Williams noted that ski patrollers, highway personnel, miners, backcountry skiers, and snowmobilers all had their own interests ranging from managing an in-bounds avalanche hazard to traveling fast and far on a snowmobile. Along with this, they all operated in different landscapes: ski resorts, roads, mines, slopes accessible by one's own legs, and the deep backcountry. With the CAIC, land users could share observations

¹²⁰ Williams, "A Short Talk on the History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center."

¹²¹ Williams, "A Concise History of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center."

¹²² Judson, "The Avalanche Warning Program in Colorado," 11.

and discuss avalanche hazards at events. The organization provided a public forum for these groups to engage each other and build camaraderie as a greater avalanche community.¹²³

Avalanche researchers continued to strengthen their own community while bringing together other stakeholders. In October 1982, the first volume of *The Avalanche Review* was published and distributed among the community. With the goal of “opening the valves of communication” among the research community, *The Avalanche Review* published an array of pieces ranging from hard science to satire.¹²⁴ While primarily for the avalanche research community, the publication was distributed in over ten countries and connected a global avalanche community that encompassed all stakeholders in mountain regions around the world.¹²⁵ By 1985, what started for Americans as a handful of Forest Service staff skiing and looking at snowslides in an old Utah mining town had evolved into an avalanche community connecting far more than curious scientists and urban leisure seekers.

Conclusion

Avalanches, the naturally destructive and awe-inspiring phenomenon experienced in mountainous countries around the world, are a magnetic force that connects backcountry skiers to other stakeholders in the landscapes they play on. Where skiing is a personal and self-fulfilling experience, avalanches force interaction with others. This is demonstrated time and time again through the history of America’s recreational avalanche hazard. Initially, unassuming resort skiers adhered to the direct advice and guidance of Forest Service snow rangers and ski area

¹²³ Knox Williams, email message to author, April 3, 2020.

¹²⁴ Sue Ferguson, “From the Pub,” *The Avalanche Review* vol. 1 no. 1, October 1982, 2, and Lucy Higgins, “Betsy Armstrong Reflects on Deep Research and Deep Turns,” *Backcountry Magazine*, March 6, 2019, <https://backcountrymagazine.com/stories/betsy-armstrong-reflects-on-deep-research-and-deeper-turns/>.

¹²⁵ “Announcing a New Publication,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1985, 38.

patrollers, the first recognized avalanche experts in the Mountain West, in order to return home safely after a day of skiing. These early experts also spread their knowledge of avalanches to the budding community of ski tourers in the 1960s through the field's literature and the daily forecasts they provided. Backcountry skiers brought this early awareness of avalanches into western national forests to both harvest silent powder turns and observe the splendor of a distant avalanche.

As enthusiasm for ski touring grew throughout the 1960s and 1970s, so too did the knowledge and resources of the field of avalanche studies. Injected with information age technology, the informational hub of the research community left the mountains physically while maintaining a close relationship with them intellectually. In doing so, the community evolved to better meet their own needs and those of the public living and playing in avalanche country. By improving the ways in which researchers could share their knowledge, they in turn advanced the knowledge and practiced avalanche awareness of the backcountry skiing community throughout the 1970s.

After two decades of consistent growth between both recreational and scientific communities, the avalanche community reached their current stride of researchers and recreationists in the mountains communicating with centralized avalanche forecasting centers in urban areas. Through this web of connection and communication, avalanche experts helped bring together the backcountry skiing community. Published texts, course curriculums, and interactions with snow rangers and ski patrollers solidified the cardinal rules of avalanche country: never travel alone, assure others know where you're going, and always help community members during an emergency. These rules established when Alta was a silver town before it became a ski resort, depend on a solid community.

This is not to say that tragedy didn't strike either the recreational or scientific community along the way. Between 1960 and 1986, 280 avalanche fatalities were reported in the United States.¹²⁶ Of this total, 79 were members of the recreation or research communities. In reviewing his career as an avalanche forecaster, Knox Williams stated, "In the early 1980s when the [Colorado Avalanche Information Center] was founded, there was an average of 5.3 avalanche deaths per year in Colorado. Now, 30 years later, wintertime backcountry... use by skiers and snowmobilers has increased at least 10-fold and... avalanche deaths have increased by only a slight fraction to 6 per year..."¹²⁷ Were it not for the efforts of researchers and recreationist in boosting avalanche awareness in the Mountain West, avalanches could still be the relatively unknown, looming force they were in the nineteenth century.

Where private investors often financed the construction of national forest ski areas, managing skiers on national forest land was the responsibility of Forest Service staff. This prompted the development of a professional avalanche community focused on researching the avalanche hazard. The establishment of this community, and the field of knowledge that came out of it, marked the first and most important way federal agencies managed backcountry skiing as a form of land use. Through developing scientific knowledge of the mountain landscape and incorporating that knowledge into backcountry recreation, avalanche awareness served as an early component of how backcountry skiers "knew" nature.

¹²⁶ Avalanche fatality statistics from this timeframe obtained from "US Avalanche Fatalities by Avalanche Year 1950-51 to 2018-19," Statistics and Reporting, Colorado Avalanche Information Center, last modified April 2019, avalanche.state.co.us/accidents/statistics-and-reporting.

¹²⁷ Knox Williams, "A Short Talk on the History of the CAIC."

CHAPTER 2 - Development

Right before arriving at the sprawling infrastructure of Snowbird and Alta, our destination appeared: White Pine Trailhead. Ducking out of the line of traffic, we did a quick loop through the trailhead parking lot only to be forced into the overflow parking along the main road; A 7:30 AM start may have worked in the past, but the combination of blue skies and a stable snowpack rightfully convinced others that this would be a good weekend spent in the mountains. While searching for a spot, we noticed a somewhat homogenous look to the trailhead lot: Subarus and Toyotas filled many of the spots; those that weren't pick-up trucks donned Thule ski racks and sky boxes. We also noticed the stickers covering each rear window: Backcountry.com and Black Diamond Equipment logos, a couple "Ski the East" tags from proud east-coast transplants, Grateful Dead insignias, and bold environmentalist bumper stickers exclaiming "SAVE OUR CANYONS" and "Protect WILD UTAH."

Once parked, we hopped out of the car and started gearing up. I squeezed on my tight ski boots and pulled the cuffs of my snow pants over them. Heel-toe walking to the back of the car, I dug out my avalanche beacon from my pack, put it over my base layer, and tossed on a jacket. Next, using all my might, I tore apart my adhesive climbing skins and placed them on the bases of my skis. Tossing on our packs and grabbing our skis and poles, my partner and I headed across the parking lot and over to the trail.

With skis on, I started heading up the well-established skin track, the trail used to get to our destination, toward my partner, whose beacon was out and in "search" mode. After detecting *my* beacon, they switched to "send" mode while I transitioned to "search" mode to locate their beacon, repeating the process. After confirming both our beacons were transmitting a potentially

life-saving signal, the tour began. As I advanced up the skin track at a steady pace, a faint, familiar burn proliferated through my legs. The sound of cars was muffled by snow-laden trees and soon replaced by that of finches, woodpeckers, and chickadees. I took a deep breath of chilling yet refreshing air and immersed myself in the backcountry experience.

This same scene plays out every weekend for thousands of backcountry skiers throughout the Rocky Mountains.¹²⁸ Front Range skiers, like those of the Colorado Mountain Club, flock to Loveland, Berthoud, Jones, and Cameron passes. Salt Lake City skiers pepper the trailheads of the Wasatch Mountains, with the highest density flowing into the various drainages of Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons. Though often near ski resorts, these drainages hold a different skiing experience that only exists in the backcountry: the undeveloped areas beyond ski resort boundaries. By spending time in these areas, generations of backcountry skiers extracted and accumulated backcountry experience. However, by harvesting the backcountry experience, early ski tourers in Colorado and Utah partook in a practice that threatened to consume the landscapes it depended on by bringing an influx of people and urban ideals into the backcountry.

This chapter hinges on an understanding of the backcountry experience as a consumable resource and focuses on the production that goes into extracting this resource. The tenets of this experience are largely individualistic—it involves a consistent internal dialogue, observation of the mountain landscape skiers immerse themselves in, and conquest of untouched snow. To gain this experience, skiers need to obtain necessary equipment, meet a baseline level of physicality

¹²⁸ Craig Dostie, “Backcountry Skiing by the Numbers,” *Wild Snow* (blog), October 7, 2010, <https://www.wildsnow.com/3694/backcountry-skiing-statistics/> breaks down backcountry skier numbers through examining equipment sales in 2010. Bringing this into the present, John Meyer, “Backcountry Skiers Concerned About Safety after Sudden Influx of Novices,” *Denver Post*, April 1, 2020, <https://theknow.denverpost.com/2020/04/01/backcountry-skiing-safety-coronavirus/236550/>, and David Goodman and Karen Schwartz, “It’s the Winter of Backcountry. Here’s how to Start Safely” *New York Times*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/27/travel/backcountry-skiing-tours-coronavirus.html> highlight further growth in ski touring’s popularity, increased gear sales, and what that means for avalanche safety. Ski resorts often record skier numbers through ticket sales. Since there are no lift tickets for backcountry skiers, tracking exact numbers per day is more difficult.

and skiing ability, and continuously build their knowledge of the environment, mountain geography, and the individual. Becoming an efficient backcountry skier is a constant process, however once they reach a certain level of efficiency, skiers can consider themselves “masters.”

Along with efficiently harvesting the backcountry experience, though, backcountry masters gain additional attributes. With knowledge of the environment and self comes a sense of competition through accumulation of these two entities, and like most competitors, a tinge of superiority and rejection of divergent ideals follows. This attitude is built through collection of backcountry experiences. While ski touring doesn’t leave a visible scar on the mountain landscape like a clear cut or forestry road, the use of resources and infrastructure that fuel a continual flow of skiers to and from the backcountry, the consumption of goods necessary for backcountry travel, and the hypocrisy of looking down on other land users while selectively observing one’s own experience create a paradox among ski tourers.

Building on Hal Rothman’s discussion of experience as a resource in *Devil’s Bargains*, historians examined how recreational development in western towns affected community identities and economies.¹²⁹ The focus of these works is on the resort and the resort-goer: those that may shake the resort boundaries and venture into the backcountry, but don’t travel somewhere with this as their main objective. Ski tourers, on the other hand, aspire to go where the resort isn’t and locate new areas to procure the backcountry experience.¹³⁰ Where resort skiers consume a refined and developed experience, early ski tourers are akin to mining prospectors venturing into the mountains in search of raw ore.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains* examines tourist towns in the West. For more on the effects of the tourism industry in Colorado, see Coleman, *Ski Style*, Childers, *Colorado Powder*, and Philpott, *Vacationland*.

¹³⁰ Philpott, *Vacationland*, 141, explains that people “skied not to conquer nature but to experience places where nature seemed pristine.” Though still discussing resort skiing, ski tourers extend this mindset into the backcountry after resorts stopped feeling “pristine.”

¹³¹ Admunson, *Yellowcake Towns*, discusses the process of individuals moving to landscapes for extractive purposes and forms the basis for this comparison.

One does not become a successful prospector simply by going into the mountains; there is a considerable amount of consumption to reach a point of “mastery.” As Rachel Gross argues in “From Buckskin to Gore-Tex: Consumption as a Path to Mastery in Twentieth Century Wilderness Recreation” outdoor recreationists “mastered” their activities by consuming material goods and information.¹³² For backcountry skiers, this mastery also involves a significant amount of experiential consumption. Through purchasing goods and using them in the backcountry, ski tourers refined their skills and knowledge to pursue their specific experience more efficiently.

Though one never learns all there is to backcountry skiing, its path to mastery isn’t aimless. Outside of material possessions, a specific knowledge set, ability, and attitude is obtained through “mastering” the art of ski touring. Along with investigating what the backcountry experience has been and how it has been pursued, this chapter questions what mastery has meant for backcountry skiers, the areas they live in, and the backcountry itself. To answer these questions, it dives into what skiers have highlighted as the main tenets of backcountry skiing between 1960 and 1985. After identifying the experience ski tourers have sought, it examines the different materials and skillsets that have been needed to produce the experience. Lastly, it discusses what “mastery” of ski touring has entailed. By thoroughly examining what has been incorporated within the backcountry skiing experience, an

¹³² Rachel Gross, “From Buckskin to Gore-Tex: Consumption as a Path to Mastery in Twentieth-Century American Wilderness Recreation,” 826-835. Prior to Gross, Lizabeth Cohen introduced the culture of mass consumption in America that followed World War II in *A Consumer’s Republic*. James Morton Turner discussed how wilderness recreationists grappled with wilderness and consumptive behavior in “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave no Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America.” Gross expands upon these ideas in her article by introducing the “path to mastery,” which serves as an excellent way to understand the production of wilderness recreation.

understanding emerges of ski touring as an extension, not a detachment, of consumptive practices in the mountain landscape.¹³³

The Backcountry Experience

In a 1985 article in *SKIING Magazine*, journalist Peter Shelton described a springtime ski tour from the town of Ophir to Telluride in Colorado's San Juan Mountains.¹³⁴ Located in the southwestern quarter of the state, the San Juans are an impressively rugged mountain range full of intricate drainages that hold a lot of snow. Due to this, and the range's distance from Denver, the San Juans provided prime real estate for skiers to break from more crowded ranges in search of the backcountry experience. Shelton broke his narrative into the observations and discussions his group had at different elevations along their trek. At 10,480 feet, the starting point outside Ophir, he discussed gear, risk, and preparations. Moving toward tree line, the noticeable delineation of mountain landscapes where vegetation became sparse, he observed the surrounding flora and natural environment, stating, "10,700 feet: All of the trees are down or leaning, as if felled by a tremendous wind. Walking on tree-trunk bridges, we finally make the edge of this stand of aspen and behold the wind maker—an avalanche, of course."¹³⁵ Breaking through tree line at 11,200 feet, Shelton's language became exquisitely romantic as he stated, "Suddenly the view is all white. There are no more trees, no colors—only shapes and their cool blue shadows. What in the later summer we know to be delicately balanced piles of vermillion rock are now sleep white waves and bowls, the legendary virgin snows."¹³⁶ He then looked

¹³³ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, discusses how Yosemite rock climbers are products of the society they exist in. This view also carries over to ski tourers, which, given the nature of backcountry skiing, is extended into the peripheries of mountain communities.

¹³⁴ Peter Shelton, "High Route to Telluride," *SKIING Magazine*, September 1985, 288-290.

¹³⁵ Shelton, "High Route to Telluride," 288-289.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 289.

inward, stating, “Walking on inclined snow... requires a certain devotion to make each step the same, or at least to finish each step in balance... but we’re all walkers here, and into the balance dance. Because taking care is like taking your time—it makes things clear, and where we cannot afford to stumble, it gets us through.”¹³⁷

At 13,432 feet, Shelton’s group reached the summit of Oscar’s Peak and transitioned to begin their descent. He described the delightful sensory experience of making ski turns in untracked snow as his party rapidly dropped in elevation toward tree line. Once crossing back into the trees, he talked of flora and then of their transition from backcountry to the developed town as they reemerged. Throughout this article, Shelton provided an excellent retelling of the backcountry experience. For him, this experience revolved around an understanding of risk and one’s personal boundaries, an immersion in the natural mountain landscape, and the fulfillment of locating and enjoying a descent through untouched snow.

Shelton’s account echoed the sentiments of at least two decades of backcountry skiers. When describing ski touring along the “rugged ramparts” above Alta, Utah in 1965, Cal Giddings of the Wasatch Mountain Club mentioned “...long mornings spent huffing and puffing up cirque bowls and over alpine passes,” descents down “powder filled cirques, canyons, and open forests” where “fields of unbroken powder snow yield to the cut of the ski,” and an overall experience that provided backcountry skiers with “true solitude in all its splendor.”¹³⁸ In 1973, Judy Childers of the Colorado Mountain Club succinctly described the experience in a twelve-line poem highlighting “silence, solitude... making tracks into a whole new world. Losing yourself to thoughts and memories stimulated by peace and beauty... riotous laughter as you

¹³⁷ Ibid, 289.

¹³⁸ Calvin J. Giddings, “Powder Touring,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1965, 6.

succumb to a snowdrift.”¹³⁹ For all three of these authors, key tenets of the backcountry experience were an active dialogue with oneself, immersion in the mountain landscape, and snow devoid of any signs of prior discovery. These remained the same from the 1960s through the mid-1980s and are repeated time and time again by CMC and WMC members.

By leaving the developed infrastructure of ski areas and cities behind and immersing themselves in the mountain landscape, ski tourers cultivated an understanding of the backcountry as being the opposite of the town.¹⁴⁰ Even by simply crossing over the resort boundary, chairlifts and trails close by, tourers were entering into an exclusive space not experienced by the common skier.¹⁴¹ Giddings emphasized this in his account of Little Cottonwood Canyon tours, stating, “The casual visitor to Alta rarely sees the vast slopes which dwarf those beneath his feet.”¹⁴² For Shelton, a romantic description of the landscape begins and ends at 11,200 feet—not necessarily because of tree line, but because this is the last contour holding “signs of man’s work.”¹⁴³ Be it above a ski area or far beyond simple structures, the backcountry existed where permanent development and people did not.

This view highlights one of the main hypocrisies of backcountry skiing. If the backcountry is a place devoid of “signs of man’s work,” it is very difficult for skiers and the backcountry to coexist. In his discussion of the wilderness idea, William Cronon pointed to this

¹³⁹ Judy Childers In Jim Schwarz, “In June... Winter Dreams,” *Trail and Timberline*, June 1973, 166.

¹⁴⁰ Roderick Frazier Nash introduced the binary of “civilization” and “wilderness” in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Though discussions on wilderness have advanced beyond this idea, a binary between backcountry and town emerged as the predominant view of ski tourers from the sixties through the eighties and still exists among many skiers today. In Mette Flynt’s *Becoming America’s Ski City: Place and Identity on the Wasatch Front*, Flynt argues that Salt Lake City blurs the line between urban and canyon. In agreement, I argue that though skiing’s popularity extended urban ideals into the hinterlands of the Rockies, it was ski tourers who extended them across the resort/backcountry threshold.

¹⁴¹ Tom Dickman, “Gad Valley Dec. 6,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1971, 6-7.

¹⁴² Giddings, “Powder Touring,” 4.

¹⁴³ Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” 290.

paradox to highlight the constructed binary between wilderness and civilization.¹⁴⁴ If the backcountry is a place where humans don't exist, then backcountry skiing effectively would destroy it. So simply understanding the backcountry as the antithesis of the resort or town is an act of detaching backcountry skiers from the landscape they recreate on. Instead, the sport can be understood as an extension of the town into less developed landscapes. Though focusing on a demanding activity, ski tourers didn't shed the identities they developed in the town upon entering the forest. By looking at "signs of man's work" as a continuum instead of a boundary, backcountry skiing is much more placeable within the landscape itself.

Whether understood as a binary or a continuum, the absence of ski area infrastructure like lifts, roads, or avalanche personnel in the backcountry added an amount of risk to the experience. As discussed in Chapter 1, both the Wasatch and Colorado Rockies produced thousands of avalanches a winter in the same terrain that ski tourers frequented. Growing avalanche awareness throughout the 1960s meant that the risk of triggering one loomed large in the minds of backcountry skiers. David Hanscom, an active member of the Wasatch Mountain Club through the 1970s, discussed how he and others addressed this risk: "I think maybe other people came to the realization as I did that it was a little riskier than they had thought... Stayed away from the big open bowls a little more." He continued, stating, "My feeling about risk is that it's not worth losing my life to enjoy some powder skiing. So the question is, what can you do without putting yourself in that kind of danger?"¹⁴⁵

The answer to this question was a critical part of backcountry travel, and thus, of the backcountry experience: to be observant of the environment and make appropriate decisions. In a

¹⁴⁴ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 19.

¹⁴⁵ David Hanscom, "David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, September 19, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6709js1>.

trip report from WMC member Emile Hall in 1965, Hall described how her group opted for a safer route to their destination that cost them some altitude from their initial plan, highlighting that “it’s a long slide down to the highway.”¹⁴⁶ Though less proactive, CMC member Craig Gaskill shared this awareness of risk while describing a near miss of a small avalanche that “would have swept [them] down to the bottom of the valley.”¹⁴⁷ Other accounts, such as Shelton’s in the San Juans, highlight instances of observing and skirting avalanche terrain. Traveling in the mountain backcountry meant acknowledging the risks it held.

Avalanches weren’t the only risk present in the backcountry; exposure, injury, and getting lost were all aspects of the experience skiers had to consider. In a 1973 *Trail and Timberline* article, Jim Schwarz described searching for a backcountry hut, one of the few structures accepted in the backcountry, at night and worrying that his group was ill-prepared for an evening without the vital shelter.¹⁴⁸ Other accounts emphasize the interconnectedness of how hypothermia can lead to injury or getting lost, which can lead to a cold night in the mountains.¹⁴⁹ Synthesizing this in *SKIING*, author Marlyn Doan recounted a tour where an ankle sprain and disorientation caused her and her husband to spend the waning hours of the day anxiously searching for their trailhead.¹⁵⁰ Warm spring temperatures at the start of the tour had convinced them to shed the necessary equipment for surviving a cold evening in the backcountry, leaving them vulnerable.

Though Doan lived to warn others of the risk involved with touring, the tragic demise of two Colorado State University students, lost in a snowstorm near Longs Peak in 1972, is a stark

¹⁴⁶ Emile Hall, “Lake Blanche Ski Tour,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1965, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Craig Gaskill, “A Ski Tour,” *Trail and Timberline*, January 1975, 121.

¹⁴⁸ Jim Schwarz, “In June, Winter Dreams of the Powder, the Trees, the Open Bowls,” *Trail and Timberline*, June 1973, 167.

¹⁴⁹ Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” 289, and Hank Barlow, “Backcountry Magic,” *SKIING Magazine* February 1983, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Marlyn Doan, “A Ridge Too Far,” *SKIING Magazine*, November 1977, 180.

reminder that skiers are beholden to the mountain environment when pursuing the backcountry experience.¹⁵¹ In a *Trail and Timberline* reprint of an article from *Belay Magazine* describing the incident, the author stated, “Fred Stone and Joan Jardine... left the unoccupied Longs Peak Ranger station in a snow storm with the intention of spending the night at the Chasm Lake Shelter Cabin some five miles away in a bleak, treeless valley at 11,590 feet.”¹⁵² Three days later, after not returning, a search and rescue party followed the route to the shelter only to find that it had never been used. Since the couple never communicated their plan with a park ranger, the party scoured the drainage below, where faded footprints led them to Jardine’s body and Stone’s pack far beneath their intended route. Concluding the article, the author reminded readers of the sometimes life or death situation the backcountry holds, stating, “One misstep in a harsh environment spelled a tragedy of false expectation and misguided trust.”¹⁵³

But immersion in a landscape didn’t only mean inheriting its risks. Ski tourers also experienced wonder and a sense of closeness to nature. To justify the length of a specific tour in the Wasatch, Giddings noted that “the scenery well justifies the expenditure of energy.”¹⁵⁴ Another WMC member echoed the awe-inspiring views from the Wasatch backcountry, describing the panorama provided from a Little Cottonwood Canyon summit.¹⁵⁵ While the top of a mountain provided its own unique scenery, Shelton illustrated the attractiveness of the way up in his description of subalpine flora and fauna in the San Juans.¹⁵⁶ If nothing else, a feeling of closeness to nature was assured when ski tourers immersed themselves in the mountains.

¹⁵¹ “Ski Touring Tragedy Near Long’s Peak,” *Belay Magazine* via *Trail and Timberline*, May 1973, 121.

¹⁵² “Ski Touring Tragedy Near Long’s Peak,” 121.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 121.

¹⁵⁴ Cal Giddings, “American Fork-Major Evans Ski Tour,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1962, 2.

¹⁵⁵ Tom Dickman, “Gad Valley Dec. 6,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1971, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Shelton, 288-289.

Immersion provided a feeling of discovery and adventure to skiers that translated into a romantic sense of understanding of the land. Per Giddings, “Each turn, each knoll, each forest glen is a new adventure.”¹⁵⁷ Describing tours in the vicinity of Alta provided a micro-scale of adventure in familiar landscapes. However, through traveling into the various nooks and crannies of the Cottonwood canyons, WMC members discovered previously unknown skiing “paradises” to explore further.¹⁵⁸ With each winter storm blanketing evidence of prior tours, backcountry experiences were ripe with adventure.

Along with exploration of the mountains, this experience invoked self-exploration. Mainly, it provided a venue for skiers to learn their physical and mental limits. Shelton discussed this aspect through describing a literal and figurative “balance dance,” in which each tourer stuck to their own individual paces on ski tours.¹⁵⁹ WMC Touring Directors reiterated the importance of this balance by warning the implications it had on both individual and group experiences.¹⁶⁰ Since the risks present required at least two people in a touring party, recognizing one’s own balance and how it affected others was an essential consideration in the backcountry. By understanding balance and pace, ski tourers observed how they moved through the backcountry. Looking externally at their environment and internally at their physicality provided two separate entities to observe. A conjunction of the two seems to be a natural occurrence, however neither CMC nor WMC trip reports highlighted this connection during a ski tour—again foregoing the placement of humans in the backcountry.

¹⁵⁷ Giddings, “Powder Touring,” 6.

¹⁵⁸ Giddings, “Powder Touring,” 6, and Susan Schott, “Green’s Basin Delight,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1979, 12.

¹⁵⁹ Shelton, 289.

¹⁶⁰ Charles Keller, “Ski Tour Rating Guide,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1966, 7-9, Dennis Caldwell, “Ski Touring 69 70,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1969, 5-6, Dennis Caldwell, “Notes on Ski Touring,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1970, 6-7, David Hanscom, “The Right Kind of Touring,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1972, 7, and “Guide to Ski Touring in the Wasatch,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1979, 6-9.

Though individually prominent, all these aspects of the backcountry experience were side effects of the pursuit of untracked powder snow. Ski tourers from 1960 through 1985 highlighted snow condition as the integral factor of their experience, with untouched snow being the gold standard. Emile Hall referred to this activity, where a group combs an area to harvest turns in fresh snow, as “powder hunting.”¹⁶¹ Struggling to find such a concise description, WMC member Tom Dickman described the downhill through “fresh Alta powder” as “something, which has to be experienced to be known.”¹⁶² Countless other WMC members also describe how “fresh glorious powder snow” really made the backcountry skiing experience.¹⁶³ As an inkling of the popularity of backcountry skiing that was to come, CMC member Fred Matheny penned an article in 1972 discussing how to assure one finds untouched snow on a ski tour by “finding a spot where the sport has not caught on, yet has good snow, great scenery... all of the things that have made ski touring so attractive.”¹⁶⁴ For Matheny, this area was the San Juan Mountains; for those in the mountains bordering Salt Lake City, one turn into an obscured mountain dell could provide abundant spoils.

Instead of delving into the tenets of immersion in the landscape, self-reflection, and untouched snow, a backcountry skier would likely answer the question of “why the backcountry” with a very simple response: because it’s fun. This is the absolute summation of these three tenets and can be seen in accounts of prominent ski tourers, especially in Utah. When asked “what made you want to ski more?” Wasatch skier Bob Athey stated that he really enjoyed it and

¹⁶¹ Hall, “Lake Blanche Ski Tour,” 5.

¹⁶² Dickman, “Gad Valley Dec. 6,” 7.

¹⁶³ Patti Schweers, “Snowy Ski Tour,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1974, 10, Dan Judd, “Mill D to Millcreek,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1976, and at least one trip report in the mid-winter issues of *The Rambler* glorify untouched snow in one way or another.

¹⁶⁴ Fred Matheny, “Ski Touring in the San Juans,” *Trail and Timberline*, June 1972, 127.

figured he should get good at it.¹⁶⁵ “Because it’s fun,” however, is the response of the backcountry master. Barring any inherent risk coming to fruition, a walk in the woods with skis on is fun for most anyone. However, there is a material and experiential baseline that ski tourers must meet before being able to sum up the backcountry experience so succinctly. Immersion, self-reflection, and untouched snow can befall any neophyte to ski touring, but to efficiently mine this experience requires continual effort.

Prospecting Snow

The path to efficient acquisition of the backcountry experience, or ski touring’s path to mastery, revolved around three core objectives. The first was accessing and obtaining the extensive list of equipment that facilitated backcountry travel and survival. The second involved building physicality and skiing ability to efficiently travel. The third objective was a constant accumulation of environmental knowledge, specifically scientific and experiential understanding of snow conditions and geography, and personal knowledge through observing one’s boundaries. Beyond where one could purchase all the skiing equipment in the world, the best way to meet the second and third objectives was through spending time in the backcountry. As such, meeting these objectives along the path to mastery for backcountry skiing was largely a path of consumption.

Consumption during this path began in the town. Imagine a paint bucket getting knocked over in a room: pouring out of the bucket, the liquid paint flows from where its stored out into the space surrounding it, spreading in the direct its spilled through any contours, grooves, or imperfections on the floor. Consumption in ski touring follows this image. Skiers practice economic consumption through purchasing gear, gasoline, and following established

¹⁶⁵ Bob Athey, “Bob Athey,” interviewed by Matthew Green, October 1, 2018.

infrastructure into nearby canyons. From there, they spread out into the backcountry to practice experiential consumption of the landscape. Though physical evidence of prior skiers can quickly disappear with new snow or a strong breeze, the path to mastery created a continual peopling of the backcountry. Where this wasn't as visible in the 1960s, as backcountry skiing grew, more people at various stages of mastery joined this cycle and subsequently pushed the boundary where one could find snow *and* solitude further into national forests.

Skiers weren't cutting down trees to mark where they've been, but an increase in people in the backcountry pushed the boundary of where people are finding the feeling of exploration and solitude provided through the backcountry experience. This perpetuated the cycle of consumption for three reasons. First, extensive use of gear created the need for new, more efficient gear. Second, if everyone is skiing in a handful of areas then the uniqueness of the backcountry experience is diminished there. Lastly, this is all still playing out in avalanche country. As Atwater stated in the early years of avalanche research, an avalanche hazard is created where humans and steep, snowy, and unstable slopes meet. Just because this growing form of recreation wasn't the initial focus of the Forest Service's avalanche doesn't mean that the agency was unaware of their existence. Ski touring at this time would fall under "dispersed recreation," which meant the activity was loosely monitored by responsibility fell on the individual instead of the agency. Where skiers were largely on their own if caught in an avalanche, a search and rescue response always occurred when word reached the nearest town or resort, meaning backcountry problems extended back to the town.¹⁶⁶ Much like the industrial workers entering the mountains before them, backcountry skiers consumed landscapes through material possessions needed to access them, through the act of increasing the human footprint in

¹⁶⁶ *The Snowy Torrents* describe the rescue response to each avalanche incident reported.

the mountains, and through dependence on a town response in the event that something drastic happened.

Like a prospector's pan, shovel, and pickax, ski touring required equipment to access the backcountry. Gear lists for backcountry skiers were quite extensive and included the following: skis with bindings that allowed heel movement, poles, climbing skins or ski wax, leather boots, gaiters, gloves, a warm hat, warm outerwear such as a down parka, additional layers, long underwear, goggles or sunglasses, sunscreen, a first aid kit, a ski repair kit, maps, a compass, a flashlight, matches, water, sufficient food, avalanche safety equipment, and a backpack large enough to store everything.¹⁶⁷ Shelton, in his discussion of hypothermia, emphasized the importance of skiers carrying multiple layers of clothing in varying weights in order to appropriately regulate one's temperature and avoid getting too hot or cold.¹⁶⁸ Along with layers, a WMC trip report by John MacDuff emphasized how necessary carrying a ski repair kit with at least a metal ski tip could be.¹⁶⁹ Cutting corners on this extensive list could cause looming risks to become pressing issues.¹⁷⁰

Lacking any of this gear marked a skier as unqualified from participating in group tours organized by the CMC and WMC. To assure skiers weren't a danger to themselves or their touring parties, the CMC held "qualification tests" at the beginning of each ski season.¹⁷¹ These weren't meant to shun or exclude participants—if a skier did not possess a compass, for

¹⁶⁷ Barlow, "Backcountry Magic," 34, Ron Cox, "Ski as Far as you Can," *Trail and Timberline*, March 1984, 85,87, Doan, "A Ridge Too Far," 184, Charles Keller, "More About Ski Touring," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1967, 4-6, and Gilbert Robino, "Ski Mountaineering," *SKIING Magazine*, February 1965, 83.

¹⁶⁸ Shelton, 33.

¹⁶⁹ John MacDuff, "Cardiff Canyon and Mill D. Tour," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1961, 5.

¹⁷⁰ Doan, "A Ridge Too Far," is a testament to this.

¹⁷¹ "Cross Country Qualification Test," in Colorado Mountain Club Records, Box 3, Folder 9, "Winter Trips - Ski tests etc.," American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15-16, 2021.

example, they would be told to purchase one before joining their next trip.¹⁷² To mitigate having to turn someone away for not having or forgetting certain gear, trip leaders from the WMC were required to carry extra equipment.¹⁷³ Though extensive, possession of these consumer goods was necessary before entering the backcountry.

Access to this equipment came through various avenues. There were ski touring shops like Timberline Sports and Wasatch Touring in Salt Lake City, Neptune Mountaineering in Boulder, or Holubar in various locations along the Front Range.¹⁷⁴ There were also community ski swaps and an active secondhand market.¹⁷⁵ In 1960, a pair of hickory skis with bindings went for roughly \$18 secondhand in Salt Lake City.¹⁷⁶ Some crafty individuals even made their own equipment to meet their specific needs. Several issues of *The Rambler* included advertisements for “sew it yourself” kits to make outdoor gear. Joel Bown, an active Wasatch skier, discussed adding Vibram soles to leather boots in order to create gear that met his needs.¹⁷⁷ Club member David Hanscom stated that he preferred buying used gear, but assured that other WMC members knew what cutting-edge skiers, bindings, and other equipment was available at ski shops.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² Elsa R., memo on Ski Test Correspondence, February 6, 1961, Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Johann Cohn, February 5, 1964 and Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Vernon Jeffris, February 5, 1964, in Colorado Mountain Club Records, Box 3, Folder 9, “Winter Trips - Ski tests etc.,” American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15-16, 2021.

¹⁷³ Andy Schoenberg, “Checklist for Tour Leaders,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1977, 15-16.

¹⁷⁴ Ads appear throughout CMC and WMC publications. Reference to these stores can be seen in Kurt Gerstle, “I Ski Free (Or Did),” *Trail and Timberline*, January 1976, 7, *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1968, 18, and Dwight Butler, “Dwight Butler, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, June 7, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6zk711k>.

¹⁷⁵ “Ski Swap,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1960, 6-7 and “Swap Shop,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, November 1978, 20.

¹⁷⁶ “Ski Swap,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1960, 7.

¹⁷⁷ *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1979, 15, Joel Bown, “Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, September 4 and 27, and October 25, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6qn7r5k>.

¹⁷⁸ David Hanscom, “David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg.

Backcountry skiers could and needed to purchase the necessary new or used equipment to begin gaining experience in the backcountry.

Trekking through snow on skis with packs full of gear required a certain level of physicality to participate. This could eventually be gained on the skin track, but even to start a short tour, participants needed a level of “physical conditioning and high-altitude training.”¹⁷⁹ Providing a sense of what a long day looked like, one *SKIING* author provided the distance he traveled in a day to ski, stating, “two runs, 6,000 feet vertical total. The climb up will take about two and a half hours. By the end of the way we will have spent five hours climbing and less than one hour skiing.”¹⁸⁰ Where a two-and-a-half-mile climb wasn’t standard for every tour, even those meeting what the CMC considered “average” in their ski tests were recommended to continuously tour to improve stamina.¹⁸¹ Depending on the area, finding untouched snow could be an hour trek or three hours, so advanced physicality only improved acquisition of experience.

This led ski tourers to find the sport more fulfilling than resort skiing or mechanized travel because it required work before fun. In *SKIING*’s “The Lure of Touring,” Kenneth Miller highlighted, “To them, ski touring is synonymous with vigor; downhill skiing (the lift-serviced variety) synonymous with decadence.”¹⁸² Discussing the sport in another *SKIING* article five years later, an author described it as for those “who want their pleasure to come as a reward for effort.”¹⁸³ This mindset was indoctrinated to the extent that touring parties would look for excuses, such as taking in the view, to justify resting.¹⁸⁴ Having the fitness to efficiently work through an uphill meant the downhill was all the more enjoyable.

¹⁷⁹ Robino, “Ski Mountaineering,” 41.

¹⁸⁰ Barlow, “Backcountry Magic,” 34.

¹⁸¹ Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Phyllis Lane, March 22, 1963, in Colorado Mountain Club Records, Box 3, Folder 9, “Winter Trips - Ski tests etc.,” American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15-16, 2021.

¹⁸² Kenneth Miller, “The Lure of Touring,” *SKIING Magazine*, February 1965, 30.

¹⁸³ George Schelling, “Those Other Skiers,” *SKIING Magazine*, February 1969, 43.

¹⁸⁴ MacDuff, “Cardiff Canyon and Mill D. Tour,” 4.

Along with “earning it,” physicality helped skiers retain energy for the downhill, but pure fitness wasn’t the only necessary skill to masterfully harvest snow. Skiing ability was essential to the experience as well. One could still have fun flailing through the snow, but a base of ability controlling speed, stopping, and connecting smooth turns was essential to avoiding injury in the backcountry.¹⁸⁵ Given the implications of this for a group, lacking skiing ability in various snow conditions was grounds to be excluded from certain group tours.¹⁸⁶ Where physicality accounted for the way up, ski tourers continually worked to master skiing ability for the way down.

While these two skills were a mastery of the body, environmental knowledge was a form of mental mastery required to efficiently find untouched snow. An awareness of snow conditions and how they affected an experience went hand in hand with an ability to ski in these conditions.¹⁸⁷ Along with snow conditions, a geographic understanding of the landscape was also part of this knowledge set. In a snow-draped canyon, landmarks and specific drainages provided geographic context and direction.¹⁸⁸ They also served as a means of finding new areas to ski in. Looking at aerial photography from a 1970s guidebook for Wasatch skiers, Bob Athey examined places the guidebook wasn’t discussing to seek out new ski runs.¹⁸⁹ Athey’s strategy emphasizes the ways skiers peopled the backcountry. Instead of using the guidebook as intended, he used it to find the places that weren’t highlighted in order to continue harvesting fresh snow. Though he

¹⁸⁵ Gale Dick, “How to Avoid Falling on Ski Tours,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1982, 9-10.

¹⁸⁶ Schoenberg, “Checklist for Tour Leaders,” 15-16, Elsa R., memo on Ski Test Correspondence, February 6, 1961, Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Johann Cohn, February 5, 1964 and Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Vernon Jeffris, February 5, 1964, in Colorado Mountain Club Records, Box 3, Folder 9, “Winter Trips - Ski tests etc.,” American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15-16, 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Schoenberg, “Checklist for Tour Leaders,” 15-16, MacDuff, “Cardiff Canyon and Mill D. Tour,” 5, and Ski Qualification Judge, Letter to Johann Cohn, February 5, 1964.

¹⁸⁸ E.J. Gauss, “Berthoud Pass to Winter Park on Skis,” *Trail and Timberline*, January 1959, 3-5, and Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” 289.

¹⁸⁹ Bob Athey, “Bob Athey,” interviewed by Matthew Green, October 1, 2018.

employed a unique method of exploration, getting outside, understanding where to find snow, and knowing how to ski it safely and efficiently was a continuous process for backcountry skiers.

Mastery also included learning and understanding one's limits to find an individual balance. This not only prevented overexertion, but also boosted morale and allowed an openness to all the backcountry experience provided. Shelton effectively drove the importance of balance home by stating, "It takes sustained concentration to walk efficiently."¹⁹⁰ In doing so, he subtly expressed the level of engagement involved in backcountry skiing. The balance, then, was an ability to calibrate skill and interest. Hanscom emphasized this by stating, "the right kind of touring for each individual depends upon one's reasons for trying the sport."¹⁹¹ Finding powder was the overwhelming goal, but how to go about achieving this required constant self-reflection and understanding.

The backcountry community assisted with this. Since getting in over one's head lowered individual and group morale, clubs developed rating systems to assure everyone could gain touring experience at a level they were comfortable with.¹⁹² Where the CMC followed a straightforward "easy" through "difficult" metric, the WMC tried multiple methods based on the difficulty of both the climb and descent.¹⁹³ This system included an explanation of ability level expected for each rating and discouraged skiers from going on tours they couldn't handle.¹⁹⁴ This sentiment was also included in *Wasatch Tours*, the first Wasatch touring guide book, which was written to provide skiers with suggestions on how to best meet and grow their backcountry

¹⁹⁰ Shelton, "High Route to Telluride," 289.

¹⁹¹ Hanscom, "The Right Kind of Touring," 7.

¹⁹² Keller, "Ski Tour Rating System," 7-9, and "Cross Country Qualification Test," Colorado Mountain Club Records, Box 3, Folder 9, "Winter Trips - Ski tests etc.," American Alpine Club Library, Accessed on October 15-16, 2021.

¹⁹³ "Guide to Ski Touring in the Wasatch," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1979, 6-9.

¹⁹⁴ "Guide to Ski Touring in the Wasatch," 6, and Dennis Caldwell, "Notes on Ski Touring," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1970, 7.

skillsets.¹⁹⁵ Because individual enjoyment led to group enjoyment, assuring that everyone found their backcountry balance on a ski tour benefitted the community as a whole.

The introduction of rating systems and community support along the path to mastery blurs the homogeneity of the backcountry skiing community at this time. Though racially homogenous and middle-class, mountain clubs in Utah and Colorado had a relatively balanced gender ratio and a wide array of skill levels.¹⁹⁶ In oral histories years later, Hanscom and Bown provided a reason for the gender balance, stating that the community was “not terribly young—thirties... Young enough to be active and interested [in] taking some risks, I guess, getting out and enjoying the powder” and that often couples joined the club together.¹⁹⁷ Though not WMC members, Ed and Dolores LaChapelle are a good example of this. Dolores learned to ski through a CMC trip and was instantly hooked. After marriage, and in Dolores’ case, mastery of skiing, the couple moved to Utah for Ed’s Snow Ranger work at Alta. Bown highlighted that academics also moved to Utah for the snow, the reason being “there are a lot of people that will give up some academic prestige and some funding to live here and have all these outdoor activities at their beck and call.”¹⁹⁸ Cal and Jen Giddings, active WMC members throughout the 1960s and 1970s, are a prime example.¹⁹⁹

The presence of couples doesn’t suggest that mountain clubs were completely balanced. While Cal Giddings served on the WMC board of directors it was comprised of 15-20%

¹⁹⁵ David Hanscom, “David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg.

¹⁹⁶ For more on the demographics of skiing post-World War II, see Coleman, *Ski Style*, 147-181. Through highlighting demographics of resort skiing in Colorado, Coleman shows the make up of people who move to landscapes for the snow.

¹⁹⁷ David Hanscom, “David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, and Joel Bown, “Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg.

¹⁹⁸ Joel Bown, “Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg.

¹⁹⁹ Alexis Kelner, “Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput,” Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, October 13 and November 7, 2006, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6612hpn>.

women.²⁰⁰ Though the roles and percentage of women on the board fluctuated, the number didn't appear to exceed 40% between 1960 and 1985.²⁰¹ The diversity in skill level and how that dictated the backcountry experience is a better metric for backcountry heterogeneity. Especially as the WMC grew, the skill level and aspirations of club members varied.²⁰² This caused some members to branch out with others based on skill level. Hanscom stated, "After a few years, I didn't go out... on club activities too often. The groups were a little too large; pace was a little too slow. I got kind of bored... going out with people that didn't know what they were doing, you'd spend a lot of time instructing, which was okay, but my time was fairly limited with two young boys, so I just wanted to get out and go for a half a day and then come back."²⁰³

As insinuated through Bown's observation of skiing academics, knowledge of the existence of good snow caused individuals to move to areas like Salt Lake City and Devner. When discussing *Wasatch Tours*, Hanscom, the author, stated, "I'm afraid it did promote backcountry skiing in the Wasatch to some extent. That's the curse of being the writer, you have to live with the knowledge that... more people are doing these things."²⁰⁴ Though beating the masses, Hanscom, Bown, and Wasatch Touring owners Dwight and Charles Butler were all drawn to Salt Lake City because of the ample skiing there. Though ski tourers weren't the sole cause of Salt Lake City's population boom, the attractiveness of a life full of easily-accessed outdoor adventure is a selling point of Salt Lake City to this day.

Athey is an example of someone who came to the club as a beginner, quickly progressed along the path to mastery, and broke from the class strata and transplant nature of the WMC.

²⁰⁰ *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1962, 1, and January 1963, 1.

²⁰¹ *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1962, 1, January 1963, 1, January 1976, 20, January 1977, 20, January 1979, 1, and January 1985, 1.

²⁰² Bill Viavant, "This...", *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1971, 4, highlights how members began joining to do one or two winter tours and mainly participate in evening socials.

²⁰³ David Hanscom, "David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg.

²⁰⁴ David Hanscom, "David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg.

Learning to ski within resort boundaries with his significant other at the time, the sport took and he took to the Wasatch backcountry.²⁰⁵ Athey grew up in west Salt Lake Valley, worked the trades in the off-season, and collected unemployment so he could ski more. A notorious Wasatch skier to this day, Athey is an excellent example of diversity in interest and rate of consumption. Along with passion for the mountains, ratings, organized tours, and a community created around recreation to discuss ski touring with all helped progress ski tourers along the path to backcountry mastery.

Through meeting this, the community, or at least individuals within it, could grow in the backcountry. Where clubs tested and taught classes on how to meet a ski touring baseline, masterful efficiency could only be met through continual acquisition of experience. In doing so, tourers put theory into practice and left themselves open to learn through trial and error.²⁰⁶ After obtaining essential equipment, skiers learned how to use it, built fitness levels and skiing ability, and developed a knowledge set of land and self in the mountains to safely and efficiently ski. Meeting a level of mastery, though, also meant developing a habit and mindset that had implications that extended beyond the snowy backcountry.

Developing the Backcountry

With knowledge of the environment and self came a sense of competition with these two entities.²⁰⁷ The need to push oneself to their limits in order to feel accomplished, very much a relic of the urban ideals of virtue and hard work, proliferated constant acquisition of the backcountry experience. Like most competitors, a tinge of superiority and rejection of divergent

²⁰⁵ Bob Athey, "Bob Athey," interviewed by Matthew Green.

²⁰⁶ Doan, "A Ridge Too Far," provided a negative example of this.

²⁰⁷ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical*, 15-43, discusses how this developed in the Victorian era and set the tone for U.S. mountain clubs.

ideals followed and played out among those back in the town. This “superior” understanding of the landscape, paired with the exhilaration of backcountry skiing, created the “gold fever” in the backcountry that drove people into new areas to ski. Like any form of growth in resource extraction, an infrastructure to facilitate this specific use emerged in the 1970s. Along with creation of amenities for ski tourers, skiers developed this infrastructure through repurposing existing municipal and ski resort amenities to access the backcountry from.

Competition between the environment and the self mushroomed in the mid-1960s. In 1968, WMC member Jack McClellan described a mountaineer as someone who “competes not with people, but with the mountain. The weather. And Himself.”²⁰⁸ Reiterating this idea, a *SKIING* article from 1969 described ski touring as “meeting the challenge proposed by nature.”²⁰⁹ Instead of racing down a track against other individuals, the opponent in the backcountry was the landscape. By appropriately tuning into one’s specific level of attentiveness and ability, skiers sustained in the backcountry and were rewarded with a fulfilling experience that left the mountains with them.²¹⁰ Overcoming risks in the backcountry led to boosts in self-confident, camaraderie and trust among partners, and a refreshed view of the world outside the canyon.²¹¹ Unfortunately, this refreshed view was devoid of reflection of one’s place in the town or the backcountry landscape, and instead reinforced the community’s perceived detachment from both. WMC and CMC narrative trip reports include plenty of reflection of one’s feeling and the landscape around them, but again, the connection of these two, and of the backcountry to the town, is absent.

²⁰⁸ Jack McClellan, “Why a Mountaineer?” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1968, 1.

²⁰⁹ Schelling, “Those Other Skiers,” 43.

²¹⁰ Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” 289.

²¹¹ Schelling, “Those Other Skiers,” 46-47, and Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” 290.

Since backcountry recreation revolved around the accumulation of these experiences away from the town, part of the lingering fulfillment upon return to it was the knowledge that one possessed something that others didn't.²¹² This experience happened in the backcountry, where every day folk didn't, and often due to material situations couldn't, travel. So when McClellan described the absence of competition or prestige among those outside of the mountaineering community, it wasn't out of a humbleness among backcountry skiers as much as a sense of superiority through possession of unique experience.²¹³ This can be seen in the backcountry skiing community's rejection of mechanized travel through the mountains. Ski lifts, helicopters, and snowmobilers were surely harbingers of change in the mountains, but they were also viewed with disdain by backcountry skiers because they did not provide the full backcountry experience. Where skiers often overlooked their activity's impacts and dependence on the town, they were quick to scrutinize that of other recreational uses.

For many ski tourers, chairlifts represented laziness and complacency.²¹⁴ This was the most visible "other" for the backcountry skiers, since ski touring started with an adventurous few exiting resorts to go tour. However, newly perceived intruders began entering the backcountry as winter travel technologies evolved. Reflecting on an area in Colorado's Elk Mountains, CMC member Kurt Gerstle mentioned one of the "charms of ski touring" before lamenting on how a change in land access forced him to enter the Elks by a winter road full of buzzing snowmobiles.²¹⁵ This sentiment was shared by skiers to the Southwest as well, who claimed the

²¹² Rothman discusses the idea of prestige through experience as the colonial driver in *Devil's Bargains*. In Robert MacFarlane, *Mountains of the Mind* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), MacFarlane shows how the imagination evolves our view of mountaineering. Given this understanding, the prestige created from accumulation of backcountry experience may not have been understood as such *by* skiers since they left the backcountry only with memories, but it is a crucial lens for understanding the mindsets of these historical actors.

²¹³ McClellan, "Why a Mountaineer?," 1.

²¹⁴ Giddings, "Powder Touring," 4, Dickman, "Gad Valley Dec. 6," 6, Miller, "The Lure of Ski Touring," 30.

²¹⁵ Gerstle, 7.

two devils in the San Juans were avalanches and snowmobiles.²¹⁶ Where Cottonwood Canyons skiers operated in watersheds that prohibited snowmobiles, their experiences were threatened by helicopters bringing noise and more skiers into the backcountry.²¹⁷ While recounting a tour up Little Cottonwood's Mineral Fork, a WMC member stated, "We were peacefully eating when a noisy hoard of skiers descended upon us, seemingly from nowhere. We had seen helicopters making passes... and now it was obvious... what was going on."²¹⁸ By not "working" for their turns via uphill travel, mechanized skiers lacked the understanding of nature and self brought on by exertion and balance, thus simply harvesting snow without procuring the full backcountry experience.

Where helicopters and chairlifts threatened looming development, the existence of a growing population of ski tourers in the backcountry was its own harbinger of change. Evolutions in equipment, such as the switch from wood skis to fiberglass skis with aluminum edges, growing dependence on climbing skins instead of finicky ski wax, Skadi avalanche beacons, and advancements in touring bindings that effectively allowed heel movement on the uphill and stability on the downhill, all made getting further into the backcountry easier and safer.²¹⁹ Recognizing both change in the Wasatch and growth within their own community, Cal Giddings made a call to the WMC in 1961 to accept more members, stating, "As the world becomes more mechanized, more people are seeking unmechanized activities in the great

²¹⁶ Fred Matheny, "Ski Touring in the San Juans," *Trail and Timberline*, June 1972, 127.

²¹⁷ Fran Flowers, "Mineral Fork," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1976, 10, Dickman, "Gad Valley Dec. 6," 7, and Michael Budig, "White Pine Holiday," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1981, 21.

²¹⁸ Flowers, "Mineral Fork," 10.

²¹⁹ Lou Dawson, "Timeline—North American Ski Mountaineering History," *Wild Snow* (blog), September 25, 2019, last modified July 22, 2020, <https://www.loudawson.com/ski-mountaineering-history/timeline-north-american-ski-touring/>.

outdoors. This commodity is our specialty.”²²⁰ Subsequent trip reports highlighted increasing numbers in the backcountry; so much so that one from 1976, fifteen years later, referred to increased use as “the expected parade of other tourers.”²²¹ While ski resorts attracted vacationers and locals alike to their developed infrastructure, once word of the snow to be had in the backcountry spread, nearby communities swelled and developed amenities to facilitate day use recreation in the areas surrounding ski resorts. Instead of building in the canyon itself, touring specific gear shops in town provided equipment while trailheads, commuter lots, and public transportation provided access. This growing machine below the mountains attracted more people to areas like Salt Lake City to develop lives rich with backcountry experiences.

Since no one permanently lived in the backcountry, any experience was a short visit. So, despite being the antithesis of the town, ski tourers needed the town to operate out of. This created somewhat of a flattening between rural and urban: those in the Front Range discussed rural areas closer to the mountains such as Buena Vista or Ophir as bases of operation, while Salt Lake City’s proximity to the backcountry provided an excellent jumping off point.²²² No matter the population, towns were on a ski tourer’s radar if there was ample backcountry to explore nearby. Like any boom town, growth in a population of backcountry skiers also meant growth in the amenities they needed.

Since the desired experience of backcountry skiers didn’t involve lodges, restaurants, or signifiers of high culture, the amenities sought in a town were different than that of the ski resort.²²³ In Buena Vista, Colorado, which was still in a natal state as a recreation town in 1972,

²²⁰ Cal Giddings, “The Past Year and Some Ahead,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1961, 5.

²²¹ Flowers, “Mineral Fork,” 10.

²²² Matheny, “Ski Touring in the San Juans,” 127-28, Shelton, “High Route to Telluride,” and Bill Coates, “Ski Touring in Pike’s Peak Area,” *Trail and Timberline*, January 1972, 11.

²²³ Rothman’s *Devil’s Bargains* and Coleman’s *Ski Style* delve into specifics of the ski resort experience and the amenities desired by that community.

these amenities included cheap motels and a gear store that sold touring equipment.²²⁴ In Salt Lake City, touring specific shops like Wasatch Touring, and eventually big box recreation stores like REI, provided gear while an ever-advancing line of what locals considered “rural” left ample space for housing.²²⁵ For Salt Lake City skiers, existing public transportation and parking, meant to shuttle skiers to resorts, became carpool rallying points and modes of transportation to bring ski tourers to existing trailheads.²²⁶ These new and repurposed amenities—ski touring shops, suburban sprawl, gas stations, trailheads, commuter lots, and city buses—all served as entities in the town that facilitated backcountry access. Returning to the backcountry paint bucket, these are the puddles and cracks that guide the flow of skiers into specific destinations. While exploration, solitude, and escape from the town remained ideals of the backcountry ski community, the reality was that existing infrastructure, functional gear, and one’s ability dictated where people skied.²²⁷ Of course, the eagerness to escape to the forest was more than sufficient in distracting skiers from considering how they got there.

Conclusion

In-town amenities, a growing “parade” of skiers in popular backcountry locales, and an expansion of tourers into quieter areas ahead of the curve all illustrate an increase in backcountry use from the 1960s onward. Enticed by the idea of the backcountry experience—the opportunity to be immersed in the mountain landscape, to explore one’s physical and mental limits, and to find pristine snow to ski through—more and more ski tourers purchased necessary equipment

²²⁴ Coates, “Ski Touring in Pike’s Peak Area,” 11.

²²⁵ Dwight Butler, “Dwight Butler, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, and Bob Athey, “Bob Athey,” interviewed by Matthew Green.

²²⁶ Bob Athey, “Bob Athey,” interviewed by Matthew Green, Joel Bown, “Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, and David Hanscom, “David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg.

²²⁷ Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg*, 19-24 refers to this idea as the “recreational fan.” Philpott, *Vacationland*, 77-126 addresses this idea through discussing Colorado’s “I-70 corridor” that served as a main access point to tourist towns in the state.

and took to the backcountry. Through following touring's path to mastery, skiers experienced all these tenets while simultaneously learning how to better access them in the future. Through multiple seasons spent in the Wasatch, San Juans, or the various subranges of the Front Range, they mastered the skills needed to take in the backcountry. By becoming master ski tourers, though, they subjected themselves to the consequences of that title. A constant desire for an unadulterated backcountry experience began to push backcountry skiers further into western hinterlands in the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, they initiated their own developmental progression in western towns.

Through focusing on the landscape, personal growth and experience, and the potential of fresh powder, skiers didn't appear to reflect on the implications of their own genre of land use until the backcountry became fuller and the presence of machines became visible. Machines, be it ski lifts, snowmobiles, or helicopters, provided further distraction from their use as they became the "other" that ski touring was compared to. Despite hordes of ski tourers in the backcountry, progressing the backcountry continuum deeper into national forests, backcountry skiers were absolved of any impact as long as machines were present. While comparing the cost of backcountry hobbies to other vacations, Bown stated, "If your idea of a two-week vacation is... the French Riviera, staying in a nice chalet for hundreds of dollars a night versus tenting your way down the Green River... I mean the difference... is just absolutely astounding."²²⁸ Though discussing finances, this sentiment translates to ski tourers. If one's idea of consumption in skiing is the resort and what goes into providing the resort experience, backcountry skiing is on a much smaller scale. But growing numbers in the backcountry, driven by the unique experience it provides, still accounts for consumptive growth. Where touring shops are not opening in canyons themselves and ski tourers aren't rushing in hordes to the rural West, the

²²⁸ "Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg.

presence of both illuminates an emerging form of development fueled by the backcountry experience.

CHAPTER 3 - Collapse

Huffing and puffing, we emerged from tree line and our end objective came into view. Climbing the ridge one step at a time, I gain a second wind with the realization that we were yards away from our descent. Arriving at the summit of our descent, we stopped to drink some water and replenish lost calories. Lacking the hip flexibility to remove my climbing skins with my skis on my feet, I took them off, peeled off the skins, transitioned my boots and bindings to “ski mode,” clipped back in, stuff my skins in my pack, and look down on the blank canvas of snow below. I took a few breaths of the crisp alpine air and waited for my partner to finish his transition.

“I’ll ski to there and turn around to watch you,” I said, pointing with my ski pole to a tuft of trees further down the slope. “Sound like a plan?” He nodded. Touring together most weekends, my partner and I can anticipate each other’s rhythms when navigating avalanche terrain. Still, we always make a point to communicate the important logistics of safe travel and awareness. “Cool... Dropping,” I say, pointing my skis downhill and pushing off with my poles. Our descent had begun.

The first few turns after a long tour are always wonky. Once I adjusted my center of gravity, however, I’m usually able to use the shape of the ski and my physical strength to carve turns down the slope. Approaching the safe perch from which I’ll watch my friend, I shifted my weight, engaged the metal edges of my skis to stop, then pirouette to face uphill to watch my partner. On my signal, my partner followed suit, gracefully carving the inverse of my turns to create a figure eight pattern in the snow. He passed me, letting out an audible “woohoo,” and I kicked off to join him as we descended down through the gentle, spread of conifers below.

As we glided through the gulch all thoughts outside the immediate reality of skiing escaped us. Whether brought on by bliss or situational necessity, we were truly living in that moment. Even after returning to the car, swapping out our confining ski boots for the comfort of normal shoes, and hitting the road back home down the canyon, the lingering euphoria served as a distraction from traffic, the scattered avalanche paths along the highway, and the Salt Lake City smog we descended into when exiting Little Cottonwood Canyon. Where we had just consumed the backcountry experience, the feeling that experience provided consumed our thoughts as well. It's easy to reflect on this and how it makes one feel—skiers have done this in trip reports for decades. However, in reflecting on the backcountry experience I'm led to wonder if skiers have reflected on the implications of their preferred form of land use? How does backcountry skiing affect the ways in which backcountry skiers choose to view the lands on which they recreate? What approach does this lead them to take to their public lands and how does that translate into their land politics?

Along with improvements in technology and a busier backcountry, my backcountry experience occurs in a vastly different world than that of the early CMC and WMC ski tourers. As backcountry recreationists in the 1960s, ski touring's rise paralleled a growing environmental consciousness and the influx of social movements throughout that decade. Specifically, tourers interested in protecting recreational havens that held the backcountry experience aligned with goals of the wilderness movement that advocated for preservation of undeveloped landscapes. Where the wilderness movement aimed to set aside "untouched" landscapes for their scenic and symbolic values, backcountry skiers had a vested interest in setting them aside to ski. Preservationist sentiment among backcountry skiers aligned so much so that the WMC became a regional equivalent to California's Sierra Club and mirrored many of the same tactics and

strategies for success. Despite an incredibly active presence in wilderness preservation and land use decisions that affected access to and consumption of the backcountry experience, backcountry ski communities too often did not reflect on the implications of their own use the way they did of other industries. This detachment is further emboldened through the community's alignment with wilderness preservation, which ignored a backcountry continuum in favor of the wilderness-civilization binary. They more often than not believed backcountry skiing to be outside the realm of extractive land use and themselves to be the antithesis of ski consumers. Backcountry skiers looked contemptuously upon resort skiers who frequented the expansive commercial base areas and spent thousands of dollars daily on passes and amenities but did not see their own relationship to this process. This led to backcountry recreationists believing themselves to be above other types of land users and not responsible for how their form of use affected the communities in which they participated and that they relied upon. This was particularly important with regard to how the backcountry ski community put the burden of their needs on the communities that served the backcountry and on the public lands management agencies that facilitated their experience.

The CMC and WMC's publications expressed this conservation ethic through articles on potential developments, increases in backcountry use, and proposed wilderness areas. Paired with oral histories of WMC members, this chapter first highlights the types of land management decisions that concerned backcountry skiers. Next, it examines how the Utah and Colorado backcountry ski communities addressed what they perceived to be pressing threats to the backcountry experience. To efficiently express their opinions, the backcountry skiing community developed a consistent conservation advocacy plan that leveraged contacting elected officials, attending public hearings and meetings, consistently monitoring development plans, and

fundraising. After examining these methods, this chapter highlights what backcountry skiers have missed in this conversation. By looking at what these communities addressed, one also notices what they did not: the consumptive tendencies of their own use.

Philosopher and mountain guide Jack Turner criticized the paradox of preservation for recreational consumption among wilderness recreationists in his 1996 text *The Abstract Wild*. He stated, “There is little evidence that either the spiritual or scientific concerns of the original conservationists... have trickled down to most wilderness fun hogs.”²²⁹ He continued, stating, “Instead of a clash of needs, the preservation of the wild appears to be a clash of work versus recreation... both groups exploit the wild, the first by consuming it, the second by converting it into a playpen and then consuming it.” In the case of backcountry skiers, the backcountry experience is this conversion to a “playpen.” Turner’s critique reiterated the idea of the backcountry recreation paint bucket. The more areas that ski tourers accessed and turned into “playpens” through continual recreational access, the blurrier the line between backcountry and town, or wilderness and civilization, became. The more people extending into the backcountry to extract the backcountry experience, the more urban ideals entered the backcountry and experiences left it. Continual growth of this process also increased the likelihood of a backcountry incident that drummed up search and rescue machine, making backcountry problems the issue of the nearest town.

At its core, Turner’s critique addressed how backcountry recreationists understood nature and how that understanding has been perceived by those that work in the same landscapes. Differences in understanding, or “knowing” nature, have been the focus of several historical

²²⁹ Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 87.

works.²³⁰ In his seminal essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” historian William Cronon examined the Wilderness idea construct and looked carefully at who has been excluded from that idea. He stated, “The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living .. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature.”²³¹ Back country skiers derided those who worked on the land, to extract natural resources and develop so-called pristine landscapes. But in this work-play duality, which group actually had a stronger relationship with the land? According to Cronon, those who weren’t natural resource workers were the ones already so detached from it that they saw themselves apart from the very nature to which they belonged.

When an understanding of the backcountry is predicated on the absence of the “works of man,” natural resource development is a visible affront to one’s access. Hal Rothman, in *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the U.S. Since 1945*, highlighted how the environmental movement in the United States didn’t gain momentum until individuals found themselves directly affected by environmental calamity.²³² Backcountry skiers from the 1960s onward experienced visibly changing landscapes through ski area and residential development and the industrial demands of the land that accompanied them.²³³ Believing themselves to have a lesser visible impact because of how backcountry skiers integrated consumer-technology into backcountry travel, on the play-side of the work-play duality, the backcountry ski community

²³⁰ Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?": Work and Nature," 171-185, and Taylor III, *Persistent Callings: Seasons of Work and Identity on the Oregon Coast*, Both discuss how natural resource workers’ “know nature” differently than recreationists because their livelihood is linked to nature.

²³¹ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” 17.

²³² Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the U.S. Since 1945* (Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 103-105.

²³³ Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*, 233-258.

had ample deflection when their use of public lands came into question.²³⁴ Where the backcountry experience provided a specific way of “knowing nature,” a critical analysis of the backcountry demonstrates this missing strand of knowledge.

What’s Going On?

At the national level, the greater wilderness movement of the 1960s played a direct role in the establishment of two major environmental laws that served as tools for future conservation issues. The Wilderness Act of 1964, written by prominent preservationist Howard Zahniser, provided a statutory system for preserving undeveloped landscapes, giving Congress the power to set aside these lands.²³⁵ Recognizing the importance of an organized push for canonized Wilderness legislation, WMC Conservation Directors published notices explaining the need for the bill, where in the legislative process it was as it made its way through the Congressional reconciliation process, and how to support it.²³⁶ Along with this, they echoed the work versus play sentiment by putting development and multiple-use in opposition of the political underdog of wilderness protection.²³⁷ In expressing support for the Wilderness Act in the early 1960s through its passing, WMC skiers advocated for the retention of their backcountry experience.

In 1961, Cal Giddings acknowledged the growing environmental consciousness of Utahns and the WMC’s role in fostering this growth. He stated, “As the world becomes more mechanized, more people are seeking unmechanized activities in the great outdoors... these people are starting to concern themselves about protecting our outdoor resources... We are now

²³⁴ Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in 20th Century America,” 462-484.

²³⁵ Wilderness Act of 1964, Public Law 88-577, 88th Cong., 2d sess. (September 3, 1964).

²³⁶ Conservation Director, “Wilderness,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1963, 7-8, and Margaret Piggott, “Wilderness Legislation,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1964, 7-9.

²³⁷ Conservation Director, “Wilderness,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1963, 8.

the local nucleus of this type of activity.”²³⁸ Years later, events like the Cuyahoga River fire and the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 raised this consciousness to a national level and solidified the need for not only an act to protect “outdoor resources” as wilderness, but a legitimate and holistic national environmental policy. Out of this rising consciousness came the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in late 1969. Differing from the Wilderness Act, NEPA provided a procedural structure for federal agencies to follow when making land management decisions that took environmental consequences into account.²³⁹ If a federal land management agency, like the Forest Service, wanted to designate a specific tract of the backcountry as Wilderness, they would have to go through the NEPA process beforehand. In addition, NEPA ensured that the attributes that qualified landscapes as wilderness, whether officially declared as such under the Wilderness Act or not, would remain intact by always taking into account the environmental consequences of major land management decisions.

The passing of both the Wilderness Act and NEPA provided statutory grounds for the WMC to protect and challenge threats to their own use of national forests. By using these legal measures, the club could uphold their constitutional purpose: “... To promote the physical and spiritual well being of members and others by outdoor activities; to unite the energy, interest, and knowledge of students, explorers and lovers of the mountains, desert, and rivers of Utah... and to encourage preservation of our natural areas including their plant, animal, and bird life.”²⁴⁰ The WMC reiterated this mindset in a 1967 rebuke of the narrative that preservationists and conservationists are never “for” anything, stating, “The real negativists are those who hasten to

²³⁸ Cal Giddings, “The Past Year and Some Ahead,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1961, 5.

²³⁹ National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Public Law 91-190, 91st Cong., 2nd Sess. (January 1970).

²⁴⁰ “Constitution of the Wasatch Mountain Club, Inc.,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1981, 12. Though this is printed in 1981, the preamble of their constitution remained the same throughout my temporal scope. In a January 1966 issue of *The Rambler*, the editor noted that this preamble is what the original members of the group intended as the purpose for the club.

exploit, denude, pollute, carve up and pave over the earth... exhausting this planets capacity to support man and his fellow creatures.”²⁴¹ CMC members also shared this view; though this was not specifically written into their constitution, the club created a “Ski Tourer’s Pledge” that vowed to protect the land and resources on which they skied.²⁴² Across the board, backcountry skiers felt it was their duty to protect their resource by combatting visible encroachments on the backcountry.

The most consistent threat to the backcountry experience was ski area development. Throughout the 1970s, expansion of ski areas further into their respective canyons caused backcountry skiers, especially in the Wasatch, to speak out. Acknowledging Snowbird Ski Resort’s plans to develop Gad Valley, a WMC-frequented touring destination, club member Gale Dick stated, “You find yourself oppressed by thought of what the future is bringing. Before too many years ski development will have chewed up this beautiful little packet of easily accessible wilderness.”²⁴³ Playing off this, a WMC member created a poster illustrating Snowbird as a King Kong-sized gorilla carrying skis, towering menacingly over the backcountry.²⁴⁴ Where ski lifts provided skiers access to multiple tours, if they overran the backcountry, as in Gad Valley’s case, then tourers would be bound to the lift-accessed experience they strove to transcend.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ “Are Conservationists Ever For Anything?” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1967, 4.

²⁴² Jean Kindig, “Ski Tourer’s Pledge,” *Trail and Timberline*, March 1975, 46.

²⁴³ Gale Dick, “Gad Valley Ski Tour,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1970, 13. In David Hanscom, “David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah,” interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, September 19, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6709js1>, Hanscom notes that the resort “ruined” Gad Valley and nearby Peruvian Gulch.

²⁴⁴ “Beauty and the Beast,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, November 1973, 8.

²⁴⁵ Charles Keller, “Ski Touring Guide,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 13-16, provides a list of ski tours in which about 19 out of 32 are lift accessed. David Hanscom, “Ski Touring Issues,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1977, 8, highlights how Brighton ski resort’s ban on “skinny skis” at one lift limited the club’s access to certain tours.

While Snowbird's ambitious development plans held the attention of WMC members in the early 1970s, development spread throughout the Wasatch throughout the decade and into the 1980s. Given the concentration of ski resorts there, a looming development dream of connecting several of them to create an Alps-type skiing destination underpinned much of the WMC concern at this time.²⁴⁶ Along with combatting this, the club continued to protest expansions into easily accessible terrain adjacent to Alta, Brighton, and Solitude ski resorts.²⁴⁷ Even areas that weren't frequented, such as the proposed Heritage Mountain resort outside of Provo, Utah, were monitored by the group.²⁴⁸ The threat of a ski lift on every hill drove much of backcountry skiers' conservation efforts.²⁴⁹

Lift-access skiing wasn't the only recreational threat to the backcountry experience; mechanized travel in the backcountry also imposed on ski tourers' consumption. Helicopters and snowmobiles were considered loud, disruptive intrusions to one's experience. Snowmobiles weren't allowed in Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons because of watershed conservation efforts, but Coloradoans resented having to share trails with them.²⁵⁰ Heli skiers received the same treatment from those in the Wasatch—not only did WMC members express resentment, but they also actively tried to restrict helicopter access to certain areas they toured.²⁵¹ To ski tourers, the backcountry had to be absent mechanized access and crowds of skiers. The backcountry

²⁴⁶ David Hanscom, "Ski Touring Issues," 7-8, discusses how a proposed Wasatch State Park Tram on the eastern slope of the range would create a domino effect of development on this front, while Michael Budig, "Conservation Update," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1984, 10, and Peter Hovingh, "Wasatch-Cache National Forest Management Plans," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1985, 35, echoed concern over proposals making the plan a reality.

²⁴⁷ Walter Haas, "Salt Lake Planning Unit Draft Management Plan," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1978, 17-20.

²⁴⁸ Walter Haas, "Conservation Ramblings," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1976, 7.

²⁴⁹ Walter Haas, "The Great Sagebrush Rebellion," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1979, 5, highlights this threat as a likely outcome of the land transfer movement of the late 1970s.

²⁵⁰ Kurt Gerstle, "I Ski Free (Or Did)," *Trail and Timberline*, January 1976, 7.

²⁵¹ David Hanscom, "Ski Touring Issues," 7-10, "ORVs and Helicopters," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1977, 9-10, Peter Hovingh, "Wasatch-Cache National Forest Management Plans," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1985, 35.

served as the opposite of the town and any reminder of development or mechanization was not allowed.

Ski area development and mechanized backcountry travel were part of a larger cycle of population increase and a boom in residential development in the Mountain West during this time. In Salt Lake valley, which is organized in a numeric grid based on the number of blocks from the temple grounds of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the extent of residential development was at 4500 South (45 blocks) and roughly 3200 West (32 blocks) in the early 1970s.²⁵² Today, there is a 15000 South (150 blocks) and a 7300 West (73 blocks) today. Part of this growth is reflected in the WMC membership rolls, which included numerous new members who migrated to the area because of the easy access to recreation.²⁵³ While valley sprawl didn't threaten backcountry resources, it meant more people going into the mountains with a variety of intents. Paired with the mentality that the backcountry was a quiet space that juxtaposed the town, an influx of people and machines traveling from the town into the mountains pushed the boundary of a true backcountry deeper and deeper.

Development in Salt Lake Valley didn't directly threaten the backcountry experience's existence, but individuals who wanted to live up mountain canyons, and the developers who wanted to facilitate that, did. In notes from a 1961 membership meeting, the WMC expressed surprise and concern with the amount of private land that surrounded Brighton ski resort in Big

²⁵² Bob Athey, "Bob Athey," interviewed by Matthew Green, October 1, 2018, and Dwight Butler, "Dwight Butler, Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, June 7, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6zk711k> explain where Salt Lake City "got rural" in the 1970s. The Wasatch Range to the east provides a natural boundary to most expansion in that direction.

²⁵³ Joel Bown, "Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg, Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, September 4 and 27, and October 25, 2007, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6qn7r5k>, David Hanscom and Dwight Butler both discuss moving to Salt Lake City from the East.

Cottonwood Canyon.²⁵⁴ Normally, Forest Service management ensured backcountry access, but private in-holdings and changes in county zoning ordinances posed existential threats to access and recreation in even the more remote places as private property posed barriers to trailheads, roadside parking, and throughways. Besides speaking out against development near Brighton, the WMC protested the development of subdivisions in Alta's Albion Basin, Emigration Canyon to the north of the Cottonwoods, and at the mouth of Little Cottonwood Canyon. Like ski area development, subdivisions threatened to initiate an irreversible process of creeping development into the mountain landscape.²⁵⁵

These concerns about unchecked population growth were part and parcel for the larger wilderness preservationist mindset to which backcountry skiers subscribed. Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb*, published in 1968, put these Malthusian undercurrents in print, but ruminations of the idea of overpopulation and how that threatened the backcountry had proliferated among WMC members from the mid-1960s onward. Drawing a direct link from population growth to backcountry development and highlighting how the WMC could step up to challenge it, one member warned, "As the population of Utah grows, the rate of destruction will accelerate."²⁵⁶ Two years after this, in 1967, the club published an issue of *The Rambler* dedicated to expressing the dire consequences of overpopulation, even going so far as to cite an Indian friend of the club writing from New Delhi and grappling with similar problems there who

²⁵⁴ Austin Wahraftig, "General Member Meeting, November 16," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1961, 2-4.

²⁵⁵ Dale Green, "Ramblings," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1963, 6-7, *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, Special Edition: Little Cottonwood Canyon—Site of Next Salt Lake Subdivision?, November 1966, "Official Club Stand on Proposed Little Cottonwood Canyon Subdivision," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1966, 3, Tricia Swift, "Subdivide Albion Basin?" *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1971, 15, LeRoy Kuehl, "From the President," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1973, 8, Alexis Kelner, "Annexation for Emigration?" *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1977, 6-7, and Michael Budig, "Conservation Update," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1984, 10-11.

²⁵⁶ Gale Dick, "Our Special Responsibility," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1965, 22.

stated, “The control of population will have to be included in any attempt to save ‘nature’... groups such as yours will have to exert their influence toward the formulation of a national-international policy towards the control of population.”²⁵⁷ These sentiments proliferated at this time and established a narrative of how population growth in Salt Lake valley threatened the backcountry’s existence that remained constant for over a decade after.²⁵⁸

Though infinite growth on a finite planet posed a threat to the backcountry, this mindset did not appear to include the personal resource use of existing backcountry skiers. At this time, both the CMC and WMC were traveling across the West to ski in the winter, as well as to hike, and climb in other seasons.²⁵⁹ More than once during the peak of the WMC’s anti-residential development battles, club members recounted mountaineering and sight-seeing trips to Africa, the continent most negatively affected by Malthusian sentiments.²⁶⁰ Along with consumption of fuel and other resources through travel, some club members became involved with the real estate industry and ads for “custom-built homes” from area realtors emerged in WMC newsletters.²⁶¹ Though unchecked consumption and growth was an existential threat to the backcountry, taking advantage of the population growth along the Wasatch Front and making money off the

²⁵⁷ *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1967, and Aroop Mangalik, “Letter from Aroop Mangalik, New Dehli,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1967, 15.

²⁵⁸ Robert Rawson, “More Questions than Answers,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1968, 13, and Nick Strickland, “Conservation Notes,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1969, 9-10 stress the importance of population control for conservation efforts. This mindset of unchecked growth drove much of the anti-development stance the club took throughout this study’s scope.

²⁵⁹ Where each issue of *The Rambler* and *Trail and Timberline* included trip reports from Utah and Colorado, they also included trips to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the Pacific Northwest, river trips in the Grand Canyon, and various adventures throughout the region.

²⁶⁰ June and Bill Viavant, “Travel in Nigeria!!” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1972, 12.

²⁶¹ *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1975, 8, and *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1977, 22, are examples of real estate ads during the WMC’s most active anti-development years.

construction and the sale of homes during this lucrative period was fine as long as one consumed the backcountry experience appropriately.

Backcountry skiers were most active in preservation when working toward wilderness designations for the areas in which they skied. An example of this was Uncompaghre Wilderness in the southwest Colorado's San Juan mountains. Given this range's popularity among ski tourers, it was one of the only ski touring destinations that both the WMC and CMC advocated protecting.²⁶² WMC members would later shift their attention to areas closer to home, such as the High Uintas in northeast Utah during the late 1970s.²⁶³ Along with quiet ski touring destinations, these areas contained peaks club members hiked and rivers they rafted once the snow began to melt. This connection between winter skiing and climbing and rafting in other seasons stitched these landscapes together in the lives of club members. Where these activities occurred for them constituted their kind of wilderness.

At the same time, WMC members advocated for protection of the Uncompaghre and Uinta Wildernesses, the club's most prominent designation battle in the 1970s took place in their own backyard: Lone Peak in the Wasatch. The designation of wilderness in this area would serve to not only limit ski area expansion, but also protect beloved places to engage in other kinds of wilderness recreation, preserving a portion of the Wasatch solely for human-powered travel. Recognizing the importance of having a wilderness area so close to home, club members were early advocates of the designation and worked closely with the Forest Service and state officials

²⁶² Margaret Piggott, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1964, 7-8, and "Wilderness Alert!" *Trail and Timberline*, December 1973, 315-318, both provide information on progress with Uncompaghre's designation. Outside of this area, both clubs tended to focus on their respective regions.

²⁶³ Cal Giddings, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1967, 3, introduces early opposition to this designation, where Dennis Caldwell, "The High Uintas Wilderness Proposal," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1978, 13-16, provides a detailed update to WMC members on the status of designation.

to ensure their voices were heard.²⁶⁴ Since the push for Lone Peak Wilderness took place throughout the 1970s, the club tapped into a decade of collective grassroots conservation experience to build an immovable front against industry behemoths that opposed the designation.²⁶⁵ In 1978, this effort paid off and Lone Peak became Utah's first designated wilderness area.²⁶⁶

Wilderness designations for Uncompahgre and Lone Peak preserved mountain landscapes frequently accessed by ski tourers, but the arguments for a High Uintas Wilderness illustrated that mountain club members were intersectional recreationists that partook in more than one activity throughout the year. As such, the WMC focused a lot of energy on preserving distant landscapes in which to ski tour, backpack, hike, and raft well beyond the Wasatch. The areas club members advocated for protecting ranged from high-profile conservation battles in southeast Utah's Glen Canyon to pushing for bans on off-road vehicle access in both deserts and forests.²⁶⁷ A club favorite desert landscape, the Kaiparowitz Plateau and the area around Escalante, Utah, received continual attention as it also held a large coal seam.²⁶⁸ Where skiing

²⁶⁴ Alexis Kelner, "Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput," Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, October 13 and November 7, 2006, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6612hpn>, Harold Goodro, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 17, Shep Bloom, "Conservation Messages," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 20, and LeRoy Kuehl, "From the President," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1973, 8.

²⁶⁵ Alexis Kelner, "Lobbying for Lone Peak," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1977, 9-10, and "Lone Peak Wilderness-What Difference Does it Make?" *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1977, 14.

²⁶⁶ "Lone Peak," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1978, 12.

²⁶⁷ "Board Meeting Items of Interest," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1973, 10, and "ORVs and Helicopters," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1977, 9-10.

²⁶⁸ Bill Viavant, "Conservation Notes," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1967, 11, W.N. Strickland, "Conservation Escalante, etc.," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1971, Mike Omana, "King Coal," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1979, 8-9, and Michael Budig, "BLM Wilderness," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1984, 10-11.

occupied one season, recreationists actively worked toward preserving year-round backcountry access by arguing on behalf of protecting wilderness recreation in all seasons.

As both skiers and rafters, WMC members consistently spoke out against the long-standing symbol of backcountry and wilderness degradation: dams.²⁶⁹ While lamenting the damming of Glen Canyon to create Lake Powell, the club actively pushed against a dam project in Marble Canyon, a tributary of the Grand Canyon, out of fear that more natural wonders would be subsumed in lakes.²⁷⁰ Despite its distance from the sites, the club also played an active role in halting projects in Wyoming's Snake River watershed and Idaho's Salmon River.²⁷¹ Full of tributaries to the Green River, WMC members adamantly opposed proposed dams in the Uintas regardless of their connection to a wilderness designation there.²⁷² Where chairlifts threatened the winter backcountry, dams anywhere altered rivers and prohibited access to the raging snowmelt that skiers enjoyed the following summer.

Through participation in mountain clubs, backcountry skiers moved from advocating to protect landscapes on the basis of skiing to building awareness of the existential threats to recreational opportunities across four seasons and advocating to protect landscapes on that basis. Industrial and residential development, the subsequent ski area expansions, and an influx of

²⁶⁹ The modern wilderness movement can be credited to a preservation battle over a proposed dam in Echo Park, part of Dinosaur National Monument on the Utah-Colorado border. Bernard DeVoto, "Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks?" *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 22, 1950 raised national awareness of this issue. "Free-flowing rivers" were so important to the WMC that they established a committee in 1973 to focus on this resource, "Save Our Rivers Committee," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1973, 20.

²⁷⁰ Bill Viavant, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1966, 6, and Gary Kershaw, "More on Little Cottonwood & Millcreek Canyons, Grand Canyon Dams," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1967, 4.

²⁷¹ Both of these rivers were club favorite rafting destinations to the North. "Letters Needed to Save the 'River of No Return'—Salmon River—and the Idaho and Salmon Breaks Primitive Areas," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1974, 16-17; and Bill Viavant, "Conservation Notes," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1976, 9-10.

²⁷² David Raskin, "China Meadows Dam," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 8; Mike Omana, "Conservation Corner," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1975, 8; and Peter Hovingh, "Conservation Comments," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1978, 13.

mechanized recreationists, created visible and audible intrusions on the backcountry experience. While controlling population growth acted as a perceived solution, club members took a more direct approach to preserving their access to recreational resources by advocating for specific wilderness designations. Participation in the broader wilderness movement and applying the statutes that came from it were dependable tools for localized preservation work. Within this broader movement existed a “plug-and-chug” framework for addressing threats to the backcountry, which mountain clubs used for the majority of their advocacy work.

Get Up, Get Into it, Get Involved

Mountain clubs provided an organized pool of like-minded individuals to tap into when an environmental issue arose. Club leadership did this by urging members to follow a low-commitment framework of writing letters and calling elected officials, attending public hearings and meetings, and “taking an active interest” through monitoring land use plans, proposals, and decisions. These actions happened in club members’ free time and, though urged, were not required. Some who took exceptional issue with development dove into identifying projects, informing club members, lobbying lawmakers, and organizing their responses. From letter writing to high-profile public comment, the individual actions taken by club members proved powerful from 1960 through 1985.

Letter writing was the most common advocacy tactic backcountry skiers employed when proposed development projects arose. Along with Utah’s senators and Congressmen, club members contacted then House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee Chairman Wayne Aspinall during the early years of Wilderness Act negotiation and implementation, Forest Service officials, Army Corps of Engineers officials, county planning commission members, and

newspaper editors.²⁷³ Similar lawmakers and land management agency officials were contacted by CMC members on wilderness issues in Colorado.²⁷⁴ Though not always inclined to use form letters, the WMC published examples of letters that highlighted talking points for members to discuss.²⁷⁵ By providing as much information as possible, mountain clubs made conservation work easy for their members who just needed to replicate the talking points in letters that expressed their views.

Letter writing served as a way for members to assure that their representatives, at the state and national levels, understood their stance on issues in their areas. Where developments in southern Utah or the Grand Canyon weren't necessarily in the WMC's "backyard," club conservation officials believed that the voices of state residents and Western voices at large held more sway than those from outside the region.²⁷⁶ Recognizing that mountain clubs were groups of likeminded individuals easily tapped for letter writing campaigns and later phone calls to officials' offices, created an organized front against any threat of development in the backcountry. Though a flood of letters opposing dams or subdivisions didn't always halt

²⁷³ Austin Wahraftig, "Conservation," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1961, 4-5; Conservation Director, "Wilderness," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1963, 7-8; Gale Dick, "Our Special Responsibility," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1965, 22; Cal Giddings, "Conservation Notes," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1967, 3; Harold Goodro, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 17; LeRoy Kuehl, "From the President," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1973, 8; Peter Hovingh, "Conservation Comments," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1978, 13; and Walter Haas, "The Great Sagebrush Rebellion," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1979, 5.

²⁷⁴ "Wilderness Alert!" *Trail and Timberline*, December 1973, 315-318.

²⁷⁵ Carl Bauer, "On Conservation," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1960, 6-7; "Official Club Stand on Proposed Little Cottonwood Canyon Subdivision," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1966, 3; Gary Kershaw, "More on Little Cottonwood & Millcreek Canyons, Grand Canyon Dams," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1967, 4; "Save Our Rivers Committee," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1974, 16-17, and Dennis Caldwell, "The High Uintas Wilderness Proposal," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1978, 13-16.

²⁷⁶ Bill Viavant, "Conservation Note," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1966, 6.

projects, mountain clubs employed this method time and time again to express the stance of an organized contingent in their region.

Though not as easily accomplished as writing a letter or calling an official, public hearings and meetings were another venue clubs used to comment on proposed developments. Beginning with the negotiations surrounding the Wilderness Act, members of the WMC testified at land management hearings to express their interest in the bill and others like it.²⁷⁷ Sending representatives to hearings was part of the “special responsibility” club members had as the nucleus of Utah’s wilderness advocacy.²⁷⁸ Through this tactic, the club sent representatives to meetings with the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service.²⁷⁹ Instead of letter writing, attending an in-person hearing or meeting allowed advocates to directly express views to law and policy makers.

As member numbers grew in the club, and the NEPA process created a mandatory public comment period on federal actions, this tactic evolved. Instead of sending a representative of their interests, clubs aimed to boost members’ attendance at hearings to assure their voices were heard as a group. At the county level, this was employed to voice their particular local desires for the fate of Little Cottonwood Canyon, and thus of the greater Wasatch. When issues arose in distant locations like Southern Utah or Colorado, clubs aimed to provide as much of a voice for

²⁷⁷ Alexis Kelner, “Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput,” Everett L. Cooley Collection: Utah Outdoor Recreation Oral History Project, October 13 and November 7, 2006, Digitized by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6612hpn> and Margaret Piggott, “Wilderness Legislation,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1964, 7-9. In his interview, Kelner recalls his relationship with Cal Giddings, who was extremely active in the Wilderness bill movement. He mentions that Giddings followed the bills closely and testified at a hearing in Salt Lake City prior to its passing. Piggott recounts what happened at the Denver hearings for the Wilderness bill, where she represented the Uinta regional group of the Sierra Club and the WMC.

²⁷⁸ Gale Dick, “Our Special Responsibility,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1965, 22, and Shep Bloom. “Conservation Messages,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971.

²⁷⁹ Bill Viavant, “Conservation Notes,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1967, 11 and WHAT IS THIS NUMBER? David Hanscom, “Ski Touring Issues,” 7-8.

the backcountry as they could, regardless of local interests.²⁸⁰ Whether aligned with local sentiments or not, publications strongly urged members to attend public hearings when they could. Along with letter writing, in-person advocacy through attending public hearings and providing comment served as a second common approach to protecting the backcountry.

Both of these methods of advocacy depended on club members “taking an active interest” in conservation work.²⁸¹ Where individuals like Kelner dedicated a lot of time to these efforts, other club members may not have prioritized advocacy as highly. To help alleviate the burden of watchdogging land management decisions, the WMC urged members to engage in issues by simply maintaining an awareness of concerning developments through monitoring newspapers and bulletins. Though vague in its application, this is what the “special responsibility” of clubs amounted to: being knowledgeable of the issues. Since their organizations depended on public lands, members needed to pay attention to issues involving them.

“An active interest” had different meanings for different people and situations. When debating adding a limit to member numbers in 1971, a WMC member mentioned that more effort in recruiting active, engaged individuals would create a focused group “with special knowledge and a deep commitment, to work... at educating and persuading the rest of our society to do the things that need doing: to give up convenience, to use more muscle instead of gas and coal, and to back good guys and beat bad ones, whether in business or schools or government.”²⁸² During the push for a Lone Peak Wilderness Area, the club operated at a higher level of engagement than afterward, when directed advocacy for wilderness occurred further from home. Regardless of where issues arose, engagement meant understanding how different statutes affected club

²⁸⁰ Bill Viavant, “Conservation Notes, *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1976, 10, and Fred Matheny, “Ski Touring in the San Juans,” *Trail and Timberline*, June 1972, 127-28.

²⁸¹ Gale Dick, “Our Special Responsibility,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1965, 22.

²⁸² Bill Viavant, “This...” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1971, 7.

members' use to help share the load of advocacy work.²⁸³ With a club full of even moderately involved members, WMC could “divide and conquer” through establishing subgroups to focus on different issues.²⁸⁴

Alexis Kelner is an example of an individual who took an exceptional “active interest” in conservation issues.²⁸⁵ Born in Latvia, he moved with his family to the United States after World War II. He was an avid cave climber throughout the 1950s and was urged by friends in that sphere to join the WMC. Through his engagement with the club and continual enjoyment of the Wasatch, Kelner became interested in the environmental issues that the WMC addressed from the 1960s through the 1980s. Where the average WMC member wrote letters and attended the occasional hearing, Kelner dedicated much of his young adult life to protecting access to the Wasatch Mountains he so enjoyed.²⁸⁶ Kelner wrote his first letter regarding conservation in high school during the 1950s, where he expressed opposition to the creation of Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell in southeast Utah.²⁸⁷ In the 1970s, he penned an article in *Summit Magazine* with Giddings “describing the urbanization issue in terms of ski touring options in the Wasatch.”²⁸⁸ The idea of individual subcommittees followed the example Kelner set with the creation of SOC.

In an effort to combat ski area expansion in the Wasatch with a more efficient model than WMC Conservation Directors offered, Kelner started the conservation organization Save Our

²⁸³ Walter Haas, “Conservation,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1977, 13, and Walter Haas, “Conservation,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1977, 16.

²⁸⁴ Walter Haas, “Conservation,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1977, 16, discusses establishing standing committees to address different conservation issues and regions.

²⁸⁵ Alexis Kelner, “Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput.”

²⁸⁶ Kelner is also an avid writer and photographer. Along with magazine articles in *The Rambler* and beyond, he wrote of his experience working with the Olympics Feasibility Committee in *Utah's Olympic Circus*, photographed popular ski tours in the Wasatch for Hanscom's *Wasatch Tours*, and later wrote *Skiing in Utah, a History*.

²⁸⁷ Alexis Kelner, “Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput.”

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Canyons (SOC) in 1973.²⁸⁹ To mitigate the inefficiency of routine turnover among the WMC's Conservation directors, Kelner began the organization to focus on development in the Wasatch.²⁹⁰ He stated, "[SOC] was organized specifically to oppose objectionable and unnecessary commercialization of our nearby canyons."²⁹¹ Since the organization consisted of Salt Lake City residents addressing local issues, it extended beyond the WMC to provide interested individuals with pamphlets and brochures on proposed actions.²⁹² Along with distributing free literature, not being bound by WMC dues allowed SOC to fund lobbying efforts to Washington, D.C. in support of Lone Peak.²⁹³ Through focused involvement in numerous environmental issues, the WMC and affiliated organizations experienced a solid level of success.

Driven by a love for the Wasatch and his experiences in them, Kelner powerfully embodied the WMC's advocacy capacity. Through SOC, Kelner and other conservationists openly opposed a potential Olympic bid in 1976 and any other development they deemed excessive in the Wasatch.²⁹⁴ This affiliation led him to lobby Congress for the Lone Peak Wilderness with other wilderness advocates, participate in fundraising efforts for the organization, and even serve on an "Olympics Feasibility Committee" as a proxy for the Sierra Club.²⁹⁵ After the Lone Peak's wilderness designation 1978 provided a barrier for development

²⁸⁹ Alexis Kelner, "Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput," "Beauty and the Beast," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, November 1973, 8, and Alexis Kelner, "Citizen's Committee to Save Our Canyons," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1973, 8.

²⁹⁰ Alexis Kelner, "Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput."

²⁹¹ Alexis Kelner, "Citizen's Committee to Save Our Canyons," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1973, 8.

²⁹² Kelner, "Citizen's Committee to Save Our Canyons," 15.

²⁹³ Alexis Kelner, "Lobbying for Lone Peak," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1977, 9-10.

²⁹⁴ Kelner, "Citizen's Committee to Save Our Canyons," 8. For more on the prospect of the Olympics in Utah, see Mette Flynt, "Becoming America's Ski City: Place and Identity on the Wasatch Front" (PhD Diss., University of Oklahoma, 2018), 154-227.

²⁹⁵ Alexis Kelner, "Alexis Kelner, Salt Lake City, Utah: An Interview by Elizabeth Shuput."

in Little Cottonwood Canyon, WMC members appeared to take a brief rest and let their most prominent advocacy victory sink in.

However, increased tension from industry interests and rural westerners, coalescing in the “Sagebrush Rebellion” of the ‘70s and ‘80s, prompted another rallying cry for active involvement among the WMC. In 1979, multiple articles addressing coal development and the transfer of federal land to western states warned that complacency at the time would result in karmic consequences for backcountry skiers.²⁹⁶ The club portrayed opposition to the Sagebrush Rebellion as a moral obligation for every backcountry recreationist as the movement threatened to severely alter the landscapes they enjoyed.²⁹⁷ For the WMC, as one member pointed out, the proposed transfer of federal lands to the states threatened “the lifeblood of the club. To lose our public lands is to lose the *raison d’être* of the Wasatch Mountain Club.”²⁹⁸ As a regional movement supported by industry and politicians at every level and from both political parties, the Sagebrush Rebellion posed a dire existential threat to the backcountry experience and those who ventured into the backcountry.

By the time of the Sagebrush Rebellion, well-established groups like SOC and the Escalante Wilderness Committee, an intellectually similar but geographically divergent subgroup of the WMC focused on southern Utah, provided another avenue for backcountry skiers to get involved: fundraising. Initially, SOC had asked for donations to cover printing fees for poster

²⁹⁶ Mike Omana, “King Coal,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1979, 9, states, “Find out what’s going on and get involved! If you sit idly by and watch this one, you’ll deserve what you get!” when discussing possible coal development in southern Utah. Walter Haas, “The Great Sagebrush Rebellion,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1979, 5. Haas warns that federal land transfer “would drastically affect our lifestyle” through unchecked development.

²⁹⁷ Walter Haas, “The Great Sagebrush Rebellion,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1979, 5, and Cal Osburn, “Sagebrush Rebellion,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1981, 10.

²⁹⁸ Cal Osburn, “Sagebrush Rebellion,” *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1981, 10.

sales and pamphlets.²⁹⁹ The Escalante Wilderness Committee similarly asked club members for funds to pursue legal action following a proposed road project in southeast Utah.³⁰⁰ As more environmental organizations and legal funds arose, such as the Wilderness Public Rights Fund, more member dollars went toward helping others advocate for their shared issues.³⁰¹

Protecting the backcountry ski touring experience is what brought mountain clubs into the larger sphere of wilderness preservation. However, protecting a single resource for a small population to pursue specific leisure activities wasn't the most effective way to grow a movement. Instead, backcountry skiers piggybacked on a diverse array of issues that advanced their own interests while including the interests of other groups who may not have cared about backcountry skiing at all. No mention of formal coalition building outside of conservation circles appeared in mountain club sources, but the convergence of backcountry skiers and larger preservation projects signaled a broader awareness among backcountry skiers of environmental issues that went beyond mere wilderness preservation. By joining larger preservation conversations, the WMC addressed several environmental concerns that both affected them and other residents of Salt Lake Valley.

Water quality and stream pollution were some of the most pressing environmental issues in the Wasatch that limiting canyon development prevented. In 1966, the WMC published a special edition of *The Rambler* on a proposed Little Cottonwood subdivision that highlighted the importance of this.³⁰² Wasatch backcountry skier Bob Athey stressed how unfettered

²⁹⁹ Alexis Kelner, "Citizen's Committee to Save Our Canyons," 8.

³⁰⁰ "Escalante Wilderness Committee," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1974, 9.

³⁰¹ Mike Omana, "The Conservation Corner," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, January 1977, 20.

³⁰² *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, Special Edition: Little Cottonwood Canyon—Site of Next Salt Lake Subdivision?, November 1966.

development in the area would negatively impact watersheds, and thus, the valley's existence.³⁰³ Along with water, air quality was heavily discussed among club members. Located between two mountain ranges, smog is a major issue in Salt Lake City and along the greater Wasatch Front to this day. Concerns about smog were directly related to the club's concerns about rampant population growth.³⁰⁴ Club members understood that protecting clean air and water affected everyone, but the WMC's approach to these issues was through the ways in which development degraded first the backcountry and then the rest of the Wasatch. Nevertheless, they found ways to make common cause with other advocates.

The mountain clubs understood that their efforts to protect the backcountry for their preferred recreational uses were related to the efforts of those who sought the same protections, but for different reasons. When discussing the High Uintas Wilderness proposal, WMC suggested that members mentioned how "virtually all hunting depends on the ability of the state to maintain large tracts of essentially wilderness terrain."³⁰⁵ When protesting coal development in the state, they also mentioned how mines and roads would threaten Indigenous cultural resources in the area.³⁰⁶ Destruction of cultural resources irked the club so much that, following press discussing the looting of Anasazi ruins, they urged members to contact congressmen to state that "our state and country are losing an irreplaceable asset."³⁰⁷ However the club appeared to arrive at these broader considerations through the need to protect their own self-interest,

³⁰³ Bob Athey, "Bob Athey," interviewed by Matthew Green.

³⁰⁴ Nick Strickland, "Conservation Notes," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1969, 9-10, and Mike Omana, "Conservation Corner," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1975, 7.

³⁰⁵ Dennis Caldwell, "The High Uintas Wilderness Proposal," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1978, 16.

³⁰⁶ Mike Omana, "King Coal," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1979, 8.

³⁰⁷ Mary Gustafson, "Cultural Resource Rip Off is Big Business," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1985, 28.

members recognized that other groups had similar goals and that wilderness designations preserved both natural and historic cultural resources.

We're a Winner

Taking an active interest through monitoring developments, writing letters, attending hearings, and fundraising proved successful for backcountry skiers. The Uncompaghere Wilderness and Lone Peak Wilderness were designated by the 1980s, a number of dams the club spoke out against were abandoned, the call of the Sagebrush Rebels to transfer all federal lands to the states never happened, and canyon development around the Wasatch was largely contained. Throughout all of this, skiers enjoyed the backcountry experience they worked to protect. They met the threat of large-scale potential destruction of the backcountry with civic engagement. But by actively pushing the wilderness movement agenda, though, backcountry skiers largely failed to grapple with the environmental impacts of their own use of the land, who they were preserving these landscapes for, and how they, as skiers, fit into the broader recreational framework.

In a 1967 article speaking out against a potentially illegal road project near Lake Powell, the WMC stated, "Increased usage of the roads would bring a demand for service stations, motels and restaurants. Real estate developers would mass into this desert country bringing an environment unsuited for this primitive wilderness."³⁰⁸ Occurring at the height of the WMC's anxiety over population growth, this article paints a bleak picture of how mechanized travel affected a landscape. Five years later in Colorado, CMC members highlighted how areas further from the Front Range had not yet been overrun by tourists but still provided just enough of the

³⁰⁸ Gary Kershaw, "More on Little Cottonwood & Millcreek Canyons, Grand Canyon Dams," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1967, 4.

recreational resources, such as gas stations, hotels, and gear stores, needed for backcountry skiers to enjoy them.³⁰⁹ Both clubs understood that some service amenities were necessary; they just didn't want them to be scaled up to the point of supporting thousands of visitors.

This again highlights the main paradox of the mentality the backcountry ski community developed. The backcountry was devoid of signs of man, but skiers still wanted to play in it and thus had to access it somehow. In the Wasatch, the majority of the club's favorite tours were located off the canyon roads used to access ski resorts. In the Front Range, areas like Berthoud and Jones passes weren't frequented by recreationists until pavement guided them there. Where growing backcountry numbers pushed skiers further from trailheads and resorts, they still accessed the backcountry through developed chokepoints. So in disallowing developed signs of man in and around the backcountry, and by ignoring ski touring's role in peopling the backcountry, the community pushed a growing number of people seeking ski touring's unique experience to specified places.

The WMC itself facilitated countless trips to these places throughout the West, intentionally bringing recreationists to the backcountry. In 1971, during a debate on whether the WMC should limit club size, a contingent pushed for separating environmentalists from recreationists within the organization, suggesting that some club members just wanted to ski, raft, and hike.³¹⁰ This paradox of acknowledging the implications of others' use without thinking critically of one's own raises questions on how self-reflective the backcountry experience really was, and by extension, continues to be. The lack of self-reflection exhibited by the mountain club points to the larger problems that have been historically inherent in groups involved in the

³⁰⁹ Bill Coates, "Ski Touring in Pike's Peak Area," *Trail and Timberline*, January 1972, 11, and Fred Matheny, "Ski Touring in the San Juans," *Trail and Timberline*, June 1972, 127.

³¹⁰ Barry Quinn, "WMC—Quo Vidas?," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, February 1971, 7-8.

environmental movement, where members think that through recreation they are environmental activists.

Though advocating for clean air and water, these clubs weren't engaging the class dynamic that allowed them to experience the backcountry and join an organization revolving around its enjoyment. As stated in Chapter 2, the WMC was a small group of people around their thirties, that included a lot of academics.³¹¹ Bob Athey was an exception to this demographic, but his engagement with the club is somewhat unclear.³¹² Some mention of affordable ski sales occurred in select seasons, but, affordable skis are predicated on one having the time and money to use them. In 1971, when warning of unchecked growth of the utility company Utah Power and Light, a club member highlighted how billing loopholes negatively affected the poor.³¹³ But once again, this consideration was rooted in the anti-development stance of the club instead of a genuine concern over class issues.

Though unintentionally, the way the WMC considered class aligned further with the broader environmental movement at the time. When Rothman stated in *Greening of a Nation?* That the environmental movement didn't pick up steam until people's lives were directly affected by issues, he referred to the affluent community of Santa Barbara suffering the consequences of an oil spill. He stated, "Only when the problems reached the lives of the privileged did the problems truly attract national attention."³¹⁴ Threats to quality of life, be it oil on the beach or powerlines in the backcountry, affected the privileged. Industrial smog and pollution, experienced more by those without means to leave the city and access the backcountry,

³¹¹ David Hanscom, "David Hanscom, Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg, and Joel Bown, "Joel Bown Salt Lake City, Utah," interview by Erik Solberg.

³¹² Bob Athey, "Bob Athey," interviewed by Matthew Green.

³¹³ Shep Bloom, "Conservation Messages," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1971, 20.

³¹⁴ Rothman, *Greening of a Nation?*, 103.

didn't threaten the recreational quality of life people moved to Salt Lake City or Denver for. Through this mindset, lower income workers, who were subjected to a lower quality of life despite usually producing the commodities that improved that of middle-class recreationists lives, didn't matter until they or their problems affected the privileged.³¹⁵ When problems of the city became problems of backcountry access, the backcountry skiing community latched onto them.

Piggybacking on the concerns of other communities affected by environmental issues also alludes to consideration of under-represented communities in the West. During the Reagan Administration, when industry influence over public lands was at an all-time high, the WMC published a peculiar article titled "The Right to Access the Backcountry by the Disabled." In this write up, the author responded to growing criticism of how wilderness advocates did not consider how a disabled person would access the resources they fought so hard to protect. He stated, "While we could not support any intrusion by pavement in a designated wilderness area, we also feel reluctant to oppose the right of the disabled to enjoy these spaces. But ultimately, we recognized the provision for what it really was—merely a smokescreen."³¹⁶ No matter the reason, WMC could not condone paving wilderness. He continued to highlight a non-profit group, S'PLORE, that brought disabled people on outdoor adventures, encouraged club members to volunteer, and stated that "if we can get disabled people into the backcountry, it might become more easy politically to obtain protective management."³¹⁷ This is the first mention of S'PLORE, or anyone in WMC really taking an active interest in augmenting access to the backcountry for those outside of the club. That it appeared in *The Rambler* as a reaction to external criticism

³¹⁵ Hal Rothman, *Saving the Planet: The American Response to the Environment in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 131-133.

³¹⁶ Michael Budig, "The Right to Access the Backcountry by the Disabled," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, December 1984, 19.

³¹⁷ Budig, "The Right to Access the Backcountry by the Disabled," 20.

highlighted the lack of real attention WMC gave the issue and made it more about giving the club political cover.

Along with disabled people, the WMC's consideration of cultural resources and Native Americans leaned on the side of being reactionary instead of proactive and was equally fraught. Though the WMC appeared to advocate for Native Americans by opposing threats of damage to cultural resources, ultimately this stance was just another political tool.³¹⁸ The WMC exhibited a chronic lack of reflection on whether tribes actually wanted recreationists accessing areas on which their cultural resources were located. When urging WMC members to write letters addressing the looting of Anasazi ruins in 1985, Mary Gustafson mentioned that destruction and looting resulted in a lost opportunity for members to learn about an ancient culture instead of arguing that preservation of these spaces were a means of preserving tribal cultural identity.³¹⁹ Both of these examples illuminate a pattern of reacting to threats and *then* encompassing other perspectives instead of considering the agency of multiple communities affected by backcountry preservation.

Despite overlooking what their status as public land users meant and how they fit into the larger recreationist and land management community, backcountry skiers did recognize that they were a part of these communities. By acknowledging that they were stakeholders, the club felt that they needed a seat at the table when it came to planning.³²⁰ However, the view that, as land users, members' had a commitment to the land only emerged in response to existential threats to the backcountry or their access to it. As such, there never was a reckoning with the implications of their use like there was with more visible forms, such as with extractive industries. When gas

³¹⁸ Omana, "King Coal," 8.

³¹⁹ Mary Gustafson, "Cultural Resource Rip Off is Big Business," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, April 1985, 28.

³²⁰ Walter Haas, "Conservation," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1977, 16.

shortages impacted the country during the 1979 oil crisis, the WMC's solution was not limit backcountry trips, but to carpool and pitch in for gas money.³²¹ This "not as bad as" attitude toward use was visible during the oil crisis, the population anxiety of the late 1960s, the boom in mechanized backcountry travel, and anytime development threatened the backcountry. Backcountry skiers were a growing community of land users and deserved a say in decisions, but because their use wasn't as visibly harsh on the landscape as other forms, they never had to reckon with the consumptive nature of their use.

Anyone can point out the flaws and lack of consideration of any political movement. But the reactionary pattern of backcountry skier advocacy speaks to a perceived detachment from the society around them.³²² Since ski tourers understood the backcountry as the opposite of town and reveled in their ability to shed its trappings in the pristine wilderness, backcountry skiers were able to ignore the very clear signs that their uses of the land came out of their position and privilege. Though they allied with other recreationists and others who had a stake in whether or not the land was protected, backcountry skiers did so only out of making common cause to reach the same goal because when development threatened the backcountry's very existence, it also threatened the ability of backcountry skiers to seek refuge in it and extract those coveted pristine experiences. The reality for backcountry skiers, however, was that even though they left the front country to seek refuge in the backcountry, each ski tour was an act of peopling the backcountry that brought all the same needs and problems of town in tow.

³²¹ Walter Haas, "The Petroleum Situation," *The Rambler: The Official Publication of the Wasatch Mountain Club*, March 1980.

³²² Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers and Nature at Risk*, 12, highlights a similar issue among rock climbers in Yosemite. Through incorporating backcountry skiers, and the idea of intersectional recreationists, one can see how this mindset isn't contained to that one sect of recreationists, but feeds into the broader movement of wilderness recreation advocates.

Conclusion

Though actively engaging with the political issues of development, extraction, and preservation on public lands, backcountry skiers overlooked their role in these processes. Mountain clubs illustrate this through the issues they addressed, and how they addressed them. Recognizing the effectiveness of the Wilderness Act as a framework for protecting the backcountry, clubs pushed hard for its passing and advocated for it heavily thereafter. Along with wilderness designations, they combatted residential and ski resort development—visible intrusions to the backcountry experience—and audible intrusions through mechanized recreational access to their favorite canyons. For backcountry skiers, the ideas of development and progress did not include more structures in the landscapes they enjoyed. Their expression of this took a variety of forms, but none of it reflected on ski touring as a mode of consumption and harbinger of change.

The various avenues mountain clubs used to address threats to the backcountry further enforced this detachment from self-reflection. By getting involved through sending letters with organized talking points, attending hearings if possible, dedicating free time to project monitoring, and donating monetarily to organizations, skiers could address the issues that affected them in a low-commitment, high-profile manner. Through addressing damaging development, acknowledging victories, and further combatting environmental threats, those that participated could feel like they've done their part without expending the energy that members who organized these efforts did. The few organizers who did more reaped even greater rewards, but just as myopically, making common cause but not creating common understanding. By tapping into the greater wilderness movement's framework, organizers and those that

participated in this framework essentially joined the “play” team in the work-play duality. As Turner critiqued in 1996, however, both teams were in the same league of land users.

By competing, every land user’s primary focus was their personal interest. For skiers, this meant only considering broader issues and partaking in coalition-building with other stakeholders when it benefitted access to and preservation of the backcountry. Instead of reaching out to disabled people to create a more equitable backcountry, the WMC shrugged off valid criticism as a “smokescreen” and considered disabled access as a reaction. Instead of considering the long, troubled history of wilderness and Native Americans, backcountry advocates used cultural resources and tribal rights as a tool to strengthen the defense of their own access. In defending the pursuit of the backcountry experience, they created a delusional attitude toward the broader society this experience occurs in formed.

This detached view of recreationists has broader implications than mere access to untouched powder, undammed rivers, and unmined desert landscapes. By recognizing backcountry recreation as another consumptive form of land use, recreationists can better address how their chosen activities affect a broader swath of society. Instead of viewing access to the backcountry as a land management issue, an understanding of backcountry skiing as bringing people into the backcountry—a common observation of skiers that is devoid of a critical analysis of what that means—needs to emerge. In doing so, a paradigm shift away from managing landscapes, and toward managing people on landscapes, can emerge. By understanding public land stakeholders as people instead of workers, players, or political tools, one can take the initial steps toward creating inclusive mountain landscapes that provide for everyone, not an elite few.

EPILOGUE - Building the Outdoor State

Between January 30th and February 6th of this year, the U.S. experienced the most avalanche fatalities in a single week since 1910.³²³ The 1910 accident, where a single, massive avalanche ran across a railway near Stevens Pass, Washington, killed ninety-six passengers on two separate trains.³²⁴ Occurring years before skiing gained mass popularity in the Mountain West, the victims of this disaster were travelers struck in the wrong place at the wrong time. Barring one snowmobiler, the fifteen fatalities during the first week of February of 2021 were all backcountry skiers or snowboarders. Though traveling into avalanche terrain under their own free will, these fifteen victims, taken from the outdoor recreation community far too soon, were also caught touring in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These fatalities occurred within and beyond the geography of this project. The highest profile avalanche caught eight skiers and killed four up Millcreek Canyon in the Wasatch. Along with one other Utahn on a peak just outside the boundary of Park City Mountain Resort in Park City, Utah, four Coloradoans, three near Ophir and one outside of Vail, also died.³²⁵ Avalanches in Montana, California, Alaska, and New Hampshire accounted for the remaining lives lost. Much like the tragedy in 1910, these fatalities gained national news coverage and exposed avalanche country to individuals across the nation.

Discussing death at the end of a literary journey to the mountains is very sobering. It also starkly highlights the trend of growing backcountry use. All of these avalanches occurred on

³²³ Stephanie Butzer, “Early February Deadliest Week in the U.S. for Avalanches Since 1910,” *The Denver Post*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/02/08/avalanche-deaths-deadliest-week-us-colorado/>.

³²⁴ Linda V. Mapes, “1910 Stevens Pass Avalanche Still the Deadliest in U.S. History,” *The Seattle Times*, February 27, 2010, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/1910-stevens-pass-avalanche-still-deadliest-in-us-history/>.

³²⁵ For geographic information and incident reports on these fatalities, see “US Avalanche Fatalities,” Accidents, Colorado Avalanche Information Center, last modified 2021, <https://www.avalanche.state.co.us/accidents/us/>.

public lands. Along with this, the victims were either knowledgeable, experienced recreationists themselves or with experienced companions. These fatalities also occurred in an across-the-board low snow year that followed the worst wildfire season this country has experienced to date. Reflecting on this tragic week, the ever-growing cadre of backcountry recreationists, and our continually changing winter climate, we must ask, what is to be done?

The first chapter of this story discussed the Forest Service's role in developing a U.S. field of avalanche research and how this scientific community spread knowledge to the growing backcountry skiing community to make the risks understandable. Today, along with studying snow science and better understanding how to forecast and model avalanches, the professional avalanche community researches where humans prefer to play, factoring that into the equation of steep terrain and unstable snow. This is known as the "human factor," and is taught in avalanche safety courses across the country to illustrate how we as recreationists make decisions in avalanche terrain.³²⁶ Along with continually building knowledge, the research community and Forest Service work with regional first responders to coordinate search and rescue operations when avalanche incidents occur and conduct incident reports afterward. As public-land owners, we are all entitled to recreating in national forests. However, examining how federal agencies and federal-funded research centers manage and study people in avalanche country points toward a need to share this view of managing people on land. More people in the backcountry means more work for agencies which are notoriously underfunded.

The second chapter examined what it means to be a backcountry skier. It described the backcountry experience that skiers sought, the physical exertion, a dialogue with oneself, immersion in the mountain landscape, and untouched powder. After, it discussed how skiers

³²⁶ For more on avalanche safety courses, see the American Avalanche Institute, <https://www.americanavalancheinstitute.com/>, and the American Institute for Avalanche Research & Education, <https://avtraining.org>.

efficiently obtained this experience through consumption in the town and a continual peopling of the backcountry. It ended by examining the consequences of this growing backcountry popularity and of the mindset held by those participating in the sport. All of those that passed earlier this month had either reached a point of mastery in backcountry skiing or were well on their way. Some even worked at a local Salt Lake City gear shop, an integral role in the community requiring a deep understanding of skiing, safety, and mountain geography.³²⁷ Through examining the growing number of skiers embarking on the backcountry “path to mastery,” this story also illuminates a growing consumption rate and pressure on the backcountry as a resource. The accidents earlier this month illustrated a negative aspect of this increased pressure: the potential for unnecessary loss of life.

The final chapter of this story placed the backcountry skiing community’s preservation efforts within the broader wilderness movement with which they found alignment. By highlighting what skiers fought to protect, it also highlights what they overlooked and how they believed backcountry skiing was excluded from the consumptive world around them. When reflecting on a day in the backcountry, it’s common practice to review one’s decisions, what went right or wrong, and what made someone uncomfortable. This is done to learn and improve during the next outing, with avalanche center incident reports providing this debrief information for those that never make it to their next tour. Though a temporary retreat from the town, a ski tour isn’t a clean break from society and its implications always reach into the world that surrounds the backcountry. As the sport grows and more people pursue the backcountry experience, ski touring’s impact also grows and affects more people than just the skiers. Backcountry skiers would do well to keep this in mind.

³²⁷ Cole L. Schreiber, personal correspondence with author, February 7, 2021.

The growth in backcountry use is happening despite the very public display of the risks of backcountry skiing in the media and in conversations within the community. Trailheads in the Cottonwoods and along the continental divide on the Front Range remain full on the weekends, while the “red snake” to get there continues to grow longer and longer. In a recent article addressing this trend in the face of a near record-breaking year for fatalities, John Meyer of *The Denver Post* quoted Clear Creek County undersheriff Bruce Snelling, who stated, “It’s just a fine line between educating the public why this isn’t necessarily the best time or the best idea right now, versus preaching to people... We can say ‘don’t go out solo’ until we’re blue in the face, and people will still think that applies to everyone but them.”³²⁸ This is the allure of the backcountry, and the backcountry experience. Being unmanaged, the backcountry provides a venue to temporarily shake obligations and to be alone. Because the experience one gains from backcountry skiing is so enjoyable, and there’s always another land user that demands more scrutiny, backcountry skiers have plenty of excuses to continue skiing. This winter, the fresh snow, which the West is finally receiving on top of an incredibly deteriorated base snowpack, strengthens this allure even further. After all, untouched powder is the pinnacle of the backcountry experience.

None of this study is meant to scream “doom” about backcountry skiing, or that we skiers are loving the backcountry to death. It is not calling for less skiers, less time in the backcountry, or less fun while skiing; these are all decisions that individuals must make. It’s simply presenting backcountry skiing for what it is: another commodified use of public lands within the multiple-use ethos. The ski touring community recognizes the economic boom that this commodity provides, but that does not put the sport “above” other users who are all equal

³²⁸ Bruce Snelling qtd. In John Meyer, “Despite Near-Record Avalanche Death Toll in Colorado, Lure of the Backcountry Still Powerful for Many,” *The Denver Post*, February 19, 2021, <https://theknow.denverpost.com/2021/02/19/colorado-backcountry-avalanches-february-2021/253439/>.

stakeholders that care dearly about their specific use for public lands. If skiers love the backcountry and want future generations to as well, they'll stop viewing themselves as innocent bystanders and start recognizing themselves as active land users who operate in relationship to others.

This study of backcountry skiing in Utah and Colorado shows that all of the components for a new way of “knowing nature” among backcountry skiers have existed since the sport’s divergence from resort skiing. Ski touring required a specific knowledge of the mountain landscape because this landscape isn’t benevolent—it held and continues to hold avalanche terrain and exposes skiers to unrelenting elements. Like other extractive users, skiers went into the backcountry in pursuit of a resource and recognized the tools and production that went into finding it. The preservation efforts of backcountry skiers highlighted concern for the longevity of this resource. All of this permitted skiing to be understood in a backcountry bubble and not in a broader societal web. By considering more than snow and self, and advocating for more than backcountry playgrounds, ski tourers can begin to consider what it means to be tied to a landscape in the same way so many other land users are.

By changing how backcountry skiers know their sport, they can shift the narrative of their use to incite meaningful behavior changes within their community that result in more favorable policy decisions. Once recreational hunters and anglers shifted the view of their sport from mere leisure to extraction, they came to better understand the role of humans in the landscapes they used. This ecological understanding, both as resource extractors and as participants in multiple use, led to conservation policy and political sway that is still practiced today.³²⁹ This sway hardly

³²⁹ Two prominent conservation bills championed by the hunting & angling community were the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, 16 U.S.C. 669-669i, 75th Cong., (September 2, 1937), and the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, 16 U.S.C. 777-777k, 81st Cong., 2d sess. (August 9, 1950). A recent example of this community exercising political sway is from 2017, when outcry over H.R. 621, a bill calling for the sale of 3.3 million acres of

exists for skiers because they haven't shifted the narrative of their use. Instead, the construction of a voting bloc to protect outdoor playgrounds, a new iteration of the "take an active interest" framework, only strengthens the work-play duality highlighted by Turner and White.

For ski tourers, the backcountry is a venue for respite from the fast pace of the urban West. It is a place where people can temporarily retreat and go home refreshed. But that feeling isn't unique to backcountry skiing. Time in nature benefits any individual, be it a forester, rancher, or recreationist. Everyone has their own path to derive value from the mountain landscape, and they all return to the town below after doing so. By viewing these values, be they material or spiritual, within the scope of humans using nature, recreationists can take an initial step toward creating a more collaborative, just outdoor state. This progression only begins with backcountry skiers understanding their role in the interconnected web of public lands. A narrative change of backcountry recreation from play to use is needed in the face of this industry's continual growth and the risk of persistent record breaking seasons, whether from avalanche fatalities, saturated trailheads, or low snowpacks, is too dire to not take action.

public lands, caused former Utah Representative Jason Chaffetz to withdraw the bill and release a statement sheepishly acknowledging the hunting & angling community. For more on this, see Rocky Barber, "Chaffetz Withdraws Public Land Sale Bill after Outcry from Hunters, Anglers," *Idaho Statesman*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/letters-from-the-west/article130291054.html>.

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