



ALTA IS FOR SKIERS.
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ALTA POWDER NEWS

HISTORICAL EDITION

Online edition available at alta.com



The Engen brothers perform at the Landes jump dedication on November 28, 1948

History of the Landes Memorial Ski Jump

Following World War II, the interest in skiing was again building in the Intermountain region. During the war years (1942 – 1946), there had been little ski jumping activity since many of the jumpers were involved in active military service. Storied Ecker Hill, near Park City, which became one of the most famous jumping hills in the country in the 1930s, was rarely used during those years. However, beginning in 1946, the idea for a 40 meter jumping facility at Alta, Utah began. It was to become one of the first significant movements to resurrect ski jumping in Utah after the war years. The hill was funded mostly through a \$10,000 gift from a well known Salt Lake businessman, Herbert D. Landes. Mr. Landes decided in 1947 that a ski jump would be the most appropriate memorial to his son, Robert J. Landes who lost his life in action aboard a destroyer during the W.W. II Philippine invasion on December 11, 1944. Robert was a 22 year old Ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve at the time, but before entering the service, he frequented Alta as an avid skier and especially enjoyed jumping off cornices and natural terrain bumps on the hillsides of Alta during the late 30s and early 40s.

William J. O'Conner, Salt Lake Winter Sports Association president during the mid 1940s, organized a committee of local ski clubs to carry out the work of building the hill. Famed ski jumper and 1948 U.S. Olympic Ski Team Coach, Alf Engen, served as construction advisor. Formal announcement of the hill's construction was made by Lee Irvine, Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce winter sports committee chairman, in August, 1948. In his comments to the press, he stated that "jumps on the new hill would fall somewhere between the A and B jumps at Ecker Hill which should allow average jumps of around 150 feet."

ALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The AHS Mission Statement

The Alta Historical Society is a not-for-profit organization, approved by the IRS under 501 (c) (3) guidelines. It was formally established in 1995, chartered by direction of Alta Mayor, Bill Levitt and initially set up under the umbrella of The Friends of Alta.

The specific mission of the Alta Historical Society is to:

- *Collect and preserve valuable historical photographs, film, documents, artifacts and oral histories that are directly tied to Alta's past.
- *Facilitate ways and means to tell the story of Alta's rich history in ways that will enhance the cultural awareness for visitors and citizens of the Alta community.
- *Work in support of, and collaborate with, other organizations having a focus on Utah history and goals which are compatible with the Alta Historical Society.



Among the jump's most ardent supporters was Alta's first self proclaimed mayor, George H. Watson. Watson was a very colorful individual who spent most of his life at Alta as a miner and prospector. It was through the mayor that 700 acres of land at Alta was donated to the Forest Service so that a ski area could be started in the late 1930s. The actual jumping site location was part of the mayor's old mining claim which he established in the early 1900s.

The Landes Memorial Hill dedication was held on Sunday, November 28, 1948. Attending the dedication activities were Utah Governor Herbert B. Maw; Ike Armstrong, Utah football coach; and Dr. N.P. Nielson, head of the University of Utah's department of physical education. The dedication jump featured on the official program, was made by the famous Engen brothers, Alf, Sverre, and Corey Engen who performed a triple side-by-side leap. In mid air, the brothers released roses in honor of Bob Landis. The longest jumps of the day were made by Alf Engen who registered jumps of 165, 168, and 181 feet. The 181 foot leap stood as the official hill record until March 5, 1961 when Chris Selbeck, a Norwegian attending the University of Denver, flew 191 feet in an official sanctioned tournament.

The Landes Memorial Jumping Hill continued to be the site of many fine tournaments between the years 1949 through the late 1970s, including a number of Intermountain ski championships, the National Junior Ski Jumping Championship, and the professional gelande ski jumping competition. In addition, every year a perpetual trophy was awarded to the top jumpers in each class of the classic Landes Memorial Jumping Tournament. One of the perpetual trophies was ultimately retired by Alan Engen when he won the tournament three consecutive years in the 1950s. Jumpers would come from all around for this particular event because it carried prestige similar to the Ecker Hill events. The hill offered a good spectator vantage point from either the Snowpine Lodge or outside on the parking lot and many ski jumping enthusiasts came to watch.



These soldiers prepared for winter warfare, but never saw battles in the snow. However, in Italy they experienced ferocious battles against well-trenched German soldiers in the rugged mountains of Italy and became the most decorated U.S. unit in World War II.

Winter Warfare Training of the 503RD Parachute Battalion at Alta, Utah, 1942

The 1942 training of the 503rd Parachute Battalion at Alta, Utah, in 1942 has been all but forgotten. Let us remember it. In the fall of 1941, U.S. Army Colonel Jack Tappen, stationed in Washington, D.C., contacted Dick Durrance at Alta, Utah. Durrance at that time was running the ski school as well as managing the Alta Lodge, which had opened during the 1940-41 ski season. Colonel Tappen knew of Durrance's reputation as a famous ski racer, but he had never met him. Colonel Tappen was interested in training military personnel for winter warfare.

In 1941, the famed 10th Mountain Division Ski Troops had not yet been formed. Tappen's experiment was visionary in nature. However, The War Department had determined that the United States would likely be involved in active European war conflict, and, if that happened, certainly some part of the conflict would involve the high Alps in wintertime. Specially trained military personnel who could ski would be of high importance.

Therefore, Colonel Tappen asked if Dick Durrance would be interested in training a relatively large group of parachutists from Fort Benning, Georgia, who had never been on skis. Some, in fact, had never seen snow! Durrance accepted Tappen's request, but he needed a cadre of instructors to do the job ahead. To solve that problem, he contacted some of his prior racing buddies, including Walter Prager, Sep Hannah, Barney McLean, Gordon Wren, Art Johansen, Bob Skinner, Alex Baer, Hugh Bauer, Bill Redlin, Henry Simoneau, and his brother, Jimmy.



According to Brigadier General Edward H. Thomas, retired, all skis were wooden, most without steel edges, and about 7 feet 3 inches long.

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Some of the other early U.S. Olympic skiers who jumped at Landes Hill and went on to National Ski Hall of Fame honored status included Corey Engen, Devereaux "Dev" Jennings, Dick Movitz and Jack Reddish. One other skier who jumped on the hill over the years included Dick Simon, who perhaps was the first to fly 200 feet. Unfortunately, he touched the snow with his hand in the landing so the jump could not be counted as a hill record. Dick left ski jumping in the mid 1960s and took up race car driving. He went on to become a nationally known Indy sports car driver and promoter. However, on December 8, 1968, Matz Jensen, a University of Utah All-American ski jumper (1965 & 67) did make a standing leap of 200 feet in competition which set a new hill record on that hill. It was never exceeded and the hill was discontinued for ski jumping in May 1988.

The old hill still stands and can be seen with the take-off in tact. However, the judges stand has been removed and there exists a high tech transfer tow which runs across the outrun making the hill unusable for ski flying purposes.





**FIRST ANNUAL
SKI
JUMPS
at ALTA**

**Sunday, April 17
Landes Hill
1 P. M.**

Whether you ski or not, you'll enjoy the rugged beauty of Alpine Mountains seen from Alta.

Lifts will be operating to the top of Peruvian Ridge, so you can plan to take that chair-lift ride you've been promising yourself. Enjoy a mountain top view of Salt Lake Valley from a ski-tow chair atop the ridge.

**ALL ROADS LEADING TO ALTA
ARE IN GOOD CONDITION**

Early newspaper clipping advertising the Landes Hill Tournament.

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These instructors taught the ski troops at Alta. Ski School Director Dick Durrance stands at the far left.

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Starting in mid-January 1942 and for 6 weeks, approximately 175 paratroopers from Company B of the 503rd Battalion trained at Alta under the direction of Dick Durrance and his instructor staff. The winter warriors were billeted near the airport in Salt Lake City, but every day, regardless of the weather, military trucks transported the soldiers to Alta under the command of Lt. Colonel Arthur F. Gorham (was later killed in action in Sicily).

The Rock Shelter (extensively rebuilt and now known as the Snowpine Lodge) was the base headquarters for the paratroopers while they trained at Alta. The War Department (now the Department of Defense) made a military film highlighting the training of the ski troops at Alta, Parachutists on Skis. Part of that film can be viewed in Alan Engen's video For the Love of Skiing: A Snapshot of Alta Ski History.

Durrance divided the soldiers into ten classes, approximately 20 skiers assigned to each instructor. Over a 6-week period, the instructors proceeded to teach the paratroopers all the basics of skiing from waxing techniques to executing turns down the mountainous terrain at Alta. Some were injured in the process; however, according to Durrance, "the end of that winter we came to the conclusion that maybe a third of them would become pretty good skiers, the middle third could get by, and the remaining third had better stay in the paratroopers and forget it."



Uniforms used by the paratroopers for the training at Alta were olive green on one side and white on the reverse side.

The extensive training included many hikes up and skiing down steep mountainsides, overnight sessions on the mountain, and parachute jumps that landed in the snow. Overall success of the winter training experiment at Alta was somewhat questionable. In the words of Brigadier General Edward Thomas, "While no conclusion was ever announced, we assumed that it was negative since no airborne infantry winter warfare unit was ever activated. To skate out on the thin ice of conjecture, I'd guess that at least one reason was the number of ski injuries we suffered. Contributing to these injuries was the training drilled into paratroopers to tumble on landing as well as the basic 'devil may care' attitude of the airborne soldier."

Whether the training at Alta was successful or not, what did happen shortly thereafter

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was the formation of the famed Tenth Mountain Division, started initially at Fort Lewis in Washington State. Later it moved to Camp Hale in Colorado. The Tenth Mountain Division troops distinguished themselves and became the most decorated division in World War II. Many books and articles have been written about their heroic feats. The Colorado Ski Museum located in Vail, Colorado, has an entire section dedicated to the Tenth Mountain Division. It should also include the 1942 training of the 503rd Parachute Battalion at Alta, Utah.



Ski Troops of the 503rd Parachute Battalion practice with winter gear at Alta, circa 1942



Instructor Sel Hannah, gives a soldier of the 503rd parachute battalion a lesson in waxing in front of the "Rock Shelter" at Alta, Utah circa January 1942

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Original Ladies of the Snows Chapel following being hit by an avalanche in the spring of 1983

A short history - Our Lady of the Snows

Credit for the construction of the first "Our Lady of the Snows" chapel is given to Merrill Matzinger, who was a long time visitor and resident of the Alta community in the 1950s and 60s. The facility, built in 1956, was of wooden construction and blended in well with the Alta alpine environment. Unfortunately, the building was severely damaged by a wet spring avalanche in 1983 and was torn down during the following summer.

During the following few years, plans were put into motion to build a new chapel at Alta and construct it in such a way that if hit by an avalanche, it could survive without significant damage being done. With the assistance of the town of Alta and the Forest Service, a land use permit was granted to build a new chapel facility on the west side of the original chapel location and in a spot which gave better access to the public and was less vulnerable to being hit by an avalanche.

The actual construction of the second Our Lady of the Snows chapel did not happen until 1993 due to the funding considerations. The building cost more than \$320,000. A great portion of the funding came from local patrons, visitors to the canyon, and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City.

Ground breaking for the current building was held on August 8, 1993 and the dedication of the building was on March 26, 1994. Since that time, it has served the Alta community in many ways including Roman Catholic liturgies, inter-denominational services, a community school, concerts, seminars and other civic and community events.

Special acknowledgement is given to the late Joan Collins, Father John Norman, and the combined efforts of the Alta and Snowbird communities for the visionary efforts and work required to construct the current facility.



Our Lady of the Snows chapel and community center Alta, Utah circa Fall 2010

DID YOU KNOW?

► The name Alta comes from the Latin word Altus, meaning high. Another word, altitude, also has the same Latin origin. European countries such as Italy and Spain have words with the same meaning, but again, originate from the word "Altus."*

*As an interesting footnote, there exist a number of other meanings for the word Alta, such as, but not limited to:

- American Land Title Association
- Atlanta Lawn Tennis Association
- American Literary Translators Association
- Advanced Linkage Technologies of America
- Adult Literacy Through the Arts
- Academic Language Therapy Association

► In May 1958, under the coordination of the Alf Engen Ski School, Alta hosted the first meeting of the National Ski Association of America (NSA) Certification of Ski Teachers Committee and National Professional Ski Instructors.

This one week "on-snow" conference was held for the purpose of establishing national certification standards. As a result of this gathering, former Alta instructor, Bill Lash, wrote and published a book titled *Outline of Ski Teaching*, which became the first complete ski instructors manual of skiing protocols which ultimately became known as the *American Skiing Technique*.



Illustration of Bill Lash

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