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# ALTA POWDER NEWS

## HISTORICAL EDITION

Online edition available at ALTA.com

## George H. Watson

### Portrait of a Utah Ski Pioneer

In the annals of Utah's rich ski history, certainly one of the most colorful personalities during the exciting skiing growth period of the 1930s and 40s was George Watson, self-appointed mayor of a place he called "Romantic Alta." As the late Sverre Engen recalled, "Watson would impose a 25 cent fine on anyone who omitted the word "romantic" before mentioning Alta in conversation."

Watson was born in Michigan in 1883 and came to Alta in 1902 at the age of nineteen in search of silver ore and the dream of finding his fortune in mining. This dream was never realized; however, he did strike fame by tapping a different "vein"...namely, white gold! In an article written by Claire Noall in the December 1946 issue of The Utah Magazine, Noall writes, "In 1903, he (Watson) was looking for news of the new silver strikes in Utah, for he had come West as the pathfinder for a group of young Michigan miners who had agreed that the fellow among them who drew the longest straw should make the trek. George drew the straw and out he came."

In describing Watson, one would probably be inclined to use words like "innovative," "humorist," "entrepreneur" and "promoter." Indeed, he was a combination of all those things and the following supports that thesis.

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George H. Watson  
Mayor of Romantic Alta



Early photograph of Alta  
with the original town visible  
Circa - early 1870s.

## The Alta Historical Society

### A Brief History

The group responsible for the formation of the Alta Historical Society (AHS) included Bob (R.T.) and Karen Travis, Tony Bowman and Dale Gilson. The impetus for the organization came from Bowman, who at that time was an Alta ski patrolman and a student doing his thesis at the University of Utah on Alta's history. It was his intent that the new organization, when formed, would be a chapter under the auspices of the Utah Historical Society, located in Salt Lake City. Bob Travis was elected the first AHS president and served from 1969 through the mid 1980s. Following his and Karen's departure, the AHS group disbanded.

In 1994, AHS was revived with the mission of promoting Alta's rich history. Mayor Bill Levitt played a leading role in putting together a new group headed by Alan Engen. Other members included the late Jody Schrontz, Heidi Mosberg, Barbara Dunlea, Dr. Joe Arave, Connie Marshall and George Ator. Under the umbrella of the Friends of Alta, headed by Mimi Levitt, the new AHS regained status as a Utah historical organization with not-for-profit 501(c)(3) IRS status.

Between the latter part of the 20th Century and the early years of the 21st Century, other members were added to this Board of Directors. They included Laura McIndoe, Jim Nichol, Nic Nichol and Brian Jones, who served as president from 2004-2005.

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## The Alta Historical Society Logo

In 1994, the newly re-organized members of the Alta Historical Society adopted the logo of a photo of an old miner who seemed to best illustrate the transition in the Alta high country from mining to skiing. However, to date, the identity of the miner and the location of the photograph remain a mystery. Anyone who may be able to provide verifiable information about the image in question is encouraged to contact the Alta Historical Society.







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## The Alta Historical Society

During the early part of 2006, the AHS group went into a semi-functioning status, but regained strength as an active organization during the latter part of 2006 when David Davenport, Sheridan Davis, De Bourdaghs and Dr. Sid Jenson joined the board. Davenport was unanimously elected president of AHS. Also elected were Barbara Dunlea (Vice President); Sheridan Davis (Secretary); and Laura McIndoe (Treasurer). Engen retained his elected position as Chairman.

A program called "Fireside Chats" has recently been re-energized, resulting in favorable skier response. Under this Alta focused program, an impressive slate of recognized ski historians and ski personalities have shared their knowledge and unique perspectives on Alta history.



Shea engine departing Alta with a load of ore.  
Photo: Alta, Utah - circa early 20th Century.

Actual Membership Card of  
The Great American Prospectors Association  
belonging to the late Alf Engen.

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Special mule drawn ore cars retrofitted to carry recreation seekers up Little Cottonwood Canyon in the late 1800s.

## George H. Watson

In 1919, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad replaced an existing mule-drawn rail system to Alta and installed a narrow gage track line so that it could accommodate a "Shea engine" locomotive to pull the ore cars up and down Little Cottonwood Canyon. Seeing this, Watson saw the opportunity to make a few extra dollars. He modified an old dilapidated vehicle so it could run on the railway tracks and named it his "Jitney." He then began to promote Alta to potential sightseers for a day excursion and used the "Jitney" to transport them up and down Little Cottonwood Canyon. Whether he really made much of a success of this endeavor is questionable but he did build a boarding house near the South Hecla Mine to accommodate tourists and mining personnel that wished to extend their stay at Alta rather than returning down the canyon.

Over a period spanning close to three decades, Watson managed to borrow sufficient funds and acquire approximately 80 Alta mining claims after they had been abandoned. By the early 1930s, most of the mining efforts at Alta had been phased out. Contributing to the demise of the mining era at Alta was the market crash of 1929 and the depression which followed shortly thereafter. However, George Watson was not inclined to give up and he pursued an all out effort to revive interest in Alta. To do this, he established an organization called the Great American Prospector's Association. For the next two decades, he sent membership cards to notables throughout the United States. In typical Watson wit, the card (copy shown at right) reads, in part, as follows:

### ORDER OF THE GREAT AMERICAN PROSPECTORS ASSOCIATION

This card is a pearl without price...guard it as you would your flask. It entitles you to enter the sacred portals of the Great American Prospectors Association. Flash it if in distress, solemnly saying the mysterious password, "There's No Alta-tude like Alta."  
George H. Watson - Mayor of Romantic Alta

Now, up to this point, everything mentioned about George H. Watson has been mining oriented and one may begin to question how he can be regarded as a "Ski Pioneer." Well, the transition really began around the mid 1930s. Watson was having a rough time keeping creditors from taking back a number of his mining holdings and worse yet, having the Internal Revenue Service making inquiries about non-payment of back taxes.

In the intermountain region, interest in skiing was rapidly changing from a spectator activity involving watching others, such as ski jumpers performing daring feats on Ecker Hill, to a participation sport. Winter sports enthusiasts by the hundreds were beginning to take to the hills along the Wasatch Mountains enjoying the sport of skiing. One of Utah's oldest ski clubs, The Wasatch Mountain Club, had frequent outings which spanned the Park City area, Brighton, and Alta during winter months. Watching all this activity, and in many ways encouraging its development, was the U.S. Forest Service. However, the Forest Service had a genuine concern and challenge of trying to protect the public from the inherent dangers of avalanches on backcountry excursions. To help solve the problem, they felt that it would be a good idea to promote the development of controlled ski areas where there was adequate expertise on hand to help if emergencies occurred.

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From Left: Alan Engen, Alf Engen, Corey Engen, Sverre Engen.  
Photo: Alta, Utah - circa 1953.

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## George H. Watson

Alf Engen was chosen by the Forest Service to scout out potential ski area sites and make recommendations for further evaluation and consideration. In 1935, Alta was one of the first places Alf visited. After several visits, both in winter and summer, Alf made the strong recommendation that Alta had all the qualifications for an outstanding ski area, but had one major problem. The miners, over the years, had denuded the mountainsides, creating a heavy avalanche risk during winter months. After careful consideration of Alf's recommendation, the Forest Service felt that with proper tree plantings at Alta, the avalanche problem could be reduced over time and the decision was made to pursue development efforts. Two challenges remained. One was that the government did not control much of the land at Alta. Most of it had been acquired by Watson. The other situation was that it would take an organization, with some degree of funding capability, to start a ski operation that far up Little Cottonwood Canyon.

Thankfully, both problems were resolved by a fortuitous set of circumstances which involved the Forest Service, a new organization called the Salt Lake Winter Sports Association, headed by S. Joe Quinney, and Watson, himself. After a series of lengthy meetings, a deed, dated May 4, 1937, was signed by Watson, representing Alta United Mines Company, conveying title to some eighty mining claims in the Alta area (totaling 700 acres of land) to the U.S. Government for the price of one dollar (\$1.00). In return, Watson was able to recover from a morass of problems involving delinquent tax payment issues and non-payment of claim mortgages to creditors.

In a letter dated September 14, 1938, sent by Watson to Wasatch Forest Service Supervisor, James E. Gurr, he acknowledges that such action was indeed appropriate and was in the "best interest of the public" in creating a "new winter sports area." He also made it clear that it was his wish that the land be used solely for recreational purposes involving skiing at the core.

Over the span of the next decade and a half, Watson took on a new mission in life....namely being Alta's top public relations personality for skiing, not mining endeavors.

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George Watson standing next to his "Jitney" used to transport tourists up Little Cottonwood Canyon in the 1920s.

## Did you Know?

Since Alta formally began as a ski area in 1938, 17 remarkable contributors to Alta's rich ski history have been inducted into the U.S. National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame. Located in Ishpeming, Michigan, the Hall of Fame provides ultimate recognition for those American skiers who excelled in the advancement of skiing in all of its forms. Alta also has been the ski home to the only family to have four family members commemorated as honored members—Alf, Sverre, Corey and Alan Engen.

### ALTA PERSONALITIES INDUCTED INTO THE U.S. NATIONAL SKI AND SNOWBOARD HALL OF FAME

Year	Name
1958	Richard "Dick" Durrance
1958	Marthinus "Mark" Strand
1959	Alf M. Engen
1969	Jack Reddish
1969	George H. Watson
1970	Richard "Dick" Movitz
1971	Sverre Engen
1973	Corey Engen
1974	Felix Koziol
1975	S. Joe Quinney
1979	Montgomery "Monte" Atwater
1983	William "Bill" Lash
1988	Suzy Harris Rytting
1989	H. Devereaux "Dev" Jennings
1994	Earl A. Miller
1996	Junior Bounous
2004	Alan K. Engen

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*Narrow gauge rail service provided transportation for mining, commuters and recreation until the early 1900s.*

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## George H. Watson

Up until his death in 1952, Watson called home a small rustic cabin very close to where the current Alta Ski Lifts Company Administrative Building is located. Although he had an apartment in Salt Lake City, he spent most of his time at Alta. During winter months, because of the significant amount of snowfall at Alta, Watson's cabin had to be entered through a special entrance built on his roof top. This looked similar to a mine shaft and had a ladder inside which dropped approximately 15 feet to the main body of the cabin area below. Watson had a sign made at the entrance to his cabin which read:

THIS IS THE PLACE.....  
BUT WATCH YOUR FIRST STEP

Towards the latter part of his life, Watson devoted much of his waking hours visiting and talking with skiing guests at Alta. He especially enjoyed observing young skiers learning how to navigate down a small hillside near his cabin. When the Deseret News Ski School started in 1948, Watson was on hand to help in almost every session. He loved people, and in turn, everyone loved him and respected what he had done for skiing in the Intermountain West.

On March 31, 1952, Watson passed away peacefully in his sleep in his beloved cabin. He was found the following day by his mining partner and close friend, Walter Hoppe. With the help of Alf Engen and his brother, they were able to get the old mayor out of his cabin, which was not an easy task. The mayor's body was then placed in an old Tucker Snowcat and taken down the canyon because the road to Alta was closed due to an avalanche which had run during the previous night.

And so it is to this day that the memory of George H. Watson lives on. One place where he is remembered is in the Joe Quinney Winter Sports Center/Alf Engen Ski Museum located at Utah Olympic Park near Park City. There visitors can learn about Watson and see his famous hat which Alta Ski Lifts Company donated to the museum for display purposes. In 1969, Watson received one of the highest honors which can be bestowed on a skier, induction into the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in Ishpeming, Michigan. Here, for all the world to remember, is a simple man who did so much to help the sport of skiing grow in the Intermountain West and to him goes the deserving title of Honorary Mayor of Alta and a true ski pioneer.

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*George Watson at his mountain cabin entrance highlighting the "Watch Your First Step" sign. Photo: Alta, Utah - circa mid 1940s.*

## Old Highway 210

### Special Mule Drawn Ore Cars And Aerial Tramways in the Late 1800s

To get the ore out of the canyon from Alta, a rail bed was constructed along the north side of the canyon where much of the road is presently located. The railway to Alta was completed in 1884 by the Wasatch and Jordan Valley Railroad.

In addition to the rail tracks, snowsheds built by Chinese labor, had to be constructed to protect the railway from avalanches which continued to run on a frequent basis during winter months. When the railway was first completed to Alta, the rail cars were pulled by steam engine to a railway station located at Wasatch, near the base of Little Cottonwood Canyon.

From there, mules hitched to the rail cars in tandem pulled the cars the rest of the way up the canyon on a single track tramway to the terminus located at the Emma Mine at Alta. The mules were then unhitched and turned loose to find their way back down the canyon to the Wasatch railway station location. The ore cars were filled and allowed to coast down the canyon with a brakeman to control the speed.

The method of ore transport was later expanded to allow sightseers to come to Alta as a day excursion. In addition to the narrow-gage single track mule tramway, there was an aerial tramway which was also used to haul ore from Alta. The aerial tramway crossed over land where the current By-Pass Road exists and continued down to Tanners Flat.

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