



Alta's Enduring Appeal

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALTA LODGE

Low key and high altitude, Alta Lodge attracts a devout clientele to its classic aesthetic.

by Bianca Dumas

Alta is a tremendous seducer. Stories are told, one after another, of people who came for just one season – and ended up dedicating their lives to the tiny ski town high above Salt Lake City, Utah.

Bill Levitt was one of these. A documentary filmmaker from New York City, Levitt first came to Alta in 1955, staying in the town's original 12-room guest house, Alta Lodge. He took lessons from men we now call fathers of American powder skiing – Alf Engen and Junior Bounous among them – and flew his family into Salt Lake City every chance he had. He finally, famously admitted, “I’ll have to buy either Alta Lodge or American Airlines.”

While skiing one day, Levitt made a purchase offer to Alta Lodge owner James Laughlin, which was accepted on the spot. But before the contract was finalized, Laughlin called him up with an objection.

“He said, I’ve been thinking about the price, and I think I’m charging you too much,” Levitt’s daughter, Cassie Levitt Dipppo,

remembers. “He said, I’d like to decrease the price because you obviously love Alta.”

It’s a little bit of Alta magic, a sense of shared love for the place that’s so great and so infectious that people will do anything to help each other enjoy it. It’s not just the on-average 500 inches of feather-light powder or the secret menu of traverse-accessed chutes. Alta has soul, and its most dedicated skiers cling to it in awestruck affection.

In the early years, when many ski areas were developed with a masterplan in mind, Alta was evolving gradually from a silver-mining settlement to one of the world’s great “town hills”. Miner George Watson bought up mining claims as they went bust, amassing a million dollars’ worth of property but, as a grizzled man who still lived in a log cabin near Mount Baldy, he couldn’t pay the taxes. He donated the land to the Forest Service and declared himself mayor. Watson then came up with a promotional nickname, the early equivalent of a marketing slogan.



“The thing about it is, you can’t just leave.”

“Watson liked to call it Romantic Alta,” Bill Levitt said in a 2008 interview. “And if you were in his hearing and you didn’t say it, he fined you two bits on the spot.” Watson was using the term romantic in its fullest sense, evoking the mythology, character, and history of a town that had been destroyed by avalanche and fire but continued attracting people like fresh flakes of snow to a towering cirque.

It was a rough and tumble place when Levitt bought Alta Lodge and built his own house at the end of the canyon. The original Collins lift had been constructed with leftover mining equipment, and the chairs hung so low that skiers had to dig a trench under them after a big storm.

“We’d laugh about the people who used to lose their oil pans on the dirt road on a rock,” Dippo says, recalling the hand-crank payphone used to call for assistance.

Her father added on to Alta Lodge three times, giving the simple chalet its midcentury-modern style and striking floor-to-ceiling windows. Much of the Lodge’s understated style is credited to architect John Sugden, a student of one-time Bauhaus director Mies van der Rohe.

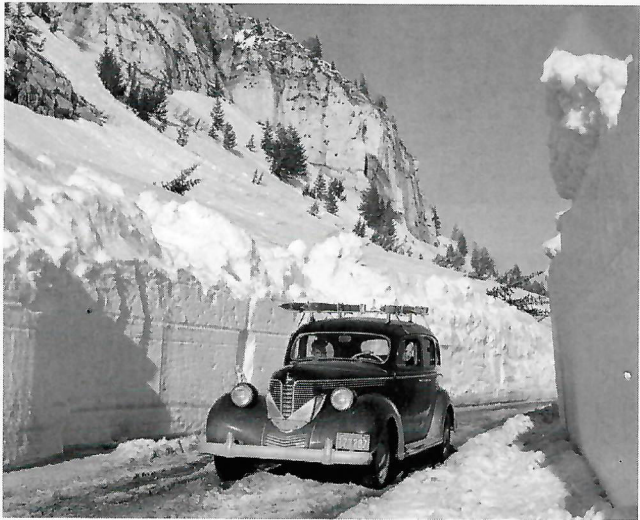
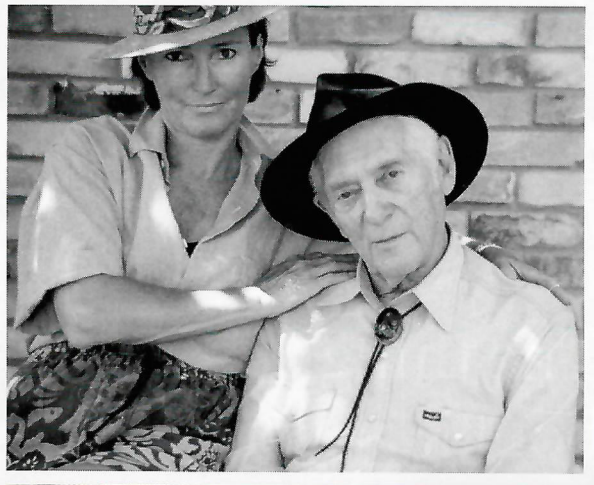
Levitt became the first elected mayor of America’s second oldest ski town. As Watson’s successor, Levitt is remembered for modernizing Alta — but just enough. He brought in a safety department and established a sheriff’s office, but prevented the bulk of proposed development. To protect the watershed and the incredible Wasatch view, Levitt started the Alta Defense Fund which became Friends of Alta, the town’s land trust. In 2009, after having served as mayor for 33 years, Levitt passed away suddenly during dinner at Alta Lodge. He was 92 years old and had skied until he was 90.

The Romantic Alta moniker may have faded with time, but Levitt recognized what a sentiment-inducing place it is. “As



mayor I must have married at least 100 people. Many of them met at Alta,” he said. “We had always one thing — if you married at Alta, it was forever.”

Alta’s isolation sets the scene. The thing about it is, you can’t just leave. Heavy snows and a narrow, winding canyon road — 57 per cent of which is in an avalanche runout zone — discourage guests from cruising down to the city après ski. Alta’s five family-owned lodges each have one bar and one restaurant, and meals are included in nightly room rates. This isn’t a place for nightlife, shopping, or the see-and-be seen



scene. This is a place for serious skiing, an attitude reflected in the motto, Alta is for Skiers.

Superficially, that means no snowboards allowed but, in effect, it's about the soul of the place. "It's not snobbery, it's actually complete enthusiasm for a sport as a whole," says Rosie O'Grady, Alta Lodge Vice President and avid skier. "There's nothing quite like it until you experience it."

In the evenings, folks gather in the tiny mahogany-paneled Sitzmark Club. Some have pulled classic Fair Isle sweaters over their heads; others are still in Flylow bibs, shod in Chaco slippers. Sipping a hot cider Boomerang toddy by the fireplace, staring out the windows at snowcats grooming runs in the dark, talk turns inevitably to the day's powder. How transcendent it was, how they felt like they were floating. Someone will remark on Alan Engen's hand-painted terrain map on the wall or Bill Levitt's bronzed boot on the mantle, then everyone wanders off to bed. Last call is at 10 pm, because who wants to stay up late when you could catch first chair?

Skiing and local folklore are what matter here. Dippo was taught by legendary ski instructor Eddie Morris, after whom Alta's purest steep-line run, Eddie's High Nowhere, is named. She remembers she was seven when she could "finally" ski powder under Sugarloaf Peak from top to bottom.

The first winter the Levitt family lived in Alta full-time, Dippo and an older brother went to school on ski bikes. "At

the end of the road we'd stick the bikes into the Jeep and my brother would drive us from the paved road to school," she says. That driver was eleven years old.

The children were schooled by Delores LaChapelle, a ski instructor rumored to be the first to ski the Baldy chute. She was wife to avalanche mitigation pioneer Ed LaChapelle. Those of wider fame – from William F. Buckley, Jr. and Milton Friedman, to Alfred Hitchcock who filmed part of *Spellbound* here – peopled the childhood world of the Levitt children. But Alta's real celebrities were always the skiers themselves. To this day, nobody is more renowned and beloved here than skimeister Alf Engen.

The families who come to Alta Lodge year after year become dear friends, and Dippo does everything she can to keep the lodge frozen in time for their sake. Guests still hang out in the mid-mod lobby, draped over Knoll chairs, sipping coffee while they watch the snow lay an impassioned blanket across the whole of Albion Basin. When the lifts start rolling, they'll walk down a flight of stairs to the locker room and glide downhill to the Collins lift.

Bill Levitt once noted that when returning guests looked around and saw that nothing had changed, they sighed with relief. "Isn't it wonderful," he said, "that there's a place left that they know of that hasn't been disrupted, corrupted, or, quote, improved?" **S**