

# Alta Lodge

As it celebrates 75 years, this low-key Utah lodge has stayed true to its family roots. **BY EVERETT POTTER**

It's not an exaggeration to say that the Alta Lodge in Utah, which celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday this season, is unlike any other ski hotel in the world. It resembles a 1940s prep-school dorm with Bauhaus touches—cement-block walls, mid-century Bertoia chairs, and floor-to-ceiling windows with eye-popping views.

There's no blaring music or fashionably attired staff. Just step outside and click into your bindings: You are now skiing Alta.

In the lobby, guests are debating the finer points of foreign policy and reading print copies of *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Or they might be having a lively discussion with the adult grandchildren of someone they skied with in the 1960s. At the Alta Lodge, guests trace their connection with the place two, three or four generations back.

"For many of our guests, this is their spiritual home," says general manager Marcus Dippo, who's married to Cassie Levitt, daughter of longtime owner Bill Levitt. He utters these words in dead earnest, and he's on the mark.

The origins of the lodge date to the late 1930s, when the Salt Lake City Winter Sports Association (which later became the Alta Ski Lifts company) decided to develop Alta as a ski destination. They enticed the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad to build a lodge there, not long after the Union Pacific Railroad had developed a ski resort in Sun Valley, Idaho. The railroad agreed, but then ran out of money.

That's when James Laughlin—an heir to a Pittsburgh steel fortune who founded the iconic New Directions publishing house—came up with \$25,000 to finish construction. (See "The Extraordinary Ski Life of J Laughlin" in the July-August 2015 issue of *Skiing History*.) Laughlin was brought into the project by his friends Dick and Miggs Durrance, who were overseeing the concurrent development of the ski slopes. Laughlin became the Alta Lodge's first owner, along with lift manager Fred Speyer.

The Alta Lodge opened on November 29, 1940—"according to Alan Engen," says Dippo. He's referring to the former Alta skiing director and son of the legendary Alf Engen, who established the original ski school there. "But it was officially dedicated on December 14, 1940.



COURTESY ALTA LODGE

Above: Change comes slowly to Alta Lodge, where many guests trace their connection several generations back. Right: Bill Levitt bought the lodge in 1959 and fought for years to protect Alta from development. He died in 2009, but a family partnership that includes his widow, Mimi, still owns the property.



COURTESY ALTA LODGE

There's a record of a special permit issued to Alta Winter Sports Inc. in August 1940 to build the lodge, which would have made it a speedy building project."

In 1958, Chic Morton bought out Speyer. Morton had started working at the lodge as a bartender in the 1940s and ended up becoming manager. He held that job until 1964, when he became manager of the Alta Ski Lift Company. But over the years, it was Bill Levitt who had the greatest impact on the lodge.

Born in Brooklyn, Levitt came of age in the Depression and had several careers. He was first a union organizer for United Auto Workers, working with Walter

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COURTESY ALTA LODGE

The original south-facing lodge opened in November 1940 and was officially dedicated the following month. Publisher James Laughlin, heir to a Pittsburgh steel fortune, was the first owner, with partner Fred Speyer.



COURTESY ALTA LODGE

Charles "Chic" and Maxine Morton with early Alta landowner George Watson. Chic bought the lodge in 1958 and later managed the ski company.

Reuther. He joined the Army during WWII but when he returned from service, he couldn't get his old job back. He ended up doing documentary film work with his sister, the celebrated photographer Helen Levitt, and his soon-to-be second wife, Janice Loeb, a member of the Loeb banking family of New York. Both skiers, they first visited Alta on a Thanksgiving weekend in the early 1950s and fell in love with the rustic ski area.

Bill and Janice were married shortly after that, and although they lived in Manhattan, they continued to visit Alta and built a house there in 1956. Levitt got to know Laughlin and Dippo says the pair were like-minded in their love for Alta and the lodge. "The joke he used to tell," Dippo recalls, "was that he came out so often, he should either buy American Airlines or the Alta Lodge." The latter was his realistic choice, and in 1959 Levitt bought out Laughlin's interest—using the financial clout of Janice's family to secure a loan. He bought out Morton in 1969.

Levitt, who married his third wife, Mimi Muray Levitt, in 1982, fought hard to protect Alta from development and preserve its beauty. He served as town mayor for 34 years, from 1971 to 2005, the longest-serving consecutive mayor in the history of the state. He served on numerous regional committees and in 1981, with Mimi, founded the Alta Defense Fund (now Friends of Alta). Levitt died in the lodge's dining room in December 2009 at the age of 92 (see the March 2010 issue of *Skiing Heritage*). ISHA member Mimi remains part of the family partnership that continues to own the lodge.

"Bill was the ultimate proprietor," Dippo says. "He had great staff and management, but he and Mimi were the stars of the show. Mimi has a photographic memory for guests; she headed reservations and made sure everyone's needs were remembered every year. Way back before there were computers, there was Mimi."

Levitt would add onto the 1940 structure three times, in 1963 and 1964, and most dramatically in 1968, with the addition of the so-called East Wing. Designed by architect John Sugden, who had studied under famed Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe, it brought mid-century modernism to Alta. To this day, the simple, dramatic walls of glass in these rooms allow a guest to feel as if they are literally standing on the mountain.

The Alta Lodge has grown from 12 guest rooms to 57, some with private balconies and even fireplaces. The luxury touches are humidifiers and boot dryers in the rooms—and high-speed wifi in a nod to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The best feature of the original lodge is the Sitzmark Bar, a locals' favorite for après ski, with a stone fireplace and mountain views.

Seventy percent of the guests return each year, and friendships last over decades. For many years, until her death last October, Ruth Rogers-Altmann—a Viennese-born painter and skiwear designer—would take up residence for weeks at a time. William F. Buckley, Jr. and economist Milton Friedman used to vacation there at the same time. Errol Flynn and Claudette Colbert used to visit, and Alfred Hitchcock used the lodge as a location in *Spellbound*. If you were here on a hot summer's day in 1943, you might have spotted Vladimir Nabokov, butterfly net in hand, exulting over his captures while staying at his publisher Laughlin's rustic lodge.

Change comes slowly to the Alta Lodge. When they redecorated the beloved lobby seven years ago, Dippo admits they were afraid of a guest outcry (but it all went smoothly). This winter, they replaced the ancient rope tow that brings guests from the base area with a new surface tow where "sometimes as the end of the day, the line is longer than the line at the Collins chair," Dippo says. What won't change is the welcome they extend, which he adds is "is like the theme from *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name." ❄️