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The strong voice for the San Juan Mountains



AVALANCHE

work focused on snow, snowslides, and other wintry stuff by andy gleason, don bachman, cado avenali, dolores lachapelle, peter shelton, jerry roberts, james burwick, scott toepfer, jonathan thompson, art goodtimes, black creek

Buddhist Road Patrol



by Peter Shelton

three snowplow drivers and a minister and his daughters—were swept to their deaths on Red Mountain Pass. Since the forecasting program was initiated in 1992-93, no one has died in a snow slide on the highway. When Roberts or his cohorts deem conditions dicey enough they close the road and try to shoot down avalanches before they grow into monsters.

“Three-Mary-Fourteen, this is Three-Mary-Fifty-one. Come in Doug.” Safely past the Brooklyns, Roberts calls a snowplow driver working the north side of the pass.

“Yeah, Jerry, this is Three-Mary-Fourteen. I’m over in Ironton Park on my way up. It’s snowing pretty hard. Visibility is pretty poor. See you on the pass.”

“I’ve got a lot of respect for the plow drivers,” Jerry says working the defroster to keep the plows from icing up completely. “Man, that’s a lonely, hateful job. Ninety percent boredom and 10 percent terror.”

We can see no more than about 70 feet ahead, and the snow in the headlights has that onrushing Star Wars effect. Jerry estimates the snowfall rate at “S-plus” or somewhere around two inches an hour. It turns out that the rate the snow comes down is an important factor in predicting instability, along with new snow amounts and densities. Wind speed and direction. Temperatures. Weaknesses in the old snow. The pieces of the puzzle come together haltingly, like scraps of a note tossed to you on the wind.

We speed up again underneath Silver Ledge, even though there’s a cliff on our right and no guardrail. “Andy [lead forecaster Andy Gleason] and I have a list of 50-60 slides that we worry about. You know what’s hanging above you. Which ones could push you off the road and into the canyon.” Roberts, who is 53, has been skiing the San Juans and driving this road for 30 years. “The living highway,” he calls it with a thin smile.

“This is where we lose NPR. At the Muleshoe turn [another slidepath]. From here to the top all I can get is this religious station. Then on the north side I can usually pick up an oldies station out of Grand Junction.” From the driver’s seat out of the dark comes another verse, palliative, better than a sermon: “Jesus talk-radio./Late night/forecast ride.”

Five-fifty a.m. Still pitch dark. At the top, at 11,018 feet, we can’t make out the road edges for the drifted snow. “Wind slab layers/thick as . . .”

“ . . . Van Gogh/brush stokes,” I contribute to the form. Jerry pulls over, puts his flashlight between his teeth, flips up his parka hood and sets out for the snow stake in the meadow. While he is gone Doug Follman comes by in the plow, all hissing hydraulics and flashing lights. I climb up the door and we chat for a few minutes over the diesel rumble. Turns out his uncle lived in the little fruit-growing town where I live now. Passed away just recently. I notice he’s wearing his avalanche transceiver over his flannel shirt, something Jerry says the drivers resisted until a few years ago.

Jerry comes back with his waterproof notebook and density tube. “Five inches new at point six inches of water. Add that to the point four we had at midnight, and we’ve got about an inch of water. I was thinking we’d need an inch and a half to reach critical.” Then, “What with the wind and the

new snow, I think we oughta pop Blue Point.”

To close or not to close the road. There’s a natural tension between CDOT, the plow drivers and the forecasters. CDOT needs to keep the road open; 550 is a major north-south corridor. The plow drivers want the work, but they also don’t want to die. The snow geeks like to shoot as often as they can, which requires closing the road temporarily, in order to keep the risk down into the future.

“That’s a 12-year-old boy’s wet dream,” says Jerry, grinning, rolling again. “Playing with high explosives and stopping traffic. Standing around telling people what they can’t do.”

Seven fifty-three a.m. Just light enough to see the Blue



Silverton Avalanche Forecaster Andy Gleason watches to see if an avalauncher shot was successful. The author watches in the background. Title photo: Forecaster Jerry Roberts and slide clean-up on Hwy. 550. James Burwick photos.

Avalanche forecaster Jerry Roberts and I are riding in his orange Colorado Department of Transportation pickup. We’re on our way to check storm boards for recent snow accumulation totals. It’s the middle of the night. The road to Red Mountain Pass is white. Our tires leave tracks several inches deep. Snowflakes in the air stop, eerily, strobe-like, in each sweep of the yellow flashing light on the roof. We’re driving directly underneath the Brooklyns, a series of slide paths that regularly hit the highway. Roberts chants an impromptu haiku: “Travelling under Brooklyns paths/fear/is my companion.”

Some hours earlier, Jerry had phoned. “I’ve been looking at the confuser. [Roberts likes to play with words.] We’ve got a hundred-mile-an-hour jet stream over us. The dynamics look good. I don’t want to overforecast, but we could see a foot and a half, two feet. Come on over. We could be rockin’ and rollin’.”

I grabbed my gear and headed south on Highway 550, up the Uncompahgre River canyon and over Red Mountain Pass to Silverton on the other side. The last time Jerry had called to invite me to ride with him, they’d closed the pass before I could get across. I didn’t want to miss this one.

Silverton, elevation 9,323 feet, is one of four forecast centers, run jointly by CDOT and the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, and charged with managing the state’s slide-prone highways. Between 1963 and 1992, six people—

Point, which isn’t very imposing as San Juans slidepaths go. It’s only a couple hundred feet high. But it drops unimpeded to the road from multiple start zones, and it’s pitch exceeds snow’s normal angle of repose. The plow drivers have a saying about Blue Point: “A cloud rolls overhead, and the Blue Point runs.” It ran three times in one night during the last storm.

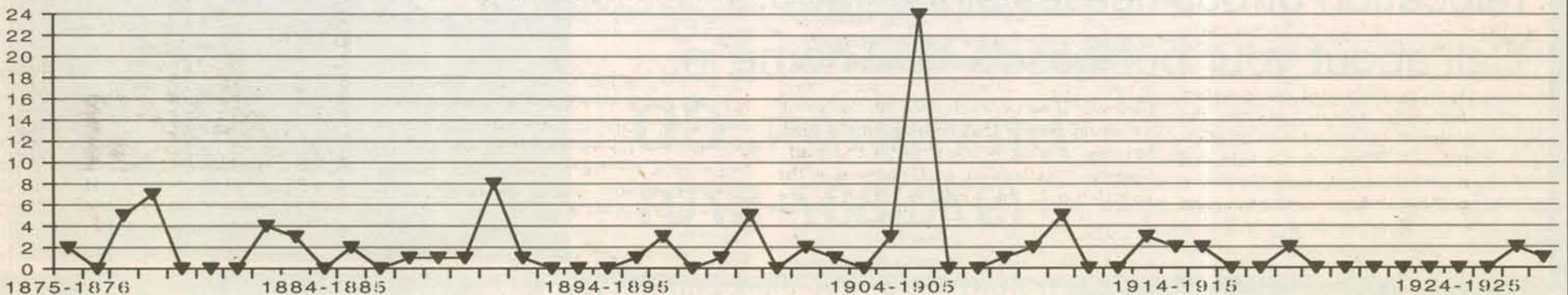
Andy and Jerry confer with the avalauncher crew, which puts six shots into Blue Point and Blue Willow. Three small avalanches pour snow to the centerline. “Kind of disappointing we didn’t get a tiger by the tail,” Jerry says, his pickup sideways across the road. “That’s the Buddhist road patrol for you. It’s kind of like I imagine Vietnam was—no sleep, firefights, an enemy who doesn’t always cooperate.”

Bud, the cat driver who pushes the debris off the road and over the edge, shouts as we go by: “It’ll keep the plank rats happy.” Indeed. Jerry’s got one more haiku, for the skiers who will follow the plows to the top: “Aaaaah, the turn./I can smell it/in the air.”

Peter Shelton writes from an undisclosed location between Ridgway and Montrose. His articles have appeared in a number of national publications including *Outside* and *SKI* magazines. This column was originally published in *SKI*. It is reprinted here with permission from the author.

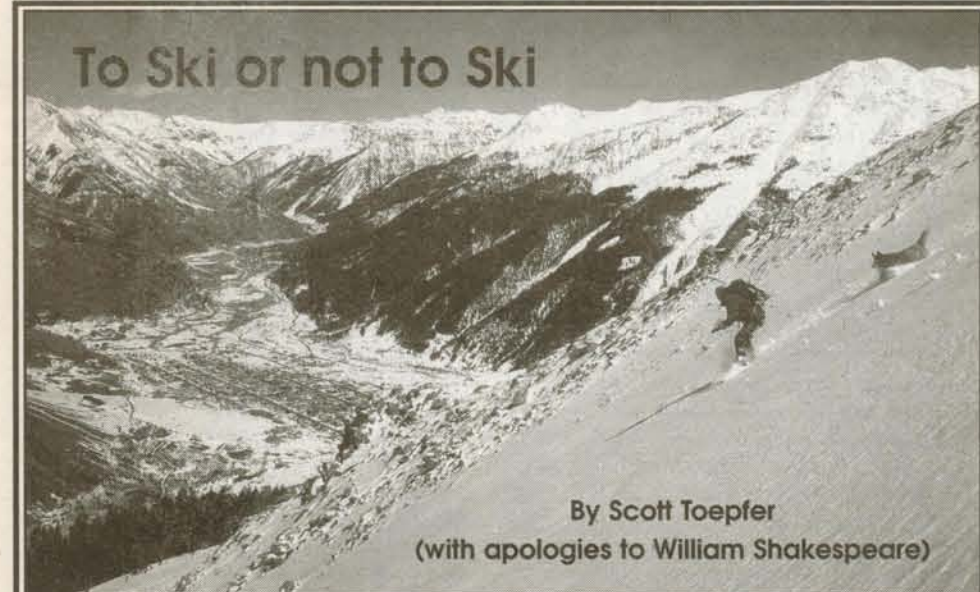
Avalanche Deaths in San Juan County, 1875-1930

Source: Century of Snow: History of Avalanche Hazard in San Juan County, by Betsy Armstrong



haiku, by jerry roberts

columns, needles, stellars	scrub glass	
bounce off	ski corn	
midnight windshield	simple life	
		sleeping with radio
a life spent seeking		and telephone
space	demented prophet	romantic forecast night
between thoughts	hauls garbage, pounds nails	
	no ego	
		fat powder skis sink
humble man shares		then resurface
wealth among	like blowing snow--	playful dolphins
mountain communities	tattered ascetic moves	
	into the future	
		jerry roberts is a mystical avalanche
yellow lights flashing		forecaster for the roads of the san
cannon firing	under forecast December	juans. he lives, skis, and haikus in sil-
another control day	storm	verton and ridgway.
	lost credibility	



To Ski or not to Ski

By Scott Toepfer
(with apologies to William Shakespeare)

Andy Gleason photo.

To ski it or not to ski it
That is the question.

Whether tis nobler for the ego to gain
First tracks or to suffer the slings and arrows
Of your peers as you insist upon a snowpit.

Or to take arms against a sea of moving snow
And by opposing common sense, hork the cornice
And by a missed landing allow stress to exceed strength.

By this error in judgement to die, to sleep---
No more.

And by this lack of caution we cause
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
For our friends and loved ones. Tis a consummation
Not to be wished. To die, to sleep,

To sleep---perchance to dream of better fore-thought
Aye, there's the rub, for in that sleep of death
By misstepped cornice horked what dreams may
come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil

Must give us pause. There's that lack of respect
That makes calamity of our so short lives.
For who would bear the burial of time
If only a cool and thinking mind we answered.

The forecast right, the proud man's contumely
The pangs of to little O₂, the rescuers delay,
The insolence of the arrogant, and the spurns
That patient merit of the uneducated takes,

When a friend might his beacon make a quick
and hasty search. Who would burdens bear,
To grunt and sweat under the weight of a Buick
But that the dread of something after death

Hastens the searcher on with speed
The unsearched country from whose boundaries
No searcher shall leave till all is covered
And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of the fool is found
Returned to pink from blue. Soft you now!!
No further chances shall thee take
And with them words of so sweet breath
Say thanks as made things more rich.
I humbly thank you---well, well, well.

Scott Toepfer is a Colorado Avalanche Information
Center forecaster in Summit County.



Tim Lane photo.