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George Watson

Born: 1883 Died: 1952

Believing that the potential had only been scratched as far as ski development was concerned, George Watson donated his 1800 acres to the Federal Government so additional ski development could take place.

George H. Watson was born in 1883, and was a true skisport builder. He was a man who skied for 50 years because he jolly well had to. His domain was Little Cottonwood Canyon, a high elevation mining region within the Wasatch National Forest, and when miners first struck it rich thereabouts many years ago, they found the winter months provided more snow than any of them wanted. This meant the miners used snowshoes, as skis were called by their Norwegian innovators, and Watson proved no exception when he came along around 1902. The mining area ended with Watson being the sole inhabitant of the area, his cabin in an isolated placed named Alta. In reading through a sports magazine, it suddenly dawned upon Watson that Alta was very much like the terrain of the skiing world. So he sent off 200 letters of inquiry to areas in the United States and Europe. Verification of his beliefs resulted in Watson calling a special election and voting himself "mayor." His platform was that Alta had a higher purpose than that of a ghost town.

How Alta went from ghost town to the nation's first true alpine-type-terrain ski development by 1938 was written into the record upon Mayor Watson's death in 1952. The eulogy was composed by Watson's main collaborator, Felix C. Koziol, supervisor of the Wasatch National Forest and a National Ski Association leader once honored with the Blegen Award for services to skisport.

From the 1953 *American Ski Annual*, as written by Koziol:

"....the Mayor lived a colorful life and he loved adventure, almost as much as he loved life and his Alta.

"His long career as a miner and prospector, stockbroker in Salt Lake City, was only overshadowed by his promotion and work in the interests developing skiing in the Alta area. It was back in 1934 that he interested ski enthusiasts of Salt Lake Valley to explore the head of Little Cottonwood Canyon for potential ski terrain. Alf Engen, Bud Keyser, Mike O'Neill and others were the pioneers who scouted the country and found it good. Then within a year or two Alta again came to life. Whereas the miners had left it a ghost town for two decades or more, the driving spirit and vision of George Watson quickly brought new life back into those white hills and Alta soon (1938) became a famous ski resort and the first among the truly alpine developments of the United States.

"The 'Mayor's Cabin,' too, became a famous and unique institution there. Officially his residence during his visits to the ski area, it was also a gathering place for the ski clan and the faithful members of the Great American Prospectors' Association. The Cabin, with its suite of famous rooms, was a delight to every visitor and no one was more proud of it than His Honor the Mayor. The register of visitors he kept included all the famous skiers of the world.

"George Watson was truly the mayor of his domain for he now owned most of the mining ground of the once famous and fabulous mining camp where 3,000 prospectors and miners once dug for wealth in the rich silver veins. But in his generosity and unselfishness, especially towards the youth, he left a great monument by his donation of the surface rights of some 1800 acres of land in the Alta Basin to the Federal Government so that the full development of the area on a planned basis could be possible. To further the project he spent thousands of his own dollars to clear the title so that the lands could be accepted by the Federal Government for National Forest purposes.

"He lived to realize his fondest dreams but he was always eager for more development. He left a great heritage for the skier, as the record in picture and story on the walls of his cabin will show. The famous hat with its unique assembly of pins and medals topped by a colorful feather will long be remembered by his countless friends all over the nation and wherever skiers are and will be. The half century he spent at Alta, first searching for underground riches and later building on the surface an enduring monument for himself so that the hundreds of thousands of skiers who came and who will continue to come in the years ahead may find a better way of life, will not be forgotten.

"Winters will come and go, storms will swirl around the great peaks and smooth alpine slopes of Alta; countless graceful ski tracks will show on Collins, Wildcat, Rustler, and the skiers will know that the spirit of George H. Watson still hovers over his domain. It is as he liked it, as he wanted it."

George H. Watson was elected to the U. S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1969.

