

Binx Sandahl, A Skiing Pioneer Remembered

by Linda Corder

I was late on the scene - almost too late. I did not meet Bengt (Binx) Sandahl until early May of 1998. I had heard about him before that. Earl, now my husband, had told me that everyone who skied Alta in the 1960s knew him. Binx was legendary as the snow ranger of Little Cottonwood Canyon. He kept the skiers safe. He was the one who decided to close the road when there was avalanche danger.

Binx had great stories about those days, like the time he closed the road through the canyon just after Christmas, on one of the busiest days of the ski season. Many important guests of the resorts were stranded below, unable to get to the mountain. "Terminator" Ted Johnson, the original developer of Snowbird, phoned him, "Binx, you'd better be right about this or I swear, I'll have your ass!" A short time later, a huge avalanche thundered down the canyon side and across the road. Binx, through his courage, had saved many lives.

"How did you meet Binx?" I asked Earl.

He sat looking off in space a moment, "I don't remember how I met him, but we used to ski together at Brundage after he moved here to McCall. We skied about the same - same speed, same terrain. The young patrollers take off like jack rabbits, and some of the old skiers don't keep up with me. But when Binx and I skied together, I would pull up to a stop and he would be right there. We skied so close that Binx used to say we ought to ski the powder 8 contests."

"What kind of style did he have?"

"The old 'Alta bounce' style; lots of up and down, like a porpoise, to get you out of the powder."

Binx told Earl that he and a friend at Blue River, British Columbia used to ski the powder 8 contests together. "He was a Black man, so we called ourselves 'Salt and Pepper.'" This was an especially appropriate name because Binx's hair was pure white. An informant once told us that Binx was quite the ladies' man; at Alta he was known as the "Silver Fox".

Earl kept alluding to some very special skiing story that Binx had told him. He would never tell it to me, but kept insisting that Binx had to tell me the story first-hand, and that I had to write the story and submit it to a national skiing magazine. We are talking special! He also told me that I needed to hurry and get this story written and submitted because Binx's health was failing, and he wanted Binx to see his story in print before he died. That is why, in early May, 1998 just a few weeks before Earl and I were to be married, I finally got an opportunity to meet Binx. Earl arranged a lunch/story-telling meeting for us.

Binx arrived at the restaurant, looking very energetic; his wavy white hair framing a finely featured face. His slender athletic build and brisk approach made me suspect that Earl had an exaggerated concern for Binx's health. After introductions and hand-shakes, Binx dove right in to telling me his story...

In the late 50s, Binx was working as a civilian technician on DEW (Distant Early Warning) line stations across the northern tier of the western hemisphere (a cold war defense program). He visited numerous sites on a maintenance schedule including one at Cape Lisburne, Alaska. Cape Lisburne was chosen as a DEW line site because of its 2,000-foot mountain, the only mountain for hundreds of miles in any

direction, and because it sticks way out into the Chuckchi Sea. The station offices and housing at Cape Lisburne consisted of a group of Quonset huts at the base of a mountain, near sea level. The actual early warning system was on top of the peak. A tramway took personnel and supplies to the top.

On his first trip to Cape Lisburne, Binx was received by the US Air Force contingent and the major that commanded the station. Binx took the tram to the top of the mountain to perform maintenance on the equipment. The view from the mountain top, was certainly astounding - a panorama of wild arctic sea. But because of who he was, he noticed something of far more beauty than the seascape. The winds, which came predominantly off the sea to the west, had scoured the windward side of the mountain to bare rocks, but the lee side was one continuous chute of unbroken snow -- 2000 feet, all the way to the beach. A powder dream!

Binx knew he just had to ski that slope, so when he returned to the base station he asked the major if he could bring his skis on the next visit. The major was a little surprised because no one had ever mentioned skiing before. Most of the airmen at the base were from the southern US. He looked around at all the snow on the beach and assumed Binx wanted to ski the pathways at base level, so he told him, "Sure, go ahead and bring them."

On his next visit Binx arrived with his alpine gear. The major, expecting a Nordic skier, looked at the gear and asked where he intended to use it. Binx pointed to the top of the mountain, and said, "Up there, off the tramway."

The major looked up at the mountain, "You can't ski that; it's practically a cliff!" Binx told him that he sure wanted to give it a try, so with some reluctance the major had him run up on the tramway.

Once at the top, Binx looked down, and it did look awfully steep. He said it reminded him of his first descent of High Rustler at Alta. But he was not about to chicken out now. He put on the gear, and made a few cautious turns to feel the texture and depth of the snow. "This was years before I became a snow ranger, and I didn't know very much about avalanche danger at that time." Binx told us.

He was lucky; much to his delight there were about 15 inches of the lightest powder imaginable. He found himself melting into the turns. He let loose and picked up speed. About half-way down his legs grew tired, so he pulled up to a stop. Just then he heard a roar from down the mountain. There, at the base, was the entire Air Force contingent. They had left their Quonset huts to watch him, and now they were giving him a round cheer. With such an audience, he knew he had to perform - and that he did. He completed the run in an unbroken series of the most beautiful round turns he had ever made, and stopped in front of the cheering crowd.

One of the officers told him, "That is the most exciting thing we have ever seen here. Would you mind going up and doing it again?"

Binx was more than happy to oblige. He went back up and sculpted the first, and no doubt the only, set of powder 8s ever on the mountain at Cape Lisburne; which, according to Binx, (and Binx put great emphasis, even winning bets, on this point) is the most Northwest corner of the North American Continent.

Binx was the hero of the DEW line. Those southern boys had never seen anything like this before. They patted him on the back and thanked him for the show. As he was getting on the plane to leave, the

major called him aside and told him, "That was a fine show, son, but next time you come, leave the skis behind. You got these guys all excited about skiing and they are all going to end up with broken legs. I have an Air Force base to run here."

Pride gleamed in his eyes as he related the story. I knew that it had been one of the highlights of his life. The greatest achievements for a true powder mongrel just happen to also be those times when you are having the most damned fun.

I told Binx that I wanted to write the story for a magazine, and he was delighted by the idea. We agreed to get together soon after the wedding and go over the story again. The summer slipped away, and before I knew it we were reading Binx's obituary in the local newspaper. I deeply regretted having put off writing the story, convincing myself that his health was better than Earl had thought.

I remembered conversations I had overheard among old veterans of Alta, about the important contribution Binx had made to the pioneering of alpine skiing in America. Binx was a decidedly important figure, and deserved a eulogy. Besides, the first generation of skiers in America, the generation that knew Binx, and is fast leaving us as he has now, deserved to hear the story of his solo run down the peak in the most Northwest corner of North America. Even though I was late, I knew I still had to tell the story.

To Binx Sandahl: A fond fair well from the skiing pioneers of Alta and Snowbird, the airmen of the DEW Line Station at Cape Lisburne . . . and from one adoring fan who was fortunate enough to hear "the story" - just in time.

The Binx Sandahl Years

by Doug Abromeit

The period 1964 through 1988 was, as were all periods in Alta's history, interesting and fraught with change. The period began with the Forest Service doing all the avalanche control and forecasting for both Alta Ski Area and for the Little Cottonwood Canyon highway; the period ended with the Forest Service fuming over primary forecasting and control responsibilities, other than military weapons, to Alta Ski Area and to the Utah Department of Transportation.

Binx Sandahl's career spans the period 1964 through 1988 and, in many ways, exemplifies the period. Binx was hired as an Alta snow ranger in 1964 after several years as the snow safety director at Alyeska Ski Resort in Alaska. Binx joined existing snow rangers Ray Lindquist, Will Bassett, Warren Baldsefin, and Ron Perla; together the four men forecast the avalanche hazard within Alta Ski Area and above the Little Cottonwood highway, shot the military artillery within Alta Ski Area and above the highway, ran all the hand routes within Alta Ski Area, and enforced all highway closures and inter-lodge travel restrictions due to avalanche hazard. Today the same tasks take forty people employed by four separate entities - the Town of Alta, Alta Ski Lifts, Forest Service, and Utah Department of Transportation. As the cliché goes, they don't make 'em like they used to.

Binx got his snow ranger job in Alta on a whim. "I went to Alta to ski in 1960 and had a great time. I saw these Forest Service snow rangers cruising around the mountain and I decided that looks like my kind of life, getting paid to ski. So I applied for a job with the Wasatch National Forest. I had worked as the snow safety director at Alyeska, so they hired me. I worked with these three other guys, Ron Perla, Will Bassett, and Ray Lindquist.

"One day the four of us, Alta ski patrolman Doug Christenson and Ray's two teenage sons went up to blast the cornice off the Baldy Chutes. The Baldy Chutes are steeper than a cow's face and while they're not part of Alta Ski Area, they turn into Ball Room which is part of the ski area. Anyway, we get up there and I'm looking down a thousand feet or so into Ballroom and I see all these people down there, they were mostly ski instructors, here for some kind of a meeting. I'm thinking we should close Ballroom, get those people out of there, but I'm new, see, so I don't say anything. Ray has me belay him and Christenson belay Perla while they walked out on the cornice, dug holes and placed explosives in the holes. Bassett was standing off to the side, watching and telling them when it looked like they were getting too far out on the cornice. Now, this cornice was big, probably stuck twenty-five or thirty feet out into thin air. All of a sudden the whole goddamn cornice broke off with Ray and Perla standing on it. Ray jerked me out of my belay seat and I'm thinking sweet Jesus, I'm going over the edge. But before that can happen, both of Ray's kids jump on me and stop me and their dad. So there Ray is, dangling on the end of this rope, watching the cornice fall into the snowfield below and start a massive avalanche hurling down toward all those skiers in Ballroom. He looks over at Perla, but Perla isn't there, his rope broke. Ray looks straight down and sees Perla flying through the air like Mary Poppins and then disappearing into that churning mass of snow. Well, Ray, hanging there in thin air, had presence of mind to yell down at the skiers below, 'Avalanche! there's a man in the avalanche!'

"Perla rode twelve hundred feet in the avalanche, going eighty or ninety miles an hour over rock bands and through trees, he was buried a few minutes, but he wasn't killed, it was like a miracle. Three or four

of the ski instructors were also buried but none of them got hurt. This was one of my first duties as a snow ranger, and while all this was going on, I'm thinking, god almighty what kind of a job is this?"

Apparently it was the kind of job Binx liked. He's still doing it today, but the complexity of the job has changed markedly. In the 1960's, Binx and his fellow snow rangers, because of the overwhelming workload on avalanche control mornings, often did not get Alto Ski Area and the Little Cottonwood Canyon highway open until noon or 1:00 p.m. This understandably upset Alta manager Chic Morton. "Chic used to get so damn mad at me and the Forest Service," Binx said, "that I was afraid to go see him. In fact, I worked out this system, I'd walk up to Chic's office door and throw my hat in. If Chic threw it out, I knew he was too mad to talk; if he didn't, I'd kinda slink into the office and test the waters. But you know, we really couldn't speed up the process; Chic felt it was the Forest Service's responsibility to provide avalanche forecasting and control because Alta was on National Forest; the Forest Service felt they could not afford to hire any more snow rangers just so Alta could open time and make more money. So, it was a standoff. By the way, let me emphasize that while Chic Morton was ornery as hell, I always knew where Chic was coming from. The man has a heart of gold and has always been a pleasure to work with."

The situation remained much the same until 1970 when Binx finally convinced Chic that if he wanted to get his ski area open earlier, he would have to provide the manpower to do so. Several events goaded Chic's change of heart, but most notable was Ray Lindquist transferring to another job within the Forest Service and Ron Perla deciding to devote his time to research with Ed LaChapelle at the Alta Study Center. That left only Binx, Warren Baldseifen, and Will Bassett as snow rangers, so the Forest Service hired Ed Hastings from Bridger Bowl to help take up the slack. Unfortunately, Hastings had to live in Brighton in Big Cottonwood Canyon because no housing was available in Little Cottonwood Canyon. That proved to be a difficult situation; Hastings was often physically unable to get to Alta because of avalanche hazard road closures, so again the snow rangers were woefully understaffed. Alta also experienced several heavy snow years during this period, including the winter of 1968.

Binx recalled one memorable morning in January 1968 after several days of hard snow and blinding wind had tipped the avalanche scale to extreme. "I remember it was a horrible morning, wind howling like a banshee, colder than a witch's tit, but clear so we could see what we were doing. We were using the 75-mm pac howitzer at that time. The howitzer has wheels, so we would drag it up and down the highway to shoot. Well, that morning Baldy (Warren Baldseifen) and I were the gunners and Chic Morton and three or four members of his Alta ski patrol came along to observe. Baldy and I situated the gun on the highway directly below the Tom Moore Toilet in the center of the Town of Alta. The Tom Moore Toilet is this quaint little stone toilet built in the '30s by the CCC. They built the thing into a rock band and built it hell for stout so it could withstand slides pouting over the top of it.

"Anyway, the first couple of shots we didn't get much, maybe a slough, but the third shot connected and started a big avalanche. We were all hoopin' and hollerin' when suddenly it collectively occurred to us that we were about to get hosed by an avalanche. I don't remember if anyone said anything or not, I do remember people running in all directions. Baldy and I looked at each other and we both took off in wild dash. The slide roared over where we'd been shooting, creating a hurricane force wind as it passed. As soon as the slide passed, I ran back to the site to assess the damage. I started looking around and realized the pac howitzer and all its ammunition were gone, carried off by the avalanche, and that three vehicles that had been parked nearby were also gone, and I'm thinking we could be in deep yogurt.

"It was about then somebody said 'where the hell is Baldy?' Good question, so we immediately started to probe the avalanche debris for Baldy and check the cars carried off by the avalanche. We found a woman in the back of a camper that had been cooking breakfast when the avalanche hit and rolled her and her camper down a steep embankment; the woman had egg all over her face, literally from the eggs she had been frying and figuratively because she was breaking the law by camping in her vehicle. So we found her, but we hadn't found B Baldy, it had been nearly an hour and we were panicked.

"Well, unbeknownst to us, Baldy had run into the Tom Moore Toilet and the avalanche had gone over the top and buried it, so Baldy couldn't get out and the snow muffled his shouts. You can imagine what it would be like buried in an outhouse for an hour; Baldy said when he first ducked into the toilet he was thinking 'great, I'm saved.' But then after forty-five minutes or so the place lost its charm, it was hard to breathe and he was thinking, 'What happened to all those other assholes, they get buried in the avalanche and die or'd they just go home and leave me to suffocate in the outhouse?' Luckily for Baldy someone in the group was smart enough to suggest maybe Baldy had sought shelter in the shithouse so we started digging. After we dug down to the toilet, I pried the door marked 'Ladies' open and there was Baldy grinin' like chesie cat and I said 'Baldy, what the hell you doin' in the women's john? You some kinds pervert, or what?'"

Several changes were instituted following the winter of 1968 and the Tom Moore Toilet trauma, including limiting mobile artillery shooting and Chic's agreeing to provide ski patrollers to do hand charge routes and be trained and employed by the Forest Service to fire the military artillery. Will Bassets and Ed Hastings left the Forest Service about this time, so Binx hired Peter Lev, an experienced ski patroller and mountaineer, and Jim Head, the former Alta ski patrol director, as snow rangers. Chic then hired Doug Christenson as Alta ski patrol director to replace Head and Dave Hamre to be the first Alta snow safety director. The Forest Service snow rangers worked with Christenson and Hamre to train their ski patrol and set up hand routes. Binx installed the first remote weather station in Little Cottonwood Canyon in the summer of 1969. Unable to obtain funds from the Forest Service, Binx scrounged a small, weather-tight building and then paid a helicopter company out of his pocket to fly the building to a solid rock site he had leveled by hand on Cardiff Peak. He couldn't afford more than one chopper flight so Binx and Alta ski patroller Hamilton "Hambone" Strayer carried all the necessary cement and tools up 2,000 vertical feet over rough terrain to the weather site, with the legendary strongman Hambone often carrying over 100 pounds on his back. Binx, Lev, and Head also instituted a program they called preventive avalanche maintenance. This program called for blind firing the military artillery and naming hand routes during storms rather than waiting, as was customary, to do control following the storm. They reasoned, quite accurately, that many small avalanches induced over the course of a storm were preferable to a few large ones following a storm.

Snowbird turned what had been the best backcountry skiing in Little Cottonwood Canyon into the some of the best resort skiing in the world when it opened in 1971. Ray Lindquist returned to the Canyon to team up with Warren Baldseifin to be the Snowbird snow rangers and work with Snowbird snow safety directors Kent Hoopengartner and Liam Fitzgerald. Fast on the heels of Snowbird's maiden year came the storms of 1972-73 and "the most severe avalanche cycle" in Binx's memory. The storms occurred over the Christmas holiday when, naturally enough, Alta was crammed with people. Before the storm cycle ended, avalanches had plowed into the Alta Lodge, stuffed all three floors with snow, buried a guest in her bed, ruptured an employee's spleen, and deposited a Volkswagen on the roof. Miraculously, no one was killed.

Onno Wieringa replaced Dave Hamre in 1974 as Alta's snow safety director and, continuing Hamre's excellent work went on to build one of the finest snow safety departments in the ski industry. The Forest Service took a philosophical turn in the late 1970's and decided it was the state of Utah's responsibility to forecast avalanches along the Little Cottonwood Canyon highway. Utah resisted the change until 1983 when an agreement was signed whereby the Utah Department of Transportation would forecast all avalanches along the Little Cottonwood Canyon highway and the Forest Service would supervise and manage the military artillery program. The change was not without its detractors; many felt, since the ski areas and the highway were mostly on National Forest, that the Forest Service had partially reneged on its original mission to reduce hazard to users of Little Cottonwood Canyon.

Regardless, the switch was made and Binx went to work as a forecaster for the Utah Department of Transportation in 1983, leaving Tom Heller as the sole Forest Service snow ranger. The change occurred just in time for the new system to undergo a baptism by snow, over 800 inches of snow. The year brought the best powder skiing in memory and some of the biggest avalanches, including a spring slide that destroyed the Catholic Church. Many residents of the town are quick to point out, not only is Alta the only town in Utah without a Mormon church, the Catholic Church is the only building to be completely destroyed by an avalanche since the mining days, and that appropriate correlations may be drawn.

The past three winters have been light by Alta standards, but the skiing has been excellent. The recent news at a glance: Chic Morton retired as Alta's general manager and Onno Wieringa replaced him; Bill Hoffman, then Titus Case have taken over as Alta snow safety directors; Daniel Howlett is Titus's assistant. Duain Bowles now stands as the heir apparent to Binx Sandahl as UDOT highway avalanche forecaster. Peter Lev also works with Binx and Duain. John Hoagland and I divide the Forest Service snow ranger duties. Right now I'm sitting in the Forest Service Alta guard station weather room finishing this diatribe, the wind is blowing like a madman, it's snowed a foot the past twelve hours, Binx is pacing the floor, and everyone is hoping Mother Nature will provide us the ultimate mondo bondage, totally awesome winter to fittingly honor Alta's fiftieth anniversary.