

The background image shows a female climber in mid-air, suspended by a rope from a cliff face. She is wearing a blue helmet and orange climbing gear. Below her is a deep blue lake, with forested hills and mountains in the distance under a clear sky.

THE COLORADO COLLEGE ALPINE JOURNAL

2017 Edition



Taggart Hut and Montezuma Basin – painting by Ric Bradley

The Tender Snowflowerⁱ by Ric Bradleyⁱⁱ

This is not a scholarly paper. It is an account of a life changing personal experience thirteen of us had in the winter of 1987. You came within a hair's breadth of learning about it in the morning newspaper or the Evening News, but since it did not end in tragedy, you were spared. That it did not end in tragedy was the result of extraordinary luck and inspired human activity.

Central to our story is the exquisite delicate snowflake. So ephemeral it will disappear before your very eyes if you look at it sternly, the snowflake nonetheless has some remarkable attributes that helped lure us into our difficulty. For one thing, collectively as well as individually, snowflakes are stunningly beautiful. No one needs convincing of that who has ever witnessed the transformation wrought when a drab late autumn landscape suddenly becomes cloaked in the first snows of winter. A mountain wilderness that can beckon you in July with its flowers and

meadows, lakes and streams, can beckon you just as insistently in February with its mantle of sparkling ermine. And the friendly snowflake even helps you get there by lubricating the bottoms of your skis as you glide along; snowflakes, unlike sand crystals, turn to water when squeezed. And if you rub a thin layer of soft wax on the bottoms of your skis you can even climb quite steeply without slipping back because the snowflakes embed themselves in the wax. Indeed, in many ways wilderness travel is easier in winter than in summer. The terrain is smooth, there are no boulders to trip over, and the skis give you wings.

And so it was that on a Wednesday in late February our little group answering the siren call of the winter wilderness as it has done every year at this time for more than a decade, parked cars at road's end in the old ghost mining town of Ashcroft, 15 miles south of Aspen, shouldered packs, and skied 5 miles up the valley to one of the Alfred Braun huts, high in the Elk Mountains.

The Braun huts were built specifically for ski tourers. Each hut provides shelter, stove and wood, pots and dishes, mattresses, and primitive sanitary facilities. The skier brings their food, personal effects, and a sleeping bag. For a very nominal fee they receive a pass to a winter wonderland fit for the gods.

But back to the snowflake. For all its beauty, the snowflake has a grim, uncompromising deadly side. For one thing it is cold, freezing cold. A person buried in snow will not long endure—perhaps thirty minutes at the outside, but often much less, depending on clothing, age, state of health, whether injured or not, and so forth. And even though it is light and feathery as it falls from the sky, snow is quite capable of burying you and holding you in an iron grip. The tiny interlocking crystal arms that hold snow in repose on steep hillsides have limited strength, and under the right conditions a small disturbance can cause the entire snow-cover to come sliding and tumbling down, gathering mass and momentum as it goes, sometimes reaching speeds of more than 100 mph, snapping tree trunks, smashing structures, devouring everything in its path. Coming to rest at the bottom, the snow “sets up” in a solid mass roughly the consistency of concrete. This is the avalanche, the dreaded white death.

And so this is really the story of an avalanche, THE avalanche for all of us who were there, as if there were no other, and indeed, we hope there will be no other.

The winter of 1986-87 was a particularly bad one for avalanches in Colorado. Eleven people died in several unrelated occurrences. Only one week before our own trip, several skiers, venturing beyond the boundary of the regularly patrolled Breckenridge ski area, triggered an avalanche that buried four of them. It was two days before the hundred or so volunteer rescue workers found and dug out the last of the lifeless bodies. That event may have helped us. At least it sobered us enough to purchase lightweight shovels to go into our daypacks along with our red avalanche lines. Dorry and I also bought a couple of pairs of telescoping probe poles, though one of the pairs later turned out to be critically defective. But we were not sobered enough to

purchase or rent the \$100 radio transmitter/receiver beepers that have since become standard equipment for us. That particular barn would be locked only after the horse disappeared.

As we picked up the key to the cabin from Fred Braun on that Wednesday morning, he expressed concern. “I should not let you go: he said. It is very dangerous. But I know you will be careful?” We assured him we would be.

Why was the winter of 1987 so bad? Mark Bradley, my nephew of 23 years, explained it to us on Friday, three hours before his own unexpected rendezvous with Destiny. We were standing on our skis in the snow, eating lunch beside a switchback of the mining road we had been following that morning. Mark was a former ski patrolman at the Eldora Ski Area near Boulder and had been lectured on avalanches.

Heavy snows came early to Colorado’s mountains that year, Mark told us. And then the weather turned cold and no further snow fell for six weeks. The cold air kept the snow from melting away, but the relatively warm ground underneath vaporized the layer of snow adjacent to it and the vapor recrystallized into large brittle ice crystals—hoar frost. Thus, right next to the ground there developed a structurally weak layer consisting mainly of air and ball-bearing-like hoar frost. Now this phenomenon happens to some extent every year, but this year with no warm weather or additional snow to settle the pack, the situation was extreme. We were now in the middle of a snowy period, and two or three feet had fallen in the previous two weeks, but the pack remained largely unsettled and poorly supported. To illustrate his point, Mark—a good product of academia dug a hole in the snow down to the ground (using one of our newly purchased shovels), and showed us a hoar frost layer a foot thick.

His explanation made good sense to us. Throughout the morning, as we trudged up the road, the weight of the person in the lead would cause the snow to settle with a deep and penetrating “whoomph”, cracks would run out from the spot where they stood, and little snow slides would come tumbling down the road cut. At one point, as we ventured out onto a broad flat



Looking up along the path Mark swam in the flowing avalanche.

meadow, there was a considerable "whoomph," the snow settled several inches, cracks appeared, and a large sparsely wooded slope two hundred yards away shed its burden, the avalanche triggered by the shock wave we had initiated. That was warning aplenty!—first by the Breckenridge accident, then by Fred Braun, then by Mark, and now by one of our very own mountains. Noting that our mining road was about to cross some steep open terrain up ahead, we canceled all thought of continuing, and resigned to spending the rest of the afternoon as we had spent the previous one, playing on a gentle, open hillside not far from the cabin.

Actually, that hillside is gentle only near the bottom. Higher up it gets much steeper, approaching 40 degrees perhaps. But in the middle of the slope, half way to the top, and at a point where the grade is getting close to 30 degrees, there is a large protected island of trees. If we limited our activity to the sheltered section below the island, we figured, we would be safe, for down there the slope was too gentle to slide, and the trees would block anything coming down from above. And so that's where we spent an hour or two, practicing telemark turns, a delightful

maneuver the Norwegians invented more than a century ago.

Except that on this particular afternoon there was more frustration than delight. The grade was too gentle, the fluff too deep. One could barely move, even going straight down the hill. Surely there had to be something better! And clearly there was: higher up and to the right of the trees, steeper unbroken slopes beckoned. Up there the Loreley sang, combing her golden hair.

According to Val Veirs' diary, he heard that song and was just beginning to respond to it when Rick Keller came by, heading for the hut. Val writes: "I pause and then decide to go down with Rick and relax and read instead of struggling up through the difficult snow for that last long run. In just moments we are in the cabin. Rick (Keller), John Watkins, Derrick Robinson, and I work on the fires and chat. As we talk, Mark is finishing putting bright orange climbers on his skis. It is clear to me that the siren that called me earlier to climb high on the mountain has exerted its powerful influence on Mark. Somehow I know that Mark is going to climb where I had wanted to go. As the door closes, 'Have a good ski, Mark!'"



Ric with Mark lying where he was dug out the previous afternoon.

We all wrote personal accounts of the day's events, and later Mark and his mother Louise (or Weezie)—who was also with us—compiled them into a little blue book. Much of the rest of my paper will be taken verbatim from these accounts. Mark tells in his diary why he put on the climbers: "During the morning I worked out a scheme which would allow me to maximize the telemark-to-zig-zag-ratio." (That is, the time coming down versus the time climbing up.) If I armed my skis with skins (i.e. climbers) I could climb higher and faster. Wearing skins I trudged up the slope we had skied down dozens of times. As it was getting late in the afternoon, the others were taking last runs or were already at the cabin as I started up the slope. I gave my mother a vague description of the route I hoped to take and asked her to watch after me." Mark then describes the climb up. "I was approaching the highest level we had skied before and eager to go higher. I was by now to the right of the dense trees, and the group which had congregated at the base of the hill was just out of sight."

Weezie recollects: "The ski day was nearly over... when Mark appeared at the bottom of the hill with skins on his skis... ready to climb more directly for his last runs of the day. Those skins were troubling to a mother—they made it too easy to climb too high. As he passed, I asked where he was headed and then if he really thought that section of the hill was safe. His confidence was reassuring, and after all he did know more about avalanches than I." Weezie then turned to talk with Laurel McLeod (Dean of Students at Colorado College), and her two companions from Boulder, Carol Kampert, and Sue Henrikson. A few moments later Dorry and I joined them and asked if they were going down to the cabin. Weezie explained they were waiting for Mark, and pointed him out high on the slope near the base of the sheltering trees and heading toward open snow to the right. Sue writes that a shadow came across my eyes when I spotted Mark, and Weezie writes that she sensed concern in my voice when I asked if he was alone. Nevertheless (and I have thought about this many times since), I did nothing to try to arrest his progress. I did not even call to ask if he were dragging his avalanche cord. Nor did Weezie. "He is now an autonomous

young adult," she writes in her diary, "a mature 23 year old, not to be clucked over."

There was more chit chat. Mark passed from sight behind the trees. I remember Weezie expressing great appreciation that she and Mark and her Boulder friends had been included on our trip, and I quoted Roald Amundsen's remark when he reached the South Pole: "It's good to be alive!" Then suddenly Laurel shouted: "AVALANCHE!" Good old Laurel. Ever the responsible dean, she had kept her eye on Mark the whole time while the rest of us had chatted, inattentively. And when Mark had disappeared behind the trees, she had continued to watch.

Our diaries describe the avalanche in such terms as: "billowing clouds of white," "dreadful river of white," "appalling," "in eerie silence the mountain was quivering," "like a hawk silently swooping down on its prey." Weezie's diary reads: "Laurel's cry caused us all to turn around and stare in disbelief. The entire right side of the hill was dancing, flowing downward in ripples. It was beautiful, it was unreal, it couldn't be happening. Then the hill stopped moving as silently as it had begun."

Mark's account is the most remarkable. Many people have seen avalanches, but few have lived to describe one from the inside. Here is his story: "I heard a faint 'woomph' above me as my ski plunged into the soft snow. I paused for a moment to see the effects of the 'woomph': Reassured by the stability of my surroundings, I proceeded. After a step or two something caught my eye. I looked! Much to my amazement, the slope beyond these trees was silently rippling, churning, and slithering down. 'Wow; I said to myself. I'm right next to an avalanche!' A second later out of curiosity I looked directly above me. The same silent wave was rapidly coursing its way through the trees towards me. It was a moment of tremendous impact. 'I am about to be hit by an avalanche!'"

"Instinctively, I shed my poles. I attempted to release my bindings. There was not ample time. Abandoning the effort, I straightened to receive the full impact of the snow. My strength was no match for this wave of frozen water. As if I had done this all my life, I found myself swimming with the current. Without much effort I reached

the surface of the writhing froth. This isn't so bad: I thought to myself as I took a deep breath of sweet air and cold fine snow-dust. But then a wave crested my head and drove me deep under. Again I paddled towards the surface, towards the light, towards the oxygen, towards life."

"I liken the ride in the avalanche to body-surfing in the ocean. I was traveling in a surging liquid. There was constant churning press surrounding every part of my body. I found myself constantly paddling for the surface of the snow ocean, while powerful currents welled around me. A second time I surfaced from the frothy mist. Yet again my helpless body was driven under. This time, as I worked towards the surface I felt my source of transportation slow. I calculated the medium would bear one or two more strokes before running to a halt. From the rudimentary avalanche training I had, I knew the text book procedure calls for the avalanche victim to create a pocket of air in front of their mouth with their hands just prior to the slide's stopping. Many times I have tried to visualize what a ride in an avalanche would be like. Many times I have practiced creating imaginary air cavities in front of my face. However, given my circumstances, having no avalanche beacon or avalanche cord, I knew I had little chance of being found if I were to be buried completely. Judging from how far I had had to swim to reach the surface before, I knew I was close. I concluded my chances of making it to the surface were greater than the likelihood of their finding me if I were buried. So I abandoned my previous survival plan. I used every bit of the avalanche's dying movements to try to crest the pack. In the increasingly viscous medium, I performed to the best of my ability, given that I was swimming with skis on, one, then one last breast stroke."

"That was it, everything stood icy still. The once rustling, slithering serpent now lay lifeless, with me frozen part way through a breast stroke somewhere in its bowels."

"So convinced I should be at the surface, I was angered. I attempted to break through the overburden with my left arm. My efforts were futile. Though I was not being crushed, my range of motion was but a few centimeters. As all was still, I became aware of my labored breathing.

This I attributed to my attempts to free myself. I stopped trying. The only task ahead of me was to slow, slow... slow down."

"Ruling out self-extrication, I next thought of my friends. The likelihood of their locating me and digging me out were slim. If they could, they would, I reasoned, and if they couldn't they wouldn't. I concluded either case had nothing to do with me. I spit to confirm my relationship to gravity. I had remembered that was something avalanche victims could do to orient themselves. I sort of chuckled to myself. There I was in a giant bodycast with a little saliva running down the side of my chin. Yes, indeed, that way was up – as if it really made a difference at that point."

"Being completely powerless, I became quite objective. I lamented for my friends on the surface, particularly my mother. What a horrific task they had ahead of them. Somewhere up there, 12 people were having to cope with their own fears and doubts while organizing and carrying out a rescue mission. My thoughts turned next to Shanti, my girlfriend, and Judith, her mother. Franz, Shanti's father and Judith's husband, had been killed in an avalanche on Mt. Logan in 1984. Shanti's uncle had died similarly in Peru ten years earlier. My death would be a tragedy for them. Ironically, though, it wasn't a tragedy for me. I was not suffering. I didn't particularly want to die. I was merely caught in a set of circumstances far beyond my control. My death seemed unfortunately early in life and avoidable, thus regrettable, but not tragic. I wished I could convey that to Shanti."

"Death is hardest on those that remain living, I realized. In fact, my friends' efforts to save me were largely for their sake, not mine. The living are too possessive of life, I speculated.

"I smiled to myself; there I was dying, carefree. The last thing I remember thinking was, 'Wow, this is incredible! If only the living knew how painless, actually pleasurable, dying is, they would make life more pleasurable. I alone have died many more painful deaths in life—pressures, guilt trips, feared rejections, etc.—than I am in death right now!"

"The grainy blackness which had been creeping into my mind began to swell. Small arched rectangles of red and yellow now

accompanied the swirling blackness. I remember smiling to myself and no longer resisting the pull to slide into the spinning darkness. With a slight twisting motion, then an undulating falling motion, I joined the rich peaceful darkness."

While Mark was slipping away into his peaceful sleep, it was anything but peaceful outside. Laurel (bless her heart), still the clear thinking administrator, noted the time: 3:04. It might be important later, she thought. She also aroused the rest of us from our shocked catatonic state: "Mark's up there. Let's get going!" Carol skied off to the cabin to get help. The rest of us, in a daze, went through various motions, Laurel writes: "As I climb (damn! need more wax), Ric is right behind me. He shouted 'Mark' occasionally. Total silence. The reality began to sink in. Nausea rose up. No! can't stop, time's too precious." Weezie writes: "I stared, waiting for Mark to ski out from behind the trees. It seemed important to give my shovel to Randy because he

was stronger and faster than I." (Weezie then describes some moments of intense frustration trying to get her shovel to Randy and then trying to get some climbing wax rubbed onto his skis so that he could climb. It probably was no more than a minute or two before Randy was on his way up the track with shovel in hand, but under the circumstances, to her and to Randy it seemed like eternity. She then describes wondering how she is going to break the news to Bill, her husband, and to Shanti, and to Mark's sister Melanie. "No!" she writes, "Mark is alive. I know he is. He will ski down any moment now so why ever are they all so concerned and running up that hill?" (At this point there is some shouted discussion about sending someone to Ashcroft for help and Weezie considers going herself.) "All the men should stay here," she writes, "so that means I must go. Dorry says I should not have to do that and I feel I must stay because I better than anyone else will be able to feel where Mark is under all that snow. Then—



Mark looking down on the avalanche the day after he was saved.

the most hopeless moment of all to see Ric probing the snow with one pole. Mark has told me that probing is useless unless there are hundreds—did he say hundreds or just lots?—of people, each with a pole standing a foot apart. Remember the pictures of the searchers in last week's paper!"

"I think Ric has said he found Mark's glasses, but what good is that! See what a huge hill it is and Mark could be anywhere in it. So I must go to the valley, but I must stay here. 'You have to find my little boy', I actually speak aloud as I turn to go."

For Dorry there was great, painful *deja vu*. She had lost her sister in a tragic sailing accident in 1944, at about Mark's age, and knew from intense personal experience exactly what lay ahead for Mark's family. She writes: "There was great shock and numbness when there was no Mark, certainly you could not be located, and the immediate realization of what this would mean to your family: 'Weezie and Bill have lost their son. Melanie will never see her brother again. They will have to go through the agony and grief of Mark's death and then will live with a constant sorrow in their hearts for the rest of their lives. How dreadful for them. How unbearable this is. And when it seemed Weezie might ski to Ashcroft I knew this was wrong. She shouldn't have to go. And it wouldn't do any good for anyone to leave there anyway.'

Other people expressed similar feelings of disbelief, shock, even anger. When Carol rushed down to the cabin and shouted: "We think Mark is caught in a slide!" Julia Robinson snapped "What does she mean—think?" Other reactions: "How could it be Mark? Mark with his winning grin and looks, a youth so obviously favored by the gods." And again: "What is this going to do to my cough? How will I tell all this to my wife? We'll be dragging a dead body down the mountain tonight. This has spoiled our cabin trips forever." And more: "What would we do with all the beer and food I so painfully lugged up here if we had to return to Aspen early? How embarrassed we would be to explain Mark's death to Fred Braun after having gotten his special indulgence to use Lindley Hut as scheduled in spite of the perceived avalanche danger."

And what about my own thoughts as I climbed back up the hill to the slide? They were pretty terrible I can tell you. For one thing, I felt a heavy responsibility for all this. I had personally arranged all these but trips—well over a dozen of them—and had invited Weezie, her two friends, and Mark, to join us. But more pertinently, at the critical moment when Mark had climbed out onto steep untested terrain, I had not yelled: "Mark, for God's sake, get the hell off that slope!" As senior member present it would have been appropriate for me to do so, and secretly Weezie might have appreciated it. But I have never been good at ordering grown people around, and of course Mark would have resented being yelled at by his uncle...but compared to this?

The other oppressive feeling I had was one of utter hopelessness. We had very little time in which to find Mark alive, and very little chance. There were so few of us and that avalanche swath was so large—a couple of hundred yards long and fifty yards wide—and we had not the remotest idea where in there he might be, if indeed he was in there at all. (He could have been lying injured and unconscious up in those trees.) All I knew was that the clock was ticking inexorably, time would slip away from us, and we were going to watch it go, helplessly. The moment would soon come when all of us would look at one another, gray faced, and know it was too late.

Still, one had to do what one could because at that moment Mark probably still lived. When Laurel and I climbed up onto the slide, we looked for any sign, any clue as to his whereabouts; an arm sticking out of the snow, a ski, anything. But the slide was pure white except for three little black objects, widely dispersed. I went over to investigate the one nearest me: it was a pair of dark glasses sticking out of the snow—undoubtedly Mark's! That settled it: Mark was buried for sure. "Mark the spot," shouted Laurel, and climbed higher to look at the other objects. (They turned out to be broken spruce branches.)

I had no real reason to believe Mark was anywhere near the glasses, but lacking any other clues, this seemed like a good place to start looking. So I poked my upside down pole in the snow all around the glasses. Nothing. Then I decided I'd better be systematic about this search



Mother and son, welcoming the new day.

or I would waste valuable time. I don't know much about the dynamics of an avalanche, but I figured the surface layers would slide faster and farther than those layers underneath, and so Mark, being buried, ought to be uphill from those glasses—and directly uphill, not off to the side somewhere. That narrowed things down a little. I punched a line of holes, about two feet apart, straight across that part of the slope near the glasses, moved upwards a few and came back, doing the same thing. Meantime, Randy had arrived and was busily attacking a mound of snow nearby with Weezie's shovel. I started back the other way again, a little higher up. After half a dozen punches in that direction I hit something hard. Clink! A rock perhaps, or a branch, certainly not a human body. Still, my pole had hit something, and something is better than nothing. "Try digging here, Randy," I said, and while Randy with his great strength (a former CC football star and a physical fitness fiend) generated a plume of snow, I continued probing.

"It's a ski!" he shouted, and soon verified that there was a foot attached to it, about four feet down. I had hit Mark's Ski, edge on—calculate the probability of that happening, Wilbur!

Of all the accounts of the subsequent rescue, Val's is the one I would like to read to you, partly because it gives you a good sense of the urgent frenetic activity we were engaged in, and partly because Val played such a crucial role in the rescue. A wonderful combination of brains and brawn, Val has a superb ability to size up situations, to know what needs to be done, to act, and to inspire others to act too. Without in any way being officious, he took charge and the rest of us were very grateful that he did. Here is his account: "By the window, Carol flies toward the door. I and others run out. 'Mark may be in an avalanche!' I run inside - where are my ski boots? my gloves? where? Quick—go—we need shovels should I take this mop as a probe? No not better than a ski pole. Can this really be happening? Got my skis - Go! Carol has departed with a shovel. Derrick is leaving. Which shovel should I take? Long one or short one? Shorter seems easier to carry - Go!"

"There is Derrick on the track - Carol is way ahead, almost up to the base of the hill. Now

Derrick is having trouble with his skis. I can see the hill others are moving upward—why so slow? Where is the slide?"

"There! ! Look at the length of the fracture line. Go, Derrick. I am hitting Derrick's ski tails. Now Derrick is stopping for adjustments and as he steps off the trail into the soft snow, I pass. Now Go! I can't seem to breathe. Why aren't those people getting up on the slide? There's Ric, way up on the slide. Randy is there also. Laurel is much higher, almost to the trees which is as high as we had climbed. Carol is making the turn and starting upward. Where could Mark be? Up in those trees? Anywhere under all that snow? This shovel is hard to hold. Look at the size of the avalanche deposit! How can we ever expect to find Mark, if he is there? He can't live! What do you tell someone later? I've got to go faster."

"Ric is poking around above me with his pole. Laurel is so high, so far away. How can we tell others? We didn't listen to the mountain when it spoke to us earlier this morning. I am coming up on Sue and she says 'Take this shovel' so now I have two. What should I do? What can anyone do? This is hopeless. Mark only has minutes—so much time is passing—I'm not moving! Why?"

"Ric shouts, 'I hit a ski!!' I glance upward from two switchbacks below and try to move faster. This can't be true did I really hear Ric? My lungs are on fire. As I approach Ric, Randy calls, 'I have found Mark!' I have to dig. Where? Where is the ski? Where is Mark? All I see is Randy shoveling frantically, snow is flying, everything is white, others are approaching. Here come Dorry and Louise. I am digging here, next to Ric. Dig. Nothing is happening. Dig. There! Randy has uncovered a foot. I see it, for just an instant before it is gone as snow falls into the hole. Dig Dig Dig. The shovel is heavy, I am tired. Switch to the backpacking shovel, it is lighter. Way too flimsy for this task. Dig Dig Nothing Nothing. Why don't we see the ski? the leg? Nothing! I can't breathe. I push the shovel in and lift but the snow falls to the side. I am not getting anywhere. I can't breathe Dig! have hit something. Using my hands I unbury part of a what? an arm. Mark really is in here! where should his head be? Seems like it should be to the left. Snow is falling down from the efforts of those that are digging above and to

the sides. Dig - Here - here is Mark's cheek his face - brush the snow away from his nose. What is that? I hear a groan. Again, snow from above fills the hole and Mark disappears again. Once more, his face is now clear at least his nose and mouth are almost clear - another groan - I clear the snow from his nose and mouth and now Mark exhales, quite forcefully! An instant later, snow once more fills the hole and covers Mark. Clear again - is he breathing? How can I tell? a shovel slams into the snow just inches above Mark's head. Be careful! but dig! Who knows CPR?' Louise is now holding Mark's head, protecting him, saving him. Mark's lips are blue - his cheeks are splotchy yellowish green - he seems to be breathing."

"John has dug out one ski - everything is all bent - must be broken - John can't get the ski off 'Do it!' I say, 'take the shoe off' what a dumb idea. John positions the ski and removes it. Where is the other ski? We will never dig him out if we don't find the other ski. Start digging down from the top I can't breathe - dig - dig - dig - we have five feet to go! Don't let the snow go down on Mark and Louise. Someone is standing on Mark. Get off! - it is me. Here is the ski - this ski is immobile - I am going to lever it out. I don't care if his leg is broken. I've got to get this ski out. Dig more snow - pull - it is moving there is Mark's leg his ski is flipped around 180 degrees but his leg seems straight - pull, here it comes."

"Got to dig around Mark's back and lift him out. This guy is really heavy or stuck or both. 'Mark! can you hear us? Can you feel this?' I pinch and poke at Mark and he says 'YES' Mark's eyes are open; his head is in Louise's lap—he really is alive - lift - lift - My God, he's O.K. Look at his lips; they are as blue as his parka. His cheeks look weird."

At this point, Julia and Derrick, who had been preparing to ski to Ashcroft for help in case Mark had serious injuries, dropped their preparations. Randy came plodding up the hill with a sled, but Mark, now on his feet and shaking violently, chose to ski back to the cabin rather than ride in the sled. John went on ahead to stoke up the stove. Laurel checked her watch, and figured Mark's face had been buried not less than twelve minutes, nor more than fifteen. Shaking all the way, Mark returned to the cabin and was

warmed by sleeping bags hot drinks, hot towels, a roaring stove.

Val concludes his piece: "Mark has returned to us. We are so thankful. Louise said we have collectively participated in a birth of life. Clearly, this event will mark all of our lives with a crystalline clarity and beauty that could have shattered and didn't."

That evening in the cabin there was great release: jubilation, tears, laughter, song, too much beer. Rick Keller, a war veteran, likened it to the closeness of comrades in war. The previous night in the wee hours, the cabin had been alive with the sound of snoring. This night you could have heard a pin drop as 13 pairs of eyes stared at the ceiling.

Dorry concludes her diary thus: "One last, and nice touch: when we passed the site on Sunday on our way out, Mark and Weezie were a receiving committee, hugging and thanking everyone as they passed by. Then they treated us all to lunch in Glenwood Springs. This is one sweet gang of people."

Were we lucky? You already know I hit Mark's ski edge on and that we were handed a solid gold clue in the form of Mark's glasses. But how good was that clue? In this case, excellent. However, the following summer Dorry and I returned to the site, among other reasons to recover one Mark's poles, missing from the moment the avalanche caught him. We found the pole all right, but it was 50 feet downhill from where Mark had lain. If the pole had been the clue sticking out of the snow instead of the glasses we would have searched in exactly the wrong places. Were we lucky? Ask Dr. Leo Nassimbele, oral surgeon here in Colorado Springs who for 30 years has been a member of a Search and Rescue team, and who has dug out many an avalanche victim, dead or alive. Not once in 30 years, he said, have they ever succeeded in finding an avalanche victim alive in those cases where they did not know in advance where the person was located. What they had never been able to do in 30 years we had accomplished on our very first try. As Rick Keller said: "No beeper in the world can beat dumb luck." ~~~



ⁱ “Snowflower” was John Muir’s term for the ‘tool’ used by the Great Maker when He carved out Yosemite Valley.

Val OCR’d and, with Stormy Burns, lightly edited and pdf’d the Colorado College print version of Ric Bradley’s report.

1/6/2019

ⁱⁱ Ric Bradley is emeritus Professor of Physics at Colorado College and emeritus Colorado College Dean of the College

Photos are by various members of Uncle Ric’s Group.