



Chapter 6



Avalanche at Jordan

My mother and I spent the winter months of 1910-11 in Carson City with her father, who had remarried.

One day, grandfather Charlie rushed home from town with some exciting news that was also very frightening. "All hell broke loose at Mono Lake yesterday." He went on to say that there had been a tremendous avalanche four miles west of Mono Lake at the Southern Sierra Power Company's plant at Jordan, near the base of Copper Mountain. It was said to be the worst ever experienced in Mono Basin. Rescue operations were underway to locate survivors — if any. The rescue operations were being hampered by blizzard conditions.

A fine powder snow had begun to fall in December, changing to a sleety, wet snow the first part of January, and finally ending on January 16. Residents of Mono Basin were greatly relieved, but not for long. An intense cold spell followed the storm, accompanied by a dense "Mono fog." Mono Basin was transformed into a solid cake of ice.¹

On February 22, the snow resumed, continuing for three weeks. It ended on March 10.

When the power went off at midnight, Bodie was the first to take action. (Bodie was the closest town and Southern Sierra's main office was there.)

Two power company employees were sent on skis over to Jordan. They were bucking fifty-mile-an-hour winds, blizzards, and loose-flying snow. As the repairmen reached the top of the ridge they expected to see the power house and nearby cottages; but to their surprise, nothing was visible but a tremendous mountain of snow. The snowslide had wiped out the entire settlement.

Immediately after this news reached the Bodie Power Company, a messenger was rushed out to spread the news to Bodie's many saloons. In

¹ Adapted from *Mineral County Independent News*, Hawthorne, Nevada, February 26, 1969. Related by Joe Scanavino.

the dim candlelight he called at the top of his voice: "Attention everyone, I have news from the repair crew." Everything went quiet. "Jordan Power plant was struck by a snowslide. It's completely wiped out. Seven men and one woman are buried under the snow."

These words sent chills through everyone who heard. Even hard, tough miners wilted back into their chairs and dropped their heads with a few words of prayer. They knew from past experience that a snowslide could be deadly.

Nothing was more important than getting to Jordan, and in less than an hour a hundred men were skiing out of Bodie.

The blizzard was raging, and at different points, thirty or so of the men had to turn back, due to exhaustion or sprained muscles. The rest continued, arriving at the Scanavino ranch (a halfway point and stage stop) at 6 a.m. After a big breakfast and four hours' rest, the remaining 70 men continued on, although some had developed colds and frostbite. Twenty-eight feet of snow fell on Bodie, and over 25 feet fell at Jordan. Eight feet of snow covered the sagebrush and fence posts at my grandmother Mary Filosena's ranch.

At midnight, on March 7 — 12:01 to be exact — "all hell broke loose." It was the largest snowslide ever: over a mile long, half a mile wide, and 18 to 22 feet deep. When the entire east side of Copper Mountain finally slid off, an estimated 4000 tons of snow piled down around the base.

The big slide cleaned out everything. The power house, four cottages, and hundred-year-old trees, which were sheared off right at the ground and then carried 500 feet.

The power plant had been put into operation in the fall of 1910. It transmitted power to Bodie and Aurora, ending at the Wonder Mine in Aurora. Prior to the Jordan facility, the Green Creek Power plant had been used to transmit power to Bodie. The Green Creek power line was 13 miles long. It consisted of two wires which led directly to the Standard Mine at Bodie. Its completion in 1893 was a major event. In fact, when Clarence Peck threw the switch that activated the first power to Bodie, the news was flashed around the world.

The force and speed of the Jordan avalanche was tremendous. An electric transformer inside the power house, which stood over 15 feet and weighed over 20 tons, skidded vertically over 300 feet. It was still in a vertical position when it stopped skidding.

Other men from nearby communities arrived to join the Bodie group in digging at the location of the avalanche.

It was -28°F . during the rescue operations, and wherever they dug, small slides kept coming their way. When that occurred, those shoveling

ran to safety, returning later to dig out their tools before continuing their grim task.

The six bodies that were found first had all been Power Company employees and were in the power plant at the time of the slide. They skidded the 500 feet along with the power house machinery, and were buried alive.

At 2:23 that afternoon of March 10, the wall of one of the cottages was located. Mrs. and Mrs. Mason (also Power Company employees) were known to have been sleeping there at the time of the slide.

The first indication of life was the faint, whimpering noise of a dog. Shep, the Mason's dog, was pulled out and given first aid. He was terribly cold and shivering.

The digging continued, and suddenly, low and painful groans were heard. The Masons had been found.

Mr. Mason had been killed instantly by a huge concrete slab — part of

the power house — that weighed several tons. Because his body was pinned against Mrs. Mason's leg, she could not move. A large trunk on her side of the bed, four inches higher than the bed itself, had saved her from the direct weight of the concrete. She and the dog had just four inches in which to move and breathe.

It had been 62½ hours since the snowslide struck. They gave Mrs. Mason first aid, but her leg was badly infected. Ten men on skis hitched themselves to a toboggan and wasted no time pulling her to the Conway ranch two miles away.



The Fred Mattly ranch at Jordan, as skiers prepare to pull Mrs. Mason to Conway ranch.

The trip was completed in 37 minutes. Mrs. Conway, a trained nurse, realized that Mrs. Mason had gangrene and must be taken to the Bodie Hospital right away. John Conway instructed his blacksmith to fix steel runners to a toboggan and equipped the sled with eight pulling ropes. They knew it might take as long as three days to reach Bodie.

Louis De Chambeau, the ski-maker, brought all his extra skis, and along with many Indian men, volunteered his help on this life-and-death run.

Mrs. Mason left the ranch at 4 a.m. on March 11, pulled by a team of 48 expert skiers. They left early to take advantage of the frozen snow.

Mrs. Agnes Mason,
Who Was Snatched
From Awful Death



NIGHT OF TERROR
IN SNOW SLIDE

Woman Whose Husband Was
Killed Tells of Terrible
Experience

OAKLAND, April 1.—Rescued from a grave of snow and the timbers of a demolished cabin, where she lay pinned, 60 hours beside the dead body of her husband, with her shepherd dog keeping her awake by licking her face and barking, Mrs. Agnes Mason is at the Fabiola hospital convalescing from the serious illness which followed.

The slide which killed Mason came thundering down from the smooth granite slopes of the Sierra in Mono county, wiped out the new power plant of the Hydro electric company and the cabins surrounding it and killed six men besides Mason.

"I don't know how or when it happened," said Mrs. Mason tonight. "Shep, the dog, awakened me, and I found that I could not move. I called to my husband, but he did not answer. My right arm was pinned across my chest. My right knee and heel were across my husband. I found that I could move my head a little, but when I raised my face an inch and a half I struck the timbers of what had been the roof of our cabin. How I knew that my husband was dead, I can not tell. The snow was everywhere about, but the heat of the dog and my own breathing made it warm and I did not suffer from the cold.

"But when my husband grew cold beside me—then I knew—" and tears came to her eyes.

"I talked to Shep and he tried to talk back. He whined and howled and barked and scratched at the snow and at the timbers.

"I must have been unconscious at times, for it didn't seem long before I heard men walking on the snow overhead. I called as loud as I could and told Shep to bark. You should have heard him. Quickly they dug down where we were. They said the snow was eight feet deep overhead.

"Well, they got us out at last. We had to stay there in the shanty several days while 20 men were breaking a road through the snow to Bodie. They built a sled and carried me to the Conway ranch, where we had a doctor. My grandfather, Henry Thornton, was notified, and he came up from Arizona and arranged for me to come here."

From San Francisco Call Bulletin, April 2, 1911

Maude Conway, John's niece, went along with the team to help care for the patient. She too was an expert skier.

Sixteen-year-old Steve Scanavino was sent on ahead to the next spread, the Scanavino ranch, to make sure his folks would be ready to feed 75 people. A steer and two hogs were butchered, and the food was on the table when the caravan arrived at 3:30 p.m. They had been traveling 11 hours.

Just past midnight on March 12, everyone got up to eat a large breakfast. Lunches were packed on a second toboggan, and so were a coffee pot, homemade stove, and a thirty-gallon drum of water. This sled was pulled by a team of six skiers. The caravan pulled out at 1 a.m.

At -16°F. , the weather was calm and icy. The Indian men saved several hours' time by taking over the pulling on snowshoes whenever they came to a hill, as the skis would keep sliding backward.

The townspeople of Bodie worked day and night from the other end, with horses and shovels, to open the road at Butcher Flat and Sugar Loaf grade through 20 feet of snow. When the man-powered toboggan met up with them, the patient was transferred to a sleigh, pulled by a snowshoed team of horses.

Mrs. Mason was soon in the Bodie Hospital, but the gangrene had progressed rapidly and she was sent directly to Oakland to have her leg amputated. She recovered and the Southern Sierra Power Company gave her a lifetime job on the switchboard.

The Power Company sent letters of appreciation and money to those who had helped.

Services were held near the Fred Mattly ranch for the seven whose lives had been snuffed out. Neighboring women sang songs fitting the occasion. It was clear and cold as their voices rose over the frosty Sierra.