

A Brief History of the Alta Cooperative Observer Weather Station

The National Weather Service (NWS) Cooperative Observer Program (Coop) is the nation's weather and climate observing network of, by and for the people. More than 8,700 volunteers across the country take observations on farms, in urban and suburban areas and national parks, from seashores and mountaintops. The data are wholly representative of where people live, work and play.

The Alta Coop weather station officially began in 1905. Though precise coordinates were difficult to determine for the Alta Coop site at its inception, records suggest it has remained within ¼ mile of its original siting throughout its century-plus existence at the top of Little Cottonwood Canyon. Historical documents refer to the development of a snow course by the “Salt Lake City Waterworks Department” in 1941, with the US Forest Service officially providing snow measurements beginning in 1944.

By 1950 a full climatological station was established, as described in a January 1952 article in Newsweek magazine (see photo below), which included a fully automated precipitation gauge. Unfortunately the gauge was destroyed in an avalanche in 1953, but dedicated forest service personnel, led by avalanche forecasting pioneer Monte Atwater, maintained unbroken records for decades after this event

The University of Utah Quinney Research Center (current home of the Town of Alta offices) was built in 1970 and became the new site for the Alta Coop. Alta town staff took over weather observations when its offices were established there in 1986, and continue to this day. The current weather team is led by 20-year veteran observer Sarah McCloskey. The observers consistently measure and report temperature and precipitation, including the ever-watched snowfall and snow depth measurements, every single day.



Atwater and his gadgetry: Also high explosives and obsolete artillery

Newsweek

Photo from Newsweek, January 23, 1952, showing the automated precipitation gauge established by the USFS in 1950 at the Alta Coop station. It was destroyed in a 1953 avalanche.