

TIED



TO THE

TRACKS



When the trains stopped coming through Ogden, the city started to die.
Forty years later, skiing may be its salvation.

BY DEREK TAYLOR

THE TRAIN PULLS INTO THE STATION. This is it, your stop. The end of the line. A blast of cool air hits your face as the door slides open. Your ski bag clunks down the steps.
“Welcome to Ogden.”
That’s what the sign on the railcar-turned-café says. There’s a sheet-metal skier on the side, a snowboarder cutout soaring over the top. What you see beyond, though, isn’t what you’d expect of a North American ski town—its brick buildings and dormant smokestacks of a small post-industrial-revolution city.

For the last five years, this is where they’ve been telling you to go. *Forbes* rated it among the top places for businesses and careers, and the eighth best place to raise a family. *National Geographic Adventure* called it an

emerging ski town and one of the nation’s top 100 adventure towns. *Smithsonian.com* listed it among “Where to live next.” Last year, POWDER placed Ogden second in its ranking of ski towns (this year,

Snowbasin/Powder Mountain are fourth), based on a formula that factored skiable acres, annual snowfall, and skier visits.

The backdrop for the city is 9,570-foot Mount Ogden. The other side of that massif is Snowbasin and its two gondolas, 15-person tram, and eight chairs accessing 3,000 acres of anything you’d want to ski—steep couloirs, well-spaced glades, open bowls, backcountry, and fast groomers.

Beyond that is Powder Mountain, featuring seven lifts servicing 2,800 acres, another 1,900 served by snowcat and bus shuttle, a 3,000-acre cat skiing zone, and another 1,000 of guided backcountry touring. Between the two is the little night skiing/race training venue of Wolf Mountain, with 100 acres and four lifts. All of this is 45 minutes from where you’re standing at the train depot.

You drag your bag across the parking lot and toward your hotel. The signs of a vibrant, small city surround you: bars, shops, and clubs, a minor league baseball stadium, a recreation facility—named The Salomon Center, after the ski company—featuring indoor skydiving, a wave pool, and climbing walls. A nearby construction crane shows that the growth continues.

Interspersed, however, another

side exists: the boarded-up warehouse as you step off the platform; an empty high rise across from your hotel; vacant storefronts, for-lease signs, and empty lots.

The story of Ogden is not unique in the ski world: a boom-and-bust town in a stunning natural setting turning to outdoor recreation to revitalize. But Ogden is different. This is a city of almost 90,000 people centering a metro area of half a million, and one whose heyday came in the 1940s. With that comes a host of challenges not found in an end-of-the-road ghost town that went bust in the 1800s—crime, poverty, and a population and business exodus to the suburbs. Talking heads across the country may espouse Ogden as the next great place, but as you walk through town, it’s apparent that the fate of this supposed ski town has not yet been written.

ABOVE: It’s still just the beginning of the line for Ogden.
PHOTO: JIM OLSEN



Jared Allen indulges deep into
his favorite vice at Snowbasin.
PHOTO: MICHAEL ALLEN



In urban jib circles, Ogden is known as a bust-free zone. It's not uncommon to see skiers and snowboarders building and sessioning features downtown, like L.J. Strenio is doing here, just off the main thoroughfare of Washington Blvd.
PHOTO: ERIC SEO/LEVEL 1

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SALT LAKE CITY HAS ALWAYS been the capital of the Beehive State; Park City plays up Utah's "Sin City" rep. But for a half century neither could hold a candle to Ogden as a center of commerce and debauchery. The Golden Spike was driven just north of

1940. By the time he was 12, the U.S. was entrenched in World War II. Chambers got a job delivering telegrams for Western Union. "There were a lot of soldiers coming through, a lot of sailors going to the West Coast. They were on their way to...hell. They didn't want to worry about gettin' shot or anything like that. They wanted to get laid... I delivered telegrams to just about all those ladies on 25th Street."



The boon years lasted for more than half a century. As America became less and less reliant on trains, however, Ogden lost significance.

Even at the height of its boon years, Ogden was a ski town—though not in today's sense. Ogden had tourism, but most of the tourists were downtown. Those that ventured out would stay at hotels such as the Hermitage in Ogden Canyon and visit Artesian Wells Park at the mouth of Wheeler Canyon (now under Pineview Reservoir). The city built an identity on good water, so when overgrazing in the Wheeler Basin threatened that—including possibly contributing to a typhoid epidemic in the 1920s—the city began buying up the land and deeding it to the U.S. Forest Service. In exchange, Ogden retained the right to operate a ski area.

Alta's legendary ski instructor, Alf Engen, surveyed the area, named Snow Basin, in 1938, and in 1939 a rope tow was installed. Construction on the Wildcat chairlift started in 1941, but was delayed because of World War II. "During the war years, there was some skiing, but it was all done with rope tows," says Chambers. Wildcat was completed in 1946. "It was a pretty big deal to have a chairlift

at that time," adds Chambers, who worked for a ski school run by Corey Engen (Alf's younger brother) and served as the resort's first full-time ski

patroller. The resort was essentially a city park and staffed with park employees who didn't ski.

The fortunes of Ogden and skiing, however, remained separate. Snow Basin's clientele was all local. Conversely, Chambers' ski shop business was less reliant on Ogden's economic outlook than weather. "People could have a whole pocketful of \$100 bills," he says. "If it didn't snow, they didn't spend it." Even as Snow Basin (renamed Snowbasin in 1978) cycled through owners through the '70s and '80s, and Powder Mountain opened in 1972, nobody ever considered skiing as an "industry" for Ogden City.

The boon years lasted for more than half a century. As America became less and less reliant on trains, however, Ogden lost significance. The diesel engine, refrigerated cars, the interstate highway system, and air travel all contributed to its demise.

By the mid-'60s, law enforcement crackdowns and an absence of patrons had driven the commercialized vice from 25th Street. In 1970, the local meatpacking plant closed. By 1971, the Ogden Union Stock Yards shut down. In '72, the railroads installed a bypass track around Ogden to Salt Lake City. In 1979, the American Can Company—a sprawling facility that had operated in Ogden since 1914—closed its doors. By the early '80s, Junction City was no more.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

"Leave It To Beaver" was shot in Ogden. Not. But it could have been, even today.

PHOTO: DEREK TAYLOR

The Victorian mansions on Jefferson Avenue are a reminder of Ogden's past.

PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

Ogden as seen from the Frontrunner train, with Mount Ogden (Snowbasin backcountry) in the background.

PHOTO: DEREK TAYLOR

A long overdue makeover is slowly transforming Ogden.

PHOTO: DEREK TAYLOR

here in 1869, connecting the United States coast to coast for the first time by rail. Shortly thereafter, every train making its way from the heartland to the West pulled up in Ogden.

The city—almost equidistant from L.A., Portland, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Calgary—became known as Junction City. It was a continental hub for industry: meatpacking, canning, cattle stockyards, and military supply.

Twenty-fifth Street, where the tracks meet the city, became a center for unseemliness that would shame the wildest American ski town story. Opium dens, started by Chinese ex-railroad workers, operated openly on the main strip. Speakeasies produced and sold liquor through Prohibition. During both World Wars, troop trains dropped thousands of soldiers off at Union Station; Ogden accommodated them with brothels.

"Twenty-fifth Street was a real robust area, a go-for-broke type thing," remembers Bob Chambers. A central figure in the Ogden ski scene, Chambers opened Alpine Sports, the area's first dedicated ski shop, in 1955. The shop is still owned and operated by his daughter, Bobbie. He was 10 when his family moved from Jackson Hole, in





Ben Wheeler enjoys a purer form of hedonism.
PHOTO: LIAM DORAN



THE TOP OF SNOWBASIN'S Mount Allen Tram is behind you. A girl sidehills the traverse in front of you. Below is Banana Chute, the classic descent off the backside—the most obvious and aesthetic route, the one visible from the highway that comes into play during big snow years. It's also the most dangerous, a giant funnel with few islands of safety should something go wrong.

You're not going that way. You wait for the girl to clear the 30-foot long traverse, then start across yourself. Soon you're standing above The Burn, a north-facing shot cleared more than a decade ago by a fire.

You're in a diverse group. One guy grew up in Ogden, the other just to the north. The girl moved here from Oregon in 2007. She's part of the Portlandification of Ogden—the young, educated, health-food-eating, IPA-drinking, outdoorsy type that personifies Ogden's changing demographic. When she moved here, she bought a little brick house from the 1930s in one of the town's nicer neighborhoods for around \$160,000.

You roll off the ridge into light, shin-deep, settled powder. Dreamy backcountry conditions. You ski for a few hundred feet, traverse left, and regroup. One at a time, you follow a spine down for another 1,000 feet through the charred remains of pine trees, and around the new life that has sprung in the aftermath.

You cut left again, and drop another similar shot. Eventually you hit the Taylor Canyon trail and follow the icy, undulating track to the 27th Street trailhead, 4,300 vertical feet below where you started.

You all shoulder skis, walk less than a half mile to the girl's house, and sit on her sunny front porch. She walks in the house and emerges moments later to hand out microbrews.

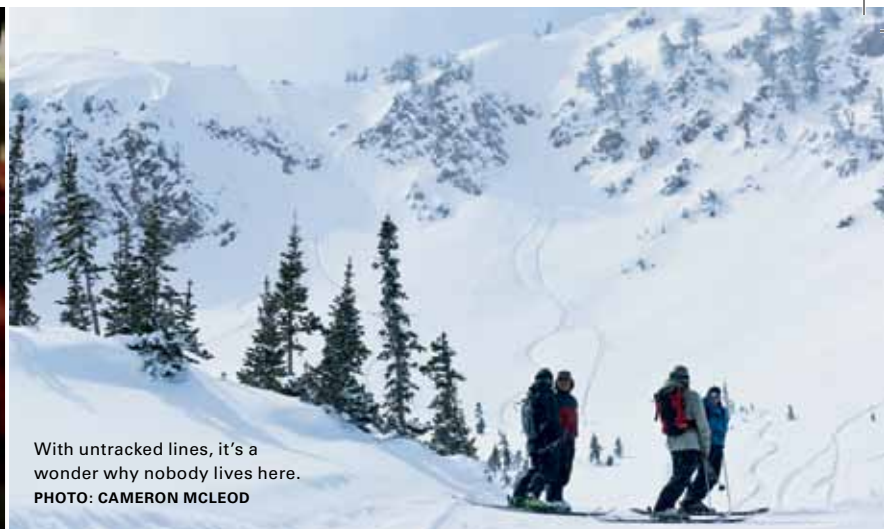
ABOVE LEFT: It took years to finally get bus service to the ski areas above Ogden. Lo and behold, turns out people actually used 'em.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

BELOW LEFT: Snowbasin, the other side of Mount Ogden.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

OPPOSITE PAGE: Despite its many renovations, Snowbasin retains some backwoods character.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD



The Nick Breeze Ski Museum in Ogden Canyon includes classic memorabilia.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD



With untracked lines, it's a wonder why nobody lives here.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD



Despite opulent lodges at Snowbasin, sometimes the best seat is still in the parking lot.
PHOTO: DEREK TAYLOR



Michael and Jared Allen.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD



The Olympics brought exposure and new facilities to Ogden, notably: the ice arena; new lodges, gondolas, and the tram at Snowbasin; and Trapper's Loop road, which eases access to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain from Park City and Salt Lake.

EVEN AFTER THE TRAINS STOPPED, as Ogden wallowed in depression, crime, and gang violence, civic leaders never saw opportunity in the city's surroundings. Politicians promised—as politicians are wont to do—that the city was rebounding. Revitalization projects included the Ogden Mall, a modern indoor-shopping center that was completed in 1980 and bankrupt by the early '90s.

Global recession stifled the renaissances of the '80s and the '90s. More recently, Ogden weathered 2008. Mayor Mike Caldwell estimates that Ogden's economy dropped by seven to eight percent during the crash, compared to about 50 percent for resort communities like Park City.

Caldwell is tall, fit, and clean-cut in a Johnny Unitas kind of way. A former ski instructor, he races bikes and competes in triathlons. He's eating a lemon-pepper salmon salad in Roosters, the local brewpub—one of the first businesses to take a chance on rejuvenating 25th Street. "When I graduated in '94 from Weber State [the local state university], we'd drive down 25th Street, and roll up the windows and lock the doors," he says. "For [Roosters] to bet their future on this being revitalized was a really bold thing." Caldwell is outwardly excited about Ogden's

rebirth. Born in Ogden, he left after graduating college, but returned as an employee of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the 2002 Winter Olympics. Ogden was a satellite venue, hosting the curling events and, at Snowbasin, the downhill and super G.

The Olympics singularly changed the trajectory of the city. But it really started 18 years earlier. In 1984, oil and hotel magnate Earl Holding, owner of Sun Valley, and a Utah native, bought Snowbasin. Holding had the financial means to develop

the resort, but, more importantly, he had clout. Holding was instrumental in securing the Olympics for Salt Lake City, and, in turn, Snowbasin became a host venue. The Games brought exposure and new facilities to Ogden, notably: the ice arena; new lodges, gondolas, and the tram at Snowbasin; and Trapper's Loop road, which eases access to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain from Park City and Salt Lake. It also opened up the city's eyes to the economic effects outdoor recreation could have.



Mike Strickland takes advantage of
Snowbasin's natural assets.
PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD





“Right after the Olympics came through, we had about 50 community leaders in the conference center,” remembers Caldwell. For the first time, the city’s leaders picked their heads up and saw the surrounding mountains. “When you do the inventory of natural assets: two rivers that converge in the downtown, this mountain-metro accessibility [to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain]... We need to capitalize on things that nobody can duplicate. It’s these natural assets.”

Matthew Godfrey was in his first term as mayor during the Olympics and became the torchbearer for Ogden as an outdoor hub. “Having a young mayor that could embrace that was huge,” says Bobbie Chambers, Bob’s daughter. “I don’t know if a different mayor would have understood the impact of this.”

In 2006, Godfrey convinced Amer Sports—the new parent company to Atomic, Salomon, and Suunto—to choose Ogden over Salt Lake City, Park City, Portland, and Seattle as the headquarters of its new winter and outdoor sports group. Instantly, Ogden gained credibility in the outdoor world.

“The cost of doing business here was substantially less—the lease rates were 30 to 40 percent lower than where we looked in some other cities,” says Mike Dowse, Amer’s General Manager for the Americas and the man who led the search. “Also, the cost of living for our employees was much more affordable here. A lot of our employees bought homes for the first time. We really liked the workforce here, and the proximity to



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**OGDEN MAYOR
MIKE CALDWELL**

the mountains—Snowbasin, Powder Mountain, and Wolf Mountain—you're 20 to 30 minutes away from all three of those resorts.”

Amer's move into the old American Canning Co. building was as much symbolic as practical: Ogden had a new cornerstone industry.

The actual economic impact, meanwhile, was only about 200 jobs. For the move to be truly successful, other outdoor companies (such as bicycle wholesaler Quality Bicycle Products, which opened a center in Ogden in 2011) would have to follow suit. Ogden also needed an influx of energetic and opportunistic citizens.

IF YOU'VE SEEN A PICTURE OF A SKIER FROM SNOWBASIN, it's likely of 35-year-old Jared Allen, a Salomon brand ambassador.

He's poised above a run in an obscure area of Snowbasin that he calls "The Wallow." His younger brother, Michael, is set up below with a camera. On Michael's queue, he skis off a small rock and is immediately buried in a face shot. His contrails obscure him through his first two turns. The light Utah snow starts to dissipate into the air, and he emerges at the bottom of the gully four turns later.

Skiing is Jared's passion, but it's not his vocation. Raised in nearby Brigham City, he went to school for graphic design and moved to St. Louis and Denver for work. Skiing eventually brought him back to Utah, where he started dabbling in real estate around Salt Lake City.

Allen says he was looking for his next investment and kept hearing about Ogden. "I saw that Salomon moved their headquarters up here," he says. "It forced us to take a closer look. Before we knew it, we were buying houses by the dozens." He and his wife, who look for older homes with potential—wood floors and quality trimming—which are ubiquitous in Ogden, now own about 20 rental properties in town. They've bought houses for as low as \$20,000 to \$30,000, all of which are within a half hour of skiing.

In 2011, he and his family pooled resources to buy two historic and long-ne-

glected buildings on 25th Street. The buildings were symbolic of Ogden's decline. They had never recovered from "Two-Bit Street's" days as a center of vice. The last businesses to operate in either were whorehouses.

After years of cleaning, remodeling, and fighting for a liquor license, Jared and Michael opened a bar last spring. Called "Alleged," for the building's sordid history, the bar offers Ogden a more upscale social club atmosphere than the college bars lining 25th. It features a rooftop patio, a modern-industrial design feel, and drinks named for the town's notorious figures. A restaurant is planned for next door. In two

years, those buildings have turned into an example of what the city could become.

They aren't the only one. Jefferson Avenue, just two blocks from the city's main crossroads of 25th and Washington, is filled with Victorian-style mansions built by the city's railroad barons of yore. As the city deteriorated, the mansions were chopped into eight- to 10-unit apartment buildings owned by absentee landlords and featuring what Caldwell calls "terrible living conditions." The entire 2500 block has since been converted back into single-family homes and is one of the nicest neighborhoods in town.



Since the Olympics, the city added some 10,000 jobs. Crime is down and gangs are moving out. Skiers, climbers, runners, and cyclists are moving in.

An O.G. from O-Town, Jared Allen flashes another secret sign at Snowbasin.
PHOTO: MICHAEL ALLEN



The river district is up next. The city spent \$6 million cleaning up the Ogden River. “They pulled 2,500 tires out of that one mile, 15,000 pounds of trash, and eight cars,” says Caldwell. In turn, Trout Unlimited recently recog-

RIGHT: Quaint neighborhoods increasingly attract skiers looking for affordable housing near world-class skiing.

PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

BELOW: Bob Chambers, with his daughter Bobbie, has owned Ogden’s Alpine Sports ski shop since 1955.

PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

nized the river as a blue-ribbon fishery. More residential buildings are planned for the area, and businesses such as Slackwater Pub & Pizzeria (owned and operated by a couple transplanted from Girdwood, Alaska) and various outdoor gear stores have opened in the corridor.

By all accounts, Ogden is



a better place than it was at the turn of the millennium. Since the Olympics, the city added some 10,000 jobs. Crime is down and gangs are moving out. Skiers, climbers, runners, and cyclists are moving in. Still, it seems to have retained an image problem. While the first Amer employees to relocate from Portland, San Diego, and New Hampshire made Ogden home, a majority of recent hires—particularly those in higher-paying managerial positions—have opted to commute from

Park City or Salt Lake.

Alison Putnam, who moved her family here when her husband’s job at Salomon relocated, can understand the hesitation. “My first reaction was, ‘We are not moving to Ogden,’” she laughs. Ogden, she says, was not seen as a place to raise a family. “Utah in general, but Ogden itself was really struggling education-wise. So we looked in a lot of other places. Ultimately, we made the decision to move to Ogden and we are really happy we did.”



Jared Allen gets ready for a home run...
4,300 vertical feet to his backyard.

PHOTO: MICHAEL ALLEN





ABOVE: The tracks were once Ogden's lifeline. PHOTO: CAMERON MCLEOD

Putnam embraced the challenge and started volunteering at her daughters' schools. When she saw there was no P.E. program at their elementary school, she helped start one. A graduate of Green Mountain Valley School, the elite Vermont ski academy, Putnam worked with the Ogden Valley Winter Sports Foundation (where she also coaches) to help start the Academy Program—where aspiring middle-school-aged ski racers get time to train and academic support from their school while they are on the road bashing gates.

Now a fourth-grade teacher (her kids are both older), Putnam has seen the schools improve since she moved here. Test scores are up and once troubled districts are meeting standards, she says.

The city, meanwhile, continues to evolve as a destination. The Ogden-Hinckley Airport began accepting commercial flights last winter, with Allegiant Airlines flying from Phoenix. Caldwell expects the service to expand to more cities next year. The Utah Transit Authority started bus service from downtown to Snowbasin and Powder Mountain last winter and plans to continue the service. The trains have returned as well. With the completion of the airport line, Ogden visitors can now take a commuter rail from Salt Lake International Airport.



Truth is, it's not really anything, besides what it is. These days, that alone is something.

The ski areas also continue to evolve. Last winter, Summit Group, a coalition of philanthropic 20- and 30-somethings who host retreats featuring world and business leaders, purchased Powder Mountain. They are planning a modest development but largely want to retain the ski area's down-home feel—a marked change from the massive buildout proposed by the former owners. “One of the reasons we are really excited to make our home here at Powder Mountain is because of the character,” says Thayer Walker, the chief reconnaissance officer of the Summit Group. “We don’t see the model being 10,000 skiers a day. We want to maintain that same kind of empty-slopes ‘Powder Country’ type of feel to it.”

Snowbasin, meanwhile, is in the approval process for a mountain village by the Strawberry Gondola, which would finally give them on-mountain lodging.

The Ogden Valley is not Little Cottonwood Canyon, and doesn’t strive to be. Judging by the high volume of traffic coming from Park City on weekends, it’s safe to say it’s not that, either. Truth is, it’s not really anything, besides what it is. These days, that alone is something.

IT SNOWED A LITTLE in town last night. Reports are claiming 15 inches at Snowbasin. You pack a bag, shoulder your skis, and walk a half block to where a city bus picks you up. The bus snakes through the city, ascends Ogden Canyon and winds its way around the other side of Mount Ogden to Snowbasin in 30 minutes.

The snow billows up around your waist as you crest the first rollover. Then everything goes dark. You accelerate, compress, and hop out of the turn. It’s still dark. You gasp for breath as your weight transitions, but your mouth fills with snow. You swallow it and any air you can get as you sink into your next turn, completely blinded. As you unweight again, you realize you’re not going to resurface.

You don’t see daylight or take a breath for four turns. And yet something is perfectly clear. You see exactly what all the fuss is about. ❄



Powder Mountain's new owners
vow the resort will stay the same.
That's just fine with Nick Martini.
PHOTO: ERIK SEO/PBP

