

HISTORY OF CENTER FOR SNOW & AVALANCHE STUDIES



Arriving in San Juan County, over Red Mountain Pass, on October 20, 2002 from Bozeman, Montana to set up CSAS shop in the Miners Hospital at 1315 Snowden, in Silverton.

The Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies (CSAS) took formal shape on January 31st, 2003, filing Articles of Incorporation with the Secretary of State of Colorado. The Incorporators were [Chris George](#) and [Chris Landry](#), and the original Board of Directors were [Don Bachman](#), [Chris George](#), and [Arthur \(Boots\) Ferguson](#). Internal Revenue Service 501(c)(3) status, as a not-for-profit research and education organization, was obtained in September, 2003.

But, the story of CSAS began much earlier. Silverton and the surrounding San Juan Mountains have a longer history of grappling with snow and its mysteries. Mineral extraction drove the first significant wave of settlement in the San Juans in the latter half of the 19th Century, and the challenges of the now-world-famous San Juan snowpack became acutely, if belatedly, apparent. Merely subsisting in and traveling through the mountains taxed the ingenuity and endurance of those settlers. Worse, avalanches literally killed them, by the dozens, while working their mines, occupying their dwellings, and traveling the roads and railways.

Whether by dint of that history, or the spectacular access to alpine terrain that US Highway

550 afforded them, in 1971 a talented group of researchers descended on Silverton for a five-year project. Known as the “INSTAAR San Juan Project”, and originally funded by the Division of Atmospheric Water Resources Management of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to evaluate the effects of cloud seeding, the project was ultimately referred to as an ‘avalanche project’ in the preface to its Final Report titled, “Avalanche Release and Snow Characteristics – San Juan Mountains, Colorado”.

That Preface, authored by Jack Ives, concluded with three recommendations. It stated, “This magnificent mountain area with its stalwart people and their attendant problems of natural hazard assessment, resource development, and land-use policy requirements, is considered as a superb natural laboratory for the enlargement of an important segment of the United States [UNESCO] Man and Biosphere Program. This should be pursued in three forms: basic research, applied research, and in training and education.” American avalanche science made dramatic advances, thanks to the Silverton project, and many future leaders of American snow science, snow practice, and snow education earned their stripes here in the San Juans.

Nonetheless, when the INSTAAR project (and other attendant) grants ran out the ‘Silverton avalanche project’ faded away and the snow research infrastructure declined along with it. The vision of Silverton as an alpine laboratory did not entirely die, however. Most notably, two individuals – Chris George and Don Bachman – actively pursued Ives’ (and their own) San Juans vision. In 1988 Chris formed CISSAR, the Colorado Institute for Snow Science and Avalanche Research. And, while serving as the lead forecaster for the Colorado Avalanche Information Center’s Silverton Highway 550 program in the early/mid-90’s, Don queried a number of universities and research organizations regarding the establishment of a mountain research field station in Silverton. Unfortunately, neither effort ‘panned out’, directly.

CSAS, however, has its roots in their efforts, and in the INSTAAR Silverton project. And, Silverton has recently embraced the notion of their community, and the San Juan Mountains, as a teaching and research venue for students of mountain ‘systems’. Building on the visions of Chris, Don, and other residents, the Mountain Studies Institute (MSI) was also organized in

2002, with its home in Silverton. The emergence of MSI was a contributing factor in the development of CSAS, and each offers the other significant potential synergies in research, facilities development, and intellectual 'capital'. Now it remains for CSAS to marshal the people and resources necessary to achieve the potential for a significant national snow system research and education resource first perceived by Ives, Bachman, George, and others.

Start-up Funding

Who better than the [American Avalanche Association](#) to step up first to the challenge of developing an American snow research center in Silverton, Colorado? At their fall meeting in 2002, the Board of Directors of the AAA unanimously voted to 'seed' the formation of the CSAS with \$2,500. Shortly thereafter, the Janss Family Foundation of Sun Valley, Idaho, matched the AAA's contribution with another \$2,500. CISSAR, the CSAS's Silverton forerunner established by Chris George in the 1990s, donated its remaining funds. Those initial cash contributions enabled the CSAS to 'open shop' in the fall of 2002. Several other significant in-kind contributors have also nurtured our early organizational development:

San Juan County - \$1,181 in donated office rents for Room 8 in the historic Miners Hospital

Holland & Hart - \$3,000 in donated legal services

Chris Landry - waived first-year salary, equipped office

Mark Ridders - \$850 in donated website development services

Even more encouraging, our direct appeal to peers and colleagues in the American snow science community yielded nearly \$9,000 in "Friends of the CSAS" cash contributions since the fall of 2003. Their vote of confidence in our effort, and their substantial personal investment in this shared vision for an American Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies, propelled us forward.

Building on that foundation, in early 2004 the CSAS was awarded an \$80,000 US Forest Service Rural Development, Forestry and Communities grant requested and received on behalf of the CSAS by the Mountain Studies Institute, our sister organization in mountain

system science and education here in Silverton. Upon receiving that grant CSAS President Don Bachman stated, "We are particularly gratified and honored to receive this timely funding from the Forest Service". He added, "The Forest Service kick-started American avalanche science and practice in Alta in the '50's. Now, combining these \$80,000 with the some \$85,000 in 'bootstrap' cash and in-kind investments made by the American Avalanche Association and our peers in snow science and practice, and by the Janss Family Foundation, our Board of Directors, and our staff, we are poised to firmly establish a 21st century national snow science asset. And, we're proud to accept these funds on behalf of the Silverton community, which has an important history of contribution to American avalanche science and lore." Of course, we remain grateful to the Mountain Studies Institute and to former Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell for that very important startup grant, and to all those who matched those funds and enabled the CSAS to successfully launch this organization.