

# Fernin Koch

3/11/85 South Fork Eagle River Valley Skier Avalanche

## Chugach avalanche kills skier

By David Postman, ADN 3/11/85

A skier was crushed to death Sunday after being carried 2,000 feet by a massive avalanche in the South Fork Eagle River Valley.

The slide occurred at about 4:55 p.m. in Chugach State Park at the mouth of the South Fork valley, which runs perpendicular to Eagle River Valley.

The man was found buried at the edge of the avalanche wrapped around an alder tree, rescuers said.

"His neck was broken and most of his limbs were broken," said Dave Young, a member of the South Fork Volunteer Fire Department.

The man was declared dead at the scene about an hour after the slide by Anchorage Fire Department paramedics. As of late Sunday no positive identification of the victim had been made.

The avalanche was 700 feet across at the top of the 4,000-foot mountain and traveled 2,000 feet down in about 90 seconds, according to witnesses.

The skier and two dogs began walking up the mountain at about 12:30 p.m. Sunday, said Jim Little, who was watching from his house through binoculars.

Little said the man made it to the top of the unnamed peak several hours later and walked across a ridge to the top of a bowl-shaped area.

"I saw him and kept telling myself 'He won't ski down, he's too smart,' " Little said, adding most people in the area know the hillside is a high avalanche danger.

"When he got to the top, he stood out there for a long time."

At about 4:55 p.m. the man coaxed his dogs down the hill.

"I saw him come off the top and ski down about seven or eight body lengths and the whole thing broke off.

"It was white for about a minute, minute and a half and then I could see this big black line across the top of the bowl."

But Little could not see the skier through the binoculars and called the Anchorage Police Department and the South Fork Volunteer Fire Department.

He then jumped on his snowmachine and drove to the avalanche site to begin searching for the skier at about 5:15 p.m.

Area resident John Leary and about a dozen members of the volunteer fire department soon arrived. While others searched uphill, Leary spotted the victim buried in the deep, hard-packed snow at the edge of the avalanche.

"All I could see was his arm sticking up," Leary said.

Little and Leary dug the victim out to his waste. "We took his pulse, checked his respiration and there was none," Leary said.

Paramedics and park rangers then snowmachined in from Hiland road, about a half-mile away form where the body was found. A four-wheel drive fire truck from the volunteer brigade also made the trip.

Rangers brought the body out at about 7 p.m. by snowmachine.

One of the man's two dogs was seen after the avalanche. But searchers said there was no sign of the other animal.

Only one of the man's skis was recovered.

"He had a full compliment of fancy skiing gear. He should have known he was in a place he had no business being in," Young said. He said the skier's presence in the area was "absolutely foolish."

Little said he watched a skier he assumes to be the same man ski down the hill last week.

Mike Goodwin, state district ranger, said the skier probably triggered the avalanche. He said high winds, fresh snow and warm weather the past few days have created a very high avalanche danger through most of Chugach State Park.

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Obituary from Bob Oswald, 10/10/2004:

Hi Joe..... thanks for the reply to my e-mail. I did manage to get into that page eventually. It saddened me to a curious extent to read of Fernin's death. I knew him for only a few months in Switzerland when he was 17 and I was 20. He was a remarkable fellow. Although the youngest of our group (of students at a French college) he instantly became the social leader through sheer force of personality. The girls were immensely attracted to his good looks, but the guys all liked him too. He never had a bad word to say about anyone, and seemed genuinely to like all people.

He taught me to ski, which is one reason why the manner of his death shocked me. He was a marvellous skier. The reason why I happened upon your listing was because one day his memory popped into my mind, and I wondered why I had not heard of Fernin as a senator or presidential candidate by now. If you had known him, that wouldn't sound like such a foolish thing to wonder. All that a Google search revealed was your listing, and another of him as a deceased alumnus of LSU's medical school, graduating in 1982. Thus he would have finished his internships and have been ready to launch himself into his career when he met his demise in Alaska.

Fernin is one of the very few people I have met in my life of whom I have a completely positive memory, and I wish I could write a more complete obituary of him. I want to thank you for your effort in putting this web site together, even if this news saddened me.

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