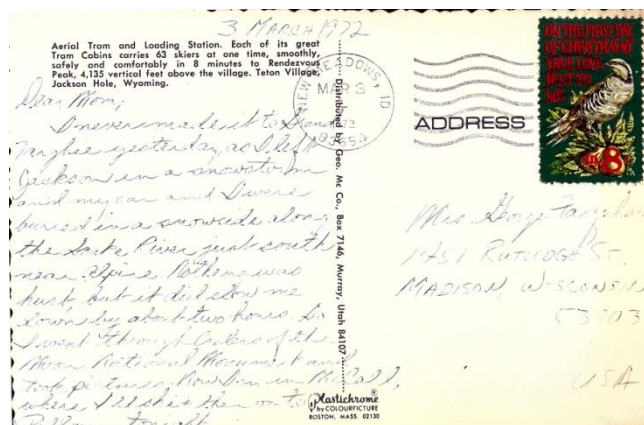


My Wyoming Avalanche Story



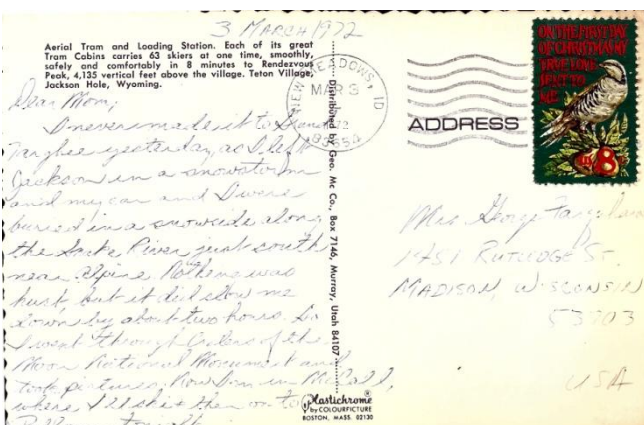
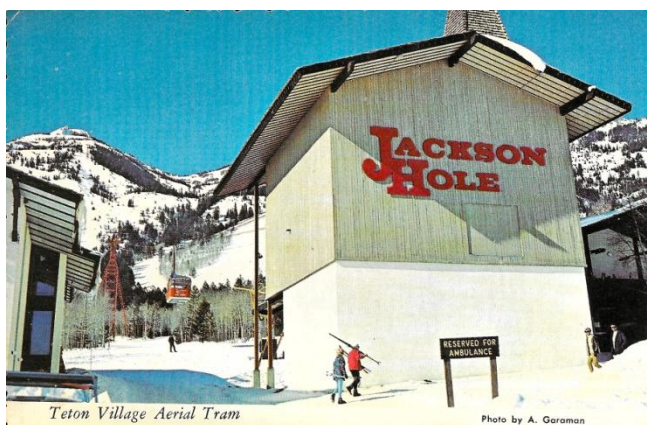
Above are images of the front and back of a postcard I sent to my mom from Jackson, Wyoming on 2 March 1972. I was on the return leg of a ski trip I made during the winter of my last year stationed in British Columbia. According to my writing, I had just had a wonderful day of skiing at Jackson Hole ski area:

"Dear Mom,

This is really a fantastic HUGE place. Powder snow up above my knees, over a 4,000 foot vertical drop. Next, Grand Targhee, Idaho on the west side of the Tetons. We're having a snowstorm right now.

Love, Phil"

The picture on this postcard shows a skier on the slope at Rendezvous Bowl, near the top of the tram, where I had my worst ski injury in December 1975. Short story for another day. The goal for the next day was to drive to drive around the Teton Range and into Idaho to another great ski area, Grand Targhee, actually in Wyoming, but accessed through Driggs, Idaho.



What a difference a day makes. The snowstorm indicated at the end of the previous postcard continued through the night, so before I could get going in the morning, I had to dig out my car, and put on my heavy-duty tire chains. I found out that the road over Teton Pass was closed, so I would have to take the long way around: south along the Snake River through a very steep-walled canyon on a winding road. I chugged along at probably no more than 35-40 miles per hour, chains making lots of noise in the wheel wells, past Hoback Junction (about 20 miles from Jackson) and perhaps another 10 miles before I came to where a snow "slide"

(avalanche) had covered the road. There were two cars waiting at the edge of the slide, with me making three. Then a Wyoming State Trooper pulled in behind me and took charge, calling in a gigantic "snow-blower" type of plow, like you might see on the front of a train crossing Donner Pass. By the time the snow plow arrived at the scene there were maybe 50 vehicles lined up behind us. We were all standing outside our vehicles, watching the spectacle of this slide being digested and spit out, up and over away from the road to the Snake River below. At one point a small sluff of a slide came down the steep slope next to the road, hitting me on the ankles, which was interesting, but not life-threatening. At that point, the trooper suggested that we might be safer inside our cars, in case there was another larger slide. Almost all of us took his suggestion to heart.

Moments after I got back into my driver's seat, the lights went out, so to speak, and I felt my car firmly nudged to the left. It wasn't completely dark, so I knew that snow wasn't too deep. I thought "someone" would probably be rescuing me (or us, I had no way of knowing how many cars were buried). I had my trusty shovel handy on the passenger side of the car, so I decided to reconnoiter. I pushed the door open as far as I could, and I could see daylight up above, maybe three feet deep across the roof of the car. I rolled down the window and climbed up onto the window sill and popped my head out of the snow and looked around. In all four cars were buried, the two cars in front of me, mine, and the trooper's. The vehicles were still accumulating back as far as the eye could see, with none of the people stepping forward to help us out. I did what I thought was the logical thing, I went back with my shovel and dug out the trooper (he seemed surprised to see me!). He and I then went forward to see how the guys in the first two cars were. All of the folks that got back into their cars were fine, but one hapless individual who was outside when the slide happened had been thrown by the slide across the road into the vertical snowbank, and probably had broken ribs, at least, but he wasn't feeling any pain, because he was under the influence of the previous night's libations (he was drunk...). The snowplow was getting closer to us, so after it broke through the bigger original slide, we stood on the left sides of our car tops to guide the plow past our vehicles. Then we had a seven or eight foot wall of snow, with the sides of our cars embedded in it. The trooper analyzed the situation, and when he saw that I had already installed my chains (Good Old Reliable Phil strikes again!), he had me get into my car and start it up, then turn my steering wheel to the right, and back into the snow bank as far as I could. Then I turned the wheels to the left and pulled out from under the snow pile. Next, an army of people came out and cleared the snow from my car's hood and roof. I was going to go back and help, but the trooper told me that I had been very helpful, and that I was free to go on down the road. And I was off, driving down the rest of Snake River Canyon, which I knew well from my summer of 1965. Chains clacking angrily I drove at speeds of up to 50 miles per hour until I got to Alpine, through numerous smaller slides which I ignored, or tried to. One slide that came down in front of me, maybe a foot high, and I hit the gas and actually flew over it. Once I got the chains off, I didn't feel like skiing (I had seen enough snow for one day), so I headed into the Snake River Plain, the relatively flat wide track of the Yellowstone Hot Spot across the North American plate. I stopped at Craters of the Moon National Monument, but didn't hang out long. Ultimately, I stopped for the night north of Boise on U.S. Highway 95 near McCall, Idaho, and sent this postcard message to Mom:

"Dear Mom,

I never made it to Grand Targhee yesterday, as I left Jackson in a snowstorm and my car and I were buried in a snowslide along the Snake River just south near Alpine. Nothing was hurt, but it did slow me down by about two hours. So I went through Craters of the Moon National Monument and took pictures. Now I'm in McCall, Id., where I'll ski and then on to Pullman tonight."

The postmark on the card is from New Meadows, ID 83654, which I had to look up. I remember McCall and Brundage Ski Area, though. It seemed like a nice place, but I'm sure it's too built up and gentrified by now.