



# ALTA

## egos

### Does Alta Club membership still have its privileges?

**T**here are some who believe the Alta Club's reputation is in the crapper. The main floor men's bathroom, to be precise.

"You'd always make sure to spit," said Joe Hatch, recalling the giant brass spittoons that once stood on the floor. "My brother and I would go down there two or three times during dinner just to spit."

Their grandfather's membership in the Alta Club allowed them this privilege. "Everybody talked about going into the bathroom. They had linen towels, they had somebody there to help. It's all marble. And then they had walls of colognes and perfumes and stuff that you could use after you washed. All my aunts would be jealous because they couldn't go into the men's room."

Being a young lady didn't stop Genevieve Atwood from entering. "My father would take us all"—she and her three brothers, she said—"downstairs into the men's bathroom. We would open up our shirts, and my dad would give us a *shhhhot* of after-shave cologne across our chests. And then us four kids would troop up through the main dining room. It must have looked like a mirage to smell all that cologne." Her metaphor may be hazy, but her enthusiasm is childlike as her dark eyes open wide at the remembrance.

Hatch's nostalgia is just as deep. "Yes, that bathroom was pretty neat," Hatch said with a sigh.

**T**o many members and guests, past and present, the Alta Club is altogether a pretty neat place. Over the years it has been the scene of many a family and community celebration, figuring prominently in the memories of people like Joe Hatch and Genevieve Atwood. For some, becoming a member is a family tradition—Mickey Gallivan, son of former *Salt Lake Tribune* Publisher John W. Gallivan, said he is the fourth generation of his family to join.

Toilet tales aside, though, the Alta Club's reputation is most firmly rooted in its connection and contributions to the business community, where it has long been known as a place to shake hands over lunch or dinner and get things done.

Over the years, its membership roster has been a who's who of Utah movers and shakers.

But the business and social landscape has changed dramatically during the 120 years since the club was born. Downtown is no longer the hub of commerce, as companies and their employees have moved throughout the Salt Lake Valley, and comparatively new restaurants such as The New Yorker and Metropolitan now compete for the business lunches and dinners that were always a hallmark of the Alta Club. Admittedly, this problem is not unique to Salt Lake City, but the question arises whether the Alta Club can evolve with the market—while overcoming perceptions of elitism still held by some Utahns—in order to continue to attract members. Can the club maintain its historical relevance and significance, or is it a tradition in the process of dying as its membership ages?

**E**ighty-one wealthy men—many of them miners, some of them bankers, businessmen, or attorneys, all of them non-Mormons—officially formed the Alta Club in the spring of 1883, almost 18 months after the club was first proposed. Modeled after the Union Club of San Francisco and clubs on the East Coast, its intention, according to O.N. Malmquist's definitive (if heavily favorable) history of the club, was "to have the club present the comforts and luxuries of a home together with the attraction to its members of meeting each other in a social way."

That the club would offer, among other amenities, a bar, card room and billiards only partly explains the lack of Mormons; the politics of the day were a heavier influence. But as Malmquist noted, "the fact that no religious barriers were suggested in constitution or by-laws indicated that [the founders] may have been looking forward to a day when the abyss separating the two worlds would be bridged, thereby permitting intermingling of the two groups socially, politically and economically." Within two years of the club's founding, the presence of a bar notwithstanding, the first Mormon was admitted.

The Alta Club, named in honor of the Alta mining district located in Little Cottonwood Canyon, was first housed in a building on 200 South between Main and >>

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Alta itinerary: "Private club means private in many ways."

(Below)The Alta Club near the turn of the 20th century."

West Temple, moving just a few doors away in 1892. The club moved into its own building—the present location at 100 South and State Street—in 1898. From the start, it was known as a place for the wheelers and dealers who helped build Salt Lake City and, by extension, the state of Utah—mining tycoon Thomas Kearns, millionaire merchant Fred Auerbach, banker John Dooly and Charles Goodwin, editor of *The Salt Lake Tribune*, were all early members. It was a men's club, though spouses and other female guests of male members could dine there. Some parts, such as the card room, were off-limits, and women had to enter through a separate entrance, though some folks contend this convention wasn't always enforced. Guest rooms on the third floor were rented to out-of-town visitors and, in a few cases, permanent tenants, until the club was forced to close them in the 1950s due to fire code violations.

It was prestigious to be a member of the Alta Club, but members saw the benefits as much more than entry into a building, with an impact extending far beyond the grey stone walls and the membership at large. In a 1984 speech paying tribute to the club's 100th anniversary, John W. Gallivan said "[The Alta Club] has been the oasis of those who by day have wrought great things in this desert land for the good of all its people; those who planned the big steps and led the way."

He highlighted the many other contributions in the community that could be linked to someone who was or had been a member of the Alta Club. Looking ahead to the next 100 years, stating that one of the biggest problems facing the state was the responsibility of providing new jobs for the future of Utah's growing ranks of children, Gallivan predicted that the problem "will be solved largely by the members of the Alta Club."

As it turned out, one of the first things the Alta Club did early in its second century of operation was open the club to female members, still one of the most significant changes to take place at the club. But change is never easy, and it didn't happen without some prodding from the outside.

The legal precedent that eventually helped pave the way for women to be admitted into the Alta Club was established in 1973. A group of women law students—which included Jean Barnard, at the time married to Salt Lake City attorney

Brian Barnard—petitioned the Legislature to amend the Utah Civil Rights Act. They argued that if the state granted a liquor license to an establishment, then that establishment could not discriminate on the basis of gender, among other attributes. The Alta Club and Bar X, which was located at 155 E. 200 South, were singled out as examples of such behavior. Women were allowed at the Alta Club, as long as they were guests of a member but could not become members themselves. Bar X, on the other hand, would not serve women; Brian Barnard heard that they discouraged women further by only having a men's room, one with no door on the stall.

The law students were successful. "Lo and behold, the Legislature changed [the Utah Civil Rights Act]," Barnard said. "But [then] nobody did anything to enforce it."

Fast forward to the mid-'80s. Karen Shepherd, then the editor of *network* magazine, began writing about the Alta Club's policy on women.

"I think it was on the occasion of the [Utah State Senator] Frances Farley incident, [when the state senator] refused to use the side door and was not allowed in" to attend a Senate meeting, Shepherd recalled. "The Alta Club was the place where almost all the important boards in town met. I encouraged the women's groups I met with to use their power on the boards they sat on to shame their colleagues into not meeting there."

The movement gathered momentum, and one particular up-and-coming attorney decided to offer moral support. But it wasn't the easiest decision for her to make. "I was terrified, utterly and completely terrified, about what to do," said Jan Graham. Not only had she just been made partner at a law firm, but she was elected to its board of directors. "This was a life's dream for me," she said.

The problem? The board met at the Alta Club. Furthermore, her boss, Dan Holbrook, practically "lived" at the Alta Club, she said.

"Here I am, I get elected to the board, and at the very first meeting I thought I would have to say, 'You know, I can't really go there, because I'm taking part of this boycott.'" She decided just to be honest and upfront about it—and Holbrook agreed to hold the board meetings elsewhere. "He was supporting what we were doing," Graham said. "And his opinion carried a lot of weight."

Barnard took notice of what was happening and, remembering the 1973 amendment to the Utah Civil Rights Act, saw an opportunity to enforce it. He sent his runner, Megan Peters, a young woman who would go on to become a well-known musician on the local scene, and an aide, another woman, to ask the Alta Club for a membership application.

"I walked in the front door, and there was an immediate 'What are you doing here?' reaction," said Peters. "They said, 'Can we help you?' but it was really 'Can we help you get out of here?'" When she asked for a membership application, she was told she was ineligible because of her status as a woman.

That was all Barnard needed. "Her request and their denial was the factual predicate of the lawsuit," he said.

In Utah's 3rd District Court, he argued that the policy at the Alta Club was in violation of the Utah Civil Rights Act, due to the club's status as a Utah State beer and liquor licensee. The judge agreed, but due to a misreading of Utah's often confusing code regarding alcohol, he ruled that the club could not discriminate on the basis of their beer license alone. So the Alta Club stopped selling beer, allowing members to still enjoy wine and spirits, and prepared an appeal to present to the Utah Supreme Court.

The case never had to go that far. Bowing to the negative publicity of the pending lawsuit, coupled with a decrease in lunch, dinner and meetings revenues (Graham heard they had dropped by a third), the Alta Club voted to allow women during what some have said was the most-attended membership meeting ever. Soon after, Atwood—whose grandfather, great-uncle and father all had been members—became the first woman to be admitted. Deedee Corradini was second (rumor has it a "no" vote to admit her was overruled) and philanthropist Annette Cumming and Jan Graham were third and fourth, respectively.

Today, Shepherd is not a member herself, though her husband, Vincent, is. "It no longer has the atmosphere of a stuffy men's club," she said. "Women have changed it a lot, and I would argue, for the better."

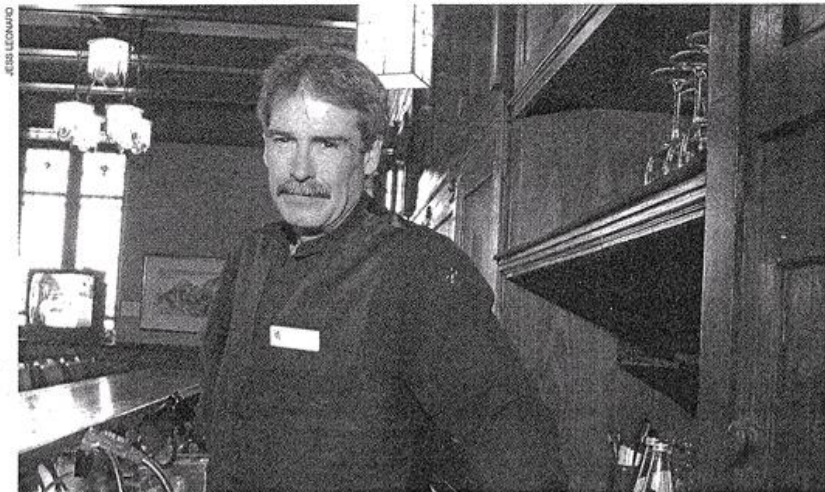
Barnard still has a check written by the Alta Club on June 30, 1987—made out to him and Megan Marie Peters—for one dollar in damages.

William Shorter has been general manager of the Alta Club since 1994. During his tenure, he has overseen a sorely needed \$4 million renovation and watched the French overrun the sec- >>

**I lifted my spoon,  
scratched smooth  
from years of use,  
to the light and  
wondered just how  
many rich and  
powerful people  
had used it before  
me to stir coffee  
or eat ice cream.**







Raising the bar: Alta Club bartender John Heiner.

(Bottom right) Alta respite: A bathroom that elicits strong memories, believe it or not.

ond floor during the 2002 Winter Olympics. In Graham's estimation, he has done more to offset the club's snobbish reputation than anyone. Now, he is trying to increase membership in an age when there is more competition than during the club's heyday.

"It's [still] kind of prestigious to belong to the Alta Club," Shorter said, though he acknowledges the club no longer has a waiting list like it used to (formerly upwards of one to two years). Its membership numbers are still respectable, with almost 400 of the maximum 500 slots accounted for. "We're healthy," he said, "but it would be nice to be healthier."

Part of the problem is that the world around the Alta Club has changed. Downtown Salt Lake City—downtown any city in America, for that matter—is no longer the nucleus it once was.

"At night, it's dead downtown," Shorter said. "And people have moved away—they live in Sandy, they live in Draper."

Centers of commerce are located throughout the Salt Lake Valley, with many employees never needing to venture downtown. Those businesses which continue to serve as downtown anchors—law firms and financial institutions, say—still provide the bulk of members.

Part of the problem, too, is attracting younger recruits. Shorter found that the addition of a fitness center in the basement helped, and a junior membership option makes it more affordable for those early in their careers to join. Those professionals aged 35 and under can join for \$1,000 down and \$50 a month, versus the full membership cost of \$2,000 up front and \$150 monthly.

That's pretty pricey for a private club, but then this is no ordinary private club as we in Utah understand them to be. To start, prospective members still must be invited to join by a current member. And Atwood points out, "Private club means private in many ways to the Alta Club." He declined to ask anyone to grant an interview for this interview. "They wouldn't want to be bothered," he explained.

This aspect still makes the Alta Club a bit of a mystery to some, contributing to misconceptions held by those on the outside. Club membership chair Tom Love recently invited his good friend, Randy Horiuchi, to join. "Withstanding all of the new improvements they have made, my joining is doubtful because of my lack of proximity to downtown," said Horiuchi.

Mickey Gallivan, a managing partner with ad agency Riester-Robb, believes anyone within the business community, regardless of locations, could benefit from membership. "If you are dealing with businesses of substance and consequence in Salt Lake City, you probably need to at least know who is at the Alta Club, if not become a part of it," he said.

"I think it's a place where people who care about our community, particularly the viability of downtown Salt Lake City, meet and talk and try to encourage a viable downtown urban center," Atwood added. "It was always a place where people who wanted to make a difference, made a difference."

Though the drive for women's membership ultimately allowed her to join the organization she calls "my club," Atwood believes the downside of that campaign was to help tag the Alta Club as Victorian, resulting in some of what she believes are faulty perceptions that persist. "It's easy to think of the Alta Club as grumpy old men sitting around—trying to keep people in their place—and I have never seen that," she said. "[But] my hunch is that the lawsuit made some people entrench. The old guard didn't like to think they could get pushed around. [But] I think there was an undercurrent of people within the club who really wanted it to change. Besides, who needs what the Alta Club is tagged as?"

Was I worthy of the Alta Club? I was eager to stay a night in one of the 20 or so rooms renovated in time for the 2002 Winter Olympics (when many were used by guests of Zions Bank), but I was anxious at the same time. Club members and guests, I envisioned, were of impeccable dress and expensive cars. To me, dressing up means wearing business casual, i.e., Doc Martens and chinos. As for my ride—well, friends call my truck The Beast.

A man at the front desk greeted me warmly and was glad to hear that I would be staying a night. When he asked me to describe my vehicle, for parking identification purposes, I pointed out the office window. "That big ugly truck," I said. Didn't faze him in the least. After finishing the check-in, and a quick tour guided by the front-desk man, I moved The Beast to the private parking lot across South Temple. Two club members stood and chatted at a car's rear bumper. I thought for certain they'd ask if I knew this was a private lot. They, too, were unfazed. If the Alta Club were ever snobby, it sure didn't seem so now.

I had another look around. The building's floors creaked in a wonderfully wooden, old-fashioned way. On the walls hung artwork of local scenes by local artists; the collection is periodically rotated. The library had stuffed leather chairs next to windows that looked out upon State Street, and magazines were neatly spread out on an expansive wooden table. In the billiards room, the flat-screen video system was the only apparent sign of modernity, as well-worn eight-ball racks cornered in scuffed brass awaited play on green felt. A wide staircase rose to the second and third floors. I could see how someone could grow attached to this place.

The Alta Club was modeled after similar clubs in cities as far-ranging as London, and as I walked around, I imagined being somewhere else. Still, the Alta Club would not let me forget it was the Alta Club—the club's logo is everywhere. Pens and stationery are just the beginning; napkins, towels, floor tiles, bathrobes (available for purchase), glasses, placemats—all are inscribed with a fanciful rendering of the letters A and C. Even inanimate objects, it seemed, identify with being part and parcel of the Alta Club.

I made my way to the club's bar and grill for dinner. There were only two other people, off in a corner and surely talking business. It can get quiet at the club. Then it struck me that I hadn't seen anyone in either the library or the billiards room.

The surroundings seemed to elevate the taste of the water I sipped as I awaited a glass of wine and what proved to be a curious, but tasty, interpretation of a chicken Caesar salad. In front of each seat at the bar was a small plaque bearing the name of someone who had contributed to the renovation of 2001. My seat was sponsored, as it were, by Joe Quinney, a member from 1893-1983; one of the originals. I lifted my spoon, scratched smooth from years of use and inscribed *The Alta Club*, to the light and wondered just how many rich and powerful people had used it before me to stir coffee or eat ice cream. Suddenly it felt good to be dressed up for a change. I felt worthy of the flatware, at least.

I woke the next morning with a wine headache and a thinner wallet. I had slept well, though the building's old walls did little to muffle the sounds of morning traffic outside. An engagement elsewhere prevented me from lingering over breakfast, and as the day progressed I realized the question was not whether I was worthy of the Alta Club, but whether the Alta Club was worth it to me. I value tradition, but at what cost?

I'm not alone with my mixed feelings. "It might be interesting to join because of the nostalgia," Horiuchi said. But more so, he wonders, "Am I an Alta Club kind of guy? A good question, indeed." **[GV]**

