

The Incredible Emile Cochand

The first pro ski instructor to arrive in North America, this extraordinary Swiss founded the continent's first professional ski school and created its first ski resort.

By Chas Maclean Cochand
With Morten Lund and Doug Pfeiffer

At the turn of the 20th century in Canada, the most popular recreational winter sport was snowshoe racing. The residents of Quebec loved the spectacle of competitors racing across the snow on great, elongated frames of bent wood strung with gut. Snowshoes were wonderful for a 50-yard dash, for leisure travel across snow and, of course, were essential for fur trappers and hunters. But snowshoeing was terribly slow, hard work compared to skiing. The tradition clung for a time, but 50 years after the arrival of skis and instructors brought an almost 100 percent shift to skis. Canada's Laurentian chain was North America's earliest and biggest concentration of ski resorts. Why and how did this hotbed of skiing develop?

Unquestionably, a great deal was due to a Swiss, Emile Constant Cochand, who arrived in North America well in advance of any other professional instructor. Departing from Switzerland in 1911, he landed at Halifax, Nova Scotia, on September 16 aboard the steamship *The Corsican*, carrying aboard 100 pairs of hickory skis, six bobsleds, and 20 small competition sleds, or luges. Emile Cochand was here to start a winter sports center at the invitation of the Montreal Ski Club, in particular Lorne MacGibbon, a man so enthused over providing ski instruction for himself and his friends that he fronted the entire cost of Cochand's equipment and travel. He arranged to have Cochand stay for the winter at the Laurentide Inn in Ste. Agathe, a village some 50 miles by rail north of Montreal.

The Montreal Ski Club had its winter headquarters near Ste. Agathe des Monts in a bare-bones, converted summer lodge near Ste. Agathe known as the Lake Manitou Club, a place without central heating, indoor plumbing, or other pretensions to luxury. Ste. Agathe had only the bare beginnings of skiing in the form of touring by hardy Montreal Ski Club members whose excursions across the fields were a bit on the rough side, given their lack of basic ski touring technique.

So 19-year-old Cochand's arrival as the Laurentians' first instructor was a godsend to Ste. Agathe. Cochand had two years of instruction experience at the Hotel Dent de Jaman in the town of Caux, Switzerland, and had been chosen as one of a few instructors qualified to teach skiing to Swiss military officers. Cochand also was jumping and cross-country



Cochand, age 19, at La Sagne, Switzerland, with his skiing trophies, 1909.

champion of the Suisse Romande, the French-speaking western region of Switzerland. He had arrived expecting employment as a ski instructor and winter sports director in Ste. Agathe, with no intention of building a resort himself or founding a skiing dynasty—yet he was to do both.

MacGibbon and the Montreal Ski Club

His sponsor, Lorne MacGibbon, had been a member of the Montreal Ski Club since its founding in 1905 and a man of considerable economic heft in the province of Quebec as president of the Bank of Montreal. Altruistically, he wanted to bring skiing to Ste. Agathe to spur its anemic economy. Selfishly, he wanted to learn how to ski decently, having been frustrated at years of being stuck at the “ingénue skier” level without prospect for improvement simply because no qualified ski instructors had yet appeared in Quebec.

MacGibbon had seized the opportunity that presented itself when his friend Ernest Desbaillets, manager of Montreal's Ritz Carlton Hotel, decided to visit his native Switzerland in the fall of 1909. MacGibbon managed to persuade Desbaillets to take whatever detours necessary to procure an experienced Swiss ski instructor, someone who could speak French well enough to make himself understood in French-speaking Quebec and who could speak English well enough

to teach skiing to the anglophone Montrealers in the club. MacGibbon would foot all necessary expenses.

By some small miracle, the elegant but very determined Desbaillets managed to find just such an instructor. One fall day in 1909 he knocked at the door of a small farmhouse in the hamlet of La Sagne in the mountains above Lake Neuchatel, asking to see one Emile Constant Cochand, who had been pointed out as admirably suited to the requirements in all respects, except his English was a little shaky. The question was this: would he leave his native land for a drastic change-of-life voyage to a nebulous destination far, far away.

The village of La Sagne had already had a considerable history in skiing. In the late 1800s, the village fathers had been so far-sighted as to hire a Norwegian skier to instruct villagers willing to educate themselves as winter guides in order to attract to La Sagne the rich British winter tourists who had begun descending on the alpine countryside intent on skiing. Young Cochand had been an outstanding skier ever since his first race in the village at age 6. Not able to afford more elegant equipment, he had headed down the course with his ordinary everyday boots nailed to a pair of barrel staves—and won. Surely this was a born skier.

From Switzerland to Canada

A dozen years later, 19-year-old Emile was the ski jumping and cross-country champion of the region and one of his country's outstanding instructors. He had, as noted earlier, taught cross-country skiing for two winters in the village of Caux, Switzerland, and had also taught skiing to Swiss Army officers. At that point in his life, as Emile once recalled, "I was approached by Mr. Desbaillets. He asked me if I would like to go to Canada." For some reason, perhaps the joy of a highly charged challenge, young Emile said yes, but that it would take him two years to pull up stakes in Switzerland, buy the equipment necessary for a start-up winter sports program, and freight it, along with himself, to Canada.

Cochand handled this drastic change of life with a deftness that left no question that here was an extraordinary young man. He crossed France by train with his strange baggage stored in accompanying freight cars, got all the gear across the Channel to England, and there booked passage for

North America. On arrival at Halifax, customs officers found the Swiss fellow's skis exotic but understandable in a country often buried in snow.

Once in Montreal, Cochand was reassured by the sight of Mount Royal, rising out of the city as a hint possibly of larger mountains to the north. Cochand was also reassured when he found he could basically understand the somewhat strange French spoken here. Emile soon met Monsieur Desbaillets and got instructions on how to take the *petite train du nord* for Ste. Agathe des Monts.

Disappointing Introduction

No one had mentioned that the Laurentians, an ancient, much-eroded chain of mountains, ranged in average height about 1,500 feet and that the giant of them all, Mt. Tremblant, standing somewhat north of Ste. Agathe, topped off at a distinctly mediocre 3,000 feet. As the train wound its way north, Cochand gazed in vain for the sort of mountains he had known in Switzerland. He saw only a rolling countryside of endless trees aflame with fall color and distant peaks rising no more than modestly in the background. At least it looked like good touring terrain.

Soon after his arrival at Ste. Agathe, Emile met Lorne MacGibbon at his summer home at Lac des Sables near the village. MacGibbon assured him that dozens of his friends, inexperienced skiers all, were waiting to take lessons as soon as possible. Cochand at once began to explore the Ste. Agathe countryside. What he found was that all the cleared land consisted of fenced-in private acres belonging to the *habitants*, farmers eking out a precarious existence on the thin soil of the Laurentian range. They were not even remotely interested in opening their fences during winter so this young man with a strange French accent could lay out trails on which he and his friends could glide merrily along on their long boards.

Emile saw that he had an uphill task ahead, but his nature was such that when the going got tough he uttered some



Cochand (right) points out the finer nuances of proper ski technique to students at Ste. Agathe des Monts, 1912.



The Robinson farmhouse (a.k.a. Minnetaka Cottage) in 1915.

unprintable French under his breath and got on with it. In this case, he found what terrain could possibly be put to use and what small areas were open to the public. Soon the snow began to fall, and fall and fall. There was more new snowfall than he'd ever seen. Emile was also struck by the intense cold, 20 degrees below what was normal for a winter day in Switzerland. However, he was young, fit, and—thanks to Franz, the Swiss chef at the Laurentide—well fed. Soon he was out in all weather, educating Montreal Ski Club members in the fine points of skiing.

Emile was not your distant, demanding instructor. His Swiss training taught him that client happiness was the key to success and he applied his youthful enthusiasm so engagingly that the Montreal Ski Club members he taught were more than satisfied. But their numbers remained fairly low in the beginning of that first winter.

In late November, therefore, MacGibbon suggested to Emile that to draw more clients from the city, he stage a demonstration of skiing for the many Montreal guests currently staying with him at Lac des Sables. Many of the guests had never seen skiing before. Emile was able to demonstrate the beautiful telemark turn, the acrobatic “cross jump turn,” and refined ski touring and jumping techniques.

In the weeks that followed, Cochand took small parties from the Lac Manitou Club along the trails he had managed to find around Ste. Agathe. From a historical point of view, despite its low-rise terrain, Ste. Agathe was ahead of almost every other place to ski on the North American continent.

In the rest of eastern Canada, interest in cross-country touring was stirring only in one other place in Quebec, at Gray Rocks, a four-season lodge in St. Jovite, bought as a family home by lumber man George Wheeler in the late 1800s. By

1905, Wheeler's timber stands were ruined by a fire, so the family had begun hosting sportsmen and laid on a few winter tours for the skiers who came around. But Gray Rocks' amateur ski guides could not teach the kind of expert technique that Cochand could—and Gray Rocks did very little ski business by comparison.

And in American snow country south of the Canadian border, there was only one recognized teacher in the sport during the 1910s and that was Carl Howelsen, a Norwegian immigrant who moved to Denver in 1911 and began giving lessons on a small scale. In 1913, Howelsen moved to Steamboat Springs and taught jumping and cross-country to locals from 1914 until he returned to Norway in 1922.

In the East, the first American inn to remain open in winter, the Lake Placid Club in upstate New York, provided skis for its guests but did not hire a professional ski instructor until 1920—by that time, Cochand had been teaching in the Laurentians for a decade. The second American inn to have a ski school, Peckett's-on-Sugar Hill, New Hampshire, hired its first instructor in 1928. During that same year on the West Coast, the Hotel Ahwahnee at Yosemite National Park opened for all four seasons, hiring two Swiss instructors with one “Ernest Des Baillets” as the winter sports director.

Holiday Festival Scores

A month after his demonstrations of skiing for visitors to Ste. Agathe, Cochand staged a larger “Christmas celebration of winter sport,” designed to give him a chance to become more familiar with the *habitants* and draw their attention to the sport of skiing. He organized jumping and cross-country demonstrations, festive ice skating and bobsledding, and a Christmas parade of decorated farm sleighs. He also had a snowshoe race, the popular winter competition. The farmers' sleighs made a splendid display with their horses wearing bells, high-stepping, and snorting clouds of steam as they pranced, hauling sleighs full of people in furs and colorful knit hats.

Cochand, with the support of several local sportsmen, built the first bobsled run in Ste. Agathe for the winter. He had cut the bob run on the Grey Nuns' property on Tour du Lac north of Parent's Bridge. Horses hauled Emile's heavy bobsled to the top and then Emile steered while the three often-terrified passengers accelerated down the track in a swirl of snow and screams. M. Parent, the mayor of Ste. Agathe, had rounded out the village's winter attractions, creating a skating rink by plowing snow off a large section of the ice on Lac des Sables.

Emile demonstrated skijoring, being towed at high speed behind a horse racing across the snow-covered portion of the lake. People watching marvelled at the speed as Emile bulleted with what seemed like reckless abandon across the snow.

The exhibition was a success, and many of the farmers who attended enjoyed themselves, becoming more sympathetic to Emile's appeals to remove sections of fencing for cross-county trails. By the end of Cochand's first winter at Ste Agathe in 1911-1912, skiing was no longer an oddity. The village was taking small steps toward becoming a winter resort.

But now Cochand faced a decision. The number of lessons given had not put enough in the bank to see him through the summer. He could go back to Switzerland or he could find a way to survive through the summer. He cast his lot with Canada and decided to stay.

Polishing English Skills Afloat

And he soon found a way to stay. Through connections in the Montreal Ski Club, he was hired for the summer by Sir Hugh Allan's famous Allan Steamship Company, operating cruise ships out of Montreal during the summer months. Cochand functioned as a cruise guide, answering questions from passengers, improving his English so that by his second winter in Canada, 1912-1913, he was able to build his clientele of English-speaking skiers.

Winter attendance during Cochand's second season rose considerably over that of the first, especially after Montreal Ski Club president Thomas Drummond had organized a jumping competition just outside Ste Agathe. The Montreal Ski Club had held ski jumping meets in the Westmount section of Montreal ever since the club's founding in 1905, and had even hosted the first Canadian Ski Jumping Championships in 1909. So the club had all the right connections to entice ski clubs on the East Coast to take part. One group even came up from the all-Norwegian Nansen Ski Club in Berlin Mills, New Hampshire.

The meet grew into such a high-profile event that Quebec's governor-general, the Duke of Connaught, arrived to officially open the event. Emile led off the field events with an exhibition of various ski techniques, followed by a successful jump meet. Some competitors, to the astonishment of the crowd, leaped more than 70 feet. Almost all the current phases of the sport of skiing had truly been introduced into the Laurentians. A good number of spectators from Montreal went back to spread the word of Cochand's expertise and pleasing demeanor among Montreal society. The school at Ste. Agathe attracted new pupils, some from wealthy families, others from the families of foreign diplomats stationed in Montreal.

The school roster in the second season, 1912-1913, included such high-profile pupils as M. Bonnin, the French consul in Montreal and Count Joachim von Ribbentrop, attaché at the German consulate, later foreign minister of Nazi Germany. Not least, in terms of prestige, Sir Mortimer Davis, president of the Imperial Tobacco Company of Canada, arrived on the scene.

Lea Berger: A Team Emerges

By the end of his second winter, Emile's clientele increased enough so that he could earn a year-round living. When winter subsided he began laying out more trails, now with real cooperation from local landowners. His next season, 1913-1914, was marked by a solid clientele, and that gave him time to court a woman vital to his future—Lea Berger, a young Swiss working as a governess in Montreal who had come up as a vacationer during his first two winters in Ste. Agathe. Being a governess was one of the few ways at the time that a young woman could work outside home, reap the education of foreign travel, and improve her chances for a good marriage. Lea's parents were restaurateurs near Bern. Lea herself had graduated from the famous Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris.

Lea was taken with the attractive 23-year-old despite his meager income. Emile was charmed in turn by the young Swiss: she was both a skilled cook and had seen enough of the world to be mature for her age.

In 1914 Emile and Lea married and Lea was soon pregnant with their first child, Yvonne. They had decided not to live in Montreal during the summer but to begin looking for a place in which they and their daughter could live together. Neither had the wherewithal to buy a house outright but they could rent or mortgage if the cost were modest. They found not only such a place through good friend Jack Kerr, a keen skier, treasurer of the Montreal Ski Club, and owner of a large sporting goods store in Montreal. It was called Minnetaka



Emile, Lea, and baby Yvonne in Ste. Agathe, 1915.

Cottage and lay about two miles from Ste. Marguerite Station, several train stops and 15 miles south of Ste. Agathe.

Taking the cottage would be a giant step. It would mean feeding and housing the clientele in their own home, essentially establishing their own resort. When Kerr took Lea and Emile to meet the owner, James Robinson, he agreed to rent it to the young couple with a view to their buying it as their profits allowed. It wasn't a wonderful house in which to live out the winter—uninsulated and with only a stove for heat—but the two had no better choice. The young couple needed a home where they could raise their baby.

An Inn's Beginnings

Minnetaka Cottage had been built as a summer place with a screened veranda to keep out the voracious mosquitoes and black flies in the summer but there was not much to insulate the house against the Canadian winter. There was no electricity, no running water, and the toilet was a privy—outdoor plumbing. The cottage did have a small farm with a stable nearby. But there was more in the air than buying a cottage. The house and stable stood on about 500 acres—plenty of room for expansion, for future buildings, and for ski-touring trails. The convincer was that the property could be bought in installments whose amount was scaled to the profit from lessons, meals, and accommodations.

The first winter would be very difficult. It meant accommodating guests in bunks instead of their own room in Ste. Agathe. And even with the stove going all night, mornings would be so cold that ice would have formed over buckets of water standing at a distance from the stove. However, the core of Cochand's clientele in the Montreal Ski Club had endured winter vacations for years in a lodge almost as primitive as the cottage—the Manitou Club. The lure of a chance to buy their own home and expand it to a sizable inn with guests paying not only for lessons but also for room and board was the final enticement—and the Cochands took it.

Emile had already built North America's first professional ski school to profitability, now he was buying an old cottage that was to become "the chalet" under multiple early expansions, all of it without any existing investment other than the sweat of his brow.

In Emile's words: "I decided this land would and could be developed for a ski resort. I bargained with Mr. Robinson for \$500 for 500 acres of land paid as the business developed. We then moved in and started our life as pioneers." *

Chas Cochand is the grandson of Emile Cochand. Today an attorney practicing in the U.K., his son Nico was awarded his Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance pin four years ago, making the Cochands the only family in Canada who can claim to have been ski instructors for more than 100 years. Next issue: In Part 2, the Chalet Cochand grows from its spare beginnings into a thriving Laurentian resort.

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