

TRAIL BLAZING AT LAKE WAKWAPATACHOKAMEKAK*

By ANTON DESSERUD

DURING the two middle weeks of April, 1933, five engineers from Montreal had the opportunity to enjoy a regular Easter holiday among the singing pine trees in the Land of the Ojibways.

We were sent out by our company from Montreal with the instructions to survey, in shortest possible time, Lake Christophersen (Lake Villebon), which is the white man's name of the lake mentioned in the title. The territory is to the north of Grand Lake Victoria, in the Townships of Villebon and Vauquelin, County of Abitibi, Quebec.

From the mining town of Senneterre to Bell River Power House, where the survey was to commence, we had a trek of thirty miles, half of which had to be travelled by dog teams, as the lake ice was too weak to support horses. The route was over Lake Obaska, Lake Simon and Sleepy River.

In the bush the snow lay three feet or more deep, and the Montreal quintet had taken their skis along. The rest of the gang, chiefly from Senneterre, were equipped with snowshoes. Endless discussions were going on which one of these two means of locomotion was most suitable in the bush, and to our surprise we found that skis were far superior in almost every instance. Thanks to our skis we completed the survey in twelve actual working days in the field against three weeks as scheduled. We thoroughly killed the belief among our snowshoeing comrades that skis are only for sport. The coming season will probably see a boom in the ski industry at Senneterre.

By taking stock of our ski wax, we found to our dismay that this consisted of one-half tin of Ostby Medium, one-half tin of Bratlie, one tin of Penttila and one larger tin of Klister. This was a very scanty outfit indeed, and something had to be done about it. Accordingly, one of the gang invented in great secrecy a brand new ski wax. Here is the recipe (patent pending): Boil one quart of pitch and one box of candles together, preferably at New Central Hotel, Senneterre. Put it on the skis at night with a hot iron or a blow torch. Go to bed and sleep peacefully. It is

guaranteed (or money back) that in the morning the skis will stick to the snow like glue. Remove every trace of wax with a sharp knife, in the meantime using a pleasant language regarding the inventor. Put on a good coat of Ostby Medium and enjoy some excellent ski-ing.

It is interesting to note that all ingredients for making a proper ski wax, such as wood tar, bees wax and paraffin were to be had in the stores at Senneterre.

It was an imposing looking force setting out in the wilderness. Five skiers in front followed by five dog team, and with ten snowshoers in the rear. And a wild country it was indeed, a place only for Indians, moose and the thrifty beaver. "And there is gold in them hills." Prospectors dropped in now and then at our camp to get a meal and tell stories, and made a good job of both.

Our survey consisted mostly of running traverses and taking topography. We were divided into two complete survey parties, called No. 1 and 2, each made up of one transitman, two chainmen, one axeman, one man taking topography besides being in charge of the party, and one dog team. The author was transitman on party No. 1. The head camp was established at the "Narrows," about five miles to the south of the Power House. Later on a smaller camp was put up at "Lac Petit" at Rushy Creek (a tributary to Lake Villebon) for party No. 1. The distance between camps was six miles.

We started work in the morning usually at a time when a good percentage of the population in larger cities went to bed. It is a fact that lighted matches were used to read the angles one frosty morning at Rushy Creek, and there was ample opportunity to shoot the Stella Polaris. The ice and snow

were then frozen solid with correspondingly rapid progress of work. Later in the day, however, the hot sun transformed the surface ice into slush. We could always get along nicely on skis; but the snowshoers had no easy task. "Je voudrais avoir vos skis ici, ça serait plus facile," said one of the chainmen, plodding along



*Ojibways: meaning the Lake with the many bays.

on his waterlogged snowshoes, sinking down one foot in slush at every step.

The crusty snow and ice were hard on our skis, and as some of us had to put in more than one hundred ski-ing hours, several ingenious schemes were proposed to reduce the wear and tear. In a desperate effort to invent a new ski wax, one enterprising fellow, one evening gave his skis a thorough overhauling with seal oil. The result was very unsatisfactory.

In Lac Petit at Rushy Creek the author had the doubtful pleasure of being forced to take a swim with skis on. Two men, including myself, and a dog team went through the ice, when going to work, Easter Monday, at daybreak. Luckily we were near the camp, and two men on shore started at once to cut trees and make a bridge out to us, and finally after about ten minutes we were dragged out. We lost the dog team. This incident did not seem to cut any ice among these hardy bushmen, and my Indian friend Miranda remarked with a grin: "Don't start swimming in April."

The appetite was always exceptionally good and it was absolutely incredible what mountainous platefuls of fatty food would disappear. The meals resembled something like bayonet charges.

It should be easily understood that swell ski-ing togs would not do in the bush, so we dressed more in the line of lumber jacks. From a sportsman's point of view we might have looked distinctly shabby. The chief question was boots and skis. A good boot is half of the pleasure in ski-ing. I had two pairs of ski boots with me, one new pair and one seasoned. The last I had to lend to a fellow, who had none, so I had the pleasure of breaking in a new pair which resulted in swollen ankles the first few days. A ski boot for all round use should be without

lining, and with full tongue, so that the boot is watertight to the very top. This new pair of mine had a thick sheepskin lining, and half tongue only, which resulted in wet feet all the time and it was impossible to get the boots dry during the survey.

The only ski material suitable for this kind of work seems to be hickory. Besides two pairs of this material, we had two pairs of ash, and one pair of birch. The last gave in at the end of the survey; they were in places worn down to about half the original thickness, and took on some grotesque shapes. This gave occasion for a lot of jokes, and the owner of the skis is never again going to invest in birch. My own pair were well seasoned Hagen hickory skis, which had been planed down twice, and were therefore very thin and flexible. They stood the strain well, and lost neither the arching nor the bend. They were equipped with Haug's harness and Jordell's heel buckle. I consider this buckle superior to the ordinary one because it does not dig, will never loosen and keeps the heel from moving sidewise.

The weather gods were kind to us and we had glorious sunshine every day, except two, when we got soaked thoroughly. During the rain the scales on the transit often got illegible, and the instrument had to be taken to pieces and dried, which of course was miserable business when raining cats and dogs.

Saturday afternoon, April 22, we said goodbye to our friends at Senneterre, and boarded the Montreal bound train, tired and happy, and with an exceptionally deep sun tan.

But I will long remember the clear, cold mornings at Rushy Creek, standing by, waiting for the sun to rise, to be able to read the transit. Spring was in the air and if you were lucky, you might discover a solitary crane aloft on a tall pine tree.

OUR FIRST SKI FUNICULAR

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 1933, it was just a shaken-down, snowed-under old derelict of a Dodge, parked in the snow off to one side at the bottom of the "big hill" at Shaw-bridge—best known run of the Laurentians—with the inventor and proprietor, Alec Foster, tinkering away in the 15 below zero atmosphere. On Monday, January 2, 1933, it was the answer to the downhill ski runner's prayer. Not a funicular, but better, a 2,400-foot endless rope, passing through blocks at top and bottom of its span of two-thirds of the hill, and around a special hub on the rear axle of the Dodge.

No schedules, no waits for the next train just a constantly moving tow at about fifteen miles per hour, which the skier with the "price" could grab, at whatever part of the hill the desire to climb struck his fancy. Five cents a trip or fifty cents a day and business was booming. Although there were halts for cooling the motor and greasing the blocks, a skier with this aid could easily enjoy more downhill running than his legs could happily absorb. We hope to see it at work again this winter, and there is certainly room for another one on the St. Sauveur Hill as well.