

“As Others See Us”

The following article, written by Christine Cash, appeared in The Cape Times, South Africa, and illustrates the international reputation of the Province of Quebec as a tourist resort.

THE SKI SPECIAL—it has almost as much significance as the Blue Train or the Rome Express—leaves Montreal every Saturday in the winter at 2.15 p.m.

At the end of the coaches is a special place for the hundreds of pairs of skis and poles. The train is always packed to overflowing and everybody knows everybody else on the Ski Special. Gay young people in ski togs. Brilliant sweaters, jaunty scarves and caps, the clatter of steel-tipped boots, laughter, arms thrown around one another's shoulders—it is a picture never to forget. A picture of youth triumphant, let out of the city's toils to the crisp keen mountains where muscles would be taxed and deep, long breaths of ice-cold air would be drawn into the lungs.

“Hello, Lou, haven't seen you for an age—going up to St. Jovite?”

“No—I'm dropping off at St. Agathe—I've heard the snow is better there.”

“Don't you believe it, sister—was up at St. Jovite last week—it's grand.”

Up and down the train they drift—chatting here and there. At each stop a few descend, buckle on their skis, swing their knapsacks over strong shoulders and glide swiftly and gracefully on their way.

We arrive at our destination. Jacques is waiting with the sleigh—his mackinaw coat a vivid red plaid against the white world's background. His fur cap pulled down over his ears and his round face red and shining.

“Comment s'a va?” (sic) he calls in patois, then spits cheerfully over the side of the sleigh. We pile in and the horses go on their way over the snow—the jingling of their bells like no other music on earth.

We leave our knapsacks at Madame Labelle's house and drink the steaming coffee she offers, then off up the trail with all worries forgotten.

Up the hills sideways like crabs—then a swooping descent—along the forest trails—over the valleys. We do not go far, because it is dark at five these winter days. Laughing, tumbling, scrambling, we arrive back at the two-storey wooden shack.

Jacques brings out the carpet brush and whisks the dry snow off our heavy clothes. Joe pushes Elsie off the verandah, and she is almost buried in the snowdrift. Others follow, and

there is a merry skirmish. Jacques sighs and brushes us down again with a grin.

Inside Madame has the stove roaring away, the pipes of which cross the ceiling and go into other parts of the house. From the kitchen comes the smell of other appetising things and the noise of high pitched excited patois. Madame has fourteen children.

We peel off our sweaters and coats—someone pounds away at the piano—someone else sings—and others sit round the stove with their feet on top. The oil lamp swings from the ceiling and round the rough painted walls are photographs and pictures cut from magazines.

The dinner bell—we rush!

French-Canadian pea soup, thick and hot, with fresh made bread and farm butter, roast mutton with jelly, potatoes, beans and corn, followed by the inevitable apple pie and ice cream. Our coffee is drunk with our meat course, and we rise from the table like giants refreshed.

Jacques tells us of a dance in the next village, and offers to drive us the two miles across the mountains.

The drive is enchanting. The mountains are so calm and the runners on the sleigh slip quite silently over the snow. Above the sky is pitch black, but the Northern Lights streak across in myriad colors and shapes. It's going to be colder tomorrow.

The cheerful jangling bells mingle with our voices as we sing interminable verses of “Alouette”—the most popular song in French Canada.

The dance has started when we arrive—the hall, lighted with oil lamps, is full of colorful skiers from other houses and villages, but we know most of them. We peel off our sweaters and coats again and also our boots. Everyone dances in woollen socked feet. As most of us have at least three pairs of socks on, it's quite comfortable.

The orchestra comprises a pianist—that is to say, a lad of about 14, who plays his tune with the right hand and with his left invents the bass with appalling misjudgment. There is also a violinist who chews gum incessantly. They are quite separate in their rendering of talent and ignore each other's time and tune relentlessly.

The master of ceremonies is a local lad and his duties are to recite the words of the songs.

All the dances are square farm dances, the words providing the key for the changes of movement, and they are hilarious. "The Turkey in the Straw," that good old American tune, is the favourite always.

We bow and we scrape and we whirl—we do chains from hand to hand—we are lifted off our feet by stalwart Pierres and Louies—faster and faster, till another minute must surely bring breaking point.

We get gayer and gayer. The room is full of smoke and laughter. The pianist goes on taking dreadful hazards, the violinist goes on chewing gum, and the M.C. begins to get hoarse.

Midnight. The party is over. It is Sunday, and the French-Canadians are good Catholics. We pile in the sleigh, tired and happy, but not too tired to sing with our heads on each other's shoulders.

We are wakened on Sunday morning by the bell of the little wooden church calling the faithful to early mass. The house is warm, but we know the temperature has dropped. All is still and everything sparkles in the sunlight.

After a heavy breakfast we buckle on our skis and start on the long trail over the mountains. We pause near the top and look down at a seemingly toy village, with its cluster of wooden houses and church, everything with its fairy crust of snow. We dip down towards the valley, where the river is silenced in the grip of winter and which we cross on the ice. Miles and miles of mountains, gorges and dips—

each corner bringing a more beautiful vista than before. The air is clean and bracing, it makes our faces tingle and icicles form on the end of our noses. The blood races through our veins and we swoop madly and often disastrously down the trails.

We eat our sandwiches in a sheltered hollow and rest there awhile with our skis leaning against the fence.

About four o'clock on the homeward trail it starts to snow, finely, the flakes almost like sugar, dry and light. The lamps shine out a welcome from the windows as we near the village, and Madame Labelle has a hot supper ready for us of tomato soup, hamburger steak and pumpkin pie.

We are tired and we loll lazily by the stove.

About eight Jacques drives us to the station and we stamp about until we see the Ski Special winding down the valley—its great light shining along the track.

"Revoir" calls Jacques from beside the sleigh.

We climb aboard to find all our companions of the previous day healthily tired and invigoratingly full of mountain air.

"You know that telemark turn—broke my ski. . . ."

"How was the snow your way?" Bit soft up. . . ."

"Gosh—I'm tired. . . ."

Montreal. We trail into a cafeteria complete with skis and have bacon and eggs. It is part of the ritual.

Then bed—memories of a perfect week-end make us ready for Monday's work.

Ski-ing begins at Ninety

THE INAUGURATION of a veteran's class in the Laurentians for all old men of thirty-five and over brought grey hairs to many a hitherto youthful head, and we look with especial interest on items relating to the care and feeding of skiers in their second childhood. In *Boston's Ski Bulletin* we found some passages on this, quoted from the *Ottawa Ski News*, which remarked: "A noted physical culturist once said that a normal being should be able to touch the palms of both hands on the floor without bending his knees until he is ninety years of age. After that he should limit himself to touching with the tips of his fingers, not that he could not do more but because, after a certain age, one should practice moderation in all things. If this is so and we don't doubt it, then a healthy man or a healthy woman for that matter, should be able to keep on ski-ing until near the century mark. The main thing is to keep at it, to keep in training. Why do we drop off ski-ing? Is it because our strength fails us? Not at all, it is merely on account of a

lack of will power on our part. It takes a certain amount of will power to get started every year, to brave the first cold, to take the first hill. Once out, we enjoy it just as much as we ever did, but the difficulty is to resume the habit. Because we no longer feel the urge to go out, that burning and feverish desire for the trails and for the hills that we experienced in our youth at the first snow fall, because a slight effort is required to put on our ski togs and we lack the will power to make that effort, we imagine that we are growing old and relinquish a source of enjoyment that should be ours to the end of our days. Ski-ing, good ski-ing, is easier than walking and infinitely more pleasant. No one would deny that walking can be kept up until extreme old age; why not ski-ing? The main thing is to acquire skill at an early age, to make easy work of ski-ing, so as to be able to keep it up throughout life. This business of quitting ski-ing at forty, fifty or even sixty, because it is a sport for the young is sheer nonsense!"