Development of Ski-ing at Banff and in the Rockies

Digest of an Article by V. Victor Kutschera, Banff

As THE official in charge of choosing the championship course for the 1937 Dominion Ski Championship events at Banff, I was amazed to note even amongst Canadian visitors an astounding ignorance regarding Banff’s history and importance as a leading mountain ski resort.

To me, born in the world-renowned Austrian Tyrol and ten years at Banff, it seemed strange that but few of the many visiting ski enthusiasts that came to Banff realized the important part ski-ing—in its modern form—has played in the development of the mountainous West. The arduous pioneering efforts of the early Scandinavian trappers, miners and lumbermen during the severe mountain winters were lightened by the use of the Canadian snowshoe and, later on, by the Nordic ski. The inevitable soon followed: the ski was taken up as a sport and the early rough and ready Western Canadian ski jumping competition was born in Revelstoke, Camrose and Burns Lake.

The honour of having first used ski at Banff belongs to the late Conrad Kain, celebrated Austrian climbing guide and trapper, as early as 1911. But the real credit as the true “father” of ski-ing goes to the late Scandinavian, Gus Johnson, who learned to ski in his native Sweden and came to Canada in his youth. Johnson became domiciled in Banff in 1917 after the inception of the “Banff Winter Carnival.” Keenly enthusiastic, he commenced to teach young and old in a really systematic way the gospel of the Nordic skidor. It was
he who discovered the steep, sporting slopes of Mount Norquay and who slashed out of stubborn fire-aftergrowth the first downhill run known even today as "Johnson's Slide." It has been a long and often disheartening struggle from Johnson's early efforts in 1917 to the construction of the Mount Norquay Ski Hut in 1928 and the Dominion Ski Championship at Banff in 1937.

But what does the name "Banff" really signify? By Banff we do not mean the little town itself, nor the justly famed slopes of Mount Norquay either. To us the name stands for the immense territory of alpine scenic grandeur, known to the world as the famous "Banff National Park."

It would seem, offhand, that such a terrain would offer a thousand places and locations to the ardent mountain skier and winter alpinist on ski, but such is not the case. The reason for this can easily be understood. The Alpine ski country we had available for immediate development in the Canadian Rockies, great open parklands, beautiful appearing mountain slopes, vast glaciers, depended for permanent success directly upon good transportation facilities, whereas actually the great distances, lack of automobile roads, etc., made it impossible from a practicable viewpoint.

The Canadian Pacific Railway established an alpine summer camp at beautiful Mount Assiniboine, but found it impossible to convert it into a workable winter ski-ing project despite the fine efforts of the director, Marquis degli Albizzi, and his Norwegian assistant, Erling Strom. It could not operate successfully during the winter season because of the great distance involved. The difficulty of introducing modern means of travel and communication over the forty-odd mile journey through the rough mountain passes south of Banff has now forced the present owner-manager, Erling Strom, to discontinue his winter season until the aeroplane and reasonably safe mid-winter flying in the mountains make it possible to bring scheduled pay-loads in and out. And such would never be warranted since the Assiniboine district fails to offer to the ultra-modern skier the thousands of vertical feet of unbroken alpine downhill running. The modern alpine trend for greater vertical descents and longer runs is being advertised everywhere on the Continent, and justly so.

Some years before, an enterprising group of youthful Western ski pioneers vissioning a Canadian alpine ski resort on continental lines, journeyed many hundred miles to search on ski, under heavy backpacks, into the remote Canadian mountain wilderness for a closely available alpine ski-ing territory. They sought long unbroken vertical descents, sporting downhill runs, great glaciers and icefields, well knowing that only on ice, deep and securely covered by snow, can the acme of all mountain ski-ing be experienced. These lads, then only in their early twenties, went on a systematic search. First south of the Canadian Pacific Railway track, into the famous areas of the Continental Divide; Assiniboine, then Sunshine, Mount Ball, the Valley of the Ten Peaks, Wenkchemna to O'Hara and finally the Lake Louise Group. A fruitless effort. Nothing good enough to suit their plans, tremendously ambitious plans indeed. So north they trudled through untracked powder snow into the wintry fastnesses of the Columbia Icefields; the hydrographic and glacial apex of the North American Continent. Another pioneering trip from remote Jasper via the Columbia Icefields route to Lake Louise, a truly gallant undertaking in mid-winter, but still no result.

At last, in an effort to obtain personal information of the district northeast of Lake Louise, they explored no further than ten miles from their starting point, famed Lake Louise, and found themselves in a glorious vista of alpine ski-ing—a mountain world of unlimited ski-ing slopes and sporting runs, such as they had dreamed of always. It was the very valley the Canadian Pacific Railway Swiss guides had advocated, fully living up to the descriptions these sturdy sons of the Bernese Oberland had given. A district truly alpine, as if taken from the very Alps themselves and placed into this bit of the Canadian Cordillera. Their joy and enthusiasm was great indeed—at last—they had found their vision.

They spoke of "Skoki" as a veritable skiers' heaven, and many were the people that laughed and snickered at them openly.

But the valiant crew went to work energetically, incorporated their efforts in 1931 and were known thereafter as the "Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies Limited," and by the autumn of that year there stood a cozy log cabin in the then little heard of "Skoki Valley."

The following winter proved the valley's merits—it was an alpine skier's paradise. Continental visitors pronounced the location a replica of the celebrated Alpine ski-ing districts, and bye and bye the unpretentious little enterprise acquired a reputation far afield, a reputation justly famous today. There were favourable and enthusiastic pressnotes in some of the leading English papers, and so it happened that Sir Norman Watson, internationally known British sportsman and alpine skymountaineer, while on a search for alpine ski-ing fields in British North America, heard of this new development and without waste of time established contact with them. Previously he had made a pioneering ski trip through the mountain wilderness of the mysterious Waddington Group and an arduous mid-winter crossing of the Franklin Glacier in 1934. It was late in the autumn and despite rain and adverse weather, Sir Norman went to look the whole situation over, and when he returned was most enthusiastic and full of
great plans for a development of a size and proportion no one had ever dreamed of before. Realizing there was a great need for easily accessible true alpine ski-ing country on this continent, nothing to his mind and judgment was comparable to the district northeast of Lake Louise—The Skoki District—known before to mountaineers and alpine climbers as the "Slate Mountains."

The results of his long and thorough investigations impressed him with the necessity of securing the close whole-hearted co-operation of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the intelligent understanding and sympathy of the National Parks Department of Canada for his proposed project.

A final check-up and a thorough survey on skis was made by Sir Norman personally during the last winter, checking again the observations of the winter seasons, the length of runs, maximum vertical drops, their exposure to the average winds, to counteract the possibility of avalanche conditions; every detail had to be considered fully, before one could plan on a major alpine ski-ing development in the Skoki-Ptarmigan area. The unbroken maximum vertical drop averages 5,000 feet. A really superb downhill ski run in the vicinity of the Red Deer River district assures a variation of glacial descents over an average of more than 4,000 vertical feet. A running which installed as the Sir Norman Watson Glacier Trophy, and it is his wish that a yearly Derby be run down the icy fastnesses of the Drummond Glaciers.

Meanwhile, another organization has grown up, the Ski Runners of the Canadian Rockies. A brother organization to the famed Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, the brainchild of Mr. Murray Gibbon. The Ski Runners have been a great assistance to Western alpine ski-ing and have enjoyed the co-operation of Mr. Cameron G. Stockhand, the present Western technical adviser of the Canadian Amateur Ski Association. They have a large ever-growing membership acquired since their inauguration in 1932, their members enlisting from all over the globe, and also skiers who have indulged in their sport only in the Canadian Rockies. The standard is reasonably high and members are selected by their qualifications as skiers and by the mileage they have toured on ski out here.

There is another ski-ing development on the Sunshine Pass, a lodge owned and operated for several years by the Brewster Transport Company, Banff. Good training runs are close to the lodge and the whole district is of typical Canadian Upland character. Sunshine Lodge is situated on the very backbone of the Continental Divide and provides an interesting area for the ski-ing disciple.

From my own point of view, there is further need for development of truly alpine ski-ing territory. This means a lot of forethought, preparatory work, bush clearing, the construction of trail systems and a general "tidying up." The Austrians and the Swiss can tell you all this costs money and a great amount of strenuous physical work as well.

I was delighted to learn that the original ski pioneering organization, the Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies, Limited, who have carried on undismayed through the depression, have received a prospectus from an important English Syndicate under the direction of Sir Norman Watson. In this is outlined a vast program for the future, to which the pioneers agreed fully. It is the Syndicate's plan to make scientific use of the immense variety of available downhill ski runs, the many glaciated areas, like Ptarmigan, the both Dognlasses, Bonnet and also the huge Drummond. And for the ski-tourer there will be comfortable huts and modern chalets at strategic places. To facilitate easy getting up into the high Alplands there is a modern automobile road contemplated, and a narrow gauge mountain railway as well. This proposed programme would create the most unique truly alpine winter sports development on the North American continent and the Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies feels now is the time, as America is ready and in need of an important development in this novel field.

And now back to Banff, to our Mount Norquay. It was the same Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies, with the foresight long ago to build the hut and create the runs on Mount Norquay, that made the success of the Dominion Ski Championships in 1937 possible. Unfortunately, the steep terrain of Mount Norquay, the artificial runs and steep descents were but sparsely covered with snow during last March, at the time of the championships. And this reminds me of the jinx of the F.I.S., the seeming unbreakable jinx all big ski meets have. Like Innsbruck in my native Austria, two years ago, on the occasion of the F.I.S. World Championships when they held their events under much more adverse snow and weather conditions than we had to cope with at Banff.

It certainly was icy where there was "snow" and terribly torn up and plowed under where there were only solid rocks and fallen timber. Therefore, I cannot but wonder and rejoice at the fact that actually none were hurt during the events, despite the fast times made. Quite different from Innsbruck, where they had some serious crack-ups and accidents. Such unfavourable weather conditions, as they experienced abroad, could never be expected in our Canadian Rockies.

So we extend to all a cordial invitation to pack your skis and ski gear and come out and visit us. We promise you a grand welcome and enjoyable experience.