

Tack Collecting in Switzerland

By Brian Meredith

THE SWISS know more about ski-ing than mere ski-technique: they know how to organize. During two months ski-touring in the Alps last February and March I learnt a lot. It was not necessarily how to ski better, for I belong to a class of incorrigibles watched over by some special providence, but how complete a service is possible under the ideal conditions.

I saw how skiers and their skis were served by a great variety of forms of transportation: how communities pulled together to attract ski business, and to keep it when they got it; how official ski schools provided instruction and touring experience for all classes of skiers; how the proper authorities guarded against accidents and were ready to act quickly and efficiently when they did occur; how races were run down from Olympian heights by lithe young Swiss supermen, with flags and markers provided by grace of advertising; how hotels of all classes co-operated and operated to attract and serve skiers and winter visitors indoors and out.

In these and other respects I saw where we in Canada had something to learn and where some of the improvements we have been fighting for for years were running smoothly and profitably.

These are Brass-Tacks, Matters-of-Fact, and I think they may interest many officials of the C.A.S.A., of member clubs and many readers of the Year Book. I hope so at any rate. They are probably worth more space than a recital of my periphrasies, the details of which would be meaningless to most, or than a record of my profound personal appreciation of Switzerland and the Swiss.

Suffice for my own escapades to say that in late January I started at Gstaad in Western Switzerland, and towards the end of March I was gloomily preparing to return to the smoke of London at St. Moritz in Eastern Switzerland. I had covered the intervening distance and visited a dozen odd resorts on skis or by train. When conditions permitted I skied across country over passes, back packing my razor and toothbrush and sending my heavy luggage ahead by train. A season of unusually heavy and continual snowfalls thwarted several attempts at ski-mountaineering or touring in the high country; but none-the-less, as you can well imagine, I saw snowfields and downhill runs and scenery such as a Laurentian skier might dream about.

Exactly a year before I had the good fortune to spend almost a month ski-ing in the Canadian Rockies, visiting the ski-camps and meet-

ing a grand collection of westerners. Time and again in Switzerland I remembered that western tour. Winter quickened the resemblance between the high country of the Rockies and the Alps; and I could only regret that so relatively few skiers could ever see a fraction of the beauties of our own magnificent mountains.

A kindred spirit pervades those high places, and a skier who comes to know them grows from being a lover of ski-ing in the abstract to being a lover of the mountains in particular. His pleasure in them, a pleasure that verges on devotion, is keener because he is a skier and feels at home outdoors in the winter time. As he gains their passes and crests under his climbing skins, as their beauty and radiance is spread before him, and as they speed past beneath his skis as he heads adventurously downwards, he feels the mountains become personally important and almost essential to him.

The mountains and the skier complement one another. Surely, he feels, they are never more beautiful than in winter; surely no one is better fitted than he to be made happy by them, physically and spiritually.

But all that, though perhaps good exercise for the soul, does not indicate what we can learn from the Swiss to our advantage in the matter of Brass Tack organization.

Take the matter of transportation: skiers could scarcely hope for better.

Though in high resorts like St. Moritz the snowfall and avalanche hazard is greater than in most parts of Canada, railways, buses funiculars and airplanes run with little interruption. Between snow ploughing and snow shovelling and snow rolling, new snow hasn't a chance. Everything from an electric rotary plough to ancient hand sledges are used to remove it.

Trains on the main lines have special coaches for skiers and their skis; and smaller trains at resorts carry flat cars with ski racks on which hundreds of skis may be stacked upright with safety.

Funiculars (or rack and pinion railways, usually electric) and cable railways ascend anything from a thousand to six thousand feet from the resorts. They are kept running under extremely difficult conditions, and they are usually jammed with traffic, often uncomfortably so. Most were first built for summer use, but they serve well enough; and several, including the Parsenn, were built for ski business, and have been the making of the resorts from which they operate.

Temporary winter funiculars have been ingeniously improvised with counter-balancing sleighs at either end of a cable, one sleigh descending its groove in the snow as its mate ascends; and as these ride on top of the snow, fresh snow is an asset and not a hindrance. They are called "Funis"—and look it.

The Swiss government postal autobusses and private bus companies operate between and around the chief resorts supplementing the railway services, and bringing skiers back from the end of many famous ski-runs. Wide mouthed wire baskets usually serve as ski

something particularly pretty off to one side, and my ski points veered slightly. I promptly fell off into deep snow.

Special rates are available to regular users of all these forms of transportation. There are week-end and winter-sport fares, reductions to certain Swiss ski club members, and inexpensive *abonnments*. The latter are tickets punched on a mileage basis so that each trip costs little if you buy in advance.

In fairness to our own transportation companies be it reported that in Switzerland, despite the seasonal rush of business, some of the



A big hill, that is a big hill, at Andermatt in Central Switzerland. The crest is well over a thousand feet above the finish, and the slope is very steep.
(Photo J. Gaberell, Thalwil, Zurich)

racks on the back; ski sticks are kept by each passenger.

For steeper ascents in some places open caterpillars are used.

Rudimentary but practical and wasting little time in waiting are the ski lifts. These, like the ski tows in the States, operate from an endless overhead cable and hook you uncompromisingly around from behind and drag you up for several hundred feet on your own two skis. Again, fresh snow is an asset and not a hindrance to them. Your skis must be kept in the proper track, however, and not allowed to diverge. Once my mind wandered when I saw

railways and funiculars do not pay. In some cases of course they were built for summer use, and enough business to cover maintenance and operating costs in winter is sufficient; and in other cases the community and hotels have an interest in it and are willing to pay for any operating loss as local trade would suffer if it closed down. Actually the Swiss Confederation is involved in owning and operating a complex maze of federal railways, large and small, and are in a financially embarrassing position comparable to that of Canada with the Canadian National Railways.

I can only imagine one district in Canada



A Ski School Line-up at Pontresina in the Engadine

(Photo B. Schocher, Pontresina)

where domestic and international passenger traffic would justify any attempt at elaboration along Swiss lines. That is in the Laurentians north of Montreal; but with the old heavy rolling stock now in use the limit is nearly reached on the railways at it is, and an increase or speeding up of train services is physically difficult. Where improvements are most needed are in and about the Laurentian villages; but these would not be wholly matters of transportation, and our railways do not relish going off their rights-of-way to take a hand in this. Too many people like myself have plausible ideas as to how they should spend money.

However, the ski-lift and "funi," exterior ski racks on trains and busses, the maintenance of winter roads, and the institution of "abonnements" all could better transportation in the Laurentians.

Maybe Grouse Mountain or Mount Royal could do with a lift, funi or funicular. There should be enough skiers thereabouts who would develop the Downhill Only urge.

So much for transportation: now as to the prevention and handling of accidents.

In Switzerland, of course, the greatest threat is from the snowslide or avalanche. As that is a danger existing only in our Rockies, and as that is being intelligently studied by the National Park authorities on the spot, avalanche precautions need not be detailed.

The cause and treatment of accidents on the main runs is another matter. There are long downhill runs at Davos and St. Moritz as crowded sometimes as our Big Hill at Shawbridge, and the accident risk is considerable. The local authorities very properly feel responsible for skiers as they bring business to the community, and they are ready to help them in case of accident.

There are first aid kits at all climbing huts and wayside restaurants, S.O.S. emergency phone boxes at junction points of all the main runs, red-painted ambulance sledges stacked

ready for use where accidents are likely; and there are men carrying first aid equipment patrolling the route. It is a little disconcerting but it is at least reassuring to know that you will be efficiently looked after if anything does happen. In many respects the famous Parsenn is like a high speed motor artery. In the event of an accident someone skis down to the next telephone box, a

patrol is notified at the top of the run, in a few minutes experts shoot down with a sledge, and at a speed faster than the average person can ski downhill the case is rushed down-grade to the next village or railway station. In the resorts and villages by the big runs there is a roster of local doctors and a Doctor of the Day always available and on duty ready to handle accidents; and in the bigger places there are hospitals.

Getting hurt is even considered a worthwhile adventure in itself. I have heard several skiers describe enthusiastically how quickly help came, how exciting was the run down in the ambulance sledge, and how efficient was the doctor into whose hands they were put. There is the inference that you've really seen nothing until you've sprained an ankle or broken a collar bone.

We can learn from all this that the treatment of accidents is a duty that should be assumed by the communities benefiting from ski business; that first aid equipment and sledges should be more widely distributed and their location marked on ski maps; that likewise emergency telephones in farms or country houses near popular ski trails should be marked; and that first aid should be studied by a special section in every ski club. Permanent patrols are too much to hope for, but ski clubs could do much by investigating local facilities and preparing them to act quickly and efficiently at any hour in case of ski accidents. The work of the St. John's Ambulance Association representatives in the Laurentians cannot be overpraised, nor the public spirit of those who have aided them. Conditions there were much better during the past two seasons, but more remains to be done.

Next comes the way Swiss communities work to attract and serve winter sports business of all varieties. The local Kurverein, a permanent and aggressive Board of Tourist Trade, does far more than merely arrange local

promotion and publicity: they provide good service, and in most resorts there is a small kurtax or head-tax levied on visitors to maintain it.

The kurverein staff marks off all the local ski runs, posts sign-posts and control flags, maintains patrols and emergency services, and keeps the runs in repair. If there is a work or sunburns patch in a bush run fresh snow is shovelled over it. If a place is dangerous, warning signs are posted.

They run the local ski school, organize ski-tours and provide guides who are distinct from instructors, for those who wish to make long tours or climbs on skis. They maintain a jump.

They have lists of all local hotels and pensions and the charges at each: and the Swiss hoteliers keep a high standard of cleanliness and service among themselves.

They maintain services for the non-skier and spectator, like skating and curling rinks, foot paths with benches kept shovelled out, and bob-sleigh and luge runs.

They organize events each week and each week-end: ski competitions of all types for all classes, ice carnivals and bonspiels, dances, band concerts and even beauty contests. They do some weird things, but they keep their visitors socially amused.

They work closely with the Ski Club of Great Britain and other national and local ski clubs, and facilitate their activities and the movements of their representatives and officials.

It all brings business.

Canadian communities would do well to study the Swiss systems carefully. The only one I personally know of that has been aggressive and efficient in such matters is Banff, and there the resources of the National Parks authorities have been of considerable assistance. The Canadian Amateur Ski Association and its member clubs could encourage and assist communities in this work of internal organization, as some have been doing already. As it is all in the interest of improving skiing conditions I believe it is their duty to do so.

Though I like to get away from it all as much as any other, and hate crowds once I am outdoors and on the trail, I have little patience with the Ivory Tower skier who wants all the facilities and assistance he can get, but who would condemn points that I have raised as being too too grossly commercial. Skiers and ski-clubs have to be ski-public-spirited. They can't wander starry-eyed through the

wilderness and then grumble because they can't get a decent meal at the next village. They have got to take an interest in the village.

The Swiss ski schools I think are the most interesting and praiseworthy of their various community undertakings. In some places the ski school is free to all visitors, its cost being included in the kurtax; in others there is a reasonable charge. The schools are staffed by instructors, women as well as men, trained in a central school and given regular refresher courses; and their methods are standardized throughout the country. They can ski brilliantly, that goes without saying, and they can teach intelligently in three or four languages. The technique they teach takes a little after the Scandinavian as well as after the Austrian systems; and it gives the beginner the best reasonable results in the shortest time. They teach thousands of skiers in each resort each season; they fit newcomers into classes according to their ability; they put their pupils through tests, arrange competitions and tours, and award prizes and badges as they gain in proficiency.

Very sensibly the Swiss reason that if people are persuaded to come to Switzerland to ski, they should be given a chance to learn to ski if they don't know how, or to learn how to ski better. If they are not helped and are discouraged and damaged by their lack of proficiency, they are not likely to return another season.

Canadian communities or transportation systems would benefit by undertaking the maintenance of public ski schools along these lines. They cannot be seriously operated by the ordinary club unless managed by paid instructors and backed by a professional organization. In the long run it is undeniable that things will only function regularly and reliably

(Photo J. Haennisegger, Andermatt)

Ski Terrain above Andermatt in Central Switzerland



if they are someone's business and not someone's pleasure. We have all tried to persuade the Vested Interests to do something of this sort—I have, I know—but they have not been interested, or they have Passed the Buck. Maybe they are now more open to conviction.

In the matter of hotel accommodation, it is difficult not to be libellous. What I think of the small hotels and pubs in the Laurentians, despite genuinely fond memories of them, I dare not put into print. Suffice to say that the Swiss, from the smallest pension to the largest hotel knows how to make his guests comfortable, how to feed them well, and how to make them want to return. Moreover some of them have real Atmosphere: they are really Swiss; they are simple, inexpensive and genuine. In Canada we have an atmosphere, we could be ourselves and be more attractive for it; but there is tragically little attempt made to preserve local color where it exists.

Hotel accommodation I think is something the Canadian Amateur Ski Association and its member clubs could improve in the interests of skiers by a little systematic investigation and inspection; and by awarding published recommendation, that would have to be renewed from month to month, to those conforming to certain standards. This might well degenerate into a racket; but if it was handled con-

scientiously it might result in vast improvements in the standards of cleanliness, cuisine and general service of hotels and boarding houses catering to skiers. Automobile associations have done much this way; we might do likewise.

To recapitulate, then, some of the shiny Brass Tacks I selected in the Alps for Canadian inspection.

You can ski in Switzerland and be sure that transportation facilities will take you to the highest practicable point in the best skiterrain, and that you can get a lift home at the end of the run. You can learn to ski or to ski better and meet people in the ski schools; and you are assured of having good skiing and good fun unless you are a natural grouch. You know you will be looked after if you hurt yourself. You know you will be comfortable and get your money's worth whatever class of hotel you choose.

The national, regional, and community authorities, the transportation companies, the hotels, and the ski clubs all pull together to help you.

All this adds to the well-being of the skier and makes Switzerland a very attractive place. I submit many parts of our own Canada would be better for skiing if we were equally enterprising.

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Ski-Heil Jerusalem

(Extract from a Letter of my Nephew Robin Fedden)

I'VE just got back to Cairo from my two-week winter vacation, quite the most interesting trip I have ever done. I left here for Jerusalem first of all. The old town and the mediaeval walls are lovely, but the wrangling sects and the atmosphere of mumbo-jumbo at the Holy Sepulchre are revolting. Nothing Christian about it. The countryside and the peasants, however, do give one the Biblical atmosphere. The shepherds, with their flocks, vineyards, olive trees on the Mount, bare hills, "the road from Jerusalem to Jericho," all these are unchanged. From Jerusalem I drove up with a friend via the Valley of Armageddon and Tyre and Sidon, a perfect mediaeval seaport, to Syria. At Tripoli, we turned inland, climbed 6,000 feet into the Lebanon, reached the Cedars (whence Solomon took wood for the Temple), and skied for a week in five feet of snow—a strange experience, with banana groves below and the Mediterranean shining in the distance. From the Cedar, we skied over into the Anti-Lebanon to Baalbeck, whose Roman temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Classical World. It's still wonderful today—as large as the Egyptian

temples, it stands on the lowest spur of the mountains, and one gets perspectives of Corinthian pillars against snowy peaks. From there we went on to Crac-du-Chevalier, the largest of the Crusader Castles, in wonderful preservation; a town almost in size, it stands on a hilltop miles from anywhere, guarding the pass through to Homs, Damascus, and Baghdad. All this in the most marvelous really wild country where twenty years ago the people would as soon have slit your throat as said "Good Morning." They are wonderfully good looking, the Lebanese, a fine mountain type, exceedingly simple, and they treat you as an equal. Their costume is most extraordinary: expecting that the Messiah will be born next of man, they wear strange breeches with a sort of sack at the back to be ready each man for the divine eventuality. They speak an exceedingly odd Arabic of their own, but in nearly every village you find some old man now completely reverted to type, but who has spent fifteen years in America, and probably speaks with the broadest of accents. Altogether, it was a most unusual and interesting ski trip.