

# I First Discover Skis

By H. P. Douglas

WAY BACK in 1890, when a freshman at Cornell University, at Ithaca, New York, I first became acquainted with ski-ing. Ithaca is in the northern part of the State with much the same climate as Montreal, quantities of snow coming early and staying late.

We did a lot of skating on lovely Lake Cayuga, ice-boating and skate-sailing were popular, we played strenuous games of "Shinny on the Ice," the forerunner of hockey, and generally enjoyed ourselves.

I remember my first winter there seeing a few on skis, more on snowshoes, but we were too busy to pay much attention to them. Bobbing, however, was the best and most exciting sport. Every fraternity house had one or more bob sleds, and races down the steep, mile long, Albany Street Hill, running through the centre of the town, were held almost nightly, late in the evening. The bobs were huge affairs, a wide upholstered plank, fully fifteen feet long, mounted on a front and rear sled with sharp steel runners. The steersman lay prone, steering by swinging the long, heavy front sled with his arms and body. It took a stout fellow to steer a racing bob. Some twelve lads made up the crew all packed down flat on their stomachs, half a dozen would start us off at the top, running and pushing far down the hill, the bob gaining speed every second. Down the dimly lighted street we thundered, clattering and skidding around the corners, a big gong in front clanging away, the crew yelling.

Exciting? I'll say it was. The bob fetching furthest on the flat at the bottom of the hill won. Great crowds watched the final heats. Accidents happened, some serious, in fact they stopped bobbing through the town the year I left, after a particularly bad smash up. As I remarked previously, we had noticed skiers on the hills, and one day late in the winter a fraternity brother appeared at the house with a pair of skis, and full of enthusiasm explained and demonstrated the new sport. I can see those skis now: crude, heavy, long oak planks, no groove, a toe strap the only binding, an eight foot pole, and I didn't think much of them. However, I tried them out, but could work up little enthusiasm, the awkward things were ever coming off, tumbles were many, control nil, so I forgot all about ski-ing until I came to Montreal thirty-five years ago. Recently I met an old classmate, Charley Blair, one of the college ski enthusiasts of those early days, and he gave me an article he wrote for *Harpers Young People*, then a popular magazine, that appeared in January, 1892. From the view-point of the sport as we know it today, I think it will amuse and interest you, so here it is:

## "SKEES, HOW TO MAKE AND USE THEM

"One of the pleasantest and invigorating winter sports, and most popular in this part of the State is Skeeing. While in the United States Skeeing is almost unknown, in Norway, it's native home, it holds a high place among the sports of that country.

"Skees are within the reach of all, and I will describe how to make a pair. The cost of material will not exceed seventy-five cents. The first thing is to go to a sawmill and select a tough, straight grained white oak board. From this have cut two pieces six or eight feet long, and have them planned down to about an inch thick. The width of the skee should be three and a half inches. I recommend six-foot skees for a beginner, if he is not very large . . ."

(Here follows a long detail of the making and bending in a steam box, that we will omit.)

"The best pole to use is the butt end of a large bamboo fish-pole. Cut off about an eight-foot length, fit a brass ferrule, and put in an iron spike a couple of inches long. The spike is useful in propelling one's self over the snow as well as for cleaning off the snow and ice from the heel plate. A coat of varnish adds to the appearance and durability of your pole. If you wish to make your skees run faster, coat the bottom with beeswax. To do this take a hot iron and spread the wax evenly over the bottom. The wax will also prevent damp snow from sticking to the wood, and thus causing many a hard fall.

"Skeeing is done with the feet assisted with the pole, which may also be used as a brake. In using skees experience is the best teacher, but perhaps a few hints may be helpful to the beginner. The pole should be held on the left side, and should be long enough to reach behind the skees when the rider is standing up erect. While riding one should stoop slightly, so as to be prepared for any unevenness of the snow.

"The Skeeing club I belong to, after only two years, has now a membership of forty. Regularly, while the snow lasts we take a run on skees, every week, for they can be used for running and walking in level country as well as sliding down hills. What can be more delightful than a moonlight trip out into the country, a supper at a country inn and a race for home? Skees compare favourably with Canadian snowshoes in level country, while among the hills they far surpass them. They attain a speed rivalling that of the fastest double runner sled, and are far more pleasant and exciting to use. When I think of the fun I have had on them and that every lad might have, I wish the sport might become universal."