

Snowshoe Thomson

The Mightiest Skier of Them All

THE introduction of ski-ing to North America is credited to a Norwegian-American, John A. Thompson, popularly called "Snowshoe" Thompson. He was born



Reproduction of a rare old stamp, issued in 1857 by the Snow-Shoe Express of California, and bearing the likeness of Snowshoe Thompson. From the collection of Dr. Lewis L. Reford, Montreal.

in Telmarken, Norway, April 30, 1827, and when a lad emigrated with his parents to the United States, settling in Illinois. At the age of twenty-one he joined the gold rush to California, and after many adventures, and evidently good fortune, bought a farm in the Sacramento Valley. The story of his life relates that one day in January, 1856, he learned about the difficulties of getting the mail across the snows of the Sierra Nevadas, the pony express not being able to come through the winter snow piled up in the passes thirty odd feet deep. In Norway as a boy he had been brought up on skis, so, axe in hand, he fashioned a pair (Norwegian snowshoes they were called locally) from an oak tree; ten feet in length, over four inches and one half in width, weighing nearly twenty-five pounds. This first pair of American skis, by the way, are preserved in the Sacramento Museum.

"After giving them several days of practice, and having acquired a poise," he reported to the United States Post Office at Placerville on his skis and volunteered to carry the mail across the Sierras. It is said that all the miners warned him, "If you go down a steep hill with those clumsy skates on you'll dash out your brains against the trees." So in January, 1857, "John A." was changed to "Snowshoe." Across ninety miles, of unmapped mountains, taking three days for the western trip and two coming home, from Placerville, California, to Carson City, Nevada, he carried the United States mail over the passes of the Sierras, (7,000 to 11,000 feet) in every sort of weather. The old timers told that his trips were as "regular as the ocean tide."

On his back "Snowshoe" carried a load that would have daunted most men travelling on foot; a mail bag weighing sixty to eighty pounds, a hundred when the mail was heavy. A single long pole six feet or more was used for propelling and steering, and held horizontally in both hands during straight descent, a toe strap and heel block his only binding. He travelled light, no strong liquor to warm his blood, in his pocket crackers and dried meat which he ate on the trail. When thirsty a handful of snow or water at a frozen mountain stream. One of the most amazing things was that he carried neither blankets or overcoat. He said "if I have my mackinaw I never freeze. My problem even in blizzards is not to keep from freezing but that I sweat too easily. I'm never cold in the mountains." When caught in a storm he just unstrapped his skis and dug in. Often he travelled at night to make his schedule. It was said he had an intimate knowledge of the stars, using them to guide his course, as well as that uncanny sense of



The Grave of Snowshoe Thompson, Genoa Cemetery, Nevada

location and direction peculiar to expert woodsmen. When asked how he distinguished east from west without the sun or on black and stormy nights, he answered: "There is something inside my forehead that keeps me right, and you can't get lost if you have the feel of the wind and the mountains."

There was not a single shelter on his route, but at Cottage Rock, the half-way mark, he had what he called his Tavern where he slept under a shelving ledge of rock, the space no larger than a baker's oven, and sometimes when he awoke in the morning he had to dig himself out through the snow which had fallen during the night. But he remarked, "to him the Tavern was as luxurious as a palace." The faded, old photograph before me, taken in his later life, shows a very tall bearded man of tremendous proportions, and evidently his vitality and strength were unusual. He had many adventures with wolves, blizzards, avalanches, rescues, etc., all of which his biographer tells us he handled with little difficulty. In addition to carrying the mail for twenty years, he packed in supplies to the mining camps, carried out ore samples, etc., and in 1859 brought in to be assayed at Placerville the first

ore samples from a mine destined to be the greatest silver mine in American history—the Comstock Lode. Not once did this wonderful man suffer an injury or was he laid up through illness.

"The mightiest skier of them all," he won great fame as a professional downhill ski racer and ski jumper, popular pastimes in the mining camps in those days, and a certain W. P. Merrill, postmaster at Genoa, claimed that he had once seen "Snowshoe" make a jump of one hundred and eighty feet without a break, and his biographer adds "that Mr. Merrill was known as a reliable man." (Mr. Merrill I fear was a trifle optimistic—Ed.) For details of the sporting deeds of this ski pioneer and his contemporaries, I refer you to Mr. Mills' interesting article "California Pioneers on Skis" following.

"Snowshoe" Thompson died on his ranch in Diamond Valley, Nevada, May 15, 1876, and is buried in the cemetery at Genoa, Nevada. On the stone, crossed skis. His epitaph—"A pioneer of the Sierras who for twenty years carried the mail over the mountains to isolated camps, rescuing the lost, and giving succor to those in need along the way."

California Pioneers on Skis

By David C. Mills, in "The American Ski Annual"

SKI-RACING as an organized competitive sport, conducted by organizations created for that specific purpose, and in particular downhill ski-racing over measured courses, is a thoroughly American institution. It was born of acute social necessity during one of the most spectacular and romantic phases of our national life, the Gold Rush of '49, almost immediately became semi-professional, and under the stimulus of financial and commercial incentive soon reached a stage of technical development not far behind the most advanced technique of the present day.

Those who were born and raised in the Feather River country in northeastern California have always known this. The races were important events in mountain life and the racers were local heroes. We heard the old timers tell of races at La Porte in 1857, and of the exploits of outstanding racers such as Peter Reandro, Jake Gould, R. Rutherford, Pell Tull and A. Hall who raced in the sixties; Charles McDonald, Chris Keenan, Frank Sharett, John Penman, Tommy Todd, the Hillman Brothers, Henry and Lon Sibley, John Conroy and Sam Jones, famous in the seventies; and in the

eighties and until the turn of the century, the McLaughlin Brothers, Buck Peters and a host of others.

Knowing this, and knowing that the ski is, and has been since pioneer days, an important and indeed indispensable factor in the winter life of the High Sierras, the "natives" have been amused and a bit incensed by the scant recognition of these indisputable historical facts by those who have written on the subject of ski history.

Knowing and proving are, however, very different things, and so much of their faith is legendary that they have had to suffer in silence while the present generation of ski runners has been taught that the organized recreational and competitive phases of ski-running are of fairly recent European origin, that the "sport" originated in Christiana, Norway, in 1870, that the first Ski Club was organized in Christiana in 1877, and that the first tournament ever held that was anything more than a local contest was that conducted by the Christiana Ski Club in 1879.

They have been seriously handicapped in their efforts to give their legends authentic