



Crevasses on Mount Athabaska

Photo: G. Morris Taylor

Hunting for the Canadian Davos

By Edward E. Bishop

THE ALPS have long been considered the Mecca of downhill and slalom skiers. Here were the best snow conditions, the steepest slopes and the most exciting runs. But surely Western Canada, with all its huge mountains, should contain ski country comparable to the best in Europe. That is what we spent the spring and summer of 1939 trying to find out.

"We" included, among others, Peter Vajda, former Swiss University Champion who last year instructed in Vancouver, and Miss Gertrude Wepsala, Peter's star pupil and Ladies Dominion Champion for the last two years. Thus it was a qualified group that conducted the search.

At the beginning of May we left Vancouver for the Forbidden Plateau, on the upper part of Vancouver Island. Forbidden Plateau Lodge,

where we first stayed, is situated on the edge of the high country a few miles above Courtenay, B.C. As we soon found out, this is a region of surpassing beauty. It consists of an area of rolling wooded hills, forming the "Plateau" about three thousand feet above sea level, bounded by the waters of Howe Sound on one side and the mountains of Vancouver Island on the other. Most surprising is the height of the Island peaks, some of which are well over six thousand feet. The whole effect is that of a section of the Rocky Mountains in miniature. From sea level to the peaks is a distance of less than twenty miles.

To reach the best ski-ing, we journeyed some thirteen miles inland to Mariwood Cabin, near the foot of Mount Albert Edward. Even in May the snow throughout the entire route was still several feet deep.

Once at the cabin we reached what Peter claimed was the best ski country he had seen since he came to this continent—and he had been to most of the big resorts. On every side was an infinite variety of hills offering every type of slope. The first fifteen hundred vertical feet above the cabin consisted of timbered mountainside, the large trees being on the average fifteen or twenty feet apart. The undergrowth between the trees was completely covered by the deep snow.

Mount Albert Edward itself can be climbed to the top on skis, and is suitable for a downhill race throughout its whole length. Peter was

departed, realizing we had discovered some of the best ski country in Canada, if not in the world.

Then we went to Jasper, where we discovered conditions just as good but quite different. This time everything was on the tremendous scale that is typical of the Canadian Rockies. Our ski-ing for the next two months was to be done on the slopes of Mount Athabaska, at the edge of the famous Columbia Icefield.

The Columbia Icefield is a 150-square-mile sea of ice, thousands of feet thick. It is almost completely encircled by some of the highest peaks in the Canadian Rockies, huge



Mount Athabaska (left) and Athabaska Glacier

Photo: G. Morris Taylor

able to pick out several courses of more than 3,000 vertical feet, and of varying steepness.

The snow near the cabin was still about six feet deep when we arrived on May 4, varying to a probably twenty feet higher up the mountain.

Back of Mount Albert Edward are miles of excellent touring country, most of which had never been touched by skis before. The tour skier and the mountaineer could spend many wonderful months exploring this virtually untouched region.

When we left Forbidden Plateau at the end of June, the snow was gone around the Mariwood Cabin, but ski-ing on the upper 2,000 feet of the mountain was still excellent. We

rivers of ice pouring through the gaps between them to form the headwaters of such mighty rivers as the Athabaska and the North Saskatchewan.

One of the encircling peaks is Mount Athabaska, which provided our summer ski-ing. Between this mountain and the Snow Dome, its nearest neighbour, flows the impressive Athabaska Glacier. Past the very edge of the glacial tongue runs the new Jasper-Banff Highway.

Our headquarters for part of the time was the luxurious Jasper Park Lodge at Jasper itself. To ski on Mount Athabaska involved driving sixty-five miles down the new road past some of Canada's best mountain scenery. In spite

of the mountainous country through which the trip is made it can be done easily in two hours.

The actual ski-ing was not done on the big Athabaska Glacier, but on an unnamed glacier on the north face of Mount Athabaska itself. Being on a north slope, the snow here is still good for ski-ing right up until the end of August. On this mountain many thousand vertical feet above the highway, there is plenty of room for excellent ski slopes.

For several weeks we lived, not at the Lodge, but at the comfortable Columbia Icefield Chalet. This picturesque Swiss-style lodging nestles beside the road at the base of Athabaska, near the tongue of the main glacier. From its dining room windows skiers on the mountain can easily be watched through field glasses.

It is somewhat of a mountaineering venture to ski on these slopes. In the middle of the summer it is necessary to climb for about an hour and a half to get to the good snow. Gertie, who was experiencing her first serious mountain trip, was more than a little impressed by the huge crevasses, the towering ice-walls and the queer looking seracs. The feeling of safety was not enhanced by the constant creaking and moaning of the glacier.

So quickly did Gertie develop as a mountaineer that after about three weeks we were able to make the ski ascent to the very peak of Mount Athabaska. This involved careful climbing among cracks and crevasses hundreds of feet deep, past looming ice-walls and even across a snow bridge forty or fifty feet long.

From the summit opened up a tremendous view of the highest peaks of the Rockies and the beautiful pure white expanse of the Columbia Icefield. The Chalet looked like a doll's house, more than a mile straight below us. Even the trepidation at the thought of the return trip down among the crevasses could not mar the appreciation of this wonderful sight.

Such a climb was no mean feat for a girl.

The only previous ski ascent had been made in June by Benno Rybizka, well known Arlberg instructor. That made Gertie the only girl and the only Olympic amateur to climb this mountain on skis.

Although we made no such trips this summer, expeditions into the Icefield proper can be made with the help of skis. But here the ski-ing is such as would appeal to the mountaineer rather than the skier. The slopes are not steep enough for good running.

We found that the summer ski-ing possibilities of Jasper Park were matched by terrain suitable for very good winter ski-ing. The glaciated region of the Tonquin Valley and the Bald Hills at Maligne Lake offer the best in ski touring country. The scenery also at these two places is probably the most beautiful of its type that can be found.

The Whistlers Mountain area, right by the town of Jasper, is one of the few places on the continent (and possibly the only one in Canada) that could satisfy the FIS requirements for the site of a world championship ski meet. This involves, among other things, three downhill runs of more than 2,500 vertical feet, one of which must finish above 6,000 feet, under safe snow conditions (*i.e.*, no avalanche danger). Downhill runs off Whistlers vary all the way from 2,500 to 5,400 vertical feet.

Nursery slopes are being cleared by the Dominion Government on the north face of Whistlers. The high valleys behind offer miles of open slopes above timberline, with vertical drops up to two thousand feet. Once Jasper is fully developed, which it can be with a comparatively small expenditure, it should equal any ski resort in North America, both in the summer and in the winter.

After a four months' search we had no doubt that at least two places in Western Canada offer ski-ing possibilities comparable to the best in Switzerland. Undoubtedly we have others, at least we have Jasper and the Forbidden Plateau.

New Divisions of the C.A.S.A.

KEEPING pace with the rapid progress of organized ski-ing in Canada, the Canadian Amateur Ski Association has found it necessary to create more offices by the splitting up of the territory east of the Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary into two Districts. This now gives us three more or less equal Districts namely, Western, Central and Eastern with three Vice-Presidents and a Vice-Chairman of the Technical Board actively engaged in general C.A.S.A. work in each Division.

There are a number of advantages to this not apparent to those not actively engaged in the organization work but it can be appreciated by

anyone that, with a membership that has doubled in the past two years, the work has been correspondingly heavy and, with competent men at key points, it is expected that progress will be more rapid and efficient.

The Western District will include the clubs within the Provinces of British Columbia and Alberta. The Central District will include the clubs in the Provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and the Ontario and Gatineau Zones. The Eastern District will include all clubs east of the Gatineau and Ontario Zones including those in the Maritimes which we hope soon to have as members of the C.A.S.A.