



Red Birds Ski Club

The Red Birds Ski Club was founded in 1928 by three McGill graduates, W.B (Bill) Thompson, Stirling Maxwell and Harry Pangman, and McGill University mentors, Colonel Wilfred Bovey and D. Stuart Forbes. Keen to maintain their connection with McGill, the three young graduates wanted to assemble a post-graduate ski team for McGill men that would not only allow the founders to continue skiing together, but also allow them to train the up-and-coming McGill Ski Team.

W.B. Thompson was a born skier who had won championships throughout high school and university and had even competed in the 1928 Olympic Winter Games at St. Moritz, Switzerland for Canada where he was witness to the superior skills and technique of the Europeans. He was also captain of the McGill Ski Team from 1926-27. Stirling Maxwell was also team Captain for 1927, with several event victories to his credit. Following graduation, Harry Pangman, well-known for his proficiency on snowshoes while at McGill, converted to skiing, and in this sport too he became superbly accomplished competing with considerable success for the Red Birds team.

The first task of the fledgling Red Birds club was to define its goals. They became:

1. To promote skiing in all its phases including jumping, cross country, downhill and slalom racing.
2. To encourage these branches of the sport with the object of training material for the McGill University Ski Teams.
3. To provide and maintain facilities and accommodations in the Laurentian Mountains.



The name was chosen to represent the martlets on the McGill emblem. The martlets were mythological birds that had no feet. The birds were red on the McGill emblem, but whether this coincided with the colour of myth is uncertain. Membership, referred to as a number in order of their joining, was restricted to men and past or present members of the McGill ski team. Many members use their membership number after their names.

In 1928, the Red Birds established their first club house on the main street of St. Sauveur, close enough to the CNR station to encourage train travellers to drop in. New clubhouses would be built in 1934 and 1948. The latter was named Mount Baker (after George "Downhill" Baker, a team friend) was located at the bottom of St. Sauveur's Big Hill.

In 1930, the Red Birds organized and held an Inter-collegiate Winter Sports Union tournament, won by the University of New Hampshire. The club had Herman "Jackrabbit" Smith Johannsen set up the courses and act as an official. That same year, Johannsen was made an honorary member, Red Bird #27. To show his appreciation (and a fine sense of balance), he stood on his head on the train car table, as it swayed and jolted along the line. Johannsen wanted to be an active rather than just an honorary member and shortly after he joined the Red Birds asked to act as an advisor to the club's executive. He envisioned the club practising on Mont Tremblant's steep slopes as a learning experience that might allow them to match the skill and experience of American skiers even though there were no trails yet developed on the mountain. He always proudly wore his Red Bird's patch while skiing.

In 1931, the Kandahar Ski Club (Switzerland) donated a cup to the Canadian Amateur Ski Association (CASA) to be given to the winner of a downhill/slalom championship. Johannsen suggested the Red Birds organize this competition at Mont Tremblant, even though there were still no developed trails on the mountain. That proved to be no deterrent as the infamous first Quebec Kandahar was held March 13 on a difficult slope still mostly covered in brush.

In late 1932, with the financial help of Alex Keiller (who was later made an honorary member), the Red Birds and the McGill team travelled to St. Moritz to compete. They were met by the Oxford-Cambridge ski teams and honoured with a brass band and a torch light parade. In the New Year, Red Birds George Jost won the Kandahar Cup in Switzerland by "tobogganing", arguably one of



the earliest versions of today's racing stance. It was referred to by the Red Birds as the "Jost Crouch", the skier sitting on the back of the boots, arms stretched forward, and with the chin tucked between the legs.

During the Second World War, many members left to serve in the armed forces, and a number of them were killed. In 1943, a military plane carrying Red Bird member Bruce Flemming took off near the clubhouse, and took the roof off the building. By 1945 the membership had been considerably reduced, decimated by dispersal, war injuries or death. The club was in danger of breaking up. In October 1945, those who remained held the club's first annual meeting in four years. At that meeting, it was decided that the club would continue operations and construct a new clubhouse to be built in "Mystic Valley", part of John Molson's land. John Molson who had already provided the Penguin Ski Club with a clubhouse and land was made an honorary member of the Red Birds. That same year, it was decided that the amateur coaching provided by Red Birds members was inadequate and that professional help was needed to ensure the future success of the McGill ski team. Red Bird members, however, would continue to assist.

The year 1950 was known as the "year with no snow". There was so little snow that to save the Quebec Kandahar race for that year, Father Deslauriers, parish priest of St. Jovite, with a number of his parishioners appeared with shovels and horses to move snow to the right places to allow the competition to take place. In 1987, the Quebec Kandahar Cup competition was cancelled; it would not be held again until 1992.

The Red Birds experienced many triumphs and some tragedies. Both Bill Thompson and A. Sidney Dawes became presidents of CASA, Bill Ball would become one of the founders of the Canadian Ski Museum in the 1970s, while other members were appointed to important posts in skiing's administration. Tragedy struck in 1959, when Red Bird, John Semmelink, was tragically killed in a skiing accident at the Arlberg Kandahar Cup.

In the 1960s, the close proximity of the new Laurentian Autoroute threatened the club's operations until a new access road, underpass, water main and ski jump were built. The club would remain on the site until it was sold in 1970. Construction of a new clubhouse was completed in 1981 at St. Jovite, Quebec.



In 1998, Red Birds travelled to Switzerland to mark the 65th anniversary of the McGill Red Bird trip in 1932-33.

Currently, the club, still involved in cross-country skiing and the Canadian Ski Matathon, is attempting to renew its relationship with the McGill Ski Team and become more involved with junior and other active racers. The Quebec Kandahar race was again suspended is no longer run by the club for technical reasons. The original trophy, however, is still presented annually at the Super Series event. The clubhouse, containing Red Bird memorabilia, trophies and record of the past, remains at the Mont Tremblant resort and is open to club members and their guests. The popular Moose Dinner continues to be held every year, with a satellite event now in Toronto. Today, total membership is over 500 scattered from coast to coast with 175 active members recorded in 2009. To learn more visit: <http://redbirds.ca/>