Histoire Québec

Downhill Skiing in the Laurentians

Sandra Stock

Citer cet article

Stock, S. (2007). Downhill Skiing in the Laurentians. *Histoire Québec*, *13*(1), 28–32.

Downhill Skiing in the Laurentians
par Sandra Stock

Sandra Stock is president of the Morin Heights Historical Association and director for the Laurentians for the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network. Sandra has written extensively about Laurentian history for several publications and for the Morin Heights Historical Association's bilingual magazine, The Pocupine–Le Porc-épic. *Sandra has an academic background in Fine Arts (Art History) and English literature. Her family has been resident in Morin Heights at Echo Lake since 1908.*

*Sandra Stock est la présidente de l'Association historique de Morin Heights et membre du conseil d'administration du Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN). M*me *Stock a publié plusieurs articles sur l'histoire des Laurentides et plus particulièrement pour le bulletin* The Porcupine – Le Porc-épic *de l'Association historique de Morin Heights. Elle a fait ses études en histoire de l'art et en littérature anglaise et sa famille habite le lac Écho à Morin Heights depuis 1908.*

Courte présentation :

Dans cet article, Mme Sandra Stock nous décrit les débuts du ski alpin comme sport d'hiver populaire. Malgré l'augmentation spectaculaire des adeptes de ski de fond après la Première guerre mondiale et la renommée internationale de l'athlète Herman « Jackrabbit » Johannsen qui a tant fait pour le développement et la promotion de ce sport d'hiver, c'est l'avènement du remonte-pente qui a attiré des centaines et des milliers de personnes, intéressées au ski alpin, dans la région des Laurentides. Finis les longs efforts surhumains pour gravir les pentes afin de profiter de descentes d'à peine quelques minutes ou même quelques secondes. En fait, l'auteure nous raconte que le premier remonte-pente a été installé à *Big Hill* dans le village de Shawbridge dans les Basses-Laurentides. Suivez avec elle l'évolution de ce sport qui a fait la renommée des Laurentides et qui a eu de fortes répercussions sur les paysages et le développement social et économique de cette région.

As cross-country skiing grew in popularity, and finally, after World War I, overtook snow shoeing as the winter sport of choice in the Montreal area, variations and improvements continuously evolved. The most obvious was the invention of the ski tow. Finally, no more puffing up the hill for what often felt like hours just to whiz down in all too few minutes! This was an idea whose time certainly had come, and it first came to the lower Laurentian town of Shawbridge.

Shawbridge, now part of a larger municipality called Prévost, still has a small but active English-speaking community. The first settlers, mainly of Irish and Scottish origin, came in the 1840s to clear the land for agriculture. Many of their descendants, including of course the Shaw family itself, still live in the town. As the first area reached with real hills, Shawbridge was a natural location for attracting recreational summer and later winter visitors from Montreal. The Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in 1890 as the lumber industry began to supplant farming. At the same time, the addition of boarding houses, hotels and eventually summer cottages helped develop a recreo-tourist trade.

In 1923 the Laurentian Lodge, a well-known private ski club, was established in Shawbridge by several prominent Montrealers and became very influential in the skiing history of our entire region. Herman "Jackrabbit" Johannsen, associated with Laurentian Lodge, was a life member. Johannsen, who initiated so much of the

"Alex Foster's first ski tow at the Big Hill, Shawbridge, c. 1930".
(Source: Laurentian Lodge Club, Shawbridge)

cross-country network in the Laurentians, had little interest in the development of ski tow skiing or downhill, or Alpine, as it came to be called. He stuck to the historically "purer" form – Nordic or cross-country for the whole of his extremely long life of 111 years. He did assist, however, in organizing the first downhill slalom race competitions in the early nineteen-thirties.

It is Alex Foster, a Laurentian Lodge member, winner of the Dominion Ski Jump championship while still a high school student, who is credited with the invention of the first rope tow in the winter of 1930. This is vividly described in the book about Laurentian Lodge, titled *Skiing Legends and the Laurentian Lodge Ski Club*. This book was written in 2000 by Neil and Catharine McKenty. In this account we learn that the tow consisted of taking "...an old car on blocks, removing a tire from one of the back wheels, running a rope up to a pulley attached to a tree or stake, starting the car's engine and hoping for the best…"

This tow was operating commercially by 1931 (five cents a ride, at five miles an hour) on the Big Hill in Shawbridge. Although European skiers had used funiculars and cable cars, "Foster's Folly", as it was called, is recognized as the first true ski tow in the world.

There were other approaches to hauling skiers up hills. In 1926, a Sainte-Agathe inventor, Moïse Paquette, created something called the "Aeroski". An early light aircraft with one big propeller at the front and skis instead of wheels, it could tow several skiers along behind it. While never actually airborne, it did offer a kind of flexibility lacking with the stationary tow!

Ski tows spread rapidly everywhere.

In 1934 the first American tow appeared at Woodstock, Vermont. At the start these were all rope tows although chair lifts – a variation of the cable car – were installed by the nineteen-thirties at the larger ski resorts such as Mont-Tremblant. Even though Laurentian Lodge continues as a recreational club, there is no longer a downhill ski operation in Shawbridge.

In 1934 the first ski tow opened in Saint-Sauveur-des-Monts on Hill 70. Percy Douglass, founder of the Canadian Amateur Ski Association and member of the Shawbridge Laurentian Lodge Club, initiated this venture in conjunction with several local Saint-Sauveur landowners. In 1939, one of these, Arthur Charette, installed a chair lift. Initially, it was very successful, however, after an unfortunate accident in 1944, operations were stopped for some time.

This property was sold in 1945 to an expert in Scandinavian log construction, Victor Nymark, originally from Finland.


Saint-Sauveur, skiers on rue Principale, c. 1940.
(Source: postcard, collection of the Morin Heights Historical Association)

Nymark was the foreman at the building of Château Montebello, which is the world's largest, and classiest, log cabin. The Laurentian nineteen-thirties through to nineteen-fifties fashion for round log homes, hotels, such as the Mont Gabriel Club in Sainte-Adèle, and even churches, like St.Francis of the Birds in Saint-Sauveur, originated from this Scandinavian influence. Although the Nymark Lodge itself is now gone, other Nymark buildings remain as important heritage sites.

The classic rope tow proved difficult, especially for children having to reach up, often above their heads, to grab and hang on to a moving rope. For the novice skier the speedy rope tow was also a challenge as it lunged forward. This often divested the frightened rider of mitts, hats and scarves. Sudden stops could throw everyone into chaotic heaps. Disembarking was frequently as terrifying as clasping on to the rope! There was always the fear that somehow one just might end up stuck to the rope and be whirred around the top mechanism. However, it always beat puffing up the hill.

J-Bars and T-Bars replaced most rope tows by the early nineteen-fifties. These proved to be much more comfortable, provided faster rides and were certainly far less scary. Also, as downhill skiing is by its nature, in one place it lent itself

more easily to commercial development than cross-country. The sale of tickets to ride the tows provided an obvious beginning, as did chalets with food services and warm-up areas. Hotel owners, ranging from small family-oriented establishments to full-fledged European style resorts, invested in ski hills and many, after the nineteen-thirties, built
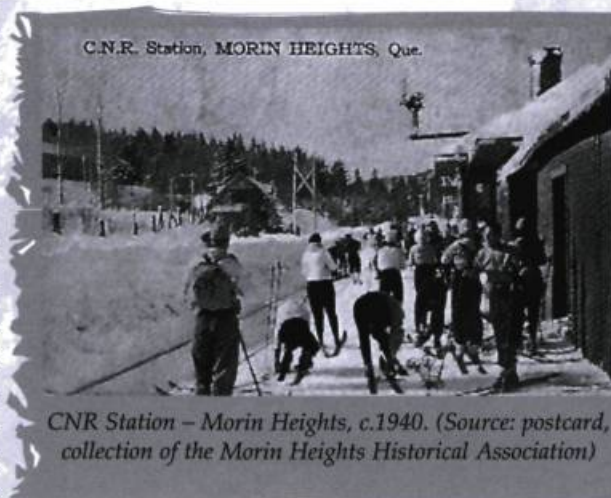
CNR Station – Morin Heights, c.1940. (Source: postcard, collection of the Morin Heights Historical Association)

their ski installations specifically for this purpose. Ski schools with qualified instructors, outlets that sold ski equipment and clothing and eventually an entire sector of the local economy of the Laurentians grew from the proliferation of downhill skiing. As farming and the lumber industry declined in the Laurentians by the mid-twentieth century, the tourist trade, especially skiing, provided employment for the local population.

Skiing was already being strongly promoted by the railroads, especially the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National

lines, to encourage the use of passenger trains in winter. Fortunately, the railway companies produced a series of postcards featuring skiing and the Laurentian landscape in general, later to become an invaluable reference source for historians.

The nineteen-thirties and forties saw the greatest growth in the Laurentians of the development of what was fast becoming a ski industry, not just a winter recreation for a few. In these decades, emphasis shifted from private clubs and university students to larger, European style resorts, or smaller boarding houses in the villages that offered access to a greater percentage of the population. By 1950, with the improvement in roads, people rented houses for the winter ski season in the same way they had during the summers since the early nineteen hundreds. By the mid-nineteen-fifties second homes were often used all year around and many more people actually moved permanently to the Laurentians.

Downhill skiing differs from cross-country in many ways. Although cross-country probably requires a greater level of all-over physical fitness, downhill, with its stress on the vertical drop, definitely requires more technique. Nearly anyone can go up the tow and come down the hill, but very few, without any real training, can do it well or even

With the development of steel edges on skis, first used in Quebec by the McGill University team in competition in 1931, it became much easier to execute turns (slalom) and control the descent. Also, skis became somewhat shorter by the fifties and again, easier to manage.

The construction of downhill ski tows spread very rapidly north from Shawbridge and Saint-Sauveur to Morin Heights, Sainte-Adèle and Sainte-Marguerite. These three towns had the advantage of being on railway lines and already had fairly well developed recreational facilities. In the nineteen-thirties, the highway north, called Route 11, now known as the 117, improved access by car and finally provided an all year around alternative to the train. However, it would be another twenty-five or thirty years before winter travel, especially on the secondary roads in the Laurentians, became an at ease option for drivers.

One of the best-known ski destinations was Chalet Cochand in Sainte-Marguerite. Émile Cochand Senior acquired this popular resort. He had come to Canada from Switzerland in 1911 with 100 pairs of skis, luges and bobsleds to start teaching skiing in the Laurentians and to promote winter sports. In the nineteen-thirties there were very few qualified Canadian ski instructors. Consequently many resorts, and

even the railway companies, hired Europeans to come here to start the ski schools and to lend a certain cachet of "old world ambience" to the newly established ski centres. Émile's son, Louis Cochand, continued in the family tradition with skiing, and was instrumental in the creation in 1939 of the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance that encouraged Ca-

Bellevue Hill, Morin Heights, view from the J-Bar, c. 1960. (Source: postcard, courtesy of Muriel Scofield)

nadian skiers to become instructors as well. Eventually, the same methods of teaching downhill skiing became prevalent across Canada. By 1949, most of the new ski instructors were Canadians, familiar with our terrains and snow conditions.

The instructors were in a way themselves celebrities. Skiing was viewed as a rather glamorous, somewhat elite sport combining an interesting social life with a hint of risk, much like polo or car racing. This is reflected in a short item written about Frank Scofield, a well-known ski instructor at the Chanteclerc Hotel in Sainte-Adèle from the nine-

teen-thirties to sixties... "Scofield's CV included an impressive list of celebrities, the envy of every ski pro in the Laurentians. Many famous people came to the Laurentians, such as the Netherlands Queen Julianna and her two daughters.... Prime Minister Lester Pearson, actress Norma Shearer, financier Lawrence Rockefeller...." This kind of luxury level skiing of course lives on for the rich and famous. However, better facilities, greater numbers of lifts, a longer skiing season extended by snow-making and superior accessibility to the hills has made skiing widely available to all. Now many children and teenagers ski and/or snowboard and modern downhill facilities offer something for everyone.

The early ski schools did not have artificial snow and conditions were generally rougher than the ski hills of today. Even the "high end" resorts like Chalet Cochand featured simple entertainment such as lunch on the trails, maple sugar fests and sleigh rides. The atmosphere of the time was unsophisticated and homey when compared to most large ski centres of today.

In Morin Heights, there were two very popular family-oriented downhill ski centres, the Bellevue Hill, run by the Basler family after 1951, and Mont Christie, in the Christieville area of Morin Heights (on the border of and really in

Saint-Sauveur), operated by the Elder family. There had been in the 1930s a small rope tow near the Bellevue Hill, started by Lawson Kennedy, a local Morin Heights ski developer. Much later, in the nineteen-fifties he operated the Kicking Horse Hill. This was quite a challenging descent and is near where Ski Morin Heights is today. After the war, in 1945-46, Ken Binns and Edward (also called "Inky") Kneeland took over the old Bellevue Hill and started Ken and Eddie's Ski Tow, which was subsequently purchased by Albert and George (Bunny) Basler.

All these smaller, family-owned ski tows were extremely successful throughout the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Mont Christie managed to go on, with some breaks, until a few years ago. However, the very large ski developments along with other social and economic changes slowly eroded the family-oriented ski businesses.

The day of the hotel ski school faded out as competitive skiing became more international with more competitions and far more developed equipment. Like so many other outdoor activities, skiing's expansion and popularity changed its nature, most especially with downhill. In contrast, cross-country skiing has maintained the kind of "purity" of the sport that Jackrabbit Johannsen commented on when the first rope tows hauled people up the Big Hill at Shawbridge. He could never understand why anyone would pay to ski...

Bellevue Hill, the chalet, c. 1960.
(Source: postcard, courtesy of Muriel Scofield)

Snowmobiles, c. 1955: these are from the former Black & White Taxi Company, proprietor, the late Paul St. Denis, Morin Heights. (Source: postcard collection of the Morin Heights Historical Association)

Sources

BACON, Dick, *UpNorth* newspaper: Focus on – *Frank Scofield-Chanteclerc's Silver Fo*, published 1996.

BERGEVIN, René, *La vallée de Saint-Sauveur en images (self-published)*, published 2001.

Anonymous writer, *Louis Cochand, 50 Years and Counting*, 1989.

MᶜKENTY, Neil & Catharine, *Skiing Legends and the Laurentian Lodge Club*, 2000, Price-Patterson Ltd., Montreal, collection & general information.

BASLER, Bunny, SERGENT, Heidi, BINNS, Ken & June, and Muriel SCOFIELD, *Morin Heights, 1855-1980, The Morin Heights 125ᵗʰ Anniversary Book*, and the Morin Heights Historical Association: for photographs.