

FIVE

US WINTER SPORTS

This is the piece with the greatest immediate historical significance, as it suggests and describes an origin for the introduction of skiing to the Banff area. This new winter sport and the facilities it spawned radically changed Banff from the summer resort that it had remained until well into the middle years of the twentieth century: the Banff Springs Hotel and Chateau Lake Louise simply shut down in winter. Before that, wealthy tourists who arrived by sleeper car on the toney CPR Trans-Canada, a stainless-steel rhapsody of Art Deco design, took the hot mineral waters at the Cave and Basin, walked or went out hunting or fishing—in summer. Here, Tex comically refers to the founding of the Skoki Lodge by the Ski Club of the Canadian Rockies near Banff in 1931. Skoki Lodge was (and remains) a back-country skiing destination three years before Tex's first boss, Jim Brewster, made Sunshine Village into the first ski resort in the Rockies. Skiing turned Banff into a year-round tourist destination. Tex refers to the anonymous inventor as "some yahoo" who "got to ghost dancing," a reference to the ghost dance of the Plains Indians. The reference is apt: diverse Native groups adopted the ghost dance as a mystical way to bring back the buffalo herds and become prosperous once again, much as (in Tex's eyes) the Banff area was looking for more ways to bring in tourist dollars.

The popularization of the automobile and therefore of cheap mass travel made resort skiing wildly popular after the First and Second World Wars, but Tex's stories had all been written before that time—one can only imagine what he would have made of skiing day-trippers from Calgary and bus-loads of Japanese tourists. Tex's self-mockery about his clumsy and amateurish use of skis is a winning counterpoint to his slightly grudging appreciation of Cliff White's visionary introduction of skiing to the area.

His point about the money to be earned guiding or teaching skiers was in a minor way prophetic, as his own son and daughter-in-law (Bill and Choukie Vernon-Wood) would run a small ski-hill near Vernon, and his grandson John Gow would start out as a ski instructor at Sunshine Village and finish as its general manager, before taking over and building up, in partnership, Silver Star Resort near Vernon, thus mirroring Tex's own trajectory in the tourist business from Banff into British Columbia.

—AG and JR

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*Some efforts in the Canadian Rockies to make San Moritz
look like a dirty deuce*

By N. Vernon-Wood

DOES BEAT HELL HOW complicated life's getting up here in the hills. Take this pilgrim wrangling, fr'instance. Used to be, a man could bust out for a month on the trail, with a few plugs of spitting tobacco, and his other socks. As long as you had plenty sow belly, beans, flour, tea and sugar, with the odd fish hook, that's all anybody looked for. Try and get away with that now. We got to have grapefruit for breakfast, and a table to eat it off.

Last summer, I was guiding a party and, after Joe had set up for the first meal, they looked the layout over, some disdainful, and asked where was the butter knife and napkins. Seeing they was ladies, I couldn't tell 'em that we mostly used the seat of our Levi's for napkins.

A couple of years back, I built me a log cabin at Spray Lakes, figuring on making it the ritziest camp in Alberta. I packed out real windows, and a stove. Put down a lumber floor, and furnished it regardless, with cots and trick folding chairs. Then I spread myself, and spent real money advertising it. First reply I got was from a bird who asked, "What other attractions have you besides fishing, climbing, and hunting? Have you a tennis court?" Joe says that next summer we had better pack along a flock of putters and balls, so the dudes can play this pup golf in and out the teepees.

It's demoralizing the hands too. I hired a new jingler last spring, and the doo funnies that waddy wanted to pack would have sunk a scow. He even had a book.

In July, I had to go up to the big hotel, to talk to some folks about a hunting trip, and may I never throw another diamond hitch, if here ain't Buckshot Foster going into the dining room, with a party he had just brung in from the Saskatch, all rigged out in a soup and fish. He looked about as happy as a buckskin cayuse at the National Horse Show.

Up till this hectic stuff hit us, if a man knew the country, run a good spread of cayuses, and didn't get too awful grouchy when a pilgrim missed a easy shot at a head he'd taken plenty trouble to injun up on—why, that's about all anyone looked for. Now, you got to be a guide, scientist, conversation expert, and God knows what all, including, "How much exposure shall I give this?" Well, you can't stay in the drag, and eat regular, so I done my best to get educated. Just when I am beginning to kid myself that my line is about complete, this winter sports thing bust right over my head.

In the good old days, when the last hunting party was in, and the cayuses run out to winter range in the foot hills, we could put in the next six months spending our summer stake, and lying to each other about the game we got, and the funny things our pilgrims said and did. There was a big old stove in the bar at the King Edward Hotel, and the bad horses that was rode, and the fighting grizzlies shot around it during the winter, was nobody's business.

Then we got all spraddled out on winter sports. Some misguided yahoo got to ghost dancing, and figures that here's the place will make San Moritz look like a dirty deuce. "We got snow, and scenery, hills for skis and toboggans. Let's put this man's town on the map as the winter playground of America."

And the hell of it is, we fall for it. Even Ike Mills himself sent up to Le Pas, and imported a flock of Huskies, and goes in for "mushing." He kept the team in an old barn back of the Methodist Church and when the faithful got to praising the Lord in song, them halfbred wolves all pointed their noses to the moon and joined in. There ain't any winter sports where the Rev. Hackleberry says we are headed for.

Then we all mucked in, and cleared the snow off the Bow river, and the fancy skating class holds forth there. Fancy is the right word, too. Kate Clark—who's a living ad for the boarding house she runs and don't weigh an ounce over 210—doing her outside edges, also her left ears, is a marvel of grace and agility. It's a right good thing she is overstuffed, and sort of bounces, or that rink would have been a dead loss pronto.

Meanwhile a bunch of energetic hombres have cleared the stumps and

brush off Caribou Hill, and built a toboggan slide. The first quarter mile ain't quite straight up and down, then it flattens out enough so you can get a couple lungfuls before it drops right out from under you. Jim Stink, our w.k. laundry expert, sizes it up and says, "Whaffor lie on belly—WHEE-E-E. Walka milee back. Clazy." He ain't so far wrong that.

However, me and Buckshot figure you don't have to be strong or graceful to do it, so we take a fall out of it. The first time ain't so worse, so we decided another whirl won't do any harm. We are doing about ninety miles an hour when I open my eyes just long enough to see Bill Davey's pig ambling across the track. When I open 'em again, Doc Robinson is telling the crowd to stand back and give me air. Buckshot is some used up too, so for a while we just give the sports our moral support.

If we had knew enough to keep on with moral support we would have saved ourselves a heap of grief, but that's the trouble with us Canucks—never know when we are beat, till somebody pounds it in with a neck yoke.

Cliff White has been East, and got hipped on skiing, and throws a mean line of talk. First thing, he educates us to calling it skeeing and not skying. Then he has me all popped up, so I see myself gliding graceful as a eagle soaring, guiding flocks of pilgrims all winter, at so much a guide, who have all quit Switzerland, Lake Placid, and such two-bit dumps, for the winter playground of America.

I send for a book all about it, and when it comes it's the one that was translated into the Scandinavian. Lars Larsen is cutting cordwood way the other side of Squaw Mountain, so I snowshoe out, and have to promise the old thug a bottle of gin and \$4 to call it a day, and come to town. When we get there, and I confront him with the book, I find out that he played in hard luck in his youth, and can't read. He holds me to the gin and dollars though. I try to collect part of it from the publicity fund of the Canadian Rocky Mountain Winter Sports Association, they take the quibbling stand that I should have found out before I lugged Lars in to town. However, there's plenty of pictures in the book so we study them.

Half a dozen optimists sent East for skis, etc., and, ten days after, the whole village turns out to see us ride 'em. Buckshot tried to cinch his onto high-heeled riding boots, and it just naturally won't work. Me, I try moccasins, and, while it's better than Buck's rig, most of the time I have one on and the other coming or going.

For the next few days the sucking ski runners sneak off into the bush and practice "in camera" as the police court reports say.

I want to give it a miss, but Cliff sings his siren song, about the demand there will be for skiing guides, and I stay with it. It's a great day in my life when I go down to the post office, stepping like I was travelling on eggs, and with a death grip on those poles with little wheels on em, and turn round without going all round the block.

On my way back to the shack, I meet a Mountie who has been bitten by the bug, too, and he says, "What's the matter with us taking some grub, and skiing out to that dump of yours at Spray Lakes? A little cross-country practice is all we need, before we start learning Telemarks and Christianias." "Listen, Bull," I horned in, "if ever I get as far as Spray and back on these thus and so Scandahoovian slipping planks, I shall be plumb satisfied to rest on my well-earned laurels the rest of the winter. Telegrafs and Christine can wait for all of me." Everyone in these hills knows I'm easy, though, and I fall for another session of education.

It's thirty miles from town to my place at Spray, and we decide not to rush, but to take two days each way, maybe laying over a day at the Lakes. The Bull gets him a week's leave, and early Saturday morning the band of Christian martyrs meet at my shack. Each of us has a bed roll and a week's grub hunt on him. I feel like the youth in Excelsior we learned about in grade four, only I would a damn sight sooner have packed a banner than fifty pounds not counting an ax and frying pan I have got.

THINGS DIDN'T GO TOO AWFUL bad until we hit the first hill. It's steep and the trail makes a bend at the bottom. The Bull takes off first, and makes it pretty good. Buckshot follows, but his pack gets going faster than he is, so he sits down, by way of putting on the brakes. I shove off, and pass Buck like a bat out of hell, but can't make that turn. I try stem turns, jump turns, telemarks, and a lot that ain't in our book, and finish in a nose dive, with kind of a tail spin, and come to a perfect fourteen-point landing, losing hide on all fourteen of 'em, believe it or not.

From then until dusk it's one long-drawn out session of struggle up one side, slide down the other, and crash at the bottom. Did you ever try to get up out of about four feet of snow, with fifty pounds on your back, an ax handle in your ribs, and a frying pan round your neck?

After a while we don't even cuss. We've used 'em all up. I know damn well we could have averaged better time travelling on snowshoes backwards, but we came to ski and, by the shriveled-up hindquarters of Astor's pet

goat, we are going to ski. We camped that night under a big old spruce, all of ten miles from town.

After we got a big fire going and a quart or so of tea into us, we climbed into our snoozing sacks and tried to sleep. I feel like I'd been running through a threshing machine, and can't say I got much sleep that night. Judging from the groans and language seeping through the winter night, I ain't the only one.

About three A.M. we are froze out, so stiff it takes all that dogged determination the sharps tell us made Canada a great Nation, to bend down and hitch on the Norwegian man killers. Every last one of us would have liked to head home, but we think of the horse laugh, and decide to die for dear old Whatsit.

The Bull has blisters the size of four-bit pieces on both feet. Every time Buckshot moves he creaks, and me, the seat of my pants is just four inches from the ground. It begins to thaw, and the snow gets sticky. Pretty soon we are not only shoving those sleigh runners, but about half a ton of gooey snow with 'em. We haven't learned about wax, so we plug along. Then I decide a live coward has it all over a dead hero like a tent, and I take the blame things off, tie 'em together, set the pack in the middle, and by hooking the poles through the harness, make a sort of sleigh of the works. By keeping in our tracks, I can just about navigate.

When we do get back to town we'll tell the rest of the winter sports what a whale of a time we had, and make big medicine about where the next trip will be.

What I want to know is, what the next complication will be. Nobody's going to kid me into hunting sheep from an airplane.

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