Ski Racing in the Sierras

Now that the great skier Billy Kidd has won the world's skiing championship for the United States, honors have come back to this country, where they truly belong for, contrary to belief, organized ski racing originated in the United States, and not in Europe. In fact, the first organized ski races in the United States, and, in fact, the world, were started in February,1867, at La Porte. Before this time, ski races had been enjoyed for thirteen years in the towns of Gibsonville, Howland Flat, Poker Flat, St. Louis, Port Wine, Poverty Hill, Scales, Sawpit Flat, and Poorman's Creek, all Sierra County Gold Rush towns. But in February of 1867 these races were organized and a great meet was held in La Porte.

Skis (or snow-shoes, as they were sometimes called, but these were not the webbed snow-shoes we know now, but long skis, or "long boards" as they were named) had been in use for travel and work in these snow-bound Sierra towns long before 1867.

The men of Sawpit Flats and Poorman's Creek were the first to use skis for both work and fun. In 1853, Charles Nelson had introduced skis in Onion Valley, where as much as twenty-five feet of snow usually fell during the winter.

John Porter, known as "Old Buckskin," made the first skis for use in the Sierras. These were long, flat-bottomed boards made of Douglas fir erroneously called spruce. They

were known as "Norway Skates." In 1857 Porter improved these skis by burning a groove in the bottom with hot pine tar. These skis sold for six dollars gold dust a pair. The citizens eagerly bought them as a welcome means of locomotion in the heavy snows of winter.

Besides Porter's improvement of skis with his groove burned in the bottom, another advancement which helped the art of skiing was the development and use of ski dope. The "receipes" for this dope were a deep, dark secret. Most families developed their own dope and all claimed theirs was the best and caused skis to glide along faster than any other. Bill Clinch of Sawpit developed the first racing dope, or "Sierra Lightning." These dopes were made of many unusual and expensive ingredients, such as spermacetti, Burgandy pitch, Canada pitch, balsam, spruce, tar, glycerine, barbary tallow, camphor, caster oil and other ingredients.

The following is Frank Steward's receipe for Old Black Dope, first used at La Porte in 1861:

2 oz.	spermacetti
1/4 oz.	pitch pine pitch
1/8 oz.	camphor
1 tbs.	balsam
1 tbs.	oil of spruce

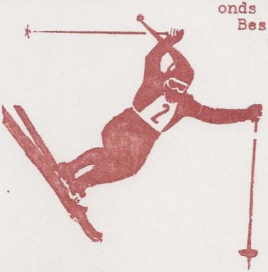
This should all be cooked together, but the cooking time was a well kept secret. Seven or eight coats of the resulting wax were painted on the bottoms of the skis, with the result that the racer really did go like "Sierra Lightning."

The first snow-shoe races recorded were in Onion Valley and La Porte in 1855. The earliest speed tests were limited to two men. Later these speed tests were free-for-alls. The record time for one of these speed tests was 1800 feet in thirteen seconds from a standing start!

The La Porte gamblers were delighted with the advent of this new sport. In these snow-bound towns there was not much doing during the long winter months. During the 1850's the gamblers and saloon keepers of many of these towns raised purses of several hundred dollars for prizes for the skiers who could make the best time down a track designated by a committee.

On February 12, 1867, the world's first ski club was formed and the world's first ski tourney was held at Lexington Hill near La Porte. The club was named The Alturas Snow Shoe Club. Alturas means heights and La Porte is situated at a height of 4500 feet. The club had vice-presidents from Gibsonville, Sawpit, and Port Wine. Robert Oliver, a Cornish miner of Sawpit Flat, became the club's first champion. Later the Alturas Snow Shoe Club challenged the entire universe.

During this first tourney forty-two men entered and they were divided into six-man squads. These squads zoomed down a 1230 foot course in fourteen seconds from a standing start.



Besides the money prizes, there was a championship belt, which the leaders of the different squads eagerly competed for. Robert Oliver and John G. Pollard made the course in fourteen seconds. Since the race was tied, they tried again and Oliver won, and was acclaimed the world's first skiing champion. Oliver's winning time was not exceptionally swift

for those days, as top velocities of one hundred miles per hour had been clocked at other times.

The women and the youngsters were not forgotten at these tourneys. The first women's champion was Miss Lottie Joy and the junior championship went to Hattie Starr of Gibsonville.

As may be imagined, with so many people competing at such high speeds, accidents were frequent. At one meet, Napoleon Normandin, a squad winner and contestant for the main prize, fell over another man. Normandin dislocated his thigh joint, broke his leg at the thigh, and sustained various internal injuries. But these hard-living, boisterous miners had much compassion for a misfortunate fellow miner. All the purses were put together and other money was collected and the total was given to Normandin to help pay his expenses. (Those were the days before hospital insurance.)

In another accident, one that was comic rather than tragic, one competitor going at about the slow speed of greased lightning collided with a young lady, throwing her "Canada West" and himself, too. The most singular part of the incident was that the race broke one of his skis and the young lady's hoops without serious injury to either. (Imagine skiing in hoop skirts !)

In 1867 ski racing reached a peak in this area. On March 11 of that year at Howland Flat seven hundred people, many of them ladies, lined the Table Rock Course for the opening contests of a four day program. Out

of that tourney came the Table Rock Snow Shoe Club with membership drawn from Howland Flat, Poker Flat and Pine Grove. This tourney produced the first specific commendations for three youthful snow shoers whose names for many years were to be household words in the area: Elias Squires of Gibsonville, Charley Littick of Pine Grove, and Hank Brown of Holland Flat.

During the winter of 1888 there was lots of snow and a great five day tournament was held. The competitions were held in various Sierra mining towns, ending on April 10 in Port Wine. There were cash prizes worth six hundred dollars and three hundred dollars worth of watches to be given to the winners. The fastest time recorded at this meet was twenty-one seconds down a fourteen hundred foot course by Pete Riendear who won the championships belt and $325. On this day there were seventy-two entrants.

Beginning in 1869, fraternal organizations played a major role in organizing and sponsoring these events. From Sierra City the E Clampus Vitus crossed the mountains in a body and it was "Hail to the Clampers" at Howland Flat. The Cosmopolitan Minstrels of Downieville snowshoed to Gibsonville while the Odd Fellows of Pilot Peak slid to La Porte.

During these years, many efforts had been made to improve not only the skis used in the races but the dope waxed onto them. In 1873 two of the leading dope makers of Howland Flat were Hiram Walker, a mining engineer and later superintendent of the Bald Mountain Mine near Forest City, and A.J.Howe, later a Sierra County Court judge. Howe also worked on improving the skis themselves. He perfected a new snow-shoe which had a wider groove on the bottom, tapered ends, and the tops were ridged and streamlined. Tommy Lodd used these new skis in March 1874 and, with the

bottoms slicked with lightning dope, he ran an 1804 foot course in fourteen seconds from a standing start, reaching speeds of 88 miles per hour.

Another maker of skis was Michael J.Sinnott of Downieville. He began work at Howland Flat in 1880 and continued to manufacture skis until 1935. He made many skis of all sizes from very small size for young children to twelve footers for racing and touring. Many of these skis made by Sinnott still remain in older families of western Sierra County.

To the inhabitants of these snow-buried towns there was no visitor hailed with greater delight than the mail-man. Communication was maintained for long periods only by skiers who carried the mail upon their backs. They were always expert skiers and handled only the letter mail.

To end on a lighter note, the following poem was taken from a Mountain Messenger 1879:

> The ladies, too with modest grace
> Will take their chance to win the race,
> And if the dears are not experts
> The air seems filled with snow and skirts.

Special thanks to Bill Berry - "The Skier" - March 1967

Georgene Copren

Notes on the Author:

Mrs. Georgene Copren, although a native of San Francisco, has lived in Sierraville, California, long enough to be considered a "native." She has raised her family in Sierra Valley and now enjoys the visits of her grandchildren to the Valley. She is presently teaching Home. Ec. at Loyalton High School, and resides in Sierraville with her husband, "Pinkie" Copren.