



OUR SKIING HISTORY



A rope tow operated by Moise Paquette on Baumgarten Hill in Ste-Agathe might be the first in North America, predating Alec Foster's Folly in Shawbridge. *PHOTOS: LAURENTIAN SKI MUSEUM*

LEAVES A LONG TRAIL

Laurentian Ski Museum honours Quebec's snow-sports pioneers

ROCHELLE LASH

The Laurentian Ski Museum in St-Sauveur is proof Quebecers have snow sports in their blood.

The museum honours remarkable champions and industry pioneers dating back more than 100 years. Its three rooms of exhibits tell snowy stories through vintage photos, racing memorabilia and artifacts such as wooden skis, bear-trap bindings and lace-up boots.

The Laurentian region is acknowledged to be the cradle of downhill skiing in North America because of its innovative lifts, early ski schools and all-inclusive resorts. There are modern-day scoops, too, among the lore found in sepia-toned documents. The museum recently has been researching the first rope tow in North America, long believed to be Alec Foster's Folly in Shawbridge, Que. Startling new information indicates a lift in Ste-Agathe may have been the first.

Such deep heritage has nurtured the sport, and Quebec now is home to about 1.4 million skiers and snowboarders.

HALL OF FAME

The museum recently held its 34th annual banquet at Sommet Morin-Heights, featuring the evening's honorary president Lucile Wheeler-Vaughan and emcee Guy Thibaudeau, a veteran TV, print and web ski reporter.

Wheeler won Canada's first Olympic ski medal — a bronze — in Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956. Skiing by the age of two, she is the granddaughter of George Wheeler, founder of the landmark Tremblant-area resort Gray Rocks in the early 1900s.

Two-time Olympian Peter Duncan rocked world racing in the 1960s and has deep Laurentian roots. His father, Charlie Duncan, was Tremblant's first operations manager, back in the 1930s and 1940s. Peter is a community leader in Tremblant, and I still occasionally see him zooming down the Duncan trail.

Twin sisters Rhoda Wurtele Eaves and Rhona Wurtele Gillis (mother of dancer Margie Gillis) aced the ski jumps on Mount Royal at age 11 and competed in the Olympics in the 1940s.

SEE SKI MUSEUM ON **B4**



Tremblant habitué Peter Duncan was a two-time Olympian in the 1960s.

FROM LITTLE TRAIN TO BIG RESORTS

SKI MUSEUM FROM **B1**

Modern-day Hall of Fame champions include snowboarder Jasey-Jay Anderson and freestyle skier Alexandre Bilodeau, both Olympic gold medalists. Among the early builders of Laurentian skiing are legendary Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen, who conceived the Maple Leaf Trail linking Laurentian communities; Mickey Stein of Mont Habitant; Louis Dufour of Les Sommets (previously Mont Saint-Sauveur group); and David Pemberton-Smith of Far Hills Inn.

Prominent ski journalists John Fry and Doug Pfeiffer, both former Quebecers who started on the slopes of Mount Royal, were among the Hall of Fame inductees at the 2017 dinner. Fry raced for the McGill Red Birds and was editor-in-chief of SKI Magazine and Snow Country. Pfeiffer founded the Professional Ski Instructors of America and was editor-in-chief of Skiing Magazine.

MILESTONES

The Laurentian region spawned many firsts in skiing in North America. Here are some of the high points.

Le P'tit Train du Nord: Originally built for industry, the train arrived in Ste-Agathe in the early 1890s, ferried early Nordic ski clubs and became known as the Ski Train by the 1930s. The train sparked the development of Laurentian resorts, towns and ski areas.

Chalet Cochand, circa 1915: A folksy cottage in Ste-Marguerite was one of the first all-inclusive resorts in Quebec, run by Léa and Émile Cochand, the latter a Swiss champion ski jumper. They weathered bitter winters and food shortages, but they made it, Émile picking up guests by horse-drawn sleigh at the P'tit Train and Léa dishing out Swiss fondue by the fireside.

The first lifts, circa 1930: For decades, it has been widely believed that Alec Foster was a pioneer in North America with his famed rope tow, Foster's Folly, which launched in Shawbridge in 1932-33. But the Laurentian Ski Museum has discovered that metalworker Moïse Paquette also operated a rope tow, possibly as early as 1928-30. Paquette's invention ferried skiers up Baumgarten Hill in Ste-Agathe and cost five cents a ride, or 50 cents a day. There is no hard proof yet, so the museum is continuing its research and concluding for now that two people invented similar mechanisms at about the same time. In the U.S., rope tows followed in 1934 in Woodstock, Vt., and in 1936 at Peckett's on Sugar Hill, near Franconia, N.H.

Tremblant chairlift, 1938-39 season: Tremblant developer Joe Ryan opened the first chairlift in Canada in February 1939, soaring above the challenging Flying Mile trail, which Ryan had named after his favourite racehorse. Downhill skiing took off so intensely that it is said Laurentian parish priest Father Charles-Hector Deslauriers wore ski boots under his robes so he could hit the slopes after mass. The Tremblant lift came two years after the first chairlift in the U.S., at Sun Valley, Idaho.

Fashions by Irving of Montreal, 1940s: Montreal tailor Irving Margolese recreated wind- and water-proof gabardine ski pants, which were imported from Europe and put Montreal ski fashions on the map. The new tightly woven cotton and wool pants — the famous Irvings — were a first step to ski chic and a welcome move away from baggy, soggy clothes. Skiwear by Irving of Montreal was sold in Saks Fifth Avenue and featured in Time



Mid-century world ski champions Rhona, left, and Rhoda Wurtele. LAURENTIAN SKI MUSEUM

magazine and Town & Country.

Maria Bogner of Germany changed the game again in the early 1950s when she blended stretchy Helanca fabric with wool and created tight-fitting, aerodynamic ski pants.

Night skiing, 1950s: In 1950, tiny Domaine Parent in St-Jérôme was the first ski centre in the Laurentians to light trails. Mont Gabriel is a better-known venture. Construction tycoon H.J. O'Connell, the contractor who built Laurentian Autoroute/Highway 15, owned Mont Gabriel during the 1950s and installed highway lights on the Obergürzl trail circa 1955. In 1960, Mont Habitant used mercury vapour lights, enabling brighter and more expansive after-dark skiing, and even racing.

In the U.S., Bousquet's in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts was lit up by 1936. Other early birds during the 1940s were Cobble Mountain in Lake George, N.Y., Snoqualmie Summit (now Summit West) near Seattle, and Grouse Mountain in B.C.

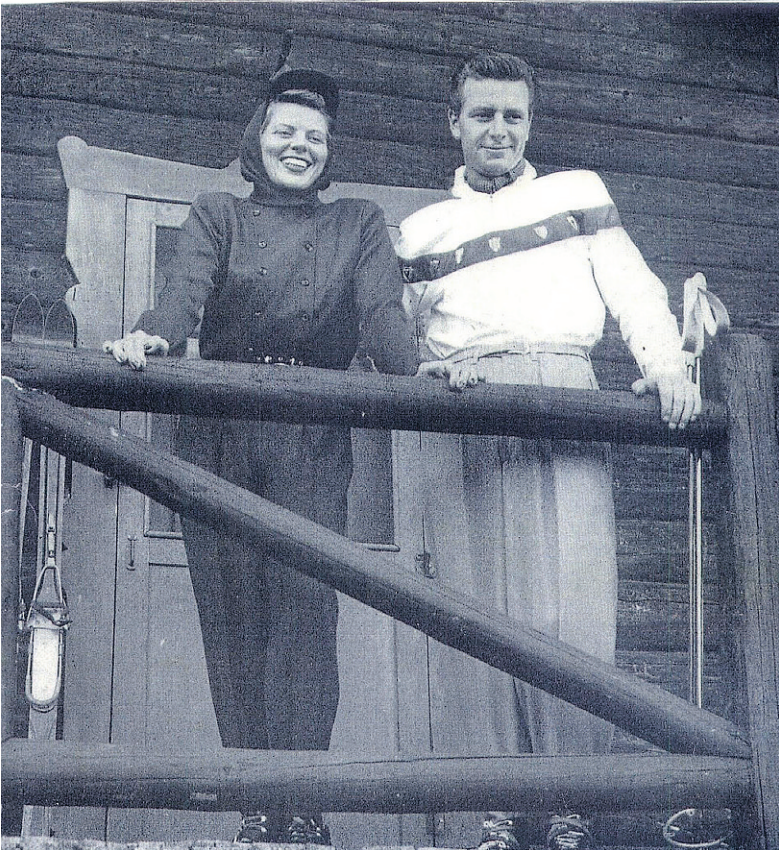
Snow-making, 1950s: John Clifford, a ski racer and resort developer from Ottawa, was the first in Canada to create artificial snow, at Camp Fortune north of Ottawa/Gatineau in 1958. He went on to install the Laurentians' first system at Mont Gabriel, and later worked throughout Canada.

The Mohawk Ski Area in the Berkshires was the first to have snow-making, in 1950-1951. Big Boulder in the Poconos and Grossinger's Catskill Resort Hotel are among other pioneers.

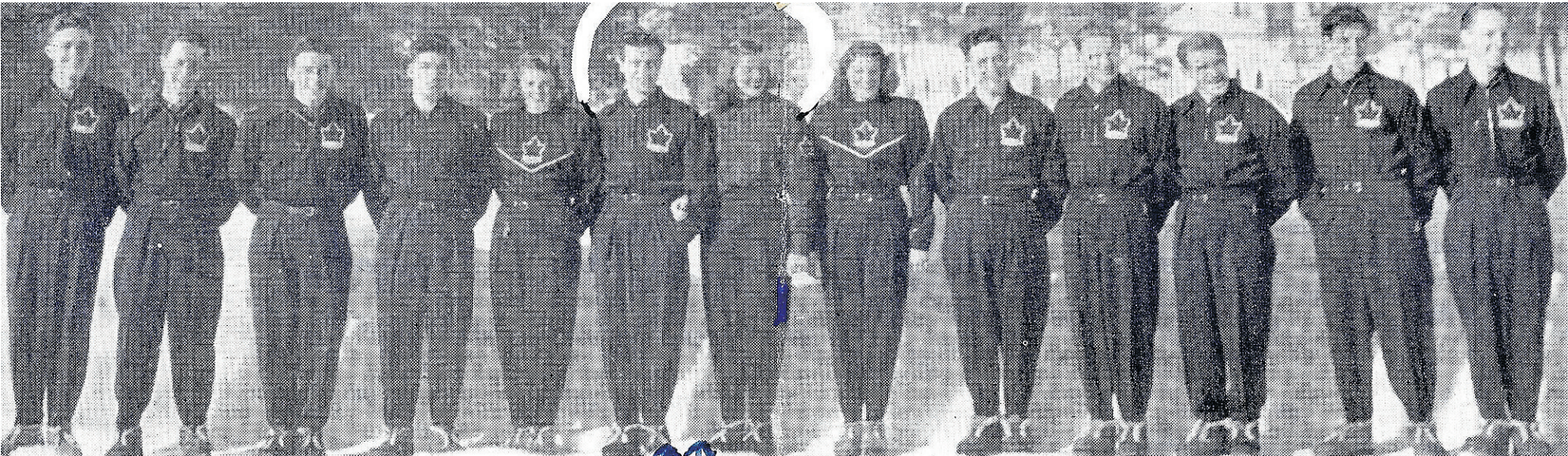
Acknowledgments: This look back includes input from Nancy Belhumeur, Laurentian Ski Museum curator; Michel Allard, former professor at Université du Québec à Montréal and author of Le Coeur des Laurentides; Pierre Dumas, engineer and author of Le répertoire des sites de ski alpin du Québec (available at the museum); museum volunteer René Bauset; John Fry, chairman of the International Skiing History Association (ISHA); ISHA board member Bob Soden of Montreal; and descendants of major ski families, including Charles MacLean Cochand and James Stein.

Information: Laurentian Ski Museum, 30 Fillion St., St-Sauveur, 450-227-2564, 877-528-2553, museeduskideslaurentides.com. International Skiing History Association/Skiing History magazine, 802-366-1158, skiinghistory.org.

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Morna MacLean Cochand and Louis Cochand in Irving Margolese ski fashions in Town & Country in 1953. COLLECTION, CHAS MACLEAN COCHAND



The 1948 Canadian Olympic ski team competed in St. Moritz, Switzerland, sporting new-technology skiwear by Irving Margolese of Montreal. From left: Harvey Clifford, Lucien Laferte, Hec Sutherland, Tom Dennie, Rhona Wurtele, Louis Cochand (team manager), Morna MacLean Cochand (associate), Rhoda Wurtele, Burt Irwin, Tom Mobraaten, Laurent Bernier, Pierre Jalbert and Bill Irwin. COLLECTION, CHAS MACLEAN COCHAND