



## Herman Smith Johannsen O.C.

Inducted CSHF: 1982

Hometown: Horten, Norway / Quebec, Canada

Date of Birth: June 15, 1875

Date of Death: January 6, 1987

Affiliated Discipline(s): Builder, Official

Active Career Dates(s): 1930 - 1975

FIS Code: n/a

Club: Red Birds Ski Club

It might be said that Jackrabbit Johannsen's lifetime was, in essence, two lifetimes, the first being the 55 year period from 1875 - 1930, and the second of 55 years from 1931 until his death at the age of 111 years in January, 1987. A long serving technical adviser to the Canadian Amateur Ski Association (CASA), his contribution of many decades to the development of skiing and its influence on the tourist industry in both in Canada, the Laurentian region of Quebec, and the eastern United States is incalculable.

His small comfortable house in Piedmont, Quebec was converted to become the Jackrabbit Laurentian Museum. It was a house dedicated to the life and memory of a unique man, a man who lived through eleven decades, Herman Smith Johannsen, better known throughout the world of skiing as "Jackrabbit Johannsen". Above the door was a battered ski, a gift to him from the Norwegian Ski Museum, similar in type he had worn as a boy in his native Norway in the late 19thC with a toe and heel strap made of twisted willow. It symbolized his lifelong passion for skiing and his many contributions to the promotion and development of the sport.

Over the years beginning in the 1930s, he cut through rugged bush to establish hundreds of miles of cross country ski trails in Quebec's Laurentian Mountain region to link the then isolated communities. Later he would ski up to 1800 kms in a season to maintain those same trails. As his eldest daughter commented' "His trails now serve as the basis of scores of resorts in Canada and the United States that proudly claim a connection with the legendary Jackrabbit." (*Alice E Johannsen, 1993, The Legendary Jackrabbit Johannsen, [Montreal & Kingston: McGill & Queen's University Press], 4)*)

In a letter written in 1974 congratulating him on the occasion of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Rt. Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada said, "...For many of us who love the outdoor life, Mr. Johannsen has been both an inspiration and an outstanding example of what a healthy and active life can bring in terms of vigour and well being. As a pioneer who first introduced Eastern Canada to cross-country skiing, he has benefitted thousands...."

Please Note: The ski information gathered here is compiled from a number of sources; it may not be inclusive of all accomplishments.

## **1875 - 1930: His work as a professional engineer**

- 1875 Born 5 June 1875 in Horten, Norway the oldest of nine children, he was introduced to skiing at the age of two.
- 1893 He reported to Krigsskolen (literally “war school” or military academy) for military training. Graduated 1894 earning his commission as a lieutenant in the Royal Norwegian Army Reserve.
- 1894-1899 Attended the University of Berlin graduating as mechanical engineer.
- 1901-1906 He left Norway for the United States where he joined an engineering company in Cleveland, Ohio. He first travelled to Canada in 1902 as a field manager marketing heavy construction equipment and made his first contact with the Cree of Northern Ontario.
- 1907-1911 Married Alice Robinson in 1907, a relationship which would last 60-years.
- He decided to become an independent manufacturer’s agent selling engineering equipment as far a field as Panama (for the construction of the Panama Canal) and Cuba.
- Moved to Cuba in 1908 to participate in a burgeoning upsurge in business opportunities following the Spanish-America War.
- 1912-1921 Returned to New York to “Swim among the sharks” where the family prospered.
- 1922-1927 Tiring of a rapidly expanding New York, he opened an office in Montreal, then a small town, and commuted weekly to Lake Placid where the family had made its home.
- 1928-1929 The family moved to Montreal in 1928.
- In 1929 his business foundered as the economy entered the Great Depression; the family existed for a while on the barest of essentials. Jackrabbit is reduced to working for local inns in the Laurentians. Such was his ability to adapt to adversity he welcomed the prospect of freedom to explore the outdoors and the freedom from the stress of business.
- Made an Honourary Life Member of McGill University’s Red Birds Ski Club for his work in developing cross-country trails

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## 1930 - 1975: His emergence as a skiing engineer

1930 Reconnaissance of territory of Mont Tremblant Park with Red Birds Ski Club members, Harry Pangman, Sterling Maxwell and Neil Stewart. They made the first descent of Mont Tremblant and established the first Quebec Kandahar Downhill Race. This first descent was made in response to a request from the Ski Club of Great Britain (SCGB) to search for a hill suitable for competition in Canada. The SCGB offered an impressive cup to the winner of a race held on the hill chosen.

1932-1939 Invited to attend the 1932 III Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York state. Co-coach of the Canadian Olympic team.

With his son, Bob, he conceived the Maple Leaf Trail, a route used both summer and winter and meander through the Laurentians from inn to inn, from Labelle to Shawbridge, a distance of 128 kms. It would draw visitors into the region and open it up as a tourist destination for skiing, fishing and hunting. The government would eventually agree and Johannsen would become the trailmaker, map its course and maintain the result. Funding was inadequate but he continued fostering goodwill among the landowners, traveling on a pass given to him by the CPR.

The Depression years continue, Jackrabbit continues to earn a meager income advising on ski matters for \$10.00 or serving tourists as a guide.

To help defray the family's expenses, Jackrabbit Johannsen, in partnership with his son, Bob, starts a small manufacturing company producing Jack Rabbit Ski Lacquer. The "factory" was located on the back veranda of the family's apartment in Montreal. Although it was no great financial success, it did establish the name "The Jackrabbit" in the marketplace.

Approached by the Imperial Tobacco Sales Company, he was asked to produce a skiers' guide to the Laurentians which eventually emerged as the popular and authoritative guide the "Sweet Caporal Skiers' Book".

His advice is sought by ski area developers for Collingwood, Ontario, Rawdon, Magog and Lac Beauport, Quebec.

1940-1960 He continued to maintain the mountain routes along the Maple Leaf trail accumulating 1811 kms of skiing mileage in a single winter.

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Supervise trail construction for the Whiteface Mountain Authority and New York State Conservation Association.

The Smith-Johannsen Wax Company now located in Niskayuna, New York, resumes manufacturing following the end of WWII in 1945.

At the age of 85, Jackrabbit Johannsen is invited by the Norwegian 100th Anniversary Committee to attend the celebration of the First Huseby-Holmenkollen Ski Meet as the Guest of Honour.

1961-1975

The Canadian Ski Marathon from Pointe Claire, Quebec, to Ottawa, Ontario, a distance of about 190 kms, is launched in 1967 to celebrate Canada's one hundredth year of Confederation. Jackrabbit Johannsen accompanied by several member of his family completes the marathon at the age of 92.

An LL.D degree (Honoris Causi) is awarded to Jackrabbit in 1968 by Sir George Williams University, Montreal, Quebec for services rendered to skiing.

In 1972, he is presented with the Medal of St Olav on behalf of His Majesty, King Olav V of Norway.

The Order of Canada is conferred on him by Governor General Roland Michener, an ardent skier himself.

To celebrate his centennial, the National Film Board of Canada records Jackrabbit Johannsen's life emphasizing his lifestyle, philosophy and considerable contribution to the Laurentian region of Quebec and the development of skiing in general.

In 1975 he receives a D.Sc (Honoris Causa) from McGill University, Montreal. Four years later, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, confers on his second LL,D degree (Honoris Causa).

His 100th year began with a birthday celebration at Laurentian Lodge Club, Shawinigan, Quebec organized by the new England Ski Touring Council to honour Jackrabbit Johannsen's contribution to skiing in the eastern United States. There was a gala dinner in New York where he was pronounced "Dubonnet Skier of the Year", a visit to Sun Valley Idaho where he "...astonished those veteran skier with his prowess on the boards". In Montebello, Quebec, there were more celebrations part way through the 1975 Canadian Marathon, where a bust of Jackrabbit Johannsen by Harold Pfeifer was unveiled, which is now on loan in the collection of the Canadian Ski Museum in Ottawa.

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