

Loads of Fun on Ski and Snow

During this raucous “ski” weekend 89 years ago, the travelers glow happily inside train cars and the walls of a once-famous club. **BY COREY FORD**

CPR/SKIING LEGENDS & THE LAURENTIAN LODGE CLUB



In the winter of 1927–1928, “snow trains” carried 11,000 skiers to the Laurentians. “What a jolly crowd it is,” wrote Canadian Ski Association founder Percy Douglas. “Pretty girls all in knickers and gay coloured sweaters, boys in every kind of costume.”

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In this undated photo, a Shawbridge skier greets a snow train as it arrives from Montreal. “Villagers turned out in force to see the trains coming in,” said Douglas.

LAURENTIAN SKI MUSEUM



In 1922, Shawbridge Club members banded together to lease a rambling farmhouse that had been a farm and boarding house. Members began to join immediately and the first signature appeared on the guest register on January 5, 1923.

The well-known author Corey Ford recalls a five-day bibulous “ski” trip in 1928 to the famous Laurentian Lodge Club in Shawbridge, Quebec, 40 miles north of Montreal, a village known today as Prévost. Ford was invited by Percy Douglas’ son, Chrystie. Ford’s hilarious recounting of the weekend was published in the February 16, 1929 edition of The New Yorker. It is reprinted here with permission of the Dartmouth College Library, where Ford’s papers reside.

The skiers’ paradise,” the rear flap of the Canadian National timetable dubbed it, “with its steep dazzling hills for the expert, and its gentle easy slopes for the timid tyro.” (I didn’t like that “timid tyro” attitude. It sounded a little patronizing.) “Shawbridge,” it continued to gloat, “with its cold bracing air,

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mysterious blue shadows and infinite hills that seem to touch the very sky.” (I suppose you do get that impression when you look down from one.) “Return at night,” the railway timetable fairly chortled, “with rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and a feeling of fitness and exuberance with which to tackle the task on the morrow.”

It was that last line that got us. We wanted to face the task on the morrow with a feeling of fitness and exuberance. We wanted sparkling eyes, and some rosy cheeks. We wanted cold bracing air, mysterious blue shadows and infinite hills; and so we decided to go to Canada for a weekend skiing trip. That was where we made our big mistake. It would have been cheaper just to have stayed home and fallen downstairs.

The clerk in the sporting-goods store said we needed heavy socks. Anybody who was going skiing in Canada needed heavy socks; and heavy gloves; and heavy pants; and a couple of heavy shirts. And heavy underclothes, of course. Plenty of heavy stuff, that was the secret of a good skiing trip. We finally staggered over to Grand Central that night with four suitcases filled with our skiing costume, in addition to a couple of heavy shirts which we had to wear because they wouldn’t fit in the bags, our ski-boots knotted around

our necks by the laces, a pair of thirteen-foot skis under one arm and a pair of ski-poles under the other, all of which caused a considerable good-natured chaffing in Forty-Second Street before we finally disappeared into the sanctuary of the sleeper. Well, let them snigger. Sour grapes, that was all. Sheer envy. Tomorrow they would still be bending over their desks in stuffy offices, while we were speeding down a couple of these infinite hills that seem to touch the very sky . . .

"It ended with a handsome parade through the clubhouse, and a rather ugly fistfight."

Just enough time in Montreal to buy us each a skiing cap (a blue affair with a long visor, like a coal miner gone collegiate) and a couple of bottles of Scotch and a little cognac, just as a precaution to tide us over Sunday in case it got cold skiing. And just enough time left to stop in Krausman's for one glass of ale before the train left. Wouldn't be Montreal without a glass of ale at old Krausman's, ha, ha. Some different from Danny's, huh? Have we got time for another?

"Boy!" I said, setting down the glass. "I can hardly wait to get out in that cold bracing air, and strap on the old skis—"

"Right up to the top of the mountain with us," said Percy. (As a matter of fact, his name is really Percy Crosby and I see no reason for calling him Bill or Ed just for this article.) "None of those sissie slopes for mine."

"I bet those chaps back home are envying us now," I laughed. "Have we got time for just one more?"

Chrys Douglas, our host, looked at his watch anxiously. Train left in ten minutes. So we grabbed time for just one or two more; and arrived breathless at Tunnel Station with our skis under our arms, just in time to see the rear platform disappearing up the track, and no train till the following noon. A whole day to wait till we could get on skis! We weathered the blow like men, and with a sigh of resignation we went back to Krausman's for just one more.

That was Thursday; and Saturday afternoon, sure enough, we arrived in Shawbridge, skis and baggage and a slight throbbing headache behind the left temple. Pile out, everybody! Get a lungful of this cold bracing air. I bet the bunch in New Yo . . . haugh . . . haugh . . . Into the sleigh, up the hill to the clubhouse,

THE SHAWBRIDGE CLUB

In the summer of 1922, a group of avid skiers, mostly affluent anglophones from Montreal, banded together to form the Laurentian Lodge Club, Inc.—better known by its nickname, the Shawbridge Club. They each chipped in \$15 to lease a farmhouse that one founder called "the ugliest building in the Province of Quebec." Laurentian ski pioneer Herman "Jackrabbit" Johanssen was an early member.

Through World War II, most skiers arrived by train on Friday night, to be met by "every kind of sleigh, with the air echoing the merry music of their bells." Over the years, the Shawbridge Club remained an exclusive gathering place for Montreal elite and their guests, who filled the weekends with skiing and sledding, ping-pong and board games, cocktails and dinners, dancing and late-night escapades. One long-time member was the world-famous neurosurgeon, Dr. Wilder Penfield.

By late 2015, membership had declined to approximately 70 people, and the club closed its doors. Its archives—including photos, letters and oil paintings—are now owned by the Laurentian Ski Museum in St. Sauveur, Quebec (www.museeduskideslaurentides.com). —From *Skiing Legends and the Laurentian Lodge Club* by Neil and Catharine McKenty (Price-Patterson, 2000).



A skier climbs the "Big Hill" at Shawbridge. In 1931 or 1932, Alex Foster rigged up a prototype tow at Shawbridge—the first in North America—using a hemp rope, a pulley and a jacked-up Dodge.

pile your bags in the room, and on with your duds. Out on the porch, Chrys rubbed his hands gleefully. Just time for an hour's skiing before supper!

I looked at Perc. He looked at me. To think of being on skis at last! To think of climbing the mountain this very evening! It was almost too much. In fact, on second thought, it was too much.

"Chrys," I explained as tactfully as possible, "thinking it over, we've decided it might be best if we spent the rest

of today just more or less getting acquainted . . .”

Chrys looked at us suspiciously. “. . . you know, watching how it’s done,” I rushed, “getting used to this cold bracing air . . .”

He kneeled and buckled on his skis in silence.

“. . . when we learn to ski,” I continued, “we want to embark with the proper spirit upon what is without doubt the greatest sport in the . . .”

Chrys shoved forward and coasted down the hill from the clubhouse alone.

“. . . because it is the greatest sport in the world,” I maintained to Perc later, as we sprawled before the fire. “Just think of those saps bending over their desks in stuffy offices, instead of breathing this bracing air . . .”

“Solutely,” nodded Perc, and filled another glass.

“It certainly will be good to get on those skis tomorrow,” I added heartily.

“Lutely,” nodded Perc. “Shall we open this second brandy?”

IT turned cold that night. We didn’t notice it at first, because we spent most of the evening before the fire with some fellow skiers from McGill University, arguing about Anglo-American relations. It was a very pleasant argument, and it ended with a handsome parade through the clubhouse, an impromptu speech by Perc on international amity, patriotic songs of both nations, and a rather ugly fistfight in the front hall; and when we finally turned in about four o’clock, Chrys was asleep. So we threw all the windows wide open and crawled under the blankets, and as a result the thermometer dropped to thirty-six degrees below by morning, and Chrystie froze his ear in bed. He was very nice about it, however, and when he returned after a morning’s skiing and woke us up for lunch, he was as full of enthusiasm as ever.

“What’s the thermometer now?” Perc inquired.

“Seventeen below,” Chrys said. “In the sun,” he added cheerfully.

So that afternoon, while Chrys was out skiing again, Perc and I sat around the fire and looked forward to the splendid skiing we would have tomorrow. Tomorrow we would show them some real skiing around here. Say, a cross-country trip to St. Sauveur, around by the lakes, and home again for supper. Or perhaps a few thrilling descents of the big mountain opposite, and the rest of the day brushing up on our telemarks and christies. It would be easy to learn.

“Just keep one foot a little in front of the other,” I said. “That’s the whole secret about skiing. And a little more soda in mine, if you please.”

“You should keep the skis parallel, of course,” Perc agreed. “It’s funny they don’t serve you ice here. I think it tastes flat without ice.”

“And balance on your toes,” I added. “Lean forward and rest your weight on your toes.”

“By the way,” said Perc, “you don’t happen to have a little ice in your pocket, by any chance?”

“Bend your knees,” I said, “and balance with your

shoulders . . .”

“I wonder what they’d say,” Perc mused, “if I went out and got some snow.”

A slight disturbance in the outside hall roused our attention.

“Sorry to trouble you.” A face appeared in the doorway, smiling through a large patch of adhesive tape. “But do either of you chaps happen to have some arnica handy?”

“Hurt yourself?” we asked weakly.

“Oh, no,” he laughed. “I did this last week—ran into a pine-tree, that was all—no, this is for my friend here. He just ran a ski-pole through his cheek.”

“I saw some arnica in the bathroom,” said Perc.

“Oh, that was used up this morning,” smiled the face. “Some chap got tangled up with the barbed wire on the big hill . . .”

Perc poured himself another glass of brandy.

The next morning Chrys stuck his head in the doorway of the bedroom for a moment. “Bill and I are going cross-country to St. Sauveur,” he explained briefly, “and we won’t be back before supper. You’ll find your skis right out in the hall, as usual,” pointedly, “in case you want to put them on for a moment to take some pictures of each other.”

He reappeared a second later in the window. “I’ve ordered you another case of ale,” he added coldly.

They put us on the New York train Tuesday night; and we both vowed to Chrys as we left that it was the best weekend we had ever enjoyed. There is no sport like skiing, Perc and I agreed. There’s no sport that gives you such rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and a feeling of fitness and exuberance with which to face the task on the morrow. ❄️

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corey Ford (1902–1969) was an American humorist, author, screenwriter and occasional member of the Algonquin Round Table, a legendary group of New York City writers, actors and critics. He published 30 books and more than 500 magazine articles. Though born and raised in New York City, he was a dedicated outdoorsman who spent the last years of his life in Hanover, New Hampshire. He’s best known for “The Lower Forty Hunting, Shooting and Inside Straight Club,” a fictional column he wrote for *Field & Stream* in the 1950s and 1960s. His papers are housed at the Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth College (for an index, go to: <http://ead.dartmouth.edu/html/ml30.html>).



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