

Apparently the Swedes, after 1200, must have learned a lesson as to the value of skis in warfare. Going into war in 1521 and in later conflicts in 1576, 1590 and 1610 A. D., they equipped all the troops either with skis or snowshoes.

In the 1521 war, the Swedes stretched animal skins between two skis, placed injured comrades on them, and in this fashion carried them off the fields -- the first known stretchers.

The bone-runner ski had no standard size. It was not turned up at the ends, this being impossible. Centuries after the beginning of the Christian Era, wood was substituted. The standard length of the wooden ski was about 7 feet 6 inches. The runners were about 2 inches thick, 5 inches wide and about 1 foot of the front end of the ski was turned up, just the way the ski is shown in drawings that deal with legendary gods of the north countries.

Obviously, the drawings were not made until long after wooden skis came into existence, although the gods and goddesses predate them by many centuries. The comparatively modern artists just took the skis which existed in their time, fitted them to the feet of the legendary and paid no heed to the contradiction that their work would bring in the history of the gods and goddesses and the wooden ski with the turned-up toe.

The ski, coming into use when wood was used in their making, sometimes had nothing but a wooden surface. Others had the blade part of the ski covered with strips of thin goat or sheep's skin. Such skis served through the early years and no radical change was made in them until the 16th century. Then the Swedes, preparing for battle, shortened some of the skis to about 3 feet and made them into a combination of ski and snowshoe, although retaining many of the old style 7 foot 6 inch skis.

Skiing was introduced into Central Europe, via Austria, in 1590, and since then has spread to North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the mountainous regions of South America, the slopes of the snow-capped peaks in Hawaii and parts of India.

Going into the 19th Century, those who used skis for serious purposes also found they could be turned into means for sport. This resulted in impromptu races. Next were some jumping contests, off short hills. There was started in Norway an annual get-together of ski enthusiasts in the 1850's and one and two day carnivals of sport were conducted.

Along in 1860 the royal family of Norway took cognizance of jumping as a sport. The king donated a trophy to be awarded the champion and appointed a committee to draft rules for annual tournaments, the king designating that it should be in the month of February and that it be at Holmenkollen, near Christiania (now Oslo), where there was a long sloping hill, ideal for a take-off.

Eventually, this tournament became the greatest national sports event in Norway. The "Norwegian Ski Derby" was originated to test the durability of skiers in cross-country racing. Later other forms of ski contests were added to the program.

It is not known who brought the first pair of skis to North America, nor whether the first pair was imported, was created by Indians in Canada or fashioned by settlers from Sweden and Norway. The snowshoe has been known for many generations in Canada, and those who used snowshoes may also have constructed skis for use down steep mountain sides.

For one thing, it is known that during the rush to the Pacific Coast for gold in the 1850's skis were very much in evidence in the snow fastnesses of the Sierra Nevadas.

In Canadian history there is a record of a snow-ice carnival in 1759 and skis, as well as snowshoes are mentioned as having been put to use. There is nothing written about skis in the United States prior to 1840, when it was stated that "wooden blades, for use on ice and snow, were brought from Norway and were used by the immigrants in the northern part of the Atlantic Seaboard", this perhaps meaning skis, brought by Norwegians to their new homes in upper New England.

One of the most fabulous skiers known to the world was an American - John A. (Snowshoe) Thomson, who carried the United States mail in the high, snow-clad Sierras for about 20 years.

Thomson's route was Placerville, Calif., to Carson City, Nev., and return. The distance was 91 miles and Thomson had to carry a pack of about 100 pounds each way. He began as a mail carrier soon after the California gold rush of 1849, which had attracted him to the West, but brought him no riches.

Thomson was a native of Norway. He learned skiing there, and also the value of snowshoes, as skiing was then called, in traveling over soft, snow-bound terrain. His salary was \$200 a month and, thanks to Thomson, there was a round-trip regular mail delivery every few days in deepest winter from the East, via Carson City, to California. He usually negotiated the route, up and down high mountains, through appalling drifts of snow, regardless of thermometer reading, within three days, taking about a week for each round trip.

Thomson, after 20 years, felt Congress owed him a debt of \$6,000, or so, for underpayment. He filed a claim. Congress sent him a nice letter of thanks--but no check. Citizens, many of whom owed their lives to Thomson's daring rescues, when not on the mail run, subscribed a small sum for him, to show gratitude. Thomson, broken up because of the Congressional rebuff, never recovered from the blow. He died a short time later and is buried in Genoa, California.

The first jumpers known to the United States were two young brothers - Torgus and Mikkel Hemmestvedt - who lived in Red Wing, Minn., and gained local fame, which eventually spread throughout the state, by jumping from reasonably high hills, without breaking their necks. That was in 1880. Their playmates soon followed their example and ski jumping became the sport thrill of winter in that part of Minnesota.

There are conflicting reports as to the first official ski club in the United States. The Alturas Snow-Shoe Club, LaPorte, Calif., is said to be founded in 1867, and a club formed by Scandinavians at Berlin, N. H., called the Nansen Ski Club in 1872. Another ski club was organized late in 1885 at St. Paul, followed almost immediately by the "Den Norske Turn og Skiforening", which was a Minneapolis organization.

On Jan. 19, 1886, twenty-eight Norwegians met at Red Wing, formed the Aurora Ski Club and decided upon a tournament to be held in Red Wing on Feb. 8, 1887. Among the contestants at that first governed tournament were the Hemmestvedt brothers, with Mikkel winning the men's jumping championship.