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John “Snowshoe” Thompson

Born: 1827 Died: 1876

Thompson trekked the High Sierra on eight-foot groove less skis, and actually wrote quasi-scientific articles describing ski contests in the mountains that are remarkably similar to the downhill and slalom races of today.

JOHN A. THOMPSON, as Snowshoe spelled his name, or THOMSON as it appears on his grave marker, immigrated to America in 1837 at 10 years of age from his Norway home in Telemarken. He was born April 30, 1827, and died at 49 years of age on May 15, 1876, at his Diamond Valley ranch in Alpine Country, California. This is a short distance from his ski-crested gravestone near Genoa in Nevada.

SNOWSHOE used skis 7 1/2 to 8 feet long, grooveless but cambered, and not greatly different from modern-day versions. He wrote about “scientific” skiing, his articles defining ski contests comparable to “downhill” and “slalom.”

THOMPSON'S description of “stakes to be stuck in a straight line every hundred feet through the track, and I will leave the first one to the right, the next one to the left, and so on until I get through” sounds very much like slalom events of today “...and

when my shoes stop running, my back shall be turned toward the outcome, and my face up hill. . .” what current race spectator or TV fan has not seen competitors do just that after each run? He even specified “jumps to be made every 200 feet by piling snow up, each jump to be five feet high, and I will run over them all.”

In 1856, Thompson read an ad in the Sacramento Union which said: “People lost to the world. Uncle Sam needs mail carrier.” Knowing mail carriers had a difficult time crossing the mountains in winter, he made hand-hewn “snowshoes” which he felt would enable him to carry the mail with little or no trouble. Snowshoe was confident that he was the man for the job, and showed the postmaster his equipment. Although he wasn't impressed, no one else wanted the job, so the postmaster had little choice but to hire him. Snowshoe carried the mail traveling 25 to 40 miles in a day in all types of weather between Placerville and Genoa, from 1856 to 1876.

The Ski Hall of Fame nomination of Thompson was unanimously approved by delegates to the 62nd Annual Convention of the United States Ski Association on June 13, 1970, in San Francisco. It was prepared by Lawrence B. Maurin of West Bend, Wisconsin, and endorsed by President Wendell T. Robie of the Auburn Ski Club, the Snowshoe Thompson Lodge of the Sons of Norway, the Snowshoe Thompson Chapter of E Clampus Vitus and several prominent historians of California and Nevada. Maurin and Robie are Ski Hall of Famers.

THOMPSON MEMORABILIA in the Western America Skisport Museum include skis and mailbag attributed to Snowshoe by the donor Wells Fargo Bank History Room. The museum also serves as headquarters for the Snowshoe Thompson Cross-Country Ski Race, and the Norwegian Ski Federation's Snowshoe Thompson Commemorative Holmenkollen Cut also is displayed.

John Albert “Snowshoe” Thompson was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1970.

