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Herman Smith-Johannsen

Born: 1875 Died: 1986

A legend in his own lifetime, Jack Rabbit Smith-Johannsen's cross-country skiing feats and enthusiasm possibly will never be equaled by any living Canadian or American over the trails and racing courses he made famous.

“Jack Rabbit” Smith-Johannsen was a living legend and probably one of the most amazing people ever associated with skiing. Herman Smith-Johannsen was born in Horten, Norway, on June 15, 1875. Herman, like most Norwegian youngsters did a considerable amount of skiing – mostly cross-country.

All young Norwegians were required to enter military service for a spell. Herman did his stint, coming out as a lieutenant. He then went to a German university where he got a degree in civil engineering. Jack Rabbit immigrated to Canada by the way of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1899.

Smith-Johannsen came to Cleveland to sell heavy railroad equipment. He always intended to come to North America, make a lot of money and return to Norway to live. Jack Rabbit never did. He did become disenchanted with the wasteful practices of the companies in the United States, particularly the railroads. This was the era when the United States was moving West, and becoming highly industrialized. Jackrabbit felt the practices were wasteful, thoughtless, and environmentally disastrous.

Herman Smith-Johannsen kept his skis with him whenever possible, particularly when in Canada. He met Cree Indians, who, on snowshoes, were fascinated by his skill on skis in the deep woods. He gained his name Jack Rabbit from the Cree at that time. Still selling heavy railroad equipment, he transferred first to the Lake Placid area of New York and then to Canada with his wife, the former Alice Robinson whom he had first met in Cleveland. He bushwhacked all over eastern Canada on skis. He found time to construct the famed Maple Leaf Trail among others. Jack Rabbit helped reconfigure some trails in the Lake Placid area. All the while, he competed in cross-country races as they arose.

And, Jack Rabbit skied and skied. He entered competitions on both sides of the border, often winning over skiers one-third his age and at age eighty, was considered a geriatric marvel. At age one-hundred he still skied, although he admitted that the “competition was getting better,” since he was placing more third and fourth places in races. At age one-hundred and two, this legend still claimed he could ski twenty miles a day, but he would be “completely exhausted” at the end of the trek.

At one-hundred and eight, he still did some skiing, although his legs were tiring and his eyesight and hearing were starting to fail. However, he was still able to travel and do things for himself.

Although he was living a serene life under the watchful eye of his daughter Alice, he was by no means relegated to the rocking chair. At age 111, he contracted pneumonia while visiting his old stamping grounds in Norway and passed on, a truly amazing man. He was still officiating cross-country competition right up to the end.

Without a doubt, Herman “Chief Jack Rabbit” Smith-Johannsen was one of the most remarkable legends in the world of sport – any sport. For his contributions to the sport of skiing, he was elected to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame in 1969.

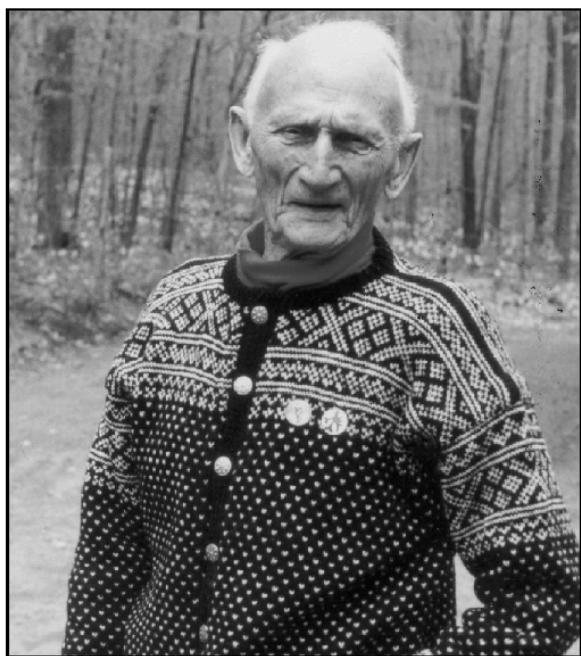


Photo by Allen Adler

Jack Rabbit at 104 years of age.