



MAILMAN ON SKIS

by Louise Cheney

OFTEN in the dead of a blizzard-gripped winter night, a strange and eerie sight appeared in the white desolation of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. A tiny ochre circle of light bounced like a displaced star frenziedly dancing amid the snowy peaks. No weird apparition or ghostly manifestation, the infinitesimal glow emanated from a lantern carried by a big Norwegian.

The big Norwegian was John A. Thompson, better known as Snowshoe Thompson, who for twenty winters, from 1856 to 1876, carried the mails over the high Sierra to the mining camps of Nevada and California. Seldom was he late and never did he allow the weather to deter him from starting on schedule. There was no regular path over

the vast trackless region, spectacular in its utter isolation but by observing trees and stones by day and using the stars by night, he arrived at his destination. It was his boast that he couldn't be lost and he never was. "I can find my way through the mountains any time," he would explain pointing to his forehead, "there is something up here that guides me."

John A. Thompson was born at Upper Tins, Prestijeld, Norway, April 30, 1827. When he was ten his parents moved to the United States and first lived in Illinois, then in Missouri. In 1841 the Thompsons moved to Iowa, remaining there until 1845 when they returned to Illinois. Three years after the great gold strike in California, John, then 24, decided to try his luck in the

Golconda of the Pacific. He made his way overland to old Hangtown (now Placerville), California, and there—at several “diggins”—searched for gold. No sensational strike resulted from his efforts. Soon he tired of mining and pushed on to Putah Creek in the Sacramento Valley where he set up as a rancher and also went in to the business of supplying the miners.

As he worked in the valley, nostalgia assailed him when he saw the sentinel peaks of pristine whiteness shining to the east. He remembered his native Norway with its vast snow-carpeted plateaus, sheer white-helmeted escarpments and slim firs. Also cached firmly in his memory were scenes of himself as a boy, skiing skillfully over the crusted surfaces of the landscape.

WHEN the gaunt fingers of winter clasped the mountain passes in an unrelenting icy grip late in 1855, the settlements in Nevada and California were completely shut off from communication. John Thompson read of the difficulties encountered in transporting the mails across the mountains and realized what an insurmountable barrier the snow presented. Not even a pack train could make it through in the winter. As his eyes roved to the high peaks an idea suddenly crystalized into determination. He would make a pair of skis to carry him over the passes.

He set about the task and, though it had been years since he'd seen a pair of skis, he remembered all the details of pattern and structure. When they were finished, being of green wood, the skis were heavy and cumbersome. They were ten feet long by four and one half inches wide, designed after the fashion of sled runners. Later, when Thompson weighed them in Hangtown, they tipped the gold scales at 25 pounds! A single leather thong, hooked over his boot toes, held them to his feet.

Once the skis were constructed, John hastened to give them a workout.

Thompson tried out his skis in secret and after several days practice handled himself so expertly that he ventured to appear in public. The inhabitants of Hangtown were amazed to see the big Norwegian, who might have served as a prototype for the Vikings of old, dash down the mountain slopes at incredible speed. With careless ease he dipped, zoomed and glided effortlessly over the snow, his balance pole held horizontally before him. Friends begged him to stop, fearing that he would come to serious if not fatal injury against a tree or jutting stone but the man only laughed and raced faster and jumped higher.

Now sure of himself on his skis, Snowshoe applied for the job of mountain mail carrier. He was immediately appointed. His maiden

trip, undertaken in January 1856, was from Hangtown to the Mormon Station, Utah Territory, a distance of 90 miles. With the heavy mail bags strapped to his back, he skimmed easily across the vast expanse of untouched snow which, in some places, was as deep as fifty feet.

To reach Mormon Station he had to cross mountain passes above 7,000 feet. Three days after his departure from Hangtown, settlers in Carson Valley saw a tiny moving dot in the loneliness of the white landscape toward the mountains. They watched it hurtle forward with incredible speed, fly across the snow and come to a sudden halt before the Mormon Station Post Office, huge puffs of snow exploding from the strange contraptions on his feet. As he unfastened his pack and delivered the first mail to be carried on foot over the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the winter months, a mighty cheer went up from the crowd. So, John A. Thompson became Snowshoe Thompson, the famed mailman of the Sierra, and a legend was born—the legend of a man, fearless and unconquerable, who defied and crumbled the snow barriers of those mountains.

AND THUS for twenty winters the tiny light so like a displaced star jogged wildly in various parts of the Sierra. Snowshoe's loads varied from sixty to as high as a hundred pounds. He never burdened

himself with a gun, overcoat or blanket. For food he carried small portions of jerked beef, or sausage and a few biscuits or crackers—his drinking water was melted snow. When in need of rest, he built a fire upon a tree stump and made a bed of fir boughs. There he slept, his feet to the fire, the mail bag pillowing his head.

With a full moon to light his way he often traveled all night. If a sudden blizzard formed an impenetrable curtain before him, he would make his way to the nearest boulder, swept clean by the fierce wind. There with his lighted lantern swinging from his neck by a leather thong, he would jog up and down to keep from freezing, until a gray winter dawn defined the way.

Many stories are still told of the huge Viking-like man's prowess and many amusing incidents resulted from his mountain mail run.

When cliffs or ledges jutted across his path he jumped them without hesitation. Once at Silver Mountain he ascended a hill, then plummeted down the steep slope, leaping again and again high in the air over a series of inclines, making six or seven jumps of at least sixty feet in height.

Even after the advent of the Pacific Railroad, Snowshoe remained a necessity as a postman between the mining camps for he was still the most dependable means of communication.

SNOWSHOE was an integral part of the history of the western frontier. It was in his pack that paper for such pioneer journals as the Territorial Enterprise came across the mountains, its timely arrival often enabling the publications to meet their deadlines. And it was Snowshoe who carried the assay that showed \$2,200 per ton from the region later to be known as Gold Hill, Nevada. He witnessed the discovery of the fabulous band of rich silver curling around Sun Mountain, saw it become a fountainhead which spouted a rushing, gargantuan flood of precious ore. He watched people from every direction and by every known conveyance of the times, sweep forward like a flash flood to converge on the Comstock Lode. He saw a small settlement in the sage brush, as if by magic, become the famous Virginia City, the desert metropolis of the nineteenth century. William Wright, compeer of Mark Twain and famous Territorial Enterprise editor, who wrote under the pen name of Dan De Quille, became a fast friend of the Sierra postman and later wrote his biography in the Overland Monthly. Although no part of the Comstock find came Snowshoe's way, there is a story to the effect that he did come upon riches in the mountains. It is said that often he brought back rocks, generously flaked with gold, from his mountain crossings. He once said that

the outcroppings of his mine were visible from his bedroom window in his home in Diamond Valley where he had moved soon after undertaking the mail route. He promised his wife that he would work his mine when his work as postman was done. After his death a thorough search of the vicinity near his home and around Horse-shoe Canyon and Hawkins Peak was made by friends and prospectors but no trace of the mine ever came to light. As Snowshoe was as honest as he was daring and as dependable as he was fearless, there was no doubt that there was a mine but it has never been found.

One of the most spectacular feats ever accredited to Snowshoe was the rescue of a traveler in the region. In 1857, while literally on a postman's holiday, he was skiing with two friends. At Lake Valley they found an unconscious man in a deserted cabin. Later they learned that he had been without heat and food for twelve days. Already his feet were severely frozen. Thompson left his friends to tend the sick man and set off at breath-taking speed for Carson Valley. He arrived on Christmas morning and sent a volunteer squad of five men to pick up the unconscious man. They made their way through a snow storm and finally reached the patient, loaded him on a sled and carried him across the Divide to Genoa. When a doctor examined the man, he announced that if the

patient were to survive both legs would have to be amputated. It was then discovered that there was no chloroform nearer than California! Snowshoe raced again on his skis, this time across the mountain passes for the anesthetic. In a week's time he made it to California and back to Genoa.

Snowshoe's job as mail carrier was never lucrative and, when he had no contract, he received no pay for two years. His friend Dan De Quille urged him to go to Washington to press his claim for pay. Thompson's trip to the Capitol was futile but exciting for the mail man and all who traveled with him. He boarded the Overland Limited at Reno and went as far as Wyoming when snow drifts halted the train. Snowshoe decided that idly sitting in a railway car was not for him and set out on foot through the drifts. The temperature hung at 30 below and a gale was whip-

ping the snow, but the mail man of the Sierras made it into Laramie, 35 miles away. There he found all railroad traffic tied up due to the weather and set out on foot again. In two days he reached Cheyenne, 55 miles distant, where he caught an east-bound train. Of this feat the Associated Press said that he was the first man to beat the "Iron Horse" on so long a stretch in ordinary shoes.

THE FAMOUS mailman died at the age of 49. He is buried in a little cemetery in Genoa, Nevada. And on the slope of a high mountain in the Sierra that he loved, stands a living monument to Snowshoe, a Giant Juniper tree, called the Snowshoe Thompson Tree, in honor of the man, who, out of a desire to serve his fellow man, traced his name across the face of the western frontier, with a pair of home-made skis.

A Long Journey

While visiting New Zealand on a lecture tour, in the late nineties, Mark Twain found that the trains were exceedingly slow. One day he was caught on a train that seemed unusually deliberate and creeping—even for New Zealand. When the conductor finally came around, Mark promptly handed him half a ticket which was customarily used for juvenile passengers. The official looked hard at the white-haired, bushy-moustached humorist and demanded, somewhat sarcastically, "Are you a child?"

"No, not any more," returned Mark nonchalantly, "but I was *when I got on your darn train!*"

—CYRIL CLEMENS

No Compromise with Communism

BY J. ADDINGTON WAGNER

SINCE the beginning of time man has desired and struggled to obtain greater opportunities for himself and his children. This desire grew from the knowledge gained through suffering the outrages of despotism. It grew from a belief in things that were good in themselves, because God had provided man with a faith to feel that which he could not touch and to accept that which he could not understand.

It was this faith that powered America's first crusade for freedom. Against the might of the greatest state on earth, a handful of men pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. The odds against them were ridiculously high. The Colonial cobbler at Concord in 1776 had no more right or reason to anticipate independence and freedom than has the peasant in Soviet Russia today. But the cobbler followed men who dared the impossible, and their faith carried them—and him—through.

These men expressed their faith in their independence when they said: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men." And in Articles IX and X of the Bill of Rights, we find an 'alerting' reminder:

(IX) "The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

(X) "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

We, the people, have reserved unto ourselves the greatest right of all—the freedom to preserve or destroy our way of life and our great American traditions.