



*Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen began skiing 102 years ago—and he's still going strong.*

Here he is, sitting by his blazing fireplace, the man many credit with bringing skiing as a sport to the North American continent. He looks the part of skiing's great grandfather, all right, spare and hardy, his blue eyes bright as a clear winter sky, his thin hair snowy, his seamed cheeks ruddy in the firelight. He lights his pipe and gestures briskly. "I can't take credit for being the first man to bring skis to America. I'm not even the first Norwegian! Good God, man, Snowshoe Thompson came here from Norway on a sailing ship in 1837! He was using skis to bring the mail across the Rockies in 1856! I never even got here until 1899! I was one of the fellows who introduced skiing for fun, no doubt. But I can't take credit for the whole business."

He pauses, puffs out pipe smoke, squints at the fire, then says sharply, "I don't know as I'd want to take credit for all of what's happened anyway! Skiing's gotten to be a money-making racket. Nothing but high-priced equipment, pretty clothes, lazy people. No one ever climbs a hill on skis anymore. They ride up. Same with cross-country skiing. These little bitty narrow skis, why you can't ski anywhere unless someone's already made a trail for you! Nobody knows how to bushwhack anymore!"

He is nicknamed "Jackrabbit," and his moves and gestures have a kind of stringy-tough, rabbit energy. Yet this old man is older than many of the world's monuments—older than the Lincoln Memorial, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower. He is older than the telephone, the phonograph,



*Jackrabbit in 1919 with his wife Alice, his son Bob, and daughters Alice and Peggy.*

the linotype. He is two or three times older than many of the trees he skis through in the woods behind his house. He is older than the steam turbine, the modern bicycle and Edison's electric light. Herman (Jackrabbit) Smith-Johannsen, born in Norway, a naturalized Canadian citizen and now resident of the Laurentian mountain hamlet of Piedmont in Quebec, turned 104 last June 15. Whatever his claim to skiing fame, this in itself makes him a phenomenon.

According to Statistics Canada, the current life expectancy for Canadian males is 70.19 years and the probability of someone living to 104 is .00013%. If you consider that Canadians live longer than the vast majority of the world's population, it becomes obvious that Smith-Johannsen has survived to an age that very few mortals will achieve. And, given his vigor at 104, he is realistically within reach of the all-time authenticated record—113 years, 214 days—set by Delina Ecker Filkins of Herkimer County, N.Y., who died in 1928. Whether he breaks this record or not, he must surely be the world's oldest athlete. For he does still practice his sport.

At his small house in the Quebec woods, a pair of ski poles sits outside the front door—another pair waits out back, as if ready to go when Smith-Johannsen feels the urge. He admits that he feels it less often now, but when he does, the old man puts down his pipe, rises with no trouble from his chair and moves with a kind of slow-motion lope from the fireplace. He dons a parka, grabs his skis and steps out into the snow. Bending with a certain stiffness, he clamps *continued*

## THE OLD MAN AND THE SKI

by WILLIAM OSCAR JOHNSON

on his ski bindings, wraps the pole straps around his bony wrists, then glides toward the woods with a long and pretty skiing stride that reveals only a touch of rust in its fluidity.

Jackrabbit might ski a mile but probably not that far, for his stability is failing just a bit. He speaks in a strong, high voice that still rings with some of the bombast and confidence of the traveling salesman he once was. "Skiing is safer than walking for me," he says. "But I am scared sometimes, I have to admit that. I fall more than I used to, and now, when I fall, I almost always break something."

As Jackrabbit recalls it, he began skiing 102 years ago this winter. "I was two and I remember it well. I had skis strapped on my feet, but they weren't real skis, they were barrel staves. And I tried to walk on them but of course I fell in the snow. Then, I got up by myself and tried again. Getting up by myself was the big lesson that day."

This first glimmer of a memory comes from the woods of Norway north of Oslo where he was born in 1875, the son of a *kommandør-kaptein* in the Norwegian navy named Fritz Anton Moritz Smith-Johannsen. The little boy, Herman, was the first of nine Smith-Johannsen children. Two others are still alive, one 89, the other 92. The good

*kommandør-kaptein* died of an accident in his seventies; his wife lived till 85. Plainly, there are genes at work here that make Jackrabbit's presence among the living something more than a miracle. Yet he himself likes to credit a lion's share of his longevity to the rugged games of barrel-stave skiing and bushwhacking that the Smith-Johannsens enjoyed in rural Norway.

He stabs an elbow in his visitor's side and chuckles. "My opinion is that people don't get enough of the wilderness when they are young. I had a great advantage living in the Norwegian bush. I don't mean to minimize the value of modern sports—football and baseball and hockey. They are fine to keep young fellows in shape who can't get into the bush. But when these fellows get to be 30 or 40 years old, they can't attend to those sports. So they quit and grow big pot bellies and move to Florida where it is warm and where they become no good to the rest of the world at all. If they had had a childhood in the snowy woods, if they had had the good fortune to grow up as I did, they would also know a way that might let them carry on until they are 100."

When Smith-Johannsen unreels this type of preaching/opinion, he manages to speak with humor *continued*



There was only a touch of rust in Jackrabbit's stride as he glided through the snow back in 1975.

and enthusiasm, emphasizing points with knobby-fisted punches against his listener's shoulder. He laughs easily and smiles often, showing teeth that are his own. Thus, though he is plainly an evangelist when it comes to the life of the outdoors, he does not come on with the air of sanctimonious self-congratulation that many clean-living advocates display.

This lack of self-aggrandizement is impressive, for over the years Jackrabbit has been lionized—almost deified—as the Moses-Methuselah of winter sports. And, in truth, he deserves most of these laurels, for few did as much to propagate skiing in the first 30 years of the 20th century as Jackrabbit Smith-Johannsen. Around 1900 he introduced skis to the Cree Indians in northern Canada; a few years later he amazed people in the Midwest with the wonders of using two wooden slats on snow; in 1928 he laid out the first downhill slalom course in Canada.

In the early 1930s, he laid out the famed 90-mile Maple Leaf Trail for cross-country skiing in the Laurentians. He set up the network of trails on Mont Tremblant, one of the continent's oldest and most distinguished ski areas. He also laid out early trails at Stowe, Vt., and when designs for ski trails on Whiteface Mountain near Lake Placid were disclosed in the mid-forties, Jackrabbit was called in to "put them right."

"The fellows laying out the mountain were ski instructors," he says. "What did they know? I had climbed that mountain, straight up on skis, dozens of times, hundreds of times. I knew Whiteface and I got those fellows up at the 4,000-foot level and I told them, 'Here's where trails ought to be.' They didn't know the lay of the land, but I got them headed right." For the 1980 Olympics, Jackrabbit's headings on Whiteface have been transformed into some of the premier Alpine race courses in the world.

But most of this didn't occur until well along into the second 50 years of Smith-Johannsen's life. His other career began when he left home. "No Norwegian leaves Norway because he doesn't like Norway," Jackrabbit says. "He leaves because he has a desire to see the rest of the world. I had graduated from a military academy in Oslo in 1894, then I went to the best engineering school in Europe—the University of Berlin. There I met the head man of a heavy-machinery company in Cleveland, Ohio. He offered me a job and I went to America—always planning, of course, to go home and live in Norway someday."

He never did. In the U.S. he became, of all things, a crackerjack salesman of heavy machinery. Yes, this symbol of the simple life and wilderness purity was once a hustling, ambitious member of the business community—and not just the branch of commerce that dealt with commodities or retail trade, but that environment-busting area which existed for the purpose of changing the face of the nation, of laying railroad tracks across the wilderness, of leveling vast tracts of trees, of damming ancient rivers for electric power.

Jackrabbit grins wryly as he recalls his former ways. "When I got to the United States in 1899, American technology was in its most ruthless days," he says. "We thought we could run the railroad through anywhere we wanted and if it ruined the land, we thought it didn't matter; the land would take care of itself. We dug nickel mines that left sulfur all around and ruined the country. We cut down the trees without noticing the wasteland we left behind. In-



In 1956 Alice caught up with Jackrabbit on a ski trail.

dustry developed this country, no question about that. But business did anything, just so it could make money. I did, too. I wanted to get orders, to *sell*. There was no thought to what we were ruining, no thought about what we were leaving for future generations."

He worked for the Cleveland firm for eight years. It was during this time that, while skiing through a local park, he met Alice Robinson. They were married in 1907, the same year that Jackrabbit decided to go into business for himself. From the start, Jackrabbit created an unusual partnership between heavy-machinery salesmanship and his own sense of adventure. "I am a man who must see the other side of everything," he says, "of mountains, of oceans, of *life*! So I decided to combine my desire for excitement with my desire to make sales. I asked for the hardest territory to do my selling. In this way, I not only got myself into places full of adventure, but I also was in territories where there wasn't so much sales competition."

He traveled to some grim places, including New Orleans and Panama during yellow-fever epidemics. He *continued*

lived in Cuba for four years—suffering “horribly” because he could not ski. He knows eight languages—Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, English, German, Spanish, French and Cree. In any one of them Smith-Johannsen was a heck of a salesman. He recalls one visit he made to a sugar-cane plantation in the West Indies. “I had been there the year before and sold the owner a hoisting machine. He said he was eager to buy another one and I asked him, ‘What did you do with the one I sold you last year?’ The man waved his arm toward a field and there was the machine I’d sold him—still in its box. He never even unpacked it. I said, ‘Why do you want another one? You haven’t even opened it up yet.’ He said, ‘You are a good fellow, Herman, and I always like to give an order to a good fellow who talks as well as you do.’”

At one point, Jackrabbit sold machinery in the north woods—the epitome of high adventure and low competition. He would head into the Canadian bush with a dog pulling his supplies on a sled while he charged along on skis. “I lived in the bush for weeks at a time then,” he says. “I loved the combination of making money and enjoying adventure at the same time. I couldn’t believe my good luck. I



At 86, Jackrabbit was still paddling his own canoe on a camping trip.

had the woods practically to myself. Nobody wanted to go to Canada. Americans had funny ideas about Canada. They thought it was full of bears walking in the streets.”

It was during these halcyon days that he became involved with the Cree. The Canadian railroad was pushing farther toward the Arctic, up toward North Bay and the coal and silver mines. “When I first got up into that country, the Indians were using snowshoes, while I had skis. They had never seen such crazy things. I would travel with the trappers over the traplines. I tried to convince the trappers that it was better to travel quicker between the traps on skis. Finally a few of them tried it. Twenty years later I went back and they were all on skis.”

Jackrabbit learned to speak Cree and became a convert to the Indian cause. “When I first started selling, I was told the Indians were scum, that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. That was what many people believed in those days. I suppose I believed it, too, until I got to know the Indians. Then I became a believer exactly the other way. No one has been as badly treated as the Indians. No one!”

The nickname “Jackrabbit” was first given to him by

friends with whom he played long, wild games of hare and hound on skis. After he played the hare a few times with the Cree, they were so impressed that they promoted him to *Okamacum-Wapoos*—“Chief Jackrabbit.”

Chief Jackrabbit was a heavy-machinery salesman first and a fun-loving skier second—until 1930. That year he went broke. At the relatively ripe age of 55, Herman Smith-Johannsen went through a reincarnation. “It was a fine experience to make a lot of money,” he says. “Then I lost it all and that was a fine experience, too. I ended up making something more than I had ever had before. What could I do? I had to feed my family. I had to live off the land. I hunted and fished for food. There was always a deer or a moose hanging in the woodshed.”

These were the years when he was creating his celebrated cross-country ski trails in Quebec. “I would hack out the trails, then haul the wood home for the stove. I was succeeding in spite of my business failure. I got so I *liked* the Depression—it gave me a wonderful new style of life!”

As time passed he became a revered character—more revered in almost geometric progression to the amount of time that passed. Thirty years ago he was perceived to be a geriatric skiing marvel, an old man still quite able to zip through the woods on two long slats. He steadily progressed from being the Old Man of Skiing to being the Old, Older, *Oldest* Man of Skiing. To his credit, Jackrabbit has not taken it all that seriously. While in his 70s and 80s, he would once a year attend a banquet and prove his agility by standing on his head or walking on his hands. He thought all the fuss about his age was silly, and he once confided to his old friend and physician, Dr. Gordon Cassidy, “Why do they make such a thing over me? They think I’m some kind of superman, but you know I’m not and I know I’m not. I can ski 20 miles a day all right, I can still do that. But, doctor, I am *completely* tired out when it is over.”

That was in his late 80s. He is completely tired after a mile or so nowadays. “My legs are going and my eyesight is going and my hearing is going,” says Jackrabbit. “But I still don’t feel old. Not *old*. That’s my trouble. I still feel like a young man, but I can’t do what a young man does.”

Yet he does what very few old men can do. But how? As he skis through the woods, Jackrabbit is asked (it cannot be avoided) his secret for reaching such a vigorous old age.

Is it religion? “I’ve never overdone the church thing. The best church is as far from civilization as you can get.”

Is it nutrition? “I doubt it. I cook for myself. I make stew. Either carrots and potatoes and meat, or meat and carrots and potatoes, or potatoes and meat and carrots—depending on which I’ve got most of.”

Is it abstinence? “No! The trouble with most people is they either drink way too much or they don’t drink anything at all. These are both extremes which I don’t hold with. I drink vodka, Scotch, beer and wine.”

He skis off with a swiftness that is alarming in a man so old. Perhaps these silly questions have irritated him. But then he slows his stride, stops and turns back to say almost sheepishly, “I can’t tell you why I have lived to be so old. All I know is that I am grateful for it. I am a lucky man and, whatever the reason for it, I am very grateful to have had the life I’ve had.”

END