

ABORIGINAL TRANSPORTATION

THE SNOWSHOE

Snowshoes have been in existence since prehistoric times, with evidence dating back to 3,500 B.C. They were used extensively as a prime mode of winter transportation by natives throughout eastern Canada, including here in Northumberland County. Efficient snow travel was a necessity of life for hunting and gathering as well as for battle.

The earliest snowshoes are believed to have originated in what is now Central Asia more than 6,000 years ago. These forerunners of the snowshoe – “snowskis” – amounted to a slab of wood lashed to the bottom of each of the wearer’s feet. The tribes that migrated westward from Central Asia to present-day Northern Europe developed the Nordic ski, while the tribes that migrated eastward across the Bering Sea land bridge into North America, developed snowshoes.

Over time, a range of snowshoe design evolved to meet the environmental conditions and intended uses in the varied landscapes of North America. The available materials also impacted snowshoe design. White ash, prized for its strength and pliability, was the preferred framing material, but hickory, spruce, birch, elm and larch have also been used. Babiche – untanned caribou, moose, or deer-hide strips – was used for the lacing.

The four main traditional styles of snowshoe are: Huron, Alaskan, Ojibwa and Bear Paw. There are also a number of lesser known traditional styles, including Pickerel, Beaver Tail, Attikamek, Elbow and Green Mountain Bear Paw.

The task of making snowshoes was traditionally a job shared by men and women; men made the frames while women laced the deck area with babiche. Frames were formed by bending lengths of wood that had been split and cut to length from straight logs of the preferred wood at hand. Each snowshoe was made from a single length of wood, with the exception being Ojibwa-styled snowshoes, which used two lengths per snowshoe. The lengths were then steamed and bent into the appropriate shape using a form. Crossbars, usually two, were added and the tails pinned together.

Above compiled with reference to: www.snowshoemag.com



Indian Hunter on Snowshoes
1860, Cornelius Krieghoff



The Indian Trapper
Arthur Heming

After the snowshoes had dried and holes were drilled, the women would take over, weaving the babiche lacing that filled the frames. In some areas the lacing was so fine, with intricate designs woven into the deck, that they are considered pieces of art.

From the onset of European activities in this northern land, snowshoes were adopted by the settlers as well as the trappers and traders, for travel in winter. In summer, waterways and the trusty canoe served as the primary means of travel for the newcomers, before the building of roads that could link settlements.

“The white man always attempted to avoid the snow or skirt it, whereas the Indian always looked for the best way to walk on it and live in harmony with nature.”

An Indian saying that was transmitted from generation to generation!

FOUR TRADITIONAL STYLES OF SNOWSHOE



Huron

Alaskan

Ojibwa

Bear Paw

