



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation25

SNOWSHOE THOMPSON

Snowshoe Thompson

An immigrant from Telemark, Norway, stood reading an ad posted on a wall in a little town east of Sacramento on a winter day in 1855. The immigrant's name was Jon Tostensen, but at some point he had changed it to John Thompson. He came out west to California in the wake of the gold rush in the late 1840s and stayed. The ad he was studying announced that the government was looking for someone to carry the mail across the Sierras in the winter. John Thompson knew that crossing the mountains meant dealing with 90 miles of rough terrain, 6,000 feet of elevation and snowdrifts up to 40 feet in depth. The only way to succeed as far as he could see was to use skis like they did back in his native Telemark.

He applied for the job and got it. At that time, he was probably the only person in the area who had seen skis before. The sheriff who hired him for the job shook his head in disbelief when he first saw Thompson's skis. How could he climb mountains with planks attached to his feet? Neither he nor the rest of the town believed their own eyes when the planks carried Thompson across the Sierras and back in five days. The town was awed by his performance—and his “Norwegian Snowshoes”, as they called them—and “Snowshoe” was the name of honor that Thompson was known by from that day on.

His technique of getting the mail across the mountains continued as the method of mail delivery for almost a hundred years. For twenty of those years, Snowshoe Thompson himself was the mail carrier. Legend says that he made his own skis from raw lumber. They were said to be ten feet long and four inches wide, but the years and the tales have probably added on to their size. After all, legendary skis should be a little larger than life.

Snowshoe's contract with the government authorized him to collect \$1 per letter that he carried, but more often than not, recipients and senders of letters did not have the money or did not want to pay him. A paltry \$80.22 was all that he ever collected from the government, so his income was mostly based on the money he received for carrying ore samples to be assayed for individual miners. As a matter of fact, it was Snowshoe who brought out for assay the ore which started the Nevada silver and gold rush.

The California Historical Society has eyewitness accounts of people who lived up in the mountains and saw how meticulously Snowshoe planned his runs. He carefully made tracks wherever he could along the route to make it easy to ski. Frequent storms made it necessary to make new tracks over and over again, but he knew that those tracks were his only life insurance if a storm hit. Thanks to his security measures, he never got lost, but on a number of occasions he rescued prospectors who otherwise would have faced a grim death in the wilderness.

Visitors to Snowshoe Thompson territory will find a monument, commemorating the legendary mail carrier, placed in the heart of the mountains that he knew so well. An annual ski race is also named after him, and in Ishpeming, Michigan, his name is inducted into the National Ski Hall of Fame.

The next time you enjoy skiing down well-groomed slopes on fiber skis designed in accordance with the latest scientific research, save a thought for old Snowshoe, who conquered the Sierras on his home-made pine skis over a hundred years ago.