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## A Tribute to my Father's Skis

By Lillian Smith Sherrer

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Would anyone care to buy a pair of hand hewn skis for \$8.00?

Well, you have missed this deal by thirty or forty years. That was when my father made skis for we children and sold some, if desired for a girlfriend or a neighbour for their children at Christmas. There are two pairs known to still be in existence, which are reverently stored away – along with the memories of days gone by spent on the slopes.

When a pair of skis was needed, Dad would take off to the woods to cut a nice straight ash tree. He said ash, being larger grained, wouldn't stick to the snow. The timber was split with an axe and hewed to the desired thickness with a hatchet.

At this point, the skis seemed to take on the character of the person who would own them. My sister was tall and slim as a young person, so hers were long and narrow, with peaked tips. Brother Robert's were wider and thicker with more bluntness. You guessed it! He was short and stocky. My younger brother and I had skis of the same length and style, as we were near of an age and same build. Fred, my eldest brother, I don't recall as he was ten years ahead of me; however, each pair had a very personalized appearance.

After approximating the thickness and length needed, Dad now brought them into the large farm kitchen. Here, whenever there was spare time from the farm chores or if there was a stormy day, work was continued. First he used a draw shave and then completed them with a wood rasp and sandpaper. Evenings were spent in a like fashion when 'Fibber McGee and Molly' or other favourites were being broadcast on the radio.

The groove in the bottom of the skis was always straight and true, even though he did most of this with a hook made on the small end of his rasp. I can still picture him working at this, the neat groove with wood shavings all about!

The next important step was to soak the ends in warm water to make them supple. Of course, the most natural place being the reservoir of the wood stove. The skis always protruded well out into the middle of the room, but nevertheless, Dad generally left them there overnight.

Skis, as you know, have to turn up on one end. For this process, they were taken down cellar, where they were bent over a large block of wood, near the wood furnace, to dry and form.

Now that they looked like skis, there had to be a means of holding them on the feet. At first, he tried slots for the leather toe strap, but this made a weak spot in the ski. The next ones had toe straps screwed on with smaller adjustable straps through them. The rest of this harness was strips of inner tube. Dad said Model T inner tubes, being small, were the best to use. They were cut like jar rubbers and stretched over the boot, from heel to over the toe. There were never any broken bones as they always released the foot whenever anyone fell.

The most enjoyable part of this whole procedure for him, I believe, was his special finishing touches. The skis were carefully varnished – with clear finish to show a particularly nice grained wood, or, if more suitable, a rich dark stain. He hand painted delicate pictures on some of them. Flowers and animals seemed to be his favourite subjects. My first ones were decorated, as they were my Christmas gift.

When I was five years old, I got the chance to test my ability on these skis. Fred told my Mother that it was time I learned. He grasped my hand and set out across the white vastness in front of our house. From then on, I was addicted.

We skied to school most of the time in winter. It was a one room school house about three miles from home. When we went across it was closer. We zigzagged across our field, through the underbrush in the pasture, cautiously picking our spot to cross the brook and one to climb a high sandpit. Then it was downhill and along another field to school.

We didn't use ski poles for many years. When they were finally introduced to us by a school mate, we were all sure we would get stabbed or poked in the eye with the very sharp points on the ends. However, we soon could be traced along the trails as we proudly left our round disc prints in the snow.

If we decided we had time, we went to school by the road, which was rolled. In those days, as cars were not driven here in the winter, the roads were not plowed but rolled down to a hard surface. The roller, I remember, had huge wooden round wheel shapes with boards nailed to them to form a cylinder. This particular one having two cylinders, side by side, threaded together with a large iron pipe. There was a wooden seat attached to the platform, built over the top of the cylinders, leaving them free to turn. The drivers of the two teams of horses required to draw the roller, sat high upon the seat. They had to dress warmly as it was often severely cold.

Sometimes, if in a good mood, the drivers, who included my Dad and often, my older brother, would fasten a long rope to the roller and tow us children behind, on our skis. This was heaps of fun! Our skis made thump, thump sounds as the boards on the rollers

were not fitted tightly together, and left hard ridges in the snow each time around.

During the noon hour, as everybody came on skis, all of us hurried out onto the nearby hills. We sometimes built ski jumps. They were generally towards the bottom of the run. A hole was dug down into the snow, piling and packing as we went, to form a large hump. When we swept down the hill and onto it, we flew into the air, hopeful of landing on our feet again. My younger brother was the expert at this feat! I always attempted each jump even though I often landed hard on my backside.

These dare devil stunts occasionally were the cause of a broken ski. This never bothered us because Dad took the remaining one and made a scooter. A seat was nailed onto a piece of 2 x 4 or similar sized board and fastened about midway on the ski. To ride or scoot, you sat on the seat and balanced, raising your feet in the air. If lucky – you enjoyed a trip to the bottom of the slope!

To learn this skill, I arose early one frosty spring-like morning – the moon was still shining! While the men did the morning chores, I practised on the scooter. The path from the house to the barn was a bit icy and crusty, so the scooter went like wildfire!

We skied home from school only to go outside after supper to ski in the moonlight. I remember having a moonlight ski party. Our family joined the neighbourhood children and ventured to the highest hills around to ski and have fun. We kept warm as we had to climb back up the hills if we wanted another long, fast ride down again. This proved to be a no-expense party with plenty of fresh air and exercise as party tokens.

When we got older, my sister purchased a pair of factory made skis; however, they never measured up to Dad's hand hewn personalized skis we all grew up with and enjoyed.