

1960-1961

The Fred Gates Brandy Bottle Classic

Fred V. Gates, Sr., owned a marine business in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, but he didn't sell many boats when the snows hit and the lakes froze over. When he first heard about a thing called a "Sno-Traveler," he was intrigued with the idea of being able to sell an over-the-snow vehicle. It would be a good item to fill in the non-boating season.

He called Edgar and Allan Hetteen, he said, but couldn't get machines. The Hetteens suggested Fred call Tom Halvorson, the Bombardier equipment distributor in Duluth, Minnesota.

In the fall of 1960, three new Bombardier Ski-Doo snowmobiles arrived in Rhinelander and Fred Gates was in business.

"You couldn't give 'em away," he reflected. "Everyone laughed at me. They said I was nuts. I took machines around to ski slopes, giving people free rides. Finally, Alex Sharka, a guy in town here, bought one. Then I sold a couple more."

Herman Lassig was one of Gates' first customers.

"Fred came out and demonstrated one at my place," Lassig said. "I have this big bog. Fred drove the thing around, went over the bog, through the brush. I was impressed and I had a couple bucks I didn't know what to do with. . . ."

Fred Gates was one of the earliest snowmobile dealers in the United States. He was immediately captivated by the snowmobile, and felt it would soon revolutionize winter activities in the snowbound northern reaches of Wisconsin. But it wasn't as easy a beginning as he first guessed. People distrusted the boxy, noisy little mechanical creatures.

Fred did everything he could think of to show how well his Ski-Doos really worked. But believers were hard to find.

The Hodag Sportsman's Club had scheduled its annual ice fishing jamboree for January of 1961, and Fred got the idea that a race between the snowmobiles he'd sold—in front of that big crowd—might be a good way to demonstrate the machines. He contacted the Hodag Sportsman's Club, and called the guys who had purchased Ski-Doos.

When jamboree day arrived, there were five snowmobiles on Boom Lake near Rhinelander. The snowmobilers congregated and a few idle boasts were passed about. Before long, five Ski-Doos were in line close to shore.

At the starting line were Lionel Bellife, Ron Strum, Fred Gates, Mike Taylor and Herman Lassig. Lassig had a fast new nine-horsepower model—the most powerful Bombardier Ski-Doo available. One of the estimated 1,000 curiosity-seekers who had gathered to watch stepped forward, waved his arm and the five Ski-Doos roared off on a round-trip race around an island a half-mile away.

It wasn't close. Herman Lassig, 60 years old, ran away with a 15-length victory. He estimated he was doing close to 30 miles per hour across the lake. The crowd was yelling.

When Fred Gates, the instigator, got back to the informal finish line, he realized a prize of some sort was in order. He remembered he had an unopened bottle of Christian Brothers brandy in the glove compartment of his truck, which he awarded Herman as the winner.

Lassig smiled, pulled the cork, took the first sample and passed the bottle to his friendly competitors.

"I knew right then that there was something in snowmobile racing," said Fred Gates.

The first race in the United States on Boom Lake gave the spectators a good look at the snowmobile, Gates conceded, but it didn't help the machine's credibility much.

"People admitted the snowmobile worked pretty good on lake ice, but they were still convinced you could never take one out in the woods in deep snow."

There was very little additional snowmobile racing activity during the winter of 1960-61. The Polaris and Autoboggan people returned to The Pas for the fourth time. David Johnson won again.

Edgar Hetteen arrived in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, late in 1960 after a brief stay in Alaska. He had decided to establish a new snowmobile company, and he took his

ideas to the local bankers.

Edgar's personal assets included what he had received when he sold his share of Polaris to long-time friend Harry C. Paul of Winnipeg. Brother Allan had become Polaris' new president when Edgar left, and David Johnson was vice president. Edgar was about to become a competitor in the snowmobile business, but it was accepted and understood by his family in Roseau. There was no animosity among blood brothers; it was a matter of pride and principle between Edgar and his former hometown.

With a \$10,000 loan and new enthusiasm, Polar Manufacturing was born in January of 1961 in the basement of an old seed cleaning plant near the banks of Thief River. One of the first products Hetteen developed was called the "Bug-O-Vac," a black light insect trap, plus a steam cleaner. Hetteen had to generate products to create cash income quickly, if he ever hoped to start manufacturing snowmobiles.

He immediately began developing his first Polar snowmobile, however. It was smaller and lighter than the Sno-Travelers, and included such other features as side by side seating for two, optional cab, optional electric start, three engine size options and reverse gear.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon in Spokane, Washington. Darrell Triber and Ted Otto were testing their racing motorcycles on the small track outside Triber's Cycle. A pickup truck was parked below a mound of dirt, and the bikers decided, just for kicks, to see how far they could jump their motorcycles over the truck. It was a fun time for the two thrill-seekers, who had already worked out a routine for crashing through fire walls at motorcycle races in the Pacific Northwest.

That Saturday afternoon, a bike racer from Montana, a friend of Triber's, walked into the shop looking for spare parts and a tuneup. He wasn't having much luck on the track. Robert Craig Knievel of Butte, Montana, wandered outside and watched the jumping exhibition with interest. The Triber's Cycle racing crew also had their collective showmanship gears in motion. Wouldn't it be neat to jump over some cars with a motorcycle, along with the fire wall crash? Add some new excitement to the races and make a few extra bucks?

Triber's Cycle racers went out and raced that Saturday night, and didn't think much more about the jumping idea until the next season, when a battered old semi arrived at a race. Its cargo included a heavy ramp, and painted on the side of the truck was the name, "Evel Knievel."



A race of a different sort, these Polaris Sno-Traveler drivers lined up on the Roseau River for the start of a fox hunt in 1961. Second from left is David Johnson, second from right is Allan Hetteen.

