

1958-1960

The very first race

The Pas, Manitoba, was a unique wintertime gathering place for large crowds to celebrate the bountiful harvest of fur pelts, and to frolic in the snow. There were dozens of contests and games, with sled dog racing one of the featured attractions.

It was a natural showplace for Polaris to demonstrate its Sno-Travelers, and for Harry Paul to attempt to sell his new Polaris-built Canadian-brand "Autoboggans." In February of 1958, a contingent of representatives from Polaris, Paul's Winnipeg distributorship and a shipment of snowmobiles arrived at The Pas.

They unloaded their machines once again on Grace Lake to show how well they would work compared to the sled dog teams. Driving around the lake, the natural urge to test one machine against another got the best of the snowmobilers. Racing for victory's sake wasn't the biggest concern at the moment, however. More important was drawing attention to the machines. . .and besides, there wasn't anything formal about it. So the first "snowmobile races" were rigged to make them look exciting.

"We tried to rig them a little bit so we had a zig-zag effect," David Johnson confessed. "One guy ahead, and then the other, and so on. At a terrific speed of about 20 miles per hour."

When the snowmobile enthusiasts left The Pas in 1958, however, plans were brewing in the back of their minds for something more organized. And more at stake than pride.

J. Armand Bombardier had tested a vehicle on a small lake near his home in Quebec late in 1957. His snow machine was a bathtub-shaped model with the engine mounted in front of the driver on top of the track tunnel. The vehicle had enclosed sides all the way around, almost up to his armpits as he sat inside.

It wasn't a satisfactory design. Before the winter of 1958 was over, Bombardier had redesigned the machine, removing the enclosed sides, and he liked the results. He named the new model "Ski-Dog," and made plans to start building the small one-passenger snow machine with front-mounted four-cycle Kohler engine

for the 1958-59 season. One last-minute change was its name. It was changed to "Ski-Doo" because the "G" in the original diamond-shaped logo was pinched and looked like an "O" on the original machine. People who saw the original logo misread it and called it "Ski-Doo," so J. Armand changed it.

It was the beginning of a new era in snow travel, a marked departure from Bombardier's previously developed line of heavy tracked snow vehicles and industrial products.

In the late 1950s, a Belmont, Michigan, man bought an old washing machine engine at an auction. He took it home and gave it to his son, who built a go-kart for his new motor.

Young Jim Adema wasn't happy, however. The go-kart was too slow. In just a few days, he had removed it and was in the workshop with a sander, trying to shave the cylinder head to make the engine faster.

Late in the winter of 1958, a seventh grader in Roseau, Minnesota, got on a Polaris Sno-Traveler for the first time. Unhappy that the machine would go only 12 miles per hour, Charles Lofton tightened the governor spring to boost the speed.

There were 10 or 12 Sno-Travelers at The Pas in February of 1959, the third expedition into northern Manitoba for the Polaris contingency. And there were plans for some genuine snowmobile contests.

A circular course was marked out with stakes in the snow on Grace Lake. The distance was about 400 yards. Three races were organized — a men's race, a race with children on the powered sleds with an adult, and a women's event (sometimes with a man aboard because the machines were too powerful for some of the ladies).

It was still informal, but it marked the start of organized snowmobile racing and David Johnson was the first "man to beat," said Harry Paul.

While David Johnson and Harry Paul were fast friends, there was another source of friendly rivalry besides racing. David Johnson had a bright, shiny red Sno-

Traveler with side skis and a platform on the back. He got to escort the queen in the parade. Paul was moderately jealous.

By the 1960 Trapper's Festival, cross-country had been added to the snowmobiling activities. Prizes were at stake, too. Local merchants in The Pas offered certificates for a jacket, a pair of mukluks, other goods. The racers wagered among themselves. Again, David Johnson was the big winner, according to Harry Paul.

"No one could beat him. In the cross-country, David would take off right through the small trees. Everyone else was afraid to try it, and went around them, so David always won."

With his earnings, Johnson bought steaks for his competitors and on Monday, he walked around The Pas, cashing in his merchandise certificates.

Snowmobile racing had begun. . . and 20 years later, it was still a part of the Trapper's Festival in The Pas.

In December of 1959, Tom Halvorson of Duluth, Minnesota, went skiing with his family at Indianhead Mountain near Bessemer, Michigan. On a trailer behind his car was a Bombardier snowmobile. The first curious vehicle had arrived in a crate—unrequested—with a shipment of Bombardier industrial equipment at Halvorson's distributorship.

Halvorson called Valcourt to find out what the machine was and why it had been sent. When he found out, he took it to the ski hill and showed it to a young man who operated a family ski business at Indianhead. Steve Ave realized immediately that this little 1959 Ski-Doo would be a great vehicle for the ski patrol to use. Ave Marine in nearby Hurley, Wisconsin, also owned by the family, took delivery of its first Ski-Doo in January of 1960 and sold it to Indianhead.

Between operating the ski business, giving ski lessons and doing some slalom racing of his own, Steve Ave found time to play with this new mechanical toy. He liked it.

Don Thompson was manager of a branch operation for Kiekhaefer Mercury when he first stumbled across a Polaris Sno-Traveler, and then a similar machine called the Trailmaker, built in Hibbing, Minnesota. A long-time boat racing enthusiast, Thompson figured if the machine was here to stay—which he felt it might be—then one day the snow vehicle builders would discover two-cycle engines were more suitable for the machines than the industrial-type four-cycle engines they were using. The snowmobile might become a great market for U.S. two-cycle engine manufacturers. He suggested Mercury take a look at this new machine.

Harry C. Paul had become as involved with the snowmobile as Edgar Hetteen, Allan Hetteen, David Johnson, J. Armand Bombardier and many others by the end of the 1950s. He stayed in close touch with his friends at Polaris. When he had an idea he thought would work he called immediately.

It was late one night after The Pas races when the telephone rang at David Johnson's home in Roseau. Johnson pulled himself out of bed, trudged down the steps and answered the call. It was 2 a.m.

"David, I want you to build me a machine that goes 100

miles per hour," Paul said.

David Johnson blinked the sleep from his eyes and the clouds from his head. "Harry, that's impossible. Have you ever seen films of the underside of an automobile moving at that speed? The distortion in the tires? You can never spin a track around a seven-inch sprocket at that speed. It isn't possible."

Harry Paul went back to bed, disappointed. He really thought the idea was a winner.

Word reached Cavalier, North Dakota, that a factory in Roseau, Minnesota, was hiring welders in 1960. The rumor was they'd pay \$1 an hour, plus time-and-a-half for anything over 40 hours a week. When the young farm boy realized he was only starting to work up a good sweat after 40 hours, Bob Eastman packed his bags and headed for Minnesota.

Snowmobile racing, from a practical viewpoint, still didn't exist outside the tiny pocket at The Pas. Elsewhere, the survival of the concept of over-the-snow travel was still the pressing issue.

Keeping the idea alive was the crisis on Edgar Hetteen's mind late in the 1950s. Everything he had was wrapped up in Polaris Industries, and he was gambling everything on the success of the Sno-Traveler. His ambitious pursuit in this wild-eyed business was met with more than silent bewilderment in the small, rural farming community of Roseau.

Edgar Hetteen wanted to build a factory in Roseau. He dared to do something different than had ever been done there. He was, in the eyes of many people in Roseau, an eccentric.

When Polaris Industries was founded with Edgar and Allan Hetteen, and David Johnson, as partners and owners of all the common stock, another \$40,000 worth of preferred stock was sold to members of the community, Hetteen said. Owners of these stocks had no voting power, but, he said, "You don't need that in a small town."

Stockholders felt if Polaris was to be a respectable business enterprise, then Edgar Hetteen, its president, should tend to his position with dignity and respect. Edgar felt the pressures but he felt more strongly that he had to get out into the world and make waves in order for his business to succeed. He worked in the shop. He stayed late at night, test-driving Sno-Travelers across the fields. He loaded machines into a truck and drove off to sell them. Stockholders frowned at these undignified activities, unbecoming of a company president.

But possibly Hetteen's most incredible—and most self-destructive—feat occurred in March of 1960 when Edgar organized the first trans-Alaska expedition ever undertaken by motorized transportation. He was determined to prove the snowmobile would work, and he was trying to open a new Alaskan market for his machines. Hetteen, with Rudy and Bessie Billberg and Erling Falk, traveled from Bethel on the Bering Sea 1,100 miles across the wilderness of Alaska in 20 days. It was an epic journey, a great advancement for the reputation of the snowmobile. . . but it wasn't well-received in Roseau.

"My customers weren't in Roseau," Edgar recalled. "They were anywhere in the free world I could find them, and they didn't seek me out. I had to seek them



From left, Erling Falk, Edgar Hetteen, Bessie and Rudy Billberg during their trans-Alaska expedition in March of 1960.

out. People didn't understand that, couldn't accept this jaunt across Alaska. They more or less told me to stay home now. My comment was when I'm domesticated to that degree, I'm no longer useful to Polaris, and you don't need me."

Feeling that Roseau didn't understand or appreciate what he was trying to do, Edgar decided to leave. He called an emergency board meeting in April of 1960, shortly after his return from Alaska, and announced he was resigning in June.

The world had heard about Edgar's trek across Alaska, however. Newspapers across North America published accounts of the amazing journey. It was one of the first times snowmobiles made big news, unlike the unpublicized festivities at The Pas. Polaris was becoming known; Roseau was more to the outside world than a small farming community in northern Minnesota. Edgar Hetteen's crazy antics began to take on new meaning.

His mind was closed, however. Following his April ultimatum, Edgar went to Minneapolis on a mission to prove to his community that Polaris was of value. There appeared to be a fear among stockholders, he had noted, that his snowmobile fantasies would go down the financial drain and take their investments along.

Edgar proposed the sale of Polaris Industries to three different firms on his Minneapolis mission. He returned for his final board meeting with documentation—firm, cash offers to buy Polaris.

Edgar was angry. He was bitter and hurt because his

own people didn't believe in what he was doing. He felt rejected by the community; almost forced to leave.

"All of a sudden," he said, "the efforts I put into research and development had a dollar value. They didn't want to sell the company then. Well, my position hadn't changed. I was through. I was tired of fighting finances, the community and trying to develop a market. So I left and went back to Alaska."

Alaska wasn't the answer, either, and Edgar Hetteen's belief in the snowmobile didn't burn itself out. He returned to Minnesota, but he decided to take up residence in Thief River Falls, 65 miles southwest of Roseau. He began negotiating financing to launch a new company. Polar Manufacturing.

"Thief River Falls was a whole new world," he said. "I wasn't the local boy everyone grew up with. Thief River's financial attitude was completely different. When you talked about thousands of dollars, it didn't shake anyone. It was possible to do things I never could have done in Roseau.

"People were beginning to say, however, that I'd left a sinking ship. . . that I bailed out at Polaris. In reality, I left them a lot.

"There would be no Polaris and no Arctic today had I listened to the philosophy of the community. They, in theory, didn't mind shooting for the moon but they wanted to do it with a slingshot. When I got to Thief River, I was an outsider. And as you know, an expert is someone from out of town."



Starting lineup for the "Fred Gates Brandy Bottle Classic" on Boom Lake near Rhinelander, Wisconsin, in 1961. Winner Herman Lassig is in the center; Fred Gates is at the right and below, seated on the first Ski-Doo he ever sold.

