

## 1961-1962

# The start of something different

The all-new line of snowmobiles for model year 1962 was introduced quietly. There was no trade show. There were no snowmobile magazines. There wasn't much room to talk about or show a new snowmobile in a one-inch advertisement in *Outdoor Life*.

The new Bombardier looked very much like the 1961 Bombardier. The new Polaris Sno-Travelers looked like the ones before. The newest entry on the market, the Polar snowmobile, didn't change the shape of things, either.

It was still an industry operating under the "show and tell" sales principle: load a machine on a truck, drive around the countryside and try to sell it.

Fred V. Gates, in Rhinelander, had his dealership well-established but customers were still few. He dreamed up plans for a second snowmobile race, bigger and better than the one on Boom Lake in 1961. He planned to mark out a nice course to the island, maybe route the sleds over and around the golf course. He took his grandiose scheme to fellow businessmen in Rhinelander. Eyebrows were raised slightly every time Fred talked about snowmobiles and races. Was he getting just a little bit crazier every year? Fred's idea for another race died for lack of a second.

Sparky Myers owned a tavern in Neenah, Wisconsin, when he first saw a snowmobile. He decided to try selling them as a sideline. He was one of Polaris' first full-fledged dealers. Optimist that he was, Sparky soon went into the business in a big way.

When his old friend Edgar Hetteen founded Polar Manufacturing, Sparky also took on Edgar's machines and became the first dealer in North America handling two brands.

At one point early in his snowmobile sales career, Sparky Myers had a grand total of 10 snowmobiles in his possession. And like almost everyone else in the snowmobile business, he was branded a lunatic. He was having a very difficult time finding cash customers.

Sparky put in long, tiresome days and weeks and months. He'd tend bar at night, load two snowmobiles on a trailer early the next morning and drive north

looking for buyers. For weeks he returned home in the evening with the same two machines on the trailer.

When things are in a rut, successful salesmen change their approach, so one day Sparky returned home with an empty trailer. The next morning, he loaded two more machines on the trailer and returned home empty-handed again. The routine continued until all 10 machines had disappeared.

"Some of the fellows who stopped by the tavern regularly started to ask about the machines," Myers recalled. "I said I was busy selling every day and let it go at that. They assumed the machines were being sold, because I left with machines every day and they were disappearing.

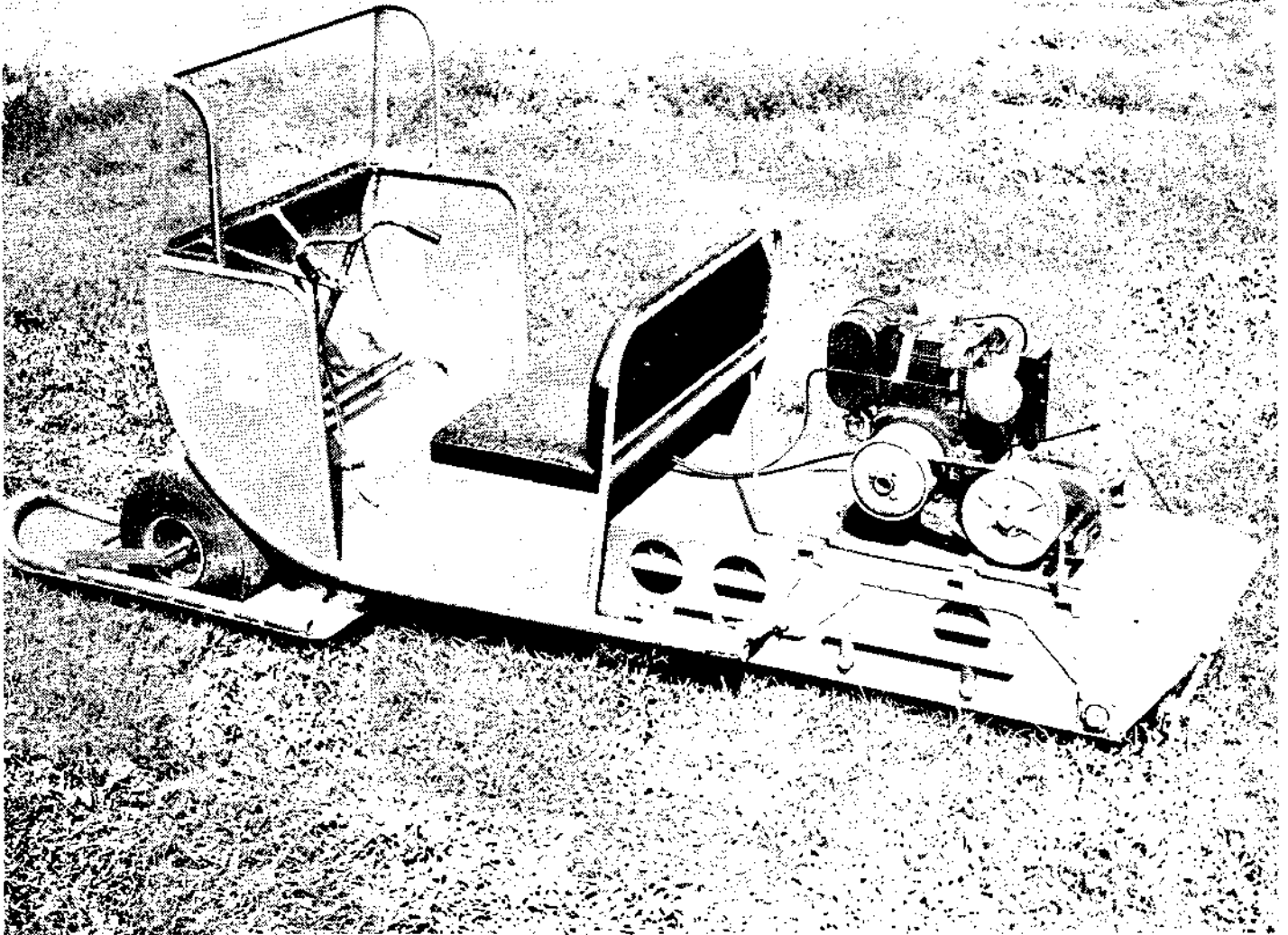
"People started thinking about it. They started to figure if they wanted one; they'd better get on the ball and order one quick, before they were all gone.

"Actually, I had been dropping the machines off and storing them in an old barn. So then, over the weekend, I would go to the barn, load on a couple of machines and show up at the tavern with them early Monday morning. People assumed I had just received a brand new shipment from the factory. They were really getting interested when they figured I was selling them that fast."

Bombardier, Ltd., was trying as hard as anyone else to get snowmobiling underway. In December of 1961, the company helped organize Montreal's first race on the river, in front of the Commodore Yacht Club on the island of Montreal.

It was a fun race, with 40 to 45 machines—all Ski-Doos and it included at least two woman competitors. The rally was simply a drive down river, and over the snow-covered banks along the way. Sleds were parked in a line, stopped, and the contestants ran to them, fired them up and away they went, bouncing along at 10 to 12 miles per hour. It isn't known who won.

Mike Bosak had continued building his "power toboggans" near Beausejour, Manitoba, during the 11 years since his first machine had been manufactured. Mike was offered a chance to go into large-scale pro-



*Polar Manufacturing's first model in the spring of 1961.*

duction but declined, favoring his personal touch and building the kind of machines he wanted to build in limited quantities.

The Beausejour Lions Club was planning its annual winter "blow-out," a special end-of-February festival to revive spirits after the long, cold season. One of the Lions suggested it would be fun to match a Bosak power toboggan against some of the other new machines in a race during the 1962 festival. The idea of having a power toboggan race to stimulate attendance was warmly accepted, and rapid organization was started. The power toboggan event was given high billing, right behind the horse-and-cutter races.

The first track was laid out on the school grounds at Beausejour. Hay bales were placed in a rough semi-circle. Six daring drivers raced their power toboggans around the course at an estimated speed of 15 miles per hour. The cheering crowd loved it. As soon as the race was over, eager spectators had a chance to ride these mechanical marvels by themselves, and the power toboggans raced around the school yard the rest of the day.

The Beausejour Lions Club got the message. At the next planning meeting, the annual February event was officially named "Winter Farewell," and the club made formal plans for another snowmobile race. They officially named it the "Canadian Power Toboggan Championships" and formally registered the new title as the main event for future "Winter Farewell" festivals.

David Johnson and Harry Paul discovered a new racing site in March of 1962, following their fifth annual trek to The Pas, Lac LaRonge, Saskatchewan, was the target.

The early LaRonge races were crude. There were two events—10 laps around the five-mile perimeter of a lake, and a cross-country event. The LaRonge cross-country was especially interesting, Johnson recalled, because it challenged the Sno-Travelers over two miles of deep, untracked snow.

"You could just see the tips of the evergreen trees," he said. "We had to line up on one grade and race to another grade, and then back. And you could not follow anyone's trail. You had to break trail both ways. It showed people who would use the machine how well it

would perform. The snowmobile could easily out-pull a dog team over or through these conditions."

The speed of the snowmobile was picking up, year by year. The four-cycle engine was still the master. . .but speeds were starting to gain. There were ways to measure progress, David Johnson said.

"My boys and Allan Hetteen's boys, when the machines got fast enough, could catch a jackrabbit. They'd catch a rabbit and paint a little red dot on it, and let it go. The second time they caught it, they'd paint a blue dot on it. That way they could tell how many times they caught the same rabbit."

The pioneer builders in the snowmobile industry had established the workhorse abilities of the machine by the winter of 1961-62. The influence of J. Armand Bombardier's little 500-pound Ski-Doo had left another impression.

Bombardier continued looking for ways to make his little Ski-Doo even lighter, more maneuverable and more reliable. He made a major breakthrough in late

1962 in Montreal, where he discovered a small two-cycle engine which was being used by a company that built pumps for fire fighting equipment. The engine was manufactured by an Austrian firm, Rotax-Werke, a company which was also creating engines for a European motorcycle manufacturer.

Bombardier liked the engine immediately. He placed an order for 500 of the little power plants and secured the first exclusive rights to an engine brand in the industry.

An order of such high volume was an indication of Bombardier's optimistic outlook. More and more people were buying his Ski-Doos. Small pockets of owners were developing across North America. No other company had yet produced a machine similar to his little front-engine Ski-Doo. Bombardier, Ltd., had a firm toehold in the young industry and he was expanding as quickly as possible. Bombardier could see strong growth ahead. His machine was not only dependable, but the owners were having fun. The Ski-Doo was proving that a snowmobile was good for more than work and transportation.



*Rolba snowmobiles built by Ski-Doo for its Switzerland distributor, Rolba Company, in December of 1961.*



*Roaring around the school yard during the 1963 Canadian Power Toboggan Championships in Beausejour, Manitoba.*