

Norway's Snowshoe Festival returns

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By Nicole Carter

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NORWAY — Back in the day Norway was known as the snowshoe capital of the world, a self-proclaimed title it held for more than 100 years.

Eventually modern design and mass manufacturing took the cottage industry away but the community continues its celebration of the snowshoe on Feb. 19 during its annual one-day festival, the kick-off for Norway's week-long Winter Carnival.

"This is the 11th annual festival," said Western Maine Foothills Land Trust Executive Director Lee Dassler, noting that last year's event was lost to the pandemic. "It started because Norway was the snowshoe capital for the bulk of the 20th century. We had four (manufacturers) here building them.

"They made snowshoes for Admiral Peary, they made them for Captain Byrd. From north pole to south pole expeditions. Norway made snowshoes for the U.S. military."

Times have changed but Norway continues to honor its heritage with the Snowshoe Festival, which has attracted a devoted crowd.



Norway poet Hortense Gates at Norway's 1949 Showshoe Race. *Supplied photo*

The event will include races and games for all ages and a fashion show, inspired by local poet Hortense Gates, who brought alpine style to Norway snowshoe races in the 1940s.

“We will have a 10K race, a 100-yard dash, musical chairs, and an egg and spoon and three-legged races,” Dassler said. “This year is also a snowshoe biathlon where racers go in loops and do cornhole tosses instead of air rifles.”

All who take part in the festivities will be awarded rustic birch participation medals.

Humble beginnings

Snowshoe manufacturing took root in Norway back in 1873 when Mellie Dunham began fashioning them in his workshop on Crockett Ridge Road. That year he made four pairs. By 1900 he was producing more than 100 per year. He took on his nephew Walter Frederick Tubbs as apprentice in 1903, which propelled him to become the largest snowshoe manufacturer in Maine and supplier for Admiral Robert Peary’s Arctic expeditions. By the time Dunham died in 1931 he was estimated to have made about 7,000 pairs of snowshoes.

Dunham by no means had a monopoly on the local snowshoe industry. During the 1870s Horace Homer Hosmer of Sweden taught the trade to his nephew Herbert Henry Hosmer, who then built a shop on Lake Penesseewassee Lake, a family business that would span four generations of H.H. Hosmers. They supplied the U.S. military with snowshoes during World War I and eventually built a facility on Fern Street that turned out 1,000 pairs a month.

Tubbs established his own snowshoe manufacturing business in 1906, working from the attic of his farmhouse. He supplied them to Admiral Donald MacMillan’s for his Arctic expedition in 1912 and to Admiral Richard Byrd in 1928 for his Antarctic treks. His shop could produce 100 per day. Tubbs would sell his company to a group of investors but continued to be involved in its operations, even after it moved to Vermont in 1932.



F.W. Tubbs & Co., of Norway manufactured snowshoes for years. *Supplied photo*

A fourth player in Norway's snowshoe mecca was Elmer Aldrich, who worked for and invested in Tubb's business. When Tubbs' manufacturing left Norway for Vermont, Aldrich established Snocraft, Inc., which would be the only snowshoe maker in Norway for the next 50 years. During the second World War Snocraft sold 60,000 pair of snowshoes to the U.S. government. In 1958 Vice President Richard Nixon brought some to the U.S.S. R. as gifts for Nikita Kruschev's grandchildren. Snocraft would employ close to 250 employees during its heyday before closing its Norway plant in 1985.

Celebrating

The snowshoe business evolved and exited Norway toward the end of the 20th century but its tradition is still celebrated, 150 years after Dunham and Hosmer first began crafting them by hand.

Races in 2k, 5k and 10k kick off Saturday at 10 a.m., followed by the Hortense Gates Fashion Parade at 11:30 a.m. Family-friendly events begin at noon and the Snowshoe Biathlon Corn Toss will be held at 12:30. Provisions will be provided by Café Nomad, Norway Brewing Co. and Oxbow Beer Garden.



The joy of snowshoeing! Snowshoe Festival 2018. *Submitted*

"We have traditionally held a contra dance at the Norway Grange Hall, but COVID has forced us to put that off again this year," Dassler said.

The festival will wrap up with a snowshoe excursion to Roberts Farm to enjoy hot cocoa and enjoy the views of Lake Pennessseewasse and beyond.

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