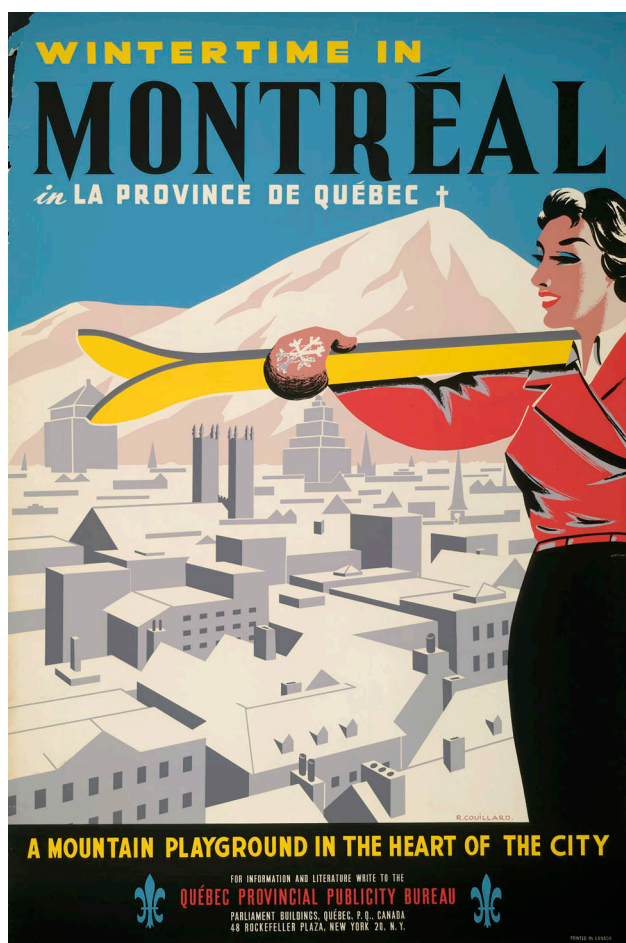


North America's Ski City

Archival images document the early ski culture of Montreal, where residents have skied, raced and jumped on the slopes of Mont Royal for more than a century.

BY BOB SODEN



A 1950s tourism poster by artist and Montreal native Roger Couillard (1910–1999) depicts a skier against the city skyline, with the slopes of Mont Royal in the background.

As far back as 1928, Laurentian ski pioneer Herman “Jackrabbit” Johannsen described Montreal as “unique in being the only place on the continent where good skiing can actually be enjoyed in the heart of a great city.” Situated on an island in the St. Lawrence River, this storied Canadian metropolis—at one time the nation’s capital and industrial engine, and still its cultural center—takes its name from Mont Royal, the three-summit mountain near the city center that was christened by Jacques Cartier in 1535.

Today, Mont Royal hosts such high-profile events as Ski Tour Canada—a FIS World Cup competition that brought top cross-country racers to town in March 2016—and an annual winter festival that draws tens of thousands of residents to the park at its summit. Designed by landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmstead (of New York City’s Central Park fame) and inaugurated in 1876, the 500-acre Parc du Mont-Royal offers cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, a skating rink, and tobogganing on a former alpine ski slope.

The city's obsession with winter sports and the mountain dates from the 19th century, when Montreal was a hotbed of athletic activity. The Royal Montreal Curling Club was established in 1807 and is the oldest in North America. Founded in 1840, the Montreal Snow Shoe Club (MSSC)—nicknamed *Les Tuques Bleues*, or The Blue Hats—was also the first of its kind in North America, and its midnight “tramps” on the mountain are legendary. Today night-owl cross-country skiers and snowshoers still circuit the mountain, their way now lit by a sparkling city below reflecting off white winter clouds above—always a magical sight.

In 1879, nine years before Fridtjof Nansen's historic ski trek across Greenland, *The Canadian Illustrated News* published a woodcut of a Mr. A. Birch of Montreal preparing to make a 170-mile trek to Quebec City on a pair of nine-foot-long “Norwegian snowshoes.” Meanwhile, many Montrealers rushed to take up the “new” sport. In the winter of 1899, McGill University professors P.E. Nobbs, J.B. Porter & R.J. Durley frequently skied on Mount Royal on 10-foot Finnish skis; for evening runs, they would hike up and drop down on long, snow-covered roads between Pine Avenue and Sherbrooke Street.

Soon afterwards, in 1903, the Montreal Ski Club (MSC) held its first meeting and was officially founded on February 11, 1904 at the clubhouse of the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association (MAAA), with first president C.J. McCuaig. That same year, the club held a jumping competition on Fletcher's Field—today's Parc Jeanne-Mance—on the eastern slope of Mont Royal. The following year, a more challenging jump was built on Westmount Boulevard near Clarke Avenue. By 1910, the MSC had relocated its jump to its final location on Côte des Neiges Road, near the St. Joseph's Oratory basilica. In 1921, H. Percy Douglas was elected president—he took over a dispirited club of 50 members after World War I.

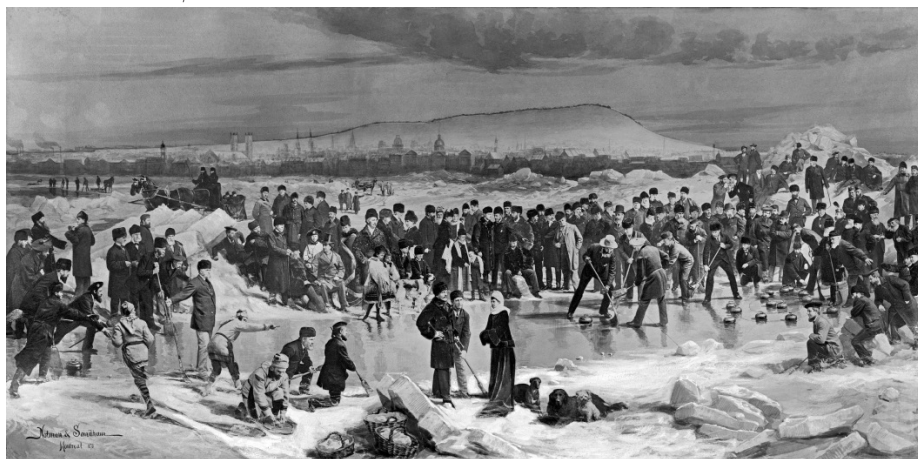
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Cross-country skiers enjoy the trails at Mont-Royal Park in 2015; behind them you can see the toboggan runs and ice skaters on Beaver Lake. Tens of thousands of Montreal residents attend the annual winter festival that's held in the park, which also hosted a FIS World Cup nordic race in March 2016.



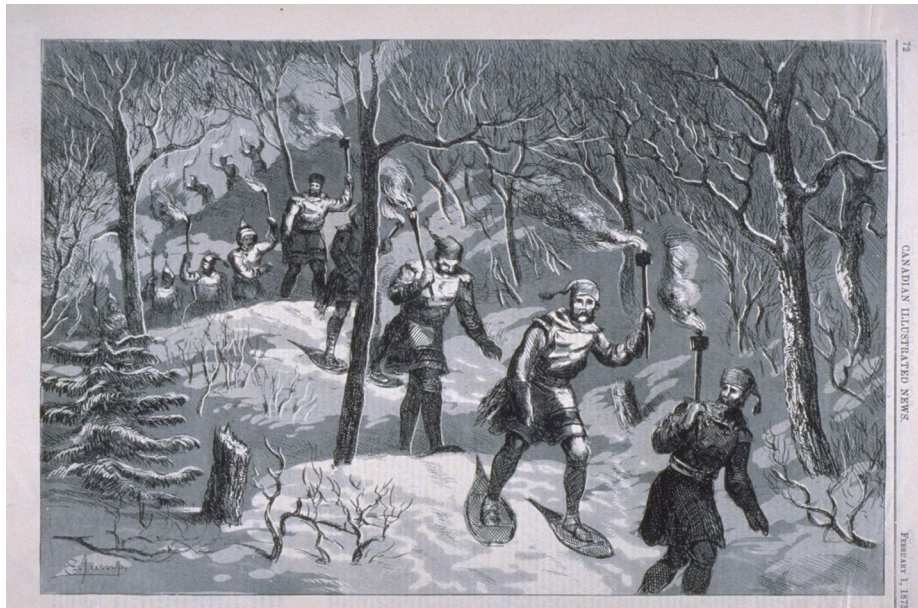
S. POULIN/COURTESY TOURISME MONTREAL

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Members of the Montreal Curling Club, North America's oldest curling club, on a competitive outing on the frozen St. Lawrence River circa 1860, with Mont Royal rising in the distance behind the skyline of the city.

WIKIPEDIA



Members of the Montreal Snow Shoe Club—nicknamed *Les Tuques Bleues*, or The Blue Hats—on one of their legendary snowshoe “tramps” on Mount Royal, guided by moonlight and torches. This image was published on February 1, 1873 in the *Canadian Illustrated News*.



BIBLIOTHEQUE & ARCHIVES NATIONALE DU QUEBEC

A winter scene on Fletcher's Field, with slopes for tobogganing and a rudimentary ski jump. Fletcher's Field is east of Mont Royal, seen in the distance. This image shows a scene very much as it would have been at the inauguration of the first skiing competition in Canada—held under the auspices of the Montreal Ski Club in 1904.



BIBLIOTHEQUE & ARCHIVES NATIONALE DU QUEBEC

An unidentified ski jumper on the new Montreal Ski Club (MSC) jump on the northeast side of Westmount Mountain, circa 1920. The road at the bottom of the jump is Côte Des Neiges Road; in the distance is Outremont Mountain. Christened by Jacques Cartier in 1535, Mont Royal consists of three peaks: Colline de la Croix (Mont Royal proper) with a summit elevation of 764 feet, Colline d'Outremont (Mount Murray) at 692 feet, and Westmount Summit at 659 feet.

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During his tenure, he determinedly raised membership to 498, purchased the CDN property, lengthened the ski jump and arranged for a proper new clubhouse. The MSC would be disbanded in 1933, due to competition from the Laurentians. The ski jump would be in use until the early 1950s.

The first intercollegiate competition in North America was reported by the *Montreal Gazette* on February 23, 1914. The jumping competition was held on the MSC's Côte des Neiges hill on February 21. The McGill Ski Club—established in 1914 (McGill's famous Red Birds Ski Club was created in 1928)—won the event, with L. Strathy having the longest jump at 63 feet. The following day, Dartmouth College turned the tables on McGill by winning the cross-country race at Shawbridge, where Montreal native Alex Foster invented North America's first rope tow in 1932. Out of this competition grew the Intercollegiate Winter Sports Union, with skiing, speed skating, figure skating, and a cross-country race on snowshoes.

By the 1940s, skiing was deeply rooted in the city's culture. None fell more heavily under the sport's snowy spell than John Fry and Doug Pfeiffer, two boys from the Westmount neighborhood who schussed the slopes and gullies of Mont Royal with Canada's celebrated Wurtele twins and ran flushes with the acolytes of Emile Allais, who had come to Canada after

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Women's jumping pioneer Isabel Coursier of Revelstoke, British Columbia, takes flight off the Montreal Ski Club jump on Westmount Mountain in 1926, at age 19. In the distance are Outremont Mountain (left) and Mont Royal (right). Coursier set several world records during her career, jumping 84 feet in 1922 and 103 feet six years later.

REVELSTOKE MUSEUM & ARCHIVES



Above: These circa 1910 images show skiers resting near—and on—the bronze lion statue in Fletcher’s Field, today’s Parc Jeanne-Mance. Right: Montreal residents sleighing and skiing at the Lookout on Mont Royal, with the city below and the St. Lawrence River and the Quebec plain stretching away in the distance.



The Park Toboggan Club slide and ski run overlooking, and running onto, frozen Beaver Lake on Mont Royal mountain, circa 1920. The toboggan half-mile run was a popular activity during the Fête de Nuit festivities in February, dating from the late 1800s and drawing such dignitaries as the Governor General.



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ARCHIVES DE LA VILLE DE MONTREAL

The southeast slope of Fletcher's Field was a popular weekend ski destination for residents of eastern Montreal. This circa 1950 photo shows a skier looking over what is today's popular Plateau district, with Old Montreal near the river, in the distance.



ARCHIVES DE LA VILLE DE MONTREAL



ARCHIVES DE LA VILLE DE MONTREAL

A jumble of happy skiers and sledders on the north end of Fletcher's Field near Camillien Houde Way (left), and (right) an orderly line of skiers at the rope tow at Beaver Lake, circa 1955.



COURTESY DOCUMENTS ET ARCHIVES UNIVERSITE DE MONTREAL

The University of Montreal ski slope and T-bar lift on Outremont Mountain, circa 1960. The hill opened in 1943 and also offered a jump, which was just beyond the scope of this photo, to the right.

World War II. Through decades-long careers, these Montreal natives made a major impact on the sport of skiing in North America: Pfeiffer helped to found the PSIA and freestyle skiing and edited *Skiing*, while Fry created NASTAR and the Nations Cup and served as longtime editor of *SKI* and *Snow Country*. (Fry and Pfeiffer will be inducted into the Laurentian Ski Hall of Fame on October 22; see page 12).

Over the ensuing decades, alpine skiing in Montreal slowly declined as residents were lured north by the greater vertical and longer runs of the Laurentian Mountains—a 90-minute ride on the P'tit Train du Nord in the 1940s and '50s, and only 45 minutes by Autoroute in the 1960s. What has remained of Mont Royal skiing today are free cross-country trails for the public and an outstanding nordic chalet. The mountain also possesses the terrain for a world-class ski jump, should the Winter Olympic dreams of Quebeckers and Montrealers one day be realized.

Ultimately, what will continue to be true far into the future, is that when a young Montrealer is introduced to skiing, his parents will take him to the slopes of Mont Royal—as was the case for this writer at the age of six, and his children when their turn(s) came. ❄️

Montrealer and ski historian Bob Soden is a member of the ISHA board of directors and editorial review board.

COURTESY BOB SODEN



Author Bob Soden cross-country skiing with his four children at Mont Royal Park in 1986.