

The Manufacturing of Snowshoes

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The manufacturing of snowshoes originates in ancestral techniques that date back to very old times. The Indians showed our grandparents how to make snowshoes. And since then the secret of the technique has been transmitted from generation to generation. Today, many persons still know how to make snowshoes. Maxime Morin, Albé Plourde and Albert Bouchard are among those who have practiced this art since a young age. Each one of them learned the technique from his parents.

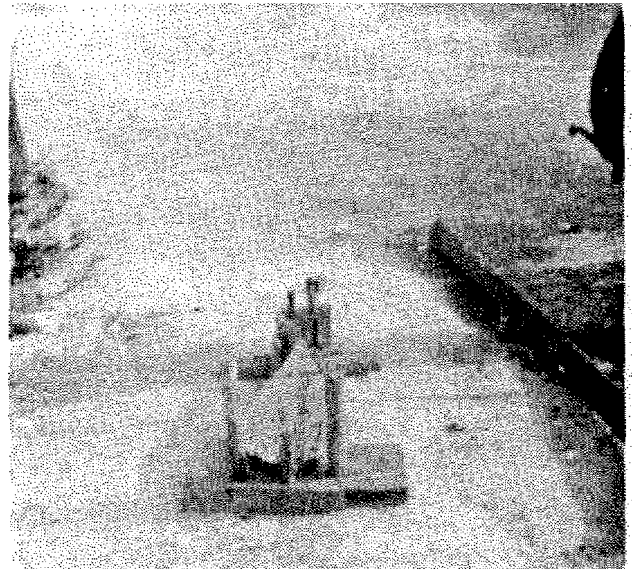
The material and tools used in the making of snowshoes today are the same as those used in olden times. Of course, we do find, on the market, snowshoes made of plastic and snowshoes strung with nylon. But, according to more experienced makers, these modern inventions “do not equal the home-made snowshoes”.

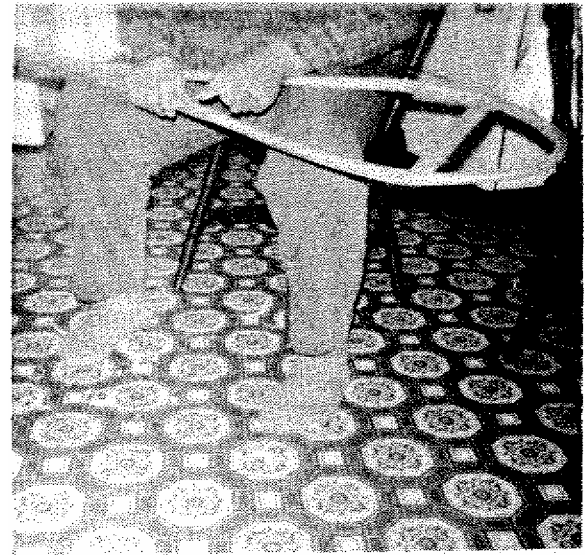
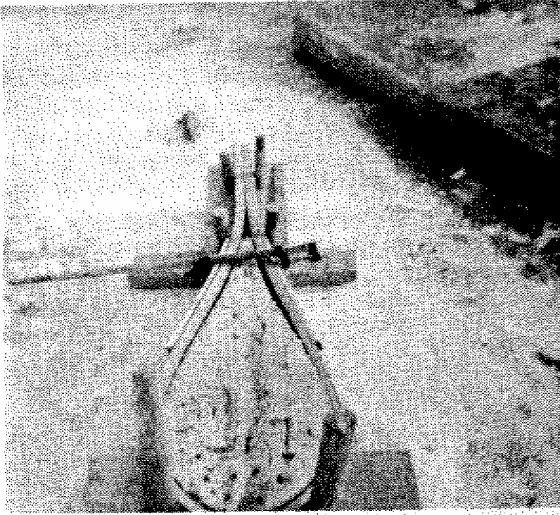
Most of the time, snowshoes are made of ash, wild cherry or yellow birch wood. Of all the hard woods, those three are the easiest to bend. The stringing material is made of cowhide. Today, the best tools used to make snowshoes are the axe, the hand-saw, the awl, the drill, the pocket-knife, and a curved-blade knife.

The wood used is selected with care. First, we must find a straight and healthy tree of about 7 or 8 inches (15 to 20 cm) in diameter. It is preferable to cut it in the fall season when the tree is in its best shape. From a same trunk we can get enough wood to make 7 or 8 pairs of snowshoes. The second step in making the frame consists in splitting the trunk in two pieces. Then, the heartwood is removed but the phloem, which is the part of the tree between the heartwood and the bark, is kept. That part is healthier, stronger, and more flexible. Then, we split the sapwood into strips of one square inch (1.5 sq. cm) by 7 or 8 feet (2m. to 2.4 m.) long, depending on the length of the snowshoes we want to make. Those strips, worked with a curved-blade knife, will become the frame of the snowshoe. Making the frame requires great care. Each strip must be bent so that its extremities are joined together. Then, we immerse the bent pieces into boiling water for two hours.



This operation renders the wood more flexible and allows it to be easily bent. The bent strip is then placed in a wooden mould so that it acquires the shape of a snowshoe.





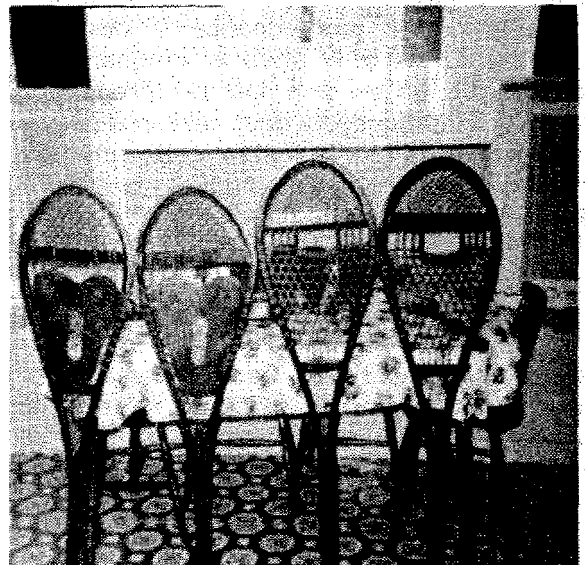
All is then placed near the kitchen stove to allow it to dry for two to three days. Then, the strips can be removed from the mould as they have now acquired the shape of the frame of the snowshoe. To maintain the shape of the frame and to finish it, two pieces of wood are added-one in front and one at the back of the snowshoe. These wood pieces are held in place by wooden pegs. The bent wood strips are tied at the ends to form the tail of the snowshoe.



“babiche”. The central part of the snowshoe, where the foot will rest, is always made of cowhide. When it is possible, the two extremities of the snowshoe are strung with deerskin leather. The leather of that animal is finer and more delicate.

When the snowshoe is completely strung and dried, we apply a coat of varnish or paint to better preserve it.

When the frame is ready, we must do the stringing. The cowhide to be used is immersed in lukewarm water. When the hair easily falls from the skin, the fat and the remaining hair is removed. The skin is then cut into thongs of about one half to one inch wide. The thongs thus finished are called



Is the art of making snowshoes disappearing? Nobody can tell for sure. However, we know that, in days past, snowshoes were indispensable implements in the life of the inhabitants. They were constantly used in winter to

make trails, to walk in the woods, to collect maple sap, and so on. Nowadays, nature lovers and some "Participaction" fans use snowshoes for sport activities. Due to its renewed popularity, the snowshoe will still be used for some time.