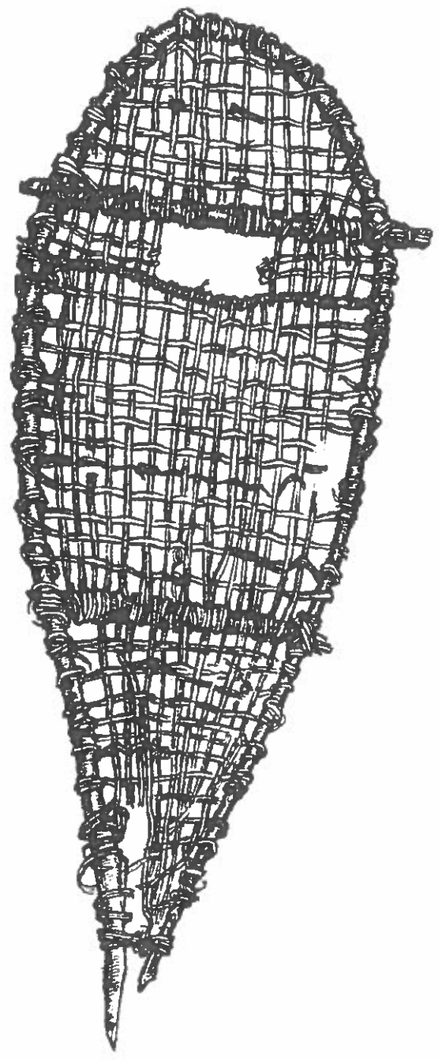
Mi'kmaq Yellow Birch Snowshoes

If you are a truly adventurous snowshoer, why not try to make your own temporary snowshoes like those woven by the Mi'kmaq. The snowshoe illustrated here belongs to a pair that have been in the collection of the Nova Scotia Museum since 1927. They were made by a 72 year old Mi'kmaq hunter, Chief Jerry Lone-cloud, who needed them because he had been caught in the woods during a snow-storm without his regular shoes. Chief Lone-cloud made these Yellow Birch shoes, used them to walk out of the woods and donated them to the museum the next day.

To make a snowshoe like the one illustrated here, bend a sturdy sapling of Yellow Birch in the shape of a frame and bind the ends together. Lash the cross-pieces in place and then weave the filling. The Mi'kmaq used either thin branches of Yellow Birch that they twisted and wove whole or larger branches that they split in half before twisting and weaving. Written records tell us that they heated the branches in hot water to make them more pliable.

Yellow Birch is very fibrous; twisting and plying one branch with another as you work will allow you to weave the filling with one continuous cord. The mesh in this case is a simple over-one, under -one pattern with no variation in mesh size between the toe, heel and central sections. Your leather toe and heel binding straps can be tied, rather than buckled. Wear with pride and pleasure!



A Final Word

There are only three things a novice needs to remember about snowshoeing: first, you cannot lift one snowshoe while the other is resting on it. Second, snowshoes are not equipped with reverse: you can't walk backwards! And third, the joy of tramping miles through the woods or jogging over the surface of deep snow in the bright sunshine of a crisp Winter's day is yours to discover. So get up and go!

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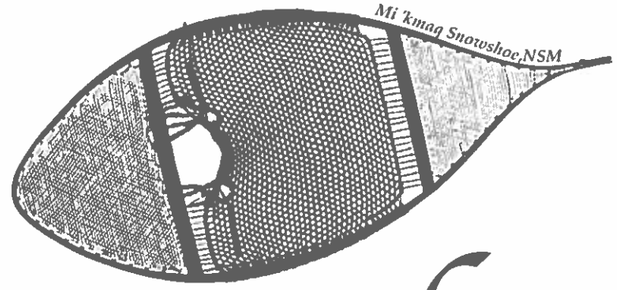


Snowshoes

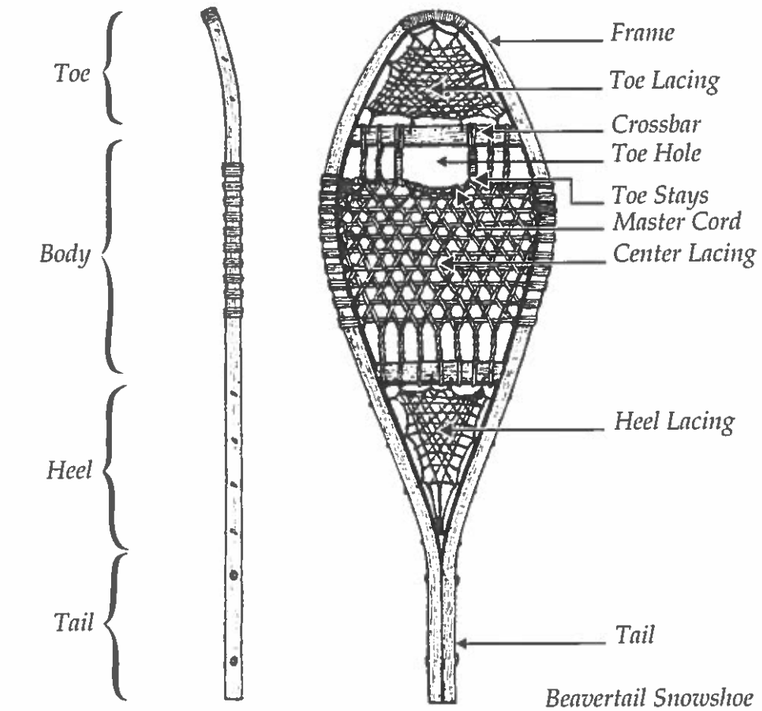
Snowshoes have a long history. They were widely used in North America long before Europeans arrived here, both because they could be made from readily available materials and because they worked: they really did allow people to walk with ease across the top of deeply piled snow. The Europeans soon saw what a nifty invention snowshoes were and adopted them enthusiastically.

The basic snoeshoe design was modified again and again to suit different geographic and snow conditions, the availability of materials and the maker's sense of style. The Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, for instance, made a small, round shoe with a short tail, often referred to as a "beaver tail" design. Other designs were popular elsewhere such as the "Bearpaw" snowshoe. There was no one set of measurements; snoeshoe-makers decided on shape and size according to their own sense of what was appropriate.

Snowshoes continued to be important in the daily life of rural Nova Scotia for a long time. As recently as forty years ago most homes in Lunenburg county had at least one or two pairs of snowshoes hanging by the back door in winter, much as we have a pile of sneakers today. They were used by everyone. It was easy then to find someone who knew how to make snoeshoes, or had a pair of frames hanging in the barn ready for lacing. Like the Mi'kmaq, these people used materials that were close at hand such as ash trees from their woodlots and rawhide lacing and bindings from the hides of various farm and woodland animals. They did not buy from stores or order from catalogues, but relied on their own resources, working often in isolation.

Resourcefulness and ingenuity have a long tradition in Nova Scotia. In times of emergency, the Mi'kmaq were known to strap boughs of bushy evergreens to their moccassins. New Ross settlers used wooden barrelheads as snowshoes for children. The introduction of snowmobiles in the 1970s quickly changed wintertime travel in the woods and snowshoeing today is regarded as a pastime, not a necessity. Snowshoes are made today by younger people who enjoy working with wood and keeping the ancient skill alive.

Bearpaw Snowshoe



Beavertail Snowshoe

Framework

Today as in the past, White Ash is the best wood for snowshoe frames because of it's strength, clear grain and flexibility. The tree grows abundantly on the Ross Farm property. A length of the trunk, about 9 feet long, straight and limb free is cut and split into quarters. The wood nearest the bark will be the outer edge of the frame because it has more sap than the inner wood and is therefore more pliable.

To make the frame for a snowshoe, a length of quartered ash wood is held in a shaving horse and a drawknife is used to shave it, carefully following the grain, until it is about three quarters of an inch square. The wood will crack as it is bent if it is shaved across the grain. The stick is shaved a little thinner in the middle so that it will be easier to bend it sharply there for the toe of the shoe. This stick is then soaked in water for a day to increase its water content before steaming.

Ash becomes very soft and pliable during steaming and usually can be bent without breaking. But as an extra precaution, a thin metal strip is clamped on the bark edge of the wood where it will be bent most sharply. The Ash is then bent and fastened as quickly as possible around a snoeshoe shaped mould or jig. The wood is left in the mould for a week or so and allowed to dry. When the frame is dry, it will "remember" the shape of the mould even after it's been removed.

At this point, notches are cut in the frame for cross bars which are held in place by the shape of the shoe and the tension of the lacing. The holes for lacing are then drilled, the frame is sanded so that the lacing won't be cut or frayed by sharp edges and the tails are riveted together and cut to the same length.

Lacing

Traditionally lacing was made of rawhide, from caribou or domestic cattle. Today's snowshoe makers prefer to use man-made cord, such as neoprene or nylon because of its strength and the fact that mice don't like to eat it!

The lacing is usually woven in a hexagonal pattern. The weave depends on the snow conditions for which the shoes are designed. A heavy open mesh is woven on snowshoes used on granular or "corn" snow, on thick crusts, or on wind-packed surfaces. A fine, closely-woven mesh is preferred for travelling on light, fluffy snow. Whatever the pattern, the toe and the heel of the shoe are always filled in with a finer cordage than the central part because this area bears the weight of the wearer.

Two heavy coats of spar varnish protect both the frame and the lacing from moisture.

Bindings

These days leather bindings or harnesses can be purchased at many hardware and sporting goods stores. (see fig. 1) However, a quite satisfactory homemade harness can be cut from heavy rubber inner tubing (see fig. 2). Anchored to the webbing, this flexible harness adjusts easily for fitting.

When you're walking on snowshoes, the binding must hinge freely, allowing your heel to rise and your toe to bend through the toehole. If the harness is properly adjusted, the tails of the shoes should drag as you walk. Properly balanced snowshoes make travelling across snow a delight.

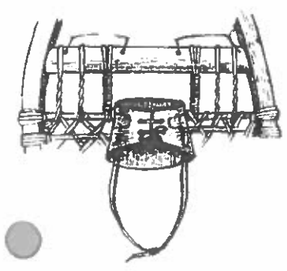


fig. 1

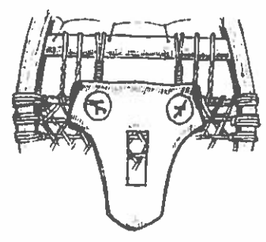


fig. 2

Care and Maintenance

Give your pair of snowshoes a yearly coating of spar varnish on the wooden frame and rawhide or synthetic lacing and treat the leather binding with a leather cream. Be careful not to dry a pair of snowshoes too near a fire: the heat will cause the wood and leather to become brittle and crack. Out of season, your snowshoes should be hung in a cool, dry place, away from gnawing animals such as the family dog (or mice).

Snowshoe First Aid

If you are travelling in the woods and have an accident, you may need to know some snowshoe first aid. A broken frame can be mended with a splint, much like a broken bone. Cut a couple of small branches, lay one on top and the other under the break and wrap them tightly together with nylon cord. (fig 3). Broken rawhide and neoprene lacing can be spliced by making lengthwise splits in each end, threading the repair cord through, tightening it and tying. (fig. 4). Broken nylon is more difficult because it is slippery. Seal the knots with a lighted match or lighter. Sometimes the lacing gets so damaged it is beyond first aid. The lacing must then be cut out and the frame completely re-strung. Contact your snowshoe maker for advice.

fig.3 *before*

after

fig. 4