



# WHAT IT MEANT

## TO SHOOT THE CHUTE

What is a toboggan, you say? Well, it is a few boards slapped together with a nice curl at one end. You can use it for hauling loads in the wintertime, but mostly it's a fun thing for getting from the top to the bottom of a hill quicker than you can say the word "toboggan." Skiing and snowmobiling are the big wintertime sports nowadays so you don't see many toboggans anymore. But in years gone by tobogganing was a major recreation here in Vermont.

Of course any open hillside could be used to toboggan on but what made the sport particularly exciting was the construction of toboggan chutes. A chute was a long **timber** structure which was packed with snow. The snow was then watered down. When the water froze you really had something slick to slide on. The first time down you'd leave your breath at the top and

have to climb back up to get it. After that you'd manage to keep it with you unless you were letting it out in a good **holler** for joy all the way down.

Tobogganing in Vermont was popular well into the 1900s but the first big boom in the sport here came in the middle of the 1880s. The craze began in Montreal, Canada, and slid down to New England and the Middle Atlantic states. By the winter of 1886-87 chutes were being built in many of the larger Vermont villages and cities. We don't know all of the locations but Rutland, Montpelier, and Burlington each had at least one. St. Johnsbury also had a chute that was probably typical.

The Caledonia Toboggan Club organized in January, 1887, and soon had enough investors at \$5.00 apiece to raise the \$300 needed to build a chute. Several

sites were considered but the one finally selected along Main Street in St. Johnsbury village became something of a local joke. It was, according to one report, “the only level spot in a town made up of hills.”

The chute was no laughing matter, however, for it gave all the **elevation** necessary for a good run. The starting end was 40 feet off the ground and the chute was 160 feet long. Including the outrun the whole chute was about a quarter of a mile long. A good time for “shooting” the main slide was about nine seconds.

On February 1, 1887, the chute opened. A season ticket admitted a “gent and a lady” and cost \$3.00. A gent by himself paid \$2.00 and a lady by herself paid \$1.50. Single admission for all-day use of the chute was 25 cents.

The new sport required a uniform. Proper **apparel** for men consisted of outer suits of red, blue or yellow flannel plus a “**species** of headdress that looked for all the world like a night-cap.” The scene at the St. Johnsbury chute, according to the town newspaper the *Republican* “would have given a stranger the impression that he had fallen upon a masquerade ball at its height.”



Toboggans cost between \$8.00 and \$12.00. That was quite a lot of money. Youngsters often built their own for pennies by attaching half a round cheese box to the end of a long wide board and then nailing a piece of heavy cloth over some rags to form a cushion. For that matter, plenty of boys didn’t bother with any toboggan, homemade or otherwise, but simply went down the icy chute on their backsides.

The Caledonia Club chute was an immediate success. To keep up with demand it was open every afternoon except Sunday and every evening except Sundays and Wednesdays. Kerosene lamps on the chute provided some **illumination** for the nighttime sliding and on at least one occasion, and probably others, additional lighting came from a **novel** source - the headlight of a train locomotive stationed on a nearby track.



In time tastes changed and the tobogganing fad began to fade. All over the state the chutes that had been constructed were disassembled. Tobogganers turned to new sports for their winter fun.

In Vermont the chutes are now all gone but one can still find toboggans. When the snow lies heavy on the hills this winter, imagine your great-grandparents in their flannel suits and “nightcaps” shooting down the hills. Better still, find a toboggan and a friend and go for a toboggan run yourself.

— Robert Hagerman

## VOCABULARY

**timber** - wood

**holler** - yell

**elevation** - height

**apparel** - clothing

**species** - a special type, kind or variety

**illumination** - light

**novel** - unusual