

History: Snowshoe Thompson created a legacy with his Sierra treks

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From the beginning, John A. Thompson was the stuff of which legends are made. Tall, rangy and taciturn, he had come to America from Norway as a boy. When the mountain passes of the Sierra were closed by snow, both California and the Carson Valley were cut off from the rest of the country, isolated from news, supplies and mail. Thompson, to whom snow was a playground not an obstacle, made a pair of Norwegian snowshoes from a downed oak tree on his farm. His "snowshoes" were 10 foot long flat boards, 4 inches wide, weighing 25 pounds. He could travel faster than anyone on conventional snowshoes.



In 1857, he began carrying mail and supplies from Placerville to the Carson Valley. It took 3 days on the eastward trip and took 2 days coming back. He carried no blankets or pistols because of their weight but he found ways to keep warm, to protect himself and sleep a little on each trek. It was the birth of a legend as well as the ski industry. Snowshoe would be amazed.

With two teams of horses and two sleighs, he also met loaded freight wagons at the snow line and took their goods across the mountains on his sleighs.

By the time he returned from his first trip, he was not only in business he was on the way to becoming a living symbol of the hardy, strong individual admired by American. In February of 1857, Hutchings' California Magazine carried his story and the most famous and often reprinted sketch of him. His name

and exploits became known throughout the country and gave an added dimension to the character of the west.

He continued his winter crossing of the Sierra for twenty years but, in spite of weeks spent in Washington D.C. in 1874, Congress never paid him more than a pittance for carrying the U.S. mail for 20 years!

At the age of 49, John Thompson died in 1876. He remains a symbol of the Sierra, of rugged westerners and of many tales illustrating it.