

# There's snow machine like it

Calvino Cheng

**Y**ears before Armand Bombardier started mass-producing the snowmobile, inventive Western Canadian doctors were acquiring or concocting their own motorized sleds. They had to. Faced with huge territo-

ries to cover, foul weather and pitiful roads — if there were roads — rural doctors sought more versatile transportation than the usual dogsleds, cutters and Model T Fords. Part ambulance and part van, these odd-looking

but infinitely practical snow machines started appearing in 1919. Below are details about 3 of the newfangled contraptions, derived from a presentation made at the History of Medicine Program in Montreal on Sept. 24, 1999.



Courtesy Saskatchewan Western Development Museum

**Back in the 1930s there were 2 types of snowmobiles:** the familiar caterpillar-style machine and the propeller-driven toboggan. Dr. Thomas Argue, who was based around Fillmore, Sask., opted for the latter because of the long distances he often traveled. He bought himself a prairie-built Fudge snowplane (right), which in fact was a propeller-driven snowmobile that literally skimmed over the surface of the snow. Argue covered from 90 to 150 km a day at an average speed of 35 to 45 kmph, although the snowplane could reach wind-assisted speeds of 150 kmph. The machines disappeared around 1956, when public snowplowing came in vogue.

**A mechanically gifted and determined doctor, William Mainprize designed and built — with the help of a local mechanic — 3 snowmobiles to help him cover his 50-km-wide territory around Midale, Sask. His first snowmobile (left), built in 1924, had a Model T chassis with an open cab style back. He closed the back in his second vehicle and added a third wheel. His last snowmobile featured a lower center of gravity, making it practically untippable and unsinkable in snow, and ideal for ferrying pregnant patients.**



Courtesy Isabel Ramsay



Courtesy Helen Hamman

**Dr. Harold Hamman of Fort Vermillion, Alta., found it could take him a week by dogsled to get to the furthest reaches of his 60-km-wide practice. A snowmobile took just 2 days for the same trip. In the early 1920s he asked his mechanic to build a snowmobile with a large cab to hold a cot and patient, as well as supplies (left). The machine also proved useful while he was courting his second wife.**

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