

# Man At His Best

mines the degree of informality. Wide wales (up to nine ribs an inch) are the most casual; midwales and pinwales (ten to eighteen ribs) are slightly more formal, but it depends on your point of view. The department head of a smart Madison Avenue men's shop, speaking of corduroy trousers in general, attempted to tell me why

they were superior to blue jeans. Corduroys, he said, are more refined; they enjoy higher status. "The better customer wears corduroys, which we carry; the others wear jeans, which we do not." There may be some truth in this, but it sounded rather like a bit of the old fustian all the same.

—John Berendt

## FIRST-RATE *The Snowshoe Man*



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN FRAILEY

One of the best names to know if you're in the market for a pair of good, old-fashioned, handmade wooden snowshoes is Trèfflé Bolduc. The seventy-one-year-old Bolduc (who seems too lively to have had open-heart surgery just three years ago) and his product have been around. Last October his Kancamagus Snowshoes, named after the White Mountain road where his workshop is located, were exhibited at the mall in front of the Washington Monument, courtesy of the American Forest Institute. In March of 1980 four climbers broke in their Bolduc Yukon specials on an expedition up Mount McKinley. "By now I suspect my shoes have been anywhere in the world there's snow," Bolduc says proudly.

Making snowshoes was actually Bolduc's fourth calling in life. Before turning craftsman, he was a violinist, playing under Arthur Fiedler and Leonard Bernstein; then he owned his own construction company

and, later, Baldy's (his nickname) Market, the grocery, dairy, and Indian gift shop he built and opened nineteen years ago on the garden plot beside his Conway, New Hampshire, house. Nine years ago last January, on one of those days when the cash register was hardly dinging, Bolduc got the idea of boosting winter sales by making snowshoes. "I'd always been good with my hands and with wood. I'd used snowshoes all my life, growing up and working in the woods, but I didn't realize what I was getting into." After two months struggling just to make the basic frame, Bolduc headed to Canada and the Huron Indian Village. "They made more snowshoes than anyone in the world, and I thought maybe they'd teach me the art." They did, as did the Montagnais, Algonquin, Cree, and other tribes Bolduc visited in search of the secret to crafting the perfect Indian snowshoe.

In Bolduc's basement workshop, the cement floor covered

with sawdust, some three hundred snowshoe frames, minus the intricate lacings, hang from the ceilings and line the walls, like row upon row of king-size wooden wishbones. To look at his machinery you'd hardly call it a factory, though for Bolduc it serves the purpose. There are electric table saws and small disc sanders and an old gas-heated knee-high vat he uses for steaming the wood frames. "My method is not white man's production," says Bolduc. "I had the chance to buy Vermont Tubb's old equipment, but I didn't want it. Simplicity is still the best to me."

Bolduc uses only the finest white ash, among the most durable, pliable, and lightest of all hardwoods. Sometimes he contracts for his wood shipments, but more often he goes into the forest where the men are working and picks out the lots he wants—the coarse-grained, slightly green ones with no knots. "They're the strongest and bend the easiest," he says. "Too many knots and too fine a grain and you'll be breaking frames all over the place."

After the frame is cut and given a rough sanding, Bolduc throws it into the vat, where it boils and steams until it's soft enough to bend. How long exactly depends. "Sometimes the wood is so green it's pliable in ten minutes, other times it's so dry it takes days." When his practiced eyes and hands determine it's ready, Bolduc bends the single strip of ash around a wooden mold, where it sits for up to a month, settling into shape.

On a snowshoe, the strength of the lacing is as crucial as the frame itself, and Bolduc's shoes have the flex of a top-notch tennis racket. The finished webbing feels so hard to the touch you'd expect it to be brittle and crack, but instead it bounces back just slightly. Bolduc has changed his lacing material over time. He used to use only rawhide, which had that fine rustic look, but once wet, stretched, dried out, and then fell apart; it also attracted rodents. Today he uses mostly nylon, coated in a

solution he brews himself.

Each shoe is laced in sections: the master, or toe cord first, then the toe and heel lacing. Because the toe cord carries most of the shoe's tension, it gets the most attention—six braided strands of nylon, each capable of holding up to 1,100 pounds. Using a hexagonal lacing, the strongest and most complicated, with a large enough weave to let any snow trapped on top fall back through, Bolduc estimates he can string at least a pair of shoes an hour, as can his helpers, among them two Penobscots, an Abnaki, and a Mohawk.

For the final steps, Bolduc gives each snowshoe a finished sanding and coats it with two layers of varnish. The completed shoe is smooth, shiny, and golden brown, the weave as even and clear as the patterns on a just-pressed waffle.

Though Bolduc does do special orders, he regularly offers only three varieties of snowshoes: the beavertail, with its long, tapered end that acts like a rudder in the woods; the modified bear-paw; and the narrower Alaskan or Yukon for open country. You'll pay between \$35 and \$65 for a Bolduc shoe and \$12 to \$25 for his neoprene harnesses. For a brochure, write or call Trèfflé Bolduc, Kancamagus Snowshoe Center, Box C, Conway, New Hampshire 03818; tel.: 603-447-5287.

For a \$7.50 shipping charge, you can get your shoes mail-order from Bolduc within a week to ten days, but if you get the chance, take a visit to his Conway workshop/store in person, if just to grab a bottle of birch beer, try on a pair of mukluks, and sample his French Canadian humor. You'll know his store—the only one for thirty-two miles between Lincoln and Conway on the Kancamagus Highway—by the totem pole in the front drive. If you can't find Bolduc, wait an hour or so. In summer he jogs three or four miles a day, but this time of year, chances are he'll be out making hexagonal tracks in the White Mountain snow.

—Christine T. McPartland