

ing posts every 20 miles, parking. Last year the government laid out \$300,000 in subsidies and expected to pay three-quarters-of-a-million this season. Not to mention 150,000 signs at \$2.50 each! The Ministry of Transport contributed special courses, lectures and exhibitions. Ten instructors chosen by public competition were detailed this season to choose 500 monitors to check clubs and their trails, signals and driving qualifications.

All the funds are ploughed into the maintenance of installations. It costs from \$200 to \$1,500 a mile to lay out a trail and \$60 a mile to maintain it. One snowplough capable of clearing 50 miles in a day costs \$16,000 and up. The culverts are paid for by concession holders who are allowed to stick up a sign boosting their hotel or service station. Clubs enter into pacts with farmers, the railways and lumber companies. Big clubs (Sherbrooke has 11,000 members) bring certain economic benefits to sparsely peopled areas.

For a fee of \$10 to \$25 a year, a skidoo driver can use all the trails of all the clubs, most of which are interlinked. You can go from Quebec City to Mont-Laurier by skidoo without coming out of the woods. The clubs are planning an atlas of the entire network.

There was a lot of protest at first against all this regimentation, but Quebec's skidoo death toll dropped from 73 to 42 in two years. Now it is conceded that regulation has been the salvation of the skidoo.

A ONETIME enemy of the skidoo, Réjean Demers, president of the federation of snowmobile clubs, is now a fanatic. He claims to have rediscovered the epoch when they did not salt the highways, when there were no school buses and people visited in horse-drawn sleighs. "Every Saturday evening," he says, "we do the 54 miles from Drummondville to Sherbrooke by the forest route. Every staging post has its speciality: ragout, steak, beans. We have soirées and dances. And it costs me less than skiing. Depreciation is only 250 bucks a season. You can't get a season skilift ticket for that. Skiing closes down at four in the afternoon. And it's more dangerous."

Demers says there is no other activity where people are so ready to help. "If your car breaks down, you can wait for hours. With a skidoo, the first passerby stops and lends a hand, invariably. It's not easy to be a snob on a skidoo. The guy in the Cadillac doesn't talk to the fellow in the Volkswagen. With a skidoo, you're all dressed the same, the machines are about the same. There



aren't any social classes. It's a great leveller."

The million sales a year is a forgotten dream. The market is not that big: the North American snow belt is rather sparsely populated. Even if the whole belt went in for the skidoo the way Quebec did, there would only be 5 million machines (twice the present total). But the biggest restraint

on sales, according to skidoo expert Denis Drouin, is "the second floor syndrome"—high rise living. "Say you live in a big city. You don't want to have to be towed back 100 miles through the slush and the traffic. And where do you keep your skidoo? You can't take it upstairs with you."

He has a point. The rural market is already saturated: eight out of 10 households keep a skidoo. In the city, only one in four, and most of those boast country cottages. The other enemy of the skidoo is the rival claimants to the territory—trail skiers, snow shoe trekkers, conservationists. The skiers are furious at being robbed of some ideal country in the Laurentians. They talk of the provincial parks being invaded by the "yellow peril" (yellow is the favoured colour for skidoos). But there are trends to compromise, too: trail skiers may use skidoos to reach formerly inaccessible country.

In any case Quebecers are not in a position to abandon the skidoo. It is Quebec's seventh-ranking industry. It employs 16,000 people directly and 40,000 indirectly for a total of \$50 million a year in salaries. Quebec makes \$24 million a year out of the skidoo in taxes of all kinds, the federal government \$40 million.

What is going to happen? Economists envisage an annual growth for the industry of 6-10 per cent over the next five years. But over the past three years not one projection has proved correct. So they are talking about branching out into motorcycles, autocycles, even lawnmowers. The idea would be to take up the slack on the production line when skidoo sales plummet at the end of the winter. At Bombardier, they have diversified into heavy vehicles for traversing muskeg—the forest swamps that form when the snow melts. They already make the snowploughs used to clear skidoo club trails. Bombardier's competitors are right in there too, though some of them will find it harder to adapt than others.

It's not going to be easy to stabilize: excess capacity representing about half the current production will have to be liquidated. But the Canadian market is probably good for around 100,000 skidoos a year over the long term. That is still big business. □