

Skidoo

Canada's snow buggy gets domesticated

by JEAN PARÉ

THIS fall in the big showrooms, behind plateglass windows beaten by the rain, it was only the rare client that passed a cautious hand over the skis of the snowmobile, compared prices. Only the kids were excited, imploring: "Will you get it, won't you get it?" The time is past when everything that skied, zoomed, whizzed or vroomed sold quicker than the manufacturers could turn them out. The skidoo industry is no longer doubling its sales every season. Within ten years it was born, it grew, it conquered the snow country, it was challenged, subdued, finally domesticated. The goldrush is over, the age of reason is here.

In the interval, the skidoo brought a lot of changes.

It made millionaires: the Bouchards of Sainte-Anne who racked up about \$12 million, Réjean Houle of Wickham who doubled that figure. They talk about the fellow who bought a three-quarters-of-a-million-dollar country house with 10 miles of skidoo track in his backyard! Whole towns sprang up, no longer round a rail junction or a religious community but round an idea, like Valcourt, Quebec, or on the ambition to become, if not the Ford of this new machine, at least its Chevrolet or Dodge: La Pocatiere, where Moto-Ski is by far the biggest employer; La Guadeloupe, which was just a hamlet before Boa-Ski came; Thetford-Mines, where Snow-Jet took nearly 1,000 workers away from the asbestos industry. Five of the seven makes of skidoo produced in Quebec are manufactured in towns of under

5,000 population. There are villages that live off the sport, like Saint-Gabriel de Brandon, where they used to "fold up the sidewalks in autumn." Now it's chiefly a winter resort. And all the flatcountry of the St. Lawrence valley now has its snow sport just like the Laurentian Hills to the north.

At Valcourt, "cradle of the skidoo," there were still 260 farms in 1965. Now there are fewer than 50. Not all the Bombardiers are in the skidoo business: the telephone directory lists a few small shopkeepers of that name. But the Bombardier plant dominates the village like a huge grey fortification, hedged by weird-looking machines and trucks.

Last August in this factory the skidoo observed its graduation to the age of reason when Bombardier, number one in the field, turned out its millionth vehicle. A thousand bottles of champagne popped their corks not only for the guests at Valcourt but for distributors as remote as Massachusetts and Alaska, linked for the occasion by a special telephone network. Guests clustered around Ralph Plaisted, who with Jean-Luc Bombardier conquered the North Pole in a skidoo in 1968. Six feet four inches, built like an ice-breaker, he is trying to raise \$300,000 to go to the South Pole in December: "I want to be the first man to reach both poles on the ground!" he says. In between, he has just spent 18 months in the bush above the arctic circle with his wife and daughters, their only equipment: two skidoos. "They got us there," he says. "Then I took out the engines to make a sawmill to cut logs for our cabin."

The plant has four-and-a-half miles of production lines, where they take two hours to build a skidoo and they could turn out a quarter-of-a-million a year if need be (at the last expansion, in 1970, Bombardier was trying to retain his 40 per cent share of the world market). The founder, Bombardier senior, recalled how in the early days he had watched people using his invention, demanding more of it than the little 6 horsepower motor could deliver. Now he makes nothing smaller than 18 hp.

1959: 225 skidoos, all Bombardiers, hand-made, selling at \$1,000. By 1964 there are three manufacturers turning out 20,000 machines. By 1967 it is 100,000, double that the following year, double that again in 1969 and by 1970 600,000, of which two-thirds are made in Quebec. Nearly 100 little companies have been added to the big ten that account for nine-tenths of the total output. In the fall of 1971 they were already talking in terms of sales touching the million mark in '73, i.e. last winter. Within 10 years, \$77 million in investments.

BUT the crisis was already upon them. That year sales fell to 450,000, then to 350,000 in 1972. The market, which was estimated at 5 million, is saturated at half that figure. In a period of general inflation, the surplus skidoos are unloaded at cut prices. In two years, only 30 manufacturers are still in the field. Of the 27 Quebec concerns only seven survive. Of those only three are owned by French-Canadians. Sno-Prince of Princeville will not

