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Our Big Toboggan Slides

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In the Beginning

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century in Canada, toboggans were utilitarian vehicles used by Natives to transport their families and supplies across the frozen north. Several birch slats, bent up at the front, were held together by cross ribs and were usually pulled by people, or occasionally by dogs. The fun of sliding down slopes had not gone unnoticed. By 1860, people around Quebec City had taken up tobogganing as a winter recreation and its popularity gradually spread. Lord Dufferin, Governor-General of Canada, created a public slide at Rideau Hall in Ottawa in 1872. Many people took up the sport in the eastern sections of the country wherever there were large enough hills. Enthusiasts banded together to form the Montreal Toboggan Club in 1881.

The Daily Free Press noted that a young boy was seen with London's first-known toboggan on January 3, 1870. Interest grew but there were no organized undertakings until the winter of 1884-85. A club with approximately 80 members was formed which built a slide on the Military Grounds near the northeastern corner of Wellington Street and Central Avenue. Both *The Daily Free Press* and *The London Advertiser* carried the club's first advertisement on Saturday, January 3, 1885, in the "Amusements" column. The ad informed the public that family season tickets would cost \$5 and they could be purchased by applying to bank clerk W.B. Wolseley at the Bank of Montreal.

*Behold the toboggan,
a new-fangled notion,*

*A broad board and
thin, that's turned up
at the ends,*

*And goes down a hill
with a swiftness of
motion*

*Which naught but a
flash to the scenery
lends.*

- Unknown¹

Right: *The Daily Free
Press*, Jan. 17, 1888



The slide was a wooden ramp about 4.5 metres wide on an incline of 45 degrees. Stairs on one side, with a narrow ramp for pulling up the four-seater toboggans, led to a landing at the top of the double chute, enabling two toboggans to descend at the same time. The planking was flooded to make a thin coating of ice down its face. The run ended after gliding across 60 to 75 metres of compacted snow on the level ground. The Seventh Fusiliers' Band serenaded the merrymakers who could get refreshments in the nearby Gun Shed to the south of Central Avenue.

A new advertisement appeared in *The Daily Free Press* on Monday, January 19, 1885, (subsequently carried by its rival newspaper) stating that the slide would be open afternoons and evenings to subscribers. While the fee schedule for families remained the same, gentlemen's season tickets would cost \$3 and ladies' season tickets would be \$2. People should "Apply to Caretaker." Two days later, the newspapers carried this additional announcement: "Tobogganing – A grand fete open to the public, will be given on the Military Grounds on Wednesday evening, Jan. 21 and every following Wednesday, weather permitting, from 8 to 10 o'clock. Admission 25 cents. Toboggans can be hired at the grounds." The next day it was reported that: "... Owing to the intense cold the attendance was hardly so large as expected, but a jolly time was put in by those present ..."

The Robert Wallace store, "Clothier and Gents' Outfitters" at 146 Dundas Street, advertised "Tobogganing Costumes Made To Order On Short Notice." The store had a good selection of blue, white and fancy striped blankets in stock for making coats, as well as various colours of sashes to match. Thomas Beattie & Co. at 176-178 Dundas Street also carried ladies and misses long woolen tobogganing stockings in all sizes and would make blanket coats to order "on the shortest notice."

Full Stock TOBOGGAN BLANKETS

JUST TO HAND.

- Navy, with Old Gold Border.*
- Navy, with Cardinal Border.*
- Royal Blue, with Black Border.*
- Royal Blue, with Gold Border.*
- Royal Blue, with Fancy Border.*
- Cardinal, with Blue Border.*
- White, with Blue Border.*
- White, with Fancy Border.*
- Grey, with Fancy Border.*

Plain White, Grey and Garnet
Full Ranges in Tuques, Sashes and Stockings.

BURNS & BAPTY,
154 DUNDAS STREET.

London Advertiser, Jan. 26, 1888

These coats with their colourful borders reached down to the knees and were tied at the waist with knitted scarves adorned with tassels, as were the matching knitted tuques. Ladies often wore variations of this headgear, but buckskin moccasins were the choice of all. A suit could cost upward of \$10 while a toboggan could range from \$3.50 to \$100.

The initial newspaper report said: "There seems to be no danger attending this sport, as there is nothing at the foot of the incline to collide with, and an upset is seldom seen." ² A month later, however, a different story appeared in *The London Advertiser*: "A devotee of the toboggan sport at the military grounds has been laid up for two days with a seriously damaged countenance sustained while enjoying an audacious dash on the slide." Accidents at other locations in Canada and the United States became more widespread. A man at Woodstock was knocked senseless and hurt badly when he ran into a fence. In spite of such reports, as many as 75 toboggans a night could be found at the slide.

Well-known American humorist Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) and novelist George W. Cable appeared at Victoria Hall in London on February 13, 1885. The next morning they visited Hellmuth Ladies' College on the northern extension of Richmond Street at the Thames River where they were introduced to tobogganing on the school's hills. The students took advantage of the occasion to get their guests' autographs.

1885-86

By December 1885, *The Daily Free Press* reported on plans for a new season of fun in the area. "There is talk of organizing a tobogganing club in Parkhill this winter. Last season a few parties indulged in this pastime there." The weather co-operated enough for the slide on the Military Grounds to re-open on Monday, January 11, 1886. Approximately 150 people paid \$3 for single membership badges in the London club or \$6 per family. Secretary Gordon, on behalf of the board of directors, had arranged for a room in the old Crystal Palace, a short distance eastward, to be furnished with a stove and adequate seating for the ladies. Hot coffee and snacks were available to all. Toboggans were kept on tables in another part of the building where they could be stored conveniently for the whole season for a small fee.³

The starting platform was 38 feet (11.6 m) high, while the double chute was sided and divided by foot-high boards and was 160 feet (48.6 m) long. The course was lit by two rows of lanterns which went from the top of the ramp down to the end of the 85-metre-long run where a cushioning bank of snow was piled up against the street-side fence. A wide cross-section of the public made use of the slide. Mature family men with children in tow mingled with fearless young boys intent on taking their trips standing up and first-time sliders whose uncertain expressions soon changed to eager anticipation

for the next descent. Young couples had their own way of doing things as the gentleman waited solicitously for his lady to settle herself in the front, then, on the word, he quickly pushed off, leaping onto the back end before steadying the craft down the course. There were always a few brash types who tried to start too soon before the previous toboggan had passed the red light marking the bottom of the chute. The men in charge had to keep them from pushing off before the red starter's flag was dropped at that point.

Meanwhile, negotiations had been going on for some time to exchange the centrally-located militia grounds north and east of Victoria Park for a more distant site. Finally, a contract was signed in February 1886 which paved the way for the move to Carling's farm on the south side of Oxford Street, well to the east of Adelaide. The city soon found other uses for the former military lands, such as building lots and a baseball field. This meant that a new location was needed for a slide. Rumours of such a change had been fuelled by an anonymous letter to a local newspaper in January. When a *Free Press* reporter asked Secretary Gordon about this possibility, he brushed it off with: "I don't think it worthwhile paying attention to his [the writer's] absurdities." But big things were afoot behind the scenes.

1886-87

Plans for a new toboggan slide on the east bank of the Thames River, between the forks and Blackfriars Bridge, were made public in early December of 1886. William Tytler was the contractor who would build the 480-foot-long (146 m) wooden structure said to be going in behind Edward Harris' home at Eldon House. In fact, the location proved to be several blocks further up Ridout Street near the west end of Albert Street on a vacant lot owned by Col. John Walker, Registrar of Middlesex County.

The starting point for the dual chute, boarded down its entire length, would be 4.5 metres above the top of the high river embankment, then it would dip southerly, crossing over the head-race north of Joseph D. Saunby's Blackfriars Mill and end on the river flats. It opened the week before Christmas with the added excitement of three overhead electric lights! This innovation helped to attract crowds of people on a nightly basis.⁴

Other changes were taking place too, for Mr. Gordon had been replaced as secretary of the London Toboggan Club by George B. Beddome, a teller at Molsons Bank. He lived on Albert Street, conveniently close to the slide. Also, instead of locally made-to-order clothing, Robert Wallace's store began advertising its stock of men's tobogganing suits made in Montreal especially for their trade here in London. Of course, there were tuques and sashes to match "at prices much lower than these goods have been heretofore offered at." Membership fees, however, remained the same.

REID'S HARDWARE
 —FOR—
SPRING SKATES,
STAR TOBOGGANS,
HAND SLEIGHS,
 Boys' Coasters and Babies' Cutters.
 All of the above at prices that cannot be
 beat.
JAS. REID & CO.,
 No. 118 (north side) Dundas Street.

London Advertiser, Jan. 17, 1888, p. 3

An unidentified *Free Press* reporter wrote a glowing article after experiencing the slide first-hand in January 1887. He painted a word picture worthy of repeating – in part at least. He mentioned tobogganing's modest beginnings on the Military Grounds and how quickly its popularity had grown, then

continued: "What was wanted was something approaching a natural slide, steep and long. The gentleman whose practical eye discovered such a spot on Blackfriars Hill is deserving of a knighthoodThe long and sharp incline at that beautiful spot has been transformed into what is undoubtedly one of the finest slides in the Dominion."

He went on to describe his ride, saying: "It was but the work of a few moments to place the scribe on the front of the toboggan with a lady behind (this was mean), and the tobogganist, with one leg swinging free as a kind of rudder, at the back. Somebody gave the sled a shove and away she went. As what is called the 'main dip' came in sight, the reporter's heart collided with his epiglottis, his hair bristled up on end, and he thought if he had to go down there it would be well if he had made a will disposing of his various estates before leaving home."

The steersman's advice to "Hold on tightly!" was totally unnecessary. The reporter continued: "They say when a man begins to go downhill, he is apt to go pretty fast. Anyone who doubts this has not passed through the experience of shooting down a genuine toboggan slide. The sensation is a sort of cross between falling down a well and getting married. You feel you are going, it may be all right, it is too late to stop, but just where you are going to land or how the time will end is terribly uncertain. Fast? No express train ever equalled the speed, the terrific momentum which the toboggan attains at that supreme moment; but it is soon over. There is a whizz, a thousand electric shocks as the frosty air cuts against your face, a flash as you pass one, two, three electric lights, and then you glide swiftly over the ice and snow on the river, bump over half a dozen little hillocks and finally come to a standstill about three or four hundred yards from the point of starting. The walk back up by a winding, easy path, is where the exercise comes in."

Later that month, the safety standards at the slide were put to the test. Three young ladies and one young gentleman began their downward journey but just past the “dip”, the lady at the front lost her grip and fell off. After the sled hurtled past her, she rolled and slid to the level portion of the chute on her own momentum. “Fortunately, the rule which prohibits a second sled from going down until the first has passed a certain point was being observed at the time.” The young lady sustained no ill effects but did not venture down the slide again that day.⁵

1887-88

London's next tobogganing season did not get under way until January of 1888 when two slides began competing for patrons. The 800-member London Toboggan Club opened a new slide farther up the eastern embankment of the Thames. It was usually called the north end or London North slide. The dual chute was higher and longer than the previous one, being 82 feet (25 m) high and 780 feet (238 m) long with a total run of 1,620 feet (495 m). It took 21 seconds for the descent but the riders faced a long walk back up the path dragging their toboggans. J.C. Dodd & Sons, the contractors, used nearly 60,000 feet of lumber in its construction. The slide and its equipment, including four electric lights, cost \$1,600. Its starting point was west of Talbot Street near Mill Street and it angled in a northwesterly direction behind the Carling Brewery, finishing on the flats near the Oxford Street bridge.

Over 2,000 people watched the preliminary heats of the club's first (and only) annual races on the evening of Tuesday, January 17th. There were 33 entries: six for the mixed tandem, 18 for the gentleman's tandem and nine for the gentleman's fours. Because of the large number of entries, the run-offs had to be postponed to January 20th and the finals were held on January 21st. Subsequently, Mr. Lefroy and lady won the mixed tandem in a very close race on his “Star” toboggan, while Masuret and

Mulkern won the gentleman's tandem, by a nose, on Mr. Masuret's “Dart”. The gentleman's fours was won by the team of Tuson, Furness, Collett and Macbeth on Mr. Perrin's “Blizzard.”⁶

Not to be outdone, London South opened its own facility that January. At that time, the area referred to as London South was still part of Westminster Township and was not annexed into the city until 1890. The Victoria Toboggan Slide⁷ was located on the hill on the north side of Craig Street, within view of the Victoria bridge to the east. Vacant lots between 47 and 57 Craig Street provided adequate space for this venture. From the brink of the hill, riders accelerated down the icy chutes, then flew through two dips on an open course across the flats where they were challenged by a few trees for added excitement. Sometimes toboggans ended their run by careening over the riverbank onto the ice. Since the Thames was quite shallow here, drowning was not a concern. This area would be transformed into Thames Park several decades later. The club's races were held on the evening of February 10th when calcium or lime lights were used to illuminate the scene. The winners were captained by Mr. Barker for the mixed twos, John Livesley for the threes and Charles Tuson for the fours.

The London Toboggan Club held a special event at the north end slide on February 14th – a carnival to raise funds for the Convalescent Home. Over \$130 was cleared after the directors paid all the expenses for the illuminations and fireworks. Eight sleds vied for a silver cup donated by the president, businessman George S. Birrell. The winning team, captained by Mr. McNab, included Bernard C. McCann, Edward Sayers and James B. McKillop.⁸ If that cup still exists, it would be one of London's rarest artifacts.

Later that week, Ralph Hodgins suffered a serious injury while tobogganing at the Victoria slide. He owned the Hodgins House, formerly known as Balkwill's Hotel, on the northwest corner of King and Talbot streets. He had been born in Biddulph Township, the

sixth of eleven children of Edward “Gully Ned” and Catherine (Ralph) Hodgins.⁹ Although he tried to avoid a collision with another toboggan by rolling out of its way, he was struck in the head, receiving a concussion which left him unconscious for over an hour. After he was taken home to his hotel, Dr. J.M. Piper attended him.¹⁰ Having remodelled his hotel, Hodgins sold it in 1888 and became the lessee of the White Sulphur Springs baths at the forks of the Thames. He died on January 26, 1892, at the age of forty. His seven brothers and a brother-in-law were pallbearers at his funeral. Could his early death have been the result of lingering effects from the concussion he received at the Victoria slide?

The Daily Free Press noted on February 17, 1888, that: “Delaware boasts the finest natural toboggan slide in Western Ontario. When the machine is let loose on the top it lands the occupants a distance of half a mile in less than a minute.” The Thames River valley has some precipitous slopes at this location which were put to good use by the sporting crowd.

Another county tobogganing site was at Peter McIntyre's farm just north of the village of Komoka in Lobo Township. His house still stands on the top of the hill at 22929 Komoka Road in Middlesex Centre. The run started below the south side of his home, then dropped sharply over the steep face of the hill and ended near the spot where a new railway station would be built in 1890.

1888-89

In London, James Shaw, manager of the Victoria slide, began advertising its imminent opening in mid-December of 1888. People could purchase their season's badges at Halle's music store on Richmond Street or at Shaw's grocery store in London South.

At the same time, a new contender came on the scene when Robert Bremner, brother of London newspaperman Archie Bremner, advertised that his Richmond

Toboggan Slide would be opening soon. Badges could be bought at Thomas Gillean's jewelry store or at the slide's on-site office at the southern terminus of Richmond Street at the Thames River. There was no bridge there at that time. Membership rates were: families - \$5; singles - \$3; ladies - \$1. It opened on December 20th with a good crowd on hand. The course of the slide, which started just above Hunt's dam, went straight up the frozen river and was lit by electric lights. The return trip was made by way of a gradually rising route along the riverbank which eliminated the need to climb any steps. Unfortunately, a thaw set in which adversely affected the condition of the ice and showed the fundamental weakness of this type of slide. The following ad appeared in *The Daily Free Press* on January 2, 1889:

RICHMOND TOBOGGAN SLIDE –
In consequence of the unfavorable season, the proprietor has determined to reduce the prices as follows: Family and gentlemen, \$2; ladies, \$1. Those who have paid full rates will have their money refunded to the above scale on application at the Slide office.

After the return of cold weather, London South's slide re-opened on January 10, 1889. Manager James Shaw lived nearby and worked for his father, George, who owned the grocery store at the corner of Craig Street and Wortley Road. James prepared the slide for the crowd that evening by using several teams of horses pulling scrapers to cover any bare spots with snow. He also made sure the chutes were well coated with ice. The Richmond slide was able to resume operations five days later.

The Glenmore slide was completed later that month.¹¹ Several sleigh-loads of London Hunt Club members tried it out for the first time on January 23rd, then enjoyed a few games of whist in the clubhouse. The original Glenmore property was in London Township on the east side of what would become Western Road. The

clubhouse was high atop the south bank of Medway Creek on land that would eventually become part of the campus of Western University. Mr. L. Bartlett also had a slide that year at the south end of Colborne Street on the banks of the south branch of the Thames. By the end of the month, *The London Advertiser* announced: "All the toboggan slides are now in full blast, and the citizens may have unlimited choices."

The touring Albani Company arrived in London on Thursday, February 14th, much to the delight of local opera lovers. Emma Albani was a French Canadian soprano who had studied in Montreal, Paris and Milan before making her debut at London, England's Covent Garden in 1872. The London Hunt Club invited the members of the company out to Glenmore on Friday afternoon where they inspected the kennels before trying out the toboggan slide for a short time. The ladies, in particular, appreciated that fun. Next, a fox was released: "... followed by the hounds and two or three mounts. Luckily the animal described a circle [circled back] and was caught and killed in view of the entire party. The troupe returned to the city delighted with the pleasant treatment they had received." After the evening's performance at the Grand Theatre, several Hunt Club officials were personally received by Albani who thanked them for their hospitality but added that she was "so sorry for the poor little fox."¹²

That same evening, a series of races took place at the Victoria slide between two toboggan teams. *The London Advertiser* reported that: "The sliding was the finest of the season, the course extending over the ice on the river."

"Jack the Ripper", owned by William Moore, with his crew of C. Tatham and H. Turner, took on B. Harding, H. Harding and Thomas Gerry on Egerton R. Robinson's "Blizzard". The latter were successful.

Tobogganers participated in the sport at various locations beyond the city in 1889. A new slide was built in Lobo Township by a number of young men of the neighbourhood, patterning it after the one they had seen in London. John Lamont's farm on the corner of the Lobo-Caradoc townline (Amiens Road) and the 5th concession (Lamont Drive) is now in the municipality of Middlesex Centre. The farm's natural terrain had an ideal spot for a toboggan run on a steep hillside leading down into the Gold Creek valley.

A large wooden structure, four or five metres high with a railed platform, was built above the brow of the hill. This platform was large enough to hold several people and a toboggan and was reached by a ladder stairway. A boarded chute with several dips was built down the incline to provide extra speed and thrills before the toboggans shot across the snow-packed course on the valley's floor. The run took approximately 10 seconds under ideal conditions and was well lit by hanging lanterns. Crowds gathered here nightly by the sleigh-load from such nearby villages as Komoka, Poplar Hill, Ivan, Coldstream and even as far away as Strathroy, bringing their toboggans with them.¹³ This slide was only a few kilometres northwest of Peter McIntyre's place. In order to stave off the competition, McIntyre refurbished his slide, raising its height by about nine metres.



Left:
Site of the 1889 toboggan run
on Amiens Road south of Lamont Drive.

Photo credit: Amanda McEwen

1889-90-91

The winter of 1889-90 was unusually warm. Virtually no snow fell until the second week of February 1890. *The London Advertiser* reported that for the first time in memory, Lake Erie's "Rond Eau" had been ice-free and navigable for small boats. Although the Lamont slide had been discontinued, Peter McIntyre's run was still open for business once the snow reappeared. Faced with a shortened tobogganing schedule in London, manager James Shaw decided against issuing seasonal badges and sold nightly admission tickets only at the Victoria slide.

In an apparent turnaround, the winter of 1890-91 started early. There were large crowds at the opening of the London South slide on December 6th and the north end slide on December 12, 1890. In spite of this renewed impetus, the writing was on the wall. A local shoe store clerk told a *Free Press* reporter: "We are not selling moccasins this winter. They have ceased to be the rage, as they were two years ago." The city's snow plows were needed eleven times before Christmas but only once afterwards. The weather had curtailed most tobogganing by the middle of January 1891. On January 19, 1892, the same newspaper stated that sleigh ride parties were "all the rage". Tobogganing was not mentioned once.

The exciting but brief era of the big toboggan slides was over. Did some fickle weather play a role in their demise or did people simply decide that natural hills could provide

them with enough pleasure? They might have been shorter or less precipitous than the artificial slopes but they were free. Skating, snowshoeing, sleighing and tobogganing were all popular in a day when people were used to making their own amusements. Skiing had not yet come into its own.

Some enthusiasts tried to revive the big slide idea early in 1920 when a new city reservoir was about to be built on the heights overlooking Springbank Park. It was suggested that a major toboggan run, more than 600 metres long, could be created by embanking the road that snaked its way down the hill to the park's pumphouse entrance. Why not build it, along with the reservoir, and include its cost in the estimates? Proponents mentioned the five-mile-long Christiana slide in Norway which was served by cable cars. With some creative planning, London could have a smaller version of that world-famous winter destination. Alas, when E.V. Buchanan, general manager of the Public Utilities Commission, was presented with the proposal, he turned it down.¹⁴

Although skiing and snowboarding may top the list of current winter sports, the first good snowfall still finds people happily sliding down hills, free or otherwise, on anything that glides. Recreational demands for large-scale downhill thrills are being met by clubs and commercial facilities, but the big toboggan slides of the nineteenth century undoubtedly sparked the trend toward the mammoth groomed runs of today.

End Notes

1. author unknown, *The Daily Free Press*, January 25, 1886, p. 8, c. 4
2. *Ibid*, January 19, 1885, p. 3, c. 4
3. *Ibid*, January 25, 1886, p. 8, c. 3
4. *Ibid*, December 13, 1886, p. 3, c. 2
5. *Ibid*, January 20, 1887, p. 3, c. 2
6. *The London Advertiser*, January 23, 1888, p. 1, c. 3
7. *The Daily Free Press*, January 17, 1888, p. 5, cc. 3-5
8. *The London Advertiser*, February 15, 1888, p. 5, c. 1
9. Lester Hodgins, compiler, *Hodgins ... Kindred Forever*, (Vancouver, B.C.: International Centre Hodgins Family History Society, 1977), p. 188
10. *The Daily Free Press*, February 20, 1888, p. 8, c. 2
11. *The London Advertiser*, January 25, 1889, p. 8, c. 3
12. *Ibid*, February 18, 1889, p. 6, c. 3
13. Florence Tilden Harrison, "Big Toboggan Slide At Lamont Farm In Lobo Provided Many Winter Thrills", *The London Free Press*, January 6, 1951, p. 12, the writer's mother was a Lamont
14. *Ibid*, February 17, 1920, p. 2, c. 4