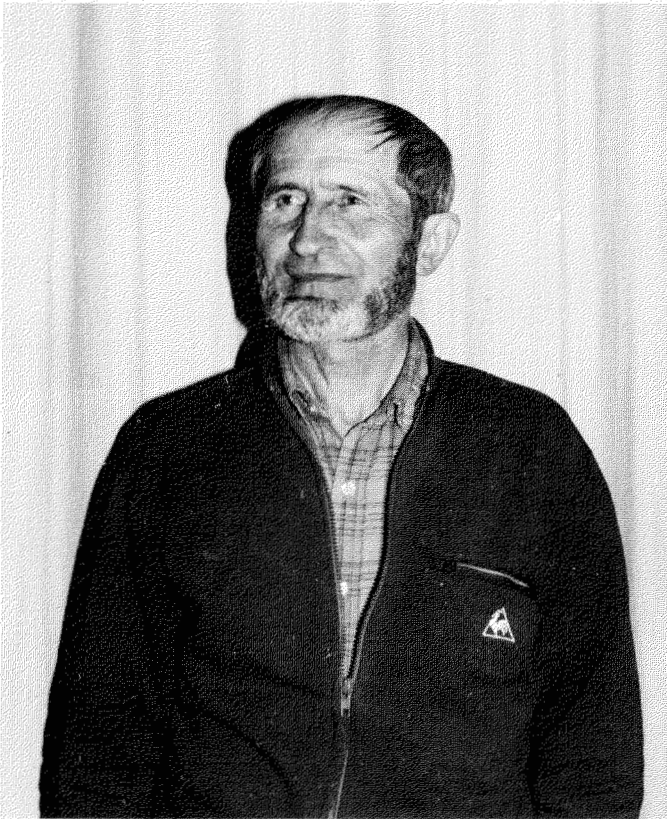


## Father J.M. Mouchet

“Motivation!” That single word, spoken with a strong French accent and remarkable conviction, resonates in the ears of hundreds of northern Canadian cross-country skiers, past and present. The speaker, Father J.M. Mouchet, O.M.I., played an instrumental role in introducing the sport to the North in the 1960s. His remarkable dedication and enthusiasm for cross-country skiing — for the North, and for the Native people — has left a mark on the entire region.

J.M. Mouchet was born in France on 1 May 1917. After studies in philosophy and theology, he was ordained as a priest in 1945. During this time, Mouchet developed a lifelong interest in competitive skiing. His church calling, however, was interrupted by the Second World War. Mouchet joined the French Resistance and was taken prisoner by the Gestapo shortly before the end of the war. Five of his companions were shot. Mouchet and the remaining survivors were liberated by American soldiers.



At the end of the war, Mouchet emigrated to Canada, where he commenced missionary work among the Indians at Watson Lake and Teslin in the Yukon Territory. After a year in that posting, he moved to Telegraph Creek, an isolated Native settlement in northern British Columbia, where he stayed for nine years. He was then assigned to Old Crow in the northern Yukon. The Catholic church first attempted to establish a presence in the Porcupine River area in the 1860s

but had been rebuffed by the combined efforts of the Anglican church and the Hudson's Bay Company. Always persistent, Catholic officials again visited Old Crow and asked local Native leaders if there was enough interest to justify establishing a mission. The leaders suggested there was, and Mouchet was sent to the community to build a new church and establish a congregation.

The hospitable Old Crow Gwitch'in had misrepresented the village's enthusiasm for the Catholic church. Although Mouchet, usually with an assistant, remained in Old Crow for 25 years, he was not able to make sizable religious inroads into the solidly Anglican community. Few people attended his church, although he became a valued member of the community. The Natives' reluctance to accept the Catholic faith did not deter Father Mouchet, for he carried a very broad definition of mission into the Canadian North and sought alternate outlets for his energy and enthusiasm.

Always an active sportsman, Mouchet was very impressed with the Natives' physical fitness, which he attributed to their active lifestyle and adaptation to their environment. He further believed that the Natives faced tremendous social and economic changes as a result of the expansion of non-Native society in the North. Physical achievement through cross-country skiing, he believed, offered Native children the self-esteem and the physical and mental toughness to deal with rapidly changing times.

Mouchet put these ideas into action. He organized cross-country skiing teams in Old Crow and, with the assistance of others who shared his vision, in Inuvik. The Native participants in the Territorial Experimental Ski Training (TEST) Programme proved the correctness of his vision. A number of the skiers that he brought into the sport became members of Canada's national ski team; the Firth sisters, Sharon and Shirley, are examples. Native skiers dominated skiing competitions throughout the North for a number of years.

Continued social and economic change in the northern communities interfered with the progress of the ski-training program, and Mouchet moved his training scheme to Whitehorse, where it was introduced into the elementary school system. From modest beginnings — with seven pairs of skis at Takhini Elementary — the cross-country ski training program became one of the most popular participation sports in the territory.

The shift in the sport away from the Native people remains a cause of unhappiness for Mouchet. He fears that the northern communities are, in his words, in a “transitional phase” and that the children are suffering as a result of the changes. He remains convinced that the use of competitive and recreational sports, if properly supported by parents, could serve as an important vehicle in providing Native and non-Native children with “more self-esteem and confidence, motivation and a tool for the rest of their lives in a complex and complicated world.”

Father Mouchet now resides in Whitehorse. He continues to be active in cross-country skiing, showing the same dedi-



cation and encouragement that he first brought to the Canadian North over forty years ago. Hundreds of children, Native and non-Native, have benefitted from his commitment and encouragement. All who have been subjected to his gentle prodding, who have heard him speak of the importance of “motivation” and have had him press them to set new, lofty goals for themselves, carry those lessons with them forever. Father J.M. Mouchet is truly a “gentle” man, an individual

of dedication, commitment, community spirit and compassion. The North is stronger for his vision and his energy.

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