

# Bringing Home the Gold

*by Carrol J. Swanson • illustrated by Joan Waites*

“Has the man lost his mind?”

“What are those newfangled contraptions on his feet?”

The questions flew like snowflakes, but John Thompson paid them no heed. He tightened the straps of his long skis, slipped a mailbag on one shoulder, and turned toward the towering Sierra Nevada Mountains.

“We’ll expect you back with the mail,” the California postmaster said. But in fact, no one at the Placerville Post Office thought they would ever see John Thompson again.

The year was 1856, and the gold rush was in full swing. Each winter, roads to the gold-mining towns were buried under tons of snow, making travel by wagon or horseback impossible.

Without a way to transport supplies and mail, business came to a halt. Finally, postal authorities advertised for someone to make winter deliveries.

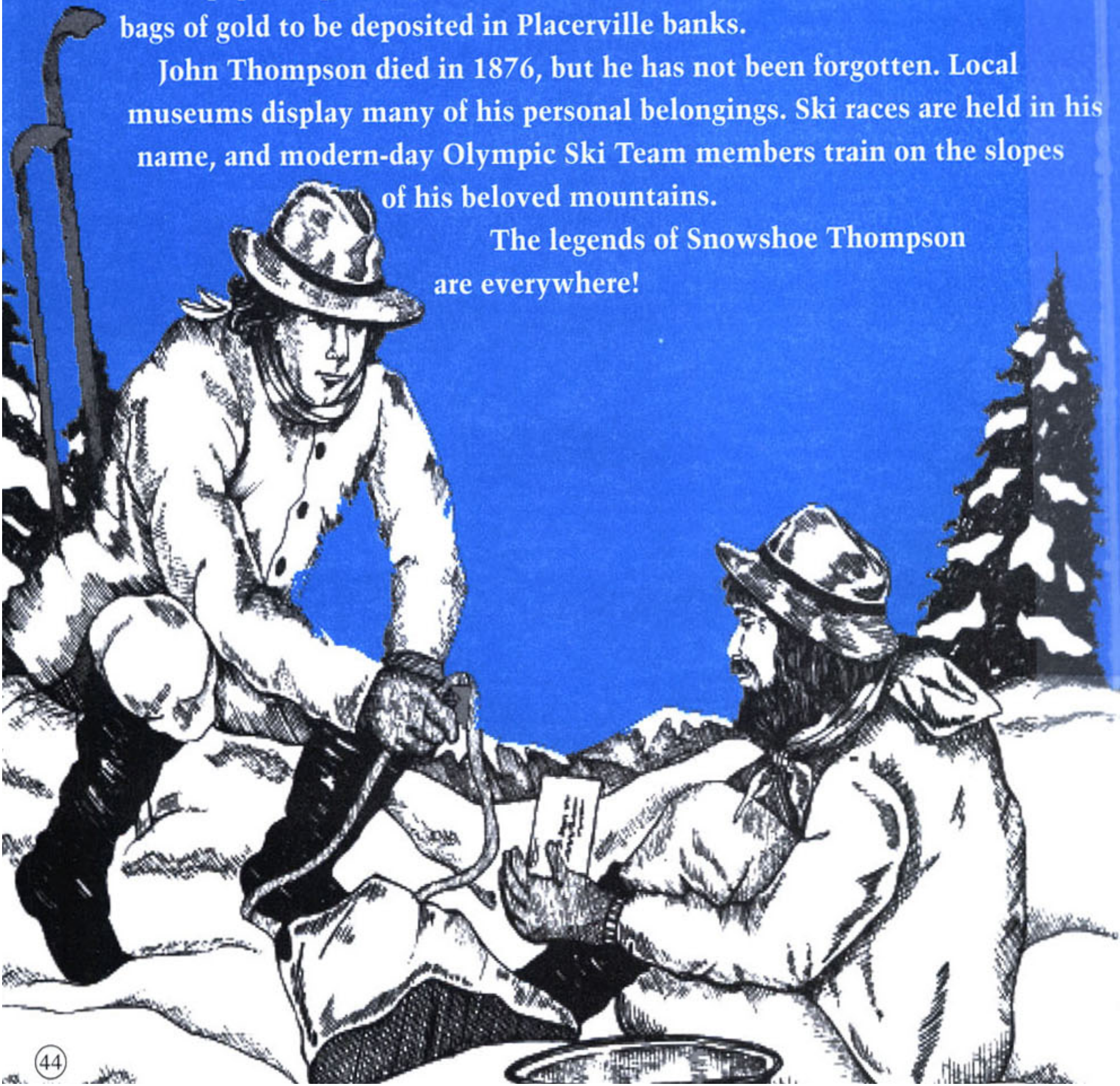
Although it had been 20 years since Thompson left Norway to settle in America,

“I would have given much for a gun that day,” he later wrote in his journal. Between deliveries, Snowshoe carved new skies and worked to improve the leather foot bindings. But he never had much time to rest. Every time someone was lost or injured, Snowshoe was called to the rescue. Leaving his wife and son in their warm farmhouse, he would once again challenge the mountains. Stranded miners, snowbound travelers, lost gold diggers – he found them all.

Besides the mail, Snowshoe packed household items, tools, and medical supplies. When the town of Genoa, Nevada, set up a printing press, he brought bundles of paper to print their first newspaper! And on return trips, he carried bags of gold to be deposited in Placerville banks.

John Thompson died in 1876, but he has not been forgotten. Local museums display many of his personal belongings. Ski races are held in his name, and modern-day Olympic Ski Team members train on the slopes of his beloved mountains.

The legends of Snowshoe Thompson are everywhere!



he remembered his boyhood love of skiing. He made a pair of skis and reported for duty at the post office.

When Thompson set off, there was no room in the mailbag for provisions so he carried his food in his jacket pockets. Because he wanted to travel light, he took no extra clothing.

The journey to Carson, Nevada, was mostly uphill, through mountain peaks 1,400 feet high. He made the 90-mile trip in three days. He was mobbed by miners overjoyed to receive their mail. Most of them had never seen skis before and mistakenly thought they were fancy snowshoes. They promptly named their hero "Snowshoe."

Traveling without a map, Snowshoe used the sun and stars for navigation. At night, he slept with his feet facing the flames of his campfire. Pine branches served as his mattress, and the mail sack cradled his head. In the most severe blizzards, he camped in one of the many caves dotting the mountains. And when thaws made the snow too wet for skiing – he walked!

Although he often crossed the tracks made by wild animals, he never carried a weapon. Once, he met a pack of howling wolves who snarled hungrily, showing their glistening fangs. As they surrounded him, he quickly skied away.

