

Snowmobiling

Kenny Nachtman

By: Shane Henderson



A snowmobile is a one or two passenger vehicle with one or two skis in front and an engine driven track to propel it. Snowmobiles have been around since the twenties. The first snowmobile made was powered by an airplane propeller and steered with a single ski. In 1958 the Bombardier Company came out with the first conventional easy to ride snowmobile. Snowmobiles have different shapes, sizes and colors. Although snowmobiling is fun, it is also dangerous. Over one million accidents have been reported over a ten year period (1960-1970). Since snowmobiling is such a hazardous sport, and since many have had fun and accidents on snowmobiles, it only seemed relevant to research snowmobiling. I interviewed Kenny Nachtman who owns and operates a snowmobile shop in Milner, Colorado. He told me about his

business and his interest in snowmobiling, as well as the history that he knew about the sport.

"I was born in Nebraska; I have lived in Colorado since 1969. In Nebraska I lived on a ranch; those were the good old days. I was a country kid; I had a good childhood. Since I've lived in Colorado, it's changed a lot. There are a lot more people. My wife's maiden name is Norma Jo Dunkley; she's a long time resident of Routt County. Before I went into the snowmobile business, I worked in construction. I did office work, I was a timekeeper and a payroll and office manager for construction companies. In college at Colorado State University, I studied construction management. I took shop classes, mechanics, wood working and iron and welding classes. In Nebraska I mostly did farming work.

"I bought my first snowmobile in 1968 in

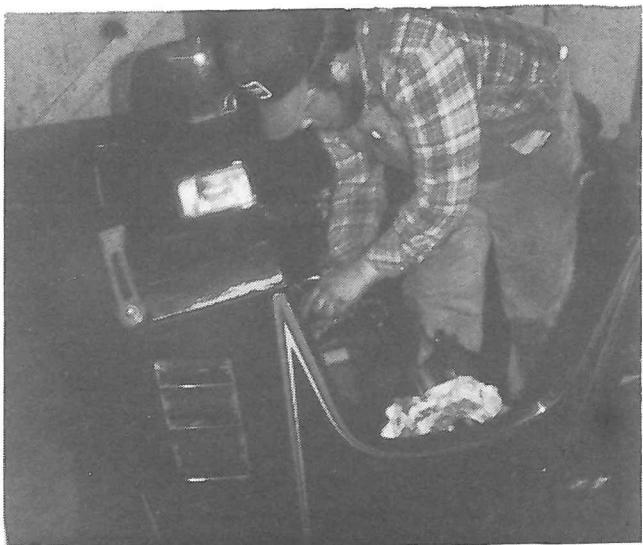
Pagosa Springs. I'll tell you, one machine with two people just does not get it. I decided that I was going to have another sled if I had to go into dealing to get it. In a round about way, that's how it happened. You see we were looking for a place to move to after I finished my work at Pagosa Springs and I decided I'd like to go into dealing snowmobiles. We found this place here in Milner and got the dealership right away. Routt County was the only place that was away from people where there was room to ride and demonstrate the machines. Now dealerships are hard to get, but they used to be fairly easy. To get a dealership you've got to meet a lot of qualifications. Such as room for inventory, tools, financial status and so on. It can get real expensive. When I started in '69, I can't say for sure, but it cost roughly around five thousand dollars to start the business. Now it would be at least twice that amount.



There are many different types of snowmobiles.

"Today I think there are five snowmobile manufacturers, compared to about 117 in the late sixties and early seventies. The most expensive snowmobile in 1969, when I started, was under \$1,000. Today (1984) the cheapest snowmobile I sell is almost twice as much as yesterday's machine. The most expensive sled I sell today would cost about \$4,800. But for \$4,800 you get a liquid cooled engine. Liquid cooled engines are heavier and they cost more. A fan cooled engine of the same size could cost as much as \$1,000 less than the liquid cooled engine. Liquid cooled engines are more expensive in the start, but if you do a lot of hard riding it would be worth the extra money to have a liquid cooled engine because they last longer and have better performance. Most of my business comes from Steamboat, but I get some business from Hayden, Craig, Meeker, and even Baggs, Wyoming. So far, this year has been good for the

snowmobile business; probably one of the best years I've had."



It takes several hours for a good tune-up.

I asked Kenny why you have to have that ugly little sticker on the side of the snowmobiles. He replied, "The reason is Government Bureaucratic outfits. Like everything else you have to have a license to do it. It started out with the idea that the money from it would pay for groomed trails and it would also help prevent theft. The registration sticker started out at \$3.00, then it was \$5.00, and now it's \$8.00 and next year it's going to be \$10.00. Ever since the registration started new laws started. You can't ride on public roads or highways. You aren't supposed to ride without an adult, there are laws not to chase wildlife, laws on how to cross the highway, and if you get caught without it by a Parks and Recreation Officer, it's a \$25 fine. Insurance on snowmobiles is getting very big. A person can't afford to buy a sled for \$5,000 and not have insurance.

"I ride all over Routt County. We ride in the Steamboat Lake area, we ride in the Rabbit Ears area, we also ride Dunkley Pass, Oak Creek and the California Park area. Last year I made my first trip out of the state to Wyoming, which was a real adventure. I ride any place it snows. One day a couple of years ago I rode over 125 miles in one day over by Oak Creek in the Flat Tops, Sand Peak area, and I've also snowmobiled in June on Rabbit Ears."

Next Kenny talked about tune-ups and how to ride.

"How often you get a tune-up depends on how much you ride. If you ride just one or two times a year you don't have to tune it. If you ride week-in, week-out, and put several thousand miles on it, you need to check it over more often. A tune-up on a snowmobile consists of changing the oils in the gear case and chain cases and checking

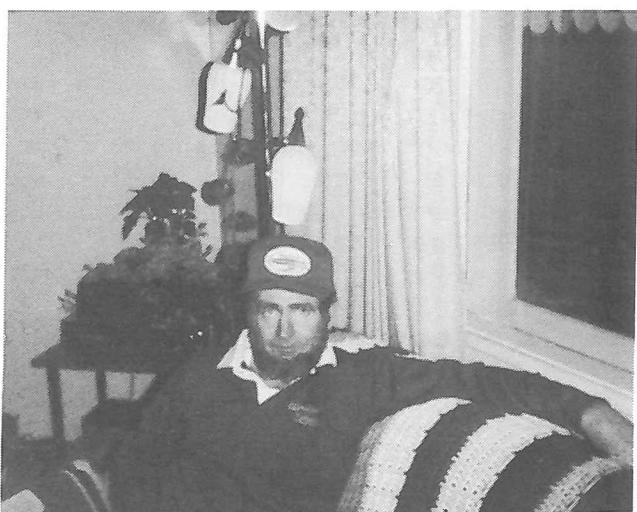
the carburetors to see that they are working properly. Check the clutch, set the timing, points and plugs. Checking the alignment of the engine and the alignment of the track, checking for loose or broken nuts and bolts, putting in a new fuel filter — there's a million different things — it just depends on how much money you want to spend on a tune-up. It takes two to three hours for a good tune-up. I would say over all, that clutches break down most often on snowmobiles. In the summertime you should run gas preservative through the fuel tank. You should lift the track off the ground and take the belt off. It wouldn't hurt to wash it. You should always run a good high octane premium gasoline through the tank; it will extend the engine's life. The main problem beginner snowmobilers have is that they see someone who knows how to ride and it looks easy. They get on it and it's a totally different situation. Most people have the tendency to buy



A racing snowmobile of the past.

something too big, fast and powerful to learn on. You can't just sit down on a snowmobile, especially in deep powder. You've got to get up and ride it sort of like a dirt bike, maneuver your body, use a lot of body English. A beginner should start out with a smaller sled. It would have less weight and less horsepower making it easier to ride and control. Power can get you into trouble and power can get you out of trouble. A person has just got to gradually learn how to use power in snowmobiling. In the past few years snowmobile manufacturers have done a lot to make the power quieter. Fifteen years ago snowmobiles were very, very loud. Nowadays snowmobiles are very quiet and very powerful.

"I've seen many accidents, I've been in quite a few myself too. One time I saw a snowmobile that fell off the back of a pickup truck on the highway; it was destroyed. I've had many ac-



cidents. I have had a broken nose, a broken vertebrae and several broken thumbs. When you ride a little bit over your limit all of the time, you are bound to have accidents. I believe snowmobiling is really increasing. The economy



is bad but people always like to have fun. People need recreation. I believe that snowmobiling is really on the upswing. Over the last six years I have averaged about 50 new sleds and 15-20 used sleds. When I started dealing snowmobiles back in 1969 I sold 11 or 12 sleds; I averaged 10 to 15 sleds for the first three to four years, then it slowed way down, and then it really started





picking up again in about 1978. Summertime business for me is about none. In the summer I work at the coal mine. Every once in a great while someone will bring his machine in in the summer to get it worked on but most people wait until the last minute."

Next Kenny talked about new technology in snowmobiling and why a good snowmobile company pulled out of the business.

"Today you can get a liquid cooled engine in a snowmobile, ten years ago it was unheard of. With the new engines the snowmobile manufacturers are making today, it is almost necessary to have dual carburetors. Dual carburetors increase horsepower and throttle response, but they don't really give you that bad of gas mileage. I would say that dual carburetors give you the same, if not more, gas mileage than a single carburetor; dual carburetors are a definite advantage. About the only thing the snowmobile industry hasn't done is put a four stroke engine into a snowmobile. The reason for this is that four stroke engines weigh more and they are not as quick, they just wouldn't work very well in a snowmobile. But who knows, I

imagine that someday they will put four stroke engines in snowmobiles. Two stroke engines are great for riding in deep powder, powder machines have to be light, although some people say that the long track snowmobiles go better. I think it's just the personal preference of the rider. Kawasaki went out of business in 1982. The main reason I would say is that the research and development got so outrageous in cost to keep new things coming like liquid cooling dual carburetors, oil injection, independent suspension and more horsepower into an engine that they were not making any money. When they first went into the business it was great, but then other companies with more money kept coming out with new things and Kawasaki just could not keep up with the budget that they had. They were more or less forced out of business, so they quit before they got into debt, and invested their money elsewhere. I don't think that they will ever go back into the snowmobile business again.

I started snowmobiling when I was ten; we had a Sno-Jet snowmobile then and it seemed pretty powerful to me. This year I bought a Yamaha Phazer, it has a 485cc engine with dual carburetors and it's very powerful. I found out just how powerful it was about four months ago. Me and a friend of mine were riding up to the hot springs when I decided to throttle it around a sharp, icy corner. Needless to say, it rolled several times causing over a hundred dollars' worth of damage. Now I know what Kenny means by "power can get you into trouble." I have really enjoyed snowmobiling and I plan to do it for many years to come.

