

# Minnkota

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Polar vortex reflections / 4

Northern Toboggan / 8

Congestion control / 12





# Harren family creates winter fun

NORTHERN TOBOGGAN  
FINDS NICHE IN THE NORTH

Northern Toboggan's team of (left to right) John Harren, Josh Kasprovicz, John Koets, Solveig Harren and Jackson Harren display the sleds and snowshoes they create near Warroad, Minn.

One might say divine intervention played a role in John Harren becoming a master at building sleds and toboggans.

After all, his uncle, Father Raymond Deschênes, is the one who steered him into opening the business known as Northern Toboggan Company a few miles northeast of Warroad, Minn., in the far northern reaches of the United States. (The business receives its power from North Star Electric Cooperative, one of 11 member-owner distribution cooperatives in the Minnkota Power Cooperative system.)

Harren started crafting sleds and toboggans in the mid-1990s after Deschênes told him about the need for somebody to build them for northern Canadians who wanted

to haul goods through the snow or enjoy a ride down a hillside. A toboggan business in Thompson, Manitoba, had become dormant.

A member of Oblate Fathers of Winnipeg who devoted his life to helping others, Deschênes learned of a shortage of toboggan/sled makers from a priest friend who lived in the same retirement community. Deschênes, always looking out for his nieces and nephews, suggested Harren look into it.

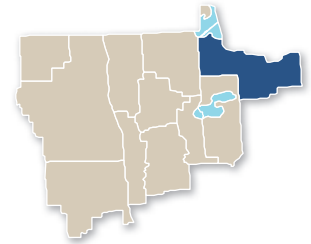
A carpenter by trade, Harren took his uncle's advice and contacted Milton Chaboyer, a toboggan maker who lived more than 9 hours from Warroad in Thompson. Harren went to Thompson and asked Chaboyer to mentor him.

"He left our residence very enthusiastic," Chaboyer recalled in a telephone interview



**“There’s been a number of projects we’ve done over the years that really deal with people getting out on the land, preserving heritage ... That’s one of the neatest things about this business, is the connection we make with the different groups of people who are trying to encourage that lifestyle and traditional products.”**

– Jackson Harren



Served by  
**North Star Electric  
Cooperative**  
Baudette, Minn.

- Incorporated – June 23, 1940
- Year energized – 1944
- Board members – 7
- General manager – Ann Ellis
- 2018 members – 6,549
- Miles of line – 1,444

from his home in Thompson. “He called me a couple of days later and said he was interested and asked how to proceed with the possible sale of my business.

“I told him I wasn’t prepared to sell my business, but I would sell my knowledge of building sleds if he was interested.”

Chaboyer and his wife later spent a week on the Harrens’ 40 acres, the Canadian showing the American the intricate processes of making ropes.

“He took to it like a duck to the water,” Chaboyer said. “He had the carpentry background and the work ethic. I’ve seen his stuff. I have his brochure. I took possession of a couple of sleds and resold them up here as advertising.

“The locals here realized that the product was still available, only at a different location now. John, in my opinion, is a perfectionist. He’s always attempting to improve the product.”

Chaboyer says Northern Toboggan is making what he refers to as the old Hudson’s Bay toboggans. Following the arrival of Hudson’s Bay Company in the 19th century, Canada’s indigenous people designed and built toboggans to haul animal furs across the rough, frozen land. Early

on, toboggans were designed to be pulled manually. Now one can see them also being pulled behind dog teams and snowmobiles.

“We send toboggans all over North America and we’ve really grown the business in the last three, four years,” said Jackson Harren, son of John. “We’re getting into more niches, developing our partnerships with the dealerships up north. We sell



Solveig and Jackson Harren (foreground) inspect a toboggan that is being crafted inside the company’s shop.





Solveig and Jackson Harren compare wooden snowshoe frames and ensure a high quality of craftsmanship before beginning the lacing process.



A wooden snowshoe frame is ready to be laced.

a lot of toboggans across the Northwest Territories and we've expanded now into the Arctic co-op stores or Inuit stores up in Nunavut, a massive, sparsely populated territory in northern Canada."

In the United States, the company sells most of its toboggans and sleds to customers from New York, Colorado, Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota. But Northern Toboggan recently had two large boxes of materials in its cold storage shed boxed for shipment to Alabama. Yes, Alabama. Apparently the buyer is constructing a building in a remote area of Canada and wanted to use Northern Toboggan's freight sleds to transport materials.

Jackson, his wife Solveig and his brother Gabriel have given Dad a hand running the business the past few years. Jackson, a manufacturing engineering manager at Marvin Windows and Doors in Warroad, helps with the processes. Solveig keeps the books and handles shipping logistics. Gabriel, who works for a software development and IT consulting firm in the Twin Cities, has expanded the marketing effort by optimizing reach in search engines. When you search for toboggans on the internet, Northern Toboggan surfaces near the top.

"This is kind of our family farm business we help out with," Jackson Harren said with a smile.

Jackson acknowledges that you can find a mass-produced toboggan for \$100 at some online outlets, but he says they can't match Northern Toboggan's craftsmanship and detail.

Northern Toboggan's downhill series red oak toboggans range from about \$350 for a 4-foot model to \$775 for an 8-foot model. The winter essential series red oak cargo toboggans range from \$760 for a standard model to nearly \$1,500 for a fully rigged model with a sleigh box and canvas wrap.

Customers use the sleigh box on cargo toboggans for such things as hauling camping gear, building materials, animal traps, mining equipment or even family members. In addition, Northern Toboggan makes red oak freight sleds and box-freight sleds. Chaboyer originally built those items for the commercial fishing market in northern Manitoba.

You won't find CNC (computer numerical control) machines or long production lines at Northern Toboggan. There isn't room for them in the orderly 30-by-40-foot shop.

"To get the quality of the product that

we want and need typically requires a lot of hands-on work,” Jackson said. “We take advantage of power sanding and planing, and we have a good band saw and joiner and those types of things. But there’s still a lot of time that goes into them.”

John Harren and apprentices Josh Kasprovicz and John Koets are the primary craftsmen at Northern Toboggan. Kasprovicz and Koets joined one of Jackson Harren’s sons, Henry, on one of the company’s toboggans in a three-person event at the 2020 U.S. National Toboggan Championships on Feb. 8-9 in Maine. Four hundred teams from around the world have participated in the competition, including one from Jamaica.

Gabriel and Jackson Harren also raced in the event. The company made about 14 white ash race toboggans for other teams entered in the competition as well.

“It’s a nine-second race down a chute,” John Harren said of the race, which has a 440-foot chute. “It’s highly competitive, trying to see who can build the fastest toboggan.”

In addition to sleds, toboggans and a recent addition of wood snowshoes, Northern Toboggan has completed a few fun custom woodworking projects. One involved building giant water skis for a display in Lake City, Minn., the birthplace of water skiing. The 150-pound display Northern Toboggan built features a replica of the first skis worn by Lake City’s own Ralph Samuelson.

The company also built the bar and some shelving for the new brewery in Warroad.

“There’s been a number of projects we’ve done over the years that really deal with people getting out on the land, preserving heritage, remembering ancestors, that sort of

thing,” Jackson Harren said. “That’s one of the neatest things about this business, is the connection we make with the different groups of people who are trying to encourage that lifestyle and traditional products.”

The Harrens have a tradition of gathering over the holidays and testing out their snowshoes, sleds and toboggans. Several years ago, when a contractor was looking for a place to haul dirt from ditches he was cleaning nearby, John Harren agreed to take the dirt with one stipulation: He wanted the man to flatten the top of the dirt hill.

With that came a 30-foot spot where the family can test and enjoy sleds and toboggans in close proximity to the shop. They call it Harren Mountain.



Traditional Alaskan wooden snowshoe frames are stacked and ready for the next step in the process.

By Staff / Photography Kevin Jeffrey



The Harrens help load a semitrailer with products to be shipped to customers across North America.