

Chicog-Then and Now for March, 2026
JoAnn Malek

Early on they were called snow buggies. Or motor toboggans. In 1917 the term “snowmobile” was copyrighted.

The snowmobile was invented in Wisconsin. I was pretty excited when I found the listing that read “Chicog (Sayner) WI”. Our little Chicog?! But I cannot find anything that connects these two towns. Carl Eliason (1899-1979) was from Sayner, WI in Vilas County. He patented his design for a snow buggy in 1927.



Eliason loved the out-of-doors, loved Wisconsin winters. But it was difficult for him to move in the snow with snowshoes or skis because of a chronic foot condition. After two years of experimentation he completed construction of a motorized toboggan in 1924. He used a small gasoline-powered liquid cooled marine engine, bicycle parts, Model-T components, mounted on a long toboggan with skis in front for steering. He was called a pioneer, a visionary. His motor toboggan was the first to be propelled by an endless moving track system with cleats and slide rails, a floating suspension and a liquid-cooled power unit.

Eventually Eliason produced eight or nine units per year, making improvements as he worked so no two were exactly the same.

Actually Wisconsinites were experimenting with over-snow vehicles before 1900. Bicycles on runners with gripping fins. Steam-propelled sleighs. Snow sleighs wind-powered by a propeller. Converted Model-T Fords with rear tractor treads and skis in front. An unusual snow biting screw auger structure. Some folks have contested the designation of Carl Eliason as the inventor of the snowmobile. In 1991 he was inducted into the Snowmobile Hall of Fame for his role in creating the modern snowmobile.

Beginning in 1927, Eliason built forty motorized toboggans in his Sayner shop. When he received a large order from Finland he negotiated to have Eliason machines built by Four Wheel Drive (FWD) in Clintonville, WI. These were the first mass-produced snowmobiles sold to the general public. FWD filled orders from the US military and the WI Conservation Department. In 1947 production was moved to the Canadian subsidiary in Kitchener, Ontario. Eliason Motor Toboggans remained in production until 1965, the longest continuous production of any brand of snow machine. Polaris Industries of Roseau, MN used design principles of the Eliason K-12 when they began production in 1955.

The 1970's were considered the golden age of the snowmobile. Over 120 companies were building snowmobiles. Manufacturers of cars, boats, motorcycles, tractors, retailers like Sears and Montgomery Wards, all jumped on the band wagon. I've recently learned that in the small town of Forest Lake, MN the Muscat Corporation produced 200 units of the Muscaro sled during the years that we lived and raised our family nearby.

Winter, 2026 only three companies are building snowmobiles: Arctic Cat. Polaris. Ski-Doo.

Snow machines provide winter mobility for many professions, recreation for the rest of us. "I like going fast across the lake" agree my teen granddaughters. "Go slower" was surely my mantra years ago on a day ride behind son Nathan in Yellowstone Park.

Thousands of miles of trails across the country bring riders into the beauty of winter wonderlands. Friend MaryAnn remembers the excitement of a moose running beside her snowmobile along a Montana trail. Son Peter loved the joy of riding along trails from our Forest Lake home to our cabin in Chicog, and then far into northern Wisconsin. Washburn County Forestry grooms and maintains trails in our area, and publishes updated trail reports.

Eagle River, WI is recognized as the snowmobile capital of the world, a 20-mile trail ride from Sayner, the birth place of today's snowmobile.

Do you have stories to tell about Chicog-Then?
I'd like to listen. Call or text me at (612) 250-0301.

Thank you for reading Chicog-Then and Now

Town Website: www.townofchicog.com

IMPORTANT MARCH DATES

Wednesday 3/11, 6pm, monthly Chicog meeting

Wednesdays 3/11&25, Namekagen Transit Service

Wednesday 3/25, 10:30-12, Books&Bread, Beaverbrook

Thursday 3/12, 10:30-12, Bibliodragon bookmobile, town hall

(Bookmobile routes are cancelled when there's a

“feels like” temperature of 20 degrees or lower)

Thursdays 10:30-2:30, Weekly Walkabout pot lucks, town hall