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Observatory Hill (SJP site)

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Observatory Hill's Namesake: A Brief History



Photo from *Abbey Quarterly* v. 3 n.1 p. 12 January 1985
<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19429>



Lake Sagatagan in 1886 – before the Observatory was built

Worship & Work p. 70g

1886 Lake Sagatagan from Observatory Hill (before the Observatory was built),
Worship & Work p. 70g



built about 1870 by the Catholic brother students. The tower was in later years (1880) replaced by CARMEL.



THE TOWER.

This was a favorite lounging place on a mound east of the Recreatorium or Water Tank. It was called the Tower, although it was rather a look-out or look-out tower, from which one had a view over a large square of woods, out of St. Cloud staples and smoke stacks. From the ground to the upper rail (A-B) it measured about 20 feet. At C was a platform, reached by a ladder D. In the partition was a table and seats.

Sketch & text
by Alexius
Hoffmann, OSB

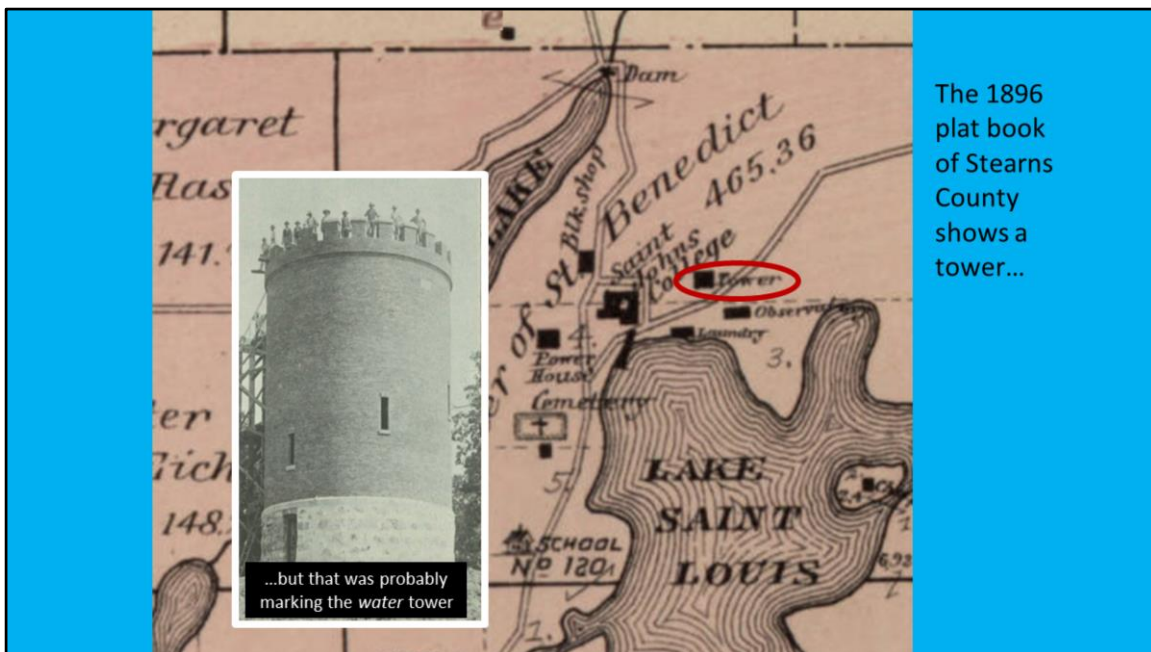
The very first St. John's Observatory

Then there was the tower, as it was called, or more properly the observatory, a frame structure, but rude, on the summit of a hill in the forest to the east of the college.

The platform was elevated some twenty feet above ground and beneath it was a lattice-work bower in which many a story book was devoured of a Sunday afternoon when summer was lovely in its verdure and the song of the Minnesota birds. A rickety old ladder carried you to the top whence a fine view could be had of the surrounding woodland with scattered farm-houses and far on the eastern horizon the most prominent features of St. Cloud could be distinguished with the bare eye. Time's ravages passed over the concern and finally leveled it to the ground. If you visit this mound today there is not the slightest vestige of the "tower."

The Record
Dec. 1891 p. 262

1891 Dec. p.262 *Record* "Forgotten Haunts"



The 1896 plat book of Stearns County shows a tower...

...but that was probably marking the water tower

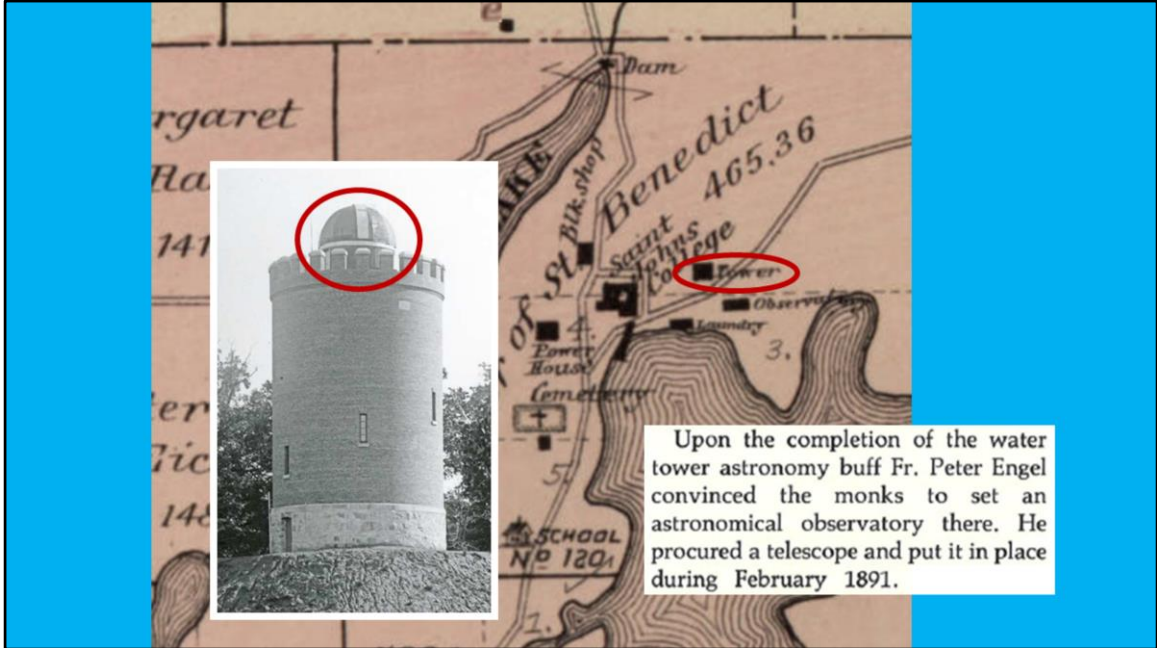
1896 Plat Book of Stearns County, Minnesota by C.M. Foste – p. 43, Collegeville Township, Saint John’s College

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/stearns/id/389/rec/1>

p. 27, Avon Township; p. 43, Collegeville Township

Water tower photo from “The Old Water (Watch) Tower – Saint John’s Guardian,” *Abbey Banner* January 1985 v. 3 n. 1 p. 6

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19423>



1896 Plat Book of Stearns County, Minnesota by C.M. Foste – p. 43, Collegeville Township, Saint John's College

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/stearns/id/389/rec/1>

p. 27, Avon Township; p. 43, Collegeville Township

Text & water tower photo from "The Old Water (Watch) Tower – Saint John's Guardian," *Abbey Banner* January 1985 v. 3 n. 1 p. 6

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19423>



The second
Observatory
was built in
1894

1896 Plat Book of Stearns County, Minnesota by C.M. Foste – p. 43, Collegeville Township, Saint John's College

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/stearns/id/389/rec/1>

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Text & water tower photo from "The Old Water (Watch) Tower – Saint John's Guardian," *Abbey Banner* January 1985 v. 3 n. 1 p. 6

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/19423>



The New Astronomical Observatory.

In the distance to the left, the water reservoir, surmounted by the
(For description see page 2.)

THE OBSERVATORY.

Last November the astronomical building was so far completed that the setting up and adjusting of the instruments could be begun. The accompanying cut gives a fair view of the observatory. It crowns the hill which is about 200 yds. east of the University and just south of the road leading to Collegeville. The top of the revolving dome is 32 ft. above the ground. The entrance faces the south and leads to what is designed to be the computation

move from east to west, which is really due to the earth's motion in opposite direction, so that an object once brought into the field of the telescope will remain visible as

Adjoining it is the transit-instrument and the chronograph; this part is $9\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{1}{2}$ ft. Opposite windows, facing north and south, and a continuous slit in the roof which is ordinarily covered by shutters, afford a complete view of the meridian from horizon to horizon.

From here we enter the round tower which has a diameter of 16 ft. In the center rises a pier of masonry to the respectable height of 19 ft. Altogether independent it pierces the second floor and wears a handsome cap of Kasota stone 8 inch. thick, to which the telescope is bolted. The telescope is mounted equatorially, which means that its principal axis is parallel to the axis of the earth and consequently points to the north pole of the heavens, whence it is called "polar axis"; perpendicular to this is the

History of a Memory

by Mike Williams

Shortly after the ground breaking ceremony for the new Prep School last September, a crane eased the top from the old observatory, preserving it for a future one. Then the crane's wrecking ball and cats' blades demolished the building to make room for the new Prep School. Nearly sixty-seven years had elapsed between the raising and the razing of the St. John's Observatory.

Back in the 1880's Father Subprior Peter Engel, O.S.B., was deeply interested not only in what lay beyond the stars but in the stars themselves. But he didn't possess the instruments necessary to indulge in his hobby and there were no instruments available to him in this area. His desire to study the stars eventually prompted him to seek some means of obtaining at least a telescope and whatever other equipment was needed to further his astronomical pursuits. He did not have the ready cash to purchase the instruments and as Father Abbot had repeatedly explained, buying them with community funds would divert money from possible community good to a non-essential. The Abbot's edict settled the matter as far as everyone was concerned—everyone, that is, except the subprior. Father Peter persisted in his desire. He reasoned and reiterated, discussed and debated, projected and proposed until 1890 when, after convincing Abbot Bernard that a telescope would be an asset to the entire community, he was given the green light to order one. Father Peter used his hard-gained permission to purchase a top-grade,

precision, 60-inch telescope from the world renowned optician, J. A. Brashear. He immediately mounted his prize on the water tower, a logical site.

Father Peter next requested permission to order more equipment because, as he cajoled, these other instruments, positron micrometer, astronomical clock, chronograph, and transit-instrument, would increase the effectiveness of the telescope greatly. Father Abbot granted this permission more readily, for by then Father Peter had done a near-complete job of "brainwashing." Immediately after receiving these instruments, Father Peter sought permission to erect a building which could contain all the instruments, explaining that it would increase the efficiency of the instruments. Abbot Bernard was very reluctant to grant this permission for one very good reason—he had no money. However, after carefully weighing the merits of the idea—academic potentiality and prestige it would bring to the campus (it would be one of the first observatories in Minnesota)—Father Abbot okayed plans for an observatory, hoping that he would soon be able to pay for it.

The site chosen was 200 yards east of the campus proper, close enough so that it could be reached from anywhere on campus in ten minutes, yet remote enough that campus lights would not impair the telescope's effectiveness. The location overlooking Lake Sagatagan was sufficiently elevated to assure a commanding view of the horizon.

In November, 1894, the telescope was removed from the water tower and, along with the other instruments, placed in the near-completed observatory. Abbot Ber-



nard died that same month. The election of Subprior Peter to succeed as Abbot was ironical, for now the observatory was ready for use, and Father Peter, the one who had most wanted apparatus for it and who was now in a position to greatly foster astronomical pursuits, would probably be too busy to ever use it.

Father Peter's dream building was outwardly very plain, yet as structurally sound as its 3-foot solid foundation of masonry. Stressing efficiency and purpose, the interior of the building was even less decorative than the outside. The observatory's three rooms were conservative in color and their 280 square feet contained no luxuries.

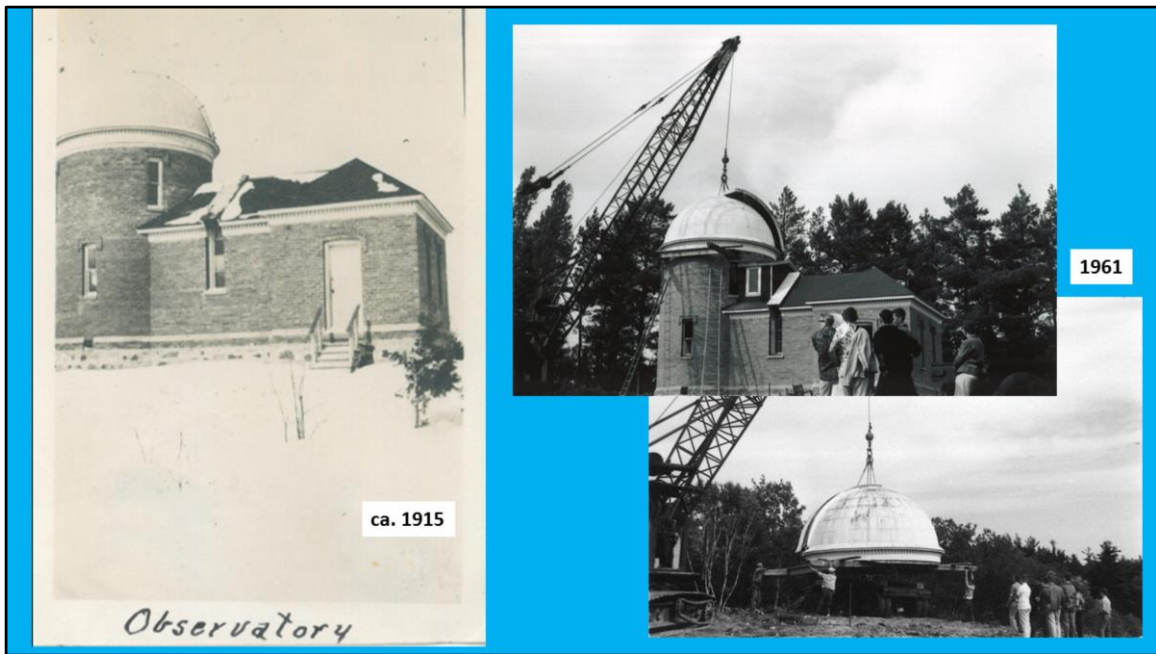
The only entrance to the observatory, on the southwest corner, led to the computation room, where astronomen did their more complicated calculations. This room was furnished with chair, desk, and light—all that was needed. The adjoining room held the transit instruments and chronograph, the former observing the meridian passages of heavenly bodies, the latter recording the time of various observations. A thirty-two foot high tower capped by the revolving dome housed the telescope and positron micrometer.

Now the observatory is gone. And used by relatively few, but admired by most, it will live for all as long as there is an "Observatory Hill."

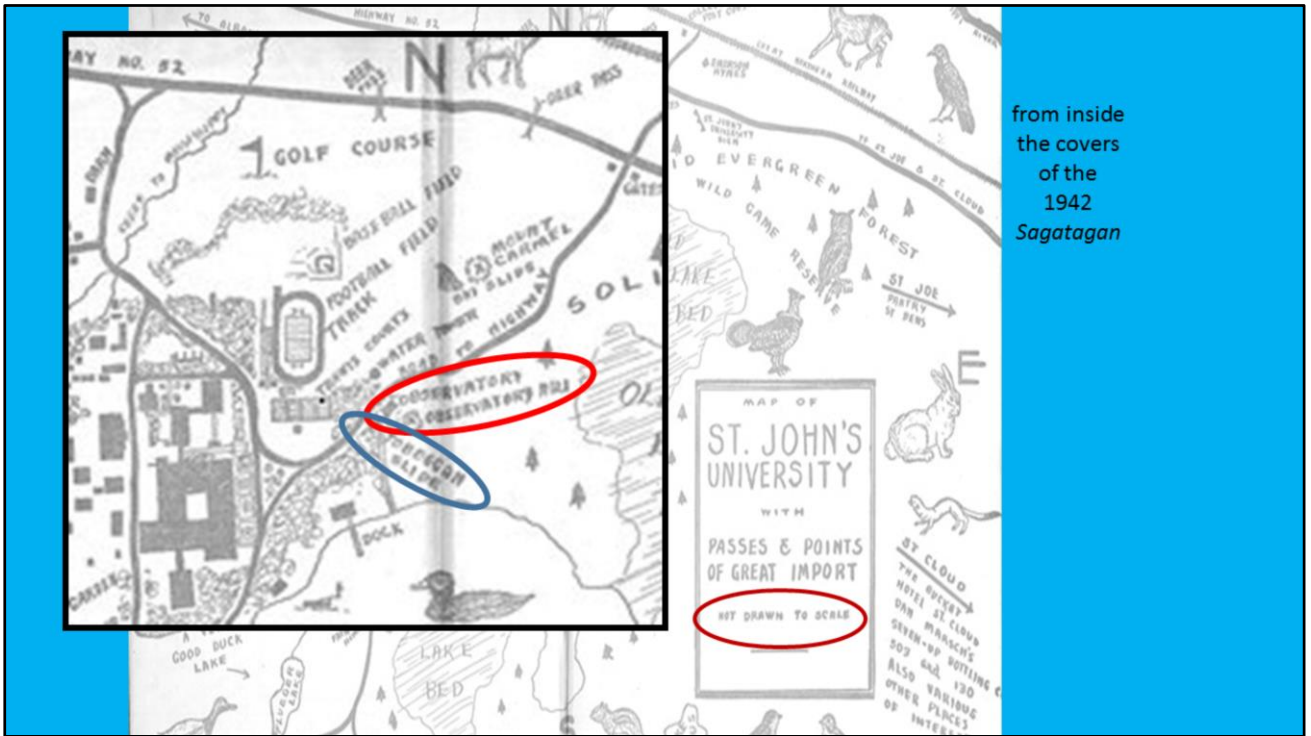
Williams, Mike. "[History of a Memory](#)," *Prep World*, November/December 1961, p. 36.
<http://www.csbsju.edu/Documents/SJU%20Archives/SJU%20Prep%20World%20Nov-Dec%20%201961.pdf>



On left: Ca. 1915 – Rudolph Welle photo, from
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\Observatory
On right: Groundbreaking takes place Sept. 14, 1961
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\SJP



On left: Ca. 1915 – Rudolph Welle photo, from
O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\Observatory
Photos on right from: O:\Archives\SJUArchives\Images\Buildings\SJP



Campus map from inside the covers of the 1942 *Sagatagan* yearbook



1919 Sagatagan



F. Boggan 1919.



1919 Sagatagan, p. 77

Middle photo from red scrapbook in the SJU Archives

"What sculpture is to a block
 of marble,
 Education is to a human
 soul."
 —Addison

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

A Catholic Boarding School for
 Young Men. Founded in 1857. Con-
 ducted by the Benedictine Fathers.

The chief aim of St. John's University is
 to teach young men not only "how to get a
 living but how to live."

St. John's holds out to its students ample
 opportunity to follow the bent of their special talents. Seminary, College and Col-
 lege Preparatory courses. Courses leading to a B.A., Ph. B., B.S., and M.A.

Splendid new \$150,000 College Hall.

Country location. Most healthful and charming environment. Extensive cam-
 pus. Large new athletic field. Every opportunity for every sport. Fall term be-
 gins September 6. *Will you be there?*

Ad for St. John's,
 1921-22

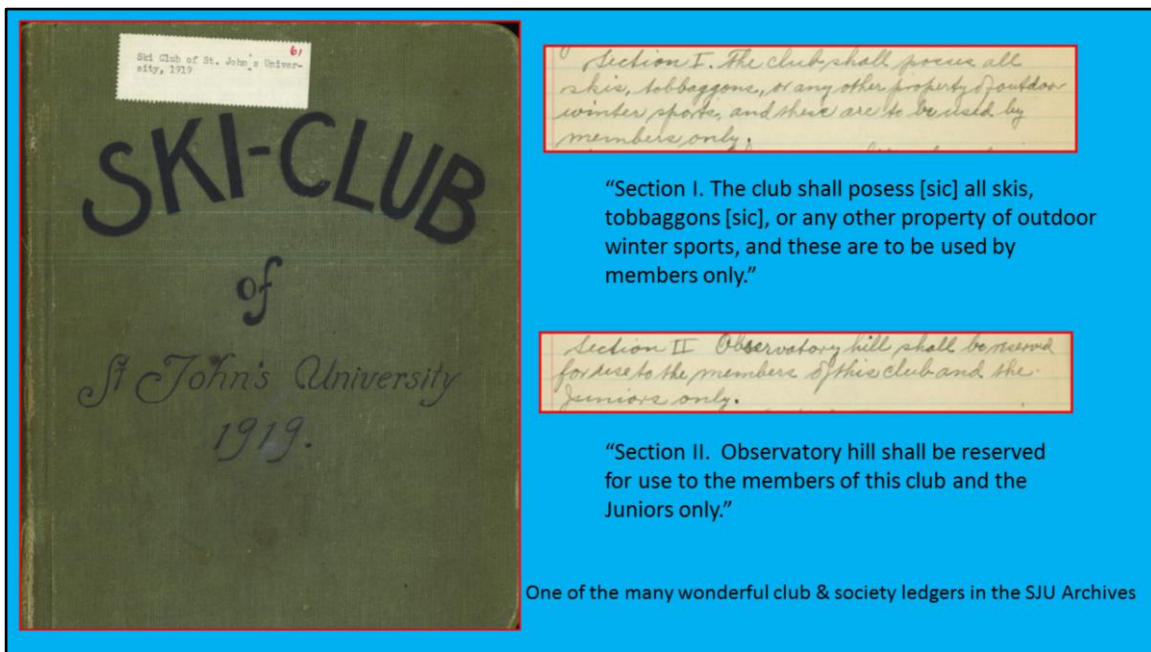
Ad for St. John's, 1921-22, from Box 1834 f10



Photo from red scrapbook in the SJU Archives

Text from 1919 *Sagatagan* yearbook, p. 78-79 (p. 39-40 of the pdf)

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/17055/show/17037>



Ski Club 1919 Stack 20/4 v.61 – cover and p. 6



From the top of Observatory hill, down, down, between the evergreen trees to the shore of the lake in less time than it takes to tell.

1941 Sagatagan



Winter Sports

Observatory hill has been the scene of winter activities for many a year. Before the skiers left it for Mt. Carmel it was the "big hill." Now, besides being the hill where you get your start as a skier, it is the scene of the toboggan slide, where spills and thrills are common. It doesn't take long to travel the long way down to the lake shore; but "it's a long way up," say Towne, MacArthur and Spitzig.

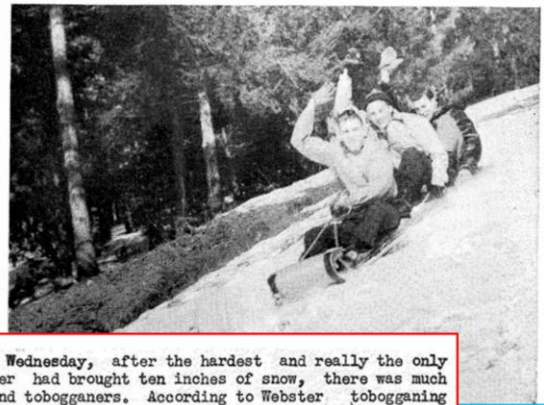


1941 Sagatagan p. 44 (of the pdf)

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/18438/show/18409>



"Push," yell Tavis, Flaten, Marx and H. Miller; and "Parrot" Smith starts them on the long ride down.



1941 Sagatagan

The day after Ash Wednesday, after the hardest and really the only blizzard of the winter had brought ten inches of snow, there was much activity of skiers and tobogganers. According to Webster tobogganing is defined: "to coast on a toboggan; hence to decline suddenly in value, as shares of a corporation on the stock market." This definition proved quite apt in the adventure of "the five snow-flakes," Frs. Hilary, Albert (An), Samuel, Anselm (B), and Allen (B). Maneuvering down Pine Knob, they suddenly found themselves airborne. Having little means of guiding while in this situation, Fr. Albert, the pilot, nevertheless almost missed a sapling of quite respectable girth. Simultaneously with the return of the toboggan to the snow, the crew of five found themselves flying through the air again, this time without the toboggan. No casualties, although the toboggan declined suddenly in value. Thereafter a renewed interest in cutting wood and similar domestic tasks seemed to gain favor over winter sports in general.



1953 *Scriptorium* p.76

1941 *Sagatagan* p. 44 (of the pdf)

<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SJUArchives/id/18438/show/18409>

Text from an April 1953 *Scriptorium* article (p. 76); Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, the only one of the five who became a permanent member of the Abbey, recalled it thus: "The toboggan run started at the very top of Pine Knob and headed more or less west on a more or less straight downhill course—usually avoiding trees. The slope was not heavily wooded, but we managed to locate one of them....It was the last time I went tobogganing. The toboggan ended up with a tree in the middle of it and the five of us strewed around the perimeter in deep snow. Pine Knob gave you a great double-dip ride downhill, into the dip about halfway down, then up, over, and down the long final slope. Then a LONG haul back to the top of the hill to do it over again. Since then the hill is entirely reforested with no trace of the toboggan run."



Compiled in 2014
from resources in the
St. John's University
Archives by Peggy
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CSB/SJU Archivist.
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