

*Sharon Firth and Shirley Firth-Larsson*  
Hard work and dreams  
Skiing around the world



# ***Acknowledgements***

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# *Firth Sisters*

A huge thanks to Sharon and Shirley for sharing their story. We hope that you find it interesting and compelling.

We dedicate this book to Shirley Firth-Larsson and her love, strength, and courage in life, and in death.

Shirley died on Tuesday, April 30, 2013 at her home in Yellowknife, with her family at her side.



**Photo credit top:** *Facebook*

**Photo credit bottom:** *Canadian Ski Museum*

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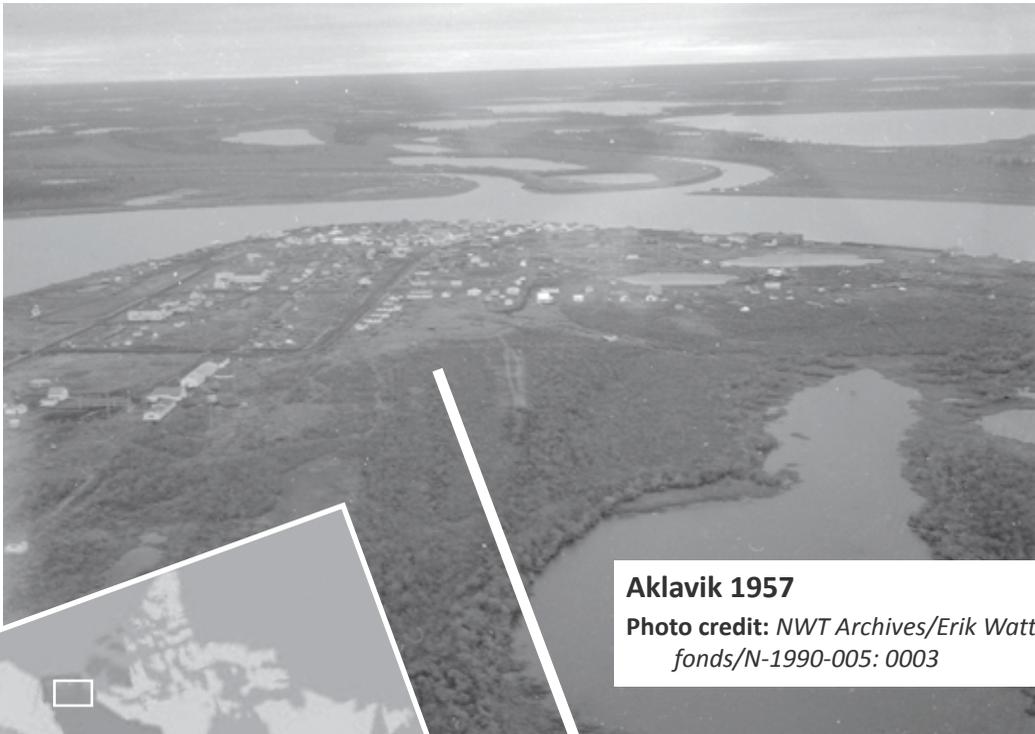
**Photo credit top left and right:** *Canadian Ski Museum*

**Photo credit bottom:** *CBC.ca (Dave Brosha)*



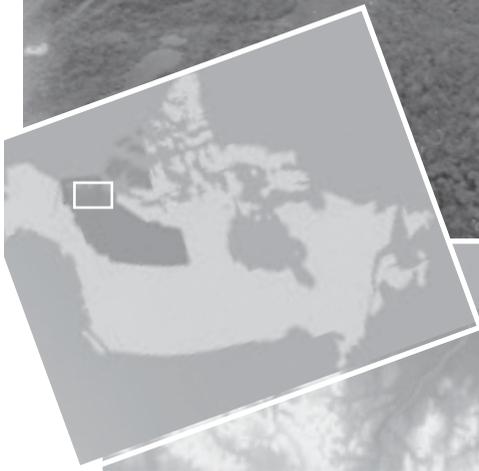
# ***Contents***

The Story Begins—Early Years .....	5
Ski Racing Years .....	21
Hanging Up the Bib—Life After Ski Racing .....	55
Awards and Honours .....	65
Glossary .....	71
Discussion Questions.....	73
Information Sources .....	75



**Aklavik 1957**

**Photo credit:** NWT Archives/Erik Watt  
*fonds/N-1990-005: 0003*



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# ***The Story Begins—Early Years***

Around midnight on December 31, 1953, Sharon and Shirley Firth were born 15 minutes apart. Sharon says, “Shirley was born first and I have been chasing her ever since.”

Their Gwich’in mother and Métis father had 12 children—seven girls and five boys. The twins were numbers nine and ten.

At this time Aklavik was the Mackenzie Delta trading centre. The population was about 1600 people.

In the 1950s Aklavik had two hospitals, several churches, trading posts, Anglican and Catholic mission schools, a Royal Canadian Legion, a bakery, post office, sawmill, native hall, and theatre.

To this day, you travel to Aklavik only by air, on the water in summer, or on the ice in winter.



Photo credit top: [tripadvisor.ca](https://www.tripadvisor.ca)

Photo credit middle: Canadian Museum of Civilization (edited)

Photo credit bottom: NWT Archives/Robert C. Knights fonds/N-1993-002: 0046 (edited)



## ***Living On The Land***

The Firth family lived on the land. They were hunters and trappers—rich in tradition, values, and love.

Sharon describes it this way. “When we lived in the bush, my mom taught us the traditional lifestyle. Hunting and trapping. And fishing and sewing. And healing. Always using her hands.”

“And we weren’t lazy. We were moving all the time. The great outdoors—that was our playground. The Mackenzie River was our highway. Dreaming and wondering where that winding river goes—that took us right around the world.”

“When my father trapped, we had lots of beaver, lots of muskrat. Our parkas always trimmed with the best furs—wolverine. Being raised with good stuff.”



**Photo top: boy setting a rabbit snare**

*Photo credit: NWT Archives/Yellowknife Museum Society fonds/N-1979-056: 0049 (edited)*

**Photo bottom: Lucy Nerysoo with a team of dogs, Aklavik 1943**

*Photo credit: NWT Archives/Archibald Fleming fonds/N-1979-050: 0005 (edited)*



Sharon and Shirley talk about their parents. “They worked so hard. Raising 12 kids while living in the bush. So you know appreciation, thankfulness for eating every day.”

“My parents were very hard workers. You could see that they worked hard. So that was one thing. Everything that you do today you have to work hard to achieve.”

Sharon concludes, “Those are the most precious memories of living a healthy lifestyle. We did not have television or electronic games to entertain us.”

“Everywhere we went was on foot. And our transportation was our dog team. I can’t express the importance of being outdoors during that period of time—I can’t imagine what my childhood experience would have been like without it.”

“It really shaped and moulded the person I became as an adult.”



## ***Moving to Inuvik***

The Firth family moved from Aklavik to Inuvik in 1959. The federal government created Inuvik to replace Aklavik as the Mackenzie Delta trading centre. They wanted a place away from Aklavik's severe flooding and erosion problems.

The government built special housing for Aboriginal families and promised people an easier life in Inuvik. The reality was quite different.

Aboriginal families who lived in the west end had no electricity, no running water, and little space. Each house had two tiny bedrooms and one larger room with a woodstove for cooking and heating.



**Photo top: Sir Alexander Mackenzie School 1970**

*Photo credit: NWT Archives/Douglas Wilkinson fonds/N-1979-051: 0409S (edited)*

**Photo bottom: Samuel Hearne Secondary School**

*Photo credit: nebraskaweatherphotos.org (edited)*



**Photo top: Grollier Hall (Anglican)**

**Photo bottom: Stringer Hall (Catholic)**

*Photo credits: General Synod Archives*



## ***Going to School***

Sharon and Shirley went to residential school from age six to nine. While there, they were not allowed to see or talk to their brothers. Their mother was ill and away from home. They moved back home when their mother got better and came home.

Sharon and Shirley went to Sir Alexander Mackenzie School for grades one to six. Then they went to Samuel Hearne Secondary School. They graduated in 1972.

Sharon says, “Most of my education was from travelling the world, meeting different people of all ethnic backgrounds, reading, and being interested in what was happening around the world, especially with Aboriginal peoples.”

Aboriginal children came from across the north to go to residential school in Inuvik. They stayed at Grollier Hall (Anglican) or Stringer Hall (Catholic).



**Photo top: Father Jean Marie Mouchet and Bjorger Petterson in Inuvik, 1965**

*Photo credit: Cross Country Canada*

**Photo bottom: Shirley and Sharon with Father Jean Marie Mouchet, 1993**

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*



## ***Skiing Comes to Inuvik***

Sharon and Shirley were 12 years old when they first put on skis. At that time, skiing was a new thing for the people in Inuvik.

Father Jean Marie Mouchet introduced skiing there. Mouchet came from Old Crow where he ran a successful cross-country ski program. The government wanted his advice about starting a program in Inuvik.

Father Mouchet loved to ski. And he believed skiing suited northern people because of their lifestyle and the climate.

He got some used skis from the US Air Force in Alaska and passed them out to the children in Inuvik. In 1965 and 1966, Father Mouchet held spring ski clinics in Inuvik with Bjorger Petterson — a certified ski instructor from Prince George, BC.



**“First Nations people. We are very skilled. We are survivors of the land. In order to live in these harsh conditions up here—you have to be smart. Adaptable.”**



**Sharon: “If we joined the ski team we’d get to travel the world and that was one of my dreams.”**



**Photo credit top and bottom: *Cross Country Canada***

**Photo credit middle: *Canadian Ski Museum***

## ***The TEST Program***

In 1967, the federal government funded the Territorial Experimental Ski Training (TEST) program. Bjorger Petterson agreed to coach the best skiers. Mouchet and others also coached and helped out. Sharon and Shirley Firth became part of Petterson's elite team.

Shirley describes TEST. "(They) wanted to see how far natives could excel in the sport. It was a good program. Got to train and travel, and show the world that Aboriginal women could excel in sport. I don't see why they doubted that."

Sharon says, "Basically that program was for residential school students. We weren't residential school students at that time. So it was like a special favour that they let us join the team. "



**“We had fun.  
That was the  
secret. Because  
if you have fun  
you do it. And  
we had a smart  
coach.”**

*Birley Firth and Fred Kelly after winning  
first place in individual competition at the  
U.S. Junior National Ski Championships  
in Alyeska.*

*Alaska Sportsman*



**Photo credit top:** *alsap.org (Alaska  
Lost Ski Areas Project)*

**Photo credit bottom left:** *Cross  
Country Canada*

**Photo credit bottom right:** *alsap.  
org, Alaska Sportsman*



## ***Training—Hard Work and Fun***

Being part of TEST, Sharon and Shirley had to train hard. Their family and their early life on the land gave them the basic skills and values they needed to adapt and succeed.

Shirley says, “When I started in this program we went to school. As soon as school was out I was the first one out on the trail, and I was the last one in.”

“It was not a game for me, this was something very serious. If you want to do well you have to train. But again, that goes for anything. If you want to be a good student you have to study. You have to throw in everything you do. That’s life.”

Sharon says, “We’d have to go running on the ski trails up there. We’d be out there for hours, just hours. And we’d come back. And our coach would be out looking for us. And he’d say, “Did you eat berries?” And we said, “No.” Our faces would be blue. So here we are training. And as soon as we’d see a berry patch we’d sit there and eat and eat.”



**Inuvik skiers at Rideau Hall in Ottawa after their first training trip to Europe, 1969.**

**Left to right: Anita Allen, Sharon Firth, Roger Allen, Fred Kelly, John Turo, David Cook, Harold Cook, Bjorger Pettersen, Roseanne Allen, Prime Minister Trudeau, and Shirley Firth**

*Photo credit: Cross Country Canada courtesy of Bjorger Petterson*

## ***Ski Racing Years***

At a time when many people of the north still survived on the land by hunting, fishing, and trapping (as their family did), Sharon and Shirley made cross-country skiing a way of life.

They were raised on the land and learned traditional skills. They believe that this early life is the foundation of their success. It gave them the discipline, perseverance, and courage to achieve.

For 17 years, Sharon and Shirley traveled the world for ski races and training. For the first few years they were still in high school. During that time they often had to do schoolwork by correspondence.

Sharon thinks back to their first trips. “We were only 13 when we started travelling. I can only picture the explorers who came from Europe. We were like that you know. Instead of coming to North America we were going to Europe and Asia, and different countries like that.”



**Photo top: Sharon and Shirley at the 1972 Olympic Games with Helen Sander**

*Photo credit: [olympic.ca/photos/sapporo-1972](http://olympic.ca/photos/sapporo-1972)*

**Photo bottom: First ski**

*Photo credit: Cross Country Canada*



During their years of racing and traveling, Shirley and Sharon skied four major cross-country events:

- 5 kilometres
- 10 kilometres
- 20 kilometres
- 3 X 5 relay: 3 women each ski 5 kilometres  
After 1976 it is a 4 X 5 relay: 4 women each ski 5 kilometres



**Inuvik ski team 1969**

**Back row, left to right: Bjorger Petterson (coach), Fred Kelly, Roger Allen, Malcolm Hunter**

**Front row, left to right: Sharon Firth, Anita Allen, Roseann Allen, Shirley Firth**

*Photo credit: Canada Ski Museum*

## ***Meeting the Challenges***

During their racing years, Sharon and Shirley met many challenges, with courage, humility, and hard work. And they always had each other.

Sharon explains it this way. “I think one of the greatest challenges was leaving the north.”

“To leave your family. I know I always worried about what was happening back home. Are my parents going to be okay? Were my brothers and sisters going to be okay? Are they going to miss me? Which I think is really important to express, because the families up north are so connected.”

“My mother instilled in us that if there is an opportunity, go for it, because home will always be there,” she said. “You can always go home.”



**Photos top: World Nordic Ski Championships Czechoslovakia, 1970**

*Photo credit top: Canadian Ski Museum*

*Photo credit bottom: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*



**Sharon: ...”when we were travelling—it wasn’t about us. It was about how we represented people back home. You know, that whole connection there. ... Never ever wanted to disappoint my parents, especially my mom.”**

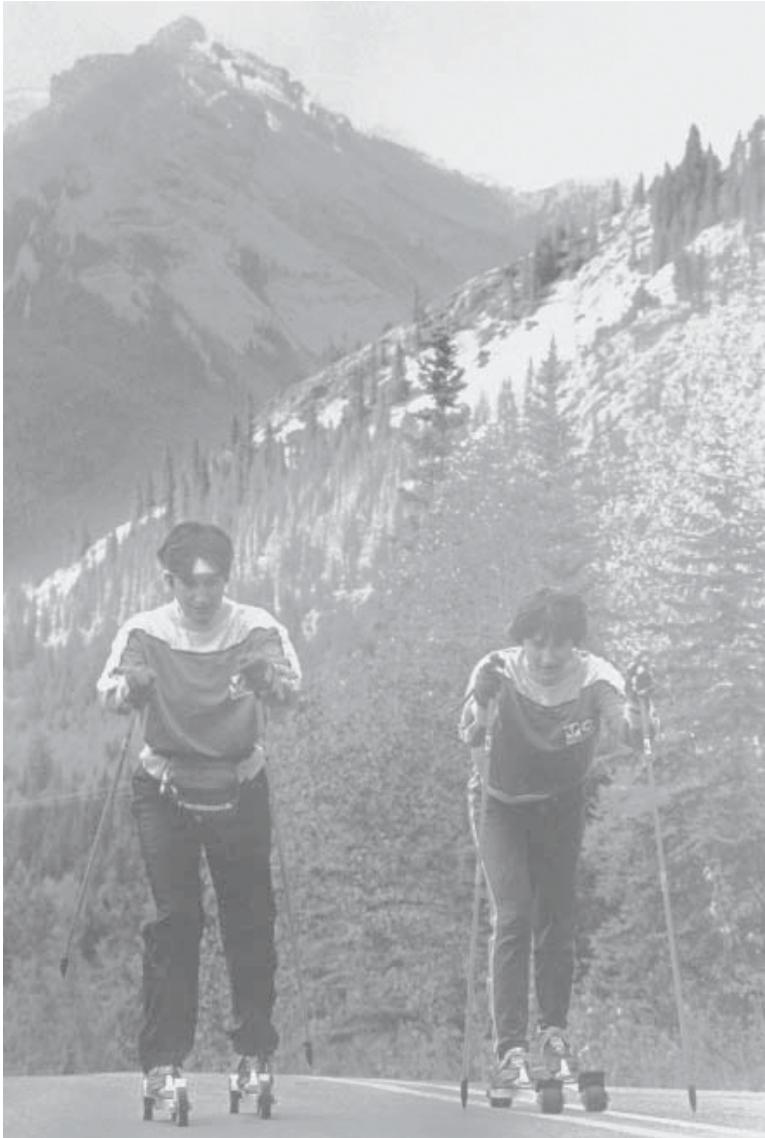
Sharon continues. “And then to live such a disciplined life. And to think of it in a really fun, positive way.”

“When you’re doing something extraordinary like we did, eyes are always on you. People watch your every move. That was a challenge—to always be at your best behaviour. We are human, we make mistakes.”

“And if you showed that you were different from your siblings or your neighbours. Or that little community that you grew up in. It’s not that you’re better. ... So in a sense it was really taking chances bridging that barrier of letting go of the family.”

Another important challenge was money. Sharon and Shirley both had to work to cover their expenses while they trained. Over the years they had various jobs: working as chambermaids, handing out pamphlets, working the trails in Banff National Park.

They approached Dome Petroleum to sponsor them. As a result of their initiative, Dome provided some funding for a couple of years.



## Roller skiing in Banff

Photo credit: *Courtesy of Sharon Firth*

## ***Banff—Home Down South***

In 1972, Sharon and Shirley moved full-time to Banff, Alberta. This was their home base until 1984 (Shirley) and 1985 (Sharon).

They moved so they could train in a place with the right conditions. More like the places where they raced—with similar weather, snow, and elevation, and terrain with hills and mountains.

Shirley explains. “We decided to move to Banff. We wanted to become better athletes.”

“A really good hard training day would be three to four hours of running, roller skiing maybe for an hour, that was about five hours. Then in the evening we did weight training—that was another two to three hours. It was a full day’s work, an eight-hour day.”

## 1968 to 1972



**Photo credit maps:** Maps created in Adobe Illustrator from base map at [http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_\\_cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World\\_map.png](http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World_map.png)

## *Skiing Around the World*





### **1972 Canadian Olympic Team—Cross-country Skiing**

**Left to right: Helen Sander, Roseann Allen, Sharon Firth, Shirley Firth , coach Bjorger Petterson, Roger Allen, Jarl Omholt-Jensen, Malcolm Hunter, Fred Kelly**

**Photo credit top: *Canadian Ski Museum***

**Photo credit olympic logo: *steveandamysly.tannerworld.com***



## *1968 to 1972 Race Highlights*

- 1968: first time skiing at the national level— Canadian Junior Cross-country Championships in Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay), Ontario.
- 1969: members of the first Canadian junior cross-country team to race and train in Scandinavia.
- 1970: members of the first Canadian women’s team to go to the World Nordic Championships— Vysoke Tatry, Czechoslovakia.
- 1970: members of the first Canadian junior team to go to the world’s biggest junior cross-country meet— Gosau, Austria.
- 1971: first women to share three straight women’s relay titles— Canadian Senior Championships, Prince George, BC with Roseann Allen.
- 1972: members of the first Canadian women’s cross-country Olympic team— Sapporo, Japan.

## 1973 to 1976



**Photo credit maps:** Maps created in Adobe Illustrator from base map at [http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_\\_cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World\\_map.png](http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World_map.png)

## *Skiing Around the World*



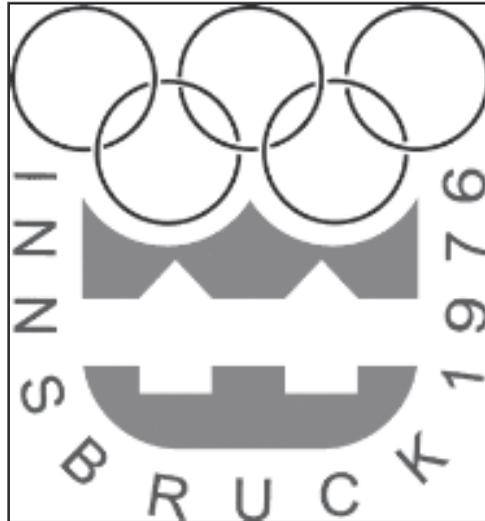


**1976 Canadian Olympic Cross-country Team: Sharon Firth, Shirley Firth, Joan Groothuysen, Sue Holloway, Bert Bullock, Ernie Lennie, Ed Day, Reijo Puiras, Esther Miller, Hans Skinstad**

**Photo credit top left:** *Canada Games*  
([Canada2010.gc.ca](http://Canada2010.gc.ca))

**Photo credit top right:** *Cross Country Canada*

**Photo credit olympic logo:** *wikimedia.org*



## *1973 to 1976 Race Highlights*

- 1974: first Canadian women to appear at two consecutive World Nordic Championships—1974 in Falun, Sweden and 1970 in Vysoke Tatry, Czechoslovakia.
- 1975: first Canadian women to sweep all three gold medals in North American Championships—Mont Ste. Anne, Quebec.
- 1976: first skiers to give the NWT four consecutive women's relay titles at Canadian Senior Championships—Sudbury, Ontario with Joan Groothuysen.

## 1977 to 1980



**Photo credit maps:** Maps created in Adobe Illustrator from base map at [http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_\\_cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World\\_map.png](http://images1.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20080122160729/criticalmass/images/1/1e/World_map.png)

## *Skiing Around the World*





**1980 Canadian Cross-Country Olympic Team—  
women only: Sharon Firth, Shirley Firth, Joan  
Groothuysen, Esther Miller, Angela Schmidt-Foster**



**Photo credit top:**

*Northwest  
Territories Ski  
Division*

**Photo credit olympic**

**logo:** *wikimedia.org*

**Photo credit bottom:**

*ilpost.it*

## *1977 to 1980 Race Highlights*

- 1977: first skiers to share five consecutive relay titles.
- 1978: first woman (Shirley) to win all individual events at the Canadian Nationals—Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.
- 1978: only Canadian or US woman cross-country skier (Shirley) to compete in three consecutive World Championships—Lahti, Finland.
- 1979: national overall champion (Sharon) of east and west, Dannon Cup US Racing Series.
- 1980: first Canadian or US women to compete in three consecutive Olympics. For the 1980 Olympics at Lake Placid, the Canadian Olympic Association decided to send only a women's team.



**Shirley at Lake Placid 1980 Olympic Winter Games, skiing the second leg of the relay race**

*Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada (collectionscanada.gc.ca—Archived)*

## ***Courage for the Hardest Challenge***

As they prepared for the 1980 Olympic Games, Sharon and Shirley had one of their hardest challenges.

Sharon explains. “Shirley and I were getting ready for the 1980 Olympics. Shirley came back from Europe and we flew from Banff to Quebec. When I woke up in the morning Shirley called me and she said she had some stuff to tell me. And I said, well if it’s bad news I don’t want to hear it.”

“She came over. She said that mom died in a fire. And I almost died. I almost collapsed. And I didn’t know whether to believe it. Then I did believe it because my family — my dad and my brothers and sisters — they were calling us — telling us you’ve got to come home, you have to come home.”



**Shirley, triple gold medalist, 1978 Senior Nationals, Morin Heights, Quebec**

*Photo credit: Cross Country Canada*



**Shirley at Lake Placid 1980**

*Photo credit: Canada Games  
canada2010.gc.ca*

With heavy hearts and much grief, Sharon and Shirley faced a dilemma. If they went home, they would not qualify for the Lake Placid games. Sharon adds, "Also at that time we were facing so much prejudice. Our association was negative about us. We were too old for them. We weren't producing. And we just thought there's no way."

And they thought of their mother. "My mother was a very positive person. She was a survivor. She had a lot of strength, and worked hard all her life. That's something we learned from her, no matter what you do in life, you don't get anything free, you got to work for it."

Sharon continues. "Shirley and I talked and we said we were going to stay. Again that was being courageous. When you refuse a funeral."

"The whole championship was in preparation for making the Olympic team—to go to Lake Placid. And Shirley and I cleaned up. We won the races. I had this whole stress of my mom dying. Cause my mom was the solid one in the family. She was the one that kept us together."

## 1981 to 1985



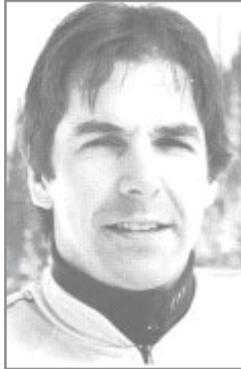
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## *Skiing Around the World*





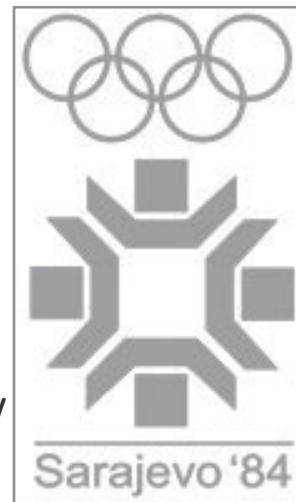
**1984 Canadian Olympic  
Team—Cross Country Skiing**



**Top: Shirley Firth and Sharon Firth**

**Bottom: Angela Schmidt-Foster and Pierre Harvey**

*Photo credit: Canadian Ski Museum (edited)*



## *1981 to 1985 Race Highlights*

- 1981: best total of any Canadian male or female skier (Shirley) on the Ten Race Cross-country World Cup Circuit.
- 1982: only Canadian woman (Shirley) to compete in four consecutive World Skiing Championships of any kind.
- 1983: win gold and silver for 5 km, 10 km, and 20 km races at Canadian Senior Nationals—Labrador City, Newfoundland.
- 1984: only Canadian women skiers to compete in four consecutive Olympic Winter Games—Sarajevo, Yugoslavia.
- 1985: first Canadian (Sharon) to compete in all eight events of the Great American Ski Chase and the first Canadian to win the overall women's title.



**Sharon in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia 1983**

*Photo credit: Canadian Ski Museum*



**Shirley in Whitehorse, Yukon 1981**

*Photo credit: Canadian Ski Museum*

## ***Fourth and Final Olympics***

In 1984, Sharon and Shirley competed in their fourth Olympic Games—at Sarajevo. Shirley married the year before and she knew this was her last Olympics. Sharon knew that when one of them retired from skiing, the other would also retire.

Sharon says, “Well, I figured it would be my last. Although deep down inside I didn’t want it to finish because being with the elite in the world is such a great feeling.”



**Photo top: Sharon and Shirley match strides.**

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*

**Photo bottom: Canadian Championships 1982  
Edmonton, AB**

*Photo credit: Cross Country Canada*



## ***The Last Race***

Shirley retired from ski racing at the end of the Swiss ski week circuit in March/April of 1984. She says, "Once we chose to be known as Olympic athletes, every day was training. This was the best life I could choose. It was a lot of hard work. ... I was 30 years old when I retired. No regrets."

Sharon retired in 1985 after the North American Championships at Spray Lakes, Alberta.



## ***NWT Heritage Fairs***

**“The Firth sisters are my heroes. I’m a skier so I know how hard they must have worked to accomplish what they did. I read their book, *Guts and Glory*, and it must have been so hard back then to train in the dark and away from their families.**

**But because they’d been raised on the land they really knew how to work really, really hard. They are both still so active in sport and set an example for young people like me.”**

**Photo credit: [www.pwnhc.ca/teach/heritage\\_fairs\\_guide/why\\_benchmarks.asp](http://www.pwnhc.ca/teach/heritage_fairs_guide/why_benchmarks.asp)**

# ***Hanging Up the Bib—Life After Ski Racing***

From their early life on the land and their years of training and racing, Shirley and Sharon have many proven skills. Discipline, hard work, dedication, positive attitude, motivation, sharing, respect, endurance. They set goals and dared to dream.

When they retired from ski racing, Shirley and Sharon needed these skills to face some new challenges. For 17 years, training and racing was their way of life. Where would their lives go now?

Sharon and Shirley had high school education and limited experience in the workforce. From their years of skiing, they started out penniless and ended up penniless. They were poor in money, but rich with experience and skills.



**“I’m a really strong person. Nothing really stops me from doing what I really want to do.”**

**Photo credit top: *CBC.ca***

**Photo credit bottom: *Aboriginal Multi-Media Society***



## ***Life After Ski Racing for Shirley***

Shirley Firth married Jan Larsson in 1983. They were still happily married when Shirley died on April 30, 2013 at her home in Yellowknife.

Shirley met Jan at a World Cup race in Finland. When she retired from ski racing, they lived in France for 22 years. Their home was in a mountain community of about 2000 people, close to Grenoble. Shirley and Jan have three daughters.

In her new life in France, Shirley again rose to the challenges. She admits at the beginning it was hard. She lived a long way away from her sister and family, and her home in the Mackenzie Delta.

Shirley learned French culture and language. She got a French drivers license. For three years she travelled to schools and other places to share stories and artefacts about NWT Aboriginal culture. She drove with her two small children and a babysitter to places in Austria, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and France.

**“Know your culture and live it. Teach your culture. Make sure when you’re going to teach somebody something—make sure people come away with a positive attitude.”**



**Photo credit Shirley:** *Northern News Services Ltd.*

**Photo credit booties:** *Facebook*



**“I’m really happy that I can give back in a positive way to others, mainly to women. ... For me the challenge is to stimulate (Aboriginal) women to healthy living ... it’s really important.”**

While Shirley lived in France, she also taught English as a Second Language to doctors, scientists, and technicians.

Shirley and her family moved to Yellowknife in 2005. Her daughters prompted this move. They grew up aware of their Aboriginal heritage. They regularly visited Sharon in Yellowknife. And they decided to move to the NWT, to learn their culture, to finish school, to live there. Shirley says, “For me that was so important. Because once you learn your culture you’re a really strong person. ... So they came here and they love it.”

Shirley did an executive secretary course and worked at various jobs—a bank, the Dene Nation, INAC. When she died, she worked as Executive Assistant to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

Away from her job, Shirley quietly helped others. In winter, Shirley made baby booties, blankets, and did other crafts. She read every day—and still liked to travel.



**Photo top: Sharon with the Hay River Ski Club**

Photo credit: [www.hayriverskiclub.com](http://www.hayriverskiclub.com)



**Photo bottom: Sharon helping with a Northern Youth Empowerment Weekend in Norman Wells, NWT 2011**

Photo credit: [Skitrax.com](http://Skitrax.com)

The main goal was to inspire and motivate Aboriginal girls in cross-country skiing. Participants got first-hand instruction on and off the snow. The 46 skiers, aged 9 to 19, came from nine communities, with a focus on the Sahtu region.

## ***Life After Ski Racing for Sharon***

With Shirley living in France, Sharon faced her new reality without her twin sister. “What is Sharon going to do now? Where is Sharon going to live?”

“When you go into the workforce you have to sell yourself big time. ... The main thing is to make the people believe in you that you can do the job. ... We weren’t raised to talk like that. ... The challenge is getting to know who you are. And being able to express it in words what you want to say.”

Feeling her way into her new life, Sharon lived in Vancouver for one year. She worked at Expo ‘86. She moved to Yellowknife in 1987. And she lives there still.



Photo credit: Facebook

...”to have a purpose in life, to know that there’s something better out there. But to still have the values of the traditional lifestyle— honest hard work, keeping your life simple, being generous, helping people, being kind to people..”



“For me I don’t want clutter. It’s learning to live a simple life. We grew up with a really simple life.”



“I know for myself that I always wanted a better life. I wanted something better than having to struggle every day, to be poor. I wanted a good life for me.”

When she first lived in Yellowknife, Sharon worked at various jobs that did not suit her nature or skills, or benefit from them. She experienced some racism and other barriers. She had only high school education. And she didn't make very good money.

But things changed in 2001. She started a job as Youth Advisor in the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs, GNWT. She developed her own job description.

In this role, Sharon inspires youth. She has traveled to 33 NWT communities. Sharon motivates youth to live healthy lives, and to have dreams and goals. She supports them to face social problems. She gets them to try skiing. She encourages them to learn from Aboriginal culture.

Away from her job, Sharon helps out in the community and spends lots of time with her sister and nieces. She designs and creates unique feather earrings. She keeps setting goals and dreaming.



**Photo top: 1990 Ski Hall of Fame ceremony. Left to right: Rhoda Wurtele, Shirley Firth, Sharon Firth, Rhona Wurtele**

*Photo credit: Canadian Ski Museum*

**Rhoda and Rhona are also twins. They are alpine skiing pioneers and champions of the 1940s and 1950s.**



**Photo bottom: Linda Dunbar receives the Firth Award in Canmore, AB on July 8, 2012**

*Photo credit: Justin Parsons,  
Canmore Leader (edited)  
(canmoreleader.com)*

**Left to right: Sharon, Shirley, Linda, Mayor John Borrowman**

**Cross Country Canada created the Firth Award in 1985. It recognizes Sharon and Shirley's outstanding contributions to Canadian cross-country skiing. Each year the award goes to a woman who continues that tradition.**

# *Awards and Honours*

Sharon and Shirley share many awards and honours.

- 1972: John Semelink Memorial Award, Canadian Ski Association, for contribution to skiing in Canada
- 1981: NWT Commissioner's Award
- 1985: first Firth Award
- 1987: Order of Canada
- 1990: Canadian Museum Ski Hall of Fame inductees
- 2002: Queen's Golden Jubilee Award
- 2006: National Aboriginal Achievement Award
- 2008: Banff Sports Hall of Fame inductees
- 2012: Queen's Diamond Jubilee Award
- 2012: NWT Sport Hall of Fame inductees



**Photo top: Students welcome the Firth sisters when they go to Aklavik to film “Chiefs and Champions”**

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*



**Photo bottom: Sharon and Shirley with the late Danny Gordon, Aklavik**

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*

## ***Documentary Films***

- 2002: CBC documentary “The Firth Sisters From the Tundra”
- 2004: “Northern Gold – The Sharon Anne Firth Story” a cooperative production by ConocoPhillips, Dargo Associates, and Municipal and Community Affairs, GNWT
- 2007: APTN documentary “Chiefs and Champions”



**Sharon and Shirley at a book-signing event in Yellowknife.**

Photo credit: *flickr.com (edited)*

**The book "Guts and Glory" is by Sally Manning. It tells the story of the skiers in the TEST program—"The arctic skiers who challenged the world." Published 2006, Up Here Publishing Ltd., Yellowknife**

## *Medals*

At Canadian National Championship cross-country skiing events ...

Sharon won 37 medals:

- 19 gold
- 14 silver
- 4 bronze

Shirley won 42 medals:

- 29 gold
- 10 silver
- 3 bronze

For six years in a row—1978 to 1983—Ski Racing Magazine voted Shirley as the Canadian woman nordic skier of the year.



**Photo top: Sharon at 2007 Canada Winter Games, Whitehorse, Yukon—the first Canada Games held north of 60**

*Photo credit: CBC.ca*

**Sharon is holding one of the pan northern torches, made from caribou antler, specially for these games. The three torches represent the three territories: Yukon, NWT, Nunavut.**

**Photo bottom: Sharon descending Grey Mountain during the torch relay, Canada Winter Games, 2007, Whitehorse, Yukon**

*Photo credit: flickr.com*

# ***Glossary***

**amateur sport:** athletes get no money to compete.

**consecutive:** one right after another.

**correspondence:** schoolwork through the mail.

**discipline:** training or a way of life with lots of self control and order.

**elite:** the best of the group.

**endurance:** the power to keep going under stress or pain.

**excel:** to be the best.

**motivation:** something that drives a person or causes them to do something.

**opportunity:** a good chance or opening that comes along.

**perseverance:** to keep going no matter what.

**prejudice:** unfair opinion against someone.

**qualify:** to meet certain conditions. Cross-country skiers must qualify to go to the Olympics.



### **Inuvik skiers 1984**

**Photo credit top:** NWT Archives/Northwest Territories. Dept. of Public Works and Services  
fonds/G-1995-001: 5625 (edited)

**Photo credit bottom:** NWT Archives/Northwest Territories. Dept. of Public Works and Services  
fonds/G-1995-001: 5959 (edited)



## *Discussion Questions*

1. What did you learn about Sharon Firth and Shirley Firth-Larsson?
2. Sharon and Shirley had goals and dreams. What things helped them achieve their goals and dreams?
3. What goals and dreams do you have? What would help you achieve your goals and dreams?
4. Sharon and Shirley rose above many challenges. What helped them do that? What helps you overcome the challenges in your life?
5. Sharon and Shirley traveled around the world to ski races. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you like to go? Why?
6. Today, Sharon and Shirley want people to live healthy lives. What choices can you make for healthy living?



**Sharon and Shirley at National Aboriginal Achievement Awards ceremony, 2006**

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Sharon Firth*

# *Information Sources*

- Personal interviews with Sharon and Shirley  
February 2013
- Canadian Ski Hall of Fame
- Cross Country Canada
- Sally Manning, “Guts and Glory” 2006, Up  
Here Publishing Ltd., Yellowknife, NWT
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