



MISSIONARIES of the MOUNTAINS

NOBODY SPREADS THE GOSPEL OF THE BACKCOUNTRY MORE THAN NOAH AND JONAH HOWELL, THE BROTHERS BEHIND POWDERWHORE PRODUCTIONS. THROUGH 10 YEARS OF MOVIE-MAKING, THEY'VE CAPTURED AND SHARED SKIING'S MOST QUIRKY CHARACTERS—INCLUDING THEMSELVES.

»» BY MEGAN MICHELSON | ILLUSTRATION BY JAMIE GIVENS ««

A TINY, REMOTE-CONTROLLED HELICOPTER CIRCLES OVERHEAD, BUZZING LIKE AN OVERSIZED, ELECTRONIC MOSQUITO. I GLANCE UPWARD, DISTRACTED BY THE GADGET, AND THEN LOOK BACK AT THE SKINTRACK, WHICH WINDS UP THE FINAL PITCH OF MT. SUPERIOR (11,040 FT.) IN UTAH'S WASATCH MOUNTAINS.

UP AHEAD, FROM A PERCH CLOSE TO THE SUMMIT, NOAH HOWELL OPERATES THE HELICOPTER THAT HAS A CAMERA INSIDE TO SHOOT OUR ASCENT. WE'RE MAKING A SKI MOVIE HERE, BUT NOT YOUR STANDARD, SKI-PORN BLOCKBUSTER. THIS LITTLE MOVIE IS LOW COST AND ALL HUMAN-POWERED. AND THIS TOY CHOPPER MIGHT BE AS CLOSE AS WE'LL GET TO HELICOPTER SKIING.

AT 5 A.M., OUR CREW OF COFFEE-TOTING SKIERS ASSEMBLED AT A PARKING AREA AT THE MOUTH OF BIG COTTONWOOD CANYON, AND NOW, AFTER OUR LONG SLOG, THE SUN IS

JUST CRESTING THE HORIZON. THE LIGHT SHINES ORANGE AND HAZY—GLORIOUS FOR FILMING. AT SUPERIOR'S SUMMIT, NOAH AND HIS BROTHER, JONAH, SET UP TRIPODS WHILE THE REST OF US SCOUT LINES AND GEAR UP TO SKI.

"DROP IN 10," JONAH TELLS ME THROUGH THE RADIO. I PUSH OFF THE PRECIPICE INTO THE OPEN SLOPE AND SLASH BIG, FAST TURNS THROUGH FLAWLESS, KNEE-DEEP POWDER. A COUPLE THOUSAND FEET LATER, I COME TO A STOP WITH A DELIRIOUS GRIN.

THROUGH THE RADIO, NOAH'S TONE SOUNDS DEADPAN. "THAT LOOKED JUST TERRIBLE," HE SAYS. I FREEZE. SERIOUSLY?

THEN I REMEMBER: NOAH AND JONAH ARE CHAMPIONS OF SARCASM, AND THIS WHOLE MOVIE-MAKING BUSINESS—WHICH THEY'VE BEEN AT FOR 10 YEARS—IS JUST A GAME THEY LOVE TO PLAY. NOTHING IS EVER SERIOUS WITH THESE TWO. EVEN AT THIS DISTANCE, I CAN HEAR THEIR LAUGHTER ECHOING FROM THE RIDGE TOP.





THE HOWELL BROTHERS ARE THE ARCHITECTS—THE FOUNDERS AND LONE EMPLOYEES—OF POWDERWHORE PRODUCTIONS. THEY DO EVERYTHING FROM SHOOTING, EDITING AND SKIING IN THEIR FILMS TO SHIPPING DVDS AND TAKING THE MOVIE ON TOUR EACH YEAR. THIS FALL, THEY DEBUTED THEIR 10TH FILM, APPROPRIATELY CALLED *SOME THING ELSE*.

Noah and Jonah grew up Mormon alongside two sisters in Salt Lake City, Utah. They were built tall—more lanky than jock. Noah was a drama kid who didn't make the tennis team and always loved to put on a show. Jonah was the more disciplined younger brother, but he was still a class clown.

Jonah stopped going to church around age 15, and Noah, after serving part of his mission in Montreal, Canada, realized he didn't fit the Mormon lifestyle and left the church at age 20.

The two had skied a few times in junior high, but it wasn't until after graduating from high school that skiing became their new religion. Both avoided college and got jobs at Deer Valley, Noah as a liftie and Jonah as a ski instructor.

Together with friends in the late '90s, they started hiking into the Wasatch backcountry, a place that, they say, felt deserted at that time. And when their dad bought a camcorder to take on a family cruise, they borrowed it to bring out skiing and created shaky edits of their friends.

Noah started entering big-mountain telemark competitions, and that's where he met the Andys: Andy Jacobsen and Andy Rosenberg, both impressively strong telemark skiers. Noah put together a 10-minute edit of them for the New England Telemark Festival and won the event's film contest. When he tore his ACL not long after and couldn't ski, he signed up for a weeklong film-editing course in New York. That's the entirety of the group's filmmaking education.

"We were self taught and had zero professional experience," says Jacobsen, who served as both a filmer and athlete for years. "We never thought this would turn into what it did, or that it would become a full-time job for Noah or Jonah. It was more like, 'We're going to ski a bunch of pow and film our friends.'"

They were still learning the rules of the backcountry, too. One day, on Utah's Cardiac Ridge, the Powderwhore crew triggered two separate avalanches on the same slope. Nobody was hurt,

but there was a lot of screaming and commotion. Ski mountaineer Andrew McLean watched from a distance.

"In one of their first movies, I lost track of how many avalanches they triggered and close calls they had, so I didn't think they'd be long for the movie world," McLean says. "But they've come a long way since then and now: they're far and away my favorite group to film with."

Their first movie, PW05, which debuted in, you guessed it, 2005, was created over a series of 16-hour editing sessions that summer in Noah's basement bedroom. The editing was choppy but the skiing wasn't. "Looking back, it's embarrassing to watch those first movies," Jacobsen admits now.

But back then, people loved it. The guys hung a few movie posters, strapped a projector onto Rosenberg's Honda Accord and went for an inaugural mini movie tour. The first show, in Salt Lake City, sold out.

As storytellers and fanatical backcountry skiers, the Howells saw their films become a celebration of the slower pace and eccentric culture of skintracks, backcountry huts and the personalities of those driven to climb mountains in search of powder.

Over the years, they've added professional athletes like Chris Davenport and the late JP Auclair, unique locations from Argentina to British Columbia and bigger lines, but they still try to focus on under-the-radar people and their stories. In 2009, they featured the tale of EJ Poplawski, whose leg was amputated after a bad crash in a tele comp and who learned to ski again on a prosthetic.

"They were never trying to be TGR," says Jay Beyer, a Salt Lake-based photographer who's been shooting with Powderwhore Productions since 2006. "They weren't always looking for the raddest, gnarliest skiing they could find. They've always been more focused on telling the story of the unique people in the backcountry and how those people are living their lives."

[left to right] Jonah Howell, class clown turned ski-film clown. **Jay Beyer**
Drama kid Noah Howell in Holden Village, Wash. **Jim Harris**
Jonah, last winter in Mt. St. Elias National Park, Alaska. **Garrett Grove**

A few years after they made their first movie, I met Noah for the first time at a German restaurant in Salt Lake City.

"I love your movies," I told him over plates of sauerkraut and bratwurst. "But why don't you have any girls skiing in them?"

He claimed it was hard to find women who were up for their style of skiing—dawn-to-dusk days, thousands of vertical feet, lots of trail breaking. When I balked at this notion, he said, "So why don't *you* come out skiing with us?"

So I did. On a cloud-covered day in the Wasatch, I brought along two female friends, both strong skiers, and told them we had the reputation of womankind on our shoulders.

We started in Little Cottonwood Canyon, skinning by 7 a.m. We skied with our hearts and our quads, gracefully and at full-throttle. We did our best to keep up, lap after lap, and by 4 p.m., I was exhausted and out of food and water. Noah and Jonah liked the footage and, after that, I became a Powderwhore, a member of their tribe.

Since then, I've lived with them for two weeks in a smelly RV in Alaska's Chugach, I fell through a cornice chasing them in the Wasatch, and I've stood, freezing, on many a ridge top in howling wind, waiting for light to peek through. While on tour across Colorado, California and Washington, I've seen them survive on fast food and sleep on kitchen floors. Through it all, I've observed them with a reporter's eye. Two grown-up brothers—Jonah is now 35, Noah is 37—holed up in the same house, living on a meager income but skiing every day.

Over the years I've watched them change. Noah has become a ski-mountaineering fiend, ticking off iconic descents in Utah and remote Alaskan ranges. He's a hardened athlete and he's all business when it comes to skiing, climbing and safety. But nothing is ever too serious when you're traveling with the Powderwhore guys.

In Antarctica in 2012, he cannonballed off a ship into 32-degree water and tore apart the skin beneath his pink Speedo. He visited the ship's nurse, then partied all night and still got up to ski first thing in the morning.

On a trip home from a sailboat-to-ski expedition in Svalbard, Norway, a few years ago, Noah thought it'd be funny to put a large beef sausage into the checked bag of fellow skier Kim Havell. When she landed in Denver, the police dogs sniffed out the meat, leaving her to explain the situation to a not-so-friendly customs officer.

Their films have starred oddballs, too, like Todd Stuart, who retired to a shack he

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built in the middle of nowhere in northern Utah, and the crusty and bearded Bob Athey, the so-called Wizard of the Wasatch, who's been cutting tracks in the backcountry since the 1970s. In their newest film, they profile an off-the-wall snowboarder in Wyoming's Salt River Range who sleeps under a tarp and spends his days talking to his GoPro.

Through their counterculture and humorous approach, Powderwhore Productions has attracted a cult following. When their movies debut on their hand-toted projector screen each fall—at breweries, ski shops and independent theaters in places like Bozeman and Bend—crowds appear out of the woods (literally) to watch. They sell out six shows of 200 people each in Salt Lake City. Even in San Francisco, backcountry skiers cram into a sports shop basement to watch their latest creations.

But making movies, Noah and Jonah say, is getting harder and harder—fluctuating sponsors, unreliable snow conditions, more crowded terrain—and the payoff, monetarily at least, is minimal. The Howell brothers fund their low-cost existence with a few key sponsors,

like Voilé, Scarpa and Black Diamond, and through ticket sales from their movie tours.

But this year, they say, their 10th film might just be their last. The end of something else, so to speak, could be near.

I've always wondered how they make ends meet, so, to ask how they do it, I called them up at their home near the base of Big Cottonwood Canyon. Jonah owns the home with his wife, Ashley, whom he married in 2005, and Noah lives in the basement bedroom. They were in the hot tub when I called.

"There was no forethought that this was ever going to be a real business," Jonah tells me. "We knew there was no money in making telemark ski movies. It was just exciting to be doing it."

"It's a miracle we're still around," Noah adds. "We've made all the biggest mistakes. But at the beginning, we thought, 'Can we actually do this? And will people watch it?' It was more for the challenge than



[top] Noah shows his O-face during a 2010 expedition to the Revelation Mountains, Alaska.
[bottom] Fresh off the boat: Noah and Jonah arrive at Holden Village, Wash. **Jim Harris all**



GIVE THEM ROTTEN SNOW, NO MONEY AND SOME OLD, BEARDED SKIERS, AND THEY'LL MAKE A MOVIE THAT PACKS THEATERS.

Noah is more the creative type—quickly interjects. “We were never actually *making* money,” he corrects. “It was all just covering itself and we were getting free trips. So we’d travel to ski and then ‘Powderwhore’ would pay for it.”

The whole thing is a low-budget operation. Minimal overhead. No office. No employees. On trips, they couch surf and live on free Cliff Bars—just two brothers, a couple of cameras and some friends willing to make pretty turns down a mountain.

“We’re still blown away that people actually want to watch us do what we do in the mountains,” Jonah says.

But by 2010, the telemark industry was dwindling and marketing budgets were getting smaller. It was harder to find dedicated telemark athletes, and their audience numbers plateaued. Plus, Noah and Jonah both switched from tele to AT and they wanted to open their films up to more than just telemarking.

So their 2011 movie, *Breaking Trail*, also included AT skiers and spiltboarders. The reaction was mixed—some new audience members trickled in, but the hardcore telemarkers booed when alpine skiers appeared on screen.

“It was like, all of a sudden, we’d become these figureheads of this telemark cult,” Noah says. “Then suddenly, we’re changing the commandments and people started revolting.”

With *Some Thing Else*, their 10th film, the brothers again find themselves at a crossroads.

“We don’t have to keep making movies, but do we want to do this? Do we still enjoy doing this?” Jonah says. “Or is it time to be done? We make that decision every year.”

“This is probably our last movie,” Noah adds, only half seriously. “But we do say that every year, and then we always make another. So anything is possible.”

Their tribe of fans—myself included—will certainly bow their heads in solidarity if the end of the Powderwhore road is near.

“I would be really sad if they stopped making films,” Jay Beyer says. “I’ve heard them say this is

their last film for five years running now. They’re bringing something to the table that’s different, and it’d be a real shame to see that go away.”

Madsen, once a rival filmmaker of theirs, feels the same way. “In the game of making ski movies and especially ones revolving around telemark and backcountry, I don’t think anyone knows the future. Things come and go,” he says. “But I commend Noah and Jonah for putting out as much material as they have. Either way, they have been great representatives of our era of snow people—and that’s what matters.”

In late January, dismal snow conditions around the West had Noah and Jonah in distress. They were worried about even having enough footage to put together a decent film, and they needed a magical trip to save their 10th movie.

“How about Japan?” Jonah proposed.

So I drained my bank account on a last-minute plane ticket. Two weeks later, I found myself sitting in the Sapporo airport with Jonah, Beyer and a few others.

Each day, we ticked off snow-drenched backcountry lines accessed from one-lane roads. Conditions weren’t shoulder-deep powder, as we’d hoped, but no matter: The terrain was striking—rolling pitches covered with a web of trees like those out of a Dr. Seuss book—and the snow was light and floaty. We ended each day soaking in hot springs and feasting on sushi and noodles.

On day five, over a spread of fish, Jonah decided to eat a hulking, raw prawn, head and all. We told him it wasn’t a good idea, but he proclaimed—half joking, half not—that it was Japanese custom. He shoved the whole thing in his mouth, the creature’s spiky, pink limbs sticking out between his teeth. That night, I could hear him making frequent and urgent trips to the bathroom, and the next morning, he looked pale and queasy. Most people would take the day off.

Jonah and Noah are not like most people. Pranksters, sure, but quitters? Not a chance. Give them rotten snow, no money and some old, bearded skiers, and they’ll make a movie that packs theaters. Give them a road between Utah and Alaska, and they’ll drive the whole thing in one sitting, then climb a mountain the next day. Give them a girl who falls through cornices and usually prefers chairlifts, and they’ll turn her into a backcountry convert.

Their gospel is rich and powerful, and it makes those who encounter it want to rise at dawn and break their own trail. There’s no way they can stop making movies. It’s who they are. It’s what they love to do.

After the shrimp incident, Jonah stayed in bed later than usual, but by mid-morning, he grabbed his skis and his camera-loaded pack. “We’ve got a movie to make,” he said. And he headed for the door. ■

anything else, just like telemarking.”

For proof that the Howells never thought their little movies would become a viable business, look no farther than their name: Powderwhore, which they called their clan in the late ’90s.

They’ve caught grief for years—a shop in Colorado Springs won’t sell their DVDs due to the indecency, and while on tour with their trailer, which says Powderwhore in large letters, small-town neighbors often complain.

For their first few movies, no sponsors actually paid them money—some donated gear to be raffled off on tour, but that was it. Noah says he put those brands’ logos on the DVD just so the movie looked legitimate.

Then, in the mid 2000s, telemarking was seeing an industry spike and backcountry was becoming a buzzword. “Companies were definitely willing to shell out some cash for these types of projects at that time,” says fellow filmmaker Josh Madsen, who produced five of his own telemark movies during that era. “While money ultimately is what is going to drive longevity, I think for some of us, it was more about having access to the tools to capture what was going on around us.”

Powderwhore Productions—which is one of the only film companies focusing purely on backcountry terrain—was on the cusp of a new revolution. Tour attendance increased by 20 percent each year for the first few years. In 2005, they started with five tour stops, and now they’re up to more than 60, many of which attract a sold-out crowd. Still, Noah says it was a real struggle until they produced *Flakes*, which came out in 2009. “Then we were making decent money and it was really supporting itself,” he mentions.

Jonah—who some call “Business Howell” since he manages the tour and finances, while