

# CURATOR'S CHOICE



## 95th Anniversary of Water Skiing

**F**or three days in the summer of 1922, 18-year-old Ralph Samuelson of Lake City, Minnesota, splashed around behind a 24-foot launch with a 24-horsepower engine driven by his brother. Despite broken skis and several failed attempts, on the third day Samuelson successfully rode the water of Lake Pepin aboard a pair of nine-foot-long pine planks from the local lumberyard. Samuelson had softened and curved the tips of the boards using his mother's wash boiler and reinforced them with metal strips.

In 1925 Samuelson performed the first water ski jump using a greased wooden 4' x 16' ramp he built on Lake Pepin. He drew crowds in Lake City, then began touring the country performing ski shows. Samuelson injured his back and wrist on land and was forced to stop performing. He never patented any of his water skiing equipment and left the sport behind, turning to turkey farming in Mazeppa. Samuelson was pulled from obscurity in 1963 by a St. Paul reporter and recognized by the Water Ski Association as the first person to have skied on water.

This pair of handmade pine water skis is painted white with a green stripe and "RWS" for Ralph W. Samuelson, their inventor. According to Samuelson, who donated them in 1971, these water skis were used in his first successful trial in skiing on water. The foot bindings are leather straps screwed into each ski alongside a corrugated rubber foot pad. The ski tips are curved with flat ends and braced on either side by metal supports. Four wooden cross-pieces are screwed to the top of each ski along the length to add strength.

Samuelson's skis are on display in the "Weather Permitting" exhibit at the Minnesota History Center. Visit the Gale Family Library or search "Ralph Samuelson" on Collections Online ([collections.mnhs.org/cms/](http://collections.mnhs.org/cms/)) to see more photographs of Samuelson in action.

—Sondra Reiersen, associate curator of 3D objects



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