Old Kiandra

NOTES ON THE EARLY DAYS OF AUSTRALIAN SKI-ING.

By W. Hughes.

Snow sports on a large scale were carried on at Kiandra 25 years before skis were used extensively in Switzerland, yet to-day the township is of little importance in the ski-ing world. The population, which was once over 10,000 has decreased, until now barely 100 people are to be found in the town.

It is impossible to compile an authentic history of Kiandra's early ski-ing days, but much interesting information can be obtained from those of the older inhabitants who have watched the various changes in ski-ing methods from their beginning until recent years. It is from such a source that the facts in this article were drawn.

The first ski-ing Kiandra saw was when one Bumpstone, a Swede, on a hastily constructed pair of skis ran from his home down the main street in 1857. He was quickly surrounded by curious onlookers, some of whom immediately began to construct skis. Soon, every near-by slope was crowded with eager novices, and, before many days passed, competitions were arranged and carried through with great enthusiasm.

The first skis were of a simple pattern, the shaping being left to individual ingenuity; the majority were of a slightly greater width at the toe than at the heel, and blunt pointed; that is to say, the corners were merely sawn or rounded off the slab and the end turned up by heating in tallow or steaming, and then set. They were almost universally made from split mountain ash and were self-grooved. To obtain this effect, the planed bottom surface was worn on hard snow until the natural grain of the wood showed up plainly.

The width, length and thickness of skis were governed by each maker's personal views, but, excepting that they were wider, they were in general respects much the same as the skis at present used at Kiandra.

A few years after the first skis were made, a Norwegian named Amundsen, said to be a relative of the late Polar explorer, started a ski-making business and introduced the Christiania type, with its long toe and artificial groove. These skis usually had a large number of very small grooves right across the face, but odd pairs, of which specimens are still to be found, had three large grooves, similar to the skis now used for jumping. Great ingenuity was exercised by some in inventing bindings. Probably the

first generally used binding consisted of a greenhide toe strap (greenhide being most plentiful) some four inches in width, let into shaped slots in the side of the ski and affixed with screws; this strap was sometimes in one piece, but was more often cut in half and laced whilst wet tightly to the shape of the user's boots. Being fixed in such a position as to bring the centre of the foot over the centre of the ski (by balance) and augmented by a piece of wood or leather nailed across the ski in front of the heel, it proved, as long as it was kept in right shape, a very serviceable fitting. Then leather or canvas straps or bindings became popular, owing to their greater rigidity when wet, but were found to be less adaptable to the shape of the boots than the greenhide. They are, however, still used in some parts of the district.

The part of the ski on which the boot rests was almost always covered with canvas or leather and large-headed tacks, or roughened by criss-cross saw cuts, so as to give the riders' hob-nailed boots a firm grip.

Many other bindings were tried—perhaps the firmest on record being one tried out by a Scotchman, who screwed a pair of boots firmly to his skis, declaring that, unless the boot laces broke, they could not get away from him. A heel strap with buckles, instead of the modern patent clips, was often used for travelling, but was considered to be dangerous and unnecessary for downhill running.

Stocks were unknown in 1850, but a single stick, 6 to 8 feet in length and sometimes very heavy, was used by novices and the elder riders, the young bloods considering it degrading to be seen with one, especially for downhill use. They were ridiculed if seen taking any run or cornice other than straight.

The miners, being busy hunting for gold, did not have time for tours or long distance races, but downhill running appealed to them and could be enjoyed, even if one had but an hour to spare. Tobogganing was tried, but the strenuous labour of pulling the toboggan up the hills was not taken to kindly.

On every holiday the main course was covered with runners of both sexes, assiduously practising, and every few weeks, when the snow was good, competitions were held. It would have seemed strange to us of to-day to have seen these ski-ing pioneers in their tight-fitting pea-jackets, white moleskins, gum boots and broad multi-coloured waistbands, their long beards streaming back over their shoulders, careering down precipitous slopes at speeds only occasionally excelled nowadays. No data is at hand to prove how the ladies dressed, but it is certain that they indulged in the sport. We cannot, somehow, picture them

ski-ing in crinolines and leg-o'-mutton sleeves, but a few years later women came out, in long dresses trailing on the snow, and ran the town course of 440 yards in 25 seconds.

The Chinese are generally supposed to take no interest in sports, but those in Kiandra in the early days adopted ski-ing with enthusiasm, and some became very proficient runners. Being compactly built and firm muscled, they ran the hills sitting almost on the skis, like human bullets—offering little resistance to the wind, and still having sufficient weight to keep the skis on the snow and ensure the gathering of maximum speed. One day each season was set aside for the Chinese runners alone, and great was the entertainment afforded the onlookers. Brake sticks were permitted, and as many as ten runners often started in a race down the Kiandra Slam, the width of which is but two chains. Consequently, fouling was frequent, and the long sticks were often used successfully by the indiscriminate to fell a rival.

With cries of "Oki," "Oolah" and such Chinese expressions of merriment or wrath, the "Pats," with pigtails flying and sticks swinging, must certainly have presented an animated scene unique in ski-ing history. Fights with skis and sticks were frequent, as someone was nearly always to be found who objected forcibly to being "accidentally" tripped up or hit over the head with an eight foot pole.

"—AND HER MOTHER CAME, TOO!" 1910.

Amongst the population of 10,000 or so were some always ready for deeds of "derring-do," and many were the feats performed which must for ever remain unrecorded. One well-remembered feat was to run down the old roads when the snow was gone from everywhere else; this needs some explanation. The bullock drays in summer cut deep wheel ruts irregularly down some of the steepest hills, and the rivulets these caused after rain cut out trenches some two feet in depth and six to eight feet in width. These impressions held the drifting snow, and thus often formed long narrow patches of snow bordered by rocks and bare ground. It required great nerve and skill to run down one of these natural slaloms on hard snow, the ground on either side looking rather forbidding and the narrowness of the course making it necessary to take all corners with jump, Christiania, or skating turns. At these turns the Kiandra skier is still most proficient. Very seldom does one see such a slalom set.

Having no knowledge of or precedents in jumping methods, the Kiandra men evolved a style of their own, and, considering that the jumping mounds were placed almost on the level, became fairly proficient. As can be readily believed, the shock to a man landing on level, beaten-down snow after a jump of any length was very considerable—in fact, sometimes so great as to split the skis. As much as 60 feet has been covered from a take-off, placed almost on the level, representing a jump of perhaps one hundred and twenty feet on a properly laid-out jumping hill. It was not until a few years ago that jumps were made on the sides of the hills, and, even then, the take-offs were often placed in most unsuitable positions, thus entailing a fall of about forty feet in jumping eighty. The run-out was often more difficult than the jump.

In 1870 the exodus of skiers from Kiandra began and the population decreased gradually, until in 1910 the last competitions were held at which good nominations were received. The years from then until now have seen a gradual decrease in the number of ski-runners, until now but a handful participate in the yearly events.

WHERE THE YEAR BOOK MAY BE PURCHASED.

Copies of this Book may be obtained from the Secretary, Ski Council of N.S.W., G.P.O. Box 50 CC, Sydney; from the N.S.W. Government Tourist Bureau, Challis House, Sydney; or from Angus & Robertson, Ltd., Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

Applications for advertising space and rates may be made to the Secretary, Ski Council; or to the publishers, Sydney and Melbourne Publishing Co., Ltd., 29 Alberta Street, Sydney.