

Ski Tourers' Association

BEFORE the 1956 snow season a great deal of attention had been given to safety measures, and after three years of experimenting, effective wireless contact from the Tow House with the Chalet and other points was established. Albina, Kunama, and the Tow House were linked by telephone line, and a snowpole line from the Tow House to Albina completed the pole circuit—Charlotte's Pass, Seaman's, Albina, Tow House, Kunama, Foreman's, Charlotte's Pass. Tow installations had been repaired, and strengthened, and the top "A" frame re-sited.

The conversion of the old Pounds' Creek Hut had been started by the sponsors of the new Illawong Lodge project giving promise of another link in the chain of main range huts envisaged when in 1950 the building of the first lodge at Lake Albina was commenced.

After a slow start with a paucity of snow at Queen's Birthday week-end, the season was in full swing by the beginning of July. Three of the Austrian sledges had finally arrived, and I took them up the first week-end in July. Little did I realise how soon and for what sad purpose our sledge would have to be used.

On Thursday, July 12, an avalanche destroyed Kunama Huette. Readers are likely to have seen the press reports at the time of the tragedy, and only a brief excerpt from our emergency bulletin of July 18 is quoted:

"It is with deep regret that we have to record in this bulletin the death of one of our youngest and most enthusiastic members, Roslyn Wesche, who was killed when Kunama was destroyed by an avalanche on July 12. What was commenced with such high hopes has ended in tragedy and disaster. Our deep-felt sympathy goes to Roslyn's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Venn Wesche.

"Unprecedented weather conditions caused the calamity in an area which

hitherto was regarded completely safe from avalanches. The impact tore the building from its foundations, and it was crushed under tons of snow. Several of the other ten occupants had almost miraculous escapes, and luckily no one else was injured. Our own wireless and inter-hut telephone communication worked well, and help was quickly summoned from Albina, the Chalet, and the S.M.A. The occupants of the Tow House and Albina, the Chalet Management, the Ski Patrol, the Snowy Mountain Authority, and the Cooma ambulance all did a splendid job. For Roslyn all help was too late, as she was killed instantly. Our thanks go to all who participated in the rescue and salvage operations."

Following the loss of Kunama, a Kunama rebuilding fund was started, and it was decided to continue operating the Tow. However, our full measure of defeat had not yet been tasted. On Thursday, August 2, exactly three weeks after the Kunama avalanche, the Tow House was destroyed by fire. From reports by the three occupants of the Tow House (Ginelle Heine, Peter Kelly and Paul Kenealy), it appears that the fire started about 5 p.m. when a kerosene heater caught alight, spraying burning kerosene up the wall of the living room. Efforts to drag the flaming heater from the building failed (it was dropped in the airlock). A foam extinguisher and a CO2 extinguisher were used but without success. A telephone call from the burning airlock, although unintelligible to the people at Albina, alerted them that something was wrong and a party set out for the Tow House. In the meantime the Tow House occupants, being unable to reach any of their personal belongings in the cut-off living room and having decided that nothing further could be done to fight the fire, shut all outside



Over the Top, summer style.

Photo, D. H. Baglin.

doors in an effort to deprive the blaze of oxygen. As they were lightly clad (only one had proper boots), and as it was bitterly cold and getting dark, they set off up the icy tow slope towards Albina. They were met when halfway up the slope by members of the rescue party from Albina. Leon Smith was the first to reach the Tow House and he frantically dug out the entrance to the Kunama basement to reach the fire extinguishers and the big water tank. (The Tow water supply had frozen up previously, and efforts to re-connect the water had failed owing to bad weather.) By the time he and other members of the Albina party (Bill and Christine Davy, Mike and Pat Osborne, John and Ross Allen) had some fire-fighting equipment ready, the fire was beyond any control and they had to watch the Tow House burn down to the ground.

With only Albina left, we decided to keep it open, and were able to accommodate many members who had lost their bookings in Kunama and the Tow House. We finished the season with no other mishap except a rather narrow escape of a party from carbon monoxide poisoning when an exhaust coupling worked loose and fumes discharged in the hut—a warning to clubs operating generating plants inside their lodges!

The unprecedented winter of 1956, which robbed us of so much of our efforts, also left a kinder legacy of tremendous snow covering on the main range, and good drift skiing could be enjoyed as late as the middle of February. Our annual midsummer races, the fifth since the Association was founded in 1950, were by far the best ever, although there were initially some doubts as to whether they could be held at all.

ALBINA SUMMER SLALOM (2 runs).

	m.	s.
1. Jean Ecuyer	1	43.5
2. Frank Prihoda	1	51.9
3. Billy Day	1	52.9
4. Geoffrey Hughes	2	12.8
5. Hellmutt Deider	2	25.3

HANS NEERING MEMORIAL DOWNHILL

	s.
1. Jean Ecuyer	32.9
2. Les Perko	37.6
3. Geoffrey Hughes	41.2
4. Cees Koeman	43.4
5. Hellmutt Deider	44.3

JUMP.

1. Paul Reader.
2. Jean Ecuyer.
3. Hellmutt Deider.
4. Kurt Lance.
5. Cees Koeman.

ALPINE COMBINATION.

1. Jean Ecuyer.
2. Geoffrey Hughes.

Another interesting Association ski event during 1956 was the breaking of Tony Sponar's Northcote Eagle record of 32.2 seconds by Austrian ski instructor, Helmut Tschaeffert. Helmut's time was 29.3 seconds for the Eagle course from Mt. Northcote to Kunama which is slightly over half a mile long, with a vertical drop of 800 feet. Had the Longines timing equipment been again available, a top speed of close to 100 miles per hour would have been recorded. The record run was made on a very fast icy course. The Golden Eagle Book, salvaged from Kunama, was destroyed in the Tow House fire.

Regarding the immediate plans of the Association, the following brief summary can be given. For this winter we will have a semi-portable Gam tow at Albina. A similar lift will be installed this season at Illawong.

Illawong Lodge will be completed and ready for use this winter, and the spon-



On top of Townsend.

Photo. D. H. Baglin

sors will shortly apply to the Association for affiliation.

Due to severe soil erosion on the Seamans/Albina bulldozer and jeep track, vehicles are now barred from leaving the main road. We hope to overcome this serious transport problem with the help of a snow vehicle. One of our members has generously agreed to lend us a small bulldozer (an Oliver OC3) for the winter season. Similar machines are in use at Falls Creek and Hotham, and the bulk of our supplies for our lodges could be brought in in winter. If this tractor, equipped with snow and ice tracks, proves successful, it might also be used at a later date for rebuilding operations in the Kunama Valley (if we decide to build there), and to carry provisions and tow skiers from the Thredbo Lift terminal on Crackenback Peak.

A shelter on Muellers saddle, near Albina, will be built this summer to cope with any possible emergency at Albina, and to house the snow vehicle. In the Kunama Valley, salvage operations only have been carried out. The stone basement of Kunama, which was under snow when the avalanche struck, is almost intact, and a working party

led by Bill Hawkins succeeded in putting the roof back over the basement, thus providing an emergency shelter. The salvageable parts of the Northcote Ski Tow were hired to the Crackenback Ski Club, which is building a lodge at Friday Flat in the new Thredbo area. Crackenback Ski Club plans to re-erect the ropeway on Crackenback Peak so as to provide uphill transportation in this area until the proposed chair lift comes into operation.

We were compensated for both losses by our Insurers, and have a sizeable amount of money in hand, although we could of course not be reimbursed for the thousands of hours of members' voluntary labour. At present we are investigating the advisability of rebuilding in the Kunama valley as well as in the new Thredbo area.

In spite of our two terrific setbacks, we are determined to carry on, to provide for our members reasonably priced, high standard accommodation in the best skiing areas, and to keep alive the spirit of touring which is one of the finest aspects of our sport.

C.W.A.