

THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED WITH MR KEN BREAKSPEAR IN 1976.

INTRODUCTION: I'm here with Ken Breakspear one of the old men of the mountains, that is the Snowy Mountains. On the roof of Australia, and we've asked Ken to come in today to cast his mind back and tell us about something of our famous snowfields. When people first started to take notice of them and how they grew and developed into such fantastic resorts, that serve so many Australians and even overseas visitors today.

Ken when were the snowfields first exploited for any pleasurable pastimes as far as you can remember from history ?

KB: Well my personal contact with the snow actually started in 1926 . I had contact with various club members of Koscuisko Alpine Club and Ski Club of Australia and had a real interest in the snow, way before that. But the opportunity to get on the snow wasn't easy in those days for the simple reason, unless you belonged to one of the established clubs you had no chance whatsoever of getting a bed. My first introduction came when I had the opportunity while working in a bank in Cooma in 1926. I was taken up by the people I was staying with and I had my first introduction to the snow at the Hotel Kosciusko, where I hired a very old pair of hickory skis, a pair of military boots and a set of bindings made of malbeline and it was like being shoed by a blacksmith. You stood on the skis and they belted the malbeline until it touched the boot somewhere and you had a heel strap with so much freedom that the test was you were safe if you could put your knee on the front of the ski.

They set you off out to see what you could do in the snow for your first effort and it was really funny to watch. But I persevered at it on the 'Kerry' climbing and finished up that in two days I found that I could manage reasonably well, and I would say that from then on the snow became my annual holiday.

Well Ken when you first visited on this occasion in '26, when you went to what you call the Hotel Kosciusko, does that still exist at present? Would people still be able to find the Hotel Kosciusko today ?

KB: No unfortunately, this magnificent building that was first built in 1909 was destroyed by fire in the '50s and was a sad loss as far as Australia's skiing was concerned, because that was the introduction to the snow of all our early skiers. They all started off at the Hotel Kosciusko and from there the Chalet, the old original Chalet built at Charlotte's Pass and those two places plus Bett's Camp was the only accommodation or commercial accommodation in our snowfields. Which meant that in those days up into the late thirties you only had three resorts you could stay at, 200 beds.

200 Beds in total, that's a far cry from what we are looking at today with the resorts at Thredbo and Perisher Valley. The numbers there I would suppose would be hundreds of times more than at present ?

KB: Yes there would be thousands of beds at Thredbo and Perisher now and because private enterprise coming into the mountains has made it possible for club skiing which is much cheaper of cause and gives the opportunity to people belonging to clubs to have their annual skiing without having to go into ballots, which you had to do in commercial lodges and government accommodation.

Ken can you recall any of the names of any of the people who were part and parcel of the snow holiday at the Hotel Kosciusko in those early days ?

KB: Well I suppose mainly it would be the manager Mr Speer and his wife who managed the first class hotel even if it was so far away from civilization as it was in those days. The Speers ran a very, very good hotel, very tight of course. It was very difficult to find your way into the servants quarters at night time without him knowing about it, but plenty of fun and games took place at night time in that wonderful building. After playing around on the snow all day we'd come home to our hotel and shower, and then everyone had to dress in evening dress. The girls in their lovely ballroom dresses, the men in their tails and dress suits. We would sit down to our evening meal in the dining room where the linen on the table and the silverware was sparkling and polished. It was really something to see the night evening meal with candles, low lights and these beautifully dressed skiers. The transformation from the old ski clothes, which were nothing in those days, military pants and putties and the girls just had similar sort of equipment on. Skirts and riding britches and to see the glamorisation and the change to the people or the guests at 7 or 8'0'clock on. After the meal we'd go to the ballroom and we would dance on every night with a pianist up there called Miss Happ, who was fantastic on the piano and she would entertain us with our dance music. We would dance and drink until the early hours of the night. Up again the next morning, ski all day and do the same thing again the next night.

What about the instructors of those days with that primitive equipment. It must have been quite a task to learn and teach ?

KB: Yes the original instructor at the time at the Hotel Kosciusko was a Norwegian named George Aalberg, a fantastic skier of his day. He would ski the 'Grand Slam' which in those days it was considered the steepest slope in the area, and would ski that on one ski to show how easy it was. And even with the poor types of bindings he still seemed to have magnificent control. I wouldn't say the average skier had the same control but in those days the turning was stem turn type of snow plow turn. We didn't have overseas instruction until 1937 when Ernst Skardarasy came out from the Arlberg school in Austria. But we really started to learn any ski control. In those days it was herringbone up the slopes and sidestep. No tows and then you put your skis together and then you schussed down and hoped you could do something down the bottom to pull up or fall over, because the instruction was really non-existent.

What about cross - country Ken, the types of ski's and equipment in those days would have really lent themselves to travelling across the snowfields rather than running up and down steep slopes ?

KB: That's a fact, the type of equipment with plenty of heel lift made it possible to tour and touring of course, you're going more or less straight up a slope and straight down undulating, and most people did go on tours. Even from the Hotel they would go up to Dainer's Gap, Plains of Heaven, Pretty Rock, Smiggins and back on various trips, and the type of equipment lent itself to touring. Even in those days the narrow langlauf ski or cross - country skis as we know it today was very evident, and the skiers studied the conditions and they made their own wax originally, so that they could climb up and then still slide down the other side by the application of various types of wax. This was made up of bees wax and paraffin in various proportion and the performances of some of those skis in those days was fantastic really, considering the primitive equipment they had. I used to do trips from the Chalet, the Hotel Kosciusko up to the summit and back. I used to do trips across to Kiandra and back.

Kiandra and back, that seems a terribly great distance for people on such equipment ?

KB: It was people like Bertie Schlink, Sir Herbert Schlink, Bill Gordon, Reg Gelling, Doc Telfer and those types of people who were the hardy ones of those particular days. They were fantastic athletes and they would go across the mountains, stopping at mountain huts to Kiandra, stop at day and come back again via the huts and it was quite an effort in those days. It was almost like going to the Antarctic to go to Kiandra.

What about competition Ken did they institute races in those times ?

KB: Yes they started off when the clubs were formed in 1909 the Kosciusko Alpine Club first, then the Ski Club of Australia and the Millions Club. They all started their club races and in those days the Australian championship was a cross - country race. The slalom and the downhill races and that sort of came later. Ski jumping and langlauf was, they were the two main aspects of skiing in those days. The equipment didn't lend itself to very much to slalom running, but we had a number of skiers Tom Mitchell from Victoria, who used to ski overseas and came out and sort of showed us the improvement in technique. Each year he came out and went on the Australian snowfields. We saw skiing overseas was improving so much, they had instructors and ski schools over there and even on modern standards their technique would look strange now on our snowfields, they were managing christies, stem christies, pure christies and this started to replace the old telemark turn. It was fantastic to watch but was a much slower type of turn than the turn we know these days.

What about these races to the Summit and other points on the Main

Range and the record times that were set. I understand that you had a part in this type of competition and set records that stood for quite some time ?

KB: Yes well like marathons and various other sports you always find that it doesn't matter what the sport is you always find the athletes in that particular sport are always striving to set a record that somebody else can't break. And in those days the trip or the record from the Hotel Kosciusko which is where Tony Sponnar's Inn now stands at Lake Kosciusko. Up to the summit of Kosciusko 17.5 mile away and back again, was the achievement that all the tough skiers of those days would all try to set a record that particular year. The old days with the type of equipment they had, they used to take 14 to 15 hours, the skis were quite good but they were heavy and each year the equipment came back from overseas it was an improvement on the previous years. The bindings were improved, the boots were improved and each year the time factor was reduced.

So we see each year the times coming down from 14 hours to 12 hours, 10 hours to around about 8 hours and that seemed to be the limit. It didn't look as though anybody could go much under 8 hours until 1928. A Millions Club skier named Reg Gelling ran with this Norwegian instructor George Aalberg and they set a fantastic time for this 35 miles of 6 hours and 10 minutes. Well now, quite a lot of skiers said that could be impossible for that to be reduced any further. They had good conditions and Reg Gelling had run with Aalberg who was a noted Cross - country runner. But I set my sights on that in the 30s when I found out that I was pretty good at cross - country I used to do a lot of marathon running, rowing in Sydney and I found out I was in fairly good nick. Each year I went to Kosciusko I tried this langlaufing out and I was given a pair of langlauf skis by Sverre Kaaten and they were so long they were 245cm that when I was on them I was half way there and they made a big difference to me. So I thought I'll have a crack at this Kosciusko summit record. I was in the state team in 1935 cross - country and I raced for Australia against the Americans in '37.

And in 1938 while the Kosciusko Alpine Club was in residence the Chalet was burned down. It happened in a heavy snow storm and we had no Chalet and the Kosciusko Alpine Club all trooped back the next day led by various langlaufers like Reg Gelling, took one party and I took one party. I went back to the Hotel Kosciusko. The next day I did a trip back up again with some meat for Mr George Day and his family who were left at the Chalet as sort of caretakers in one of the sheds up there. And on my way home that afternoon back to the hotel I saw this lovely track for 11 miles made by about 50 skiers so I said summit record tonight. Well that was probably the greatest mistake I made because I set off at 9 O'clock that night. I was on the summit that night and the moon went down. Coming back through the Perisher I was in the dark and on langlauf ski, in those days you wouldn't find it was very good. I got back fairly tired at half past three and didn't break the record. I waited two days then and I got up at 3 o'clock in the morning and there was fog so I couldn't go. So I decided then I would have to run from daylight to nighttime, it would be the time for me to break

the record. The next day I set off from the Hotel Kosciusko at 5 o'clock had good snow all up to the summit, up there at 8 o'clock. I thought well I'm going pretty good, I ought to break the six hours with out any trouble and then the hot sun came up and all the way from Bett's Camp back to the Hotel Kosciusko I was pushing in slush, mud and got back to the Hotel in 6 hours and 1 minute and broke the record. Which for me was the greatest moment in my life. To have done it under daylight conditions when all the previous times had all been done at nighttime when the snow was fast and was firm snow of course, you get the much faster running and you don't get the waxing problems.

Ken you did that run in 1938 and broke that fantastic record that had existed previously and under such conditions. How long did this record last and till somebody else was able to better that time ?

KB: Well that record lasted until broken by Ross Martin I think it was about in the middle 60s, I think Ross Martin broke that.

Well Ross Martin is still one of our greatest cross country skiers today ?

KB: Yes well he was our olympic representative and of course he had slightly different equipment to what we have now, and in those days. They're running now on Balsa, hickory based skis where as the skis that we ran on were solid hickory, and of course the equipment wasn't nearly so good. But I think the skiers of those days were a tougher breed than what they are now. For the simple reason we didn't have tows, so we had to climb every mountain. We didn't have motor cars so we had to walk and I feel that the skiers of those days were better equipped for this sustained effort. Ross Martin trained of course for the olympics and he I think his time was round about 5 hours 17, something like that and I wouldn't be sure.

Well considering it was in the vicinity of thirty years later and the appreciable difference in time was not that great and allowing for the equipment, conditions and training techniques it would appear that your record apart from its long stand and you had the advantages of the modern skier you might have set a record they were still trying to achieve ?

KB: Well I wouldn't like to say that but you know these records are subject to so much, so many conditions both of the skier himself and of the conditions, that over a distance of 17.5 miles, 5000 feet up to 7000 odd. The conditions can change so much even with ideal conditions the skier himself has also got to be at the stage of his best that records are very hard, it's very hard to say whether one mans effort was better than anothers subject to conditions.

Well we can safely say Ken yours was a fantastic effort and the fact that you are still skiing so strongly and competitively is a credit to your condition and the way you maintained it for over

many years. We are talking back to 1926 and this is 1976. It's not hard to say that there is half a century of skiing in this man Ken Breakspear and there doesn't seem to be anything likely to stop him.