

Looking Back

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BYOND the gold and grey of sunset I see an aurora of splendid promises flashing to the zenith. Looking back along the road I review scenes and incidents during forty years' progress and achievement in the opening up of the Kosciusko Snowfields.

Transferred in 1906 from "Roads and Bridges" in the Maitland offices of the Department of Public Works, I found myself employed in the "Government Architect's Yard" at the top of King Street, Sydney, on the site now occupied by the Registrar General. Here in my hours of duty I posted accounts for sundries issued from stores for day labour works including those at "The Creel" at Thredbo and "The Hospice" at Kosciusko. In my lunch hour I watched the blacksmith as he wrought heavy iron hinges and lamp standards for the entrance gates. These names meant nothing to me then.

In a new job as clerk to the Architect in charge of the vast drawing offices of the big "Works" building I recorded correspondence with accompanying plans. Here I saw the first draft sketch for "An Accommodation House at Mount Kosciusko" dated 8/8/'06, and a much enlarged later scheme for "Proposed Hotel on Road between Jindabyne and Mount Kosciusko" dated 29/1/'07.

Soon I changed places again and had Kosciusko brought more closely to my notice. Excitement was obvious one day when the "Boss" strutted in his office before envious confreres dressed up as for a part in a play. He had on a "Balaclava Helmet," a voluminous white sweater and woollen gloves to match. My puppy stage with regard to Kosciusko then ended. My eyes opened and I saw with due astonishment that this was a place different from any other in Australia. Snowstorms raged in the winter and workmen were asking for climatic allowances, even in the summer. The Metropolitan Architect was preparing to visit the works with view of settling the question. I think the "woolly" outfit showed he was at least climatically influenced in favour of the men. They succeeded in their claim.

Things marched quickly for me from this time on. Officers from the "Intelligence Department" conferred frequently with the Architect regarding furniture and furnish-

ings for the Hotel Kosciusko. High-powered salesmen called to push the merits of their silverware, cutlery, crockery, stoves, baths, kitchenware, carpets and linen. In the midst of this I secured another new job, this time in the said "Intelligence Department" as assistant to the Immigration Officer. Here in 1908 I met for the first time Mr. Percy Hunter, just returned from London and a trip to the Continent on official business. Newly possessed of the fullest understanding regarding St. Moritz, Adelboden, Davos and the Bernese Oberland, he assured the public in splendid pamphlets that all the delights of winter sports which he had so recently experienced in these places were now to be available in Australia.

A thousand beds were promised and Australians were to be spared the hardship of winter crossings of the English Channel, which Britishers had to endure in addition to tedious night trains across the Continent to come to their snow. Enthusiastic publicity officers concocted new aphorisms for the Hotel Kosciusko. "This great Caravanserai" wrote one of them. "No," said Mr. Hunter, "it's not a Caravanserai." The first Balance Sheet presented to Mr. Hunter showed a deficit of £2000. "What's £2000," he said, "in the cost of establishing a new industry."

I took my cue and later when my chance came, continued assiduously establishing the industry.

Frequently when immigration business allowed me to enter the sanctum of Mr. Hunter, there occurred some interruption, affording odd glimpses of the Kosciusko Scene. Two of these I have already recounted. Others concerned the purchase of a licence and the change of name from "The Hospice" to "The Hotel." The licence was purchased for £700 and transferred from Dalgetty. The name "Hotel Kosciusko" has not yet completely displaced the original "Hospice" from the minds of some surviving local shepherds.

In line with his avowed eclectic policy, Mr. Hunter attached to himself an array of brilliant men useful to his projects. Charles Kerry, George Bell and Frank Hurley, top men in their profession, publicised Snow Sports photographically in the illustrated press. Leading journalists represented their

papers at the opening of the Hotel Kosciusko in June, 1909.

C. E. W. Bean distinguished himself by climbing on Klandra skis to the top of "The Perisher," leaving exhausted, at intervals on the steep slopes, nine others who attempted the ascent. It is reliably stated that this exhibition of stamina, remembered five years later by one of the nine, decided the final selection when Dr. Bean was chosen No. 1 War Correspondent and War Historian.

My first visit to Kosciusko was a sudden affair. Mr. Hunter was in London, and Mr. E. H. Palmer, who was in charge in Sydney, said, "I want you to go to Kosciusko tonight, the book-keeper is leaving." It was 4 o'clock on a July afternoon in the so-called "Alpine Week" and the train was due out at 9 o'clock. I hurried home, passed the news to my family as curtly as I had received it, and rushed to the local store for some suitable clothing. Remembering the "outfit" of the Government Architect I bought a Balaclava helmet, travelling rug, woollen sweater, gloves and scarf. I arrived at the Hotel next day and with it all on and wearing as well my brown Chesterfield overcoat with velvet collar and facings, a bowler hat, military boots and puttees and gripping a Gladstone bag and umbrella. The open tourer motor car from Cooma suffered two tyres blown out before reaching The Creel. Here we had lunch and afterwards climbed on a stile into a four-horse coach for a walking pace climb to the Hotel through 4 to 6 inches of mud and snow after the Green Bend (The road was not metalled till 1920-21). My fellow passengers had little to say as their heads were wrapped in rugs and mufflers. There was excitement, however, when snow caps were seen resting like Christmas cakes on the blackened stumps cleared for the road formation.

The Hotel was crowded and I had one of four beds in a converted sitting room. A lady who arrived in the same coach complained to me in the office immediately after being shown to her room over the kitchen, "I've got a stinking room," she said, and then dictated a telegram to her home in Sydney—"Frightfully bored here, returning Thursday." People could not arrive or return here as desired, but were obliged to book seats in the coach on a day when there was a vacancy. As the staff were coming and going at a fairly regular rate, many guests had compulsory waiting days beyond their wishes.

Still, the pressure of business was such that clients fought for priority and even paid for rooms held in their absence so as to be sure of accommodation. The tariff was 17/6 per day compared with 6/- to 8/- for commercial hotels in town or country.

Snow fell heavily the second day and I joined a party going to Pretty Point for a run in the afternoon. I turned out in all my woolies—helmet, chesterfield, muffler, puttees and gumboots with Klandra skis.

One hoe handle was the regulation issue in place of alpine stocks. Off we set. At the gate I was already perspiring. A few yards further climbing caused me to discard overcoat and muffler, and before passing the "Kerry" I had tossed away the helmet and the sweater and skied bareheaded. My waistcoat pockets filled with snow as it pattered against me. Visibility was only a few yards to I passed through Dainer's to Thompson's Plain without seeing ought but snow gums beautifully hung with white plumes. By this time I was wet through, but nothing could stop me. So far as my effort was concerned I felt no effect, but just floated along in Fairyland. I was astonished to find how flat the mountain seemed. "Ye Craggs and Peaks" there were none to apostrophise. The run home required all the push I could exert and I learned all about "balling" in wet snow and how to scrape it off one ski at a time on the back of the other one.

Another year I was allotted the job of annual stocktaking in April. The Manager, Mr. E. T. Cheeseman had contracted for a new post at the Hotel Sydney. The Director, Mr. Govers, was there and he asked me if I would mind remaining on at the Hotel for a while to represent the Department until a new Manager could be engaged. I leapt at the opportunity. I asked, why seek another Manager. I was cocksure I could do it. I had had years of youthful experience in a country general store dealing in groceries, crockery, glassware, farm produce, furniture, fruit, vegetables, confectionery and cordials, tinware, brushware and brooms. Refreshment booths at Agricultural shows and military encampments were sidelines in the business, and at these I had had experience in preparing and serving large numbers of meals, also serving wines, beers and spirits. I was acquainted with the clientele of the Hotel Kosciusko, had a knowledge of its accounts and stocks. And "what is more than all those boasts can tell,"

I wanted the job. There and then I was accepted and took over from Mr. Cheeseman. He duly departed, but found in Sydney his new employers were not yet ready, so he graciously returned to Kosciusko and tutored me thoroughly for several weeks. At the end of these weeks, I was not so cocksure of myself, but had already given up my home in Sydney and brought my family to live at Kosciusko.

Early in the period of my management I had the honour of a visit from the first Director of the Intelligence Department. From this cultured gentleman, Mr. H. C. L. Anderson, then retired, I learned the story of its establishment. The Premier of the day, Sir Joseph Carruthers, was the initiator who appointed Mr. Anderson. The purpose was to show the world, but principally the London Loan Market, that though gold production was declining, New South Wales was not a bankrupt State, not a desert, nor just a sheep walk. It was a well developed and developing country. British capital and British migrants were needed to realise the dreams of productiveness in breadstuffs then in the minds of public men. The plans succeeded. The present Chief Justice, Sir Frederick Jordan, then a brilliant young barrister who had rescued one of the commercial banks from a legal predicament, was an early appointee. I remember him engaged compiling informative booklets, much of the material and form of which is still used.

Mr. Percy Hunter was principal assistant to Mr. Anderson and his appointment, I was told, was decided on the strength of a "breezy" newspaper article on "Isobars" written by the clever journalist, who at that time presented the external appearance of "A bit of a boy in a straw hat." The scientifically correct, but popularly readable article was written after an interview with "old Russell" the State Meteorologist.

Clement Wragge was then in his "heyday" spending winters in rough huts at the Kosciusko Summit to observe weather conditions. Summer excursions were organised by the Department. Scientific investigations regarding the "Ice Age" were conducted by Professor David, later Sir Edgeworth David, of Sydney University.

Mr. Anderson accompanied one of the much publicised Summer Camp Excursions to the Summit. The new road was under construction, so the route taken was the old road along the Crackenback Range. Coaches

conveyed the tourists from Cooma to Jindabyne where luncheon had been arranged, horses hired for the party, and a bullock team engaged to carry the food, tents and camping equipment. It was to be a three-day journey with a stop-over at night at Old Bett's Camp. The party included pressman, Watkin Wynne, Parliamentarian, Sir Thomas Henley, about forty guests in all, astride and sidesaddle. The tour prospectus said "First Class Throughout." The luncheon at Jindabyne was corned beef, bread and tea. Mr. Anderson asked the waitress why at least potatoes were not added. He was told forcefully if he did not like it he could so and so leave it. Observing the muscular forearm of the woman and for the sake of peace he did his best to like it. The riding party reached Old Bett's Camp fairly late. They had dawdled at may lookout points. The bullock waggon, it was learned later, still was hopelessly bogged miles back along the track. The women were accommodated on the floor in "Old Bett's" and the men settled on the grass outside. It was cold. Mr. Anderson, after a look around, chose the lee of Sir Thomas Henley for shelter value and thus survived the miserable bivouac. He said Mr. Wynne had a lot to say about the "First Class Throughout" portion of the advertisements prepared by Mr. Percy Hunter.

A memorable visit was the Vice Regal party accompanying Sir Walter and Lady Davidson. The Alpine Club had put on a Bett's Camp Race as part of their Annual Carnival. I ordered out the sleigh to take the Governor and his Lady to Dainer's Gap where a crowd had gathered as usual to cheer the exhausted competitors on the home run. The road was ruined by the horses. The racing skiers took tosses they would not otherwise have expected. Fairly heavy snow came on with a driving N.W. wind. The club racing officials, who at my invitation had been entertaining an elderly visitor from New Zealand Alpine Club at Bett's Camp, returned laden with his extra skis, extra stocks, sealskines and an utterly useless ice pick which he could no longer carry for himself. Charles Maclurcan was never so angry as when I saw him arrive at the club sitting room laden with the frozen ice pick which had fallen to his lot. His justifiably impolite language drove me out of the room, a man broken in the performance of his duty to the King's representative.

(To be continued)