

Twynam Western Face Again

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(For further description of this area see the 1942 Year Book and "Australia's Alps," by Elyne Mitchell.)

NAGGED into activity by my parrot cry, "we must start early," we actually did leave the Chalet about 8.45 a.m. In winter the chief reason for an early start is to ensure leaving the tops in the early afternoon, in case of a change in the weather. In the spring, with long settled days, the chief consideration is to time the snow right for the main run down, and if a too late start lands you up to the ankles in porridge, a too early one can present you with a slope of sheet ice. It's fearfully as difficult to forecast as the weather, so whatever you advocate, there is grave risk of ultimately being assailed by the fatal words, "I told you so."

Two days before, I had been out to the west spur of Twynam, and down about 1000 feet of one of the many skiable slopes that form the bowl-shaped valley which drains into Watson's Gorge Creek. We had both been too late for the best snow, and with too little time in hand to exploit the full possibilities. The 1000 feet we went down ended in a gully, beyond which rose a subsidiary ridge, really little more than a shelf, the further slopes of which descended at least another 1000 feet into the main creek, which meets Watson's Gorge at right angles. To get over the upper end of this ridge would require less than five minutes' climb, and it was over that ridge my ambitions lay.

In 1943, with Colin Wyatt, I had skied on the spur which runs off Twynam, north towards Mt. Anderson, thus forming the eastern side of the bowl, and on that occasion we had looked directly on to the slopes I speak of now. They are well illustrated in the 1944 Year Book dealing with this trip, and also in the 1942 Year Book, photographed by Wyatt from the Anderson Spur. Since 1943 I had made sundry mid-winter attempts to get out to the west spur, but had always been unlucky with the weather.

After some delay on the top of Charlotte's Pass, we had an amusing run down to Chink's Dip over snow which was becoming ominously soft under a very hot sun. We started the climb about 9.30 a.m., and after discussion as to whether we should go via Blue Lake or the summit of Twynam, chose

Blue Lake, which is probably an easier route, though in time both are about the same.

The lake was covered deeply with snow, and must be safe we calculated, though the big cracks on its surface, and specially round the shores, were not reassuring.

Instead of climbing straight out the head of the valley we edged up the slope on our left and came out on top of the ridge near where the Twynam West Spur joins it and then turns north, at the elbow as it were, of the long crooked arm, which extends into what is best known as Watson's Crags. A gentle schuss carried us on to this spur, the stretch of which was hidden by a big hump.

Once up the hump and we were really on top of the world. There is something intensely exciting about the west side of the Range. I do not know if the hard work which goes towards getting there means anything, or if the answer lies in the almost startling contrast, for this country is as different from the rolling eastern hills, as the dam in the back paddock is from the surf at Manly.

It was a very hot day without a breath of wind. The whole continent spread at our feet and way out we could see the long snows of the Bogong High Plains lying like a smoky yellow cloud above the heat haze. Looking back, we faced right on to the Townsend Spur and the north slopes of Carruthers, some of which looked extremely interesting, while a swing round covered most of the landmarks of the Kosciusko Plateau. The snow was shaded with western dust and it was a strange sepia landscape, typical, incidentally, of the spring.

The spur we were on reminded me very much of the razorback on the way from Hotham to Feathertop. The right slope was heavily corniced and the left slope disappeared steeply, so that although the top was at least 60 yards wide, there was the same feeling of walking the plank out into space, for it appeared to be suspended like an undulating white ribbon above the dark Geehi Valley.

We ran over a second hump and down to a low saddle. Here we knew from the pre-

vious day was an easy place to get over the cornice, indeed in a very heavy snow year it might easily be the only place. Down the steep shallow gully to the left went our old tracks, and it looked so good we were momentarily tempted to do it again, but it met the subsidiary ridge too low down. This ridge ran parallel to the spur on which we stood, so we could only guess at its further slopes, and it was those slopes we wanted to reach. We went over the cornice and straight ahead over the snout of the hill, and down a beautiful run to the foot of the ridge which we met higher up. The snow was good spring snow, though it had just had too much sun to be fast and by the bottom we met heavy sog, but we had already had 1000 feet of wonderful ski-ing.

In a few moments we were up on the intersecting ridge. It was very like a miniature edition of the razorback we had just left, and the prospect from it fulfilled my best expectations, for a series of steep unbroken slopes led down at least another 1000 feet to the crevice of the valley, beyond which the further wall shot upward its timbered slopes and smooth gullies being rather reminiscent of the Loch slopes at Hotham, but on a narrower, steeper and less likeable scale. On our own side, the ends of the ridges right on the creek were timbered, and unlike most of the timber, which consisted of stunted, burnt-out snow gum, there seemed to be some quite luxuriant trees. What a perfect place for lunch. The only problem was the snow, for judging by the last few feet of our run down, it would be almost too heavy to plough a way through. However, we decided, having come so far, to try it.

The ridge was corniced, but it was possible to get over almost anywhere. The leader went off and his first turn promised well, but as he continued across the head of a shallow gully on a long traverse, we could see from his heavy tracks that the snow was no good. Then slowly the slope that he had cut started to slide. The surface snow was pink with dust, and as the avalanche gathered weight and momentum, a white gash fanned out down the mountainside. It went down about 200 vertical feet, I suppose, and was no more than thirty feet wide and perhaps two feet deep. It was only a little avalanche, but like little sharks, not to be courted. It was the first genuine avalanche I had ever seen any sign of in this country,

for most slides are only caused by the lip of a cornice falling.

Even without this added deterrent it would have been hopeless to go on for the snow was so porridgy that the two who had gone on the slope had a hard job climbing back even that short distance. It seemed to have no solidity at all, and I wondered if the night's frost had done any more than crust it. If it ever had been skiable spring snow, I had never before met it in such an advanced stage of decay. Certainly we would have had to leave the Chalet before daylight to catch it right.

We continued on to the end of the ridge where there was a cairn. We could not see if a descent over the snout would be practicable on ski, but by descending either side of the ridge to the creek it should be possible to get right down to Watson's Gorge, though this might entail some scrub and rock hopping. Across the gorge, and immediately opposite us, the steep gullies running off the Anderson Spur were laid out for our inspection, and above we could see the unmistakable landmark of Friar's Alp with its mountain ash.

The sound of running water led us to a lunch spot down the left or west side of the ridge. It was about 250 feet to the creek, and surprisingly, the snow was quite good. We were then approximately at the bottom of our run of two days ago.

There was no need to hurry with lunch. Everyone had brought a contribution, with the result that we had far too much food, as well as a very varied diet of sardines, liver sausage, cheese, bread, dried fruits, tomato juice, tinned peaches, oranges, and Palato. (In hot weather it is very essential to carry something to drink as it is not always feasible to get down to water.)

Did I say hurry? After this it was impossible to do anything but lie on the heather and doze, and I for one dreamed of a day when a chalet in Pound's Valley would make this country easily accessible. Why not a small chalet in the bowl itself? My drowsy mind became involved with hoists and flying foxes—even tunnels—as the mantle of Jules Verne settled slowly on to my shoulders. But why would it be so impossible in these days when nothing is impossible? Here in this sheltered valley, we have downhill running that compares in length and steepness with Europe, ski-ing

that the Hotel and Chalet guests don't even dream exists, more than that, ski-ing that could put Australian on the map as a winter sports resort.

On the climb out we joined our old tracks up the shallow gully. The heat was nothing short of terrific. The slope caught the full force of the afternoon sun and it was like labouring up the sides of a frying pan, and not enough air to make a match flicker let alone dry the sweat that coursed down our faces. To make matters worse, it was just too steep to climb comfortably on skins without traversing.

It took us an hour to the saddle, and once over the cornice the climate was altogether different, for there was a faint cooling breeze. We dawdled considerably, but even so we did not get to the top of Twynam until 4.30 p.m., for with the exception of a short run down on to the elbow, the return

journey was a pretty constant though gradual climb.

Sitting on top of Twynam cracking the last bottle of Palato we decided there was everything to this spring ski-ing. The air was soft and caressing and brought a reminder of the spring which already blossomed down in the valleys. The hills seemed to slumber in the pale evening light. It was still and peaceful and above all kind. Winter memories came to me, of eating frozen sandwiches, crouched in some inadequate lee, or struggling with board-like skins, and always of being hounded on by a wind barbed with ice. Keep moving, keep moving, the wind howled incessantly, as you tried to rest a moment in the cold sun whose deceptive gleam had lured you out for a day on the Range. Now those harsh mid-winter days were hard to believe.