

The Problem of the Unattended Hut

Don Richardson

[Note: The incidents recited in this article are either first hand knowledge or based on reliable information.]

WERE I student of human behaviour I might essay answers to some of the questions raised hereunder. Not being such a student, I can but dissertate upon and,

with you, deplore this sorry state of things —attempting neither to explain nor to understand. I refer, in a general sense, to those acts of vandalism, those selfish, thoughtless,

careless acts which we see evidenced in so many places where private ownership is absent, or perhaps not under immediate supervision.

Take, e.g., the bar tables in our Law Courts; one finds initials, designs, even impolite references scratched on or cut into or impressed in polished cedar and maple; at our University few desks do not display the initials of generations of students; most of us have observed, with feelings of frustrated annoyance, leather upholstery in buses sliced through as with a razor blade; then there is the individual who, apparently just for the heck of it, runs about cutting grooves in plate glass shop fronts with a diamond; there are those who cannot look upon some historical article without wanting to "souvenir" a bit of it; and there are others in whom the sight of a beautiful piece of polished woodwork stimulates an irresistible urge to deface it.

Some of these acts might be put down to preoccupied doodling, some to an expression of ego. Yet to the average normal person the scratching of names and hieroglyphics on, e.g., a copper direction plate such as we find on Mt. Kosciusko, is quite meaningless and incomprehensible. These are acts of vandalism in the sense of careless or thoughtless destruction, generally lacking the intent to destroy which we usually predicate of the word. Even as I write these notes my back rests on initials three inches high, carved into a garden seat. Does the perpetrator imagine that posterity will gaze upon his work with the same feelings that we experience when we view, e.g., the "marked tree" at Katoomba?

You are no doubt wondering what all this has to do with ski-ing. I am coming to that. Come with me on a tour of inspection of our huts and you'll see what I mean.

Let us start with the Perisher Hut on the Hotel Kosciusko-Chalet route. I thought so. Note those filthy dishes and cooking utensils, the dirty unswept floor; see those initials on the walls and the untidy bundles of blankets? I inspected this hut a little time ago, just after a party had left. Everything was spick and span, utensils clean and available for instant use, food packed away, kindling wood and split billets beside the fireplace—all in readiness should skiers seek shelter in a blizzard. Casuals have probably done this, the minority who think only of

themselves. Let's have a look at Pound's Creek Hut. Where are the blankets and mattresses that were here a few seasons back? Souvenired? That's a mild word. Essential foods used to be stocked here; what you see now are rat-nibbled scraps left lying around by visitors for the day. Would you like to use that billy? Or that basin or frying pan? I thought not.

Let's move on. I particularly want to show you White's River Hut.

"Where's that?" asked my imaginary companion of this imaginary tour of inspection.

"It's about 14 miles to the north, on the way to Alpine Hut," I replied, "nestling in a sheltered valley and regarded as the most strategically placed hut on the range."

"Is it a Government-owned hut?"

"No, it belongs to Ray Adams—though Kosciusko Alpine Club built an additional room, lined it and installed eight bunks and fitted it out with cooking gear, cutlery, crockery and what not."

"How about food?" he asked.

"Essential foods are packed in by the Club and stored in a rat-proofed cupboard; sleeping bags and blankets are supplied and housed in a galvanised iron container under one of the bunks; and there are Aladdin lamps, stacks of wood under cover, a two-war radio installed by the Trust and everything you could wish for."

"How does the Club finance it?" my friend was interested.

"The Club operates it on the honour system; users pay for food and the use of gear, etc., at a rate based on the actual cost."

"It must be a boon to main range skiers," my companion commented.

"It is," I rejoined, "and the vast majority play the game, though thoughtless and selfish acts spoil the harmony of the scheme occasionally; off-season users are our main trouble, however."

We were idling along at really good speed, the sort of motion that one experiences in sleep or flights of fancy such as this. We stopped for a while under the curling rim of a cornice near the Sentinel Rock before commencing the run down to the hut.

"Is this route much used in summer?" asked my friend of fancy.

"Quite a deal," I replied, "and the owner is not always there to keep an eye on things."

For the space of a few minutes we were

lost in reverie. It was one of those days—still, brilliant, with the sunlight catching the facets of snow crystals. It seemed a pity in such a beautiful place to look on the gloomier side of ski-ing. It was I who broke the silence.

"Only last year the 'cow' incident occurred."

"What was that?" he murmured, still somewhat dreamy-eyed.

I gave him some details: "Some summer users left the door open and a cow wandered in. Somehow or other (as we reconstruct the affair) Daisy knocked over a table, blocking the doorway and effectively imprisoning herself. She was discovered several days later, lean and hungry."

"Must have made a mess of things," interposed my friend.

"She did, indeed," I continued, "chairs broken, double-decker bunk badly damaged, mattresses and covers ruined. Reckon it'll set the Club back twenty quid at least, with replacements to be packed in by horse over the ranges for fifteen miles."

As we moved off to select the run down, I added: "It was probably nothing more than sheer carelessness, but from the point of view of cost and inconvenience and discomfort, it might just as well have been deliberate."

We kicked off our ski at the hut door and entered. It was evident that our tucker had been broached. There was no need to prize the lids off; the cases had already been effectively smashed in. "Well, I'll be—Look here," I said. "I left the packing in as late as possible, not more than a month ago, and yet they've got at it."

"Who are 'they'?" he queried.

"I'd like to know," I muttered. "Hell's bells, look at that sugar! the bag just ripped open and rat droppings over everything." I surveyed the mess: "Chocolate missing, two tins of salmon and all the bacon gone; blast their hides!"

I was muttering (not loud but deep) while my companion did his best to look sympathetic, uttering occasional remarks that were meant to console me, but which merely added fuel to the fire of my rising temper.

"Ah, well," I grunted, regaining my composure somewhat. "let's have a look at the sleeping bags and Club tucker."

As we lifted the lid where the sleeping bags were stored, we noticed it askew. As the lid came up, so rose a cloud of the finest down. An ex-American sleeping bag had suffered the ravages of rats and was a total loss. Another bag was missing. Rats had nested in, and rendered unfit for us, a 50lb. bag of flour. Comments seemed futile.

We opened the G.I. food cupboard. Again there was evidence of rats, but most of it was boxed or tinned. In the corner was a 4 gallon tin of honey from which a little had been taken.

My friend peered over my shoulder. "A rat," he exclaimed, "what a death."

"Drowned in delicious honey," I growled. "Come on, help me out with it; it'll feed the flies and ants next summer if the thaw doesn't wash it all away."

We dumped the honey and I indicated to my friend the features of the valley. The sun was setting behind the rolling slopes of Dicky Cooper Bogong and tinting the tree tops of Gungarten with a golden glow. As we settled down for the night I thought on of similar occurrences at Grey Mare and other huts, and the cost of replacing mattresses, blankets, etc., missing from Alpine Hut since last winter. And I wondered whether another generation would bring co-operation — a little less selfishness and a little more appreciation of the amenities provided for the comfort and safety of the travellers of the Range—or whether it is human nature itself which must suffer a change to remove the major problems of the unattended hut.