

The Hotel Kosciusko Fire

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AT 4 a.m. on the morning of 18th April, 1951, Hotel Kosciusko was destroyed by fire.

The work on Hotel Kosciusko was commenced in 1908 and completed in 1909. In the beginning, there were several people concerned in the management. Later Mr. Cheeseman took over and then during the early stages of first World War, Mr. H. J. Lambie, who was Manager until 1923. Mr. Lambie introduced School Tours and the Ski School in which his son George took a prominent part. Mr. P. M. A. Speet took over from Mr. Lambie and held the reins until the end of

The Hotel, 1950.

Photo. D. Cowie.



1938. His two sons also played a prominent part in popularising ski-ing. In January, 1939, I took over from Mr. Speet and remained in control until the Hotel was destroyed (with the exception of a brief period during the War, when I was engaged on a war job).

With the great changes in the district brought about by the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Authority, the hotel became more popular. It was the central point for old and new activities and accommodation became taxed to the limit.

Many will miss the old hotel and its shelter during blizzard weather. As an old friend wrote in a letter to me after the fire, "the pub has gone, long live the pub."

The fire commenced at approximately 4 a.m. There was no light as the flames had destroyed the main power wires at the outset. A strong north-west wind drove the flames into the main building and under the roof, and so we were faced with a difficult task from the outset. All fire fighting equipment had to be found and manned in the dark. Very early all passageways and rooms in the front of the hotel were filled with smoke and fumes.

The fire was first noticed by a member of the staff. The Night Watchman immediately awakened the Engineer. He detailed a man to the fire bell, the tolling of which undoubtedly gave due warning and was the means of saving life. In a remarkably quick time three hydrants inside the building and five outside at various points were in operation, but the heat drove the men from the centre of the fire.

My wife and I were quartered in the front portion of the building in the path of the fire. We were awakened by the smoke. I realised there was no time to be lost and told my wife to get out of the window. However, I found later when I left her to go upstairs, she had groped her way to the Housekeeper's room to warn her. Dense smoke filled the passageways. I made my way upstairs opening doors and directing guests to the stairway. Quite a number of guests filed past—



The Fire from the North Side.

Photo. Miss O. Chaplin.

it was remarkable how calm they were. There was a complete absence of panic, although the fire by then had a strong hold. Gaining the centre of the building, I met the Engineer and another member of the staff running a hose through one of the courtyard rooms to the courtyard. Taking over the hose from him, I got out on to the lean-to roof outside the window and directed the hose on to the seat of the fire. The Engineer and his assistant then went down to the northern side of the building. Immediately in front were staff rooms—the normal exits of which were shut off. Four people got out of the windows on to the roof and escaped through the courtyard. Flames were then leaping 20 to 30 feet about the centre wing.

An explosion blew the roof and scattered burning material, and the roof adjoining the main building broke away, revealing flames leaping through to the front and behind. I then realised it was hopeless and made my way towards the front stairway, but was driven back and had to crawl along the passageway to the south wing. Gaining the stairs, I made my way to the locker floor and

my bedroom. Flames had by then penetrated towards the dining room.

Joining my wife outside, we raced over towards the Lake and by then flames were leaping over the roadway. Staff who were then operating the hydrants at the rear of the buildings were forced out owing to the heat and falling material.

Later, with Arthur Rixon we entered the building to my office, but it was impossible to enter the passageway where the trophies were housed, as it was enveloped in flames. These trophies, as guests will remember, included the Summit Trophy, Captain Scott's polar sledge, and many club cups and shields. However, we managed to save £2000 from the safe and a few pictures, including one of Old Tom. We could then only concentrate on saving buildings and prepare for the comforts of all concerned, many of whom had escaped in their night attire.

A pleasing feature was the fact that there was no loss of life or serious injury. The promptness of the staff and the willingness of all to assist under most trying conditions, are much to be commended.

Hotel Kosciusko after the Fire.

Photo. D. Cowie.

