

EARLY EXPLORATION and the New Alpine Highway

By SIR HERBERT SCHLINK

THE now almost defunct township of Kiandra can lay claim to having produced some 10 million pounds worth of gold and to having had in its heyday a mining population of some 10 thousand souls. But to us its chief claim to fame is that it was the cradle of Australian skiing, or, as it was called locally, snow shoeing.

Among the miners were several who had migrated from Scandinavia and undoubtedly they taught the local inhabitants how to ski. In the 1860's they organised competitive ski running events, and by the years 1878-1880 had a well-established Kiandra Snow Shoe Club.

On 19th August, 1897, Charles Kerry, an enthusiastic pioneer of the Southern Alps and a constant visitor to Kiandra, led a party of twelve to the summit of Kosciusko from a base camp established on Friday Flat in the Thredbo or Crackenback Valley. This was the first ascent ever made in winter. The personnel of the party and the hardships they underwent can be read in the first issue of the Australian Ski Year Book, 1928. It is passing strange that the proposed new hotel and the chair lift are to be sited on Friday Flat where Kerry had established his base camp for his attempt on the summit.

From the party of this conquest of Kosciusko in 1897 Kerry formed the N.S.W. Alpine Club in Sydney and its members continued to visit the Kiandra competitions each year.

It is interesting to record that a new member of the Sydney Club, Boore Winther, ex-champion of Southern Scandinavia, made a record jump of 110 feet in 1901.



Sir William Hudson, K.B.E., Commissioner of the Snow Mountains Authority, was knighted in June, 1955, shortly after the opening of the Authority's first power station at Guthega.

Photo. S.M.H.E.A.

Another notable event in Kerry's skiing career was that he persuaded his friend, Percy Hunter, to join the N.S.W. Alpine Club and conduct, as his *locum tenens*, a party to Kiandra in 1905. As in all he undertook, Percy threw his heart and energy into the new sport, but it was not very long before he came to the conclusion that the difficulty of access to Kiandra prevented any large numbers from taking part in the pleasures of skiing. So after his last season at Kiandra in 1907 he set about persuading the then Premier, the Hon. Joseph Carruthers, to build the Kosciusko Hotel.

Thus the skiing centre of gravity was shifted from its birthplace at Kiandra to its new home. In the light of experience we now know that the Kosciusko Hotel was

built at too low a level for good ski-ing fields. However, at the time it was built by Mr. Vernon, the Government Architect, and opened by Lord Chelmsford in 1909, the expense of siting it higher up would have been beyond the then financial resources of the State, as transport from Cooma in those early days cost £6 a ton in our old solid currency.

Although we are all agreed that it should never be rebuilt on its old site, we must not forget the useful function it served in enabling thousands to learn and become interested in the sport of ski-ing. The first of us were taught by Kerry and Percy Hunter on the old Grand Slam in gum boots and on the mountain ash Kiandra type of ski. The original hotel was built to accommodate 80 guests, but for the opening night dinner Gregory Wade, the then Premier of N.S.W., had invited all parliamentarians from both sides of the House and 120 sat down. Where they slept that night was always a mystery to me. It is said the Premier himself slept on the billiard table.

Percy Hunter delivered a lantern slide lecture on the Kosciusko terrain and the possibilities of the sport. Champagne was provided by the Government, but few guests could drink the Governor's toast in the amber-coloured fluid, as the rapidly recruited polyglot serving staff didn't let it leave the kitchen. Next morning, as the only doctor in the house, it took me hours to sew up the cuts and treat the bruises of members of the staff!

That first season we learnt to stand on our skis, run down the Grand Slam without a fall, make the trip to Dainer's Gap, the Devil's Staircase, the Plains of Heaven and Pretty Point.

The following season in July, 1910, wearing gum boots on Kiandra skis and with sugar bags loaded with food and spare parts, four of us—Oscar Paul, Arthur Pitt, John Cosgrove and myself—reached the summit for the first time via the hotel route in three days, sleeping at Betts Camp on the outward and homeward journeys.

For many years Betts Camp was our

headquarters for exploring the High Alps. Many trips to the summit were made. Ram's Head, Townsend, Clarke, Northcote, Carruthers Peak, Twynam, Mount Anderson Spurr, Mann Bluff, Mount Tait, Consett Stephen Pass. Granite Peaks were all explored from there.

We then became ambitious to cross the range from Kiandra to Kosciusko. Few accurate maps and little information were available, and we spent many years in summer exploration. Firstly, Neils Storaker and I went to Kiandra in 1921 and met Chester Foy there and proceeded to traverse on foot the main Dividing Range. We only got as far as Tabletop Mountain, but at least we learnt about Bolton's Hill and the upper reaches of the Happy Jack River.

The day after our return to Kiandra the weather became so terrific that we were prevented from staying and hiring horses for the journey through, as was our original intention. In the summer of 1925 Douglas Reid and I went to Kiandra, engaged horses and equipment and set out from Kiandra. We by-passed Tabletop and the first day reached Boobee Hut, where we slept with the rats which infested that jerry-built place. Next day we crossed the Saddle between Jagungal and Bull's Peak, kept to the spinal column of the Range, passing round Gungartan without discovery of old original Tin Hut. Here the Range makes a circular descent to the west before mounting to Granite Peaks. We thought we had missed the Range—doubled back and continued along what we called Disappointment Spur, which petered out. As darkness descended we had to sleep under a rock until daylight—a most uncomfortable experience. It was so wild in the morning that, although we discovered our mistake of the previous day, we were forced to turn back to Kiandra. As we retraced our steps we discovered the Tin Hut which we missed the day before. A piece of bad luck, because if we had had a comfortable sleep in it we certainly would have got through to the hotel.

Crossing the Valentine Swamp Plains, the day broke into brilliant sunshine and windless. So we decided to make for Mc-

Phee's Hut on the Grey Mares. We found McPhee's Hut with embers still burning, indicating that McPhee had just left, so made our way round the north-western aspect of Jagungal summit to Farm Ridge Hut, where we slept, and returned to Kiandra in the morning.

Other explorations were made in the summer and, finally, in the Easter of 1926, the Ryrie sisters, Da and Dee, Doctors Teece, Fisher, Douglas Reid, Mr. Teppema and Mr. Vaughan and myself, with two guides, crossed the main range from Kiandra to Kosciusko on horseback in three days.

In the winter of that year a party consisting of the late John Laidley, Eric Fisher, Arnold Moulden, Bill Gordon and myself attempted to go to Kiandra on ski from Kosciusko. We were caught in a blizzard, spent four days at Tin Hut, and were eventually forced to return to the hotel via Finn's River. In the winter of 1927 Drs. Fisher and Laidley, Messrs. W. Gordon and W. Hughes and myself crossed from Kiandra to Kosciusko on ski in three days, sleeping at Farm Ridge Hut and Pounds Creek Hut. This was the first winter crossing ever accomplished.

We had discovered so many magnificent ski slopes on the main range that we increased our pressure on the Government to build a more commodious and convenient jumping-off place than Betts Camp. The result was that, through the Ski Club of Australia giving the Government a cheque for £1,000, Mr. Chaffey, the Chief Secretary in the Bavin Government, instructed Mr. Smith, the then Government Architect, to build the Chalet at Charlotte's Pass. The original building was opened on 1st May, 1930, burnt down in 1938, and the re-built present building was occupied in 1939.

It has served its purpose like the old Hotel, in that it has made possible the development of the sport. Looking back over the years, the advance from the old Kiandra snow shoe days to the present international standard reached by so many of our young runners is almost unbelievable. That Christine Davy has accom-

plished a run of 70 miles an hour illustrates the strides that have been made over the years.

Skiers of my generation would not believe that we would see such comfortable huts as Kunama and Albina in the heart of our mountain system. Mr. Anton and his co-workers deserve great credit for this remarkable piece of private enterprise. We are all very much indebted to them.

This scrappy history of skiing in Australia which I have endeavoured to portray has three marked phases:

1. Kiandra and its early snow shoeing carnivals.
2. Kosciusko and its early skiing and exploration.
3. The Chalet and mountain huts with their international standard of running.

We are now entering the fourth stage in the development of our Alpine heritage, made possible by an extensive system of sealed, all-weather roads under construction by the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority.

Up until now the skiers, as well as the summer tourists of N.S.W., have been largely confined to the north-eastern aspect of the main Dividing Range on the Kosciusko Plateau, and have had only one means of access by the long, winding Summit Road. The Victorians, likewise, have been confined to Hotham, Feathertop, St. Bernard, Buffalo, etc., as the main Divide continues on through their State. The large area of territory from the south-eastern line of division between the two States, the source and upper Murray River and the western side of the Dividing Range within N.S.W. is unknown, except to a few. This interstate Garden of Eden is in the process of being opened up by a great Alpine Highway which will run from Jindabyne to Corryong via Khancoban, crossing the main Dividing Range at a Pass called the awful name of Dead Horse. It lies just below the southern peak of the Ram's Head Range and is the lowest part of the main Dividing Range, 5,000 feet. It is situated about halfway between Sydney and Melbourne, and by it the distance between the two capitals is only 50 miles



FRIDAY FLAT IN SUMMERTIME. This site, which has been chosen for the Thredbo Hotel, is about 200 yards off the Alpine Highway. Photo. G. E. F. Hughes.

longer than the Hume Highway. Through the courtesy of Sir William Hudson, Mr. Munro, the Chief Road Engineer of the Undertaking, has driven me by Land Rover over the route, so possibly a short description of my impressions on the two journeys may help you to understand the glories about to be opened up primarily for Victoria and N.S.W., but really for the whole of the Commonwealth.

You all know the road from Sydney, Canberra, Cooma to Jindabyne Bridge. The Alpine Highway commences immediately to the left of the old Kosciusko Road

as you cross the river and makes its way up the Crackenback or Thredbo Valley. For the first few miles you run through pleasant undulating country and eventually strike the Thredbo River running down to the Creek. The last habitation is Tom Rutledge's fishing shack. From about here on the scenery is dominated by the great Crackenback Range, most of which reaches over 6,000 feet. It faces steeply to the valley with its winding, fast-running Thredbo River. The road has been cut on the right bank of the river and has a very gradual ascending grade. As you mount to the source of the river the ter-

rain flattens out at Friday Flat—the site of Kerry's base camp for the first winter ascent of Mount Kosciusko. This is also the point at which Wragge and Jensen, when living for a year on the summit for meteorological observations, reached the Thredbo when on their way to Jindabyne for fresh supplies of food, and is now the site of the proposed Chair Lift and the Thredbo Alpine Hotel.

Even in the early days of the Hotel after we had traversed and come to know the Kosciusko Plateau terrain and all its moods of weather, we formed the opinion that the real approach to our sport was via the Thredbo. An hotel in this valley would have many advantages:

1. Citizens from Sydney and Melbourne could motor to its doors on all-weather roads in about 8 hours.
2. The cost of transport supplies from the neighbouring towns and cities would be less than half what it took to carry to the old Kosciusko Hotel.
3. The river would supply all the water and water power needed for bathing pools, skating rinks, electric lighting and power, as well as providing an ideal sanitary system that would not freeze up.
4. It would be protected by the mighty Crackenback Range from the prevailing winds and blizzards of the plateau and have a most magnificent panorama of the mountain-ash covered valley with its ever-changing range of lighting and sunsets.
5. In the summer fishermen will have within a short distance all the rivers of N.S.W. and Victoria. It would take little time to get to the Kiewa, Mitta and Murray Valleys. Bush-walkers would have a perfect Eldorado to the N.S.W. and Victorian boundary, with Jacob Tin Mine area and the lower reaches of the Snowy River down south, as well as all the magnificent alpine scenery at their back door. Horse riders would have a more extensive area to explore and enjoy.
6. Apart from skiers, fishermen and bush-walkers, the Hotel will be a great

boon to motorists travelling between Sydney and Melbourne. The Hume Highway is mostly monotonous and crowded with large trucks and hauliers, whereas the new highway is one of magnificent alpine splendour. Imagine leaving Sydney, sleeping at the Halfway Hotel, and next day proceeding over the Dead Horse Pass to Melbourne by four different alpine routes.

On our trip to the western side of the main Divide we were taken up the Geehi Valley to a point under Watson's Crag. Never have I seen such wonderful trees, such a profusion of ferns or such magnificent views of the Dividing Range which, from this western aspect, rises from the valley in precipitous formation. Mr. Munro, who was born in New Zealand, said he had never seen anything better or as good in New Zealand.

We returned to Geehi Survey Camp nestling in the bend of the Murray River and had all the comforts of civilisation, even down to a hot water bottle in our beds. Early next morning we took off in Land Rovers—those wonderful four-wheel drive machines—crossed the Swampy River, which is formed by the junction of Bogong Creek and Geehi River, into which the water from Wilkinson Valley runs, travelled through magnificent trees with some great rolling plains as luscious and as green as you would see in Devon; and all along the way you get breathtaking views of the Divide. We started round Tyrell's Spur and crossed over the southern part of the Youngal Range, passing several small, rapidly-running streams—Bridge Creek, Snowy Creek and the Leather Barrell Creek, beyond Tom Groggin, which is situated about 2,040 feet above sea level. From this level you ascend fairly steeply past the Wattles to the source of Dead Horse Creek, which takes origin at Dead Horse Pass or Groggin Gap, as the old-timers called it. This Pass unites the Crackenback north-east section with the Geehi western section of the Alpine Highway which runs through Kancoban to Corryong, Talangatta, the Hume Weir and the Murray Highway through to Mel-

bourne. Corryong is a centre from which opens the network of the Upper Murray, Mitta, Kiewa and Ovens Valley roadways. For instance, we can take the road to Omeo over to Hotham, Mount Bernard. Feather-top, Buffalo, and the whole of the Victorian ski-ing centres are drawn nearer to our own. What this will mean to the ski-ing and motor touring of both States I will leave to your own imagination. A central hotel for the best and highest Alps we have in both States mid-way between their capital cities is an asset for all Australia in health and pleasure. I predict a most golden future for our only Alpine Highway. Great credit is due the Snowy River Undertaking, which has opened up our Alps by a sound system of all-weather roads, and have made it possible for all

Australian citizens to enjoy the glories of our Alps and see country that would have remained undiscovered except for a few intrepid skiers for another hundred years unless the leaders of the Undertaking had shown the vision of great men.

In conclusion, let us hope and pray that the Commonwealth and the neighbouring States of New South Wales and Victoria will follow the Tennessee Undertaking in the United States in working under one Authority so as to co-ordinate without destroying the many State and private agencies which now exist. This area is destined to be for all time the greatest and only national alpine asset we have to keep our people healthy and happy. It belongs to the whole of Australia and not to any particular section of it.

