

PILGRIMAGE TO WHITE'S RIVER

By CHARLES COFFEY

FOR years I had wanted to return to White's River Hut. My taste for touring had its beginnings in the earlier, pre ski-lift days of skiing. Ever since, on my many snow holidays I have done my best to spread the gospel of ski touring. A couple of one-day tours each year were all I could usually achieve.

Eventually I was spurred into action by my wife saying ". . . for goodness sake go on your big tour and get it out of your system!" I found three fellow enthusiasts in John Duval, Rex Cox and John Morgan, and plans were made for a tour on the October long week-end from Thredbo to Guthega Power Station via Albina Hut and White's River Hut.

After much discussion, the top of the chair lift was chosen as our starting point. Tentative suggestions that true ski tourers would start their trek at the bottom of the mountain in the village were hurriedly dismissed. I was elected leader of the party. My main qualification for this position was the fact that I had been to White's some nineteen years earlier. It was assumed by the others that I remembered the way, and although they no doubt had secret qualms as to just how good my memory might be they managed to disguise their misgivings fairly well.

John Duval, referred to during the rest of the trip as John D., was made responsible for the food and equipment lists. He was aided in this by no less an authority than Paddy Pallin. Paddy was to have been a member of our party but was unable to come at the last moment. John D's lists were works of art, everything being worked out to perfection and shared equally to the last ounce. Thanks to this our packs were only about 33 lbs. each, though it took the scales to prove this to us. We imagined they were 53 lbs.

John Morgan, referred to during the trip as Young John, was elected to make a wise decision on subsequent performances. Rex, who happened to be absent at the time voting took place was unanimously elected washer upper. It was the theory that there had to be someone to take the blame, John D suggested I should be made responsible for the weather during the tour. The other two claimed I must have received secret instructions from some aboriginal rain-makers. The fact remains that the currently prevailing bad weather stopped on Friday night, the week-end was perfect with barely a cloud in the sky, and it started to rain heavily ten minutes after we arrived at Guthega Power Station.

From the top of the chair lift we went off up the steep slope to Crackenback Peak. The expressions on the faces of the liftbashers who watched our departure up the slope, laden with our packs and gear, were an interesting mixture. A few (very few) showed awe and admiration. These, no doubt, were the naive and unsophisticated beginners. The more seasoned skiers wore looks of disguised derision we saw on their faces.

The two wily Johns carried their packs to the top while Rex and I struggled to make our skins grip the loose granulated spring snow. After a backward slide on loose snow followed by a struggle to get on my skis again on a particularly steep pinch, with my rucksack pulling the other way, and being gaining my second wind, I was beginning to think I was too old for this sort of thing. Fortunately, I happened to overhear a remark made by an impressive young skier nearby, to a companion: "Gee, those blokes must be"

**Charles Coppa and John Duval
in Carruthers looking towards
Sentinel Peak and Watsons
Craggs.**



White's River Hut and Valley

**John Duval, John Morgan,
Charles Coppa and Rex Cox
outside White's.**



This acted like a shot in the arm and I steamed up the rest of the slope in double time.

From the top of Crackenback we climbed the gentle slopes towards Seaman's Hut and stopped for lunch at the first rocks from which we had an uninterrupted view of the range. After lunch, instead of going to Seamans, we climbed to Rawson Pass; the saddle between the Summit and Ethridge. On our left and below us, Lake Cootapatamba was a glittering field of snow overhung by heavy cornices that teetered over the south-western ridge of Kosciusko. The dazzling whiteness around us dramatically ended in a drop to the misty blue-green that was Victoria. From the saddle we enjoyed a delightful run down to the shoulder of Muellers, passing on the way the knobbly remains of small avalanches that had fallen off the cornices above us. After some miles of climbing and pushing with a rucksack on our backs, downhill running gave us the impression of being air borne.

The traverse across the eastern slope of Muellers Peak down to the saddle above Albina Hut was thrillingly steep. We could touch the slope with our left hands, while to the right pellets of snow loosened by our skis streamed down the slope. Albina Hut, a gem set in the majestic chain of the monarchs of the Main Range, welcomed us from under a heavy mantle of snow. This comfortable and extremely well fitted out hut is designed to accommodate twelve skiers, with emergency beds for three more in the living room. This night it bulged with twenty enthusiastic main rangers. A strict roster had to be adhered to for cooking, eating, washing up, etc., but everything worked out beautifully.

There was much hilarity, singing and general rumpus. Two of the company entertained us with their description of descents that day down Little Austria, Sentinel Peak, and other western faces. The following day we saw their tracks

of linked turns down what appeared to be the almost perpendicular face of Sentinel Peak. There should be more of this sort of skiing!

At 5 a.m. next morning we picked our way around the sleeping skiers on the floor of the kitchen to prepare our breakfast. Within the hour we were climbing the icy flank of Northcote. When we reached the top it was a brand new sparkling world that greeted us. White mountains, brilliant in the early morning sun, all around us. To the right the distant Monaro Plains were buried under a sea of low clouds, to the left the dark mysterious Geehi deep in shadow, 6,000 feet below us, seemed only a hop, skip and a jump away. All the way along the crest of the Dividing Range to Twynam, via Lee and Carruthers, we feasted our eyes on clear unending views stretching in all directions. Excitingly steep slopes, deep in snow, dropped away to the west in numberless gullies and crags. Here was the real heartbeat of skiing in Australia. This area, so well described by Elyne Mitchell in her book, "The Australian Alps", deserves to feel the swish of the ski more often than it does. With all that beauty around us, coupled with the tonic effect of the crystal clear morning air, we felt far removed from the monotony of lift bashing the same slope day after day.

We shed our skins on top of Twynam and let ourselves swing down to the source of Pounds Creek, under a ridge of Anderson—1,450 feet of descent on a good, firm surface. Yes, even tourists go downhill sometimes! A short, steep climb, followed by some more downhill running, then a long steady climb to a clump of rocks just under the summit of Tate for lunch. Young John demonstrated his ability by brewing us two wonderful billyfuls of tea from the snow. On a rock nearby a robin red breast wagged about, waiting his turn at the table. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky and it was a delightful hour we spent amongst those rocks.

Our next target was Consett Stephens Pass. Prior to our trip there had been much talk about this pass: how it was the important key to the route to White's; how difficult it might be to find; would we recognise it when we did find it. Over drinks at the Chalet bar, Brian Davidson had gloomily predicted that at this point we would probably get lost. There had been so much discussion about the pass that John D. had begun to doubt its very existence. However, there it was, just where I had left it nineteen years previously. One and a half miles north of Tate, the pass forms the head of Windy Creek and gives a superb view to the north of miles of practically unknown skiing country towards the Grey Mares and Jugangal. To the south flows the Guthega River, forming a valley of deep untrodden snow without a tree or a rock to mar its smooth surface, leading down to the cluster of huts on the other side of Guthega Dam. We promised ourselves the pleasure of a run down this valley some day.

The way to White's after leaving the pass is to keep in a northerly direction with the Rolling Grounds to the right, then along the base of the Granite Peaks. These are a spectacular series of huge cathedrals in granite which merited more time spent on the reconnaissance than we, in our rather exhausted state, were able to afford. About 2½ miles after leaving Consett Stephens the head of White's River Valley opens out to the north-east of the traveller. Twin peaks of 6,400 feet were kept to the right then, criss crossing the course of a small head-water of White's River and there, one mile to the south of Schlink Pass, was White's River Hut, the Mecca of all Main Range Rats. We were welcomed by another tourer and his charming daughter who administered cups of tea. The map states we covered only 16½ miles that day but to us it felt more like 26 miles, plus 3,000 feet of climbing.

White's consists of two small rooms containing eight bunks with wire mat-

tresses, a large fireplace and a table. It is a plain and unpretentious hut and at night there is the scurrying and whisperings of rats on the prowl for tit bits; but it is dear to the hearts of tourers, situated as it is in a bowl of sheltered slopes that more often than most other slopes in the range offer powder slopes to delight the skier. The valley itself is remote and fairly inaccessible, and this makes it even more attractive to tourers.

Next morning we breakfasted outside in the snow; the better to enjoy the glorious spectacle of millions of frost crystals glittering on the slopes all about us, reflecting the sun as it rose over Gungarten. It was an hour of magic. The four people who had been at the hut before we arrived set off for Guthega station after breakfast and we spent a delightful day climbing Gungarten, back down again to Schlink Pass and then up the other side to Dicky Cooper Bogong, a spectacular rocky peak with a superb view of 360 degrees encompassing most of the Main Range from Townsend to Geehi, the Grey Mares, Jagungal, Gungarten and the Perisher Range. We spent the best part of two hours perched on the rocks gazing at the panoramic spectacle before us. Here we felt in the very hub of the Australian Alps.

A quick run down to the hut and then the rest of the day was spent in preparing, cooking and consuming various dishes thought up by Young John, aided by suggestions from the rest of us. More hours were spent by the fire discussing skiing from every angle. As the evening drew on the slopes grew steeper, the runs down faster and longer and the snow more and more powdery. It was nice to have nothing more urgent to do than cook, eat, relax and spin yarns; we felt we had earned it. Rex, the cleanest member of our party, insisted on having a bath standing in a small hand basin of water. He followed this by wiping himself with two yards of surgical gauze

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BLACK COCKATOOS AND A SKI LODGE

By ELYNE MITCHELL.

PROBABLY one of the requisites for a well run family ski lodge is a mother who likes cooking and does not like to ski—if she skies—not a mother who is passionately addicted to the sport herself!

Our family is badly off that way.

However, on the other side of the ledger, if mother is absolutely crazy to go skiing, she will put up with a few unexpected inconveniences if they do not upset the ski schedule too much. Unexpected inconveniences can occur even at a gas-and-sewerage-and-electricity joint.

Imagine a lovely new lodge (not ours unfortunately) with gleaming gas stove, gay crockery, dunlopillow cushions and chairs, wood floor and nice mats, Onkaparinga blankets, innerspring mattresses, showers, gas heaters, and a superb view of the ski run through plate glass windows! Imagine the sun pouring into it through these windows! Imagine the sigh of pleasure going up from a family arriving there in a convalescent state after influenza.

A hasty check ascertained that the sewerage was not completely frozen. Only two out of three of them failed to work. The hand basins were frozen solid. The next inquiry indicated that there was gas in cylinders.

Imagine how much we enjoyed a cup of coffee while we watched the smooth wadeln dance of the skiers down the opposite slope!

Beds had to be made for three young children and two adults—sheets, pillow slips, the difficulty of tucking in top banks with heavy inner spring mattresses. *Were those pale blue Onkaparingas and innersprings going to be commensurately more comfortable than a sleeping bag on a mattress on the floor at Pretty Plain?*

Darkness crept in before the beds were made.

"I'm sorry," said Tom's voice, "but something has happened to the electricity."

We had torches, of course, and a gas light in the living room threw a little light by which to eat.

"With a torch, I may be able to see what is wrong with the hot water system," said the same lugubrious voice.

The torch failed to make this problem clear.

Eventually I got the small ones of the family, somewhat unwashed but well fed, tucked into bed by torchlight.

I have often read the claim of people in the drought-stricken Out Back that one can get perfectly clean in a basin of water. At least in the Out Back they probably have not got a white-hard frost outside while they have that scrubby wash. There was no heating in the bathroom. *In the old days at White's or Pretty Plain we used to carry the basin in by the roaring fire.*

"What about the fridgidaire?" I asked, when the light had come from natural sources the next day. I was thinking of the packets of frozen peas I had brought, and the sausages.

"It needs metho to light it, and someone's left the cork off the metho bottle"

"I know," I said. "Bingo! It's evaporated, and we can't light the fridg!"

"That's right, and there's no metho to be bought in the village."

The day that had dawned and brought us light was the Sabbath—not a day of rest for the staff at Thredbo. No one had a moment to do anything about our electricity—but the snow was lovely for ski-

ing and the sun shone. I could put up with most things for that skiing.

The night drifted into the luxurious lodge softly and quietly, just as it used to drift into the old mountain huts. We washed up with kettles of hot water. I carried kettles to the bathroom and washed the children.

On Monday, by lunch time our electricity was going again. Some thoughtless person had seen fit to throw an even grander master-switch than the one in the lodge. The Grand Master switch lived in a kind of fuse box of whose existence we knew nothing. It was outside, and on the opposite side of the house to the one to which we had been formally introduced.

As regards the hot water service, Bill Farrington told us that no one nearer than Jindabyne knew anything about them. As it was not ours we did not like to tinker with it. We borrowed showers from friends—and discussed wedeln under the steaming water.

That night we had light—masses of light—and lucky it was, too, because the smallest was smitten with gastric influenza—not the thing to have away from home!

"Better keep the children in bed a bit longer," said the lugubrious voice, next morning. "We've run out of gas, so there are no heaters."

The lodge was very cold. *It was at the Grey Mare hut that I slept across the hearth and threw on another log whenever the frost crept in.*

By mid-morning two grinning men had ridden the gas cylinders down the steep snow to the lodge. That day, in the queue for the chair lift, I heard of Steve, who was a wizard with hot water services. In the afternoon Steve persuaded ours to go. We also got some metho with which to light the fridg. The beautiful lodge was beautiful indeed.

We entertained our niece and nephew for drinks. We lay back in comfortable chairs in the living room that was warmed by the gas heaters. We cooked ourselves a pleasant meal. We discussed

wedeln, for that day I had had a lesson my first for twenty-one years, and I had enjoyed myself enormously.

Next day, even with school work to be done, we got out earlier—cooking and washing up were so much quicker with hot water! The snow was visibly retreating, and the temperature very high. Soon a wind started blowing down the valley, sometimes switching right round, sometimes tearing over the tops. In the afternoon nine black cockatoos flew over the trail crying, crying. By four o'clock the chair lift had to be stopped because of the force of the wind.

"My aneroid is steady," said Tom when the children and I got home, "but the black cockatoos must be right."

The lodge was very snug and comfortable, and felt even more so as the wind started to howl and buffet. The niece, the nephew, and other friends came in and yarned, their voices dropping into the strange quietness that exists in an airtight, warm house when the storm is starting to roar outside.

The children were snug in bed. We had had dinner when Jean and Joe came in, and we sat telling yarns, evoking the mountains and old, gay, happy, far-off days. We laughed and laughed, and the wind roared down the valley, shaking the warm lodge.

How the wind used to shake the old chalet at Charlotte's Pass.

"An old-fashioned night," Tom remarked, and then we went on to talk of touring to Lake Albina in the spring.

"Whooooo!" the wind howled.

"Those black cockatoos really meant something," Tom muttered.

We all stopped and listened to the wind. Then:

"CRASH!"

I saw the plate glass glistening as it flew past Jean's head, almost earmarking her with a slice off the near ear.

"BANG!" The door blew wide open.

"Crash! Tinkle! Crash! Tinkle!" More of the glass came flying in.

We grabbed the curtain and held it, billowing in the gale, while the two men rushed out on to the verandah and pulled out the remaining glass. If it had not been for the masonite that Joe hammered over the empty window, perhaps the lodge would have been blown away on the blast! At least one of the children had the same idea, because he kept waking and saying he wished we were at the Ski Club Lodge!

Jean and Joe sat with us drinking reviving mugs of black coffee, and telling wilder and wilder yarns of things that had happened in the mountains in the old days! We were used to wild nights. *Do you remember the camp on the Pinnacle of the Grey Mare Ridge, and that one on the top of The Long Spur?*

Soon after midnight the rain started pelting down. It was still thrashing, lashing, and roaring in the waterfalls everywhere, next morning. The time had come for dwellers on the other side of the Murray to pack up their traps

and get going, because there would undoubtedly be a very big flood.

Of course we had to leave the lodge clean. If you have a gas stove you must clean it. If you have shower rooms, basins and the rest, all must be washed, floors too—not like leaving the Cascades hut, or Pinnabar, or Geehi, where one simply swept straight out the door. We mopped, we swept, washed, packed, folded blankets. We switched off everything that should be switched off (and nothing that should not). Tom made seventeen perilous journeys down to the Land Rover, trying hard not to slip and slide down the hillside which was running with water.

Then we made a bolt for the road home before the river beat us.

The first day when the sun shone and after the flood subsided, we were up for the day again. Perhaps, in the long run, it may pay to have a mother who's crazy about skiing.

PILGRIMAGE TO WHITE'S RIVER.

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(Paddy Pallin's idea of a lightweight towel) and the effect was rather like a dance of the seven veils. If the rats put on a performance that night we slept too heavily to take much notice, although Rex insisted that they held a square dance in the front room. Perhaps our orgie of mixed dishes, plus his bath, may have had their effect on Rex!

Next morning, after three days of clear skies and perfect weather, we were greeted by drizzling rain. We did manage to ski about a mile down the valley but the other four miles or so to Guthega Power Station were just plain foot slogg- ing in the mud.

And so ended our tour when we left the dazzling snows behind us and we came back to earth again.

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