

Snow Memories

By R. W. Wilkinson.

This is not a history of ski-ing in the early days in Victoria, but a few reminiscences. So dates are omitted, as being irrelevant and the cause of too many arguments.

Staker's track first led us to the Buffalo Plateau—there was no road then. Snow stopped the horse carrying our pack at Carlile's, so we humped our goods to the hut, stupidly destroyed when the present Chalet was built nearby. We slept on a fence in that hut. The bunks were of wire-netting and the bedding of old tarpaulin. The guide, a wily old bird with one blue eye, *slept* on the floor while we three poor innocents *shivered* on the "beds." We had yet to learn of mother earth's superior warmth and comfort.

We spent hours on snubby-nosed split palings, fastened to our feet with rope, trying out any safe descents. Wily old blue-eye got us out before dawn and we trudged over the site of the present Lake Catani to the Horn and returned via Carlile's at 10 p.m. That blue eye was unerring in fog or darkness.

That first view from the Horn holds a warm place in my memories of mountain-top winterscapes. There was no wind, and the frost and light snow which covered trees and rocks made an ideal foreground, gradually merging into the billowy waves of rolling clouds stretching to the horizon on every side. Their colouring, from sooty black to fleeciery white, was tinged by the rosy-pink glow of the setting sun. Piercing the clouds were the distant, sun-kissed, glistening white tops of Bogong, the Alps, Wellington, Cobbler, Buller and company, with a cloudless blue sky over all.

We ate up all our roast beef and were compelled by lack of food to leave the top. On the way down we struck a camp of navvies who were making the road. We bought bread, butter, jam and oatmeal from them and off we trudged back again up the mountain.

When tucker again ran out, snow was falling heavily and old Blue-eye suggested a short cut down by the Lady's Bath. The initial stages were a series of slithering slides on Nature's toboggan over snow-strewn boulders sometimes yards long. Then the snow changed to hail, and, lower down, to rain. We got to the abode of Blue-eye, drenched and dripping. He handed out our dry clothes through the window and we changed in full view of the public road.

We reached Harrierville the same night (there were no motors then) and slept at a two-storied pub which is non-existent now. The regular occupants of the beds resented our intrusion and bit us viciously. Other livestock obtained at this pub, which we did appreciate, was a stringhalted but otherwise perfectly good packhorse which carried our belongings to St. Bernard for a modest half-crown.

Fortunately for us, the lessee of St. Bernard was a mining enthusiast, who carried on through the winter and worked his mine on the Dargo. On the way up we saw some lyre-birds

scratching unconcernedly for minutes, heedless of us a few feet away.

The ski at St. Bernard were of split woolly-butt, shaped and well turned up at the point, with leather boot-top fastenings for our feet but innocent of heel straps. Armed with a pole, long and strong, we journeyed to Hotham and Loch (seven and nine miles away respectively). Our only waxes were soap and floor polish.

We were told the sea could be seen from the Blue Rag Range, so at 6 a.m. one day we set off. We got lost en route,



R. J. Tobias.

This photograph was taken at Mt. St. Bernard in 1911 or 1912. The figures on the right are the Governor of Victoria (Sir Thomas Gibson-Carmichael) and Lady Carmichael. Behind the Governor is the late Mr. Catani, after whom the lake at Buffalo is named, and on the left is Captain Boyle, A.D.C.

but found a wild bees' hive under a fallen snow-covered tree, lying across a small creek. Eventually we reached the top of the Rag and proved our informant a picturesque liar. We returned at 11 p.m., accompanied over the last mile by our host, who had come out to look for us.

The goats have vanished from St. Bernard, more's the pity! They were most attractive in their mountain setting and their milk was the richest I have ever sampled. We found they were fond of raisins—useful knowledge when one wanted to take photographs of them. When there was bad weather on top we followed the old Bairnsdale track down the Dargo for many miles, a sheltered and beautiful trip, with its richly verdured and diversified gullies under snow.

Later jaunts to Buffalo recall Mick Dockerty of honoured memory. Mick was wonderfully thoughtful for his women passengers. He called them "gals," whether they were 60 or 16.

After a long, hard day I have seen him worrying around the deserted fire in the hotel kitchen, filling their hot water bottles.

On two occasions Mick was unable to get his horses through and I was a passenger each time. The horses simply lay down in the drift at Carlile's, too spent to stand. The four of them were unharnessed, the buggy lifted clear of the snow and turned right about face, the horses reharnessed and back poor Mick had to go to Bright.

Under these conditions, when travelling between Carlile's and the Chalet, you only knew you were off the track when you got into the creek on one side or among the rocks on the other. Before turning back with his horses, Mick vividly impressed on us the absolute necessity of getting certain heavy baggage belonging to his "gals" to the Chalet, and I then found out the comparative ease of carrying such heavy weights slung on a long pole between the skiers' shoulders.

Mick's sleigh was rather a dangerous contraption, drawn by four horses, but he never had an accident. His skill with horses and storytelling, born of a lifetime's experience on mountain roads with Cobb & Co. and other coaching firms, served his passengers well. Good old Mick!

I have never met a serious accident on the snowfields, but one night, when dining at the Chalet, an anxious landlady came to me, a layman, and asked me whether I could do anything for one of her waitresses who was lying in a detached tent-hut with a foot of snow outside. She was in such pain that she could not bear the weight of a blanket and was covered only with a sheet. Inquiries revealed that she had fallen over a bucket, and examining pressure and screams located the broken rib. A tightly-drawn horse bandage relieved the pressure and pain and an opiate soothed her to sleep.



The old hut on the Buffalo Plateau, which was built near the site of the present Chalet.

In the still hour approaching midnight, I quietly opened the door. The sufferer was calmly sleeping. At each corner of the foot of the bed was a candle shedding a dim religious light, and at each candle was a kneeling figure, clad in white sleeping garments, praying silently but so earnestly that the opening and closing of the door were neither heard nor seen.

But, to return to St. Bernard. I wonder whether from the Twins, that grand old cornerstone of the Victorian Alps back of St. Bernard, that glorious picture of Australia's noblest mountain tops is as wonderful as memory paints it? Way



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Portion of the famous herd of goats which once provided milk for the tea at St. Bernard's Hospice and whose offspring supplied "lamb" chops occasionally.

down on the Dargo I wonder whether there's a trace of old Joe's spotlessly clean hut, the walls of which were covered with pictures from London "Punch."? He made a gigantic fruit cake, 18 by 6, by way of welcome. I wonder whether I would find, in the bathroom at St. Bernard, a wombat torn to pieces by dingoes and foxes? Here, where the Ovens gushed out of the earth at its source, I wonder whether it would give us another shower bath, about 20 degrees warmer in winter and 20 degrees cooler in summer than the surrounding atmosphere? Would I see a Governor of Victoria guiding the first faltering ski-steps of his lady, she being attired in a skirt sweeping the snow?

I wonder whether . . . ? It's many years since I was there. I must go and see again, before memory fades.