

Memories

By R. W. Wilkinson.

The first classical ski-ing in Victoria's mountains was done by Mr. Hans Fay. Before his advent, the few skiers existent then had acquired a hybrid style handed down by Kiandra miners at St. Bernard. All used a single pole and good old Rickmer was our hero. Lunn, Caulfeild and company had not then appeared on our horizon.

The graceful action of this six feet or more of lithe, athletic Norseman on his lengthy ski compared with the animated, tripod figure of others on their podgy ski, was the contrast between a racing steed and a carhorse. The cart-horse was filled with emulation, but how? Fay said: "Throw away that damned stick!"

Yes, and at once the dismembered tripod was a spreadeagled mass of struggling profanity.

Fay had unconsciously absorbed ski-ing from his childhood days in Norway, but could not impart it. His theory was that a Briton would naturally be a boxer or cricketer, but a skier had to be born in Norway. I accepted this dictum gladly. It left me my stick—that trusty, thrice-blest companion of many a joyous jaunt. How to be "on with the new love before being off with the old" was not easy until Caulfeild and Lunn made it so later.

Friend Fay's first view of the Alps, from the Hump of Buffalo, brought forth a sermon of appreciation:—

"The good God has given you Victorians those beautiful mountains and you never use them. You don't deserve them. In any other country they would be black with people." I have often quoted this when forwarding schemes for better ski-ing facilities.

He was keen to pioneer a ski trail from St. Bernard to Feathertop. So was I, but the Hospice was closed all the winter in those days, and we would have to camp there, if allowed. That winter was the best I have known. The Holy Angels had moulted so profusely that isolated bridges even on the Buffalo were piled feet high. The owners, unfortunately for them, insisted on going to the Hospice with us. We soon met the snow-line, Fay and I on ski, the McMillans, father, daughter and niece, on horses.

Fay and I went on, opened up the Hospice, lit fires and waited. No appearance of the rest of the party at dusk. Why? Was it those fallen trees across the road? We went down, found one girl ahead of the others, pulling her pony up the mountain, put her on ski, took her horse in tow, back to the Hospice and then down again, lower still. Found the other girl in worse shape, transferred her to ski and dragged her horse along; then, again, further down was Mr. McMillan; his riding horse was able to flounder along without its rider, but the pack horse could not stand up. Its pack was not unduly heavy, because we were able to carry most of it up to the Hospice that night.

It was past midnight now. However, I got some bags, an old oilcloth table-cover, rope and shovel and made the fourth pilgrimage down to the pack horse, lying in the snow. I scooped a hole under it through the snow, covered it with bags and oilcloth and tied it round with rope. It would have to take its chance.

We were a very doleful party when I got back to the Hospice. The only seat available was between the two girls. I put a sympathetic arm round each, the immediate result being a deluge of pent-up tears from both. Later on, at about 2 a.m., a feast of steak and onions provided a happy ending to our afflictions.

I thought about that poor brute of a horse so, before breakfast, again went down. It had taken up its bed and walked. The feed was eaten from the bag

I had left open and, lower down, I found its bed had fallen off. I heard later that it was waiting at its stable door before 8 a.m. A malingerer, don't you think?

We lacked fine weather for a journey to Feathertop. Beyond St. Bernard, the plucking of Jupiter's geese from Olympus on high had entirely blotted out the road. On getting to Hotham, I pointed out Feathertop—seven glorious miles distant—which we must reach not later than 4 p.m. on the morrow. "Wilkinson," said Fay, "we shall be there by noon." A very nice margin, should we have to return to the Hospice or slide off Razorback down the Ovens Valley to Harrierville.

Early next morning the dawn was faintly visible over Hotham, the bigger stars and moon still showing. A heavy frost and a high barometer promised a good day. Soon we were making our first acquaintance with huge plates of "horse and jockey," gigantic chunks of juicy steak, surmounted by poached eggs. Thus fortified, we set off at 8 a.m. I was on ash ski with lap-thong bindings, which had roamed the mountains of Norway for many years before I got them, wonderfully tough ski; I still use them.

We had to climb up the ridge of every rise dragging our ski, the snow was so hard. On the runs down, Fay would be ahead of me, his long hickory ski detonating on the ice like machine guns in full blast, while I "tripped" more or less steadily in the rear.

All went merrily over the top of Hotham and down on to the Razorback. Here it was new country, but plain sailing for us, until we struck an ice wall many feet high. Fay climbed on my shoulders and could just see over the top. He dragged himself up and hauled me after him. Then we came to a fork rising from the main ridge, with the deepest valley in Australia (entirely uninhabited) easterly and the friendly Ovens valley to the west. We did not hesitate to go west.

We were on Feathertop by 11 a.m., thus comparing favourably with the record of Martin Romuld and Fred Ewert about 20 years later. I carried no pack, not even a camera. Fay carried our tucker. After boiling the billy at the old hut on the site of the present Bungalow, we set off down the mountain. Harrierville welcomed us graciously at 3 p.m.

The whole journey of 20 miles was a sheer delight, which I have often repeated. Would that we had more such routes as easily available as this is now—every inch of 13 consecutive miles of it—5,000 to 6,000 feet and more nearer heaven than our drab cities by the sea.

