

A Winter's Work

By Warrant Begg

I spent seven weeks in the winter of 1934 as "offsider" to the engineer in charge of the State Electricity Commission's meteorological station on the Bogong High Plains. The station has been established on the flat open space below Wallace's Hut and is approached by a track up the Middle Creek Valley from "Shannon Vale," Mr. George Fitzgerald's homestead. A very comfortable, if somewhat compact, house has been built, in which lived the engineer, Mr. Olsen, Mrs. Olsen and their son, Lasse. I was living at the Cope Hut, about a mile further up the valley. I had to ski to work each morning.

The scope of the work carried out at the station is very wide; in addition to standard meteorological work, such as determination of precipitation, temperatures, and so on, it covers a detailed study of the behaviour of the water (including snow), both on and in the ground. My job was to bore holes six feet deep in the ground and to take samples of the soil every foot. These samples were taken to the station, where the moisture content was determined. It was essential that no snow or other moisture mixed with the samples, so it was necessary to remove the snow from an area usually about four feet square. For the same reason the work could be carried out only in fine weather.

On other occasions I would accompany Mr. Olsen or go alone on inspection of one of the three lines of snow gauge stations, in Pretty Valley, Rocky Valley, or down to Roper's Hut. In really bad weather we would work at calculating the records in the "office," that is, the living room. Here also Lasse would be studying, for he was getting his schooling by correspondence.

The trips around the lines of gauge stations afforded the best opportunity for ski-ing, and I had some very pleasant days despite the fact that



—W. Begg.
S.E.C. Meteorological Station, Bogong High Plain.



Cope Hut, Bogong High Plain —W. Begg.

a small toboggan fitted out to carry instruments had usually to be dragged around. The stations in Pretty and Rocky Valleys are situated on snow pole lines, the poles being spaced 100 feet apart. At each pole the depth of snow is measured to a sheet-metal plate fastened to the ground. This measurement is made with a special ski stick of hickory, about seven feet long, graduated from the handle end. These sticks are very unwieldy to ski with at first. At each station the snow-fall since the last inspection is determined by weighing the cylinder with its contents and then emptying and re-weighing. The scales are mounted on the little toboggan. Then the various other readings are made and entered in a field book. One became quite an adept at ski-ing with notebook and pencil in hand and the lifted stem turn was greatly used. This job was most unpleasant in bad weather as great difficulty was experienced in keeping the field book dry. The Roper's Hut line of stations was vastly different from the other two, and the stations were not connected by snow poles. The line extended northward, really off the plains, and the last station was below the Hut at an altitude of little more than 4,000 feet.

The above short description of the work may make it all seem very straightforward, but it was really extraordinary how little difficulties cropped up. Thus, sometimes a snow bin was covered completely or frozen in and had to be dug out, or else the contents were frozen to the bin and had to be chipped out bit by bit after weighing. At other times several attempts would be made before a good sample of snow for density measurement could be obtained in the special cutting cylinder. Sometimes much digging would be necessary to uncover the trap-door over the snow melting gauge. Yet another difficulty, which arose as spring approached, was the crossing of open streams. This generally meant wet feet for the rest of the day.



Reading a snow gauge near Mt. Cope.
Note the scales mounted on a toboggan.

—W. Begg.

So much for the day's work. Knock-off time was 5 o'clock, and then I would pack up, and go to the Olsen's house to drop the day's soil samples or get the orders for the morrow. Lasse would be ready for a few practice runs before I set off for "home" to tea and bed. On the way I would collect enough wood in my arms to keep up my supply. Frequently I was invited to stay to dine with the Olsens. In this event Lasse and I would ski usually until dark if we felt inclined. Then a pair of Mr. Olsen's slippers was at my disposal in the beautifully warm living room. The spotless table cloth laid with shining silver and glassware was a welcome change from the rough slab table at Cope Hut. The wireless provided dinner music and kept us abreast of the news. After the washing-up, a game of cards or a lively discussion would make the evening pass all too quickly. Then for me it was a case of climbing into ski boots again, putting on my electric head-lamp and setting out into the snow. In fine weather with good snow the homeward trip did not take more than 20 minutes and was very pleasant. But with icy conditions, high head wind, or dense fog it took considerably longer and at times was quite difficult. Once home, the thing to do was to hop into bed as quickly as possible, as the hut was very cold and it was not worth while lighting a fire. As a matter of fact, from the middle of August onwards there was a continuous stream of visitors to the Cope Hut, so the fire was usually alight. Eggs and bacon was my standard breakfast, and I was quite surprised the first time I found that the eggs would not crack in the usual way. They peeled quite easily, however, and looked just like a lump of glass. When dropped into the pan the egg would gradually thaw out and cook at the same time. The thawing took so long that most of the egg was cooked hard before the inside was melted. Another quite serious consideration in the morning was the thawing out of boots.

On my first week-end I made a trip with Mr. Guy, who is engineer in charge of general hydro-electric investigation, to the S.E.C. Hut in Pretty Valley, intending to go to Mount Fainter the following day. However, the weather turned very bad and we had to return, after a comfortable night in



The S.E.C. Experimental Gully, near Wallace's Hut. —W. Begg.

the hut. (In passing, I would point out for the guidance of Victorian skiers that this hut is kept locked and so is not to be relied on for shelter or accommodation.) On subsequent week-ends I made several trips to Mount Hotham, often arriving well after dark, as I usually seemed to strike bad weather or left Cope too late in the afternoon. On one occasion I made the return journey in one day, leaving Cope Hut at about 8.30 a.m.

I found there was a certain fascination in travelling alone over these comparatively long distances, though one is naturally more cautious than usual on steep or difficult descents. I had only two really unpleasant experiences. On one occasion, after a very heavy snow-fall, I was compelled to ski in deep soft snow right down to Dibbins' Hut on my return from Hotham. On another, this time at night, the wind velocity was so high at one point on the Loch Ridge that I had to take off my ski, and even then was, for a time, unable to stand. The advantage of being alone lies chiefly in the fact that one sees much more of the native animal and bird life than usual. Thus I found that the birds, particularly robin redbreasts, were very tame. They would frequently perch on my ski stuck into the snow, close to where I was working.

A precaution that I took when ski-ing alone was, at each hut I passed, to leave a note in a conspicuous position, giving my name, when I left and whither bound. The note might, in the event of trouble, save the inevitable search party a lot of work.

A few general observations may be of interest. Firstly, as to clothing. My universal outer garment was a zipp-fastened jacket of Grenfell cloth. The cloth was double over the shoulders and halfway down the back, and the sleeves were amply long and buttoned at the wrists. This material is, admittedly, not fully waterproof, particularly where there is constant rubbing as by shoulder straps; but I found that a heavy woollen sweater underneath kept the wet from penetrating. This had some pretty severe tests as temperatures were mild and we thus had a lot of cold driving sleet

instead of snow-falls. On one occasion I experienced a wet blizzard practically head-on, all the way from Cope Hut to Hotham Heights. Boots gave very little trouble. I kept them well greased with ordinary dripping—having put Stockholm tar on the seams when new—and dried them very carefully.

For light loads I used a very small home-made rucksack without a frame, made of Japara, waterproofed with paraffin wax. I used a frame rucksack over a wide range of heavier loads. In easy country when the load gets up to 50lb. or more and is bulky and awkward a light sled becomes useful. We had a small toboggan on which were mounted the scales, shovel, snow-sampling cylinder and all other tools necessary for the routine inspection. The harness found most satisfactory was a wide canvas belt around the waist to which were attached the ropes from the toboggan. For descending hills, Mr. Olsen had an arrangement for fastening a ski stick rigidly to the toboggan, so that it projected forward and could be held in the hand. The device was no good for sharp corners, but neither is any other scheme that I have seen yet. Of course, the toboggan, with its wide, flat, running surface, was quite useless on a side slope. It was found that Mix was the most satisfactory sledge wax for all occasions.

For more bulky loads than could be handled by the toboggan there was a sledge—aluminium frame with wood slat deck and wooden runners. On account of the narrower runners, this sledge did not give so much trouble on side slopes, though still not satisfactory. After a little practice I was able to bring in quite heavy loads of firewood downhill, probably at least 4 cwt. per load, from the trees some distance above the hut.

One little domestic matter which gave some trouble was the keeping of fresh meat. I stored it in the entrance porch of the hut and found that it would hardly keep for the week and was usually distinctly "tasty" by Friday night. Of course, the quantity of food consumed was colossal and I cannot imagine any better way of becoming absolutely physically fit than to take a field job in the snow. I noticed on my return to town, however, that my leg muscles became very stiff and sore as I had to walk on hard pavements instead of doing virtually all my moving about on ski.

