

VICTORIA.

The Mount Bogong Disaster, 1936

[An exhaustive account of this tragedy has already appeared in "Schuss", the magazine of the Ski Club of Victoria, and the following short résumé is published as a matter of record and for the benefit of those ski-ers who have not yet seen it. There are lessons for every ski-tourer in this story; if the tragedy has the effect of driving these home we may count them as some small set-off. A fitting tribute to the heroism of the party itself and of the rescuers has already been given, and we print here only the bald outline of the story. With this we publish an outline of the rescue work and a short note on the Cole Memorial Hut made up from various sources (chiefly by H. Doughty and M. McColl).—Editor.]

On 5th August, 1936, C. J. M. Cole, Chairman of the Hut and Trip Subcommittee, P. E. Hull, Treasurer of the S.C.V., and H. Michell, an Adelaide member, were at Mt. Hotham in Victoria. After a short vacation at Hotham Heights they crossed the Bogong High Plains and reached the Big River. On 8th August they spent the night under canvas in heavy rain, preparatory to tackling a climb on to Bogong itself. The next day, 9th August, the climb of 3,500 feet from the river to the Summit Ridge was undertaken. Very bad conditions, thick fog and a blizzard, were encountered and the party was unable to find the cairn on the summit.

The following is an extract from Hull's diary:—

"It was driving sago snow and Mick Hull found his slit aluminium goggles quite useless under these conditions. . . .

The cairn had not yet been located. Howard Michell, who had done some blind flying, was placed in charge of the compasses and a course was set for Quartz Nobs, with the idea of returning to the Big River, but they, like the cairn, could not be found.

From 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. endeavours were made to get off the mountain by any spur, but every spur that was attempted ended in sheer precipices.

It had been agreed earlier that if no way off could be found by 5 p.m. the only course left would be to make a snow dug-out. The one place found that offered any shelter (although that was not much) and which lent itself to the construction of a dug-out, was located 400 feet to 500 feet below the summit on the south side and it was on a slope of 25 degrees. . . .

A hole 4 feet wide was dug into the hill, and when it was finished for the first night it had a snow roof of three feet. Ski and sticks were placed on the outside with a tent and oilskin over them, and snow over that again. Most of this work was done by Howard as Mick and Cleve Cole were tired. Mick helped until his hands became numb, stiff and powerless, in which state they remained for the rest of the trip.

While these operations were going on the snow was falling heavily and there was no abatement of the blizzard or the density of the fog. Cleve's proofed Japara tent, which had an oilskin floor was put down in the dug-out, the floor of which was hard packed snow."

A lack of oxygen in this hole caused difficulty with matches, fifteen or twenty having to be used at times to ignite meta tablets. Eventually, "it was found that by igniting a piece of ciné-film used in Cleve's camera, the fuel tablets could be set alight quickly and easily. . . . Oxo cubes were invaluable as hot liquids seemed to be needed by the human system more than anything else".

Next day conditions were too bad for a thorough search and a second night was passed in the dug-out.

"A stocktaking revealed that supplies of meta fuel were sufficient for three days. . . . By careful experimenting all possible use was made of the heat generated, two hands being heated round the pannikin, a pair of knees underneath, and a segment of sleeping bag warmed under the fuel container. Later Mick's toes were warmed in his sleeping bag while the cooking was in progress."

On 10th August the temperature dropped, and a blizzard and thick fog continued, but neither the cairn nor the route they knew so well could be found. On 11th August they were still unable to find a way off.



P. E. Hull.

On the Bogong High Plain. Michell waits while Cole attends to a boot.

been broken a number of times on the ice pinnacles, which the continued strong winds made, this method of travel had to be abandoned."

Suddenly they walked right on to the summit cairn. This was about 5 p.m. Their attempt however to cover a distance of some 400 yards to the beginning of the Staircase Spur did not succeed. By 2 p.m. after a nightmare journey of mental torture and doubt as to the course they were following they had got out of snow country to a stream which subsequently proved to be the Big River. Unknowingly they had descended the southern instead of the northern slopes of the mountain. On 13th August they followed the river through steep ravines,

Wednesday, August 12th:

"After careful consideration it was decided to make 'a last hope' to find the cairn and the Staircase Spur. . . . After having a brew of chocolate and each man eating his share of what remained—about one small square—they set out about noon, taking with them only a packet of P.K.'s and a stick for each man, the pint bottle of rum, Mick and Cleve a camera each, Howard and Cleve a compass each, and Howard a length of cord and some oilskin ground-sheet a couple of feet square. . . . The fog gave a visibility of only 20 yards. . . . the wind was almost unbearable. Compasses were produced and, so that there should be no possibility of the cairn being missed, each man was spaced at regular intervals along a 60 yard length of cord, stretched across the top, but after the cord had

constantly crossing in icy water and all were suffering with sore or partly frozen limbs. Cole was having severe pain with his eyes. By 5 p.m. about 15 miles had been covered, and they passed the night in hollow logs.

On 14th August Cole slipped and was badly shaken, but the party continued and found a log which gave them scanty shelter for the night. On 15th August Cleve Cole was weakening and Mick Hull's feet were stiff. Their rate of progress was only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile an hour.



P. E. Hull.

Cole on the Bogong High Plain. This negative was buried in snow for four months.

"It was obvious that Cleve could not continue much longer and that one of the other two would have to go ahead and try and get assistance for him. As Howard was in the best condition it was decided that he should go. . . . After shaking hands Howard set off. No one knew what distance he had to travel, whether it was 20 miles or 50."

On 17th August Howard Michell arrived, frost-bitten and exhausted, at Glen Valley, a mining centre some 42 miles from the summit of Mount Bogong by the route he had travelled. The local inhabitants immediately organised a search party. Members of the S.C.V. left Melbourne on Monday and Tuesday, the 17th and 18th August and were quickly on the way.

Meantime Cole had become too weak and too blind to walk, and Hull found a shelter in an open space where searchers could readily see them. They tried to maintain vitality by drinking water, two gallons of which per day would, so they had heard, sustain life for about 15 days. For three nights Hull, with the utmost devotion, nursed Cole, who was at times delirious.

On 18th August the searchers arrived. The two men were carried to a camp about 10 miles away, but Cole was terribly frost-bitten and unconscious. At 4

p.m. on 19th August the party arrived at Glen Valley. But it was too late, for Cole, and he died that evening at about 8 p.m.

The Rescue.

On Monday morning, 17th August, Michell arrived at the home of Mr. Batty, a cattleman of Glen Valley. After providing Michell with some nourishment, Mr. Batty immediately set about getting ready to go out for Cole and Hull. He and his brother did not return to Glen Valley until late on Wednesday afternoon, after they had found them.

Michell went to Glen Valley Post Office and rang first his mother in Adelaide, then J. S. Gibson, the Secretary of the Ski Club of Victoria, in Melbourne, and finally Mr. Gribble at Hotham Heights. Gibson was out of his office when Michell rang, and it was not until late in the afternoon that Gibson was able to reach him by telephone at the Omeo Hospital. Two parties of the S.C.V. members arrived at Omeo on Tuesday, August 18, the Club President, S. C. Stephens, and S. Flatley and E. Robinson with full camping gear at 7 a.m., and J. S. Gibson with Hull's father at 9 a.m. At Glen Valley it was found that all the men of the district who were able had already set out or were about to set out in search parties. The township of Glen Valley is constituted principally by the staff of a gold mine called the Maude and Yellow Girl; only a few inhabitants remained.

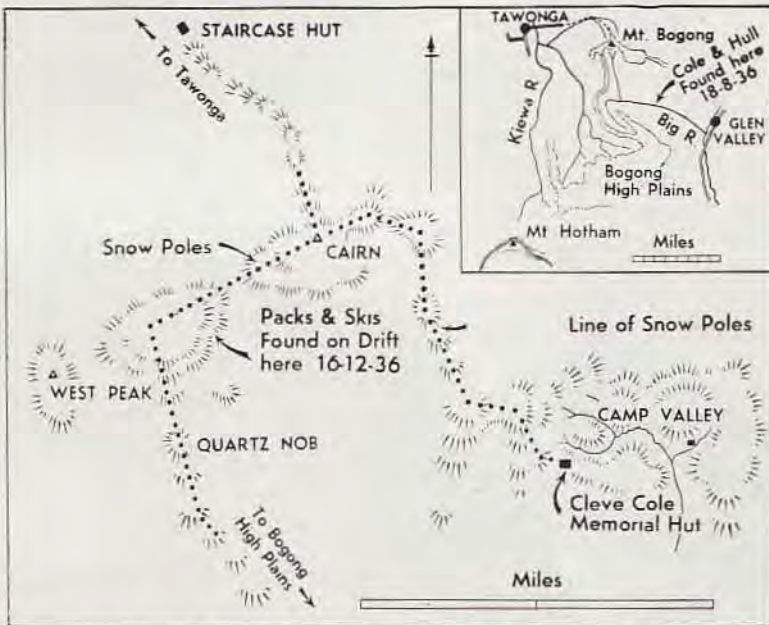
On Monday morning, as soon as they received news from Michell, J. and W. Batty had set out, joined by A. and W. Nightingale and A. Hunter. These men went scantily clad with an overcoat and some food and were destined not to return until late on Wednesday evening and to endure privation and hardship



P. E. Hull.

Fitzgerald's Hut at 7 a.m. This was one of the negatives recovered.

which stirred all Australia. They were soon after followed by P. Bittner, C. Rootsey, T. Fitzgerald and J. and E. Moore. At 1 a.m. on Tuesday, V. Nightingale, G. Douglas, S. Street, A. Bittner and J. Hazel, the police constable from Omeo, left, taking with them blankets and a good stock of food. With the exception of Hazel and Hunter, the men of these three parties subsequently joined forces and to them is due the credit of finding and bringing in Cole and Hull. They divided into two parties, one following the floor of the valley and the other keeping higher up. At 8.30 a.m. on Tuesday, Bill Batty, Tom Fitzgerald, Paul Bittner, Cyril Rootsey, Arthur Nightingale, Douglas Nightingale and Jim Moore, the party following the floor of the valley were crossing a spur. They were calling out frequently and suddenly heard a sound which they at first thought was the call of a bird; after more shouts and careful listening they found it to be a scout whistle and immediately saw Mick Hull get out of a log and move across a flat below them; they raced down, to find him trying to tell Cole that help had arrived.



Line of snow-poles made after the tragedy.

The exposure had taken heavy toll of the waning resources of Cole, who was unconscious. Hull was in full possession of his faculties and, although his hands and feet were in a bad state, he was, in the circumstances, in excellent spirits. Such attention as could be given on the spot was immediately given to both men and no time was lost in making a start back for Glen Valley. Three men carried each stretcher and the speed at which they travelled over the rough country was amazing. The river there rushes down between narrow walls, often too precipitous to negotiate, which meant climbing over rugged spurs.

At mid-day the party which was searching the spurs above the valley was recalled by the pre-arranged signal of a dynamite explosion; with the addition of six to the party seven men were able to be spelled at a time. Camp on Tuesday was made just before dark and a start was made at daybreak on Wednesday to cover the remaining twelve miles to reach Glen Valley. A party of forty-two,

consisting mainly of Glen Valley residents, with six Omeo residents and two club members, Stephens and Robinson, had set out from Glen Valley. This party had travelled about ten miles up the valley and pitched camp about a mile from a point at which Constable Hazel had established himself to await news from the men of the party who had gone ahead. On Wednesday morning this party met the stretcher party of thirteen who had carried Cole and Hull over the roughest of the country and were glad of relief. The latter party had not been to bed since they left home on Monday morning and had been going hard all daylight hours and some of the night.

On Wednesday morning a party of club members, Brockhoff, Collingwood, Adamson, Fisher and McColl, arrived at Glen Valley, together with a party of members of the Boy Scouts' Association, Waters, Williams, Doughty, Kemp and four members of the University Ski Club, Dr. A. Walkley, who had come across from Hotham, Gould, McKay, Moffat and Doery, who left Melbourne the previous night. Hull's two brothers had also arrived. These persons divided into two parties, one comprising Gibson, Collingwood, Brockhoff and Doughty, who commenced a search from the Big River Bridge below the township of Glen Valley in case Hull had, in the event of Cole's death, endeavoured to reach Glen Valley and become exhausted in this vicinity. The remaining members set out after the main rescue party on Wednesday morning to go up the river.

The people of Glen Valley can never be forgotten for the way in which they dropped all everyday activity to do what they could to help. Mrs. Bittner made her guest house available to all and sundry. Mr. J. Barker, the mine manager, released his men from the mine for the search, gave his home and his time in hospitality for people from Melbourne, and Mrs. Parker, the postmistress, kept her office open day and night during the search to provide a most efficient telephone service. In Melbourne, Gibson's partner, Mr. W. Orr, had the burden of constant telephone calls and attending to urgent matters which arose in connection with the search, including the despatch of aeroplanes for an aerial search.



The late C. J. M. Cole.

The late C. J. M. Cole.

The popularity of Mt. Bogong to-day as a ski-ing resort is due mainly to the interest and work of Mr. Cleveland Cole, who in the autumn of 1932 made his early reconnaissance trip to the mountain and during that winter made the first ascent on ski from the Tawonga side. Born in 1897, Cleve Cole in 1912 joined the staff of the Commonwealth Bank. In 1922 he was transferred to the bank's branch at Launceston and spent three years in Tasmania, returning to Melbourne in 1925. He was for some time a teller with the Commonwealth Trading Bank and held various other positions

culminating with his appointment, not long before his death, as Agency Inspector of Commonwealth Savings Banks.

During part of his life he was also an enthusiastic member of the Boy Scouts' Association. He was Scout Master of North Fitzroy Troop, which position he occupied for several years. In 1924 he was a member of the Overseas Scout Contingent which visited the Imperial Jamboree at Wembley, and again in 1929 he went abroad to the Jamboree held at Arrowe Park. During the course of these overseas visits he also spent some time in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. As a member of the Boy Scouts' Association he is best remembered for his work with the Lone Scout Section of the Movement. He was part-editor, with South African Lone Scout leaders, of a handbook for this branch of Scout training.

Cleve Cole was ever an adventurer in the best sense. In the latter years of his life, ski-ing was his passionate delight and his exploring spirit led him year after year into the snow country to pioneer new runs and open up new country. In the winter of 1932 he pioneered the northern approach to Mt. Fainter. In 1933 he visited New Zealand and with local guides made an extended tour of the Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers. He also made aeroplane flights over the Southern Alps in New Zealand. Returning to Victoria, he visited Mt. Bogong at every opportunity. He stimulated the interest of the Ski Club of Victoria in the mountain and undertook its development as a ski-ing resort. His plans for the development of Mt. Bogong have already been published in the 1934 and 1935 *Year Books*. At the time of his death he held the office of Chairman of the Hut and Trip sub-Committee of the Ski Club of Victoria and was a member of the Club's General Committee.

In 1934 he camped on Mt. Bogong during winter for a week. Substantially at his own expense, and with the aid of Mr. Walter Maddison, of Tawonga, he had a hut built on the Staircase Spur, which is now known as the "Bivouac Hut". He also had a track up the Staircase Spur improved. Only three weeks before his death he crossed the Dargo High Plains from the south, traversing country which had not been travelled in winter since the mining days of last century.

Dauntless, but not foolhardy, Cleve Cole was always out to explore and develop the lesser-known snow areas. He always stressed the necessity of extreme caution on long ski-ing tours, and it is a bitter thought that he, who travelled first, some years ago, the heights of Bogong in winter, became its first victim. Readers of the *Year Book* have had the opportunity in its past issues to appreciate some of Cole's delightful photography and have read with interest numerous articles which he wrote on touring.

The Cole Memorial Hut Appeal Committee.

At the last August general meeting of the Ski Club of Victoria a Committee, consisting of Messrs. Gordon Brown, Chairman, Harold Brockhoff, V. Letcher (Railways Department), A. W. Shands, D. Gray and D. Stogdale, was elected to raise funds to erect a hut on Mt. Bogong as a memorial. This Committee subsequently co-opted the services of Messrs. H. Doughty (Boy Scouts' Association) (Secretary), A. W. Keown (Railways Department), Miss B. M. Kermodé (Treasurer), and M. McColl.

The objective of this Committee is to raise sufficient funds for, and to design and supervise the erection of, a hut on Mt. Bogong. This should result in really excellent ski runs, better than exist elsewhere in Victoria, becoming accessible to ski-ing enthusiasts on the highest mountain in the State.

It was felt that such an object could not be achieved without the erection of a substantial building, and it was decided that the least deterioration would result if a stone building were erected. An investigation into the cost showed that an amount of at least £500 would be required. A public appeal was immediately instituted. The members of the Appeal Committee have worked hard

in an effort to achieve their objective and up till March, 1937 (in a period of six months), had raised the sum of £350. Lately the Committee sent a deputation to the State Tourist Committee of the Victorian Government and, on submitting plans and specifications of the works which it proposed to carry out, obtained a grant of £200 from the State Unemployment Fund, for expenditure on local un-employed labour.

Mr. McColl, as architect for the building, and Mr. Doughty, as secretary of the Committee, worked with untiring effort to push on with the commencement of work during the 1936-37 summer. At the time that this grant was obtained from the Victorian Government, they had produced plans and specifications of a building which could be built in three sections. The erection of the first section to provide accommodation for ten people has been begun. The sketch of the proposed hut and a plan showing the building scheme are set out for the information of readers. At the time of going to press the first section of this building, marked "A", will be completed and accommodation will be available during the winter of 1937 for ten or more people.

The erection of this building has involved Messrs. Doughty and McColl in tremendous work and numerous visits made over week-ends from Melbourne to the mountain in arranging contracts for the packing of materials with the builder and in supervising the work. They have, however, had the whole-hearted co-operation of their Committee members and of men of the finest type working on the job at Mt. Bogong.

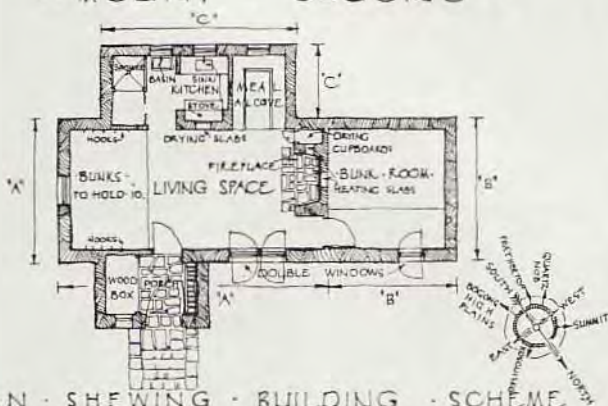
The true development of Bogong will date from the day Camp Valley can be approached from Melbourne without having to cross the summit. A fairly easy track leads into Camp Valley from the Omeo side, but it is much too long. It has yet to be pioneered in winter, and at present travelling time and expenses from Melbourne favour the Tawonga approach. The simplest solution would be, as we have pointed out above, a road up the Big River Valley, but the ideal would be one from Tawonga, skirting either the northern or southern face of the mountain and entering the valley below the timber line. However, for several seasons to come, most of us will continue to use the old route up the Staircase. The ascent from the Bivouac can be made much easier by removing the young timber which grows so vigorously along the crest of the ridge. This clearing work was one of the points in the late Mr. Cole's scheme, and he referred to it as having been accomplished. Some work was done, but unless it is carried out in a more complete manner it will be always a trouble. Second only to the completion of the Hut must come the expenditure of at least a further £25 on the more permanent clearing and widening of the present strip on the Staircase track.

Above the tree-line the contour of the Staircase is such that under certain snow conditions climbing is difficult. For this reason, as well as the need to avoid the summit traverse, the longer but safer approach from the Omeo side may yet have to be considered.

The importance of a snow-pole line on the summit of a mountain was brought home by the tragedy. But for the inability of Cole's party to find the summit, it is probable that tragedy would not have befallen them. Strenuous representations were therefore made by the Ski Club of Victoria to the Victorian State Government for financial assistance in the erection of a snow-pole line on the mountain and a grant of £50 was made available by the State Tourist Committee. To the Appeal Committee fell the task of arranging for and supervising the work. We reprint the plan of the snow-poles which have now been erected on the mountain under a contract with Mr. W. Carson, of Tawonga, who has worked in most difficult circumstances and through the worst weather which could be remembered by those who knew the mountain for some fifty years.



.. THE CLEVE COLE MEMORIAL HUT ..
 .. MOUNT BOGONG ..



· PLAN · SHEWING · BUILDING · SCHEME ·
 · THE · PORTION · MARKED · "A" · IS · BEING · ERRECTED · NOW ·
 · PORTIONS · "B" · "C" · ARE · TO · BE · ERRECTED · IN · THAT · ORDER ·
 · AS · FUNDS · BECOME · AVAILABLE ·

The Committee is now pleased to report that as we go to press it has received advice that the road from the Tawonga township to Cooper's property has been greatly improved and the track from that property to the foot of the Staircase Spur and from there to the summit has been cleared and opened up for easier foot and horse traffic and, in the snow area, has been cleared to enable easier progress on ski. These improvements to the track have resulted in the reduction of travelling time from Cooper's to the hut site of at least one hour, and in normal weather the journey should be made in four hours on horseback and in five hours on foot.

Through the efforts of Mr. Doughty the whole of the cost of the transport of materials from Melbourne to Tawonga, which would have involved an amount in the vicinity of £40, has been donated by the Lone Scouts' Section of the Boy Scouts' Association. Eleven tons of building materials of every description were delivered by motor transport to Cooper's property at Tawonga. The Committee was fortunate in obtaining the services of a local resident, Mr. Dudley Walker, who had had considerable experience as a contractor packing materials from Tawonga to the Bogong High Plains for the State Electricity Commission. The magnitude of his task is reflected in the price (which, in the circumstances, was a very fair one) of £19 per ton, which has had to be paid for the transport of the materials by pack horses over this 8-mile stretch.

From February 21 to April 7, Walker travelled every alternate day with eight horses fully loaded up the mountainous track and maintained the only communication between the builder's party and civilization. It speaks volumes for his work that we are able to report that there has been not one breakage.

Plans and specifications prepared by Mr. M. McCoil, a member of the Committee and an architect, were submitted by him to the Hut and Trip sub-Committee of the Ski Club of Victoria, and approved. The Committee was fortunate in securing the services of a building contractor, Mr. George Sharpe, of Bright, who had had considerable experience in the erection of stone buildings. Mr. Sharpe's assistance in giving estimates of quantities and prices for labour in connection with the hut was invaluable to the Committee. Mr. H. Parsons, the managing director of H. Parsons Pty., Ltd., has also the thanks of the Committee in supplying materials for the hut at cost. He, with D. & W. Chandler, Ltd., hardware merchants, of Fitzroy, Victoria, has saved the Committee a large amount of money.

The shell of the building is of stone, with foundation walls of an average height from ground level of 2 ft. 15 in., thick set in reinforced concrete. On this foundation wall has been laid a damp-proof course on which the walls of the building, 12 inches thick, have been built. Section "A" contains a bunk room accommodating ten people on double shelf bunks. Steps from ground level give the approach to a large porch at the entrance to the building which contains a large wood-box and a ski rack, capable of holding twenty pairs of ski. A large fireplace, lined with fire-bricks, with two large drying cupboards on each side separates Section "A" from Section "B". The drying cupboards, heated from slabs set in the side of the fireplace, are fitted with shelves and hooks for boots and clothes. Water has been piped from a spring about 420 feet away from the building and is laid on to Section "C" where a sink and draining board with shelves over them and a washbasin have been built in and are provided with running water. Double casement windows give protection from the cold and are an innovation not found in any other Victorian snow resort.

Section "B" consists of another bunk room heated by a special arrangement from the back of the main fireplace and will also accommodate ten people on double shelf bunks. In Section "C" has also been built a colonial oven and a shower and washing recess complete with pump. In this section there is also a meal alcove to relieve congestion in the main living section. The roof has been

kept fairly flat, with the object of stopping snow from sliding down off the roof to the ground and banking up around the hut and blocking access and windows. The hut has been erected on a site which has a most commanding outlook with glorious views in all directions, has a substantial firewood supply right on the spot and is very easily approached from the summit of the mountain.

At the time of going to press the Committee reports that it is now in a position to estimate the final cost of the building at an amount which may slightly exceed £600. On account of this sum £500 has now been assured to the Committee and it, therefore, takes this opportunity to bring its work under the notice of readers with the earnest hope that further contributions will be sent either to the Treasurer or the Secretary at the following addresses:—Treasurer, Miss B. M. Kermode, Government Tourist Bureau, Queen's Walk, Melbourne, Victoria. Secretary, H. V. Doughty, Esq., 397 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria.

It will also be of interest to readers to learn that the Victorian State Downhill and Slalom Championships are being held at Mt. Bogong for the year 1937; it will, therefore, be appreciated that the late Mr. Cole's ambition to develop Mt. Bogong has almost reached reality. If readers give the Appeal Committee practical support in the form of substantial contributions there is no doubt that all who so desire will now be able to spend a holiday in Victoria on Mt. Bogong in as much comfort as could be found at any other snow resort and an ideal field for the ski-ing enthusiast, whether his leanings are to downhill running, touring or jumping, will be found on this mountain. The tourist has only to step out of the door of the hut to see the fine snowfields of the Bogong High Plains just across the Big River Valley which can be approached along a line of snow poles which follows the Quartz Knob Spur across to the Plains. It rests with the enthusiasm of those interested in ski-ing whether every detail of the Committee's objectives is completed or not.



Building of the new Hut in progress.