

A Club is Born and a Mountain Found

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THERE was formed in December, 1947, a ski club comprising members from the extensive district surrounding Tallangatta in north-eastern Victoria.

Eleven men and seven women, attending the first convened public meeting, became the club's foundation members—six of them demonstrating their interest and confidence in its future by forthwith subscribing to life memberships. In the interests of skiing generally, and of the club particularly, application for membership of the Federation of Victorian Ski Clubs and of the North-Eastern District Ski Association was summarily agreed upon.

As the most economic means of equipping those members (the majority) without skis or stocks, it was initially decided to individually and collectively work up suitable local timber into the finished articles. With the rapid growth of membership to 117 however, this policy was, of necessity, reviewed. A firm of Melbourne timber-benders, Messrs. J. S. Lee and Sons, from undertaking at the outset, to bend and roughly shape into skis sufficient local timber, was subsequently persuaded to work this timber to the finished product, as a trial preliminary to mass-producing Australian skis at a price low enough to win more popular support for skiing. Australian "Bogong" adjustable bindings were obtained from Sydney, and cane-handled stocks, fitted with aluminium baskets from Melbourne at fairly reasonable cost. Novices in their first season, after meeting this expense, found even the cheapest Australian ski-boots beyond their means, and relied mainly on working boots with their apparent limitations in shape and rigidity.

In considering their future field of activities members decided, after hearing reports from stockmen running cattle on the highlands, from timbermen with winter's experience in the region, from travellers en-

countering heavy snow on the road to East Gippsland, and from a survey party comprising Messrs. Mitchell, Dunlop, O'Connell and Walsh, to sample winter conditions on Mt. Wills, the most accessible high country from Tallangatta.

Traversed by Omeo Highway, 41 miles north of Omeo and 63 miles south of Tallangatta, of which the intermediate 13 miles of exposed roadway ascends 2800 feet to 4500 feet above sea level over a narrow winding eathern surface, Mt. Wills rises to an elevation of 5758 feet (approximately the height of Cleve Cole Hut) about ten miles from the summit of Mt. Bogong on the eastern extremity of its main ridge, and around it on every hand stretches to the skyline a magnificent panorama of the serried peaks and sheltered valleys of Eastern and North-Eastern Victoria.

On the western fall an undulating plateau, averaging 5500 feet, extends one mile to the west and four of five miles to the south, overlooking the gorge of the Big or Mitta River, 3300 feet below, on to the adjacent slopes of Bogong and of the High Plains around Mt. Nelse. Large healthy snow gums, interspersed with occasional rocky outcrops, but without smaller boulders or undergrowth, are sprinkled over the greater part of this plateau. Open glades and gullies converge on extensive moss-beds, before their water content cascades to the roaring stream below. These afford abundant shelter from the prevailing winds. Snow-cover during the relatively light falls of 1948's winter averaged between 24 and 36 inches through July to October.

Overlooking the Omeo Highway, 1700 feet below, on the eastern fall to Christmas and Wombat Creeks, a 60 degree slope, sheltered from all save the very rare easterly, promises thrills and spills once a trail has been cleared through the dense growth of snow gum and alpine ash.

The northerly approach to the plateau and summit along Razorback Spur has proved by far the easiest. Leaving the Highway where it crosses Razorback between mile-posts 42 and 43 at 4400 feet, a vehicular track, trafficable except in mid-winter, extends for one mile to the junction of the alpine ash and snow gum timber at 5000 feet.

At this point Tallangatta Ski Club has built its base cabin for day-skiers, with the ultimate intention of building its overnight lodge on the western edge of the plateau at 5500 feet one mile further on. Immediately beyond the base cabin a wide cleared track, carrying sufficient snow during winter to constitute a good run, rises to the plateau 500 feet in 500 yards, and is bordered by a permanent spring of good volume running from 5250 feet. For foot traffic an initially steeper track leaves the Highway near mile-post 41 reducing the distance to the base cabin to 400 yards.

During 1948 several parties of skiers used the new approach to Mt. Bogong from Omeo Highway with its sheltered rise to Cleve Cole Hut of 3000 feet in ten miles, pioneered by Tom Mitchell, as easier and safer than the strenuous and hazardous climb of 5000 feet in five miles from Tawonga to the summit, followed by a two miles' exposed crossing of the main ridge to the hut. A road at present being constructed by Messrs. Dunstan & Sons to recover timber from their forest concession, rising on the exposed face of Mt. Wills from 4400 feet on the Omeo Highway at Razorback to 5200 feet on the saddle of Bogong's main ridge, will be practically snow-free during early and late winter, and will further reduce the climb into the Cole Hut to 600 feet in six miles. As snow will at these times be correspondingly light on Mt. Wills, the attention of Tallangatta members will also be directed towards the higher slopes of Mt. Bogong.

After acquiring a four-roomed weather-board cottage standing alongside the Omeo Highway, the Tallangatta Club secured permission from the Forest Commission to occupy a pre-selected building site at the foot of a steep slope looking easterly on to Mt. Kosciusko and New South Wales Main Range, about 400 yards from, and 600 feet higher than the Highway. This was considered the most convenient point from



which novices and day-skiers could operate. Owing to the rocky, timber-strewn, winding nature of the track and its steep gradient beyond the vehicular section, the difficulties of transporting the club cottage, even in sections, appeared insuperable, and the same considerations excluded the possibility of erecting a log cabin. To make maximum use of timber on the site, it was, in the alternative, decided to put a sawn and split-timber frame, walled with split slabs standing vertically, over round-timber foundations, measuring over-all 30 feet by 15 feet, divided into three rooms. During Easter week-end the first working party commenced opening up 200 yards of track to winch materials, and clearing the tree-covered site, and encountering its first season's snow in a twenty-four hours' continuous fall. Track building was carried out to such good purpose that timber-miller Jack Dunstan found amount of exploratory work was undertaken.

he was able to tractor-haul all round, split and sawn timber into handy positions. Steady progress with building operations continued despite intermittent snowfalls during the following few week-ends, until at the end of May an exceptionally heavy fall presaged suspension of further out-of-doors activity. Nevertheless it was found possible to make a final delivery of materials right to the cabin door by four-wheel driven truck as late as mid-June. In a desperate effort to proof the building against winter's weather, external work continued until after dark, with the carpenters knocking odds and ends into tables, stools and furnishings beyond mid-night. Finally, on 3rd July, three days after the roof had been secured, and the external walls completed, permanent snow to a depth of 15 inches settled for the remainder of the winter and halted further operations.

In response to earlier representations, advice had just been received from the Country Roads Board that no special efforts would be made to keep the Omeo Highway, main connecting link between Gippsland and North-Eastern Victoria, open to traffic throughout the winter, a practice discontinued during the war years. Sustained and concentrated efforts of Vern Corr, of the Ski Federation, and Tom Mitchell over the next few days secured a reversal of this decision, and a heavy power-grader was brought into use in the region. This was particularly gratifying to Tallangatta members as not only was their access to Mt. Wills made so much easier, but the success of the operations also demonstrated to the

Board that roads above the snowline can be kept open by regular patrolling, and afforded its employees valuable experience for use on other alpine roads in various aspects of snow removal.

Journeying to Mt. Wills for the opening of the club's first snow season, continuous snow was encountered covering the roadway on the sheltered side beyond Rocky Knob near mile-post 46, four miles from the club cabin. Skid chains were made ready to grip the heavily-frosted surface by the added weight of passengers travelling on the rear bumpers. With outside assistance through the deeper drifts, steady headway was maintained to the point where the road crosses to the eastern fall on the saddle at the 43rd mile-post. The car was halted in 10 inches of snow. Skis, etc., were quickly unloaded and donned in the rush to take the first "fall." President Alex Turbull made the first official run, but steadfastly declined to annexe the more dubious honour. On a fine powder surface, the party climbed to the club cabin, the roof of which sparkled resplendently with its 10 inch crystalline carpet. Ground cover of 15 inches was recorded in the vicinity. On this and later visits an adjacent slope provided useful practice.

In preparation for the first round of the Victorian Federation Inter-teams' Championship, in which Tallangatta was drawn to meet Wangaratta, skiers with previous experience or of marked aptitude were constantly under review and encouraged to use the steeper and longer slopes. Within the time limitations of day trips, and despite shallow snow at lower levels, a certain

