

1950 on the Victorian Snowfields

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WHATEVER else of major interest has made the year 1950 stand out in the rapidly-growing corridor of the ski-ing years in this State, the lightness of the snowfall and the shortness of the season will probably be the item which will be brought to mind in the years to come. Skiers being what they are, no matter what momentous event has occurred in any articular year, it is the depth of the snow blanket and its effect on one's ski-ing activities that finally labels the year. Thus, according to one's years or good fortune in having developed the ski-ing mania while very young, one refers to '27 as the heaviest year ever, or '43 as being quite a good year, and '46 and '47 as very heavy years.

1950 will long stand out as the lightest year on record, even in the memories of those who may aspire to be among the founders of winter sport in Victoria. The snow year opened late and finished early without much snow falling in between. At Hotham where on King's Birthday week-end,

cars were parked in profusion on the summit of the mountain, the Drag was unskiable for most of the season and the Alpine Highway was open to motor traffic about October 8th—an event usually occurring in early December.

Among the items in 1950 worthy of comment, and of certain speculative interest, is the question of access to Mount Hotham. This problem suddenly assumed large proportions when it was seen at the beginning of the season that even the rather antiquated—in this age of mechanisation—method of transport to the snowline usually available was in grave danger of becoming non-existent. No one will deny that our worthy four-footed friend, the horse, has his uses and is, in certain places, highly and rightly prized for his fleetness of foot or his value as a pleasant means of seeing the country. But his usefulness as a sole means of access to Mount Hotham is at least open to doubt, particularly as most of the who place them-

selves on his back do so once or twice only per year, and that is on this very trip. Even those who were more familiar with the right side of the animal to face when mounting were not in the habit of making a steep 4000-foot ascent. Consequently, the physical discomfort caused by that mode of transport as well as by the inclement weather at times was in no small degree responsible for many otherwise ardent tyros being discouraged from visiting the State's premier winter resort.

Ways and means were studied, but the difficulties seemed insuperable. So, suddenly, in this age of progress, Hotham, up till then on a steady wave of post-war progress, slipped back a whole decade and access to it became, for the majority, the long, arduous and risky trek from St. Bernard. But the fates were kind and no real blizzards blew and the big lumbering blade of the front of the Country Roads' Board Matador truck pushed its way up and down the road right up to the Roads' Board camp for the whole season. Some of us even drove our own vehicles up and left them there for two weeks. So far so good. But what might have happened if we'd had the snow of '47, and the blizzards, and the plough hadn't got closer than four miles below St. Bernard? There might have been a number of very weary people arriving at Hotham, that is, supposing they had arrived at all.

Meanwhile, in the Kiewa area the American "Snocat" arrives, a vehicle which could mean for Hotham the dawn of a new era and the end of nineteenth century transport.

The year saw a continued steady growth of interest in ski-ing throughout the whole of the State, which evinced itself in a surge of publicity both in the press, on the air, and even in Parliament. In the latter sphere, one of our most active and well-informed skiers became one of our leading citizens when T. W. Mitchell was appointed Attorney General on the formation of the Country Party Government.

The pulses of all skiers quickened at the news that the State Electricity Commission had acquired two new Tucker Snocats for winter communication service on the Kiewa Hydro-Electric Scheme. These vehicles have been developed over a great number of years in the United States and have proved admirably suited to over-snow progress, mainly through an ingenious driving system over a

sliding pontoon at the rear end and steering skis at the front end. Their ability to traverse steep slopes and to climb with complete ease, combined with their versatility in all types of snow make them the answer to practically all our snow transport problems. But dollar shortage stands in the way at the moment, and we can only dream of the day when we will be able to save a couple of days at each end of our snow holiday. Of course, when that day comes we may even have advanced into the helicopter age.

Almost before most of us were aware of it, a new ski village has grown up at Falls Creek. This village is in the centre of the area where millions of pounds are being spent to increase the State's electricity supply, and where good access roads are essential. Country clubs within a radius of one hundred miles are flocking to this area and even a Sydney University Club has applied for a building site.

The slopes are not as long and as steep or varied as Hotham, but these factors are offset to a great extent by its ease of access to and from many areas. Already State Championships have been held at this centre and with the visit this year of the New Zealand team interest will be once more focussed there. The suggestion made recently that the future village area might be sited on McKay Creek near No. 1 power station is of considerable interest.

Memories of pre-war days were revived by the return to Victoria of Franz Skardaras to take charge of the ski school at Mt. Buffalo along with New Zealander, K. W. Kear, and Victorian, Bill Marriott. It takes one's mind back to what might be termed the beginning of serious ski-ing in Victoria. Those who enjoyed the benefit of Franz's tuition and later that of Toni Walch and Richard Werle will agree that this regular organised teaching transformed our conglomeration of various styles into a fairly homogenous, sound and, to say the least of it, vastly improved style.

Unfortunately, with our lean snow year, Buffalo was not the best place for Franz to renew his acquaintance with our snows. Let us hope that he will return from his native land to enjoy much better snow in future years. Rumours have it that Toni is anxious to return also to renew his friendship with many Victorian skiers who deem their days on the snow with him as some of

the most enjoyable of their ski-ing career. He was last reported in the Laurentians in charge of a ski school.

The ski schools at our four ski centres—Buller, Hotham, Buffalo and Falls Creek—continue to attract those anxious to lay the foundation of their ski-ing career as well as those who are keen to build up and improve upon what they have already. As yet there is no talk of an Australian style as a counter to the Swiss, French or Austrian styles. The Swiss style seems to have retired somewhat, leaving the field more open for the long established Austrians to ward off the sallies of their highly organised and subsidised rival. The claims made by some that evidence of the superiority of the French style is to be seen in their convincing placings in world championships is scarcely borne out, as the champion, Couttet, would probably have been outstanding in whatever part of the European Alps he happened to have been born and whatever style he had acquired in his early teens. A fair sprinkling of the champions of all the leading ski-ing countries of Europe seem to be among the leading competitors — with the Austrian women much more to the fore than most others.

We in Australia would do well to use our initiative and develop our own style—not just to assert our national spirit but because our snow is generally so vastly different to that of Europe that it often requires a different technique.

The amazing growth evident at Buller over the last two years continue unabated with the completion of the Omega, Walking Club, Ullr, Harding, Moose, Women's, Monsanto, University, Yurrella, Dandenong, Morgan, Pattern, Buller and Grey Rocks Club lodges. These, together with the buildings completed before last season, namely, the Ivor Whittaker Lodge and its surrounding cabins, the Chamois, Postal Institute, C.S.I.R.O., Youth Hostels' Association and Junior Ski Club, brought the total accommodation on the mountain to a figure far in excess of any of our other snowfields. This year the rush has slowed down a trifle, the only buildings to commence so far being the B.M.W. Club, which miraculously sprang up over night, and the Alpine Club, whose building is being erected on what is probably the steepest building site in the Alps, namely 25 degrees.

However, the buildings mentioned above have formed the nucleus of quite a substantial village, which, together with the promised road improvement and water reticulation, should make a well-organised centre. Another benefit promised, a cabaret and general store, is viewed with rather mixed feelings, many skiers believing that the unorganised and spontaneous atmosphere engendered in most ski lodges is vastly preferable to the organised and synthetic commercial variety.

The future growth of the mountain will be watched with interest. The standard of the buildings erected so far has been fairly high, although one or two clubs, in their desperate eagerness to get the building up at any cost, have rather fallen from grace. The virtue of simplicity and proper regard for the relationship of window opening to wall space has not made itself apparent to a number of otherwise well meaning people, whilst in one rather conspicuous position a club has fallen into that old trap of trying to improve on nature by ripping colour from its context and adorning their building with a particularly vivid scarlet. Unless a building in its structural form has the perfection of the structures of Ancient Greece, it is better, in the writer's opinion, to eschew bright colours and to let the beauties of nature provide the picture.

Road access and parking problems provided a number of incidents during the season, but all are merely teething troubles which are to be expected in the growth of any boom settlement. The course of a year or two should see them ironed out.

The Buller Committee of Management continues on its successful way, keeping a paternal eye on the activities of the area without using too heavy a hand in its control. Having been taken as a model for the Alpine Report it can be considered to be proceeding happily along the right lines.

Now that accommodation problems are being solved for many skiers their next interest lies in getting to the top of the neighbouring slopes in the minimum of time in order to descend those slopes more often. Overseas visitors return wondering if they will ever be able to face again a slope unadorned with lengths of rope, pulleys and engines, not forgetting the gent selling the tickets.

We are far behind overseas countries and our neighbours, New Zealand, in this matter

of ski tows. Those that we have are either unreliable or small in scale. But even so, their success is undoubted. The tow at Buller despite its comparatively short length has a queue of forty waiting to use it week-end after week-end in the peak of the season. The only other one in the State, at Mt. Buffalo, although rather troubled by the lightness of the snow this year, is a very popular institution. Perhaps the lack of effort in this direction has been due to the preoccupation with building.

However, a strong effort is at present being made to organise a really long tow at Hotham, based on the types which have been successful in New Zealand. The ultimate aim there would be a tow on both sides of Swindler's Creek with perhaps another one in the Australia Drift area. These would open up vast areas of wonderful slopes which are now only occasionally used by the more energetic. Efforts are also being made to erect a tow in the Falls Creek area. Buller could well do with a longer one on the higher slopes. The installation of tows on all our slopes is long overdue. The standard of ski-ing in this State is going to improve by leaps and bounds once we do have a few tows of worthwhile length, as they increase downhill ski-ing many times and still leave large areas of untracked snow for the confirmed soft-snow skier.

The visit of Arnold Lunn to this country was a stimulus and a gratification of a long-felt desire to meet this outstanding figure in the ski-ing world to those who for years had derived considerable pleasure and benefit from his witty and forceful writings. A full report of the memorable occasions on which Victorian skiers met this distinguished visitor appears elsewhere in this book.

Another outstanding event of the Victorian ski-ing year was the publication of the State Development Committee's Report on Alpine Areas, setting out a comprehensive policy for the future development of all our snow centres. A commentary on this Report is given on other pages by Vernon Corr.

The visit of the Bogong Club team to New Zealand was a happy inspiration. It will probably do more than many inter-dominion visits to bring our two countries closer to-

gether. The lessening of the time taken to cross the Tasman, and, unless Australians do something about it, the better ski-tow facilities will be among the causes of many of our skiers deserting their native shore for a land where powder snow, so it is reliably reported, can be found with monotonous regularity.

On the equipment side, our local manufacturers are continuing to forge ahead, albeit slowly, as the competition from the imported article is always severe, Australians being notoriously prone to look upon the imported article as being superior to the local, often due to the mistaken idea that what comes 10,000 miles must be good, or at least better than the local product. In that belief they have sometimes been justified. However, if a few more would take a risk and sample local ware we might be in a better position with regard to supply.

Bindings, ski boots, skis, waxes, clothes, etc., made locally and of good quality can all be purchased now of a standard high enough to satisfy the most critical.

However, it seems to take a long while for proven new ideas from abroad to be turned out by our own suppliers. Maybe they act on the principle that a thing is not established until it has been tried out for three years or so. Our importers, however, are generally on the beam and for a country with a relatively small ski-ing population we don't do so badly. Of course, we pay dearly for our pleasures—but, who doesn't these days?

One feature of overseas snowfields which has been slow in appearing in this country is the cutting of tracks in order to develop runs through the more thickly timbered country. In parts of the United States where the snow country is at a much lower altitude, there are resorts where all the runs are through country of this nature, and trail running is the only kind of ski-ing known. Even in Switzerland, the wooded areas are by no means disregarded and trail running is extensive. In fact, it is almost a separate branch of the sport, entailing as it does a type of ski-ing on a track where there is no stopping or going back and where one needs a blind faith in the ability of the person ahead to keep going at all costs. Of



Road to Hotham.

P. G. Haddow.

course, sometimes the faith is misplaced and the consequences of suddenly rounding a corner to find the skier ahead could stop, in however unorthodox manner, are somewhat interesting.

Various areas at Buller, Hotham and Feathertop could be vastly improved by the judicious use of an axe. Indeed, unless the axe is used in a few parts these areas will soon be too overgrown to ski on, thanks to the rapid growth of scrub induced by some of our severe bush fires.

Interest in the Baw Baw area continues to increase. A number of clubs have been

formed to operate and build there. Its main appeal to skiers from Melbourne should be its relative closeness, but to listen to accounts of the time and energy taken to get there, it would appear that there is not much to choose between it and Buller. Also, the slopes and length and steepness of runs do not appear to compare with those of the other resorts. Still it is good to see the area progressing as it is close to a region which will be more densely populated in the future.

At the present moment, development waits upon the selection of the most suitable village site and the Government's consideration of the Alpine Report.