

The St. Bernard Area

By R. W. Rowed

A FEW years ago an old hand-lithographed poster in a shop window in Bright showed a number of inset views of places of local interest. One of the little pictures portrayed a homestead at St. Bernard on what is now known as the Old Hospice Site. A dog-leg fence ran up the hill behind, half-way up what is now the St. Bernard ski run.

Those were the days when prospectors for gold tramped out into the mountain wilderness, coming up from Harrierville with several months' supply of flour on their backs. They disappeared into the big wild hills out towards the Dargo High Plains, hills that form some of the wildest and most beautiful mountain country in Victoria.

There are stories, too, of the stage coaches going over the high parts of the Omeo road weighted down with heavy rocks to prevent their being blown over by the wind. There are those who will recall happy times at the old St. Bernard Hospice; and the names of Spargo and Barney Rush are often mentioned by an older generation of skiers. In those days you could earn a badge for running straight from the top of St. Bernard down to the road without falling over, with the added possibility of celebrating this event afterwards in the bar of the Hospice itself. Summer visitors often came to the Hospice and, as late autumn drew on, the host would look with eager anticipation to the state of the weather and as the first few flakes of snow began to fall could be heard to say, "Aha—the snowmen will soon be here."

Well, the snowmen and women are still there, but, alas, the Hospice is gone, fallen victim to the 1939 bushfires. All that remain are a few cement foundations and the melancholy spectacle of twisted and broken bottles. There is a tunnel into the hillside, too, where the folk at the Hospice took shelter from the flames. The site is still marked on many road maps and some confusion is caused to tourists who climb up the hill to the nearby Wangaratta Ski Club Lodge under the impression that it is the old place, and the hopeful cry is often heard, "Is this the St. Bernard Hospice—can we get a cup

of tea?" Incidentally, the "Wang" place is built over an old mine works now flooded. The mullock heap can be seen down the road as you approach the Dargo turn-off.

What has St. Bernard to offer for skiers, and what is its future as a ski-ing ground? It has modest possibilities to offer. Subsequent upon the road being kept snow ploughed, it will always be one of the main routes into Mt. Hotham ski village, despite the hazards that can arise at certain times. It is an interesting tour from the scenic point of view if the weather is reasonable. Wangaratta Club skis there at week-ends, and there is a steadily increasing quota of day visitors, especially on Sundays. There are cleared runs in the area. The main slope of St. Bernard is moderate, but more interesting diversions can be had by going over the cornice on the south side and making your way down the Dargo road, thence left down into the big timber in the valley far below. There is plenty of wood running, while there are good open slopes to the back of the mountain which last well into the spring.

Wangaratta has a langlauf course which takes in part of the Dargo road and then detours through the hills beyond. To the west of St. Bernard is a big mountain of 5582 feet, known as "The Twins," the gateway to the Barry Mountains, still tramped over by intrepid bush-walkers. The view from "The Twins" is one of the really superb mountain panoramas on its day. There are ski-ing slopes further up the road on "Rene's Lookout" and on the east side of Mt. Blowhard. This latter area is an important one. The snow here lasts well into the spring in a fair season and it is sometimes possible to get a vehicle as far as the C.R.B. Huts on top of C.R.B. Hill. A typically good run on Blowhard starts from the top snow pole at the north end, traverses east over the cornice and then south down a big gully with a flat floor into the Dargo. You can go down a long way here, and it is an awfully long way back. To those who do not know the area, names like Rene's Lookout and C.R.B. Hill will be meaningless, but a check up on S.C.V.'s map "Bogong High Plains and Adjacent Peaks" or Broadbent's Alpine Map will help to give the picture.

The key to the development of St. Bernard as a ski-ing area is accessibility by road and, in order to achieve this, a snow plough has been operating for the past few years. The

vehicle is not satisfactory, however, and breakdowns last year made the road inaccessible beyond the ten mile on many occasions. This gave parties going into Hotham something like nine and a half miles ski-ing instead of the six miles from St. Bernard. It is to be hoped that the C.R.B. will make available a better plough for their operator, Mr. Forester, to use this year. Until the certainty of a good road can be guaranteed, it would be inadvisable for private car owners to leave their cars parked at the top for any length of time. There is a telephone in the roadside hut at the top for emergency. Press reports on conditions on the mountain are often misleading and drivers should check with a reliable source of information (e.g., any Hotham ski club) before proceeding.

St. Bernard as a ski-ing ground has disadvantages. It is not to be compared with

Hotham, Buller or Falls Creek. You could scarcely hold a first-class downhill or slalom there. Conditions vary widely from year to year. The weather can be really foul on the tops and shelter facilities for visitors are very limited. The snow is not always of good quality, being at 5000 feet, and it becomes wetter much more quickly than at higher altitudes. To offset these disadvantages, the possibility of getting right up to fair ski-ing grounds by road will make it a boon to north-eastern Victorian skiers.

Which is St. Bernard? Well, as you come up the road from Harrierville you will notice a change as you near the top of the saddle. The big woollybutts give way to snowgums. When you get to the saddle where the signpost stands, St. Bernard is the hill immediately to the west. The big mountains further west are "The Twins" and the rocky outcrop across the valley to the east is Mt. Smythe.