

Last Words on our First Skiers

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The First Recorded Reference to Skiing in Australia

"Scores of young people are frequently engaged climbing the lofty summits with snow shoes and then sliding down with a volancy that would do credit to some of our railway trains."

—"Monaro Mercury," July 29, 1861.



Her Majesty's Mail, Kiandra, 1900

Photo. the late Charles Kerry.

THE 25th anniversary of this annual seems an admirable occasion for printing some hitherto unpublished evidence on the origin of ski-ing in Australia. It is a collection of old newspaper extracts discovered in 1932, 1933 and 1934 during an intensive search of books, papers and documents in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and the library of "The Sydney Morning Herald." Their contribution to ski-ing history is that they offer contemporary documentary proof of the long-held belief that ski-ing was a pastime of the Kiandra goldminers as long as as the winter of 1861, the second year of the Kiandra gold rush, with a strong probability that this was the first time ski had ever seen used in Australia.

A word about this library search. In the Ski Year Book for 1931, Mr. William Hughes (quoting, he afterwards explained, some old Kiandra identities) claimed that the first ski-ing Kiandra saw was "when one Bumpstone, a Swede, on a hastily-constructed pair of skis, ran from his home down the main street in 1857." The date of this episode was challenged by the Sydney historian, Mr. W. L. Havard, who pointed out in a letter to "The Sydney Morning Herald" of September 30, 1932, that Kiandra did not exist in 1857.

In an effort to track down the truth, Mr. Stewart Jamieson, at that time Associate Editor of the Year Book, sought the co-operation of Mr. Havard and Mr. Hughes in a systematic search for contemporary written evidence. Aware of the fact that the Kiandra gold rush started in October, 1859, and that no township existed on the site before that, they took as a starting point the winter of 1860, the first winter experienced by the Kiandra diggers. But after a very thorough of the files of "The Sydney Morning Herald" of that year, the Mitchell Library's files of Kiandra's first newspaper ("The Alpine Pioneer"), a number of other country newspapers published in 1860 and the N.S.W. Government Gazette of that year, not a single reference to ski-ing was brought to light. Only when the search was continued through the 1861 files did indisputable evidence of ski-ing appear.

Mr. Jamieson kept this evidence in his possession for twenty years in the hope that it could be included in a general history of Australian ski-ing, but the history not having appeared by 1952, he decided to hand over the records of the search, with his own notes and those of Mr. Havard, to the Editors of the Year Book for publication.

The first discovery was the one quoted in part at the top of this article. It was found in "The Sydney Morning Herald" of August 6, 1861, an item reprinted from "The Monaro Mercury," published in Cooma:—

"Kiandra is a rather dreary place in the winter, but yet the people are not without their amusements. The heaven-pointing snow-clad mountains afford them some pleasure. Scores of young people are frequently engaged climbing the lofty summits with snow shoes and then sliding down with a volancy that would do credit to some of our railway trains."

We need not worry about the "snow shoes." Ski were called snow shoes in Kiandra for the next fifty years. Mr. Jamieson supposes the word is a slight corruption of the corruption of the correct Scandinavian pronunciation of ski (she . . . shoe). At any rate, Scandinavians introduced ski-ing to America at the time of the Californian gold rush, and in California and Kiandra alike the word was always "shoe." Our Kiandra miners probably also had Canadian-type snow shoes in that winter of 1861, as the next extract suggests, but the shoes that slid with the speed of trains were something quite different. Exactly what they were like is now made clear:—

"No idea can be formed except from actual experience of the horrors of a winter in that part of the country. The roads are impassable except with snow shoes or the more novel mode of travelling on skates. The skates are constructed of two palings turned up at the front and about four feet long, with straps to put the feet in, and the traveller carries a long stick to balance himself and to assist him up hill. Down hill they can go as fast as a steamer, and on the level, with the aid of the pole, they can make good headway. Some of the buildings at the Four and Nine Mile have fallen in and others were only saved by great exertions. It was impossible to get the horse post in; the letters were carried by men on snow shoes and the papers were left behind."

—"Braidwood Observer," requoted by the "S.M.H.," August 12, 1861.

Here we have both snow shoes and ski in use at the same time, the ski being called snow skates. But whereas snow shoes were

employed for the purely utilitarian purpose of moving men over deep snow, the "skates" (or Lapland shoes as they are called in the next extract) were primarily worn for fun:—

"Some of our young men do not mope over the fire now as they did at the beginning of winter, but have made themselves Lapland Shoes, and taking a long stick in each hand, move about. On the worst of days they amuse themselves with sliding, and some have come down a hill in right grand style. The Commissioner was over seeing them the other evening and laughed heartily at some of them when they got a good capsized."

"The Yass Courier," August 10, 1861.

These were the only, and certainly the earliest, references to ski-ing in Australia found by Mr. Jamieson and his research team, showing conclusively that ski-ing was a pastime with the young Kiandra miners in the winter of 1861. Maybe it was providential they discovered such a harmless and invigorating diversion. The shadier temptations of life in a shanty town, listed in contemporary accounts as drinking, dancing, gambling, fighting, cursing, blaspheming and thieving, must have been formidable. Wrote the "Herald's" horrified correspondent: "I counted no less than nineteen grog shanties, surrounding which were a number of the most dissipated characters I ever looked upon."

Before the search was over, Messrs. Jamieson, Havard and Hughes tried hard to find some trace of ski-ing in 1860 without success. If any of the diggers thought of making ski out of fence palings in that first Kiandra winter it was evidently not recorded. Mr. Jamieson reports that the Mitchell Library's 1860 files of the "Alpine Pioneer and Kiandra Advertiser" (Kiandra's first newspaper) contain no reference to ski-ing, snowshoeing, or anything like it. Nor do we get any help from the voluminous accounts of Kiandra doings published in the "S.M.H." that year. The other country newspapers of 1860 examined by Mr. Jamieson and his colleagues (mainly the "Adelong Mining Journal," the "Goulburn Herald" and the "Yass Courier") record such related matters as the depth of snow and thickness of ice, the extreme cold, the demolition of fences for firewood, the impassability of the roads, the use made of sledges, the exploits of Chinese porters carrying immense loads of food and building materials on their backs . . . and this



When Flowing Beards were all the Go.

Photo. the late Charles Kerry

item, dated July 20: "On Monday it was truly astonishing to find that what we all dreaded was received with almost pleasure; everyone seemed to enjoy the novelty of the scene and to enter with zest into a universal snowballing through the diggings." But not a word about ski-ing, an omission which prompted Mr. Harvard to ask facetiously, "Were there any palings yet unburnt of which to make ski in that year?"

As far as recorded history is concerned we can be reasonably sure there was no ski-ing

in Kiandra in 1860 or before, and Mr. Harvard's final conclusion, conveyed in a report which Mr. Jamieson has preserved, may well be the last word on the Kiandra mystery: "To me the evidence detailed indicates that snow skates, probably called snow shoes at the time but of the nature of ski, were introduced (by whom and how?) during the winter of 1861, and that at first they served as a means of relieving the monotony of winter by providing a novel means to amusement."