



Mt. Hotham — Past, Present and Future

SET 6100 ft. up in the Australian Alps in the North-Eastern part of Victoria, Mt. Hotham has long been just as high in the estimation of discerning skiers from all parts of the Commonwealth, and beyond. In a little more than a decade, there have been marked improvements both in the accommodation available and the surrounding terrain generally. Much is on record of what has been done in that period to popularise the sport. But research into the very early days reveals little of an authentic kind.

However, there is one interesting and little-known fact. Between Mt. Hotham and Melbourne's Botanical Gardens—one of the finest in the world—there is a link. This association is due to the outstanding botanical and geographical work of Baron Sir Ferdinand Mueller, K.C.M.G. He was the creator and, for many years, the Director of the Botanical Gardens. Of perhaps greater interest to skiers, however, is the fact that, in the absence of more authoritative information about the period between 1824-1854, he must be regarded as the first real explorer of the Victorian Alps, including Mt. Hotham. There is a record of a trip he made, leaving Melbourne on November 1, 1854. He went to Gippsland, in Eastern Victoria, and after ascending Mt. Wellington, travelled up the Mitchell and Dargo Rivers right into the heart of the Australian Alps. Unfortunately, he left behind little personal account of his journey. Still, it is clear that he made the

first scientific expedition into the area, of which Mt. Hotham has since become such a prominent feature in the ski-ing world.

In passing, it might be stated that ski-ing began in Victoria in the 'seventies on the goldfields, if that term can be applied to the steep alpine slopes which were being scarred by the miners of Omeo, Dargo and Harrietteville. The two light ski sticks, now universal, had not been thought of. Propulsion, stopping, braking and turning were achieved by means of a long stalwart pole, which was also carried in Blondin-like manner to preserve balance.

Moving on to more recent times, the development of Mt. Hotham is linked with the name of Bill Spargo, known to all who have visited that area over the years. He was employed by the Country Roads Board of Victoria as a Patrolman. For his own, and the accommodation of other Patrolmen, the Board built a cottage on Mt. Hotham in 1925. Realising the winter snow sports possibilities of the region, Bill sought and obtained the Board's permission to accommodate visitors on a commercial basis. Thus, Mt. Hotham was opened, and many of Victoria's leading skiers to-day were amongst Bill's earlier guests.

He continued there until 1933. It was then that the Board requested the Victorian Railways Department to take over the management and operation of "Hotham Heights" with the idea of quickening the development

of snow sports. The Railways Department had been conducting "The Chalet," Mt. Buffalo National Park, and in view of the experience gained there, it readily extended its guest-house operations to "Hotham Heights."

A Manager was installed, and extensions and improvements were made by the Department. These included extra sleeping accommodation, a hot and cold water service, hot showers, drying room and wireless facilities. In all these moves, the Railways Department closely co-operated with the various ski clubs in Victoria by conferring with them and taking advantage of the experience which their members had gained over the years. Included amongst the outdoor improvements—carried out by the Public Works Department of Victoria—was the work of clearing the Bon Accord Track, a much shorter route (11 miles) from Harrierville than via Mt. St. Bernard (19 miles), also much easier and less exposed, should adverse weather conditions be encountered.

In 1936, the Railways Department reached a decision that has had far-reaching effects on ski-ing in Victoria: action was taken to seek from overseas the services of a Continental ski-ing instructor, primarily for service at Mt. Buffalo National Park, but, as practicable, for Mt. Hotham, too. As a result, Franz Skardarasy was engaged. His credentials were of the highest kind. He had passed with honours through the famous Hannes Schneider School of Ski-ing Instruction at Anton am Arlberg, Austria.

June, 1936, saw the arrival in Victoria of Skardarasy in a special six months' engagement and Victorian ski-ing history was made when, in June of that year, he conducted an Instructional School at Mt. Hotham, revealing all the grace and skill of the Arlberg system for the first time in this State. A party of 31, including representatives of the various Ski Clubs in Victoria, took part in the School, which was an outstanding success. Amongst the well-known skiers who attended were Messrs. J. W. Begg, H. Brockhoff, K. Gibson, G. Rush and the late N. H. Straus.

There was widespread pleasure when, in the following year, the Railways Department re-engaged Skardarasy. Incidentally, Skardarasy, while in Victoria wrote a special booklet, entitled "Ski-ing," and it enjoyed a wide sale, being especially useful to novice skiers. Diagrams, accompanied by concise descriptions of each stage of ski-ing from

merely standing on the level to the more advanced movements, portrayed the fundamentals of the Arlberg system in easily understood fashion.

Although Skardarasy did not return to Victoria again, the Railways Department maintained the continuity of the Arlberg system of instruction by engaging two other Continental ski-ing instructors: Leopold Feidler and Anton Walch—both, like Skardarasy, having graduated with honours through the Hannes Schneider School. Feidler went to Mt. Buffalo National Park, and Walch to Mt. Hotham. This was the first occasion on which such expert tuition had been available at Mt. Hotham. Tony Walch was immensely popular, and he was re-engaged during the 1939 season. In the two years he was Instructor, nearly 500 people enrolled in the classes at Mt. Hotham, practically all of them obtaining certificates of varying proficiency.

At this stage, it is opportune to mention the visit to Mt. Hotham in 1937 of a team of four leading skiers from the United States of America, who were visiting Australia at the invitation of the A.N.S.F. It included R. H. Durrance, one of the greatest skiers in the world. Earlier in 1937, he had been captain of the U.S. team at the Ski Olympiad held at Garmish-Partenkirchen, Germany, coming tenth in the Olympic combined downhill and slalom races. He also ran twelfth in the combined events at the great international ski meeting at Innsbruck, Austria. Therefore, what Durrance had to say about Mt. Hotham will be of interest. Before leaving Victoria, he made these flattering comments: "Our stay at Mt. Hotham was worth every bit of the climb up. The steep gullies around 'Hotham Heights,' with their scattered gums, made for marvellous ski-ing. Mt. Hotham has probably the best slalom slopes we have seen anywhere, with natural hazards on the terrain itself—just begging for slalom poles to be put on them. We were sorry to leave Mt. Hotham for we felt that there the inherent joys of ski-ing for its true pleasure were freely appreciated."

An innovation by the Railways Department in 1936 was the creation of the position of Snowline Representative, at Harrierville. Eric Stewart was selected to fill this post. He was appointed primarily to facilitate visitors' transport arrangements, and to act as guide, when required, for visitors to Mt. Hotham, also to Mts. Feathertop and St. Bernard. On

many occasions he demonstrated his great value, particularly in piloting comparative novices up into the higher altitudes where the the greater opportunities for ski-ing won many more enthusiasts for the sport.

Nineteen-hundred-and-thirty-nine was an eventful year for Mt. Hotham. On January 13, Victoria was swept by the worst bush fires in history, during which "Hotham Heights" was completely destroyed.

Little time was lost in preparing plans for a new modernly-appointed guest-house on a site a few yards away from the original site. By April, 1939, construction was well advanced. However, it was a dramatic race against time . . . whether the new "Hotham Heights" would be ready for the King's Birthday Holiday week-end on June 6. The work, which was undertaken by the Railways Department, ranked as one of the biggest of its kind yet attempted in such a remote area of Victoria and at such an altitude. About 300 tons of material for building and furnishing purposes had to be transported over the precipitous Alpine Highway from Bright—virtually a race before the heavy snow drifts made road traffic impassable. The material ranged from timbers, 25 ft. long, steel, concrete and boilers to such fragile equipment as glass, crockery and electrical equipment.

Progress on the work aroused keen interest throughout the ski-ing clubs of the

Commonwealth. It was completed just before June 6, the last load of material from Bright reaching the house the day before snow drifts forced the closure of the road to heavy vehicular traffic. The new building provided (as it does to-day) accommodation for 30 guests, and included a spacious lounge-dining room, bedrooms, drying room, bathrooms, a sun deck, central heating throughout, hot and cold water service, electric light and other amenities.

At the same time, the Bon Accord Hut, which had been destroyed in the bush fires, we re-built. In addition, the Bon Accord Track was further improved. As "The Hospice" at Mt. St. Bernard had also been burnt to the ground, almost the whole of the winter traffic to Mt. Hotham was diverted via the Bon Accord Track. An increased supply of horses was provided by the Department; as many as 28 guests, with luggage, were transported at one time.

When "Hotham Heights" was re-built in 1939, it was regarded by the Railways Department as the nucleus of a larger structure, and provision was therefore made for future extensions, the ultimate aim being to provide for a maximum of 70 guests. However, the completion of this work has been indefinitely deferred because of restrictions on such projects and, further, owing to the acute manpower shortage.

I Discover Hotham Heights

W. Harris

Mr. Harris was Chief Instructor at the Hotel Kosciusko, and is now Manager of the Chalet at Mt. Hotham, Victoria.—Ed.

ACTUALLY, when I had my first glimpse of the ski-ing grounds at Hotham I was amazed to find the slopes here steeper than most about the Chalet at Kosciusko. A little further on Mt. Feathertop came into view, a truly magnificent mountain rising up out of the Diamantina Gorge as if to challenge anyone who dared to climb or schuss its eastern face. This is the only real mountain I have seen, standing alone and of unique beauty. It seems unfair that such a fine fellow should have such a flimsy name!

My next surprise was the Chalet. As we

turned the bend there it was, not exactly a picturesque building, but once we were inside it was another story for beautiful full-view plate glass windows gave magnificent panoramas over the ski runs and the surrounding profusion of peaks and gorges.

The ski runs right from the front door—and there are many—all have variations which prove exciting to even the most seasoned veterans. Runs, such as the well-known Varsity Drag, drop off suddenly over 1000 feet into deep, sheltered valleys. Actually the Varsity Drag is 1200 vertical feet

We Build a Ski Lodge at Hotham

P. Holdsworth

"OUR own ski lodge at Hotham!" For years we have dreamed of it, saved for it, worked for it, and now it is a reality. *That* had been a beautiful stone building, two stories high, a real mountain chalet. We visualised it on our site, its back to the road, facing up Swindler's Creek, a noble building on a noble site!

We still have the noble site, of course, its plentiful water supply, a good healthy creek, running well both summer and winter. But the noble building—no. When we submitted our lovely plans to the builder, and received his staggering estimates, we were appalled! So much money! Next, he told us that we couldn't build it because of shortage of labour, shortage of materials; so, realising that the country's housing need was greater than ours, we sorrowfully laid our lovely plans away.

The we thought of a wooden building. But that was even worse. In a city where two-thirds of the population wanted to build homes, where would we get a builder, timber, and all the building necessities that are in such pitifully short supply? No, that also was out of the question.

Then, just when we thought we'd have to wait till things got better, some one had a brilliant idea. What about a prefabricated building? Of course, the very idea! One member said he knew a man who'd bought one, and he might let us have it—and so, our little lodge was born!

On Anzac Day, 1947, we started a working bee. In two days the lodge under expert guidance was dismantled in sections, packed on to two trailers, and taken to Hotham. The building is a galvanised-iron, cement-

sheet roofed, and is 60 ft. long and 18 ft. wide, so you can imagine the job it was. After two days' harrowing journey (Oh, that Cobungra Hill!) we arrived at the site.

Here we met a major problem! Instead of a fall of three, it was eight feet in the width of the building. Amateur surveyors (that's us!) had underestimated the fall of the land, and we had not sufficiently long stumps on which to set the building!

But help was at hand. A bulldozer had been working in the district, and, having finished its job, was returning home. Prayers and pleas from our irresistible secretary, and the driver was prevailed upon to give us one morning before returning to Bright. In that time our site was levelled, the work of five men for two weeks being done in a few hours. Labour was procured at Bright, and work begun. Stumps were set in, the floor laid, the walls erected, the roof put on, and the whole building completed. We boarded the workers at the Chalet, and although it was hard work, all enjoyed it. The first snow was later than usual, giving us time to finish, so we felt that Providence smiled on our venture, and that it augured well for the Edelweiss Ski Club's ski lodge at Hotham.

In town, we had a buying orgy. Eight army beds, mattresses, four blankets to each bed, pillows, bed-side lockers, folding chairs and tables, sink stove, bath and heater and stores. The stores list was drawn up in masterly manner, proved by the fact that not once did we run out of anything. We catered for eight people, for approximately eight weeks, and I may add that eggs and bacon were on the menu every day during occu-

pancy! We also acquired, from relatives and sympathisers, odd chairs, even two polished coffee tables, all helping to make our cabin the pleasant, comfortable place we intended it to be. On King's Birthday week-end, a working party went up, via Omeo. On this trip all agreed, most emphatically, that, when the Omeo road is kept open during the season ski-ing will go ahead by leaps and bounds. By eliminating the need to stay overnight at Harrietville, and the oft-dreaded horse ride up the mount, the fatigue of the trip is eliminated. The car journey from Melbourne took us exactly fourteen hours. We bedded the car at Whisky Flat, and skied the rest of the way to the hut. An easy and very pleasant trip.

That week-end we checked and stacked the stores, laid the water on to the sink and bath, dragged the bags of coke from the road, stacked the sheets of masonite, and sorted the crockery. The howling wind and driving snow made conditions very trying for the outside workers and the inside ones were kept busy packing and plugging the holes in the walls with wet paper. We realised, on that first trip that we had a lot of work to do.

The first club holiday was in late July, four members being in residence. They reported bad weather, but fairly good snow conditions. The lodge was proclaimed quite snug, though lacking in many necessities.

The next party was of twelve University students, who were there for the racing. This time many inconveniences were encountered. The roof was beginning to leak, and in some places the snow had blown through the cracks in the floor. The bad weather and the number of the party made the lack of drying room very evident. But in spite of all this,*the whole party voted the trip a good one.

In September five members went up for their annual holiday. They found twelve feet of snow on the roof which caused some of the cement roofing sheets to crack, and made quite a lot of leaks to repair! The weather was again blowy, but, with a fair share of sunny days, they managed to have quite a lot of ski-ing. In moments when they weren't ski-ing, cooking their meals, fiddling with the wireless, playing chess, they lined the living room with caneite, restored the water supply, and repaired the roof.

Then, in November, we received stunning news. During a bad storm the wind blew



The Edelweiss Lodge

half of twelve sheets of the roofing away, and water was pouring into the hut. Unfortunately no one was available to go up, and our feelings can be imagined better than described! But we are very fortunate to have as neighbours the Alpine Club at the Alpine lodge, and we are very grateful for their prompt action in moving the contents of our lodge to positions of safety, and thereby preventing serious damage.

On December 27th, another party went up, taking two jacks, sheets of iron, tools, spades, etc., and they stayed till January 1st, 1948. They found the lodge in a terrible mess! Dust thick over everything, and flies—blowflies—myriads of blowflies! Even the blankets were flyblown, and had to be brought down to Melbourne to be laundered. The carpets were sodden, and the floor was very damp. But willing workers and good organisation did wonders. The carpets were dried out and the blankets aired in the glorious summer sunshine. The water system was again repaired, sheets replaced in the roof, the building was jacked up where the weight of snow had caused it to subside, and it was set on the start of a stone wall that will eventually surround the building.

We have now had one winter and summer to test our lodge. It was erected in a hurry to beat the snow and the weather has shown us many weaknesses, which we have been correcting. We now feel that for the coming winter we will have a snug, comfortable and spacious lodge for our holidays. While there is still plenty of work to be done, our drying room to be completed, our cooking stove to be set in, and the bedrooms to be lined, it is habitable, and it is **our own**. We do not now depend on the chance draw of a name from a hat to tell us when we may go, and with whom we may go. We can go when we please, in the winter for the thrills of ski-ing, or in summer for those temperate sunny days to be found in the Australian Alps.

every aspect. N.E.D.S.A. is growing rapidly as present clubs expand and new clubs affiliate. Competition is keen, but the spirit of co-operation is also well developed. The 1947 meeting has established a high level of good fellowship, enthusiasm and ski-ing ability.

This year's meeting suffered from two disadvantages, (a) restriction of time, and (b) restriction of space for courses. It is obvious that future meetings should be held earlier in the season or at a different spot to facilitate a better Downhill course and if possible to include a Jump or Langlauf. The meeting should also spread over two days. One day for Novice and Intermediate events as well as the Open Langlauf or Jump. The second day could then be devoted to the Open Slalom and Downhill. Meetings of longer duration than two days are impracticable as the majority of district skiers have only the week-ends available. In any case accommodation on any accessible field is still not sufficient to cater for competitors from six or

more clubs. It will be seen also that the sport can gain much from an interested public. In this respect N.E.D.S.A. is unique in being able to take non-skiers to see its annual ski championships.

Results:

Open Slalom: B. Murphy, Wangaratta, 100; B. Osborne, Wangaratta, 99.6; T. Mulharvey, Bright, 87.8; D. Watson, Albury, 83.3; T. Dunlop, Beechworth, 76.66; B. Walpole, Myrtleford, 54.3.

Open Downhill: D. Walpole, Myrtleford, 100; A. Connor, Albury, 97.6; B. Osborne, Wangaratta, 92.2; B. Murphy, Wangaratta, 88.3; T. Mulharvey, Bright, 88.3; B. Walpole, Myrtleford, 76.1.

Intermediate Downhill: L. Murphy, Wangaratta, 100; L. Blake, Beechworth, 75.6; J. Saunders, Bright, 72.4; F. Griffiths, Albury, 70.8; D. Briggs, Myrtleford, 66.8; J. Edwards, Albury, 65.4.

Aggregate: Wangaratta, 542.35; Albury, 414.60; Myrtleford, 385.13; Bright, 384.2; Beechworth, 327.3.