

REVIEW

of the year in Victoria



By JOHN NICHOLLS

IN the past year there has again been great progress in Victorian ski-ing, mainly concerning access and accommodation in the mountains. Undoubtedly our greatest step was the snow-plowing of the Mt. Buller Road by co-operative effort between the Country Roads Board, an instrument of the Government, and skiers themselves.

In the previous year the Federation of Victorian Ski Clubs had attempted to plow the Buller road in winter through the co-operative venture of most of its Buller clubs and the commercial interests on the mountain. This attempt was not very successful, but at least it was an attempt and it did show that, mean and helpless as skiers so often seem to be, they can be rallied into constructive efforts to help themselves. The Country Roads Board, one of Victoria's best Government instrumentalities, was not slow to appreciate this venture. They very graciously offered to snow plow the Buller Road during 1954 season, provided skiers put up some of the money required, albeit only about 25 per cent. The effort was most successful, access being possible to the old Chalet site throughout the winter. This is really a remarkable achievement, and it is expected it will be repeated during winter 1955.

An unfortunate aspect of this project is that there are some clubs domiciled at Mt. Buller who have not yet contributed one penny towards the skiers' share of the cost of snow-plowing the road. No matter how much we may hate restrictions and any compulsion—there is far too much of that throughout the world to-day—it is high time something was done to see that every club and every skier pays his full

share of the cost of ventures which are in the interests of us all.

Perhaps the next most outstanding feature of the 1954 season was that the Hotham Heights Chalet made a small profit. This is of outstanding importance to the whole future of Victorian ski-ing. Despite its magnificent, natural attractions Hotham would not be the marvellous ski centre it is to-day were it not for the existence of the Hotham Heights Chalet, and it is absolutely imperative that this Chalet should remain there as an untrammelled commercial venture open to all. There had been some talk, after the S.C.V. had taken it over and failed to make it a paying proposition, that the Chalet may be forced to close. Happily, wiser, more energetic and more practical leadership intervened; a new company was formed almost entirely from those members of the S.C.V. who held debentures in the Chalet project, and the result is that Hotham Chalet Limited made a slight profit on its operations over the first twelve months of its existence. If, as seems likely, a licence is granted to the subsidiary company, Mt. Hotham Hotel Limited, then there will be no doubt that Hotham will forge ahead again and become easily Victoria's premier ski-ing resort, a title which at present rightfully belongs to Buller.

This question of commercialism in our snow country is one which should be given much thought by skiers. It should be fairly clear to all of us that it is in nobody's interest for ski clubs to endeavour to run commercial enterprises. Obviously a commercial organisation is better fitted to run a commercial enterprise. The more clubs try to usurp the commercial field the less prospect there is of worthwhile

commercial enterprises being attracted to our mountains, and there is no doubt that in many little ways clubs do endeavour to give a service to their members and, at the same time, make a profit on their members' guests. I submit that every club that charges more for a guest than for a member is actually doing this and hopes thereby to finance additional facilities in its lodges or to build new ones. Hence they are, of course, competing in the legitimate field of commercial enterprise. We cannot have it both ways; we cannot have lodges for ourselves for our own convenience and want to make money out of them and also want the facilities in our ski fields that will only come when commercial enterprise in these fields is strong enough to attract numbers of people to justify the outlay on facilities such as road improvements, snow-plowing, ski tows, etc. There may be many of us who do not want to see commercial enterprise in our mountains anyway. They, I am afraid, are out of touch with this world. We either go ahead—and that means bring more people into the mountains—or we go back, and the latter is hardly a possibility. To them may I say that there is still Bogong and Feathertop in Victoria and the more remote parts of the Main Range at Kosciusko. But do these people ever go there?

Still on this subject of commercialism. From the example of Hotham Chalet, the really outstanding effort of Kooroora at Buller, the now well-established and highly successful Drift Chalet at Hotham, and from the success of the less ambitious Bob Hymans at Falls Creek, it is clear that there is tremendous tourist potential in our higher mountains. True, the Chalet at Mt. Buffalo, run by the Victorian Railways, again made a loss, but it may well be thought that the tariff at this Chalet is too low for the service guests receive, and an inspection of the last published statement of accounts for Buffalo Chalet showed that a small increase of tariff would have covered the loss made. Such an increase would not have diminished the popularity of the Chalet—have you never joined the waiting list for bookings?



Junior and Senior Ski Tows, Falls Creek, and Frying Pan Ski Runs. Photo. T. W. Mitchell.

Buffalo, too, has a part to play in the whole tourist and skiing picture of Victoria. It is the nursery of Victorian skiing and a jolly good one, too. A new lodge has been built at Dingo Dell, where a ski tow and instruction are provided by the Chalet, and the lodge very appropriately has been named Keown Lodge in honour of Mr. A. W. Keown who, for so many years, has been a friend of skiers in his capacity with the Victorian Railways of Superintendent of Refreshment Services and being responsible for the Buffalo and formerly Hotham Heights Chalets.

One of the pleasing features of Victorian skiing, which seems to grow year by year, is the assistance which skiers get from the various Government Departments with authority over the areas in which we are

concerned. To all of these departments we give our thanks. There are, however, some instances where skiers are rightly impatient at the attitude of some Government Departments. In particular, we cite the case of Mt. Buller, where for some reason known only to itself, the Forests Commission continues to refuse to give to the Mt. Buller Recreational Reserve Committee authority over the whole of the top of the mountain, or at least over a much wider area than the Committee has at the moment. As a result, there is the iniquitous position whereby all clubs other than the S.C.V. itself, or some of its affiliates, must build in the village to a definite standard, whilst the Ivor Whittaker Lodge, its surrounding cabins and the other buildings now being built in this vicinity come directly under the Forests Commission. I would hesitate to say that matters are made any easier for these people than for the clubs building in the village itself, but why have two separate authorities to do the same thing and why does the Forests Commission grant concessions to one set of people and deny them to others? The proper development of Mt. Buller is certainly being hindered by the present attitude of the Forests Commission, although much credit and thanks are due to the Commission for the very wholehearted assistance it has given clubs at Buller in the past.

The tally of ski clubs in Victoria grows almost weekly. There are now over 70, most of them with lodges of their own at one of the major ski resorts. The villages at Buller and Falls Creek continue to grow rapidly and to such an extent that it is difficult to forecast an ending to this rapid expansion. At Hotham, however, no new lodges have been built in the past year. This is significant, for clearly Buller and Falls Creek are far better week-end attractions for everyone in Victoria other than south-east Gippslanders. Consequently Hotham is a mountain where one goes for a holiday of a week or more. The other places are still predominantly, but by no means only, week-enders. We may expect, therefore, there will be little further lodge

building at Hotham until the Alpine Highway is snow plowed for its full distance; in many ways that will be a sorry day. Should a licence be granted at Hotham, however, it may well be that the present nine miles of unplowed road will be kept free of snow for the whole of winter.

Access to our resorts is improving year by year. The Country Roads Board is doing wonderful work on the Buller Road, where in three years it is anticipated the road will be about three cars wide to the old Chalet site, and at Hotham, where the Harrietteville side is being greatly widened and the Omeo side considerably improved. All these roads are snow plowed as far as is practicable. Access to Falls Creek, however, still depends on the goodwill of the Kiewa Hydro-Electric Project of the State Electricity Commission and is inclined to be perhaps unnecessarily restrictive. However, Falls Creek skiers have much to thank the State Electricity Commission for and there are very few grumbles about the regulations governing the road up the mountain to Falls Creek.

Apart from our four main resorts—Buller, Hotham, Falls Creek and Buffalo—development remains practically at a standstill. Bogong and Feathertop are rarely visited these days and more is the pity, for they are magnificent mountains. The early promise of the Baw Baws developing into a real ski centre have not been fulfilled and, apart from local Gippsland interest, they never will be, for the Baw Baws are not high enough, nor for that matter interesting enough, to claim universal attention. The busy centres at Donna Buang and Lake Mountain, close to Melbourne, still get their share of tobagganists and Sunday visitors, and now and again the odd mid-week skier who wants to find his legs. The Bogong High Plains are being used a little more perhaps than in the past two or three years, and most of us yearn to do a ski tour there again one day. For the rest there is little. Tallangatta have their home mountain—Wills; Wangaratta still go to St. Bernard and the Upper Murray Ski Club to the mountains between Corryong and Kosciusko. The



After the Blizzard — Pattern in Rime, Mt. Buller.

Photo. D. F. Pile.

opening of so much New South Wales country from the Victorian side by the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority is bound to lead to a lot of us ski-ing outside Victoria in the next few years, and it will certainly be of tremendous interest to skiers of north-eastern Victoria.

There is controversy in Victoria about Olympic participation. In general, it must be said that there is little real enthusiasm either for or against it, other than from small groups of people. The racers can generally be said to be in favour of the idea, but it is noticeable that not many racers are doing a great deal about raising the necessary money. Racers are such a small percentage of our ski-ing population it is clear that, enthusiastic as they may be,

a small group of Olympic protagonists can hardly hope to raise sufficient money for the Victorian share of sending a team to the 1956 Olympics. That is perhaps one of the extraordinary aspects of Victorian ski-ing. Probably no more than 1 to 2 per cent. of skiers here are keen on racing and yet this group is inclined to consider that racing is, to say the least, the main aspect of ski-ing. Unfortunately, it goes a little further and it is not an unfair generalisation to say that racers themselves do little for themselves and it is left to a very small group, some of whom have never raced, to do the bulk of the work required. It will be a long time before racing assumes any real prominence in Victorian ski-ing.

The Skiing Improvements Fund still battles on. However, there is now likely to be much more enthusiasm for this project, because the Federation has at last found someone keen to get the scheme really cracking and to act as its Secretary, Promotor and generally to wave the banner. It does no harm to repeat my assertion that once this scheme really gets moving it will be the biggest thing Australian skiing has yet seen. Already the scheme here has achieved worthwhile results, but nowhere near the extent that it should have, and that it needs to, in order to capture the imagination of more clubs and individual skiers.

At long last it looks as though we are drawing towards the end of negotiations between F.O.V.S.C. and the S.C.V. for the formation of the Victorian Ski Association, a body designed to incorporate every club in Victoria and hence bring real unity to skiing in this State, which has never before really been a fact. Whereas the F.O.V.S.C. has always been keen on this it is still an extraordinary thing that the S.C.V. has not considered it of sufficient importance even to give it a mention in the Club's last annual report. Some of us may possibly be excused for thinking that such is not out of line with the S.C.V.'s approach to the formation of the V.S.A. and it has led many others to wonder whether there is any point in endeavouring to bring the S.C.V. and all other clubs together. There is, of course, very real point and the sooner it is accomplished the better for Victorian and Australian skiing. For one thing, it would seem certain that the V.S.A. would have some really potent words to say on the activities, or lack of them, of the A.N.S.F. It would probably be true to say that no more than 25 per cent. of people skiing in Victoria have heard of the A.N.S.F., and most of these probably only in a critical manner.

It is some years since an article appeared in "Ski Horizon" and was reprinted in the Year Book entitled "The Law and the Ski Tow." It was a thought-provoking article not unnaturally written by Tom Mitchell, and it gave prominence to legal aspects of

ski-ing which we would do well to consider again now. This subject has been brought very much to the fore by what has become known as "the Bates case" (see "Ski Horizon," Vol. 6, No. 2) and concerns the granting of substantial damages to a novice skier at Buffalo, who fell into a small culvert which, it was alleged, had not been drawn to her attention by the instructor. Skiers were surprised at the judgment, and it has made clubs, tow operators, ski instructors, etc., review their legal position with great haste. Clubs could well, for instance, be liable for damages if any icicle accidentally damaged the skull of the unwanted guest.

Speaking of insurance, the Royal Insurance Company's Ski Accident Insurance Scheme has been very successful. It is true that the majority of skiers have still failed to avail themselves of this scheme and hence most of the people who have accidents are uninsured. It is pretty certain, however, that gradually the numbers of those who insure will increase until eventually nearly all skiers will accept insurance as being just as much a part of the season as to get their equipment ready. When this happens we can expect insurance on a wider scale and probably even at reduced rates. The number of accidents, as with the number of skiers, grows greatly every year, and I am not sure that in time there may not be more interest in safety bindings than in the short ski as there is now.

Eric Johnson's death was a great loss to Victoria. He had raced for the State in the 'thirties, and for the last 20 years had been closely connected with the development of ski-ing. His horse-sledge service up the Bon-accord Spur into Hotham was one of the wonders of post-war ski-ing. In his later years he was at Buller and had great plans for access services there. However, he finally succumbed to an illness that had been with him for a long time, and every skier in Victoria regrets Eric's passing in his forty-sixth year.

The 1954 season was a light one for snow, but it was, nevertheless, a long win-

ter, for just as the snow was petering out there was a remarkable fall in mid-September which carried the season on almost to November. As usual, the official opening was on Queen's Birthday week-end, but there was not quite enough snow for the official closing of the season on Melbourne Cup week-end.

Victoria suffered one of the worst defeats at the hands of N.S.W. we have had for years, and our racing will need some pepping up if we are to be serious interstate challengers in two years' time. Results are given elsewhere. The Inter-club Championship has established some sort of rivalry between clubs, but racing here still retains very much the individual bias.

There were many more interesting features of skiing in Victoria during 1954 which cannot be given prominence here, but perhaps we could briefly report that the two ski journals, "Schuss" and "Ski Horizon," are still published regularly and provide a service to skiers which probably the sport could hardly do without. It is surprising that N.S.W. has not a monthly ski journal; but maybe that will not be long in coming now.

The Red Cross Ski Patrol, despite the enthusiasm of a few early in the year, did not operate properly and it still suffers from lack of support amongst individual skiers. The day is fast coming, however, when such a service will be considered just as essential as the snow itself.

We had differences of opinion throughout the year on the virtue of large-scale removal of lovely snow gums from Buller's famous Bourke Street, and many of us hope that there will be no repetition. There are two sides to the argument, of course, but it takes a long, long time to replace a snow gum.

We are pleased to record the great success of the establishment of Australia's base at Antarctica and that some of our Victorian skiers were very closely associated with this development. Mr. Phil. Law, the Director of the Antarctic Division of the Department of External Affairs, is a member of the Alpine Club of Victoria

and the University Ski Club and has skied for many years.

Finally, in this all-too-brief survey we can say that the social side of skiing progresses just as well as do our activities in the mountains. The Wangaratta Barbecue and the Albury Club's Toonallook Wool Shed Ball were outstanding country social events, and in the city it was just as difficult to find time for activities other than those connected with skiing during the summer months as it is during winter.

Perhaps what we would like most to see in Victoria in the future are two things. Firstly, a round-table conference with the Government so that skiers' and official views can be swapped and a real developmental plan drawn up. Secondly, a national body truly representative of all skiers and with some definite programme of work to achieve.

John W. Hiron, Official Photographer, Victorian Rail

