

# PERISHER HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Issue 9 Summer 2012/13

## Life Above the Snowline

The following articles are the first in an occasional series on the people who have spent many happy years living and working above the snowline in the Perisher area.

### John and Pat Davis

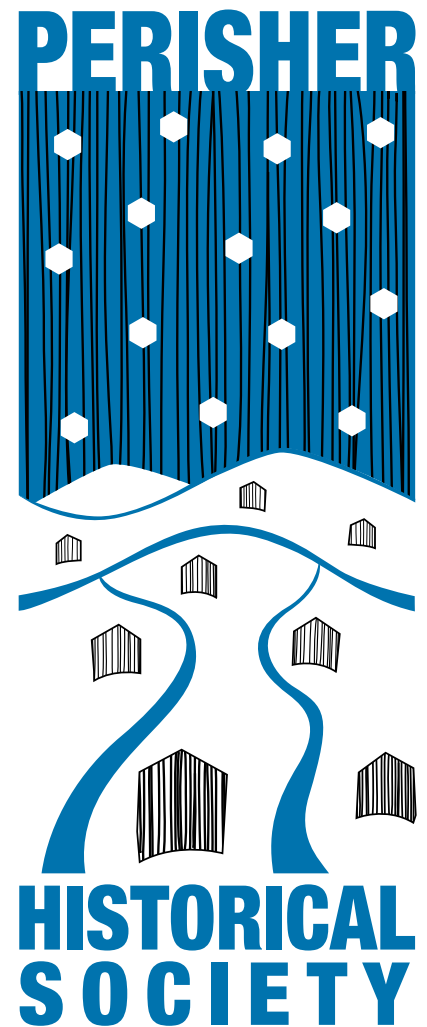
By John Davis

In June 1955, a year after we were married, Pat and I began our association with and love of the mountains that has endured to the present day.

Since 1949, I had been following the sport of skiing as reported on the noticeboard in the foyer of the Sydney YMCA. I knew that snow accommodation in NSW in 1955 was limited to the Chalet at Charlotte Pass, Betts Camp, Kiandra Chalet and Youth Hostel. We discovered that the NSW Government Tourist Bureau owned and operated The Chalet and did the bookings. The clerk there advised us peak season is big bucks and a ballot often decides who goes, but for first timers to experience The Chalet for a reasonable price, with the slight risk of having no snow, we should go during the last week of June and first week of July. We agreed to take the two weeks but found that it wasn't as easy as that. Because of popular demand, the bookings opened at 9.00 am on the first Monday in March and it was first in first served. The queue usually formed just after daylight.

It was safe to travel on trains back then and we walked from St James Station down to Martin Place well before dawn on the specified date to find a few there before us, some all night. The old timers in the queue were happy to pass on little bits of information they wanted us to know, names were exchanged and friendships were made, some lasting until today. Time passed quickly and when the doors opened the queue ran from Challis House around the corner into Pitt Street.

We booked a double room at The Chalet and a sleeper on the train - waste of money though, as we froze and didn't sleep on the train. Then there was a bus ride to the remains of the Hotel Kosciusko (now Sponars Inn) where we collected our skis etc. It was pouring with rain and we struggled through mud with everything onto the back of a huge truck called Walter driven by Frank Patterson. There was a sort of cover over the back of Walter; about ten sat on the stools down each side and the other hundred or so stood and hung on. Frank ploughed through the mud right to the door of The Chalet. No snow, so no snowmobile ride from Smiggins. We were warned; we'd chosen



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two of the cheapest weeks of the season, with a possibility of no snow.

The Chalet staff appeared to help us out, carry our luggage, put our skis in the ski room and welcome us to Charlotte Pass and tell us snow was forecast. Brian Davidson labelled us 'the honeymooners' and even in recent years ex-staff still maintain we had our honeymoon at The Chalet.

Our skiing clothes were parka, gabardine ski pants, Norwegian socks, mittens and langlauf band and we each had a bottle of solcream provided by Dick Gilkes from Snowline Ski Centre.

Snow didn't fall until the Tuesday night of our second week and was a big dump, enabling Sasha and Karl to start giving beginner lessons after lunch on Wednesday. By Friday the rope tow was running and we were riding it to the bottom of Pulpit Rock. We were hooked but had to leave on the first snowmobile out on Saturday. We returned to The Chalet the following year for the same two weeks then backed up again for a week in September. It was during this week we decided to see if we could get a job for a season, have a lot of fun and learn to ski like the staff.

The only employer in the Kosciusko region to our knowledge was the Government Tourist Bureau and the only married accommodation they had for staff was at Smiggins Cafe and Betts Camp, a small hut that took a few overflow guests from the Chalet. We applied for both and were notified that the position at Smiggin had been filled, however our application for managers (cook and everything) at Betts was successful.

Fortunately we were advised by Brian Davidson and Dick Gilkes that Betts was a bit rough. Brian suggested that if we wanted to get jobs at the Chalet we could start living in single staff quarters and then move to a room together. Finally, a letter arrived from Dick Gilkes saying he had heard of a proposition in Perisher Valley that may interest us. In December 1956, Pat and I met Sverre Kaaten. This meeting would see the end of our Chalet skiing and our move to live and work in Perisher and Smiggins for the next 22 years.

During the summer of 1956, Sverre had built a rope tow and a hut to house the engine and quarters for an operator and his wife. He offered Pat and me the opportunity to lease the place for the winter and provide three meals a day and accommodation for 12 guests. So in 1957 Pat and I ran Perisher Valley's first commercial lodge and one of the valley's first two modes of uphill transportation.

The lodge was known as the Tow Hut and we were there for three winter seasons. Following the first winter we returned to Sydney for the summer. I worked as a builder's labourer and Pat got a job as a waitress at David Jones Seventh Floor Restaurant in Elizabeth Street, the idea being to learn more about the catering industry that we had ventured into twenty weeks earlier. From the second summer on, we stayed in the mountains and took on wood cutting and anything else that came up.

Following our three years at the Tow Hut, we teamed up with Sverre Kaaten and Dick Gilkes to develop Smiggin Holes, as Johnnie Abbottsmith, who had built a rope tow there, was moving to Jindabyne and

cutting his ties with the mountain and Bob Strizek who ran the Snowmobile service to Perisher was also finishing up. The three of us formed a small company and for the next three years started the formation of the Smiggins Resort.

Alpine Gate, a 24 bed lodge was built, a Poma lift and T-bar were in operation, the Snowmobile service was improved and extended and a manager's residence built. Incorporated in the Alpine Gate was The Snowline Ski Shop and equipment hire. At the end of the 1962 winter, a Sydney-based company moved into Smiggin Holes with big ideas and gained control of our operations after a messy takeover. Pat and I decided that after six years, we would head back to Sydney. United Motels, who had the lease of Ski Rider at the time, offered us a job managing the Motel Blake at Blakehurst for nine months. We accepted but afterwards we couldn't get back to the mountains quickly enough.

Stan McGuinn, the boss of Perisher Valley Hotels gave us a job managing the Chairlift restaurant and looking after the 10 or 12 staff living there for the 1964 winter. After the season we moved to the newly built Royal Coachman Lodge at Smiggins to run it for Nancy and Bob Watson who wanted to explore the possibility of year-round operation. Following our stint at Coachman we moved into the Australian Golf Club Lodge at Perisher and remained there summer and winter until the close of the 1968 winter.

The Golf Club allowed us to live in the lodge during the summer but we were free to do whatever we wished. This allowed me to carry on the septic tank/ grease

trap cleaning service I started in summer 1965. By 1969 we had started the Perisher-Smiggin garbage collection and disposal service, summer and winter. This was a full time occupation and with no accommodation in the mountains we moved to Jindabyne, eventually building a depot for our operations and accommodation in what was Jindabyne's second industrial area.

Initially the winter garbage collection was only for club lodges but some commercial establishments contracted our service. It was extended to the Smiggin Holes car park for the National Park and then on occasions in the summer we were contracted to do the picnic areas and roadside bins from the Thredbo River to Rawsons Pass for The Park.

On our many trips to Rawsons , many times just on daylight, some days still and clear, other days the opposite with fog or wind or rain, or the lot, we realised how much we loved the place and have been here ever since. After a while we



*John and Pat Davis – pioneers of the early Perisher and Smiggin years (photo courtesy of the Davis collection).*

sold the septic business, then followed disposal (no sale) of the garbage business and with premises in the industrial area and encouragement from Neville Kennard of Kennards Hire and Kosciusko Snow Revellers, we started Jindabyne Hire, eventually selling out and now enjoy living in the mountains in the summer and follow the sun in winter.

From our days at the Tow Hut until now, Pat and I have done everything together, worked together, lived together, played together, in blizzards and sunshine. On only one occasion during all these years did she refuse, and that was to take an active part in the septic tank cleaning.

## Marian and Bill Clark

*From notes made by Marian Clark*

Bill Clark grew up in Canberra and was introduced to skiing in the 'Y' and Harry Black years. In 1955-1956 he managed Albina Hut on the Main Range and experienced the avalanche which killed Roslyn Wesche and destroyed Kunama Hut. For Marian, a chance meeting with the Sports Master of the Cowra High School at a PE conference in Adelaide, her home town, where she had been teaching sport for six years, led to a job managing Cowra Ski Lodge in Perisher for the winter of 1966.

They met that year when Bill, holidaying from Brewarrina, was staying in Perisher at his club Parrawa. They were married at the end of the year and for the next few seasons Bill worked around the Valley - driving oversnow transport for Ansett, ski hire, bartending and dishwashing at the Valley Inn - while Marian continued as manager of Cowra Lodge.

When their first child, Lachlan, was due, they wound up their earthmoving business and purchased 3000 acres to begin

a cattle grazing venture out of Cooma. At about the same time, the opportunity to manage the newly built Barrakee Lodge at North Perisher also came up, and in April 1970 they combined this role with their rural aspirations. Thirty amazing years followed.

Barrakee was originally licensed for 16 and an extension increased bed numbers to 29 in 1973. The Clarks opened at Christmas and Easter and enjoyed cricket on the Perisher carpark, water sports on Lake Jindabyne and mountain bushwalking. New Year's Eve



at the Smiggin's Pub and drinks at 'The Man' were highlights, as there were plenty of club lodges open and the chairlift operated for tourists. Son Callum was born in 1973 and daughter Shannon in 1980. The Lodge was family orientated so there was a constant stream of familiar faces coming back each season.

Barrakee Managing Director, Stewart Wallis, encouraged guests and the Clark children to participate in the Perisher Cup. Many years of friendly rivalry between Cooma, Boonoonoona and Barrakee followed. It was always the Downhill Racers versus the 'Chook Footers'!

In the early days, permanent residents were allowed domestic pets but, after the Clark dog chased the Minister for Lands up No. 1 T-bar, they were all banned, by order from above.

The 1983 extension, which included a squash court, extended bed numbers to 50. Barrakee operated as a commercial lodge with five staff. Unfortunately, the 9 February start date and a huge dump of snow at Easter while the roof was off resulted in the whole extension being wrapped in black plastic and completed the next year.

Oversnow transport was essential for the running of Barrakee. The Clarks began with a Porsche which had seen service in the Antarctic, then a custom-built Mole Mink. Bill was sent to Europe by the company in 1982 to find a suitable machine. A state of the art Kassbohrer was delivered and can still be seen operating around the Valley.

The sewerage plant was built, despite protests and lobbying, almost under the Barrakee lounge room windows. The Clarks

witnessed the development of Blue Cow Resort and Skitube and have vivid memories of the night locals were evacuated from the Valley when a fire broke out in the tunnel during construction and toxic fumes were spreading rapidly.

Over the three decades, light and heavy seasons seemed to occur without any pattern, but brought a diverse set of management problems.

Marian and Bill's recollections of picnics in the snow, the amalgamation of all the resorts, lost skiers, a fatal heart attack in the stairwell, Perisher Ski Racing Club, summer evenings at Spencers Creek for barbeques, dramas with staff and the amazing personalities who worked in the Valley provide them with a rich bank of memories for their retirement, which began in 2000.



*Bill and Marion Clark outside Cowra Lodge in 1967 (photo courtesy of the Clark family).*



*Bill alighting from the Kassbohrer that was state of the art when procured in Europe in 1982 and can still be seen plying the North Perisher oversnow route today (photo courtesy of the Clark family).*

## Date for Your Diary

**Perisher Historical Society 6th Annual Dinner at Marritz Alpine Inn on Sunday 9 June**

# 'Australian Skiing: The First 100 Years'

On 4 September 2012, The PHS hosted a most successful launch of Wendy Cross's authoritative book covering the first one hundred years of skiing in Australia. We were delighted to be joined by the Thredbo Historical Society in this venture.

Guests from Sydney, Melbourne and Jindabyne crowded into History House in Macquarie Street, Sydney, to toast the first comprehensive work to bring together the history of skiing in NSW, the ACT, Victoria and Tasmania.

The book was launched by Zali Steggall, four-time Winter Olympian and past Director of Ski & Snowboard Australia, who was introduced by PHS President, Philip Woodman. Wendy replied and later signed copies of her book.

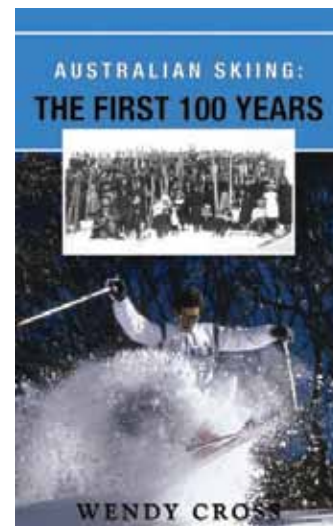
On the speaker's lectern was an image of Warren Peck, historian from the Australian Alpine Club in Victoria, holding an advance copy of the book in front of the Matterhorn. So, perhaps it really was an international launch!

Author, Wendy Cross, is a Melbourne-based journalist and editor who has been deeply involved in Australian skiing since 1961, serving on the Victorian Ski Association executive committee, and as a ski patroller, for more than 20 years. She edited the national ski magazine, *Fall-line*, throughout that time and was the longest serving editor of the *Australian Ski Year Book*.

Copies of Wendy's book can be purchased by logging on to the PHS website and downloading the order form.



*Zali Steggall and Wendy Cross at the launch of Wendy's book at History House in Sydney (photo by Jan Glover).*



*Warren Peck holding an advance copy of Wendy's book in front of the Matterhorn, Switzerland; a synchronised international bi-hemisphere launch! (photo courtesy of the Peck family).*



# Hello in the Snow 2012

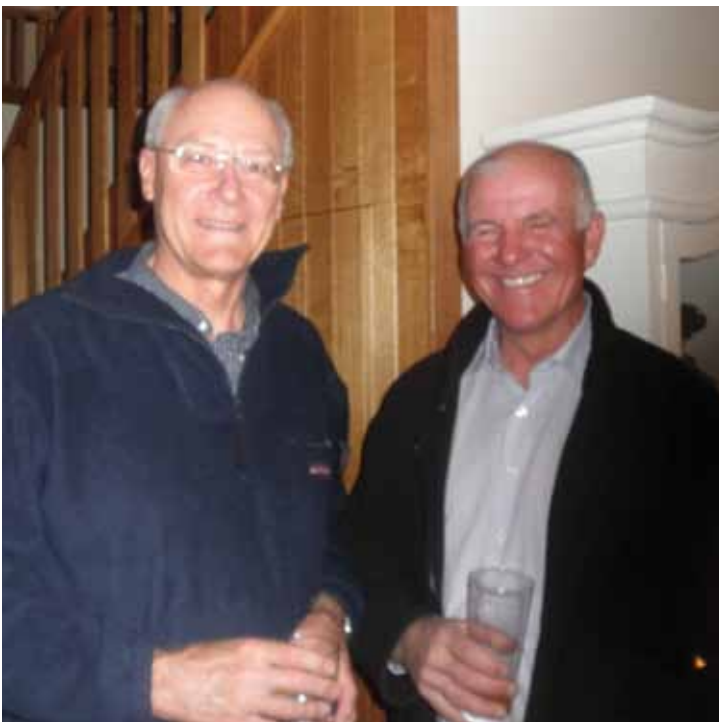
This informal get-together in Perisher during Nordic Week is growing year by year. On Tuesday 7 August 2012, about 45 members and friends gathered in The White Spider Restaurant at Eiger Chalet to 'talk of many things' over drinks and nibbles after skiing. Once again we had a good mix of alpine and cross-country skiers, including some visitors from south of the border. Our thanks to Sue Randall and Garry Fischer of Eiger Chalet for their support.



*Geoff Laing, Carel Laing (daughter of Stan McGuinn), Rebecca Lee and Cathy Conacher (photo from the PHS collection)*



*Carl and Jeanette Melvey (photo from the PHS collection).*



*Frank Zipfinger and Ashley Blondel (photo from the PHS collection).*



*Left to right: Roger Fortescue, Lois Fortescue, Ruth Mattes, John Mattes and Virginia Morris (photo from the PHS collection).*

# Monaro Sculptures: *Green mountain blue II*

It may not rival Bondi's Sculpture by the Sea but the route from Sydney to the snowfields does boast an interesting collection of sculptures. Have you ever wondered how the big blue steel stick insect came to be sitting on a windswept hill beside the Monaro Highway about 17 km north of Cooma?

Suspected by some locals to be a CIA tracking station, the sculpture is also known by some as the Sheep Chucker. As explained by a father driving past with his children, "it's a device to fling sheep across the Monaro Highway."

The sculpture was commissioned by John Kahlbetzer in 1978. American sculptor Charles Ginnever installed *Green mountain blue II* on Kahlbetzer's property later that year.

The sculpture was donated to The National Gallery of Australia in 1981, with plans to move it to the Gallery's Sculpture Garden



*'Green mountain blue II' adjacent to the Monaro Highway between Cooma and Bredbo (photo from the National Gallery of Australia website).*

once the garden had matured. However the move did not take place and nearly 30 years of exposure to the elements, together with damage by livestock, birds and passers-by, led to serious deterioration of the surface of the structure.

In August 2007, the sculpture was disassembled and transported to Queanbeyan to

be sandblasted, primed and repainted 'Harbour blue'. *Green mountain blue II* was re-installed in its original picturesque location in October 2007.

Thanks to John Green for alerting us to The National Gallery of Australia website:

<http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=33854>

## Stop Press

Peter Southwell-Keely has completed his history of the ski resorts along the Kosciuszko Road. The text, with almost 400 photographs, is at the proof stage and will be off to the printer next month. The book looks terrific and is certain to be a necessary item on the bookshelves of skiers past and present and a must-have reference for every ski club.

The book will be officially launched at the PHS Annual Dinner to be held at the Murrumbidgee Alpine Inn on Sunday 9 June 2013.

## New members

We are delighted to welcome the following new members and thank them for their support.

Len Gillett  
Gunyah Ski Club  
Cowra Ski Club  
University Alpine Ski Club  
Windarra Ski Lodge  
Anne Collet and Toni Sarri



*Faces from the 'Ministry of Skiing' (c.1983). L to R: Philip Woodman - NSWASA, Bruce Lever - NPWS, Kurt Lance - ASF and Russel Knutson - NPWS. (See back page as to why we would like your images).*



## Your photos and recollections are gold!

Do these images bring back memories and take you back to your own happy times? Recalling the past is great fun and is wonderful therapy. Would you help the Society by dragging out your old photographs or those of your relations? We would love to have a copy to store on the PHS website.

### What sort of pictures?

Pictures that show what skiing and lodge life were like in times past. Think of such things as how people dressed, meal times, parties, lodge or club 'working bees'...those things that pictures describe so well and much better than words.

Included on this page are some examples that have been kindly donated to PHS. We would prefer originals as this is best for museum archival purposes but today's technology means that you can keep the originals!

### Supporting information

Pictures are better appreciated by others, as well as easier to archive, when the following information is provided with your image:

- When - date taken (at least the year)
- Where - location
- Who - names of people in the picture and who took the photo
- Why - background story to the picture
- What – is the photo part of a collection e.g. grandfather's album, etc.

### How does it work?

Call and have a chat with Pam Woodman (02 9488 7475) about your memories, photographs, memorabilia or people to interview. That way we can make arrangements that suit you.

PHS will happily scan and return your images and adhere to copyright rules and requests that you may have when using your images.



A 'Charleston Night' with the bar workers celebrating in the early years at the Sundeck Hotel (1962-64). L to R: Shirley Neal, Alfie, Andrea and Jack. (Photo courtesy of Shirley Neal).



Bondi Icebergs in Perisher Creek in August, 1972 (photo courtesy of Laurence Bell).



The Perisher Ski Shop in 1960 built by Ken Murray (source unknown).



Hawaiian Night at the Sundeck Hotel (1962-63) decked with palm brought from Queensland. L to R: Andrea and Shirley (photo courtesy of Shirley Neal).



No longer present, the Alpine Gate was the main service centre for skiers visiting Smiggin Holes in 1962 (courtesy of the Wirruna collection).



Perisher transport in 1972 (photo courtesy of Laurence Bell).