

## AUSTRALIAN SKI HERITAGE

# SKI TOURING PIONEERS ON THE KOSCIUSZKO MAIN RANGE 1950 - 1983

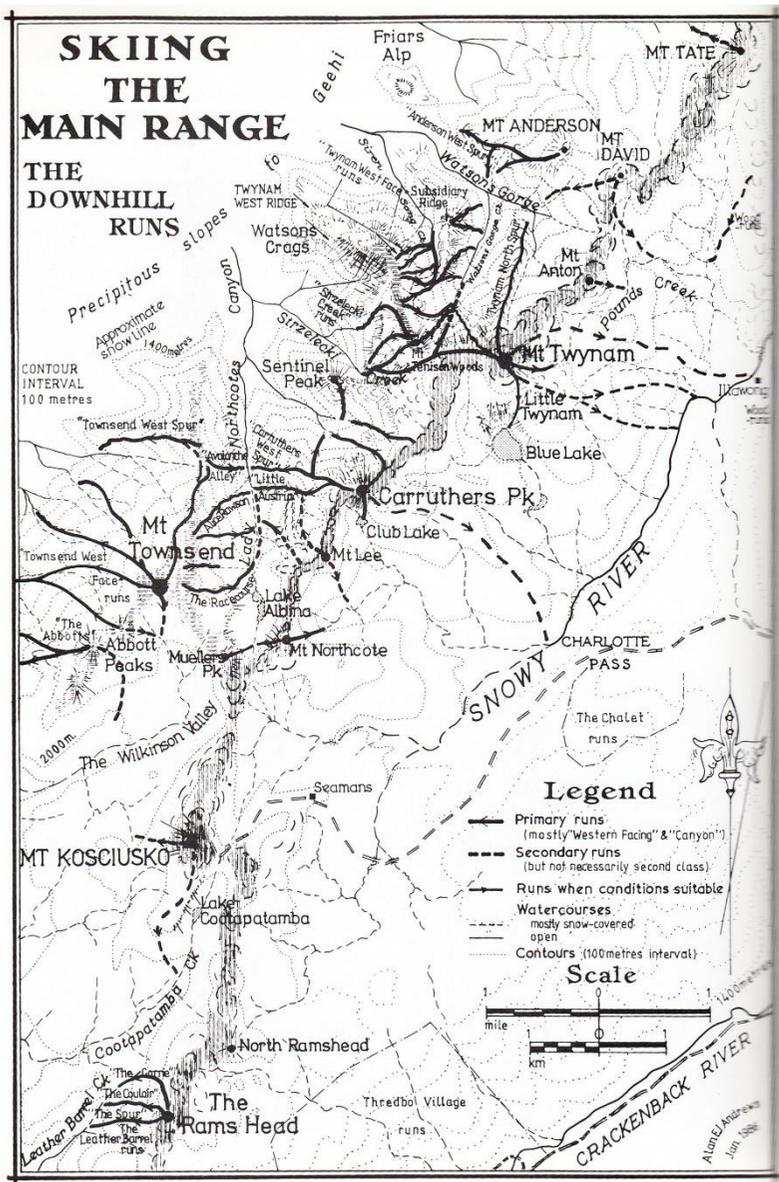
### INTRODUCTION

As recounted in the Sixth Instalment of Australian Ski Heritage, the Ski Council of NSW had advocated the building of a Memorial Shelter Hut close to the western faces of Kosciuszko during the 1940's. On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1950, a meeting convened by Charles Anton and attended by the Vice-Chairman of the Kosciuszko State Park Trust (KSPT) (Mr. D.S. Mulley), the Secretary and Director of the NSW Government Tourist Bureau (Mr. Harold Best) and representatives of the Ski Council of NSW (including its President, Mr. C.A. Alexander, accompanied by George Day and Ken Breakspear) approved the construction of the Lake Albina Lodge with unanimous support from all persons and organisations present at this meeting. The Ski Tourers Association was then inaugurated, at a well-attended meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1950, with the initial goal of building a touring lodge in the vicinity of Lake Albina. These decisions were also communicated to the general skiing community by Bob Arnott, writing in the December 1950 issue of "*Ski Horizon*" and by Don Richardson writing in the "*1951 Australian Ski Year Book*".

The First Installment in this Ski Heritage Series included photographs taken in April 1951 of the construction of the Lake Albina Lodge over a few days following heavy snowfalls. This appendix is complementary to the Appendix to the Fifth Installment's description of ski touring in the Snowy Mountains in the 1940's and provides more detailed information as to the benefits to the Skiing Community of the projects of the **Ski Tourers Association (STA)**, in the period from 1950 to 1969 when the STA was permitted to operate lodges on the Kosciuszko Main Range. It has been prepared mainly from original documents written within a few days to a few months of the occurrence of each of the described events and it is illustrated wherever possible, by contemporary photographs. It includes the occasional failure as well as the many successes.

**Who were the ski tourers in Australia in 1950?** They were proficient skiers who would ski beyond the boundaries of existing ski resorts to access steeper

and longer ski runs, such as those shown on Map No. 1. Most tourers skied on conventional downhill skis, as Nordic skis were not readily available locally.



**Map No. 1. Downhill Runs on Kosciuszko Main Range (Alan E.J. Andrews)**  
**SKI TOURERS AND SKI RACING**

Since the earliest days of skiing at Kiandra in the 1860's, ski racing has been closely related to both downhill skiing and ski touring. The necessary poles

and flags for setting ski race courses were kept in well utilized lodges such as the Lake Albina Lodge, Whites River Hut and the Alpine Hut.

Photo No. 1 shows the occupants of Alpine Hut resting at the bottom of the course after competing in an impromptu slalom race with seven gates, on the snow slopes south-west of the Alpine Hut, on Friday 27 August 1943.



**Photo No.1 Ski Tourers relaxing after an impromptu slalom race near Alpine Hut (F. Leyden, August 1943)**

### **LAKE ALBINA LODGE**

It was quite an achievement to progress so rapidly from receiving official permission in October 1950 to build a lodge in the Lake Albina area, to forming a club on 10 November 1950 to carry out the work (mainly using volunteers), so as to get the building to the "lock-up" stage by the end of April 1951 and to have a functioning ski lodge at Lake Albina in the 1951 ski season.

Whilst the lodge was "weather-tight", well-equipped, with good food preparation facilities and comfortable bunk rooms, by the time its first ski

season commenced in June 1951, the plumbing arrangements were described as “Spartan” by the occupants. Portions of the plans of Lake Albina Lodge, prepared in November 1950 by Architect Dudley Ward, are reproduced as Figures 1 to 3. These plans, (which have lain folded in a small envelope for about 50 years), illustrate the meticulous attention to detail taken by the architect. This was no simple draughty “mountain cattle-man’s” hut”; this lodge was designed to cope with the wild, stormy weather that often lashed the highest peaks in Australia. The plans made provision for an air-lock entry, 2 bunks in each of 6 sleeping cubicles, well-equipped kitchen, a shower and a flush toilet; they also provided for an open fireplace, which was not built due to the absence of fire-wood at Lake Albina; kerosene heaters were used instead.

The plans also provided for three large windows in the dining area to give stunning views of the nearby mountains (including part of the Grey Mare Range) and of Lake Albina, generally snow-covered in Winter (Photo No. 2).



Photo No. 2. View from Lake Albina Lodge’s Living Area. (W. Peck 1963)

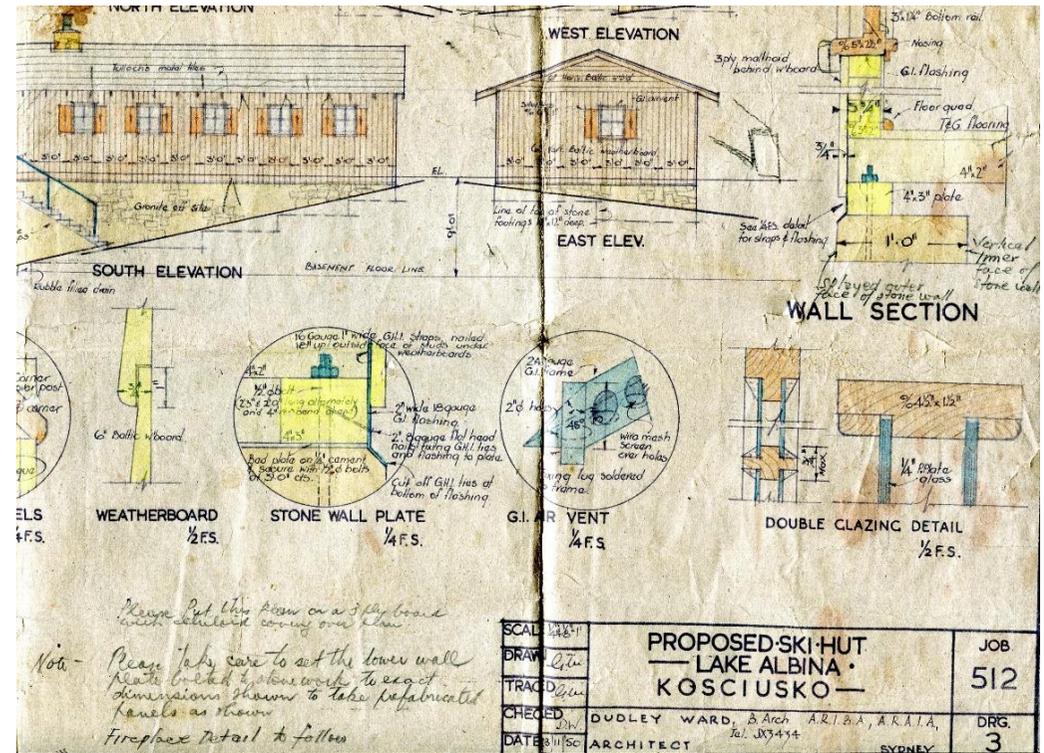
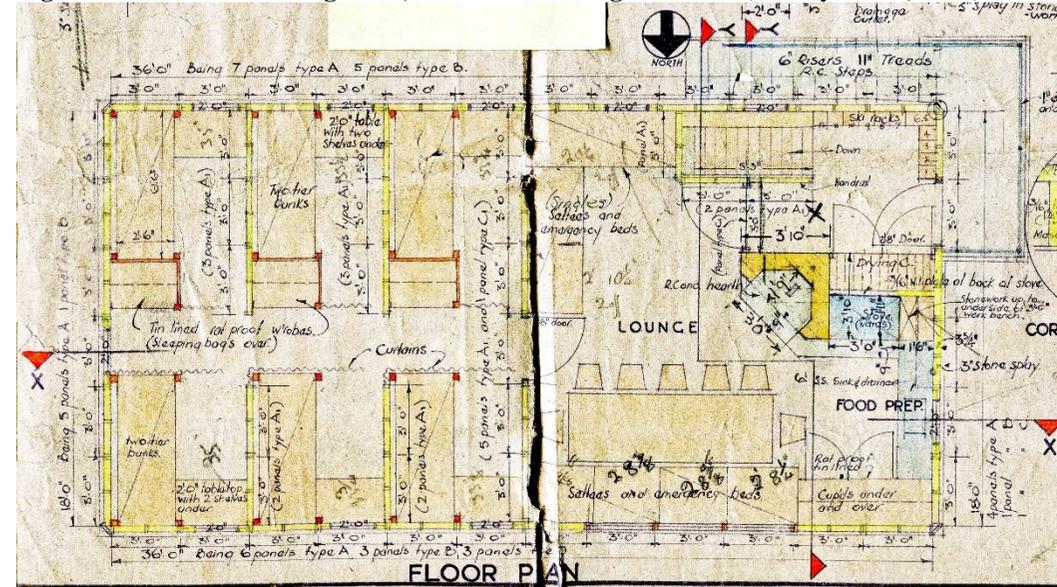
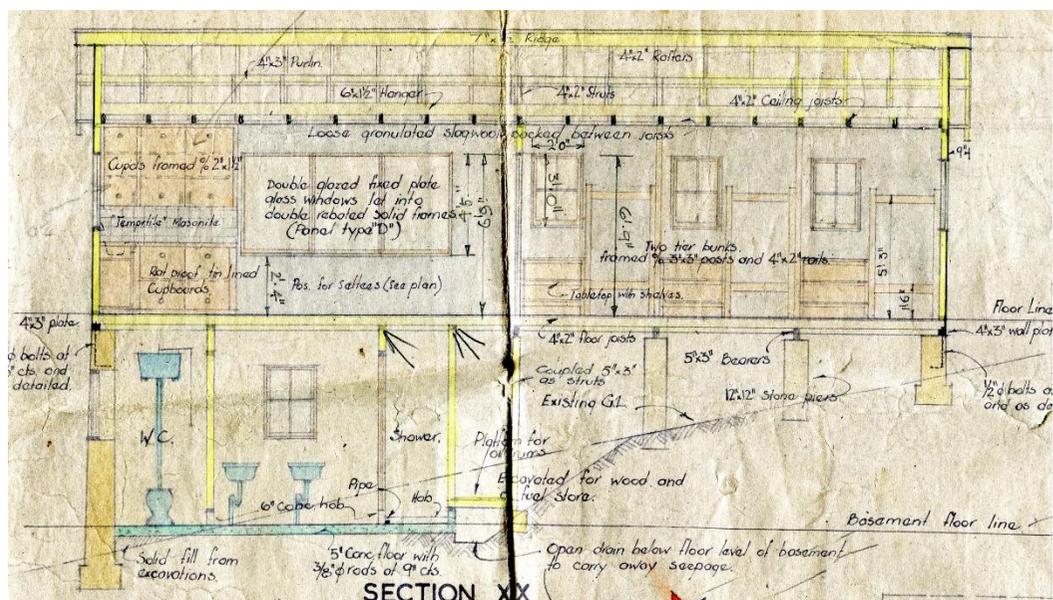


Figure 1. Part of Drawing No. 3, Lake Albina Lodge Plans. (Dudley Ward, 1950)



**Figure 2. Floor Plan showing sleeping cubicles, kitchen, lounge & food preparation areas**



**Figure 3. Cross-Section through Albina's Living, Sleeping and Ablutions Areas; note the provision of storage space in the cubicles for the occupants' clothing and gear; the flush toilet, and the provisions made for emergency accommodation in the Lounge.**

At an altitude of 1990m (6530ft), Lake Albina Lodge was Australia's highest habited building. The coming and going of skiers and walkers with their packs and ski gear, results in significant wear-and-tear to the fabric and fittings of mountain huts. Albina's wooden floors were covered with linoleum and rugs. Kerosene lamps and heaters needed regular maintenance and refueling from the 200 litre drums of fuel stored outside the lodge, when liquid fuels were used in mountain huts. Often in the Winter of 1953 for example, which was a heavy snow year, Albina's residents needed to do some plumbing work, in order to get the shower operating satisfactorily. Regular maintenance was needed because the fierce weather drives water into any joints or cracks in the timber cladding, doors and window frames, where water can then freeze and wedge the sides of the crack further apart. But members' summer work parties made significant improvements each year; for example, kerosene lamps and candles were replaced by electric lighting. Photo Nos. 3 to 5 were taken in 1957 in the kitchen, lounge and library areas of the lodge during one such work party.



**Photo No. 3. Kitchen of the Lake Albina Ski Lodge (Toni Smith, 1957)**



**Photo No. 4. Dining table in Lake Albina Lodge (Toni Smith, 1957)**



Photo No. 5. Library Area looking towards Albina's Entry Airlock (Toni Smith, 1957)

Lake Albina Lodge was constructed over 60 years ago by the many keen members of the Ski Tourers Association (STA), who also maintained it through regular work parties in the summer and autumn. Their voluntary work was gratefully acknowledged at the time. Virtually every STA member contributed to the building and/or maintenance of one or more of the various STA lodges.

**A Winter Holiday at Lake Albina Lodge** (based on Frank Leyden's 1954 Diary). Most skiers travelling from Sydney to Kosciuszko in 1954 were destined for the Chalet Charlotte's Pass and used the overnight Cooma Mail Train to get to Cooma, where they had breakfast and then travelled to the snow-line by taxi and/or by bus. Although the guest accommodation section of the Hotel Kosciuszko was destroyed by the 1951 fire, the staff quarters were being used as the ski hire depot for those planning to ski at Smiggins, Perisher and Charlotte's Pass and who needed to hire skis. Whilst some skiers could get a ride to the Chalet in the ex-army tracked bren-gun carriers (then being used for transporting Chalet guests to the Chalet), many Perisher and Main Range skiers had to ski or walk from Smiggins (or from the old hotel site in heavy snow seasons). In 1954, Frank's group waited at Smiggins for over 2 hours before deciding to walk to Charlotte's Pass in heavy rain, once

they had been able to arrange for their luggage to be taken to Charlotte's Pass by the Chalet's truck.

As they walked through the rain that was turning to wet snow at Pipers Gap, they met Johnny Abbottsmith returning in a Landrover and arranged to be taken to the Sugarloaf (near the Chalet) for ten shillings (A\$1.00) each. "Then walked to Chalet; picked up our skis; (met 4 other ski tourers headed for Kunama and Albina); went up over Charlottes 3pm; Weather easier, rain stopped; slight sago snow; a very poor winter – never seen ground so bare of snow in September; All bare over Charlottes and enormous patches of grass & rocks visible; almost like summer. Walked along road to about opposite Mt. Stilwell; then struck west down patchy snow to junction of Merritts and Snowy Creeks." After fitting climbing skins to their skis, Frank's group "went up valley towards Mueller's in medium visibility and mildly driving sago snow. Picked up snow pole line over Muellers Pass and arrived Albina 5.30pm." The remainder of Frank's group had left Charlottes Pass Chalet earlier and spent their first night in Kunama before joining Frank at Albina the next day. Frank noted in his diary "Hut very dirty and untidy. Previous occupant had been cooking on heaters. Was mistakenly using Dieseline in lamps & primuses with bad results. Lodge walls covered with sticky soot". This is an example of the problems that can arise when there is not a Winter resident manager at a lodge.



Photo No. 6. Albina Lodge blended nicely into its Surrounds (STA photo circa 1955)

### **KUNAMA HUETTE & Mt. NORTHCOTE SKI TOW**

In November 1951, the site for a new Ski Tourers Association lodge was selected in the magnificent Mt. Lee – Northcote – Clarke – Carruthers basin (see Map No. 1) and the name Kunama (aboriginal for snow) was selected for the basin and for the lodge. Work commenced in February 1952, all materials and fittings had to be carried down the precipitous slopes from the Northcote-Clark saddle by members. More than 70 tonnes had to be transported in this way to the site some 240m below the saddle. “Our first taste of real trouble came in February 1952 when a ‘willy willy’ wind storm severely damaged the shell of the building, such that it could not be completed prior to the onset of the 1952 Winter. Kunama Huette (at 1896m then the second highest Australian ski lodge) opened in 1953. . . .

“The Association in 1952 also decided to build a ski tow in the vicinity of its two existing lodges, Albina and Kunama. The slope on Mt. Northcote, probably the finest in the country for a tow, was selected” (Charles Anton, 1962). Construction of the Tow and Tow House commenced in 1953 and by

June the lift line was set out, locations for the poles and pulleys were selected and the tow rope was laid out. Unfortunately, when the volunteers returned the following weekend to continue their work, they found the tow rope to be buried under large snow drifts and a huge cornice at the crest of the slope. No further work on the ski tow was possible for the remainder of the 1953 Ski Season.

“After the 1953 season’s disappointment with the tow, when it became completely buried, the top “A” frame was moved about fifty metres down the slope. The route was re-aligned and the number of poles was increased. On March 27 & 28, 1954, the tow was given a test run, which proved so successful that our April Bulletin carried the jubilant slogan ‘The Tow Does Go.’

“Queen’s Birthday week-end in June 1954 was the real test of the tow under winter conditions. A large party of twenty-seven went to Kunama and Albina for the week-end. On Saturday all available hands were put to work under the direction of Geoffrey Hughes (Chairman of the Tow Sub-committee) placing the tow rope in position. In the afternoon last-minute alterations were made to the “A” frame and pulleys and the engine was started. Shortly after, the party was rewarded for their labour when the engine was put into gear and the rope started to move, with the first skier (by kind invitation – Charles Anton) being towed up Mt. Northcote. That afternoon the lift worked for three hours and members rode up and skied down the tow slope like happy yo-yos! In the July 1954 Bulletin we exclaimed “It goes and Tows”.

“Having learned our lesson the previous year when, in June, the tow was left unattended and the rope buried, we took the rope in and did not bring it out again until the beginning of July, when Harry Malcher took up residence at Kunama. On July 11 1954, a brilliant Sunday morning, about seventy guests, mainly K.A.C (Kosciuszko Alpine Club) members, skied or travelled in three snowmobiles to Kunama for the official opening of the tow, with our Treasurer, Robert Ward, acting as host. It was a heart-warming sight for those who had toiled so long and who had been disappointed so often, to see the Northcote ski slopes dotted with skiers and long queues forming at the start of the tow. Such happy activity in this lovely corner of the Main Range brought to mind a day, only two years back, when two skis and two stocks, stuck in the snow on a knoll, marked the site where Kunama Huette now

stands; leading from the knoll was a single track to the present position of the Tow Hut and up Northcote along the route where the tow now operates were footmarks measuring the distance to the top. A dream come true!”

“All through the winter the tow operated with almost monotonous regularity and individual skiers and clubs made good use of it. The K.A.C. (Kosciuszko Alpine Club) for instance, held its club races at Kunama and had five snowmobiles and nearly 100 skiers in the area. The Sydney Ski Club Races also took place near the tow. The Ski Club of Australia booked Kunama for the first week of its club season and the Club’s giant slalom was held on the tow slope. The Interstate Giant Slalom of the 1954 National Skiing Championships was also run on Mt. Northcote, giving the Victorian racers an opportunity to see our Main Range projects.”

“At the October holiday weekend, long after all other tows in Australia had ceased operations, our lift was still running. Many day visitors from the Chalet used the Northcote Tow after the skiing season had ended at Charlottes Pass.”

“**Kunama Huette** was booked out for most of the (1954) season. The outstanding new feature, electric light, delighted resident members. Harry Malcher, our Kunama area manager, did a fine job in running the tow and looking after Kunama, and members were full of praise for his efforts.”

“**Midsummer Races:** Races for the Albina Summer Slalom Cup and the Hans Neering Memorial Trophy, usually run between Christmas and New Year, had to be cancelled owing to lack of snow. We hope for better luck this year.”

“Our thanks are due to those members of the Association who, for the past few years, have worked hard and had to put up with so many disappointments. I feel that they are being repaid by such sights as fifty or sixty skiers enjoying themselves on the Piste alongside the Ski Tow on Mt. Northcote, or a sunrise watched through the picture window at Kunama” (Charles Anton, Jan. 1955).

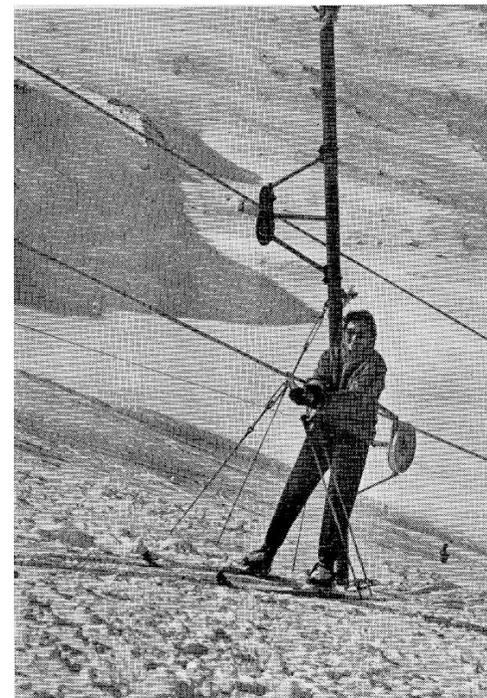


Photo No.7. “Sasha” Nekvapil riding the Northcote Tow in 1954 (G.E.F. Hughes)

The Northcote Tow and Kunama operated very well in the 1955 Winter. But the 1956 Winter was characterized by very heavy snowfalls. An avalanche from Mt. Clarke destroyed Kunama Huette just after day-break on July 12, 1956, killing Roslyn Wesche whilst other huette occupants had lucky escapes from serious injury. Three weeks later the Northcote Tow House burnt down. Rebuilding on the Main Range was not possible under the then recently amended Park Regulations and STA’s attention turned to the Thredbo Valley.

### **SKI DEVELOPMENT IN THE THREDBO VALLEY**

The Snowy Mountains Authority constructed 4WD vehicle access tracks and the small Friday Flat Construction Camp in the Thredbo Valley in 1955, to link its work sites in the Guthega – Jindabyne area to those in the Geehi – Khancoban area. Tony Sponar and Eric Nicholls commenced looking into the possibility of building a chairlift from the floor of the Thredbo Valley up the steep slopes of the Ramshead Range in September 1954. They were joined by Geoffrey Hughes and Charles Anton to establish the “Kosciuszko Chairlift and Thredbo Hotel Syndicate”. The Syndicate met with the Kosciuszko Park

Trust in May 1955 to discuss the possibility of such a development. At that time the STA owed the Park almost \$2,000 for the costs of Park's transporting building materials and supplies to the STA lodges. "Charles was asking the Trust to forgive the debt on the basis that the Ski Tourers' Huts provided safety for Main Range skiers". The Park's Chairman suggested that the Syndicate "find a backer with real money. Then come and see us again and we will talk seriously with you". A suitable backer was found in Thyne Reid, a member of the Ski Club of Australia, who became Chairman of Directors of Kosciuszko Thredbo Limited. (Geoffrey Hughes, 2008. *"Starting Thredbo"*). A search was then commenced in the Thredbo Valley for the best chairlift alignment to suit the terrain and the best ski village site near the bottom of the proposed chairlift.

Tony Sponar, Geoffrey Hughes and Charles Anton undertook about ten survey trips in the winter of 1955 to assess the skiing potential of the Thredbo Valley, commencing with the George Chisholm Course on the steep slopes of the Ramshead Range about 3km from the Charlotte's Pass Chalet and about 4km downstream from the site ultimately selected for Thredbo. The thick scrub and unfavorably steep ground contours near the George Chisholm Course re-focused the search onto the more open slopes linking Crackenback Peak (1950m altitude) with Friday Flat (1400m altitude). John Turner accompanied Charles Anton on skis on a couple of these winter survey trips from the Chalet to Friday Flat via Crackenback Peak. In January and February 1956, Tony Sponar, Danny Collman and a team of Snowy Mountains Authority (SMA) labourers spent several week-ends clearing a survey track for the proposed Thredbo Valley Chairlift.

In March 1956, Charles Anton reported (Ski Year Book 1956) "An experimental trail along the route of the projected chair lift has been cleared this summer (Photo No.8), and it is intended to get an access road built by the S.M.A. before the onset of winter" in 1956. "A public company will shortly be formed, and skiers and members of the general public asked to subscribe. It is hoped that access roads, chair lift, hotel accommodating about 100 guests, hydro-electric scheme, and the nucleus of an alpine village at Friday Flat will be completed for the 1957 winter season. Members of the S.T.A. intend to erect a snow-pole line this summer from Crackenback Peak to link up with the snowpoles on the Kosciusko summit road near the second Snowy bridge not far from Seamans Memorial Hut. This will give safe, snow-poled

access this winter to Albina and Kunama from Friday Flat via the cleared chair lift track."



**Photo No.8 Survey Trail along Proposed Route of Thredbo Chairlift (Toni Smith, 1956)**

Up until 1957, winter access to the Main Range and Lake Albina Lodge was usually via the Charlottes Pass Chalet. Since the Kosciuszko Summit Road was not usually snow-cleared beyond Smiggin Holes in the winters of the nineteen-fifties, most Main Range tourers heading for Lake Albina Lodge needed to first get to the Chalet. The best they could hope for was to be towed behind a snowmobile, as the Chalet's snowmobiles were fully utilized transporting the Chalet guests, their food and fuel, to and from the end of the snow-cleared road. Main Range access via Thredbo very quickly became the norm in winter. The Ski Tourers built Roslyn Lodge in Thredbo (using a Snowy Scheme barracks building purchased in Guthega for \$800 and then moved to Thredbo by road) and subsequently Kareela Lodge at the top of the

Thredbo Chairlift, as two of their chain of lodges accessing the Main Range Peaks and connecting them to the established Kosciuszko Ski Resorts.

### INNOVATION AT POUNDS CREEK HUT

Frank Leyden's party of 10 ski tourers overnighted (August 22, 1945) in Pounds Creek Hut, located about 40m above the south-eastern bank of the Snowy River. His party had arrived mid-afternoon with a threatening western sky and gently falling snow and no wind. They had skied from Whites River Hut via Mount Tate. Pounds Creek Hut was in good condition with 6 beds and 5 mattresses, plus 5 chairs with backs and 2 good tables. Frank reported that the fire burns and heats well and that there was some cutlery and billies.

But on Wednesday 7 August 1946, Frank's next visit to Pounds Creek Hut, he reported that Pounds Hut was in an almost uninhabitable state; water from melting snow in the ceiling cavity was pouring down onto the mattresses and beds; and the floor was covered in ice. His party departed Pounds Creek Hut at 3.00pm and arrived at the Charlottes Pass Chalet at 4.30pm. There was no indication as to the cause of this inundation by snow/water. Perhaps a door had been left unsecured and it was blown open, allowing snow and rainwater to accumulate inside? Alternately, snow may have been blown through gaps between the walls and roof. This 1946 event underlines the value of every mountain hut having a caretaker group that not only maintains a stock of emergency supplies in the hut, but also performs whatever repairs might be necessary to keep the hut weather-tight and hygienic. Possibly as a result of this inundation, one of the hut's two entry doors was permanently sealed shut.

In February 1956, Charles Anton announced in the 1956 Ski Year Book, that the Ski Tourers' Association had applied to the Kosciuszko State Park to take over and re-build the Pounds Creek hut and that the Park had granted this request. A band of S.T.A. enthusiasts led by John Turner then embarked on the conversion and enlargement of this basic shelter-hut to become Illawong Lodge, a very comfortable 8 bed lodge near the foot of Mt. Twynam and 1.3km from the impounded waters of the Guthega Dam. In full view of the lodge are

Mt. Twynam and Mt. Tate, whose western faces offer some of the longest and steepest ski runs in the Australian Alps (Andrews, *Skiing the Western Faces, Kosciusko*. 1993).

A brief description of the refurbishment and enlargement work to create Illawong Lodge was given in the Third Instalment of this Australian Ski Heritage Series illustrated by Photo Nos. 19 to 29 in that instalment. The Pounds Creek Hut conversion to Illawong Lodge demonstrates the innovative approach that characterized the Ski Tourers Association. A colour movie including scenes of the main Illawong construction work was filmed in the period Easter 1956 to 1959 and a number of screen captures from the movie are presented here. The initial work commenced a few days prior to Easter 1956, with most of the works program carried out between October 1956 and the onset of the 1957 Ski Season. The 1956 Ski Season had very heavy snowfalls with some large snow drifts persisting into the 56/57 summer. Fortunately, the Illawong site itself was relatively free of snow during that summer.



**Photo No. 11 Work Party at Illawong (John Turner at left, Leon Smith at right)  
(Toni Smith, Xmas 1956)**

The initial thinking had been to use the Pounds Creek Hut as a shelter, workshop and store for a new lodge. However, there are enormous physical

difficulties of getting building materials into a site like Illawong, where all off-road vehicles are banned and the nearest public vehicle tracks were about 3.5km away from the site in the direction of the Charlottes Pass Chalet or 2.5km away in the direction of Guthega. Thick scrub and dense forest occurred in the steeply undulating country that adjoined the stored waters of the Guthega dam, but the south-eastern bank of the Snowy River upstream from those stored waters is more open, with gently undulating herbfields, shrubs and heath. There were no walking tracks into the Pounds Creek Hut from either direction. It is likely that at least some of the building materials, used to build the original hut, had been brought to the site by pack horses travelling down the valley of Spencers Creek from the Charlottes Pass Road.

The Guthega option, with the rugged topography and thick scrub adjoining the Guthega Dam, required the STA to have a boat in which to convey bulky, heavy building materials across the Guthega Dam and around the rough country, an over-water trip of about 1.0 km when the dam was nearly full.



**Photo No. 13 Charles Anton loading boat on Guthega Dam, 1956 (John Turner)**

Fortunately, following the Easter 1956 Work Party at Pounds Creek Hut, the decision had been made to incorporate the existing hut into the new Illawong Lodge. Not only did this decision reduce the quantity of building materials that needed to be carried into the site in the 1956/57 Summer, but also this retention of the original building, with its significant ski heritage values, possibly saved Illawong from demolition in the 1980's when Albina was destroyed by NPWS. Photo Nos. 17 and 18 show the new addition to Pounds Creek Hut taking shape.

About half of the building materials were carried the 1.2 km from the boat unloading area at the headwaters of Guthega Dam to the hut, by club members (Photo Nos 14 - 16) and the remainder was sledged to the hut by horse and handlers (as illustrated by Photo Nos 19 - 23). Mick, the horse in these photos, was kindly loaned by Stan M'Guinn, then manager of the Charlotte's Pass Chalet. The building of Illawong in the nineteen fifties was made possible by all sorts of people. There were AAC members and their families, tradespeople, groups of students, workers from the Snowy Mountains Authority and even passers-by. Illawong was completed in less than two years. It had its own water supply, septic tank and electric lighting. There was an automatic hot-water service, gas cooking, refrigerator, drying



**Photo No. 12 Pounds Creek Hut in the 1955 Winter (John Turner)**

room with exhaust fan, innerspring mattresses and carpets. It was linked to Guthega by snow-pole line.



**Photo No. 14 Unloading Building Materials from Guthega Dam boat (John Turner)**



**Photo No. 15 Carrying Timber using a Yukon-type Frame Pack (John Turner)**



**Photo No. 16 Volunteer Carrying Timber Beam (John Turner)**



Photo No. 17 Illawong Extension to Pounds Creek Hut (John Turner, 1956)



Photo No.19 Mick, Handler & Sled (John Turner, 1956)



Photo No.18 Mick rests as the New Frame Takes Shape (John Turner, 1956)



Photo No. 20 Mick Hauling Timber from the Bank of Snowy River (John Turner)



Photo No. 21 Almost Half-way to Pounds Creek Hut (John Turner)



Photo No. 23 Unloading Timber in Front of Illawong Lodge (John Turner)



Photo No. 22 Approaching the new Illawong Lodge (John Turner)



Photo No. 24 Illawong Lodge nearly at "Lock-up" Stage (John Turner, 1957)

Photo No. 26 Charles Anton & Yutta Lunching at Illawong (John Turner, 1957)



Photo No. 27 Illawong Lodge in the 1957 Winter (John Turner)  
**BRIDGING THE SNOWY RIVER AT ILLAWONG**

The Snowy River near Illawong is difficult to cross for much of the year. It is a rock-climbing exercise to even get down to river-level at several places. The rocks in the river and adjacent to it, can be ice-coated for much of each winter. Whilst the flow in Summer might only be about 2 cubic metres per second, it can increase to about 50 cubic metres per second in the Spring thaw, with many rocks in the riverbed submerged. It was often necessary to walk upstream along the river bank for about 800 metres, to above its junction with Spencers Creek, in order to find a reasonably safe crossing point. A bridge across the Snowy River was definitely needed. A suspension bridge had existed across the Snowy further upstream at Charlottes Pass, and that bridge swayed alarmingly whenever anyone was crossing it. John Turner designed an innovative, cable-stayed bridge with wooden deck for Illawong, that would be much more stable and much easier to cross than the (ill-fated) Charlottes Pass Bridge over the Snowy, which was subsequently swept away in a flood in 1958.



Photo No. 25 Kitchen of Illawong Lodge in 1957 (John Turner)





**Photo No. 28 John Turner working on a 3.7m long section of deck of the first bridge**  
The first Illawong Bridge consisted of six wooden sections, each 3.7m long, (Photo No. 28) resting on two steel cables that had been anchored to large granite boulders on each bank. Once the supporting cables had been installed and tensioned, each wooden section was assembled on the Illawong side of the Snowy River and then slid along the cables to its final position (Photo numbers 29 and 30). Each deck section was then secured to the supporting cables (Photo No. 30) and the hand-rail cables were installed. The completed bridge was 22.5m long and 4m above the river at the bridge's lowest point (Photo No. 31).



**Photo No. 29 Pulling assembled wooden deck sections across the Snowy (John Turner)**

The first bridge was not high enough above the river and was partially destroyed by a flood in the Winter of 1958 (Photo No.32). The granite boulder to which the bridge had been attached on the Twynam Bank, was completely pulled out of the ground and dragged closer to the Snowy River. This event clearly demonstrated that the deck of the replacement bridge would have to be at a significantly higher level above the Snowy River, if the replacement bridge was to avoid flood damage in the future.



Photo No. 30 Securing wooden decking to supporting cables (John Turner 1957)



Photo No. 31 The Freshly Completed (First) Bridge (John Turner, 1957)



Photo No. 32 Flood Damage to Illawong's First Bridge (Toni Smith 1958)

The first bridge had remained relatively intact on the Illawong side of the Snowy but it was clear that the replacement bridge needed to be connected to a much larger boulder of granite located higher up the Mt. Twynam Bank of the Snowy. This time the bridge was 41m long and 6.7m above the Snowy River. Experience with the first bridge indicated that the second did not have to be quite as wide as the first bridge, since pedestrians didn't normally need to pass one another part-way across the bridge. Photo nos. 33 and 34 show the second bridge being built in the Summer of 1958/59. After ten years of service, the timber and cables had significantly deteriorated under the extreme local climatic conditions and Tim Lamble designed and supervised the construction of the current fully-galvanised steel bridge, which was erected in the Summer of 1971. The National Parks and Wildlife Service kindly made their helicopter available for a couple of hours for the lift of the various parts of the third bridge from the Charlottes Pass Road to the bridge site, thus saving the days of backbreaking effort that would have been required to manually carry the steel bridge components from the road to the bank of the Snowy River at Illawong.

The ingenuity and hard work of the Ski Tourers, resulted in the establishment of probably the finest ski touring lodge in Australia, set in the midst of our

best downhill and touring snowfields. For the many volunteers who donated their skills and time, this was the fulfillment of the dream of a life-time.



Photo No. 33 Assembling the Second Illawong Bridge (John Turner, 1959)



Photo No. 34 The Second Bridge nearing Completion (John Turner, 1959)  
**TRIAL OF THE GAM TOW AT LAKE ALBINA LODGE**

John Gam was an Australian who graduated in Engineering at the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and returned to Australia to work for the firm of consulting engineers involved in the construction of the Thredbo Chairlift. When Charles Anton heard that John had **seen** a portable ski tow in the USA, Charles wanted John to **design** a similar portable ski tow for use on the Kosciuszko Main Range, particularly for the AAC Summer Races that were mostly held on a huge 1500m long snow drift (often called the South America Drift, because of its characteristic shape) that persisted well into Summer on the south side of Mt Northcote (facing Seaman's Hut).

The Gam Tow was to have been a light-weight thing, so instead of having an endless rope which the skiers gripped with 'Nuncrackers' whilst the continuously moving rope conveyed the skiers to the top of the slope, Charles Anton wanted a T-bar type of lift. This was to be achieved by using a steel cable supported on poles with one T-bar at the top of the slope and another T-bar at the bottom. In principle, two skiers would get onto the T-bar at the bottom and pull a lanyard to cause the motor to deliver full power and pull

them up the hill, whilst simultaneously, the upper T-bar returned to the bottom, ready for the next customers, whilst the throttle returned to idle.

The main problem was that the STA had insufficient funds to build a sufficiently robust machine that was capable of operating successfully in the environmental extremes of the Main Range. Charles Anton directed John Gam to cut corners, so as to save money. For example, the power unit of the tow was built on a hardwood frame instead of a steel frame and the resulting hardwood frame proved to be insufficiently rigid to maintain the proper alignment of the various components. Hence the centrifugal clutch would not properly disengage. “Also, instead of having a hydraulic reversing gear-box, which would have been very efficient, John was obliged to contrive a mechanical gear-box” (Leon Smith, 1970). “The control mechanism, through no fault of John Gam, was crude and inefficient, and the very environment made it unworkable. . . . The whole thing had to be set up with anchors top and bottom, and a winch had to be used to keep the correct tension throughout the tow. If it was erected for any length of time in falling snow, it iced up badly.” John Gam was angered by Charles Anton’s interference in the design of the portable tow and they quarrelled bitterly.

The Gam Tow was erected on the South America Drift for the Summer Races in December 1957 but, despite the combined efforts of Charles, Lubor Vozab and Leon Smith, the Gam Tow could not be made to operate as a ski tow. The tow was then stored in the basement of the Lake Albina Lodge whilst various possible modifications were considered and trialled.

Leon Smith wrote in 1970 that “Lou Vozab – a master of improvisation – eventually got the tow working by disconnecting the reversing gear-box, taking off the T-bars and turning it into an endless rope tow” (Photo No. 35). Albina skiers did get a few runs on the Gam Tow on that particular day in September 1958. The STA never again tried to build uphill transport.

John Gam formed his own ski lift company and successfully built two T-Bar ski lifts. These lifts were the first T-bar ski lift to be built in the Perisher Valley and one of the first T-bars built at Mt. Buller and both operated very successfully for many years. Unfortunately John Gam was killed in a road smash immediately prior to Christmas in 1959.



Photo No. 35. September 1958 Trial of the Gam Tow at Albina (Toni Smith)

## COMPULSORY ACQUISITION OF ALBINA LODGE

The Kosciuszko Park authorities had taken over the Lake Albina Lodge in 1969 and it is interesting to discover how well the hut performed without its pre-1969 regular maintenance and restocking of food and fuel. Guy Holdgate, an experienced ski tourer of both the NSW and Victorian alpine areas, spent a number of days at the lodge in the very heavy snow year of 1981. The snow had built up to the level of the upstairs windows of the lodge, as can be seen in Photo Nos. 36 & 37. Despite the lack of regular maintenance for more than 10 years, Guy states “My recollection was the place was well looked after, but the heating and lighting systems were disconnected, with parts thereof still on the walls. I seem to remember there was a downstairs loo but was inoperable (blocked up). I also remember we had a choice of rooms with bunks; I think some bunks might have had mattresses. We had our own cookers/stoves and food enough for a week. There were some chairs/benches and a table to sit around and cook/play cards etc., during the blizzards outside.” In between the storms, their ski touring party experienced some

good weather with spectacular views and well packed snow. Albina “was a very welcome refuge”.



**Photo No. 36 Lake Albina Lodge Partly Buried under Snow in 1981 (Guy Holdgate)**



**Photo No. 37 External Condition of Albina Lodge in 1981 Winter (Guy Holdgate)**

In his 1982 book, *Huts of the High Country*, author Klaus Hueneke reports (on Page 8) “Albina, the next shelter on the lakes walk, is the most popular outback hut in the mountains with over 2000 visitors a year. Such focus of interest is largely due to its prominent position overlooking the glacial valley of Lake Albina. It is a place of exquisite micro-environments displaying a mosaic of deep green mosses, delicate flowers, hidden ferns, wind-pruned shrubs, ice plucked rocks, quiet water pools and brown stained snow patches.”

As can be seen in Map No. 1, presented at the beginning of this Appendix, there are numerous outstanding ski runs in the Mount Townsend – Carruthers Peak Area with descents of 500 to 800 vertical metres on slopes of 14 degrees to 26 degrees. Whilst the descent of any of these runs might take about half an hour, or less, the climb out afterwards might take between two and three hours. (*For those not used to assessing ski runs by their slope angle and vertical descent, here are a couple of comparisons. The top half of Thredbo’s Ramshead Chairlift and the lower half of the Mount Perisher Triple Chairlift, both average 20 degrees. The fall between the top station of Thredbo’s Crackenback Chairlift and its bottom station is 550m vertical;*

*from the top of Mount Perisher to the bottom station of the Mount Perisher Triple Chairlift is a fall of 280m vertical.)*

Mount Townsend's outstanding ski runs are 6.5km from Charlottes Pass Ski Resort and 8.5km from the top station of Thredbo's Crackenback Chairlift. It should be noted that skis and snowshoes are the only permitted mode of winter access. To undertake the return trip on alpine skis to Mount Townsend from one of these resorts, so as to be able to ski one of the top runs down the Western Faces, all in the same day, is a formidable task requiring at least eight hours under good conditions. Given the variability of both snow and weather conditions in the Australian Alps, it seems quite unrealistic to require those skiing these advanced runs on the Western Faces, to return to Thredbo or Charlottes Pass each night. The death of four snow boarders in a snow cave south of Seamans Hut on the night of 7 August 1999 (Eighth Instalment in this series), demonstrated that snow caves and tents can become death traps if heavy snowfalls occur and/or large snowdrifts develop in windy conditions.

The demolition of the Lake Albina Lodge in February 1983, by workmen employed by the Kosciuszko Park (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service) simply defied logic. The Ski Tourers Association (STA) had been founded on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1950 to build the Lake Albina Lodge, with the active support of the Park. The lodge provided shelter to all Park Visitors who passed that way, even though the quality of the accommodation declined following Albina's compulsory resumption in 1969. Visitor enjoyment of the Mt. Townsend area and visitor safety, was compromised by Albina's demolition.



**Photo No. 38 View North along Western Faces of the Main Range (C. Peck)**



**Photo No. 39. Leaving Charlottes Pass for Mt. Townsend (peak on right-hand edge of photo) one must first cross the Snowy River and travel 6.5km to reach the top of the best ski runs ! The only shelter hut in the area is the Seamans Memorial Hut on the Mt. Kosciuszko Track, over 3km from Mt. Townsend and 4.5km from Charlottes Pass.**



**Photo No. 40. Having crossed the Snowy River at an altitude of 1700m and heading for Mt. Townsend (in shadow against the sky-line) at an altitude of 2200m, this is the terrain one must cross for 6.5km in order to reach the top of the best ski runs down the Western Faces of the Main Range.**