

WARRUGANG IS BORN

By George Failes

The actual decision date to start Warrugang Ski Club can be reasonably identified. But the real history starts before this. Skiing had not become as popular then as it is today (1975). Even when Warrugang was built there was only a handful of club lodges in the whole valley – and there were no commercial lodges or hotels and no T-bars or chairlifts.

So I take you back to the early 50's and the Students Geological Society. It was this society of geology students from the University of Sydney which laid the foundation for the events which followed.

The first excursions of this group to Kosciusko were summer walking trips. No doubt there were keen bushwalkers in the Society who provided initial enthusiasm. So far as can be remembered the principal organiser of the two summer excursions to Kosciusko was one, Cliff McElroy. The years were 1950 and 1951.

Who could fail to be impressed by the grandeur of the mountains and the potential for winter sports? Who indeed! Certainly not geology students. It was inevitable that bushwalking should give way to skiing – for tryout at least. So the next year, 1952, it was a winter trip for the Society rather than a summer one. On this occasion the ringleaders were Harry Mladek, Don Pinkstone and John Barrie. They collected together a party of 27 comprising two who had skied before, and 25 who hadn't.

The group had hired Harry Pemble's mother's truck which they had filled with mattresses, straw, food, grog and people. They left Sydney on 9 August 1952 and arrived back at Central Station at 8.00 am on 16th August.

Headquarters for the first truck trip was Smiggin Holes – for no better reason than they could not go any further with the truck.

The group adopted the "lovely old tumbledown" Smiggins Café as their own. Its potbellied stove was a real treat when temperatures got down to below freezing. Across the road were two derelict Norwegian pre-fabricated huts left there by the Snowy Mountains Authority. They weren't particularly habitable as they were inches deep in water and ice all the time – but they did have hooks for hanging things.

The nights were cold – it got down to 12 degrees Fahrenheit (-11 C). But many times through a night someone would wipe a sweaty brow, throw back the tarpaulin and cry "Heft, it's hot in here". With 27 packed into the communal bed it was a case of "when one rolled over, we all rolled over" and that many bodies generate a lot of heat

Skiing was hard work in those days, without tows, chairlifts, or oversnow transport. So it was quite a feat that a touring party of 12 set out for the Chalet. They arrived about 3.30 in the afternoon and were delighted to find they had tows. It wasn't long before all remnants of wax were gone (who can remember pre-plastic sole days?) and with it getting dark there was little chance of the party making it safely back to Smiggins. So they went to see the manager – "You shouldn't have come, he said, "The Ski Council wouldn't like it". But those were the days when the spirit of the mountains really meant something and they stayed.

One of the party knew someone who was staying there and so they took over the bathroom and wallowed in luxury.

Can you imagine the dust that billowed into the back of a truck all the way on unsealed roads from Canberra to Smiggins – and this compounded by a further five days without a bath or shower!

That was really the year that started it all.

Without the enthusiasm that was built up that year there might not have been a second trip. But there was.

The "second truck trip" left Sydney at 4.00 pm on Friday 28 August 1953 (and returned on 6 September). The party arrived in Cooma at 3.00 am Saturday and not one petrol station was open! The temperature was 30 degrees F (-1 C). What with waiting for petrol and a two hour wait for skis it was 10.30 am before the truck reached Smiggins Holes. Alas, the huts had all fallen down so the party retreated down to the old Hotel site – the remains, as it was then, of the fire and which is now Sponars. Naturally they met the manager in the bar! After a few ales he said they could stay so up went the mattresses etc. to the third floor where conditions- were very liveable. Luxuries there were too – on the ground floor one cold tap worked and one toilet.

Memory hath it that the party included John Barrie, Paul Hoelscher, Jan Horder, Laureen Horder, Bot Cater, Peter O'Halloran, (and his now wife Marge), Betty Bruncker, Bill Richards, "Hank the Plank" and five Med students including Dave Prosser, Ron Elmsley and Brian Purser. Barbie Graham had to be there as well otherwise I wouldn't have all this. (There must have been others as well whom I haven't yet identified).

The party stayed at the Hotel that year and skied the Grand Slam – they didn't get back to Smiggins. It was fun – and there was courting. Marge was doing a ballet dance through the bare concrete – bashed her toe and bled profusely. Peter came to her rescue and carried her off. Later she was seen cosily in his arms while he combed her hair.

It is believed that John Barrie spoke the magic words, "Let's build a ski hut'.

Certainly that night was spent arguing colour schemes for the roof and inside the hut. And there is no question that John was a real enthusiast – one who organised people and money.

1954 was the founding year for Warrugang.

Easter of that year was the hut site selection party. It was easier in those days – you picked your site and you built.

No truck trip this year – people made their own way to Kosciusko. Barbie Graham went down with Harry Mladek on his motorbike and sidecar. They left Sydney at 5 pm on Thursday 15 April 1954 and stayed overnight at Gorman House, Canberra, with Lois Naesmith (now Humphrey). There were several hell stretches on the Cooma Road – totally unsealed in those days. Bits of bike kept falling off – Barbie says they put the chain back on 29 times between Canberra and Kosciusko. Barbie and Harry spent the morning fixing the bike. The rest of the party went off and they found the site.

It was Saturday, 17 April 1954. There was quite a party that night!

It was obvious that water would be needed so out went the diviners with fencing wire divining rods. The real success was Lois Naesmith. Even blindfolded and taken backwards and forwards across Mt Wheatley her rods always dipped at the same spot. The dam was built on Sunday 18 April

The return trip to Sydney was as hellish as the forward – a broken spring, innumerable punctures and finally no lights on the bike. But despite it all – we had a site.

The Club was officially registered as a company "Warrugang Ski Club Limited" on 23 December 1954.

ADDENDUM

There's a lot more to Warrugang's History; including lighter moments when the snowfall was so great that members would ski off the roof of the lodge.

From those humble beginnings, Warrugang surged to become a very successful ski club.

The lodge expanded in size from a common area for eating and sleeping (in sleeping bags) to the creation of family rooms in the 1960s and then into 2 bedded room accommodation in the 1970s.

At the end of 2000, the old lodge was demolished as it was less expensive to rebuild than to substantially upgrade the lodge to comply with new fire safety regulations.

From the early days, there was a high focus on ski-racing since including Inter-lodge racing, the KAC, the Perisher Cup, Pub to Pub, and the WOMB cup and our own championships.

The trophies displayed around the lodge indicate how successful Warrugang members have been in skiing over its 70 years.

In the same way as ski and boot technology has improved, cross-country skiing has been overtaken by downhill skiing, snowboards burgeoned and changes have occurred in the ownership and operations of the Perisher ski area, the competitions available for Warrugang members has changed; to which Warrugang has adapted.