

SHANN TURNBULL – AN ORAL HISTORY
Interviewed by Edie Swift, Woollahra NSW, 8th July 2018



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Conducted by Edith Swift, Woollahra, March 8th, 2018.

*This is Edie Swift and I am interviewing Shann Turnbull at his home in Woollahra, Sydney.
Shann, let's start at the beginning. What was the date of your birth and where were you born?*

I was born on January 12th, 1934 in Melbourne, Australia.

Can you talk about your early years and how you started skiing?

I was growing up in Launceston in Tasmania. Then World War II came along and I went to ten different schools on account of my father who was a medical practitioner and major in the army. At the end of the war in 1946 when I was twelve years old, he took my sister and myself to Mt Buffalo to go skiing at Dingo Dell. There were only two places in Australia where it was practical to take children in those days. One was the Railway Chalet at Mt Buffalo and the other one was the Hotel at Kosciuszko. So I think we spent about two weeks on a rope tow. My father took along an Austrian ski instructor who was given free accommodation as he was our private tutor. That got up the noses of the local ski school so when we did our proficiency tests, we failed. We didn't go to the organised ski school.

Back in Launceston, the home mountain was Ben Lomond and the ski club there was the Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club and it was only 60 kilometres from Launceston but it took about three hours to get from Launceston to the summit because it was about 2 hours walking up 600 metres.

Can you talk about what happened there, where you stayed? After that, you can talk about the next place you skied.

I think we started skiing there in 1947. You left your car at the bottom of the mountain and spent an hour climbing up about 300 feet to an old handmade wooden hut called Carr Villa - that is the name of cemetery in Launceston. Being children we weren't allowed to stay overnight at the Summit Hut. It was for adults only. So we had to camp at the Carr Villa Hut and in the morning you would have another 300 metres to climb up to what was called the Summit Hut. That was at the top of Ben Lomond. So you would walk up the ski slopes and ski down because there were no ski lifts or ski instructors. We would then go down and stay on Saturday night at Carr Villa and walk up the next day.

We had handmade Tasmanian hardwood skis. They had the old bear trap Kandahar bindings. I think our boots were army disposal ones with a steel shank put under the bottom of the soles to keep the compression from the heel to the toe so that the boot didn't buckle in the middle. The skis had no edges so we used to get a blow torch and burn Stockholm tar into the base to give it a running surface.



Carr Villa Hut - Fred Smithies 1947

After a year or two of skidding over the icy crags and rocks of Ben Lomond, the edges got a bit rounded. I had been to a carpentry school and so I put steel edges on our skis, which was vast improvement.

No ski instructors of course, so we learnt our skiing from text books written in the 1920s, doing kick turns, telemark turns and stem christies. Then in about 1947 I think my father got special permission to take my sister and I to the Summit Hut during the week-days when there wasn't any other body there. He hired a pack horse to take our provisions up because he was taking food for three people for five days and the sweat of the pack horse got into the bread, which I thought was utterly revolting. My father assured me that it would be quite OK and about the third day, when it was getting a bit stale, we freshened it up by putting water on it and baked it in the oven. I think I can remember finally eating it with my meals.



My father had the largest medical practice in northern Tasmania which got him elected to parliament. Then he became the Minister for Health, and so we moved to Hobart. In Hobart I first became a boarder at the Hutchins School in 1948 and in 1949 my father got a house at Sandy Bay, and from my school class room at Hutchins, I could look up at Mt Wellington and see people skiing on a bit of snow at the top. It is not a very good ski mountain at all.

Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club - Summit Hut 1947

There is one big drift where you could ski may be fifty metres at best. To go skiing, the main ski fields were at Lake Dobson that is about an hour and a half drive from Hobart. There were no snow ploughs or ski lifts, no ski instructors of course. You would walk in about six to ten kilometres to get to your lodge. The only lodge there which would take children was the Hobart Walking Club, so you had to go walking which was consistent with my love of the mountains. I met Jack Thwaites, quite a well-known photographer and pioneer in Tasmania, and he took me to the club, and I became a member in about 1948 or '49.

After I came back from Melbourne University in 1954, through the Walking Club I met a young Dutchman who had just arrived from...

Let's go back to where you were first, because we were talking about when you were a child.

I can remember when I was skiing, I used to watch and try and learn. I can remember getting places or wins in the Southern Tasmanian championships. Another event was in 1950 when I was sixteen I was appointed to represent the northern body on the controlling body of skiing in Tasmania – the controlling body in skiing in Tasmania was the Tasmanian Ski Council. The northern division was simply my home club – the Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club. The Southern division was an association of about four or five clubs, and the President of the Southern Division of the Tasmanian Ski Council was a fellow called V C Smith, who the Managing Director of the Cadbury's factory in Hobart. The Australian controlling body of skiing in those days was called the Australian National Ski Federation and they had two representatives from each of the three skiing states: New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. The Southern Division of the Tasmanian Ski Council appointed one delegate and the Northern Division that was my home club appointed another delegate to the national controlling body, the ANSF. So I found myself at the age of sixteen being on the controlling body of skiing in Australia, as a school boy.

In the same year, 1950, my father took my sister and myself to The Chalet at Kosciuszko during the September school holidays. We spent two weeks staying at The Chalet. I met all sorts of people that I would meet during my ski history, but I was invited as an outsider to race in the Australian Junior Championships which were held opposite The Chalet up the hill. I can remember being the winner with John Brockhoff from Victoria, another invitee, being the second runner and with Bill Davey coming third. Bill received the big cup because he was a member of the Ski Club of Australia which sponsored the races.

Charles Anton was there with his first wife, Margaret. They saw that we were both strong skiers and they invited us to go ski touring on the Main Range. We went out with Margaret and Charles and other people and we hiked up and skied down all the various Main Range mountains, skied down Little Austria. We had artificial skins for walking up the hills.



Shann Turnbull jumping through his poles off 'Legges Tor' on Ben Lomond circa 1950

I suffered badly from snow blindness because I wasn't aware of the problem - I wasn't warned about it at all - I was getting itchy red eyes.



Austrian and Romanian banners - 10th World University Games – Semmering Austria

On the last day I can remember that with Charles and the two ski instructors at The Chalet and others including Bill Davey, we went over to the Thredbo Valley to a place, now known as Saturday Peak. From there you could see Dead Horse Gap, and in comparison to the western slopes like Little Austria being exposed to the weather, Thredbo was a little bit sheltered, but a lot of others didn't believe it. It was a southern slope so it kept the snow for the longest time and Charles said: "This is the ideal place for a ski resort." It had been suggested earlier by the secretary of the Australian Ski National Federation with whom I had been in correspondence with as a member of the ANSF; Venn Wesche had suggested that the Thredbo Valley was a good site for a ski resort. That was my first exposure to Thredbo, and with Charles saying more or less "This is a place for a village" as part of the Ski Tourers' Association. Other people would disclaim who was the first to say that, but Charles was an activist and during that Christmas in 1950, he wrote to my father and said he was forming the Ski Tourers Association and would he and my sister and myself, like to be members.

My father coughed up the money to make us all foundation members of the Australian Ski Tourers' Association.

So still in Tasmania, I went to Melbourne University in 1952 to study engineering and science, and competed in the inter-varsity races. In those days there were only four events that you skied. They were the downhill, the slalom, the jump and the langlauf at the inter-varsity team's races and at the national races. I won the slalom, the downhill and the langlauf, and came second in the jump, so I became the university champion skier. At that stage in 1952, I also went into National Service. At the university we had an intake so I spent six months spread over two summers over university holidays.

Just before going to National Service at the university ski club we got an invitation from the international body of students to participate in the Tenth World University Winter Games. This came from a communist front organisation and they were desperate to get people from the western world to participate to advertise they had a world constituency.

They offered to pay the fares for one skier to represent Australia at these Games in February 1953.

So I managed to get a leave pass from the Air Force National Service and got a free ticket to go and wave an Australian flag at the opening ceremony in Vienna. The Games were held in the Russian Zone of course at Semmering which is a middling sort of ski resort - it's not a big resort - but that is where the Russians had control. So I competed there and I think I beat a few Italians, but it was only in the alpine events. It was only downhill and slalom. Giant slalom didn't exist in those days.

At the winding up closing ceremony held in a huge big hall with hundreds of people, I sat at the head table because I had come the furthest I was not from the communist world. So I sat on the left hand side of a big sturdy Russian general, Marshal Zhukov who was a hero of the Russian Army for pushing back the Nazis out of Leningrad and so on. So I was introduced to this Russian hero and he said "We must toast the students of the world. You must skol the liquid." I never drink, I don't drink alcohol. So I did what I was told by this big sturdy Russian general. So I swallowed it down and I didn't taste anything until suddenly I was coughing, then he said, "Take bread! Take bread!" I managed to get my breath back but as far as I was concerned, I had never experienced alcohol like that. The dinner went on and then he said "We make another toast! We make another toast for student friendship!" Even though he was a Russian general, he had a great reputation, I managed to say "No, I couldn't possibly again drink that fire water." So that was another adventure.

That was when Stalin died in February 1953 which was memorable. My ticket took me back via America and the Pacific. In those days it was the old DC6s. I left Australia in a Constellation. I remember Kasee telling me he came out to Australia and having a night at Raffles Hotel. I managed to do the same thing going back to Australia. Coming back to Australia, across the Atlantic we were on a Strato Cruiser, and then from America we were on a DC6 landing at some teeny little islands in the middle of the Pacific, and so I got back to Sydney Australia.

In 1954, back in Tasmania with a job as a cadet electrical engineer with the Hydro Electric Commission of Tasmania and it was in that year that I met this young Dutch guy who had just joined the Hobart Walking Club. It was Kasee Koeman who became a well known Thredbo identity. There were still no ski instructors in the Lake Dobson, Mt Field skiing areas so we taught each other. In those days the huts were at Lake Dobson and from there you climbed up a hundred metres up to the ski field on to what they called the Tarn Shelf. There used to be a track going up from Lake Dobson called the Golden Stairs, they cut it out and made a much more even grade track to get up to the ski fields. At Lake Dobson there was no skiing and so occasionally Kasee and I went skating on Lake Dobson. It was also very windy so we got a ground sheet to hold between us and went wind sailing across the Lake. The ice wasn't that firm and in the end we were paddling with our skates on which was a new sort of sport. So that was in 1954.

I think I might have gone to the main land to compete in the inter-state races. In 1957 when I was still in Tasmania, I went to compete in the main land races, getting various odd cups in 1955, the Olympic selection season for the Cortina Games. I should go back a bit. When I was skiing in Mt Buller in 1953, I was a member of the University Mountaineering Club; they did all sorts of adventurous things such as snow camping in the Baw Baws. So I started off snow camping at the Baw Baws in a little japara tent where I learnt the lesson that when you took your boots off at night you always leave them open. I forgot to leave them open so when they froze solid in the night, I could not get my foot in. It was impossible. I had frozen, wet boots. One thing to remember is – always leave your ski boots open so you can put your foot in to thaw out the ice. The other issue was that my eggs froze - I couldn't boil them without first thawing them out - then you needed extra time because the altitude of the Baw Baws lowers the boiling temperature, so I had to give extra time to allow my eggs to cook.

Also when I went to Buller, to save money I took my tent and went snow camping on Mt Buller near Bourke Street, and on the right hand side of Bourke Street, going up where I had my tent at Poo Corner, I used to invite people in for a drink. Everybody was curious about people who went snow camping. People didn't go snow camping then, and I was the only one on the mountain, and they had never heard of it.

The following year, I was invited to join a club for racers only. The Ski Club of Victoria had a hut made out of compressed straw, it had ten bunks and it had ten members. It was for race training so I was invited to be a member and there I met Frank Prihoda, John Wagner, Frank Siktanc. There were a couple of officials, who were members, like George Chisholm who was the official Olympic selector and manager of the Olympic teams, and John Young, his offsider who used manage the timing equipment for the racers. Because in those days you hand timed racers with stop watches. You laid out a telephone wire from the start so that the people at the bottom with hand stop watches could hear the start at the top, saying "Ready, set, go." I think some of them used German language to get you going and they took an average of the times with the hand held watches at the bottom of the mountain for downhill and slalom.

In the inter-varsity races we never had the telephone wire, so we had to use a semaphore system. At Mt Hotham at the university drag, I can remember we had somebody at the top and with the hand timers with watches at the bottom. When the racer finished at the bottom, the finisher would hold up his ski pole with a cloth on it to signify that the watches were back and they were ready for another start. The person at the top of the drag would then hold out his ski pole to say that he had received it and was about to then send the starting signal which was when he would move his ski pole from horizontal to the vertical. When you saw the flag drop at the top of the run, you would than start the stop watches. So that was how the downhill was done and the same arrangement happened for the slalom. Langlauf of course you started and finished at the same place.

Getting back to ski racing and skiing administration, I think in the various history books of skiing it is a point that has been overlooked – how the controlling body of skiing actually got involved and promoted the development of ski racing in the various places. Someone should really do a history of both of racing and of skiing administration, where I think there is a gap. It needs to be looked at by the Historical Society.

In 1952, Australia sent its first Olympic team away with George Chisholm as manager. There was Bob Arnott, Billy and Gordon Day, Christine Davy, sister to Bill Davy, who had been with me with Charles Anton viewing the Thredbo Valley potential. George saw the need for longer ski runs. Australians could not compete internationally because we didn't have sufficient downhill training. Our mountains weren't high enough to meet the minimal height for an official downhill. There were no giant slaloms or super giant slaloms in those days. It was just slalom and downhill – and that was it. George was very keen that we develop a resort which could at least get to the women's standard for downhill. The Thredbo valley was seen as a potential for that and the controlling body of skiing – I think by that time

the ACT had become a member of the ANSF – so there were now eight people on the controlling body for skiing in Australia.

To encourage the development of the Thredbo Valley they designated to have the Australian championships in the Thredbo Valley in 1954, which was the year before the Australian Olympic selection of 1955. So we all trooped out from the Chalet, about 3 or 4 kilometres due south, to a place now called Twin Peaks. We then set the course, hiked up, trained the course, walked up, and raced the course and picked up the injured at the bottom. I remember very vividly in the training session I watched Frank Prihoda in his training run and he tripped up. I have this instant image of Frank completely upside down, skis on top and with his head just touching the snow and he did a complete three sixty somersault, landing and off he went again.

At the bottom one of the leading women skiers of NSW, Barbara Potter – now Barbara Sanders – injured herself. George Chisholm was in charge of the course at the time. She got a spiral fracture of the ankle and so we had to piggy back her up out from the bottom of the valley up to the top. I can remember John Wagner – we had the strongest skiers in Australia there – and John Wagner did most of the work of carrying Barbara up the slope. I got the role of cutting the steps for John to walk in because it was soft unbroken snow. Somebody had the foresight of going back to the Chalet and finding a sledge to bring her out and get her back. There was a very strong head wind; it was very intimidating pulling the sledge against this strong gale when we skied to take her back to the Chalet.

In other words the ski racers and the ski controlling bodies were encouraging the development of the Thredbo Valley to raise the standards for Australian downhill racing. It is a story that hasn't been told properly I think.

The following year, I think it was 1955, was the Olympic selection year for the Cortina Olympics in 1956 and George Chisholm decided we would have a proper Olympic training squad and we should all get together and get proper training. So it was organised that about seven or eight of us were invited to join this training squad to go to Cooma Hut at Perisher. Rudi Wirth, an instructor at the Chalet, was appointed the coach and I think six or seven of us trained there. Again, I don't remember us using ski lifts at that stage. Danny Coleman had work commitments. I think he joined us for a few days. There was Bob Arnott, Bill Davy, Bruce Dyson and Jimmy Walker, who I had met in the 1950s during my first visit to The Chalet. Gordon and Billy Day – ex Olympians were in the squad. We trained there and after a week we had the first championships on which Olympic selection were made. There were three Alpine Championships, NSW, the Victorian Alpine Championships, and for the first time ever in the history of skiing in Australia and the last time to date, the National Championships were held at my home mountain at Ben Lomond.

At the NSW Championships Bill Day fell, so I won it. Then he won the downhill and I came second. So I collected the marks for the combined alpine event. In those days they also had an all-round championship – a four event championship which included the jump and the langlauf. I won the four event championship. In the Victorian races I didn't do



***Australian National Ski Team - Inter Dominion Championships
Mt Rauapehu New Zealand 1958***

They had Frank Prihoda and John Wagner – they hadn't attended the NSW championships or the Nationals. They were in the team so they didn't even bother. They were already selected to be in the team so they didn't need to go to NSW or Tasmania. So there was Billy Day and perhaps one more would be selected, in Tasmania Jimmy Walker pipped me in the downhill and he went to the Olympics. I was seeded fifth and they were sending four. This happened again to me when I sought Olympic selection for the langlauf team for the 1964 Winter Olympic Games and I came in third seed when they sent two!.

I represented Australia again next in the Inter Dominion competitions between Australia and New Zealand. In 1958 there were two inter-Dominion competitions: A National team events were held at Mt Rauapehu and then a week later there was another two week event at Coronet Peak. This was for the Combined Australian Universities Inter Dominion.

So I competed in both with a week in between that was a real adventure.

The year before, in 1957 an entrepreneur called Harry Wrigley had developed skis to put on an Auster aircraft for landing on the glaciers in New Zealand. So for the first time ever they had a ski plane in New Zealand. There were no helicopters in those days. In 1958 one of New Zealand's well known photographers, Robin Smith wanted to spend a week in New Zealand's highest lodge called the Pioneer Hut on the top of the Fox Glacier and he wanted to take pictures. He had a lot of equipment and he needed a pack horse to carry his camera equipment, so I got invited along as a passenger to go up with this small group. I think there were five of us. We had a mountain guide who was a very wiry lady called Betsy Ensor and we had an Australian doctor and there was another lady.

We landed on the top of the Fox Glacier in the middle area. We then had to find access to the hut. In New Zealand they have lots of avalanches and the only safe place to put a hut is on the very top of a ridge so there is no mountain above it for avalanches to knock it off its perch. The Pioneer Hut was on the Fox's Glacier southern ridge and we had to cut steps in at the top of the glacier to get access to it. So we got into the hut with our guide. Then got the camera gear and food carried in. The hut was literally perched on the ridge and it had wire cables holding it to both sides of the mountain. From this ridge you could see the Tasman Sea and watch the sun go across to sink on the ocean. The north side of the hut was the entrance. On the south side was the toilet which meant you hung to the building wire and did your thing over the side. Your poo went down the glacier on opposite side to the one you climbed up.

During the day you would get the hissing noise as the sun got on the top of the glaciers and little bits of snow and things would start melting and sliding down - it was a bit of shushing and shushing. Then later in the day you would get the booms and cracks and groans as huge blocks of ice the size of three or four storey buildings were turning and rolling over down to the bottom of the glacier. Your sense of distance got completely lost because it was all so large. I had never been amongst such big mountains before. You lose your sense of perspective and you think the other side of the glacier is only a short walk away and an hour later you get there. So that was quite an adventure in '58. Where did we get to now?

Well we were going back to where you were living at the time.

I was now living in Melbourne and doing a science degree. I had graduated as an electrical engineer with the Hydro Electric Commission. In my last year in about 1956 I completed my first year in pure mathematics. Being a student at the Tasmanian University allowed me to represent them at the Inter-varsity. I ended up representing both Tasmania and Victoria in the Australian university championships. I represented three states at inter-state competition. So I had been in the Tasmanian state team, and the Victorian state team and New South Wales state team. Now they don't have inter-state teams any more, so things have changed.

So you were doing that and after that – what year are we at now?

1958. I was back at Melbourne University doing my science degree in 1959.

You were competing at Kiandra in 1961, right?

Yes that's right. I got a job in Melbourne with Australian Paper Manufacturers and they sent me to Perth for a year and I kept running around the sand hills there trying to get my strength up for the long distance skiing and that was when I was trying to get into the long distance langlauf, to represent Australia in the langlauf at the Olympics in the USA, at Squaw Valley. So I was doing dry land training in Australia in 1960 and 1961. In early 1961, I got accepted to go to the Harvard Business School. When my employer learnt of my application in 1960 they transferred me back to Sydney. So I was living in Sydney in 1961.

Is that when were you on ski patrol in Thredbo?

That came later. In 1961 was the 100th anniversary of the first ski race apparently on record – alpine skiing – not long distance. And apparently in 1861 they had what we call a shemozzle start ski race at Kiandra. Nobody had ski poles. Everyone started at the same time. You could get pushed over. The winner was the first person to the bottom. So they replicated this at Kiandra in 1961 and all the entrants were given a commemorative medal. I have got mine somewhere and I will donate to the Ski Museum. It was important marking the history of alpine skiing – the 100th Anniversary.

In September 1961, I went off to the States. There I found we got one day off from classes, and I met a couple of avid colleagues – one was Malcolm Swenson whose family owned Granite Quarry. He was a very good skier. John Heinz IV, heir to the ketchup fortune, was the third member of our Harvard ski team. He became a Republican Senator and Presidential hopeful.

Let's concentrate on Australia. Can you go back to the next thing in Australia?



When I was back in Australia – I was back here in 1963, skiing in August '63 I think and Thredbo was now developed and with ski lifts but no official ski patrol. If you are a strong skier you got taken on. All you did was to volunteer to the management and they gave you a ski patrol parka. I am not too sure that it began in '63 but certainly in '64 I used to get free skiing by just happening to be a strong skier. There were strong skiers on the hill – Tommy Tomasi, George Freuden, George Weiss, Barry May, they all came along and formalised it. They were very happy to have strong competent skiers on the mountain wearing a red cross. So that is how I paid for my skiing in the middle of the '60s. I wasn't professional or so dedicated so I just became a spectator again. So that was part of the ski patrol.

***Shann Turnbull's Australian National Ski Federation
World Cup Uniform 1978***

But I did get involved with ski administration again on the NSW Ski Council and with colleagues, I just can't remember whether I initiated, but I certainly co-organised the first ever inter club races at Thredbo in the 1960s for a couple of years. So the inter-club competition was initiated at that time.

Then in ski administration I was appointed to what they called the Secretary General which was like a voluntary Chief Executive Officer of the controlling body which at that stage was called the Australian National Ski Federation. I think it was because I was advocating that it should really be a formally constituted body with a formal constitution, incorporated as a not-for profit organisation to represent skiing as a sport.

So I got appointed as its Secretary General to re-organise the controlling body. So I incorporated it with a new name. We changed the name from the Australian National Ski Federation to the Australian Ski Federation.

We had a bit of a budget and I remember sharing a Paddington Terrace with the Institute of International Affairs on the south side of Oxford Street, as an office.

Then we got our own office on the north side of Oxford Street. So I was running the national controlling body for about four years from 1974 to 1978. In my last year I became the World Cup team manager for the beginning of the season. That is how I got the 1978 World Cup uniform which I have offered to the ski museum.

I think we can wrap it up at this time. Do you want to mention anything else? You sure did a great job

No I don't think I know what would be relevant.

Well I think we will wrap it up. You did a great job. Thank you very much. Would you donate this to the Thredbo Historical Society?

Yes. You're welcome.

Editors Note: In the Thredbo Masters Ski Race on 28 July 2018, in the Men's 75 & Over Category Shann Turnbull placed 3rd with an combined time of 149.99 (2 runs) over a course of 33 gates.



Shann Turnbull with his father and sister in
Mt Buffalo 1946



Shann Turnbull racing in Thredbo circa 2012



*Pauline Markwell and Shann
Turnbull at the Thredbo Historical
Society Mid-Winter Dinner 2018*

*Shann Turnbull holding his langlauf
skis with his collection of skiing
trophies*

