

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CEES KOEMAN – An Oral History

Conducted by Jerry Krejzar

Thredbo, August 2nd 2011, July 16th & August 3rd 2012



**Cees Koeman
November, 2004**

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PO Box 6
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CEES KOEMAN

Interviewed by Jerry Krejzar at 'The Thredbo Museum' Thredbo on 2nd August 2011 and later at unit 7 Happy Jack's, Thredbo, on 16th July & 3rd August 2012

JK: Good afternoon Cees, as you are aware the Thredbo Historical Society has asked me to do your oral history. Firstly would you give me your full name, date of birth, and where you were born?

CK: I was born in Holland in a beautiful little village 47 kilometres north of Amsterdam, my father was a tulip grower and an orchardist and I had a wonderful time there. I was born in 1935 and I immigrated to Australia in 1953.

At the outset Cees made it clear that he preferred to limit the interview to his time spent living in Thredbo; Cees's early years have already been well documented by - 'Immigration Bridge Australia' - the initial document below will help to outline these early years, those related to his migrant experience.

BACK	
First name	Cees
Surname	Koeman
Country of Origin	Netherlands
Date of Birth	06/02/1935
Year of Arrival in Australia	1953
Story	<p>A sense of adventure, having an ex-cowboy living next door, & a headmaster who encouraged us to embrace the whole world, were all factors in me leaving my beautiful small rural village (horticulture, tulip farms, pear orchards) in the north of Holland. At 14 I wanted to go anywhere. My father insisted I have a trade so I was apprenticed to the local builder/joiner 5 ½ days a week (summer 55 hours, winter 50). \$12/week in the first year. 4 years later & night school, I got my diploma.</p> <p>At that time the Dutch Government actively promoted immigration of its own citizens and paid 50% of their fare. Since my only possessions were an old rusty bicycle and a box of tools, I gladly accepted the offer. The Australian Government paid the other 50%; they could see the benefit in getting us here. The Dutch Government was terrified of running out of space for its citizens; lots of babies after the war! Many very large rural families immigrated. Another reason for wishing to see the world was my refusal to do national service. I received my call up papers when I was on the immigrant departure list. I remember my visit to the Australian immigration office in the Hague. I had studied some English and learnt some slang. I passed quickly. Previously I had put my name down for South Africa, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, U.S. but Australia was lucky to get me!</p> <p>The flight aboard a DC4 PHTLW, "Lazy Willem" 4 props, sometimes 3, was an experience for an 18 year old. On boarding at Amsterdam airport, a government official said "<i>be good citizens of your new country and quickly assimilate.</i>" Waving goodbye was exciting for me, but later I realized the trauma for my</p>

Mum and Dad. At that time, it was goodbye forever. You went and did not come back. I have been back 29 times since 1967, once in 1958 as a deckhand on a Norwegian ship.

The flight out to Oz was 7 days and nights. Amsterdam-Rome: first spaghetti delicious. Cairo: so many pyramids, low flying. Basra: desert refueling. Karachi: hot and millions of people. Calcutta: beggars in gutters, babies without limbs. Singapore: rest day for the crew, stayed at Raffles, white suited Planters. A steward dressed as Neptune threw a bucket of water over us in the plane when crossing the equator. 1 meal ticket, 1 drink voucher (soft drink) for each day. Jakarta: hot, refueling, lunch then long haul to Perth. I have a fascination with cartography, and I had drawn and redrawn as a boy the NW Cape Exmouth Gulf. I recognized it immediately as the first landfall from 4000 feet up in the air! Coincidence.

At Perth it was over with the luxury KLM hotels. Iron barracks at the airport. Next day to Melbourne where each person was handed 25 pounds, and you were on your own. Next morning to Hobart by DC3. No one to meet me but I had an address; there were 3 village men already there. One, who had a brand new gleaming Hillman Minx, said "*See that car? You don't get that by working, you go to the races!*" Each Saturday afternoon he'd arrive at my boarding house (5 pounds/week including meals and cut lunch) with heaps of money. After 3 weeks I relented and went with him to try his 'system' and lost my first 3 weeks wages (15 pounds/week). I have never been back. I could sense my Mum and Dad watching me from afar!

Sunday in Hobart in 1953: a young man looking for some life; a lonely time. Just one milkbar. Still, there was the occasional Saturday night dance, no drink, but a bottle in the bushes. A fortunate meeting with Hobart bushwalkers; a bunch of tough men and women. I joined and it set me on a course which became my life's work and play: I was introduced to skiing in Tasmania and got the bug. I must have climbed almost every mountain looking for snow. I realised there were bigger mountains on the mainland.

I got a job at the Chalet at Charlottes Pass in the Snowy Mountains, worked there for 3 great years. From 1960 I have been involved in various aspects of the development of Thredbo as a ski resort – creating ski trails, operating ski lifts, etc. In 1963 I married Ann and in 1966 we built our guest chalet in Thredbo – Kasees Lodge. Our lodge was entirely built by immigrants and mostly by hand. Hungarian architect/builder, Yugoslav bricklayers, Greek labourers, German stonemasons and plumbers, Italian carpenters, German painter, and me, a boy from Holland! Ann and I still own and operate our beautiful lodge. We have two daughters born in Thredbo and I enjoy skiing and have many other interests.

JK: You came to Hobart which you mentioned in an earlier interview, shall we get straight to Hobart?

CK: Yes I was introduced to skiing in Hobart, lucky for me that was through some people in Hobart that were members of the Hobart Walking Club and in the winter they went off skiing, and that's where I was introduced to the sport, and that's how one ends up in Thredbo.

But on the 1st day of skiing, someone told me there that you could turn these skis and I didn't believe it, but since that time I have learnt to do that. I must have climbed just about every mountain in Tasmania looking for more snow. So in 1955 I went to The Chalet at Charlotte Pass

where I got a job by various means and I worked and lived there at Charlotte Pass for 3 years and they were fond ones.

JK: Cees may I ask who you met there, who was the manager and when?

CK: Oh the manager was Stan McGuinn and I got my job there by not paying for my overnight accommodation, he hauled me into the office, it was only one night, but I was booked into Kunama but there was a blizzard and we could not go. Anyway I just loved the place, and I was there for 3 years and I was involved in a lot of things there and then later on I went overseas.

JK: That is where you taught yourself to ski?

CK: That's right, I have never really had any lessons, over the years I have just followed ski instructors around the mountain, but later on in 1956 we went with some friends to see the proposed development at Thredbo, and it took us a whole day to drive from The Chalet to Jindabyne and then on to the present Thredbo site.

JK: The roads were pretty bad then?

CK: They were just a quagmire, a track that was in 56. The following year I competed in the NSW Championships in Thredbo and we walked from The Chalet at Charlotte Pass at night to Thredbo to compete the following day at the Championships; that was quite an adventure.

I was lucky to survive that trip as three of us left The Chalet at Charlotte's Pass after work around 5.30; it was the winter of 57 and it was a full moon but blowing hard, when we saw the lights of Thredbo (Crackenback ski-club & The Lodge!!) we went down (too early as it happened) through scrub and trees, could not take the skis off as we sank to our waist in snow, so struggled on down, waded across the Thredbo river, one of us dropped his boot, went sailing down the river, we were exhausted of course. Then walked up the road and to the village; arrived there at 2am and slept on the floor of Crackenback Lodge, a charge of 4 pounds.

I did not do well in the NSW Slalom Championships the following day, tired. Many years later Mr Crean went down the same area, sat down for a rest behind a rock after crossing the river, hypothermia set in and he died there. Moral of the story; don't sit down to have a rest, keep going.

JK: All before Thredbo was developed?

CK: That's right, there was just the rope tow there; we used the rope tow there which went at hell of a speed.

JK: What can you remember about the rope tow, how far did it go?

CK: It started just above Lover's Leap and then went some distance to where Kareela is situated at present. I was totally besotted with skiing and ski racing, I hadn't saved enough money but in 1957 I managed to get a job on a Norwegian freighter to go back to Europe and go ski in Austria. I ended up doing that and working for Mr Kastle at the Kastle factory in Hohehens in Austria, which is another interesting experience, I met up with a lot of the Austrian ski racers as well who used Kastle skis as their preferred skis, and then I got fairly homesick, back to Australia, jumped on another migrant ship, this time not flying like I did previously.

JK: What year was that?

CK: The next year in 1958. In 1958 I came back, I got off the boat in Sydney and went straight as fast as I could to Thredbo to compete in the Championships again, I think it was the slalom Championships, well I never did very well but enjoyed it. Later on when ski racing got really serious I dropped out altogether, we used to have a lot of fun racing. Always got beaten by the Austrians, Swiss, understandable.

Then I worked for Paul Reader in Sydney for one winter, that was 58, and that was another interesting experience, just started a little repair shop, a ski repair shop, some of those skills that I had learnt at the Kastle factory in Austria, and I did that in Mosman.

JK: Do you recall where Paul Reader had his shop?

CK: Oh yes, the Boulevard Arcade in King street, and then I got sick of Sydney and the life there and I arrived back in Thredbo, permanently in Thredbo if you like, on the 26th January 1960 and I met up with Charles Anton again who had just built Kareela hut.

JK: Where did you move to that first time?

CK: I got a job, Charles gave me the job in the winter of 1960 of managing Kareela hut which was an experience, but as a little sideline I managed to open the very first little frankfurter hot-dog type lunch place. The photograph showing me handing out rolls and sausages to the guests, and there is an interesting story about that because there was an old rope tow hut there; I cut a hole in the wall, some gas rings and some big pots, I ordered lots of sausages and frankfurters and rolls, they came up on the chair and I sold out within half an hour.



I was so successful I ordered twice the amount the following day and again I sold out. I thought now where the money? So I ordered double again and then a blizzard blew up for 2 or 3 days, the lift didn't run and all the sausages went bad. Also I found that it cut into my free skiing time, one of the guests of the lodge that I was running was happy to help out, so that was an interesting experience, yes I had the first sort of food outlet on the mountain; Rudi would be very happy to hear that.

JK: Was somebody resident in Kareela, were you living in Kareela?

CK: Yes I lived there in the winter of 60, lots of shovelling, it was a heavy winter. We had many well-known guests; I can still see Zara Holt sweeping down the stairs. Charles Anton invited many politicians and business people. Les Hooker came up as well. Obviously Charles was looking for people who would invest in Thredbo. Dusseldorp was not one of them at that time, but when he bought the village later he loved going up to Kareela for the great dinner-parties that were held there. Rudi Schatzle created a wonderful atmosphere there; he could tell a few anecdotes, I am sure.

That was a very interesting winter it was a very heavy winter, one of my duties was to keep the bull-wheel free of snow, of course for the fact that the chairlift only went as far as Kareela station and that was quite a job, I did a lot of shovelling. On the Saturday nights we were allowed to go down to the village, my guests and I, for the dance, we had a lot of fun; the engineer running the lifts would take us back up to Kareela.

JK: How many stayed in the lodge?



Kareela Hut

CK: We had up to 10 people

The interview was terminated owing to an unexpected influx of visitors to the Museum due to bad weather on the day. We reconvened for the interview at unit 7 Happy Jack's on 16th July 2012.

JK: Cees we are about to take up the story again, of the guests being taken back to Kareela after the dance.

CK: To continue the story about the Saturday nights when we were allowed to go down to the village from Kareela with some of my guests, the lift manager would insist on us being at the bottom of the lift at midnight; if you are not there you don't get back up, and there were a few times when I had to walk up. Too late, because we had no snow packing of course in those days, very heavy snow, they were wonderful days.

In 1961 I started work for the company with a lot of different things, I built the railings on the footbridge, the vehicular bridge across the Thredbo River was one of my first jobs. Also when winter arrived I took over the ski hire, Joe Planger who was a Swiss man who was doing it at the time and somehow I don't know how I did it but I managed to run the ski hire.

JK: Was that Fleets then or not?

CK: No, no.

JK: Who was it then?

CK: It was run by the old company, the original company, a new ski hire shed had been built and I was given the job of running it. Later on Rudi Schatzle came and joined me and we had a lot of work and a lot of fun. When the original company was sold to Dusseldorp and the Lend Lease Corporation, I will never forget it. It was interesting because there were only about 15 or 20 employees, most of them got sacked within 2 weeks; I remember one of the early directors said to us at a meeting, the employees, nothing will change, you will all have your jobs and we will still be directors, well, it didn't happen.



Ramshead Top Station Platform which was later moved moved to a higher position due to the build up of snow

JK: One question on that, was Tony Sponar gone by then?

CK: Yes, yes the man in charge, the manager was Charles Pelc. Things really changed very quickly when Dusseldorp came on the scene; and I had the most incredible lucky experiences during that period because this is what happened; he said “*We don't want to run the ski hire ourselves, we are going to lease that out, so you can put in a price on it, to run it, so you give me a price. What you are prepared to pay for a year's rent or a year's lease?*” Which I did; I think I put together a price of 4000 pounds per year. Very quickly Dusseldorp came back, he would come over almost every weekend and said “No, I have given that business to Fleets but I am going to make you Mountain Manager!” Just like that, just like that, amazing! Oh, wow!

JK: Can we confirm the date of that?

CK: That would have been early or late 61, about that time, and then of course the work started. The company with Dusseldorp in charge, he would come down almost every weekend, building projects started which I was involved in; the building of the new valley terminal and at the same time the building of the new hotel, roads, sewer treatment plants, lifts and the Ramshead lift.

JK: Cees, can you remember the people you worked with at the time? Did you have to supervise people, or did you have to interact with various company personnel?

CK: The first man from Lend Lease, Civil & Civic was the building company of Lend Lease, was a fellow called Les Young. He was the foreman or manager on site, he was very tough, not popular, somehow I survived that period. He was sacking older, the original, workers. The story goes that, I don't know if it is true but this is what I heard, that he would get a number of our original employees digging a trench, there were plenty of trenches to be dug, anybody who raised his head would be fired, or stopped to have a rest, whatever. So I survived because I was

a carpenter, he needed a carpenter; I built his first little office-site shed outside the 'Old Lodge'. I think in a way I led a bit of a charmed life, Dusseldorp obviously took a liking to me.

JK: Did you speak Dutch?

CK: Well it was interesting we had many conferences and many meetings but we never spoke Dutch, even with Albert, there were three Dutchmen sitting around a table discussing the work. So as I said I survived and I was made a leading hand on the Valley Terminal and the building of the hotel, then on the mountain, my work started on the mountain.

JH: Was that in the same year, in 1962?

CK: Yes, in 1962. What's important here is that the company had no experience, had no people at all, had any experience with snow or skiing of any kind; so they sucked my brains to put it a bit crudely. They used me and I was very happy to oblige of course. But my work on the mountain was very stimulating as I was given quite a lot of free hand up there.

JK: When you say work on the mountain, to be a bit more specific, are we talking about trails?

CK: Yes I am talking about trails, creating ski trails and there are many interesting stories and one of them I have to tell you; we had a very rough track back from Little Merritt's back to the main run, so one of the jobs I was given was to create a proper catwalk with a bulldozer. Now I can't drive a bulldozer but there was a man, a Mr Golby who was an excellent bulldozer driver, I think from Moonbah, came up and I basically directed him, I put some markers in and so forth and within two or three or four or five days we created this road if you like, 'The Catwalk'.

An interesting story here is that when Dusseldorp skied on it the following winter, he fell about three or four times, he was absolutely furious, he said, "*this is much too fast, make another one, a flatter one*". So the following summer I built and named the 'Bunny Walk' and he was happy; now of course it hardly ever gets used because it is really too flat. This is very interesting, the perception of Dusseldorp towards the mountain, because he was a beginner skier and he was quite a big man, a little, how would I say, not a natural mover on skis. I think that is the nicest way to put it. So one of the runs I made and marked out and Rudi Schatzle did most of the cutting, he worked incredibly hard, was 'Little Beauty' which I named.

JK: I am surprised that Rudi was that involved.

CK: Oh very, as well as some other workers, incredibly hard work, there were contracts that we let in sections and he was willing to work very hard and make some money, and we were lucky to have him. But 'Little Beauty' was originally only half the size, half the width, Dusseldorp once again was unhappy with it, (*we both laugh*). He said "*much too narrow, people like to traverse down the mountain*"; of course I was a fall-line skier so I had to make it twice as wide. Now at that stage there was no snow packing.

JK: Was it originally half the width?

CK: Yes it was but he found it too narrow, which in my opinion it wasn't. We also had a problem with wind, it was a serious problem in those days, of course we could not pack the snow, we had no equipment to pack snow; it would blow away; one of the reasons to keep your trails reasonably narrow. As an example of that, what wind could do, an interesting story here;

the Ramshead lift was built on the advice of Dusseldorp himself who was determined to build the top station of Ramshead in a hollow, so that it would be away from the wind; and I will never forget this, I stood next to him up there and I said “*Sir, this fills with snow, this hollow fills with snow*” and as we know it certainly did, and it almost totally covered the whole top bull-wheel construction.

JK: Just to clarify where was that top station compared to where the present site is now?

CK: Several metres below where the top station is now, there is a hollow. Another thing that is very interesting about the planning, not everything that Dusseldorp or the company did actually was successful. There were some things that were perhaps not thought through sufficiently, but only in hindsight do I feel that, at the time we were all very excited. I was excited about all these projects, I loved it. I just loved to be involved in the building of it; but Dusseldorp said another thing, he said “*We are going to build this Ramshead chairlift so people can be transported from the valley to ‘The Basin’ because that’s where they want to ski.*” So it was an access lift and although they did put in a ‘Wood Run’ station which was, sort of highly unsuccessful, it was dangerous. It was high and it was very small. It did run for one year.

JK: You are not talking about ‘Tower Ten’?

CK: No ‘Wood Run’ station, which we still call the ‘Wood Run’ that was pulled down the following year. So we know it has been a white elephant ever since it started. Now there are many stories that I can tell you about the building of this which was done by the boys from EPT, Electric Power, all Italians, and I had a wonderful rapport with them; they basically built that lift with their bare hands, incredible what they did. As an example, I was given the job of transporting the tubular towers for the top section of the Ramshead lift, attaching them to the cable of the Crackenback lift, hanging them off the cable then slowly transporting them up to the top of the mountain. The EPT boys, the Italians, would pick them up and drag them down to ‘The Basin’ and build the top station of Ramshead lift. They did that by hand, amazing.

JK: How did that differ from the building of the Crackenback lift?

CK: Well the original Crackenback lift was a Mueller design which is a web design, sort of bolted together. Yes, as I said the Ramshead chairlift basically was an idea that Dusseldorp forced through and was to give access to ‘The Basin’ really, “*that’s where people want to ski*”. Bruce Gaingel was a man who was working for Civil & Civic at the time, also another man, but he was a capable engineer and he was a good bloke. He has told me recently that without the Italians that lift could not have been built at all.

JK: Was that due to the fact that the Italians had that industrial technical know-how that nobody in Australia had at that time or what?

CK: EPT was building the major power transmission lines all over Australia, and those boys were riggers. They were all very capable doing that. So that was a very interesting period.

JK: Nothing to do with Transfield?

CK

No that is the story down the road. The Alpine Way to Charlottes Pass chairlift, that is another fascinating story. Maybe I should tell you now, some of it, and this is true, well, like everything I told you. I was having a drink in the new Shuss-bar, lots of fun there at that time; I heard a man boast about building that lift. He said, "*I am going to kill Thredbo*". That certainly did not happen. That job was rushed, and Charles Anton urged great caution, but they did not listen to him of course; we were all excited by development, it was an active-time. The story of The Chalet chairlift is being written up and will be a fascinating lesson in treating the mountains with more respect. This lift was known as the 'Kosciuszko' chairlift and the public wanted to ride it in the following summer, to go to 'Kossie'. I lost a few clients that way.

Now back to the Ramshead lift building. The bull-wheel on top of Ramshead, I also transported by having it attached to the cable of the Crackenback chairlift. It took me two and a half days to get it up there. The bull-wheel would touch the ground, so heavy, between each tower going up Crackenback, you understand. How the hell we got over middle station to this day I don't know, but we did, and because of the construction of the Crackenback chairlift towers which is a web design, and the enormous pressure exerted by this monstrous bull-wheel that was attached to the cable, the towers would actually twist. (*JK groans*). We would go up there with a 'Tirefort' which is a kind of hand-winch and attach one end to a rock or something solid and hold back the twisting of the head of the towers. It was quite a job, quite a job; anyway. Ramshead was built. It ran, one of my jobs Dusseldorp personally told me to do in the winter. I was running the lifts, I was Lift manager. I was not only Lift Manager but I was Village Manager, Garbage Manager, everything, Mountain Manager. So I had my hands full, and had a lot of fun.

One of the things that disappointed Dusseldorp, that not many people actually wanted to ride the lift. They all wanted to wait in the queue and of course there was the Crackenback lift, which was only a fixed two person seat. I was personally told by Dusseldorp on a few occasions, "*You stand up on top of the stairs, you stand there and you direct people towards the Ramshead lift*" (*JK chuckles*) Because I am not a company man, and of course eventually they sacked me, but it took them a couple of years to do so. I saw that coming so that's how I ended up already building Kasees' Lodge; but that's another story, but I was almost, you know forced, to force people to use the Ramshead chairlift, which of course is against my principles. I can't, and obviously I wasn't very enthusiastic about that. But there is one interesting story, well there are hundreds --

JK: Just before we get to that, were people actually happy to do that, or did they say "No, we want to go up Crackenback?"

CK: Yeah you are right, people just wanted to go on Crackenback, however the line would be so long and would move so slowly that, yes people were starting to use it, absolutely. But now, the fact that we only often could ski as far as Middle station, we had no snow making in those days, it became apparent that we had to, because the lift line would be at Middle station, that's where the lift line would be, the queue, and just down a little bit was the Ramshead lift running. So we had to make a connection; and in the middle of 1964, in the middle of the winter that heavy winter, there was an enormous amount of snow, I with my man cut a track through the trees towards what was tower 10.

With the help of Bruce Gaingel who was the engineer, who got in touch with the Riblets people, it was a Riblets chairlift an American design, whether it was OK to pull down the cable and build a station at ground level which we did in the middle of winter. Then people could, they had an alternative way of getting on the mountain. You had to wait too long at Middle station you skied down to Tower 10 and up you go on Ramshead.

Yes that must have been the case in 1965 the year I started skiing, as I remember, that people got sick and tired of waiting at Middle station so off you would go to Tower 10; and that was the case for a number of years, so that relieved the pressure on the Crackenback lift.

Another thing that was interesting to report, Dusseldorp bought suddenly, without telling anybody, he bought a Tucker snowcat from America or Canada I am not quite sure. A beautiful machine and of course like everything else, I had to drive it.

Tucker Snowcat



JK: Was that the one with the four tracks? For snow tours?

CK: Yeah, yeah very powerful, later on I transported people on the Main Range up to Kosciuszko and that was a lot of fun too, but we didn't have a packer behind it like some roller where you could, you know, pack the snow so I made one; which was an amateurish affair, made out of aluminium and steel and stuff.

What is interesting to note that when I went out on the middle slopes in the winter of 1964, I looked out the back of the window of the Tucker snowcat as I was driving with the roller and there were people skiing right behind me, and from that day on people have expected snow to be packed. I was lucky I was the first guy to do that in Thredbo, it wasn't very professional but it worked in a way.

JK: You could say that the start of 'grooming' started around 1964.

CK: Yes on that day in 1964, trial grooming. It wasn't grooming as it is today, but yes. But the winter of 64 was remarkable; it was a big year, biggest year that I ever experienced in my time, and I can tell, and people who were here can tell you stories.

Ramshead Top Station (1964)

At one stage when all the lifts in ski resorts in Australia were inoperable, because they were snowed in. The Crackenback lift was at one stage was the only lift running. It was a super-human effort, I would be on the loudspeaker to ask for volunteers to help us. My back still hurts. We did get some volunteers.



JK: Volunteers used to help dig out the chairs?

CK: Yes to keep it running. On the last chair in the afternoon I would walk in to the Bistro and ask for volunteers of my crew, not the guests. "Who is going to spend the night in top station and make sure that the bull-wheel is free of snow?"

JK: Can we just confirm that there were no other lifts; none were working in Australia at the time?

CK: There was a period in the middle of winter of 64 when all other lifts were snowed in.

JK: For how long, two weeks?

CK: Well Jerry, I can't recall precisely, we were all too busy digging snow. I don't know but it was a super-human effort by people. Even the wife of the General Manager went up there to be a volunteer, digger. There are many many stories about that period to try and fight, fight that snow drifting into top station. We had to almost dig a trench, for instance, between Kareela station and top station; they were special times.



Volunteers digging out Ramshead Top Station (1964)

I had a Holden 'ute' at that time and I parked it next to Leo's, Maria's Lodge, and it was snowed in and disappeared under the snow for most of the winter. Because I was also in charge of the Village, we had one little tractor with a blade, a little International or Massey Ferguson or something, that was our only snow clearing machine.

JK: What happened to the situation of the road if there was not much clearing done?

CK: Well of course the guests who came in would somehow drive their cars into a spot and then in the morning it would be covered with snow, just unbelievable, we had heavy snow drifting down to Friday Flat. But when it got beyond us we called the 'Snowy' to help us out who bought some machinery down. They also provided volunteers from the 'Snowy' to help me digging out various lift stations on the mountain.

JK: Did they clear the roads?

CK: No, only to help dig out the various lift stations as well.

JK: You wanted to go over some details that we missed in 1962 and 63.

CK: Yes, of course we had, I think it was 1962 or '63? We had the chairlift collapse. This could have been a major disaster we were lucky there was no loss of life. Without going into absolute detail, an error was made about the tensioning of the cable, of the new cable of the extended Crackenback chairlift.

JK: The year it was extended from Kareela to top station?

CK: Well it was extended again in a sense; it was briefly extended for one year with the money that was gathered from some business people; in 60 and 61. The chairlift was extended from Kareela to the top, but it was a rather shaky affair with a bull-wheel hanging up in a loose arrangement.

JK: It does not sound too stable.

CK: Exactly; and when Dusseldorp bought the resort he did a proper job

JK: And that took place in 1962 and 63?

CK: Yep, yep, now we used to have a lot of trouble with cables, with new cables stretching. The cables that we have today are much better, much better constructed. There was a fully loaded chairlift with people in the middle of winter, a lot of snow had fallen, a metre of snow had fallen. An engineer or someone decided that the weight of the fully loaded chair - the weight was getting to the point where people would be, touching the Middle station - that it would have to be tensioned, so someone pressed the button on the winch which holds back the bull-wheel at the top to try to winch the whole thing back.

Now the details of that you need to get from an engineer but what happened was that the winch was unable to do the job because it was not designed for that kind of work, for a fully loaded chairlift, fully loaded from top to bottom; and the whole bull-wheel flew out of the top station., missed Benny Zeller, who lived down in Berridale, lovely man, good friend of mine, missed him, and I will never forget I was - I think it was 1961, I was running the ski-hire at that time.

Anyway there was no loss of life but I think there were some injuries. Rudi Schatzle remembers this too. We were having lunch at the Bistro of the old hotel and I remember suddenly everybody rushed to the window and we saw the last of the cable just flicking up and down, settling into the snow. People were tossed out of that lift, of the flicking of the cable, and landed in the deep snow, we were fortunate to have that snow. You know the company people never wanted to talk about this thing. It was an accident that you don't really want to know, but these things are important.

JK: I gather it was an accident, though not so much an accident, but the fact that the nature of the engineering was not as sophisticated as it should have been, not like today?

CK: Well it was, maybe that, or also that people were taking risks, eh I think as a result of that, whoever pushed the button, and you would have to talk to Lou Reinstadler who was here.

JK: You say who pushed the button, the stop button?

CK: No, the winch. Somebody got fired, the engineer working for the company was fired and there is a little anecdote here because, his girlfriend also left, as he was forced out to go, Dusseldorp sacked him quick smart, and his girlfriend who had the only secretarial job in the Village left with him. I got on the phone to my girlfriend "Ann, there is a job for you down here!" She tossed in her job in Sydney and came to Thredbo and was given the job of company secretary. Her story is also remarkable.

JK: That is a good story. Dusseldorp did not brook any fools.

CK: On no, but this accident happened so early in the Lend lease, of the Dusseldorp period.

JK: Do you wish to cover anything else of significance of that period?

CK: Well there was one other thing, Albert Van der Lee was my boss and Dusseldorp was his boss, and my boss.

JK: What was Albert's position?

CK: He originally came here as engineer, came from working on the Opera House and then he was made Village Manager or Resort Manager. I was never Resort Manager I was Operational Manager or Mountain Manager.

During the period when we used the Crackenback lift to transport, gravel for up the top, the parts for the Ramshead chairlift, lots and lots of timber, you name it, we used the Crackenback lift as you could not have any wheeled vehicles or tracked vehicles on the mountain - totally taboo - the National Parks would not allow it. So we used the Crackenback lift for a lot of these things, we just tied things onto the cable pressed the button slowly and let it go.

There is one episode which I don't mind telling, it's absolutely controversial; but we had to transport all these lengths of timbers and piles of stuff. We had these rather massive loading hooks which would bolt onto the cable, like an L-shaped steel loading hook, with which we could strap the various lengths of timber or whatever else was needed. When they were unloaded by the top station operator, these hooks would frequently twist they no longer had weight on them and they would twist with the cable, the new cable, that had this twisting action.

On several occasions I saw these hooks would come dangerously close to the towers, so someone - we had Civil & Civic engineers here as well, I did not actually work for Civil & Civic I worked for the new company - someone suggested that the operator would attach a heavy load, heavy steel, a lump of steel on each of these loading hooks to stop it from happening. Of course you know what happened when some operator was either unable to lift this heavy weight by himself, we were very limited on manpower, or forgot. One morning I saw this again, this close shave with almost the hook coming down and grabbing the tower, you could imagine what would have happened then.

I said, I will never forget this, I said to the local welder or mechanic I said, whatever his name was, "*Get your oxy-torch and cut these darned things in half and dump them down in the tip*" at Friday Flat, which he did. When some engineer came down, "*Where are the loading hooks?*" I said "*They are in the tip - too dangerous!*" He got hold of the welder, "*Pick them up and weld them back together again*". There was quite a lot of this sort of thing going on, yeah, I think it was not very----- we were flying by the seat of our pants in a lot of ways.

JK: Did the engineers not understand the potential danger?

CK: No, obviously not, well I mean there was pressure to get the jobs done. Absolutely, so the result of that of course sometime later one of these loading hooks did hook onto one of the web towers, it was tower 12 and pulled it over and it laid on the ground. I remember Albert went up and came to me and said "*Don't tell anybody!*" The first person I came to I told, I will never forget that; because it's important, because you are talking about safety, I felt, I didn't even think about it.

JK: What was Albert's motivation for that?

CK: You don't want any bad news. You know, I think nothing is different today with these kind of things happening. I'm not saying that I am a whistleblower but it's just that; EPT who were still building things here at that stage quickly put the tower up, and I talked to the EPT foreman

on the job, Vigilio Bungno, lovely man, I visited him last year in Italy, where he has built a small resort and a lovely chalet.

JK: When did it happen?

CK: That happened not in winter, it was in the off-period. There were not too many people were around. There was quite a bit of stuff going on; we had a lot of icing problems in those days, icing up for some reason and sometimes we would have to go up and bash the cable to try to get the ice off. One of the engineers decided we should try to run the lift very slowly, during the night to stop the ice forming, and the running of the chairlift at a very low speed resulted. I will never forget this either, it resulted with the fuse-box with all the resistors that you need to run an electric motor very slowly, you need resistors to get rid of all the energy, the hot box had melted. There were quite a lot of incidents and learning about technical things.

JK: So the place was getting itself together.

CK: That's right, yes, I think that is all part of pioneering and with pioneering there are dangers. We used to have to blast so many rocks up on the mountain there because we were not allowed to have bulldozers or any vehicles of any kind so we would drill holes with a portable drill in granite boulders and then put a stick of gelignite.

There was a lot of pioneering going on and being so closely involved with that, I loved it. One day it was decided to have a weather station on the mountain and Carlo and I built it - 300 metres from top-station. I had to learn about operating it, reading the instruments, sending the coded telegrams to Melbourne twice a day. I believe it was a good move to have a weather-station so we would get Thredbo mentioned on the national news almost every night, good publicity. To get all this equipment up the mountain you had to get all the equipment up the chairlift, and when it was away from the chairlift carry it up to wherever, which is incredible when you think about it, hard work.

Well we had to deal with that, hard work. Sometimes I would stand on the chair and when it would pass close to a tower I would grab the tower and climb down it to where we were, drilling rocks or clearing stumps etc. - working.

JK: That continues to today?

CK: No no you can drive all over the mountain, roads all over the mountain, oh no, that is very different.

JK: What can you recall after 1964, through '65, '66, '67, were things settled down a bit?

CK: Yes but I just want to go back to when I was given the job of running all the Ski-Patrol, which was part of Lift Manager, Mountain Manager responsibility. It was an interesting period because it was voluntary, there was no professional patrol and on the weekends I would give out some jackets, I had half a dozen jackets with a white cross on them, the people would knock on my little office door down in the Valley Terminal, and if I knew they could ski I would give them a jacket. When all the jackets were gone that was it. My lift operators, and myself, acted frequently as ski-patrollers - just getting the injured on to a sled and to get them down. Common injuries were ankles and breaks.

JK: There was no question of St John's?

CK: No just if they were a good skier; that was the very beginning of that.

JK: Getting back to Fleets, you were saying?

CK: Yes when Dusseldorp said to me *“I can’t give you the ski-hire because I have given it to Fleets. Fleets were successful in the quotation but I am going to make you Mountain Manager”*. My immediate reply without any thoughts at all was, *“Well I can’t work with Willi Falger”*. *“Oh he is gone, don’t worry.”* That’s what he said.

(We reconvened the interview on 3rd August once again at unit 7 Happy Jack’s, Thredbo)

JK: Cees you had a few additional facts to add regarding Merritt’s.

CK: Well it was interesting. Charles Anton wanted a high level Thredbo village and the first one of the huts of course is Kareela hut and he had planned to build a whole little upper Thredbo village up there.

When Dusseldorp bought the resort he came up with the same idea but in a different location, he looked at the ridge which is Merritt’s, Merritt’s ridge and instructed me to do snow readings, generally look at what could be done there and in the office in Sydney I believe they actually designed a high level village for Merritt’s. I was a little bit cautious about it because it has limited space, and I mentioned that to him but he was really keen, so I did a lot of investigation up at Merritt’s.

He also wanted to investigate the building of a cableway to ‘Kossie’ and I had a lot of fun placing snow depth markers all the way to north Ramshead; amazing to think that I was able to decide to stop the marker’s there. Later I mentioned to him that I would like to build a lodge and he said he would give me all the assistance, *“Which block do you want?”*- There were several blocks available in Thredbo - a lot available- - and he was very keen to see them built on.

JK: What year was that Cees?

CK: That would have been 1965 and it may be late ‘64, in the summer, something like that, and the first lot that he was ready to give to us.

JK: At no cost?

CK: There was no initial cost in those days provided you signed the lease for so many beds. Today we pay rental on so many beds. It was quite funny. It was a lot right next to his company lodge and it was full of trees and scrub. He said, *“Ok you go and walk with a big stick through all the bush where you want to build your lodge and I’m going to sit up on my balcony to see if it encroaches on any of my view towards the hotel.”* And I am bashing through the scrub holding up this stick which was supposed to be the height of the roof of the planned lodge, walk back up to his lodge and he said *“No good, no, you can’t have it. It would obstruct my view of the hotel”*. *Lhotsky is situated on that lot today.* Anyway he said *“Choose another lot.”* and I chose an area where Kasee’s Lodge is now but that was actually one of three small lots and no one wanted to build on that because a large part, the central part, was a swampy area; and typical Dusseldorp, he said *“Oh you can build anywhere”*. He was a builder.

We had already had a plan for the lot next to his company lodge there and so we could ban that, Bela Rasco had already designed it. So now we had to do a new design and Bela designed

another lodge on this particular lot that we were allocated. We started digging and we found, Bella said that we had better stop digging and get an assessment by a geotech engineer, so he got hold of a man called Dave Svenson who is a Swedish geotech engineer working for the 'Snowy', and who did a report on it, and we abandoned that particular position. The lot was so large that we could build on a solid section exactly behind Komarang which required yet again a fair design by Bella. I will never forget - he said "*Oh just go and look underneath Punchinello*". That was the lodge that he had already built and he pulled out this design that he had done for that particular lot some years before for a man called Mort Cohen, I think he was a politician from Sydney.

Bela applied that particular design to Kasee's Lodge as it is. So three times we had to go and get buildings approved and it's amazing we persevered and we did it. Bela was one of my heroes, he was just fantastic, he designed it, he built it. We put the spade in the ground for the foundations on the 1st March 1966 and by the end of July the building, at least the upper floor, was ready for occupation, and the building was built completely by hand by migrants, there was not one Aussie involved. It was exciting to think back that, as I said, that it was built with just manual labour, no machinery for digging and stuff. We had a Serbian block-layer; we had my friend George Andreopolous, a Greek labourer; we had German stonemasons, and concreters; we had four Italian carpenters, three brothers and another one, Agostini, they even made all the windows on the site, timber windows; we had a German plumber; German painter; so there was not one Aussie involved. It was extraordinary!

JK: How many months to completion?

CK: As I said to you we started digging the foundation trench on the 1st of March and by the end of July we had our first guest.

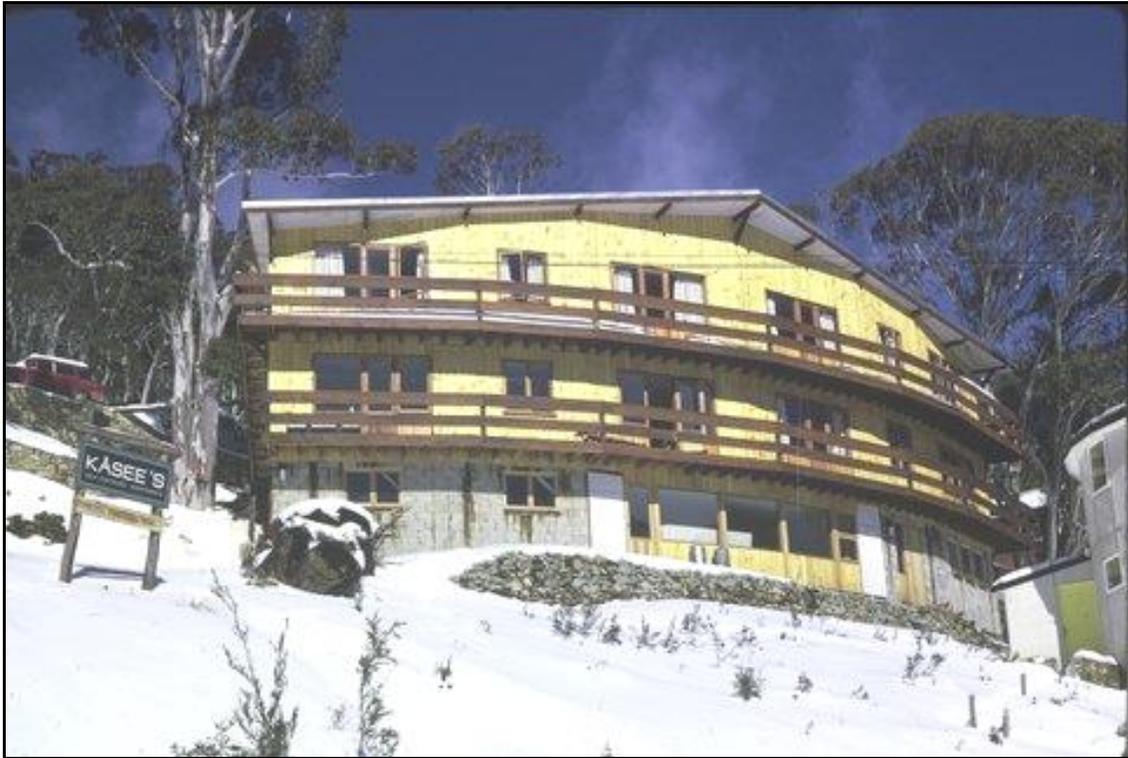
JK: The same year, incredible!

CK: Yeah, by hand, in 66 and my wife Ann was working as a secretary for the company in the Valley Terminal and I was working on the mountain. I was still Mountain Manager and so some of my duties were taken away as it was getting too much; I also knew somehow, that I was not a company man I could see that the writing on the wall, eventually I would not, I was not interested in climbing the company ladder.

JK: You knew in your mind at the time that you were not going to stay with KT.

CK: That's right when they sacked me, I just basically came to the conclusion that I was not a company man and I am quite proud of that. But Ann ran the first season 66 and part of 67 all by herself. I would come off the mountain and throw a log on the fire and talk to the guests.

Of course we were booked out in those days. We were booked out from the beginning of the winter to the end of the winter. They were the good days but it has just been a wonderful ride and we are still doing it. In the 70's I built on a nice apartment on the side of Kasee's because my little family was growing, we have two daughters and Ann has been an absolute marvel the way she has worked at it.



Kasees Lodge

JK: What do you think was the greatest challenge in getting Kasee's up and running?

CK: Well as I mentioned to you we had to get three designs and three different locations and at the time we were young and you just did it.

JK: So how was the actual approval process, getting it through?

CK: It was so easy that I remember one of the designs, I think it might have been the middle design, not the first or the last; in those days the building authority was the Snowy River Shire, they were the ultimate authority. There was a man called Des Macarthy. He was the building inspector there. I remember getting on the phone and I said "Look I have got this plan and we want some approvals, KT has given it approval." He said "Come down to Jindabyne." He met me there and he said "Where is the plan?" I put it out on the bonnet of the car. He grabbed hold of his stamp and he said "Where is a good place for the stamp?" and 'whack', done.

JK: f it was only so easy now.

CK: That's right yes.

JK: In those early years were there regular guests already?

CK: The place was buzzing. We had enormous demand. People would come for one week, sometimes for two weeks, sometimes come for three weeks. We have dozens of stories about the most interesting guests, very interesting guests, I don't know where to start with those stories, many stories! But Ann she was behind it all she is the one that works so hard at it.

It is interesting to know that when I said to her in 64 "We're going to build a lodge", she said "I'm not cooking!" (JK laughs) That is why we got Bela to design little apartments with cooking

and so forth. That was the right decision on reflection. There was another reason too but it is a bit cheeky. I do not want to say anything bad about anybody but I remember one of the lodge owners throwing out, with quite a lot of noise, throwing out some guests who were not behaving themselves, for whatever reason, and I thought maybe I could do better than that.

JK: Better in what way?

CK: Well not throwing guests out in the middle of the night.

JK: Maybe they deserved it.

CK: Maybe they did but my decision was made just on the spur of the moment really, and encouragement too because KT, sorry Dusseldorp, did want to have all those spare lots that were still available - he wanted to have them built. One of the things that he also said which was interesting, he said, *"I will help you with the materials"* and you could buy them through the company, but that was not actually feasible. I went to Sydney and I talked to one of his managers there and it never eventuated, but it was a nice offer. He other thing that was important, I said *"We can't really start yet because we have not got the final stamp."* He said *"You can start"*. He was the boss man.

JK: Much more flexible then it is now.

CK: Yes and of course I have to repeat, Jerry, that my time on the mountain where I was able to create new runs, that was a fascinating period, and we have talked about that, and to have that freedom.

JK: Was that because of your time on the mountain that you were given a lot of leeway to a choice of sites and all that?

CK: I think it was generally that Lend Lease company - they were very keen to see the place grow - and I think that I mentioned to you earlier that he doubled the rental very early in the piece. I did not have a lodge at that stage but I was there at that a particular meeting where there were a few lodge owners already like Sasha's, the Deseo's, Winterhaus and others, where he said *"I am going to double the rental on you"*, and there was this gasp, *"but I'm going to fill you up year round"*. Basically Jerry we are still waiting.

JK: Waiting?

CK: Well we are still waiting, waiting for this village to be filled up 'the year round'.

JK: I get your point. So that was the promise way back then and nothing much has changed.

CK: It disappoints me that the enthusiasm and the money in the early 60's has not really resulted in what we were all dreaming that would happen, that we would have a viable year round summer and winter resort. Now we sit in a situation where the winter is not profitable.

JK: Could it be because of the distance from Sydney and Melbourne?

CK: Competition; competition from overseas, competition from Perisher, which is right next door really and it is due to the particular philosophy of this present company.

In the early days in Thredbo I was involved in setting up the first reservation centre, just called 'The Thredbo Reservation Centre', and it was located in what still is the public walk through area of the hotel. We had a little booth there and we had one telephone and one girl.

JK: What year?

CK: That would have been 67 or 68, and we had one girl, and one telephone; and we charged a commission I think the first year we charged a commission of 7.5% for the bookings we did for any lodges.

JK: Were you still Mountain Manager at the time?

CK: No, so of course it was just the lodges - the commercial lodges - that were involved in this little reservation centre. The hotel at that stage was not involved.

JK: Who made their reservations?

CK

They had their own, and there is quite a story about this. My part was in setting it up down here, together with Michael Lucas of Alpenhorn. As it developed we got a little bit of space in what now I think the bottle shop is located now, and we grew to two girls and two telephones and charging 10% commission. That went for many years.

JK: That is quite high 10%.

CK: We pay 15% now. I was involved in the Chamber of Commerce which was operating that Reservation Centre.

JK: When did this entity become the present Thredbo Centre?

CK: Well it's called the 'Resort Centre'. Albert van der Lee decided we should give it a different name, early on. I don't remember the exact year, and he was very keen to call it the 'Resort Centre'. He came back from America and he found that 'Resort Centre' was the more appropriate name.

JK: Did the hotel then join the booking system of the 'Resort Centre'?

CK: Yes it did. Later on it became very dominated by the company, yeah. I don't want to go into too many details because it is actually a very important story by itself. It is a vital story for the whole resort.

JK: Who is best to cover that?

CK: I will give you some names.

JK: Now?

CK: Not now. I also want to talk about some of the fun that we had during the summer period and the latter part of winter. We organised 'Carnival Weeks'.

JK: Who organised those?

CK: Well there were a number of people involved in that, once again that is a separate topic, 'Macca' should be the one interviewed for that. On the personal side all of the efforts to make a vibrant, happy, healthy, financially viable society as a village; I come from a village in Holland which, still is, and operates as a very small community but it has a lot of facilities, and I always felt like I wanted to try to create something like that; with cultural facilities, sporting facilities, music facilities and so forth.

I don't mean facilities I mean organisations, clubs and I did my very best but a bit disappointed that did not actually happen. I did manage to bring ABC television here, with the help of a friend who worked for Dick Smith and knew about transmissions. We put up an antenna on top of top-station restaurant, picked up a strong signal from Brown Mountain and transmitted it directly at the Village, and it worked. I could write a book about that episode, not all plain-sailing. Later in the 80's I worked to get SBS here, with help of others and I am quite proud of that.



I used to skate on the lake, down at Friday Flat, I have got pictures of me skating on the lake which I love. Lately it hasn't been possible.

JK: Because it does not freeze over anymore?

CK: Well because, my lake I call it, because I built it. I talked about that earlier on. Now they are using it to pump out the water for the snowmaking, and that means that the level rises and drops, and the edges are not really solidly attached. The ice is not solidly attached.

JK: Towards the end of the 70's I gather things weren't running as you wanted as Lend Lease were losing interest in the community?

CK: Yeah that's right. I think Dusseldorp himself was doing much bigger things overseas, very instrumental in building in New York and London and big things with Lend Lease. So the interest here was waning. There was no new money coming in. There was no news of further development and the managers that were sent down from Sydney were also only really, well, just wanted to make money. It was not a good period. It was a period of stagnation if you like. No marketing, poor management which came right from the top, I think they just lost interest. Sure they did some real estate development and sold off some apartments, that's easily done.

During that period it was very difficult for us the lodge owners to see a good vibrant future and when finally Lend Lease sold it to the present company, I remember I was delighted. I could see especially since this company was involved in movies, and all our locals, we thought we would have first releases here and we get summer really jumping. Now we are basically waiting for something to happen again.

JK: Back to Kasee's the lodge that is.

CK: Yes well business was good in the early days. A lot of people would pay in cash, it was easy, we didn't have computers, it was wonderful really. We had a 2B pencil and a booking book and a rubber (*we both chuckle*), and a telephone, that was all, it was easy. You know we would be, I would say pretty much full from the June long weekend to the October long weekend. Unfortunately that hasn't continued but we had a lot of fun. We had a lot of guests from Melbourne, we had some high society people and over the years it's interesting we had some people that are well known, in Australia staying with us and on hindsight it's sort of comforting, it's nice.

We built a little swimming pool in front of Kasees in the 70's and dug it out by hand with a friend of mine, and I remember I was filling up the pool, it was all pretty much done. I was standing there and it was crystal clear, mid-summer and the man from the company came running up, and told me to pull it out walking up and he had noticed that I had not put in the appropriate building application, although I had verbal Ok, it was all right but just a little scare.

But there was another scary period towards the end of the Lend Lease period I referred to earlier. Lend Lease used to send one or two people down here, who had no interest in the resort at all, but were appointed by some person high up in Sydney: "*To go down there and get some more money from these people.*" One episode with our lodge, others as well, we were given notice to vacate the premises, which scares the daylight out of you, on the basis that my balcony railing was six inches out of line. Those were scary days, they really were. They used their company power to frighten the shit out of us. Various people were involved in similar ways. It was unconscionable conduct.

JK: What year was that?

CK: Oh that must have been late 70's. It got so bad, because it was an unconscionable conduct, that the Chamber of Commerce wrote to the Lend Lease board in Sydney expressing no confidence in the company, the management and in the board. This didn't get us anywhere other than one of these people called Mailins - he had the job to get extra money out of us - he was the one - he was the head-kicker who was sent down from Sydney. "*Oh we will come down with some whisky and we will have a chat*", they said. So they came down with the whisky and we all had a few drinks but nothing was resolved, nothing. We then went to Canberra and approached the ACCC, not sure if it was called the ACCC in those days and we had a very interesting day with them. There were four of us we went together. They were very sympathetic but nothing was done to make our life here bearable under their rule.

JK: Who were the others?

CK: There was Michael Lucas, Geoffrey Straney, can't think of the others. They were very sympathetic in Canberra, very sympathetic indeed they took us to lunch and nothing happened. So the power of the corporation over us - the way the lease is set up is something that is not appropriate in this modern age. It reminds one of a kind of serfdom, a kind of system where they are all powerful. It is a company town.

JK: Cees, and that remains the case to today?

CK: Yes and I don't think that the lease is an appropriate document really. Ideally this whole resort should be owned and operated by a cooperative and I look forward to that eventuating.

JK: These are very pointed yet appropriate words on which to wind down the interview. Although I would like to ask, considering you have enjoyed four full decades, great satisfying decades involved in running Kasee's, and previously on the mountain, where do you think you will go from now?

CK: Thanks. It was enjoyable talking to you Jerry. I am involved still in lots of things. I have a lot of different hobbies: I have got my little tulip farm down the road; we are planning new things for the lodge; we are planning a kind of re-development; and yes, I believe that there are many good things about Thredbo and its mountain and that new thinking is possible and it has a future.

Ann and I have built a lifestyle and a business that I would like to keep going as long as possible. Naturally I would like to travel more. After all I am a European like you are, love to go see my sister in Holland or my cousin in France. We have two daughters: Annalisa she comes and helps us sometimes but she has her own professional career and Melanie who lives in Sydney and who is very busy with her little clinic. Ideally I would love to see one of the girls take over the business of course, but I'm having a darned good time right now.

JK: Do you see the possibility of the younger family getting involved?

CK: I think so. I'm still hopeful. My love for Thredbo and the mountains still burns brightly, as it does for many here who have a stake in it; and I look forward to the further development of the resort, so it may become the year round successful place envisioned by Dick Dusseldorp.

JK: Yes we should stay hopeful and on that score. Cees I would like to thank you on behalf of the Thredbo Historical Society for this very interesting interview and just to add that may Kasees continue to thrive.

CK: Thanks Jerry.