

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

STUART MURRAY – An Oral History

**Conducted by Edith Swift
Milson's Point NSW, June 1st 2010**



**Barrakee Lodge, Perisher Valley - 1969
designed by Stuart Murray Dip Arch ASTC FRAIA RIBA**

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STUART MURRAY – An Oral History

Eddie: My name is Eddie Swift and I am recording at Milsons Point with Stuart Murray. It is June 1st 2011 and he is going to tell me about his skiing.

Could you start with your parents and tell me their names and your date of birth?

Stuart: My parents were Cyril Murray of Scottish descent and Daphne Williams of Welsh descent and I was born in 1926 at Five Dock in Sydney.

Eddie: We will go on to when you first started skiing at the age of sixteen

Stuart: When I was sixteen, our school, Fort Street School, which was the oldest school in Sydney, had holidays at Hotel Kosciuszko and we boys went down for the final year's holidays in 1942.

We had finished our Leaving Certificate and it was a sort of celebration. It was our final year. We took the train to Cooma and a bus to the Kosciusko Hotel which was still there in 1942 – it burnt down in 1952 and we had ski lessons on the Grand Slam, which was next to it – a big hill – but there was very little uphill transport. We had races at Smiggin Holes later - we were there for two weeks and in the final week we had these school boy races. I was the school champion – I beat Neville Wran – he came second – Neville later became Premier of this state, New South Wales.

It was just a downhill race. We didn't learn much – turns or anything. We had wooden skis, cane stocks, army boots with built up rubber heels with grooves to take the spring bindings for the toe caps. We had safety straps of course so our skis wouldn't come off and slide down the hill.

Our trousers were waterproofed and tucked into hand knitted woollen socks, woollen gloves, which were all dried at night in the bedrooms on the heaters. There were no drying rooms. I have a note on some postcards I sent to Mother saying that I had a bed next to the heater.

From 1944 onwards I was a night student at Sydney Technical College in the architecture course and working in the office of Walter Burley Griffin and Eric Nicholls. At the time Eric Nicholls mentioned nothing about skiing. I don't think he knew anything about it. He was of course, involved in the foundation of Thredbo as the architect. How that came about was that he was brought in Lend Lease, an American firm which underwrote most of the construction of Thredbo in the early stage of construction but that was in the late sixties, early seventies.

Before that there wasn't any skiing at Thredbo. All the skiing was at Kiandra, so that is where I did my first skiing from the late fifties - 1957 to the late '60s – '68, '69.

Eddie: Tell me about Kiandra, how did you get there and what was it like to ski and what was your equipment like?

Stuart: In the late 1950s I was involved with the buildings in Canberra, which was designed by Walter Burley Griffin. The buildings then were public housing and I had a contractor there called Leightons, who then went on to be involved with construction at Perisher. But in the late '50s there was no real skiing at either Perisher or Thredbo much. I hadn't been there since the 1940s so when I did take up skiing again it was with a club, it was the Kiandra Club which was formed in the 1860 in the gold rush. We were the first racing club in the world, even the Norwegians, the Finns told us this, they skied but they didn't race. It was all involved with the gold rush. The miners used to bet, and since they didn't have race horses, they bet on ski racing so that is where the race club started.

It was an interesting time because there were only nutcracker rope tows there at Kiandra and we skied in a place called "The Quarry" which was an ex mining quarry where they mined gold but they weren't mining anymore there. The hotel at Kiandra was a lock-up. The miners were pretty riotous people because they came in from anywhere and there were lots of fights and arguments. In the hotel, at the pub, there were still a couple of cells at the back. I think the police occupied them. It was quite a good time. We had a couple of skiers there who went on to become entries in the Olympics. But this is back in the early sixties.

In between that I had travelled to Europe. I travelled through a lot of different countries in Europe and I did a bit of skiing. But the Kiandra Club, apart from that we used to go to Perisher on weekends and over to Charlotte's Pass and then sometimes to Thredbo which had just started to operate lifts with two big companies – Transfield and their construction company Sabemo. I knew both the founders of those, Belgiorno and Nettiss.

By this time I was involved in an architectural partnership and following the design of housing in Canberra, Leightons asked me to design their lodge at Perisher which I did. It is still there and it's called Barrakee and it is at North Perisher. I had already done one on the way to North Perisher. It was Langlauf, for some doctors at Mosman.

The Kiandra Club decided to move from their old building and they got me to design a place at Charlotte Pass. That reached the stage of the model and we had the site all lined up, but they didn't buy that. The Kiandra Club then moved to Perisher and bought an existing lodge at the back of The Man. I think from an Austrian. It is still there and we did alterations to it.

Eddie: What is it called?

Stuart: Oh it is called Kiandra. There is also another lodge there I designed, called Ullr. Not the one at Thredbo, there is one at Perisher called Ullr – before the Thredbo Ullr.

Eddie: So when you were designing these, you did most of the design here and then did you go on site?

Stuart:: Oh yes, we supervised.

Eddie: And what were the difficulties and how did you get up there? Was it difficult?

Stuart:: Oh no. We had a car. I had won a national competition for another building in Sydney against Harry Seidler – I made some money out of that and I bought myself a Citroen Goddess. It was a ideal for going down to the snow – it had pneumatic suspension - you didn't need chains. You had a lever inside, and when you pulled it up, the thing rose up on an Olio-pneumatic suspension system. Do you know them?

Eddie: So when you were building these lodges, where did you get people?

Stuart:: Oh no, there were contractors around then. Leightons did certain lodges. I can't remember who the others were, but there were always contractors down there. They came from Cooma and Canberra and they arranged their own accommodation in places down there. It was difficult. On Barrakee at North Perisher we had a lot of stone masons working on that. The timing was a bit rough because of the snow and because they used to drink a lot and go off and wouldn't be there when you got down there. Oh, it was good fun.

Eddie: And what was the skiing like when you stayed at the Kiandra Club when that was at Kiandra?

Stuart:: We had a very good instructor who finally – he used to stay in the lodge. I don't know whether he stayed there in summer – no - we didn't have it open in summer. He used to sleep in the drying room. He was an ex Italian mountain trooper and his name was Gianni Destafanis and he went on to be an instructor at Thredbo and also at Perisher. But he trained us as a club racing team and we used to go to Perisher and race in the Perisher Cup – Kiandra did. The Perisher Cup was on every year. This was in the early sixties and by then I had three or four children. I used to take them down and they were on skis at the age of three and four up at The Quarry.

We used to have children's races. It was more of a family thing than at the other resorts in those days. It is still around and there is the 150th anniversary this year in the club.

Eddie: Can you remember some of the people who were in Canberra with you? Can you mention some of them now?

Stuart: Peter Hansen, he was a doctor who used to ski. He is still around, but he is the same age as me. Peter Fountain used to run our lodge at Kiandra. Over at Perisher, Langlauf and Barrakee, I forget the people who used to manage them. But the Kiandra lodge, I have drawings of the lodge I did for them for the existing lodge because we had to do alterations to it.

Eddie: What year was that? Langlauf and the one you are mentioning now

Stuart: Langlauf was in the fifties and Barrakee was in the early sixties, I think. It was a top job. Leightons which did all that housing, and that is how I met Leightons – that top job in was '59/60s.

Eddie: And what were the conditions like building then? Was it difficult? Did you have storms and how did you do the buildings so that they would be snow proof and warm under those conditions?

Stuart: We used to use snow boards on the eaves so that you didn't get too many icicles and they would hold the snow on the roof and it was insulation. Snow actually insulates as well as freezing, but it does insulate and keep the heat in. Most of the heating was hot water recirculated systems. They didn't have oil systems, but the fuel was oil and it was just hot water recirculating all the time. It was the only way we could do it. I did put a sauna into Barrakee at North Perisher but we didn't have anything like that at Kiandra. At Kiandra were four bunk rooms – not quite dormitory stuff but the only dormitory one I did, was Sydney University Ski Club at Thredbo. But in the last five or ten years that has been sold privately and they have redone the whole thing. It was a university club.

In Thredbo one of the first clubs I was associated with was, but I wasn't a member, but I knew most of them, was the TAC Shack – the Thredbo Alpine Club and that was fairly early. It must have been the early sixties and there were lots of parties there and one of them was very violent. We had a lot of workers from Island Bend come over and they crashed the party and of course it finished up in a fight with smashed bottles and everything. The Thredbo Alpine Club was designed by a chap called Jim Bibby and I knew him, but he was a university man then.

Eddie: So the techniques as you designed these things and they changed later because new techniques were different?

Stuart: Of course, this happens with all buildings, different materials, different insulation, different fittings and different windows, even double glazing wasn't around. Now we've vacuum, heat resistant and heat absorbent glass. It is the same thing with insulation. There is a blue insulation now which you just wrap the building in – we never had anything like that – it

was always those batts. But those fibre glass batts I never liked because if there were any leaks at all into them, they never worked – the water got into the bat and held it and it didn't evaporate and held it, and there was no insulation. There is much better now. It is a bubble wrap insulation – if you heat it, the bubbles keeps things warm. It is also coated with foil on one side, which helps. I don't use fibre glass bats anymore, there are too many problems. In the roof – if there is any condensation on the roof covering and it is cold and it is heated inside, you will get condensation drips on to the bats, and they are useless.

Edie: So after those buildings, were there any more that you did?

Stuart: You mean down in the mountains?

Edie: Yes

Stuart: No, not really.

Edie: What was the last one you built?

Stuart: When I left my partnership in 1975, I didn't do any more work like that. I was doing public housing and mainly working for a private firm – a millionaire who has a lot of land. Actually he has a ski lodge too, Twynam Pastoral, in Thredbo. I didn't design it but I did some alterations to it. His name is Dieter Kahlbetzer. He has a ski lodge there and when in Alta, Utah USA. But I have done a lot of work for him on other buildings. I designed a seven storey building at Elizabeth Bay for him.

I did the Great Hall of Newcastle University, lots of buildings at Sydney University, a master plan for Melbourne University. I analysed floor areas for the Bond University because I did planning as well.

Edie: Now getting back to the skiing, have you noticed in Perisher the new buildings – are you quite impressed with what they have done there?

Stuart: I haven't seen many new ones there. Now Robin Dyke who is the architect for Thredbo, is also the architect for Perisher. He worked for me and I took him skiing for the first time. Robin, I believe, had a scheme for over the car park at Perisher, which was a pretty big scheme because Packer owns all that. It is all owned by Packer.

Thredbo is owned by Kosciuszko Thredbo and originally it was within a National Park which it still is, but in the last four years it has been changed from a Crown Lease into Torrens Title. That means it has been excised from the National Park but all the buildings on it are still on a head lease to Torrens Title. They were on a head lease to Crown Land, so we have all got this sub lease to a head lease. Now we have got a sub lease to Torrens Title. So we all pay ground rent still to Kosciuszko Thredbo which in my case, having a tiny little one bedroom and a two-bed loft, the sub lease and my share because it is a strata plan, my share in the strata is about \$7 or \$8 thousand dollars a year and there are forty eight or fifty units here in Thredbo. Can you imagine how much that brings in? And that is only one development in Thredbo.

Edie: Now where is that called?

Stuart:: That is Riverside in Thredbo. There is about forty to fifty units in it and at \$8,000 a unit, it is \$400,000. Kosciuszko Thredbo are making a lot of money but I don't know how much they paid for it, because they used to pay a head lease on it.

Edie: And what year did you build Riverside?

Stuart:: No, I didn't do it, Robin Dyke did it. That was done in 1992.

Eddie: And the other ones you mentioned, they were in the sixties.

Stuart: Langlauf was in 1962 or '63. Barrakee was about the same time. I altered Barrakee again in about 1970. I added another wing to it and put a sauna in. Leighton's is quite a big firm. You will find it in the business pages still. Wal King is, well now he is retired, but they have asked him to come back. But when I did it, Stuart Wallace was the director. He used to ski. Well, King skied too, he still does I think. I don't know.

Eddie: So do you go back now to Riverside?

Stuart: Yes, I am fully involved with Riverside. I stay there at least twice a year but I don't ski. I walk in summer. I do a lot of walking. I didn't do the Summit this year but my wife did. I managed to get to one of the lookouts and I said "I'll wait for you". I have taken the kids right across the mountains. We used to camp out actually, but I gave all that up too. The kids did too.

In the very early days I belonged to YMCA Ramblers and that was a bush walkers group. We used to do a lot of walking from their YMCA camp at Yarramundi near Richmond. In 1942 I met a chap in the middle of Blue Gum Forest, he had a marvellous japara silk tent. I had never seen anything like it. It rolled up into a little bundle and put into a sack on the back of his rucksack. I had a long talk to him because I was going past. He was pretty old then and he had grey hair. I must have been about 18, and his name was Paddy Pallin. He went on to form a big bush walking business – and it is still around.

Eddie: Now what were the last years were you skiing for the last time?

Stuart: I took my second wife skiing in 1972 but she preferred apres ski. Although I took her down hill between my legs, you know. She was very fit but she doesn't do that sort of thing.

Eddie: Now what was the last time you skied?

Stuart: In the early seventies I suppose.

Eddie: Did you like the equipment compared with what you started with?

Stuart: Oh yes. But I never really got into carver skis with the spoons on the front. I never got them. The sort of skis I used, I got through Johnny Destafanis. He was Italian but he taught us to wedel, which is parallel skiing and racing. I did have a couple of bad falls and by the time the seventies were around I must have been fifty or more. Yes, I have had a few falls and I finished up in a brace actually. I skied with this Dr Peter Hansen. He told me "If you keep doing that you will break your hip." Steel around the spine, straps over the shoulders. So I got out of that, threw it away and went to a chiropractor who did nothing. You just live with a slipped disc

I had one doctor who was pretty good. He is Australian but he uses acupuncture. He uses needles about two inches long – not quite two inches – but they are longer than the Chinese ones and he goes down both sides of the spine on your sciatic nerve and when he feels the nerve relax, he marks every point and then hits it with a laser. It's pretty good.

Eddie: So what happened when they had the collapse at Thredbo when the whole mountain fell?

Stuart: So that was quite near Twynam Lodge up on that road, where the other one came down completely. It was obviously due to the construction of the roads and everything there because you can see by the trees, they started to lean. If you looked at all the trees on either side of that road, the ones uphill started to lean and that means they have been pushed over. They put gabions along the road and they actually don't allow a build up of water because everything

seeps out between them but they do keep the soil back. It is part of engineering which I understand.

If you put a concrete retaining wall in, you must put a drain at the bottom on the inside of it and weep holes through the wall so the water doesn't build up. But it is the build up of the water which makes the earth move. It wouldn't move if you didn't soften it with water. The hillside is covered with snow and when it starts to melt, the soil starts to move. That is what it is all about.

They obviously didn't understand or bother about it in the early days because we used to drive down there on dirt roads. And as I said we did have a Holden for a while, and we had to use chains and it was pretty rough. Down at Kiandra, we all had shovels which we took out of the cars because then we had to dig the cars out.

Eddie: I think we will conclude now and this was great. You have told me about all of your buildings and unless you would like to make a statement about anything else, I think we will conclude the interview. It was very good. I will ask you "Would you donate this to the Thredbo Historical Society."

Stuart:: If they think it is worth it.

Eddie: And also let it be transcribed?

Stuart: Yes. I'm 85, and people say I'm very fit and I will live to be 100 but I say "I can't, I haven't that much money!"

Eddie: Well thank you very much Stuart. That was wonderful.