

# Whose Idea was Thredbo? Who Founded It? And Who Deserves the Credit?

Chas Keys

If these questions were to be asked of the skiers of Thredbo today, the chances are that the most frequent answer to all of them would be “Tony Sponar”. But the answers to the questions are more complex than many believe. Sponar was extremely important, but no one individual gave rise to Thredbo.

Several people had the idea, and even more contributed to the decisions and actions that saw the village and the resort take root. Sadly, the matter has become a little controversial, passionate words being spoken about the roles of various individuals in the story and at least one person resigning from the Thredbo Historical Society because of a disagreement about the way the story was told in a video made several years ago. It is necessary, six decades on from the events that led to the birth of Thredbo, to flesh out the record and identify the roles of the key figures more clearly than they are perceived in the minds of the many for whom Thredbo is important. Who did what on the way to the establishment of Thredbo, and how important were the contributions of the many who played their parts?

## The Idea of Thredbo

Any founding starts with an idea. Sponar certainly had the notion of a world class Australian skiing resort with long runs like those in had known in Europe, and he pursued his idea with vigour. But others had the idea before him and wrote about it, nominating the valley of the upper Thredbo River as a place – perhaps the only place in Australia – with the necessary attributes for a ski resort of real quality. Famed author Elyne Mitchell nominated the valley in 1942 in her well-known classic *Australia's Alps* as an excellent site for an alpine village and resort. As far as is known this is the first reference in print to the skiing potential of the slopes of the Ramshead Range, oriented as they are to the south of south-east.

A few years later, in 1947, Venn Wesche, a prominent figure in Australian skiing circles, predicted with fine precision in the *Australian and New Zealand Ski Year Book* the idea that was to become Thredbo. “One day”, he wrote, “there will, of course, be a road up the river from Jindabyne and a lift up to the top from a hotel at Friday Flat.”

The use of the words “of course” are telling. They imply an inevitability, and Wesche saw that inevitability at the exact place that within a decade became the site of the village of Thredbo. He foresaw, too, the location of the original chairlift.

The idea of a ski resort in the upper Thredbo valley was well and truly alive in the minds of Australian skiers before the arrival of Sponar in the mountains in 1951. By then many Australian skiers, staying at the Chalet at Charlotte Pass, had toured the main range south to the Ramshead Range and had gazed down into the valley of the Thredbo River. A very small number, probably not long after the opening of the old Kosciusko Hotel in 1909, must have wondered about the possibilities of a plunge down from the Ramshead peaks towards the river, and some in the 1940s (and probably earlier) tried it as far as they could before trees and scrub brought a halt. Wendy Cross in *Australian Skiing: the First 100 Years* cites Peter

Blaxland and others skiing from the range to the river in 1943 and Tom and Elyne Mitchell doing the run from the range to Dead Horse Gap six years before. Others skied the slopes in even earlier times, among them the men who staffed the meteorological station on Mt Kosciuszko around the turn of the twentieth century and skied down to the Thredbo River on their way to Jindabyne for supplies.

By mid-century many in the still-small skiing fraternity would have known of the prophesy of Venn Wesche three years before: the *Ski Year Book* was widely read. In September 1950 Charles Anton led a touring party from the Chalet that included young Tasmanian skier Shann Turnbull, and they stood atop Saturday Peak looking into the valley of the Thredbo. The group pondered the potential of what was before them, and Anton waxed lyrical about its possibilities for downhill skiing. The slope was far longer than anything on the eastern side of the main range, the principal skiing area of New South Wales at the time.

## **The Search for the Site and the Forming of the Syndicate**

The story of the search for what became Thredbo is covered by Sponar in his autobiography (*Snow in Australia: that's news to me*) and in Geoffrey Hughes' *Starting Thredbo*. Others, like Wendy Cross, have added detail and there were reports on Thredbo in the *Ski Year Book* from time to time during the 1950s. Both Sponar and Hughes were players in the search for a site for a skiing resort and in the decisions that were made as a result of their endeavours. They are the only two members of the syndicate who recorded their views about the processes that led to the development of Thredbo. Broadly, their accounts are similar.

Sponar, while at the Chalet in 1951, wrote in his book of being told by a "man in a slouch hat" of long, skiable slopes to the south. These made up the "Thredbo fall" of the Ramshead Range and had a drop of perhaps up to 3000 feet (more than 900 metres) to the Thredbo River. These were the very slopes that Elyne Mitchell and Venn Wesche had identified. During the summer of 1951-52, according to an oral history recorded by Klaus Hueneke in 1986, Sponar first saw them from the Ramshead Range having ridden there by horse.

More than two years after sighting the southern flank of the range, Sponar met Eric Nicholls, a Sydney architect and town planner. Nicholls heard with interest Sponar's ideas for a ski resort there and (according to *Snow in Australia*) "proposed ways of getting the project under way". This involved generating publicity, seeking financial and other support and contacting people who could install a modern chairlift. Nicholls also spoke to skiers Charles Anton (the President of the Ski Tourers' Association and already known to Sponar) and Geoffrey Hughes (a Sydney solicitor and a member of the Ski Club of Australia). Quickly, the notion developed that the four men should form a syndicate, secure a lease over an area in the valley of the Thredbo River and begin developing a resort there.

The four pored over maps, searched the valley for an appropriate site, and considered Dead Horse Gap and the Twin Valleys (where the national championships had in 1953 and 1954 showcased the valley of the Thredbo as a site for downhill racing). They also put their idea of a resort village to the trustees of the Kosciusko State Park and, lacking money, began seeking business backing for their proposed venture.

Through the contacts of Nicholls and Hughes, Thyne Reid joined the group. Reid's business contacts and considerable wealth made him the obvious person to become the chairman of

the syndicate. Before the end of 1955 the Friday Flat site had been agreed by the now five players, and in 1957 Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Ltd was formed.

## A Video and a Controversy

Sponar was heavily involved in both the search for the site of Thredbo and the early development of the resort. In Thredbo lore, he came to be considered a [key](#) perhaps even the [central](#) figure in the story. But in 2006 a video appeared which in some minds appeared to diminish somewhat Sponar's contribution. This was *Charles Anton, the Main Range and Thredbo, 1950 -1962*, by Helen Malcher [with](#) with narration by Philip Lewis who is Anton's son. It is an informative video, but part of the narrative can be and has been heard as disparaging of Sponar's role in the story. Accordingly it has been criticised in some quarters. The man who resigned from the Thredbo Historical Society did so because the Society had not publicly disassociated itself from the video as he had asked.

The video makes much of Sponar's writing in his autobiography about his "hidden valley", and implies that he "discovered" it, had the "vision" of a resort there and was the "founder" of what developed as Thredbo. Entirely fairly, the video points out that autobiographies can be dangerous as sources, vehicles for the egos of those wanting their achievements to be favourably recorded for posterity. Sponar's book is not without flaws on this score.

But the video may go too far in its portrayal of Sponar's role as more limited than Sponar claimed. The term "hidden valley" is not best seen as a claim on sole ownership of an idea: it is better, perhaps, to think of it as describing a romantic vision. "Discovery", too, does not have to mean the finding of something that was previously completely unknown: one can discover a thing for oneself that is already known to others. Nor is it true that it is Sponar's book that created the impression that Sponar was the only or key "founder" of Thredbo, because that notion was well established in the minds of many Thredbo skiers long before the book was published. And it cannot be denied that Sponar had a "vision" for a European-style ski resort and came to see the valley of the Thredbo River as the place to build it. Others had a similar vision [like](#) Venn Wesche for one [but](#) but Sponar acted on his.

Sponar describes some of the contributions of the other members of the syndicate, with the exception of Hughes whose name is not mentioned. He and Hughes fell into serious disagreements in about 1957 and their relationship soured. It is also clear that Sponar disliked Reid and had differences with Nicholls. But he discussed Anton, Nicholls and Reid at some length and recognises their roles in the story including the importance of the role of Reid and his money. Sponar is far from claiming all the credit for Thredbo.

Some people believe that Helen Malcher's video elevates Charles Anton's role in the Thredbo story to the same level as Sponar's or higher. In this regard it might be suggested that Anton's former secretary (Malcher) and the narrator (Anton's son) are not ideally placed to comment objectively, especially having been critical of Sponar's autobiography for having gilded his own lily. The video implies that Sponar exaggerated his role and that a corrective is needed in Anton's favour. Sadly, a battle has arisen over the contributions of two of the players in the story. This is rather ironic given that Anton and Sponar were allies who got on better with each other than Sponar did with the other syndicate members.

## The Contributions of the Players

Where the truth lies in such matters is not easy to determine. But it is possible to work out the contributions of the five syndicate members between 1954, when Sponar met Nicholls, and 1958 when Thredbo was taking shape on the ground. Nicholls is the least well known of the syndicate publicly, but his business contacts in the early part of this period were critical and he made good on his promise to find chairlift manufacturers and obtain newspaper publicity for the proposal to develop a ski resort. Older than the other three originals in the syndicate, he probably played little if any role in the physical search for the best site for Thredbo, but it was he who coined the name of the original Kosciusko Chairlift and Thredbo Hotel Syndicate as part of the goal of attracting publicity: the word "Kosciusko" was well known and thought important for marketing purposes. Nicholls was also involved in the preparations for the negotiation of the lease arrangements with the Park Trust.

Once Reid came on board, Nicholls appears to have deferred to him on important decisions such as the siting of the tourist hotel which was to be the centrepiece of the village. He was then instrumental in surveying the village to form lots for clubs and businesspeople to build lodges upon. Large lots were created, a boon because they allowed room for the lodges to be expanded and provided generous space for car parking. Years later, long-term Resident Village Manager Albert van der Lee gave Nicholls credit for the foresight he showed here.

Anton's role was quite different. As the leader of the Ski Tourers Association, he pioneered the development of a chain of mountain huts including Lake Albina, Kunama and, at Thredbo in 1958 and 1959, Roslyn and Kareela: he and the STA thus supported the infant resort when not many Australians were ready to invest in what must have seemed at the time a risky venture. Anton was also a wizard at obtaining publicity for the projects in which he was involved, had good business contacts through his employment in the insurance industry and was experienced in negotiating with the Kosciusko State Park Trust. He owed money to the Trust, though, which may not have been helpful. He also had an infectious enthusiasm and boundless energy for developments in the Snowy Mountains. But after having participated strongly in searching for the optimal site for the resort he too deferred to Reid on the details of decisions about the village and the ski slopes. His principal interest was in the development of huts for ski tourers, and Thredbo was to help him achieve his goals in that endeavour.

Hughes, the lawyer, had experience in leasehold negotiations and drafted the lease documents which led to the legal agreement with the Park Trust. He too had good business contacts, a sense of the need not to attract competition by publicising too heavily the benefits of the Thredbo area before the syndicate had secured a lease over it (in *Starting Thredbo* he mentions cautioning the enthusiastic Anton on this score), and access to a personal network made up largely of young skiers from the legal fraternity. Moreover Hughes fashioned the first uphill transport in time for the winter of 1957. His rope tow, cobbled together from spare parts, was important in providing access to Thredbo's slopes in that first season. He too seems to have deferred to Reid on important decisions from 1957 onwards.

Sponar was the skiing expert who led in the search for the site of Thredbo. He had a more detailed understanding of the requirements of a skiing resort than any of the others. On this score he thought Friday Flat superior to the Twin Valleys site further down the Ramshead

Range: that location, the site of the George Chisholm Run which had achieved prominence when it hosted the National Championships in 1953 and 1954, was favoured by some in the skiing community of the 1950s including Winter Olympian Bob Arnott. But most who had an opinion favoured Friday Flat: according to Bill Bursill, a large party of businessmen and skiers who visited in October 1955 agreed that it was the place at which Thredbo should be built.

Multi-talented and hard-working, Sponar laboured over the summer of 1956-57 to clear a line for the chairlift. He then obtained and re-erected the hut that became the company's Thredbo building (The Lodge) and he accompanied people around Thredbo as they searched for their own lodge sites. In addition he managed with his wife the operation of the nascent village and helped people to get started on their building projects.

Sponar did, though, tend to get ahead of Reid and the rest of his partners on matters like defining the line for the first chair. Not consulting sufficiently and believing that he had a superior understanding of what was needed on the mountain, he antagonised Reid with what must have been taken as arrogance. Tellingly, Sponar was not made a director by Reid when the company was formed. His original chair line was deemed to be badly sited, given the need to locate the tourist hotel in a reasonably well drained position, and he was accused of wasting syndicate money. For his part, Sponar believed that the slopes next to his planned chair would have given skiers more nearly optimal runs in relation to the fall line along with a slightly longer snow season ☐ because of the more south-facing aspect than the replacement line delivered. Some skiers agree with Sponar's view even today.

Reid was the man with the money and accordingly the man with most of the power in the first years of Kosciusko Thredbo. The golden rule is that "he who has the gold makes the rules", and Reid unquestionably had the gold. He involved himself in all the early developmental decisions, and eventually he fired Sponar whose fingerprints on Thredbo's built environment were in the end fainter than they might have been.

Without Reid, KT could not have begun to meet the requirements of the lease. But even his money was not enough to develop the ski fields and the hotel to the level required by the lease. His final contribution was to find in Lend Lease a company with the resources to take the project further.

The skills and capacities of the five men were quite different, as was the nature of their contributions to the early Thredbo. Weighing these contributions is not easy; it is akin to comparing apples and oranges. But between them they formed a collective which despite the clashes and the enmity between the individuals involved created the beginnings of a significant resort. Probably, the two who were most central to the early development of the project were Sponar and Reid ☐ the former with his vision, his role in the selection of the site and his hard on-the-ground work when the resort was being created, and the latter with the business acumen and wealth without which Thredbo could not have got started. Nicholls, Anton and Hughes all played positive roles in setting up the venture but their contributions were in important ways less critical than those of Sponar and Reid.

## **Conclusion**

The idea of Thredbo clearly pre-dated Sponar's arrival in the mountains: many in Australia's small skiing community by 1950 knew of Friday Flat and the flanks of the Ramshead Range

and had pondered a haven for skiing there. Then, between 1954 and 1958, several others apart from Sponar and the other syndicate (and then company) members were involved in the founding of the resort. Some of these were outsiders: Sir William Hudson as the Commissioner of the Snowy Mountains Authority gave considerable help to the fledgling company, for example by offering the cutting of the access road from the Alpine Way to the village. Hudson sought to promote not only the Snowy Scheme but also the mountains, and the Thredbo venture fitted that broader objective. Others who played important roles in the first two or three years of Thredbo were Kosciusko Thredbo company directors John Gam and Peter Lloyd, Sponar's wife Elisabeth, builders Bela Racsko and Steve Szeloczky, the accommodation-providing Deseos (Kornel and Suzanne), Nekvapils (Sasha and Karel) and Bill Bursill and ski instructors Leonhard Erharter and Helmut Pfister. Many people worked hard and effectively to ensure the resort became successfully established.

But it is surely true that Sponar's role was central, indeed indispensable to the beginnings of the place we know today. He has an honoured place in the history of Thredbo which is well merited; rightly, he has been accorded great credit for what he did. Nobody else played a bigger part. Geoffrey Hughes, no friend of Sponar in the late 1950s but generous to his rival in *Starting Thredbo*, generally supports Sponar's version of the story of the conception and birth of Thredbo. Without Sponar in the Snowy Mountains in the 1950s it is probable that Thredbo would not have been founded when it was or at the site at which it developed.

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