

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WALTER AUER – AN ORAL HISTORY

Conducted by Roger Andrew, Heath Hill Vic. March 2013



Walter Auer, Thredbo 1971

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Walter Auer – An oral History

Interviewed by Roger Andrew, 2013.

Walter what were your first impressions of Thredbo in 1962, regarding the village itself and the facilities in Thredbo?

It was really funny, driving in to Thredbo - driving and driving, and no snow, a bit of road and then at the very end a bit of snow could be seen out there, - the car stopped where the car park used to be, at the bottom bridge. The bottom bridge was there because the high bridge didn't exist then, and there was ankle deep mud. So I thought "Well, that is what it is, and that is what it is."

Anyway we were taken up and given our rooms at the Lodge Hotel. At the bottom there was a Commonwealth bank and a bit of a store and the bar of course. It was a bit noisy at night if you wanted to sleep - not that we needed sleep.

Anyhow it did start to snow. Don't ask me when it was. And then the chairlift broke down, that was my first year, and I was sitting with a poor beginner girl on the chair out of the bottom station before the first pylon on the highest part of the lift, when whoosh, the chairs started to jump up and down, and things got crazy finish. Anyhow, I got lowered down with a rope, and the girl too.

Then of course the season was finished for that year and we couldn't use that, so that is when we had to up Middle Station with the snow cat, and the students had to go up with the snow cat and the instructors had to use the staircase underneath the chair up to the Middle Station so that is where all the skiing was done.

So the skiers actually carried up with the snow cat?

Yes, because they couldn't ski up. The better ones could be towed up. It was a big snow cat and the students could sit on it. There existed that little T-bar at the foot of Lovers' Leap and then there was this T-bar that went up to Kareela Station. Anyhow, that is where most of the classes were and the beginner classes. The better skiers had to walk higher up to Kareela and higher up, ski down and climb up again. It was pretty hard going but everybody was happy so how do you complain?

Our lessons didn't really suffer a lot. We were working flat out. It was school holidays you know. But it was amazing that despite the fact that the chairlift wasn't working, the season went well – it was pretty good.

Now this all happened because the cable came off the bullwheel

That's right

The Crackenback Chairlift

So the story is that it was very, very windy, and one of the chairs got caught at the last pylon just before it got into top station and the bull wheel got pulled out.

And the cable came off

Yes.

Were there many people injured in that situation?

We were lucky.

Were there many injuries in that situation?

We were lucky there were no serious injuries, only a couple of minor injuries and so forth. Anyway, us ski instructors had to quickly go up because a lot of them were may be just a metre or a metre and a half off the ground there so we had to take them off. I got to just below Kareela, – where it is steep, then it flattens out – I had to go to a chair with two guys on it, may be a metre and a half off the ground and I told said “Gentlemen, the chairlift has broken down, you have to get off” and they said “No way, we have paid to go to the top”. I said “You see the chairlift has broken down and you have to get off”. Anyway there was a bit of swearing and we got them off. I wasn’t the only one that had that sort of experience. It ended on a good note

I will tell you another funny story. That was the year when, what was his name – Hughes? Was he a major or a colonel in the air force? He became the mountain manager then – they were the people that bought the Silver Brumby Lodge and his son had to learn about the mountain. They knew nothing about snow and skiers. Why was he made mountain manager? Anyway young Robin had to learn about the mountain and do some work on the ski lifts. So he was to go up and put the T’s behind the skiers’ backs. There comes beginner skier came up with the snow cat and he goes straight to the T-bar with the skis tucked under his arm, and we were watching, and Robin put the T behind that poor man’s back, and as soon as the cable tightened up, bang, the skier fell flat on his face. We were laughing, and we shouldn’t have because we should have warned them.

In 1962, what kind of skis and equipment did you have?

Well us guys from the Tyrol area – like Leonhard, **Oberhauser (?)** Pfister, Pfertscheller and myself – we all skied Kneissl. The guys who came from the Vorarlberg, they skied Kästle.

What type of bindings were you using?

During the first years, the so-called long thongs. One wouldn’t use those things anymore now in a fit, but then we used them.

Were you supplied with clothing by the company?

Oh yes, we were supplied with the ski school anorak. The ski school anoraks were then supplied by Kurt Lance, a Thredbo skier who had a factory making clothes or something.

Your accommodation was at the Lodge Hotel.

That was in my first year in the Lodge and in the second year in the Valley Terminal - the bottom station was already built. Above it on one side was a bar, and on the other side there were the ski instructors' quarters. It was very basic really, but it was only for sleeping.

How were you paid? Were you paid by the tuition or were you paid a regular salary week?

We had a salary and **10%** ?? for private lessons. It was very, very good pay in those days. We got our accommodation, food and everything.

And food was included. Did you pay rent?

Of course not.

With the entertainment, I am told you were a very good yodeller and still are a good yodeller – is that correct? Did you go on the night on the prowl having a good sing?

Of course, when we were in a good mood we had a bit of a sing-up every now and then - especially Hansi Pfertscher and myself. Now there is a funny story. Now we came out by boat, and there is usually a bit of a festivity when you go over the Equator. We were really in a good mood and Hansi asked one of the guys of the band on the boat, it was the "Neptunia" we were on, if one of them could lend him a guitar and so Hans and I started off with a few yodelling songs and then there comes an elderly lady and says "Boys, I have a job for you!" and he says "Sorry, we already have a job". She wanted to engage us for some sort of tour or her restaurant or something.

There comes another singing before that – I was in Kitzbuhel for three years as a member of the 'Gay Tyroleans' - Tony Brachmyer's folk and singing group. In 1958 we went on a tour of England and Scotland and Wales. In the autumn of this year we did a three month tour of the United States. We went around and did God knows how many shows, concerts in how many states. We even did a guest appearance on the Ed Sullivan Christmas Show in Radio City.

So you were not only a ski instructor but also an entertainer as well?

In a way.

They tell me being a ski instructor you have to be a good entertainer as well, because you have to keep the people engaged all the time.

I would say, not an entertainer, you have to be a good communicator.

From 1962, then you kept coming back each year.

1972 was my last year.

What were the major changes that you saw over the period of time?

Well of course the ski school grew every year because the village grew and more and more people came, and consequently there was a need for more and more ski instructors you know. But it was still sort of very, very intimate still and even in '72 everybody knew everybody still.

Was there any rivalry between the ski instructors?

Good lord, no.

So you were all gentlemen were you?

There may have been a bit of rivalry now and then over a female but...

I thought there was a lot of rivalry of the females. Now on which part of the mountain did you like skiing on the best on or did it depend on the snow?

As a mountain man, the main chairlift was the best run. Across the Ramshead was good, a little bit steep but quite good, then you had to traverse across again, and in those days, Merritts didn't exist anyway. The chairlift didn't exist. It was only after the Merritts area for beginners was opened.

That was in 1968 or '69?

Yes, but there that was not much skiing there. There were a few runs up top there and then there was big Cat Walk traverse across.

Then there was the Duplex and the Mighty Mite?

Yes.

And they were the main facilities on Merritts, and Merritts Chairlift?

Yes

And you used to go up a couple of a hundred metres at the top of the Duplex and then ski across?

One winter when there was absolutely no snow, and Leonhard could not think of us being paid and not a thing to do, so we got access, and we cut the Cat Walk across with the mountain people helping. But we got the equipment, and then men, and we got the Cat Walk across.

And how did you find Leonhard? Was he a hard boss?

Leonhard was a very, very hard boss. He was not a very easy man to deal with, but when it came to his ski instructors, he stood up for them 120%. Because there was one incident when during the school holidays in Australia, one man decided that we ski instructors had to be unionised, we had to belong to some sort of an Australian union and we had to pass an Australian instructors exam and Leonhard said "I beg your pardon, but who is going to examine us?" Well there was no answer to that and the whole thing came to Dusseldorp. There we were the whole lot of us down to his lodge and there was this man with his big cigar and Leonhard said "What is this about us having to pass an exam and who will examine us? You?" then Leonhard said "I am resigning over this. The boys will complete their contracts for the year and that's it." And nothing ever came of it except that guy when he came to Thredbo, he thought he was the king for the army. He got the sack that year.

Can you remember which year that was? Was it around about the '70, 71?"

No, it must have been earlier – in the '60s.

Now as a ski instructor and you could see the increase in numbers of skiers coming on to the mountain, you have had something to do with the ski patrol or come across some of the ski patrollers?

Of course we knew all the ski patrollers.

Did you know them very well?

We knew them very well, and been good friends with them, going out drinking with them of course especially Adrian Studley, and the Italian, Tommy Tomasi. Yes we knew them all.

With you staying in Valley Terminal, how many years did you stay in Valley Terminal and where did you go to from there?

In '62 I stayed at old Lodge and from '63 until '72 I stayed at the Valley Terminal.

You must have noticed a change in the village in 1968 after the extension of the Alpine Hotel, and the building of the Merritts Chairlift, so in a matter of two years when the resort had gone from something quite small to something much larger than what it had been.

The big leap had already been done in 1963 when the new Alpine Hotel opened up, that was already a major change.

Can you remember the best snowfall year for that ten year period? And when would it have been?

1964 was enormous. That was when the Swiss National Team was out.

1968 was a good year too. It started bad then it came good.

1968 was actually a good year because that was the year when Jean Claude Killy came out after the Olympics I think with Warren Miller and we had to go out with – there was Leonhard, myself, Hannes Pfister, and a few more and we had to go out with the snow cat to the Main Range and we had to ski and be filmed.

That would be a good memory.

Yes, and then there was one year – I can't remember which year it was - when we walked out with the National Geographic photographers to Mt Kosciuszko. Just below Mt Kosciuszko there is that big cornice and - I can't remember how many ski instructors there were of us - and a couple of Australians - Nicky Allen and a couple more - we each stood up there and jumped off the cornice one after the other and skied down – bang, bang, bang. It was not a long slope but fairly steep. Suddenly there was a “whish” and it was Nicky Allen who fell off the cornice, and slid further down the slope than we skied. At the end Nicky said “I am the first Australian that fell off the top of Mt Kosciuszko.” He didn't hurt himself or anything.

Can you remember what year that was?

No I can't remember. But I am sure that could be easily found out because the National Geographic would have things there. I kept that National Geographic because of that photo. I still have the picture of that guy lying there.

What is the best memory you have of Thredbo?

The best memory? They are all good memories except for the few days when we had to drain the water that came out of the ski boots and Leonhard said “How can you wear ‘dry-as-a-bones’ when nobody can see what your legs are doing. Off with the “dry-as-a-bones”.

Did you ever ski often from the top of Ramshead?

Often we went a few times there. As a matter of fact one year we went there with Leonhard and Elyne Mitchell in spring time and it was really funny because she was there skiing in front, filming with Leonhard. She was only interested in Leonhard and it's not much of a place as you know, there are a couple of places, then you have a bit of a walk until you get into the gum trees and bushes. And I thought "I will leave it to her." The last time I did it, was with Heinz Reichinger.

Were you there when the World Cup was on? What was your role at the time?

Nothing. The night before we had to slip the course and to do the gate keeping. But I didn't do any of that, I remember. There were hardly any spectators. Everybody was more interested in their own skiing.

Skiing on the mountain, for some time there was no grooming at all.

There was some grooming. Often after a big snowfall, we often went out and side stepped a track for the skiers. That was also part of the job.

So you really spent a lot of time on the mountain.

Oh yes.

Over the years, have you made many good, long term friends?

Oh yes, like Richard Walker who really got me to like the country life and so forth. I spent most of my time after the snow with the Walkers and I was probably his cheapest labourer then but I loved it and I learnt a hell of a lot about farming.

That is because I finally came to reside out here because there was a family when I was their ski instructor over there and they had a home in Melbourne and a farm in Alexandria, and I met my wife in Southern France and she was down there too with a friend of theirs. And they said "Walter, whenever you want a job on a farm you can look after our farm in Australia." That is how **Hanni** and I got married in 1974 and we managed 'The Oaks' in Alexandria for ten years. That was a two and half thousand acre place of Goulburn River flats and I had a herd of five hundred Angus cows there. When that place was sold, we bought the place down here in **Heathcote**.

*You are now living in **Heathcote**?*

At the moment we are now selling the place. My wife was into dressage riding and teaching riding. She is a qualified equestrian instructor but she is getting sick of teaching and horses

and so forth. So we were able to sell the place and we are moving up to Wangaratta and I am closer to skiing. We still have got friends up there from the ten years we lived in Alexandria.

So from the years you lived in Thredbo and you said you still ski, which of the resorts do you ski now?

Well I usually go Falls Creek with friends at times. Also I go up now and then to Hotham because Zirky was also a ski instructor in Zurs and he has got that lodge up in Hotham. Apart from that when we were in Alexandria, I used to go frequently up to Buller because I could ring up and ask the boys "What is the snow like?" and they'd say "Good". So I would go up and ski for an hour and a half and go home again.

Well in changing your lifestyle and living in Wangaratta, it will certainly give you easy access to ski resorts in Victoria.

Well it will also be much closer to Thredbo because from there to Thredbo, it will only take three hours - from Wangaratta to Corryong, probably a good hour and then from Corryong up, another two and a half.

Depending on road conditions. Now if you had your magic wand, what changes would you make to Thredbo village and where would you put the next chairlift?

Now there is a good question. The village has reached its main capacity. I don't think it is possible to grow any bigger because every new chair you put up, no matter where, it won't open up a much bigger area for skiing because if you go to Ramshead or a bit further, it is going to be very exposed to the winds and the weather, so it would be quite often closed and the skiing over that way is not really exciting, I find. So I think it is big enough now as it is.

In 1963 the chairlift opened just down from the Thredbo Village – the double chairlift that went from the road over to Charlotte Pass. Do you remember the chairlift and did you ever get the opportunity to ride on it?

I remember the chairlift but I never rode on it. I think it only existed for more or less, for a year and then they had to pull off everything.

Well thank you Walter for your time, and thank you for all things you have done to give pleasure to skiers over the years. There must be hundreds of skiers who you have taught over the years to do it well. And I thank you for the opportunity for me to be here today to say "Thank you very, very much."

It was a pleasure.

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Details of the Oral History Interview

Place of Interview:		Date of Interview:	2013
Interviewer(s):	Roger Andrew	Position:	Committee Member
Description of Interview:	Walter Auer's years as a ski instructor at Thredbo from 1962 to 1972		
Reference Number:			

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