

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

IAN CURLEWIS – AN ORAL HISTORY

conducted by Christina Webb
Thredbo Alpine Hotel, Thredbo, July 26th 2017



Ian Curlewis, July 2017

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IAN CURLEWIS QC – AN ORAL HISTORY

This is Christina Webb and today is July 26th 2017. On behalf of the Thredbo Historical Society, I am talking to Ian Curlewis QC so as to record his oral history for the Thredbo Alpine Museum's archives.

Ian, to place you in history, Ian please could you tell me your grandparents' names?

My grandfather was Herbert Curlewis. He practiced law following his graduation from the Sydney University and retired as Judge of the NSW District Court. He married Ethel Turner (author of "Seven Little Australians") who together with her parents, emigrated from the United Kingdom.

Who were your parents?

My father was Sir Adrian Curlewis CBE, CVO. Born in January 1901, he was known as a "Federation Baby". He too studied law at Sydney University, however serving with the Australian Infantry Forces in WW2, he was captured in the fall of Singapore in 1942 and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner in Burma. He survived the horror and returned to Australia in October 1945. He resumed practice as a lawyer in 1946, and served as a District Court Judge from 1947 to 1941.

My mother' maiden name was Betty Carr and she came from Kalgoorlie, in Western Australia.

When and where you born?

I was born in 1929 in Mosman and christened Ian Adrian. I had a sister Phillipa who married Adrian Poole and she went to live in Wellington.

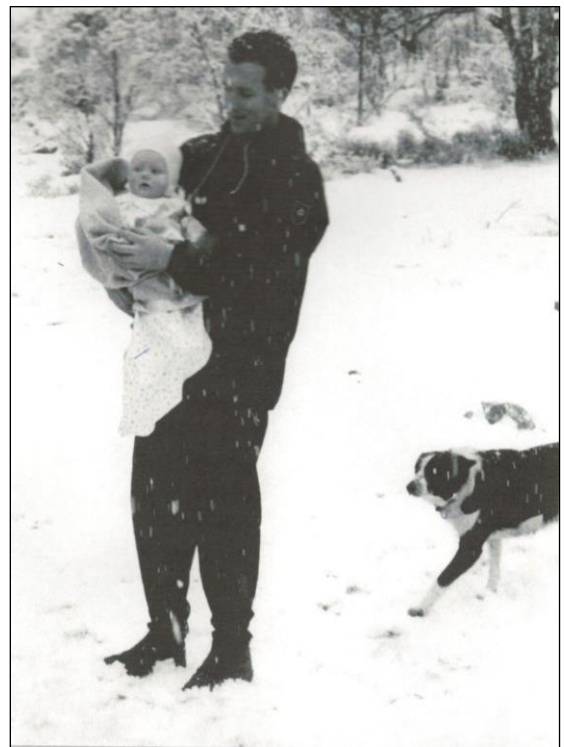
Where did you attend school?

Both my primary and secondary years were spent at Shore school at North Sydney.

Which university did you attend and the year of your graduation?

In 1951 I began reading law at Sydney University and graduated in 1953. I joined the legal firm of Abbott Tout Creer and Wilkinson in 1954 and I was called to the Bar in 1955 and so began work as a legal practitioner.

In 1954 I became engaged to my wife, Bev Friend. We married in 1955 with our daughter Amanda arriving in 1957, followed by Luisa in June 1958, Tony November 1960 and Matthew in June 1964.



Ian Curlewis holding his five month old Daughter, Amanda in Thredbo in July 1957

When and where did you begin skiing?

Whilst still a student in 1951, my first visit to the Snowy Mountains was with my friend John Holt who also later on went on to be a QC and judge. We spent our first night in the hotel in Old Jindabyne. We hired boots and skis from the Old Hotel which had been damaged in a fire in the previous year.

What was the equipment like?

We used wooden skis looking like fence palings and ex-army boots with a groove around each heel to accommodate the metal coil of the Kandahar bindings. From Jindabyne we travelled on to Smiggin Holes headed for the Kosciusko Chalet at Charlotte Pass. Our progress was made much easier when at Smiggin Holes, our equipment and back packs were loaded into a trailer towed by a converted WW2 Bren Gun Carrier fitted with caterpillar tracks for oversnow travel, whilst we continued on skis to the Chalet.

At the end of the day-long journey, we walked into the bar at the Chalet to be greeted by the barman Brian Davidson, who was renowned for arresting pretty girls scantily clad in bikinis on Bondi Beach where he was employed as a Beach Lifesaving Inspector during the summer months. By the end of the week we had mastered the snow plough turn and had been charmed by the legendary Czech Winter Olympian Sasha Nekvapil who was instructing at the Chalet.

When did you first visit Kunama Hut?

My first visit was in July 1952 together with Alec Shand (later Alec Shand QC). Being impecunious university students, we were promised reduced accommodation charges at Kunama Hut owned by the Ski Tourers' Association (STA) if we were prepared to assist in the completion of the hut, so we offered our services. Little did we know how hard we would have to work! Following the ski from Smiggin Holes to the Chalet where we caught our breath – our equipment being transported by the Bren Gun Carrier trailer – we went over Charlotte Pass, down to the Snowy River, crossing it near Foreman's Chimney and up the slope to Kunama Hut with skins on our skis.

On arrival at the Hut, we met Charles and Margaret Anton, who were there to inspect the final stages of the building being carried out by Bill Hawkins and his offsider Tony Cooper. There started a long friendship with Charles which lasted well into the early days of Thredbo. Alec and I were both impressed with the standard of accommodation that was being offered in such a remote location but there was still much work to be done to complete the building. Alec and I worked like slaves, for most of our fortnight's holiday but towards the end of our second week, the work was finished and both of us assisted Bill and Tony with their luggage and tools back to the Chalet. Although work on the hut came first, we still managed some wonderful skiing round the adjacent peaks.

During the course of our stay, it was necessary to run into the Chalet to obtain fresh food and replenish our liquor supply, only to learn that on a couple of nights during the week there would be drinks at the bar with Brian Davidson, following by dinner and dancing. Because we had no desire to get back to Kunama in the dark, and because we could not afford to stay at the Chalet, we found we could hide behind the long lounge seats in the reception area at the top of the stairs, and at daybreak before anyone was about, we would depart for breakfast at Kunama Hut.

The system worked well until we slept in one morning. At that time Elisabeth Sponar was the empress of the reception desk and she discovered us. We were duly threatened with financial ruin and warned to keep away from the Chalet in future. In the following years, on our Chalet sorties, Sasha took pity on us and gave us shelter in the cold galvanised shed at the back of the Chalet – this was her accommodation. However, as before, we had to be up at daybreak and away before Elisabeth came on duty. On one of these trips I can still recall so clearly as we climbed up to Charlotte’s Pass, a red dawn arrived and as we looked out on the Range, it had all turned the colour of cochineal.

July 1953 saw John Holt (later Judge Holt QC), Alec Shand and myself back at Kunama Hutte. In May that year Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to climb Mt Everest and on reaching the top it is reputed that Hillary said “we’ve knocked the bastard off.” So every time we reached the summit of one of the peaks on the Main Range, it became a tradition to quote “We’ve knocked the bastard off.” Thinking himself the better skier, John Holt appointed Alec and myself as his sherpas.

Bill Clarke was the manager of Kunama. Bill and his wife Marion went on to manage Barrakee at North Perisher for many years. As John Nagle’s sherpas, one of our duties was to descend into the freezing basement and warm the toilet seat for him. In later years sometimes whilst walking to the court house in Sydney, dressed in our legal robes, other lawyers passing by would call out G’day Sherpa.

It was the dream of Charles Anton to have a string of mountain huts across the Main Range. In the years 1953, 54 and ’55, as the law vacation fell in July, both Alec and I joined friends which always seemed to include other lawyers. During these years we had some memorable holidays touring the whole of the Range from Tate to the Ramsheads, including Watson’s Crag, Little Austria and the western faces of Townsend. Quite often we were visited by friends from the Chalet who were out for a days’ skiing on the Main Range.

In which Ski Tourers’ Association projects were you involved?

Being involved with Kunama meant that we were required to join what was then the Ski Tourers Association. I think it probably cost \$50. But having become involved, we joined quite a large group of skiing enthusiasts who banded together in the summer time and at Easter to carry out hut maintenance. This included work on Albina which was the first Main Range hut and been built a couple of years before Kunama. In addition to hut maintenance, food provisions, gas cylinders and kerosene were taken in, some by vehicle, some in back packs and some by aluminium sled.

In 1954 I was involved with the building of the Northcote rope tow which was constructed under the peak of Mt Northcott and of course a Tow Hut which housed the tow engine and included accommodation for another 4 people. What a wonderful facility this provided.

So for us all, downhill skiing took off, and in Charles Anton’s typical manner he devised an 800 metre competition downhill run from the peak of Northcott whereby you competed for a “Golden Eagle”. As I recall Christine Davy, who later represented Australia at two Winter Olympics, reached a speed of 80mph. For the most part the people who formed the work parties and enjoyed the main Range skiing, were members of KAC or Ski Club of Australia. Whilst Cooma Ski Club provided a few, it was a time when there were very few skiers, and one tended to know many of those who visited the snow country.

When did you introduce your fiancée Bev to skiing?

Bev was introduced to skiing in 1954 before our marriage. After two weeks on skis, she accompanied me to the Albina Hut before we married, much to the concern of her mother.



Easter 1956, Alec Shand climbs through Snow Daisies on the slope of Mt Clarke down which the avalanche roared in July 1956 to destroy Kunama Hutte and kill Roslyn Wesche (GEF Hughes Collection)

Can you describe the conditions leading up to the Kunama Avalanche and what happened in the avalanche?

On July 6th or 7th 1956, Alec and I made a trip into Kunama in good weather knowing that we were to return to the Chalet to bring out to the Hut a close friend, John Holt and Roslyn Wesche. On the Sunday we returned to the Chalet to meet John and Roslyn but found their transport to the Chalet has been delayed. By early afternoon the weather had started to turn ugly but in spite of the lateness we set off into the increasing wind and cloud about 3 pm. We had contemplated staying at the Chalet but because of our poor financial position could not risk such a course. The four of us made our way satisfactorily over the pass and down to Foreman's Chimney. Putting on our skins we set off into what had become a howling blizzard. By about 5.15 pm as it was becoming dark, we realised we were lost as a snow pole from the snow pole line had been blown over and were finding thaw, from time to time our ski tips were disappearing into drifting snow.

At that time we also found ourselves adjacent to a red water-measuring hut, several of which we knew at that time existed in many parts of the Snow Mountains. Following a huddled meeting we concluded we could well get lost going back to the Chalet so we decided to spend the night in the hut. The door could not be opened so we clambered on to the roof and made our entrance through a trapdoor in the roof. What a decidedly uncomfortable night we had!!! The hut measured no more than 1 metre by 1 metre. It had a bench on which sat a measuring device and on which Roslyn sat, whilst the three of us stood. We found we could not lean against the walls for condensation from the heat of our bodies caused water to drip down the walls. However, we made ourselves as comfortable as we could and waited for day break.

About 7 am Monday July 9th we realised the wind had almost died down, so we climbed out the trap door and set off for Kunama Hut, only going a short distance, when the sky cleared to a beautiful sunny day. On arriving at the Kunama Hut we all had a good breakfast and spent the rest of the day skiing in wonderful conditions.

Tuesday July 10th, started out well but by late afternoon another front descended bringing wind from the southeast and buckets of wet snow. The snow continued throughout Wednesday so skiing was out. However, as we had previously found out, not all our systems which had been designed to make life comfortable in the mountains always worked. We had found the previous night there was no water running into the huts so a decision had been made to dig in the snow to try and locate the dam which supplied the water, by a roster system. Every one took a turn digging into the snow making a tunnel some 3 metres deep to locate the 44 gallon drum that formed our dam. Extraordinarily enough the dam was found, the filter cleared of debris and the water ran again.

On Wednesday night, July 11th, all went to bed with the blizzard still raging outside. Inside the hut, all 8 beds on the ground floor were occupied and an additional 3 were upstairs on the mezzanine floor. I might mention here that on the mezzanine floor, a water tank of some 100 gallon capacity was located.

Who was staying at Kunama at the time?

Jann Benn, Murray Clark, John Holt, Keith Hordern, Peter Kelly, Allie Payne, Jill McPhee, Margaret Philpotts, Anne Roarty, Roslyn Wesche and myself, Ian Curlewis. I think some had not been able to continue on to Albina because of the weather.

As the morning of Thursday July 12th, was breaking, I was aware that Keith Hordern who occupied the bunk under me, got out of bed to go down to the basement where the toilet was located. I was aware of Keith coming out of the basement and just as he was about to get into his

bed, the hut shook with the sound of breaking timber. I could feel the whole hut being moved forward in a northerly direction with it coming to rest in the snow but I found I could not move as I was pinned by a beam across my chest.

As we were all aware fire was an ever present risk in the snow, my first thought was of the Fireside Heater which had been left during the night on a low flame. I recall there was some panic to find the heater to ensure it was out. At the same time I looked round to where daylight was coming through a crack in the wall timber which had been damaged and I thought I saw smoke. My heart did a few quick beats before I realised it was my breath against the cold air. My next realisation was that I was soaked with water for the water tank had been capsized when the hut moved and flowed into my bed.

In a short time I was shattered to learn Ros had been killed when snow entered the corner of the hut, forcing her head into the snow, resulting in her suffocation. I had to wait until some tools and manpower had been assembled so I could be freed. Fortunately, Ken Breakspear and the two Studley brothers were in the Tow Hut and in a short time they had cut through timbers to release me. This experience was not without its interest for, as they were attacking the broken timbers, they were commenting to each other to be careful lest the hut should move some more. As it was, I had quite severely bruised ribs and I was fortunate it did not move again in the rescue.

After an hour or so I was eventually released and the sad process of getting Ros' body on the sled for transport back to the Chalet, was undertaken. Before leaving Kunama the weather had cleared sufficiently for me to see that a slab of wet snow, only 3 or 4 metres wide had slid down the mountain from between the two rocky outcrops below the peak of Mt Clarke and into the south eastern corner of the Hut, where Ros' had been sleeping. The whole party then moved back to the Chalet to be greeted by Ros' mother and father who were staying at the Chalet where they had been skiing, and who had already heard the sad news.

What were the outcomes of the destruction of Kunama Hut?

The building and provisioning of the two huts, running a bulldozer and mainly 4-wheel drive vehicles from Seaman's Hut to the huts had caused disastrous erosion. All the work on the Main Range had been carried out with agreement and encouragement of the then Kosciusko Park Trust but no one realised just how fragile the area was. By 1955 or '56, further traffic was stopped and in the following years a great deal of money was spent restoring the damage that had occurred.

Where did you stay in Perisher Valley?

I stayed at Perisher Hutte which was a Ski Tourers Association lodge.

I know you are a keen cross country skier. For how many years did you compete in the Paddy Pallin Classic?

I competed every year in the Paddy Pallin Classic as well as the Martini Rossi race. I also skied at Cabramurra.

And what was the last year you raced and how old were you?

2015 was the last year I competed in cross country ski races. I was 84 at the time.

When did you first visit Thredbo?

My first visit to Thredbo was at Easter in 1954 together with Jon Holt and friends. We stayed at the Creel and the next day we took our skis and drove to Dead Horse Gap on the road completed by the Snowy Mountains Authority for access to Khancoban. From there we climbed up to Saturday Peak which was on our right, stopping at what is now Eagle's Nest. From there we could see a clearing of trees felled by Danny Colman who been engaged to cut the threes down for a possible village site. We were able to ski down to the level where Kareela is now, after which we scrambled down the cleared lift line for the first rope tow which was to be installed by Crackenback Ski Club.

Which lodge did you join?

In 1957 I became a member of Crackenback Ski Club, having been introduced by my colleague Tom Hughes. In 1958, the NSW State Championships were held at Thredbo and I placed 9th in the Giant Slalom and 10th in the Slalom. My time was almost 1 minute slower than the previous runner. I was never a racer in those years.

Which was the last year you skied in inter-club races?

About two or three years ago was the last time. I competed in 10 races altogether – always with an age handicap.

Which Thredbo ski instructor did you ski with?

Leonhard Erharter was my main instructor – there were only four instructors in the newly formed ski school.

If you had the time to ski overseas, where did you go?

I was fortunate to enjoy three ski trips to Europe. They were Steins' Tours led by Bernti Hecher.

What was the highlight of your skiing life?

Without a doubt, skiing on the Main Range was the highlight of my skiing life.

Thank you for sharing your interesting history with the Thredbo Historical Society. Are you happy for it to be transcribed and be made available for research by the general public?

Yes.

Thank you very much.



***Ian Curlewis, his wife Bev, and their family - Amanda, Matthew, and Luisa
at the Thredbo Historical Society Mid Winter Dinner, July 2017***

Oral History Interview Agreement

In this agreement, the interviewee assigns copyright to Thredbo Historical Society (THS). Your recorded interview will become part of THS's collection, where it will be preserved for future researchers. The Thredbo Winter Sports Museum is grateful for your participation in this oral history project.

This is an agreement between the **INTERVIEWEE** and **THS** (please fill in your details):

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I have been asked and have agreed to be interviewed by THS, subject to this agreement and as part of the Museum's programs. The Museum has advised me that it wishes to preserve the Interview as part of THS's collection. Once the Interview is preserved at THS, I understand that it can be used by the Museum for a variety of purposes including, but not limited to, exhibition, research, education material, public presentations, publication, website, broadcast and transmission unless I place restrictions hereunder on any of those uses.

And

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