THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BILL BURSILL – An Oral History

conducted by Edith Swift
Sydney, June 2002

BILL BURSILL – An Oral History

EDIE: This is an oral history with Bill Bursill dated 14 June 2002.
Would you donate this tape to the Thredbo Historical Society and will you share the copyright with the Thredbo Historical Society?

BILL: Certainly

EDIE: And would you give them permission to transcribe the tape.

BILL: Yes

EDIE: And you would keep it open to the public for research?

BILL: Yes

EDIE: Thank you. Having just read your biographical notes, I would like to note the dates when you were born and something about your great grandparents.

BILL: My great grandfather was born in England, and he was sent out here as a convict at His Majesty's Pleasure in the very early 1800s. His name was William Bursill. I am not sure of the date of his birth. His son was my grandfather, Samuel Willliam Bursill. He became the Mayor of Campbelltown. He continued to run the store that my great grandfather built back in the 1820s, not directly, but intermittently. So that what actually happened, he would sell out and my grandfather would come back and buy it again. Then my father who was Samuel William Bursill, started the store again but it didn't go directly to my grandfather, there were intermittent tenants in between.

My name is Samuel William Bursill. I started in the Great Depression, in the same store but I took over from some tenant who had gone broke.

EDIE: Do you have any dates of those people? When they were born?

BILL: I think the whole history of the Bursill's right from the convict era, is with my grandson who is Samuel William Bursill again. It is a book about so thick.

EDIE: Your mother?

BILL: My mother was of Scottish German descent. Her name was Eleanor Jane Young. She was born in Bega, New South Wales.

EDIE: Could you tell me a little about your upbringing - until the Depression? What happened?

BILL: Yes. I was born on the 2 October, 1915, in Campbelltown and lived above the shop while my father was running it. Because we were children, we were a bit obstreperous, my grandfather suggested that my father should take the children out and we became farmers in the Cow Pasture area at the back of Campbelltown. So I was really brought up from the age of 6 on a farm. From there on I went to school and ended up at to Parramatta High School.

Then the Depression came and nobody had any work. I was intending to be a school teacher but because of the Depression, they wouldn't take you into the University or the Teachers College. They just said "Wait your turn" and that is how my father said "The shop down there is vacant. Why don't you go down and at least earn a living?" So that is how I started my business.

EDIE: What was it like in your home? What was the atmosphere? Did you go up into the Snowy Mountains as a kid, did you walk at all? Were you in athletics at school?

BILL: I was an athlete at school. I was the secretary of the Parramatta High School athletic club and reasonably successful. My brother was also an athlete and he was much more successful at Parramatta High School. Our family was very happy on the farm. There were four of us – three boys and a girl. My brother was killed in the War – as a pilot. My sister unfortunately has loss of memory and she is in a home. My younger brother is still alive, living in Camden.

EDIE: Did you live in a home where you did a lot outdoors? What were the animals on the farm?

BILL: Yes, mostly dairy cows and calves. We supplied milk to the Dairy Farmers Association Co-operative in Campbelltown. We also supplied cream to the Butter Works too. We were typical Australian dairy farmers.

My brother, he was a champion 220 yards – I was probably an "also ran" and came 2nd or 3rd in most races. I used to go in everything from 100 yards upwards to the mile. I came second in the 8 years age race for the mile and the 220 and 440 in the one year at the school. Yes, I loved athletics. At the Meeting, standing up in front of a crowd, lecturing something I have never done before. It is like getting ready to a start and going like mad, you know. It is an exciting time to be on the mark in athletics as you can appreciate.

EDIE: Bill, you were at the store at 18 and that was in 1932 – the General Store in Campbelltown and from then you just worked for quite a period, and that was until 1965. So could you tell me a little about the store, starting in 1932, at the beginning of the Great Depression?

BILL: Yes, I took over, well really it was a vacant store because the former tenants who had been running it had become insolvent and that is the reason I was able to start off without very much money. My father gave me fifty pounds and a little 1928 Chevrolet truck. I started selling groceries and hardwood, and built the store up from there to being a department store by the time I sold out in 1965.

Because things were so difficult, we worked in the store from say 6.00 in the morning to 8.00 or 9.00 at night, six days a week, because we had to serve, take orders and deliver in the truck that I had. My father used to come in from the farm for a couple of hours some days and help but generally speaking I was on my own. After 12 months or so I hired a young lad who could ride a bicycle, deliver things and generally help. From there it built up into quite a large business.

In the very early days of Campbelltown, there were three important towns in New South Wales – Sydney, Parramatta and Campbelltown. The railway went from Sydney to both Parramatta and Campbelltown. Then the Cobb and Co Coach went out from Parramatta and/or Campbelltown to the west and south west of New South Wales. Campbelltown was an important town in the very early days and it became the end of the suburbs in Sydney as Parramatta was on the west of the line. Campbelltown did not grow as fast as Parramatta. Parramatta was a much more thriving area. However, basically it was good for me because I was able to go through the Depression and survive in it and I built up quite a business there.

EDIE: Was that the only store? Was it the major store?

BILL: Yes, one of the major stores. There was another store – one of the chain stores – and also a Jewish chap had a store. There were three stores in the town.

EDIE: What were they?

BILL: They were general – they sold everything because that was the only way you could survive – by selling everything.

EDIE: From where did you get your deliveries then?

BILL: From Sydney and through the War years, I used to buy truckloads of everything from wherever they grew. Potatoes for example. We'd to get a rail truckload of potatoes from that district, and I used to distribute them among the other stores in Campbelltown during the War years.

EDIE: I can't just imagine this person on a bicycle. What did he deliver?

BILL: He delivered groceries and small hardware – whatever the person ordered. If it was too big, such as fodder for the cattle, then it had had to go in the little truck.

EDIE: It would have been hot. It would have been raining.

BILL: Yes, that's right, it just had to be done, whether it was raining or hot.

EDIE: What did his bicycle look like?

BILL: It was a Malvern Star I think. It was being manufactured by one of our cycle racing people – I can't remember their name now but their family is still living on in Sydney.

EDIE: What was the development of the store towards 1947? How did it change?

BILL: It became larger and larger. It became more or less a department store because I had the property which having been owned by my parents, so I was able to start boots and shoes, drapery, mercenary, hardware and a timber yard. So it got to be quite a big store. The three stores that were in the town had to supply virtually everything for the town, particularly through the War years.

EDIE: What were people doing in Campbelltown during those years – 1932 to 1947?

BILL: They were generally farmers, railway workers. People used to live in Campbelltown and travel into Sydney to their offices. Very similar to what it is today.

EDIE: By train?

BILL: Yes

EDIE: How did you go down to Thirroul to surf?

BILL: On Sunday I would get the truck and we would pick up some of our high school friends and we would go down to Thirroul to surf for a few hours, and then drive back.

EDIE: Was it a good road?

BILL: Yes a good road – bitumen. Down the Bulli Pass.

EDIE: During the war years, were there military training camps near Campbelltown?

BILL: Ingleburn Camp, that was the largest in the area. That was where we were taken each weekend to train for the Volunteer Defence Corps. The other places were Menangle - the University Regiment had a camp at Menangle. They were mostly training officers. Studley Park in Camden was training senior officers. I supplied the officers' mess with whatever they wanted.

Towards the end of the war, because we were looking for somewhere where we could have a rest and a holiday, the Army suggested they take in civilians, and that included my wife, to Mt Franklin where they had a hut. They had a basic ski run. A roadway up to the top of Mt Franklin, and another road up to the top of Mt Ginini and further road to the top of Mt Gingera, three mountains on that Mt Franklin plateau.

I took up there for a week. We went up there. I am a bit hazy about the time because it must have been towards the end of the war which was 1945 – it could have been 1944, 1945 or 1946. I am not sure about those dates because I am sure my daughter was not born when we went and she was born in September 1945.

EDIE: What was her name?

BILL: Helen. She will be coming to the Mid Winter Dinner. I was talking about it to her the other day and she said, "I can't tell you Dad, obviously."

It was one of those years. The accommodation was a nightmare. A hut was built of hessian and all the partitions were hessian and beds were two saplings with chaff bags pulled over them. So you had that sort of bent shape with the two saplings. The hessian only went up to half way so the people on the top beds could sit up and see everybody else right round the whole of the "lodge" or hut. That was very funny because you could see somebody trying to get their shoes and clothes off. And then because it was in the Australian Capital Territory, they had to have a septic. Because

we had no septic system, we dug a pit for the toilet, which we had to dig over in New South Wales which was eighty feet from the lodge. You had to track across there at night. It was pretty raw.

Then we had also a very funny incident. They had a shower where you could bathe yourself but you had to boil up snow in the big copper out in the open. Then you took a basin of the hot water, a basin of snow and you put it up in this gadget the Army had invented. You got undressed in the snow and you pulled the chain and the hot water was supposed to mix and cool down with the snow, but generally speaking the snow was so hard, that it would tip over you and you got scalded on that side and snow on this side. It was quite something.

I thought it was worth mentioning the way we really started skiing. And that was directly after the War.

EDIE: Now did you use skins to climb and how far did you have to climb up?

BILL: We had to climb, I would think, about 300 metres. It was a reasonably gentle slope. We might have thought it was steep in those days. I haven't been back since so I can't really tell you. But I can remember taking the skins off. Both my wife and myself, we had never skied before and got into these Kandahar bindings, pointed the skis down hill and off we went. We got about 50 metres and used the lavatory crouch of course because we knew no other way of skiing. With the road being rounded, we slide off into the trees and we were laughing, mixed up with skis, stocks and trees. But that was the beginning.

EDIE: Now where did you cook your meat? Your meals?

BILL: Down below the bedroom, it was like one big bedroom. They had a kitchen and lounge room. That was reasonably comfortable. There were a couple of old couches you could spin around, and the kitchen itself was like an army camp. It was quite good – good army equipment. So that was alright.

From memory they had a couple of Army chaps there who cooked for us. But the night time was a terror and having to go out to that New South Wales toilet was something else and freezing. I only had one attempt at having a shower. By the end of the week I must have been pretty high. Some of the girls tried, you would hear a scream, then rush out into the snow, and then run back in again because she was exposed. It was funny.

EDIE: Who were some of the other people who went with you to that?

BILL: Mostly Air Force and Army boys with their wives. I can't remember their names. It is very unlikely that any of them are still alive.

EDIE: What were your skis like?

BILL: They were old hickory skis from Canada, I think, from memory. Just plain hickory with no base, no sole like we have nowadays.

EDIE: Did you put on wax to go downhill and how far did you do down?

BILL: Yes, and we went down from the top of Mt Franklin to the lodge. Also I remember one day that we had to pass round Mt Franklin to go round to Ginini which was a bit higher. That took time. But there was so much walking that you stuck at Mt Franklin which was close.

EDIE: And your ski boots?

BILL: They were old leather army boots.

EDIE: So after skiing at Mt Franklin, you skied somewhere else I imagine?

BILL: The next time was at what we called the Mt Kosciusko Hotel which was run by the Railway Department. I would have spent the first time after Mt Franklin, at that hotel.

EDIE: Do you know when it was built by the Railway and do you know when?

BILL: It was built before the War but closed there when I was up skiing at Mt Franklin. It wasn't until after the War had completely finished that it opened up. The same applied to the Chalet. That was built by the Railways too. In the following years from Mt Franklin, my wife and I would have gone to the Hotel. Then we progressed to the Chalet (at Charlotte Pass) and gone over the mountains hiking, langlaufing as we called, it to the various peaks around, together with doing a bit of downhill too. But there were no lifts so we had to walk everywhere.

They got what they called a "J-bar" working at the Chalet one year I can remember and that was the first uphill transport I had ever had. We used to use this J-bar, when it didn't break down, to go up to Pulpit Rock and the top of the Pass of the Chalet. Then we would ski back down to the Chalet. That was our downhill.

Then we also had at the Chalet what we called the Stilwell Cup. We used to walk up to the top of Mt Stilwell and ski down. That some time after we had built the KAC lodge. I had helped to supply building materials to build the lodge and I was a consultant with the architect who designed it.

EDIE: What does KAC stand for?

BILL: Kosciusko Alpine Club. I have got some of the photos of the old KAC. I thought I might bring out some of the photos, showing the chairman of the KAC Lodge and so and so who we used to ski with. It would be interesting to some people because they would remember the Chairman of the original lodge.

EDIE: So that lodge was built by that Association?

BILL: Yes, the Kosciusko Alpine Club hut was built by the club and an architect called Dudley Ward. I helped him with the building materials and also a bit of consultancy.

EDIE: Now what time are we talking about now?

BILL: It is probably late '40s/early '50s. Some of them will remember that lodge. That lodge was burnt down I think in the early '50s. So it must have been in the late '40s.

It was our only form of skiing and as I said we walked everywhere, with the exception of the small time with the J-bar. That is how I started off at the beginning of Thredbo because my bricklayer that built these three places for me, Rudi Wurth was a ski instructor.

Tape 1, side B

EDIE: Before I go on, I would like to find out how the KAC hut burnt down.

BILL: I wasn't there. I don't know how it started but I think it was in the kitchen and it was at night as it always is. I heard about the horrific stories about people jumping out the window just in their nighties and their pyjamas but fortunately the Chalet was next door to the KAC Lodge so they were brought into the lounge of the Chalet. Things were alright from then on. There was no loss of life but the complete loss of the lodge, their equipment, all their clothes and things.

EDIE: Did they ever rebuild?

BILL: Yes. I didn't have anything to do with the rebuilding so I don't know and Thredbo was on the horizon at that stage so I left the Chalet area altogether. I was a member of the KAC of course. But I left the Chalet area and came completely over to Thredbo. I don't know what happened after that.

As I was saying, In the early fifties, during the winter my bricklayer Rudi Wurth, when I got to the Chalet he would say *"Come on Bill, we'll go to Mt Kosciusko, I am sick of all this.*" And as I said, "*What about your class*?" He said "*Oh they'll be alright, they can look after themselves*." So we walked, walked and walked.

One day this person in white was coming towards us and Rudi said to me "*This is Tony Sponar, he is always out on the mountains. He is employed by the Snowy Mountains Authority, testing the snow everywhere. He is an interesting character, we will have a talk with him*."

When he got up to us, Rudi introduced me to him and he said he was looking for a place to start a ski resort and he had found this Crackenback where at the same height, had deeper snow than anywhere else on the mountains. He said he thought it would be a great place for a resort. So I said I am interested in that and he said "*Well tonight we will have a gluhwein party when we get back - and when we get back from Mt Kosciusko.*" So we did. We were, really were Tony Sponar, Rudi and myself sat around.

EDIE: And did you go up Mt Kosciusko? To the very top? And you started at the Chalet? That's a long trip.

BILL: Yes. We started at the Chalet. It is a long trip but I was young and Rudi was giant of a man. He was very, very fit. Bricklaying all summer through on my buildings.

EDIE: What was the weather like that day?

BILL: Good, clear. That was why I was saying, You wouldn't have attempted it if there were any clouds in the sky and if also if we had seen one coming up from Victoria, or anywhere, we would have turned round straight away and gone back home. You had to do that, you couldn't risk it.

However Tony, Rudi and I sat around the gluhwein and he told me what he had in mind at Crackenback. I said to him then *"OK, Tony well if you can get permission from the government to start something like that, and then just get it going, I would like to put up a little commercial lodge.*"

After that the next thing was that Tony rang me. He had organised a train trip from Sydney to Cooma for a whole lot of interested people to go down for a weekend and camp on Friday Flat in the Snowy Mountains Authority camp they had for the workers over in the Murray Valley. These huts were igloos with a little hot stove in them. That was for one or two people in each. I can remember how freezing it was on Friday Flat, and then when you got about an hour in the hut, you got so boiling hot with the stove, so I had to open up the door to let the cold air and in doing so I would get so cold that I would close the door. I didn't sleep a wink that night.

However, we all got up the next morning and we hiked up to Crackenback with Tony in charge to decide where the Thredbo ski area was to be. There were about forty or fifty of us altogether from Sydney, business men, skiers, old skiers that wanted to see what could be done. That lasted for the weekend and we came back on the Cooma Mail on Sunday night.

EDIE: Now was that a nice day when you went up?

BILL: It was a nice day and one of them, Charles Anton grabbed a pair of skis and he walked right up to the top of Crackenback just to say he was able to ski on that day we went down.

EDIE: But you didn't go on the snow up there that day, did you?

BILL: No I didn't ski but this Charles Anton did. He was the only one of the forty people on the train that did. He came back with glowing terms. He had gone to the top of Mt Crackenback and said "*Look the skiing is great*".

That was around about October I think. So that was really the first sight of Thredbo. We talked about where the village should be. I don't think what we decided that day eventually ended up as such, but it was pretty close to it. Tony was the one dictating what he thought and I think everyone agreed that it was the best position.

EDIE: So what time did you start out doing that trip? From Friday Flat?

BILL: I would say, well we had a Snowy Mountains Authority breakfast with sausages or whatever it was, then we went straight up the mountain from there.

EDIE: Did it take you a long time?

BILL: Yes it took quite a while. We didn't go straight to the top. It was only Charles Anton that went to the top. We only went to what we now call Kareela. We walked all around that position. We said "*This looks as though this is going to be the best. We'll do all our clearing here, and then the lodges will be down there. We will build a bridge across the river."*

EDIE: So what time of the year was it again?

BILL: October, and there was hardly any snow down below at all. That was why Charles Anton was determined to ski and he walked up carrying his skis from Kareela to the top of Crackenback.

One incident is of note, Sir William Hudson organised a group of jeeps from the Snowy Mountains Authority to pick up all the people from the train to take them out to the site which was Friday Flat where the SMA had the camp. On the way, Tony and I were with Sir William Hudson leading in his vehicle and we got half way across the Little Thredbo River and the jeep went down into a hole. Tony and I had to jump out and push whilst Sir William drove to get across the ford at that time. The other jeeps that followed behind were aware of the danger and of course didn't have quite the problem. That was the night before we camped at Friday Flat.

EDIE: I think it might be fun to talk about the General Store in Campbelltown. You owned it and you were starting to look at building in Thredbo and tie that in with supplies for the lodge in Thredbo.

BILL: The thing was that I had all the building materials there at hand and it was just a matter of supplying Bursill's Lodge and others that were building the village at the time such as the old Roslyn Lodge and partly the Black Lodge[(1)] where Tony had the hotel.

It was some time later after the original train journey, there was a knock on my door at Rose Bay. It was Tony Sponar who said *"You promised to build a commercial lodge if we got permission from the government to start a tourist ski resort at Crackenback in the Thredbo Valley*." I said "*That's right Tony*." He said "*Well it's ready. Now you can come down and build your lodge. We are drawing up the plans and I will pick you a good site*."

Much later I had a phone call from Cooma and it was from Tony "*The plans are surveyed and approved and drafted. I picked the largest central block for you. When will you start?*"

EDIE: Would you back up a little and talk about the store after 1947 and what you were doing with the General Store in Campbelltown, just briefly.

BILL: After 1947 I was still managing it and still running it for my own benefit, supplying the town with fodder for cattle, hardware, building materials, groceries, boots and shoes, the old general country store that we used to have in those days.

That went on for another twenty years probably. However, the date that we are talking about when Tony Sponar phoned to me to say that the land was picked for me and ready, and he had picked the one in the centre for me, that would have been about ten years later after '47, maybe 1956 – I am not sure.

EDIE: And how did the whole process come about, so that you could build there?

BILL: Tony had gone to the Lands Department and it had to go through Parliament. He really spent the effort getting it approved so that it was all surveyed and marked out just about where we had picked the sites when we had gone up on that train trip. Being a very busy person, I had nothing to do with the government dealings. These were done entirely by Tony and the architect who was Eric Nicholls. He was part of the syndicate and the general manager of Hardy Asbestos who was Thyne Reid. The other persons that were in the syndicate with ourselves **(2)**, were Jeffrey Hughes and Charles Anton. They were the syndicate virtually.

EDIE: What was the syndicate?

BILL: They were the ones that were organising the sites – what had happened – Tony had gone round to lots of people like he had to me. *"Would I join this syndicate and start this project off*?" Thyne Reid had plenty of money. He was to put in the money. Tony Sponar was to manage the show. Charles Anton was to help manage and to do a certain amount of work. Eric Nicholls was the architect for the whole area and Jeffrey Hughes was also a helper. Jeffrey Hughes being a solicitor was very helpful at getting it through the government. So my view was to build a commercial lodge.

EDIE: What I don't understand is that Monaro region had been used for livestock wasn't it? When did the land become available for this – for being able to build a lodge?

BILL: It took years to get it through. When we first met, Tony and Rudi Wurth and myself, it must have been in 1954 or '55. It took from that time up until 1957 to get it organised and they were the people that did the organisation. I didn't. I said "*Oh no, I am busy enough in my own business, but I will build a commercial lodge*." That was my part. That is why Tony kept ringing up, knocking on my door saying "*You promised that you would*" do this, that and all the other things.

EDIE: Now what was happening in Thredbo all those years?

BILL: It was an SMA camp and the Geehi Dam was being built around in the Geehi Gorge which was over Dead Horse Gap, down the Murray and back up the Geehi. Everybody knows where that is of course. That was what was happening whilst we were making these representations.

EDIE: Where were you skiing in that time?

BILL: Around at the Chalet I had helped build the KAC Lodge. The architect was Dudley Ward. He and I used to go up, he supervised and I would supply building materials for the KAC Lodge at the Chalet.

EDIE: From 1947 to 1955 what did you do with your skiing? Were you still going into the mountains and what did you do with your equipment? Did it change?

BILL: Yes, between 1947 and say 1955, I had been skiing mostly at the Chalet. Over in America I skied at Sugarbowl, Squaw Valley and Donna Pass, over in the Laurentians in Canada. So I had done a fair bit of skiing overseas.

EDIE: Where in the Snowy did you go?

BILL: Only to the Chalet and that was all. We skied there.

EDIE: With whom did you ski with during the period from 1947 to 1955?

BILL: Mostly on my own, with my family. I can remember taking my kids at the time up to the Chalet. We would ski there in the school holidays.

EDIE: Did you have private rooms there? Did it change?

BILL: Yes. One of the reasons for building the KAC Lodge was to get away from the 6-bed rooms and the shared toilet. So by the time I was taking my family up there, KAC Lodge may not have been built, but it was being built and we had better accommodation.

EDIE: So now you are working on the new lodge and Tony Sponar is knocking on the door…?

BILL: I wasn't working on it, as I said Tony said "*I've picked the largest central position for Bursill's Lodge, when will you start?*" He really put the pressure on. I said "*Soon*." But I did not hurry, I was busy running the store and what not. This was something I wanted to do, but you know it was a mighty project and the first commercial lodge to be built down. There was an awful old track to get in. Knowing full well that we had to go across Little Thredbo River, big semi trailers loaded with timber, and what not, I was a little bit daunted. You could understand that, I take it.

Then the next thing was an urgent phone call from Tony, a really urgent one. This was some time later and he said he had bought some SMA huts and he wanted materials to erect and finish the old Black Lodge. He said "*You promised Bursill's Lodge and I have bulldozed your land*." He had actually without my authority, just gone in and when he was bulldozing his own Black Lodge which was the old original hotel, he bulldozed my land too.

EDIE: Did he take the Black Lodge down and build it twice.

BILL: The Black Lodge consisted of two Snowy Mountain Authority huts which were brought from one of the high plains[3] after the SMA had closed it down and transported around by Tony Sponar to the site and joined together. I helped by supplying from Campbelltown some of the building materials for it.

Also Charles Anton bought one of these SMA huts and he transported it around. They, the Roslyn Lodge people, they erected it on the corner of what we call

Diggings Terrace. I supplied some of the building materials for that also from Campbelltown. These were both done before I started on my place so I was a bit a slow in starting off because it was such a big project for me -–having to run a business – a general store – and then build this place down at Thredbo as well.

The Snowy Mountains Authority was selling off the huts at a very cheap price, after they had used them on the very high plains, to build the whole Snowy Mountains Scheme. They had reached the stage where they were wanting to move over to the Geehi and to the Murray dams over at Khancoban. So they had these huts for sale. That is how Tony Sponar bought two, and Charles Anton bought one. They used this one to build the original Roslyn Lodge. That was later sold to some other club. There is a new Roslyn Lodge which is still there – nothing to do with an old SMA hut.

An urgent phone call from Tony and he said "*I have bulldozed your site, you promised Bursill's Lodge, and it is all level and ready to start*." I delayed it a bit because I had to get all the building materials together. Then there is another call from Tony to say "*As the sewerage for the village is going past your block of land, I have dug your sewerage trench. So come up and finish the job*."

I got two semi trailers together, three campervans and made a trip down to Thredbo with all the building materials and everything and took the builders down. We started. That would have been 1957, '58. The Black Lodge was finished and I can remember the caravan being so cold when we were in it. However we kept building and sending building materials down over the twelve months while we were building Bursill's Lodge.

EDIE: It was really difficult getting materials in, what was the road like then?

BILL: It was an old SMA road which they had graded up over hills and down valleys. It wasn't like it is today. It was just a track. They did do a better job on Little Thredbo River so we could get across that without bogging like the first time.

Tape 2, Side A

EDIE: We are talking about the two instructors who helped built the lodge.

BILL: At this stage the lodge is virtually finished, in that there were bits and pieces of carpentry to be done on the inside particularly. As there were no guests in the village through the week, Leonard Erharter and Helmut Pfitser were ski instructors Tony had brought from Austria,**(4)** had nothing to do. They asked if they could finish the internal parts of Bursill's Lodge. I said I was only too happy for them to do so, as it was difficult enough getting labour down there. They used to work until 2.00 or 3.00 pm in the afternoon and then they would say "*We will now go up to the top of the mountain and have a ski*" as a sort of a rest and resuscitation.

When they first saw me skiing, I came down in the lavatory crouch, skiing straight down, not know much about turning or anything, Leonard himself, put his hand on his head and said "*Billie, whoever taught you to ski?*" From then on they took over, and every afternoon I was lucky enough to have these two Austrian ski instructors

instilling into me the Austrian method of skiing which was the stance was that as you went down the hill, your body was always facing down and your legs twisted around to get the skis parallel. That is how they got that photo of me after they had finished teaching me skiing.

EDIE: And how did you get up? You walked?

BILL: Yes, you had to walk up and we did the skiing then in what we know now as "The Basin". On weekends the guests used to come down to Black Lodge, then the ski instructors of course had their work to do.

EDIE: How did the guests get to Thredbo?

BILL: The guests came by car, by train, and you could fly into Cooma and hire a taxi.

EDIE: What year are we talking about?

BILL: I would say '58. I am not sure on that, '57, '58 or '59. The building of the lodge ran from 1957 through to 1958 and probably even into 1959.

EDIE: What building specifications did you make for a lodge at that altitude?

BILL: I used all the cork insulation from the army hut that I bought. Every wall was insulated with cork so you could virtually heat Bursill's lodge with a candle, it was so well insulated. Also we built the first skin on the outside with packing car cases from America. I had bought a whole heap of these car cases and we used that. Then we put the wooden sides over that again. So it was a very snug, warm little lodge.

EDIE: Did you have individual rooms?

BILL: Because it was a commercial lodge, we had eight bedrooms downstairs and then upstairs it was a complete big open space with two bedrooms belonging to myself, and a toilet. That was living in the roof.

EDIE: If this was the first part of Thredbo, then where had they had experience in building in the Snowies?

BILL: In my building company I had employed a builder who built Kiandra lodges many, many years ago. An old chap who knew exactly what to do as far as the snow was concerned.

EDIE: What was his name?

BILL: His name was Dick Joyce.

EDIE: Did they have some new methods in the Snowies which they didn't use in Kiandra?

BILL: Yes. We obviously had to use what we had available but because he had had this experience of building in the snow country so many, many years ago. It helped a lot

as far making sure everything was done for a snow country instead as he was building for me in Campbelltown.

EDIE: Were there new things that came out in that year which were different and helped in a cold climate?

BILL: I would think so but I am not aware of very much of the difference to the old style of building for the snow country.

EDIE: So what was the difference that you wouldn't have to do in Campbelltown or Sydney?

BILL: Well insulation mainly. That was the reason for me buying that cork insulation from the Army and also double thickness of wall on the outside, and double thickness of windows too – glass. As for the foundations and the under floor, we used granite. In our case we mixed granite with large river stones and that formed the part of our under floor level and also our battering of the steep slopes off the road. We used the local stone.

EDIE: Where did you get the stones?

BILL: Most of the granite came from the quarry around the back of Jindabyne but there were a lot of loose stones everywhere and also lots of large river stones that were in the various creeks and rivers everywhere. We used to collect them and use them.

EDIE: So how about the exposure to the elements? How did you site Bursill's Lodge so that it would be the best?

BILL: We used the site entirely where Tony had bulldozed it. But everything was for the view which was up the mountain so you could see the skiers skiing. For example, you could see the back of Black Lodge but the view was up the mountain.

EDIE: What about the sun and the heat?

BILL: We generally made sure that the end of the building faced Dead Horse Gap so that when the blizzard came over, you didn't have the broad side of your house taking the blast of the wind. It took the blast on the narrow end.

In the beginning the stone work was mainly done by my two boys during school holidays, and myself. The carpentry was done by Dick Joyce. The painting was done by a painter I had employed at Rose Bay, and I took him down for a week or so from this job here. I can't quite remember his name now. All of them of course, have now passed on.

The lodge was built as economically as I possibly could because it was quite an investment to make and nobody knew what the future would be. Also it had to be done very thoroughly because the company, the syndicate which I had promised to build the lodge, wanted to rent it from me for a two year lease as an annexe to the Black Lodge Hotel. So they were my first tenants. In other words, the syndicate were the first tenants in my lodge as well as the Black Lodge.

EDIE: Did you have to buy the land?

BILL: Yes I had to buy the land. It cost me – well I am glad you brought that up because there is a funny story about that. Later on when we were probably just about finished the lodge, the company rang me and said "*Look, you've got an unfair advantage over everybody else. You've got the whole of the centre of Thredbo Village and we think you got it too cheap for 350 pounds or whatever it was. We are going to divide your block in halves and sell you the back section for 290 pounds*" So instead of getting the big block for that, I had to buy part of it back. So the section at the back went to the ski club to which I belonged.

EDIE: So you originally brought how much land?

BILL: I bought nearly an acre of land originally – that was allocated to me right in the centre of the village. They felt I should pay a bit more so the syndicate got another 290 pounds – that is the people who were running the Black Lodge, the people who were my lessees. It was a bit involved.

EDIE: Bill you made a comment about your lodge and your land, and how you bought it? Whose was it during that time and the arrangement?

BILL: Well the whole of the Thredbo land was a head lease from the Crown to Kosciuszko Thredbo Limited who were the people I mentioned in the first place. Tony Sponar, Thyne Reid, Jeffrey Hughes, Eric Nicholls and Charles Anton. They formed this Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Limited who took the head lease. We as owners or occupiers of the land, leased the land from Kosciusko Thredbo - we were sub lessees to Kosciusko Thredbo

On the rear section of the land after it had been subdivided into two lots, I built a club lodge. I was a member of the club. It was old members from the Kosciusko Chalet who had come over and we built a tiny club lodge at the back of Bursill's Lodge which was the commercial part of it.

At the rear of Bursill's Lodge we built a small bedroom-come-bathroom for management to look after Bursill's Lodge. It was attached to Bursill's Lodge. In other words it was not a servants quarters as such but a managers' residence. But it was just one big bedroom and they had to use the kitchen in the main lodge.

The reason for Bursill's Lodge being an annexe to the Black Lodge was that on weekends, they would get more guests than the Black Lodge would hold. So they were the head lessees for Bursill's Lodge and that was to take the overflow on weekends. That was a lease for two years. After that I leased the lodge to private people.

When I was first building Bursill's Lodge there was a rope tow built by the Crackenback Ski Club and that went part of the way up the hill. They had chopped out certain tracks through the trees. So the Crackenback Ski Club and the guests from the Black Lodge would make use of this rope tow. Everybody knows pretty well where that rope tow was. I think there is still a track where it was.

While that was still running, we were negotiating with a pack of engineers to build the chairlift which was to go to Kareela. Kareela is not at the top of the mountain but it is a fairly safe area wind-wise. Later on it was found that it was not quite high enough because the better snow was up at the top of Crackenback and around in the Basin where Leonard and Helmut used to teach me how to ski. We had to walk up to it.

So Tony and the group under the name of Kosciusko Thredbo Limited, decided that we should extend the chairlift to the top of Crackenback. I can remember this because they asked me if I would buy the big cable from BHP with which I used to deal in my business. So I went to Newcastle and arranged for the new cable to be supplied. I can't remember at what stage the extension was made to the original chairlift but it must have been about 1962. That went to the top of Crackenback and it was really a very much more satisfactory arrangement. We all had to buy shares in Kosciusko Thredbo Limited to pay for that extension**(5)**.

EDIE: I am interested in how this lift was put in. It sounds as if it was the first chairlift in Australia and that was quite a project. I wondered about some of the problems you had putting it in.

BILL: Obviously being an area where there were no roads, we had to get helicopters in. Or at least Transfield had to get helicopters. They had some problems with the helicopter lifting sand and steel towers up and working in a place where the weather could change any time.

As far as I can remember there were really no serious accidents except for an enormous amount of problems. I am not sure whether we were the first chairlift in Australia, there may have been one in Victoria and one might have even been over at Perisher. I wouldn't want to argue about that – they must have all been about the same time.

Transfield was the company which was working for the Snowy Mountains Authority and they were given the first contract because they had the experience putting towers across for electricity, all over the Snowy Mountains and Victoria.

EDIE: What were the chairs like?

BILL: The chairs were manufactured here in Australia. They were a hard chair, nothing like the new modern chairs – they had wooden seats made strongly. One of the things that was a bad deal was the fact that there was no rubber on the pulleys and wheels that ran over the top, so when your chair went under a staunchion you got an enormous rattle and clang where steel hits steel – no rubber around the pulley wheel. Later on

when we increased the chairlift to the top of the mountain, we had all chair wheels renewed and they were rubberised **(6)**, so it was a quiet ride over the pulley wheels of the staunchion.

EDIE: Did they have covers for the people riding, blankets or anything like that.

BILL: No. They were out and exposed. We got very used to being out in a blizzard – and very cold too at times. We had accidents where the whole machine stopped and they had to get big ladders and get everybody off the chair. I can remember that the chair stopped because the wind got so high, it blew one of the cables over a tree that was a bit close and it pulled the cable off the pulley wheels. The whole thing of course stopped immediately and we were left dangling in the air. I was on a chair that was about at the height of the present first station and I had my son with me. I can remember Leonard was on the one ahead of us. We were all going up to ski together and it was quite obvious from what had happened , we see that we all had to be taken off. They were running getting ladders down below at the time.

Leonard got down off his chair, got his hands on the foot rest underneath, and lowered his body down so that he was only about a metre or two metres above the snow because the chairlift cable had sagged where the chairs were. He just dropped and skied down. As he passed Donald my son, and I, he said "*You haven't got far to drop, I think you will be here half a day. You could drop down*." He told us what to do. We could put our skis together and drop on to the snow, so that we didn't break our legs. I looked down, and the thing about it is, you know you look forward when you look down and the mountain is going up, it doesn't look so far. So I said to my son "*What do you think?"* and he said "*Oh yes, Dad, we'll do that*." So he got down and he let go and I looked and it seemed ages before he hit the snow. Obviously he had bowled over quite a bit and then he came running back up "*Right oh Dad, its your turn now."* I said "*I think I might wait until the ladder comes."* And Don said, "*Come on, Dad, you can do it*!"

So I decided to do it, also. So with my skis across the slope so that when I fell, I would fall with my skis like that. It was a frightening moment, I tell you. You seemed to be in the air for such a long time then BANG! and of course my knees collapsed. You can't work your knees. You hit your bottom on the back of your skis with a WHAM, and then slither down the hill. However no damage done and the other poor people, particularly some of them up at the very steep part, they were terrified and cold. It was blowing a blizzard, like mad.

EDIE: How long did it take to get them off?

BILL: About three hours I would say. They were working hard too.

EDIE: Did you have the ski patrol at that time?

BILL: Yes, that's why Leonard himself jumped off because he was more or less in charge of everything, ski patrol as well as the ski instructors.

EDIE: You had a change of licencees on the property of Bursill's Lodge.

BILL: After the lease was up with the company, between Bursill's Lodge and Kosciusko Thredbo Limited. I had Tony and Elizabeth approach me. Tony and Elizabeth had had a confrontation with the Kosciusko Thredbo Limited and they were given the sack from the operation of the Black Lodge Hotel. Tony asked me, as the lease was up, could he take a lease over Bursill's Lodge for the next five or ten years because he had nothing to do and felt it was his baby, the Thredbo scene. I said "*Certainly, how could I be so lucky to have a couple like that to run the lodge.*" I took them on immediately and they moved over immediately from the Black Lodge to Bursill's Lodge and they were there for about six months**(7)**.

It became a very heated argument with the company and Tony, and myself. Firstly they asked me not to employ Tony or to give him the lease for Bursill's Lodge. I refused because I thought he was really being handed a pretty raw deal. But at the end of six months, there was so much argument amongst the syndicate and division between Tony and myself and the rest of the syndicate, that the chairman who was Thyne Reed came over to Tony and said "*Tony, we can't sort of agree together about you operating against the us in the village. I have decided that we will buy you out. I will pay the money of four thousand pounds***(8)** *for you to go*".

Tony came to me and he said *"Bill, I can buy the old servants quarters of the old hotel that was burnt down***(9)**. *I can buy the old section for four thousand pounds. I think I will take it. I think that is the way to go*." I said *"By all means, Tony, because it is your life*." I said "*I am the sorry one in this particular case because I am losing a very, very good tenant.*" That was the end of it.

It showed two things: one was, what a fine character Thyne Reid was, who paid Tony out with his own money; and gave Tony a chance to have Sponar's Inn which was built with the money he got. That was my second lessee of Bursill's Lodge.

After Tony and Elizabeth Sponar left Bursill's Lodge, I was approached by Leo Pockl and Maria. Leo was head waiter at the Black Lodge and Maria was the chef. They asked could they have a lease over the lodge and I said "*Yes, I would consider it. But we would want somebody to take over the new restaurant I was about to build and they would run that as well.*" They agreed and they came and they ran the old wood lodge while we were building the masonry restaurant with accommodation upstairs. When the restaurant was completed, Leo and Maria became the lessees and they called it 'Leo's Lodge'.

They were short of money and they came to me and asked could I finance them for the chairs, tables and necessary equipment to run the restaurant. I had a friend, Ken Myer from Melbourne, who used to stay quite a lot at my lodge and we got together and we gave them a thousand pounds each as a loan, to start off. That is how Leo and Maria were able to buy themselves a coffee machine and the general equipment – that was the beginning of Leo's Lodge.

They were very successful because they were serving coffee with alcohol and that pleased all the skiers. However the company who dismissed Tony Sponar because they considered it unfair competition to their Black Lodge, now came to me and said

"*These people are serving alcohol, and generally taking our business and we want you to dismiss them or at least tell them they weren't allowed to sell any alcohol or coffee or anything in opposition to the syndicate in the Hotel*." My solicitor said "*They have got a lease, they have every right to do whatever they like and it is up to the company to compete"* and I told the company so.

Then Leo put his name and 'motel' on the lodge. The company then claimed that, that contravened their right to use the word 'hotel' and once again they came to me and said Leo should be given the notice to quit if he didn't take down the words 'Leo's Lodge and Motel.'

Once again I sought the solicitor's advice and he said "*The lessee has all the rights to do what he likes, and it is up to the company to tell him or see him, just don't interfere yourself as the landlord*." So I told the company that and they were most annoyed as far as I was concerned. They went to Leo and talked about it. They talked him out of it being 'Leo's Motel.' So it became Leo's Lodge. The 'motel' was dropped so we overcame that problem.

Leo and Maria were very successful financially and Leo took a holiday back to Austria for some six months. That was over summertime so it wasn't quite so busy and Maria ran the place but the problems started when Leo came back with a brand new spanking wife. At that stage I realised Leo was not married to Maria at all – not Pockl at all. However that was no business of mine. The problem was that they couldn't run the place together so Maria brought Leo out and Leo started up a restaurant up in Sydney.

Maria continued to run Leo's Lodge on her own but by this time it was a very big business and she had all sorts of people helping who weren't particularly interested in her business. She went down financially and she was drinking too much alcohol, so that finally I had to buy her out and ran it for a short time myself.

Then I got two boys who were ski retailers from Sydney, who said they would take the lease. That went on for some twelve or eighteen months. They knew nothing about, or had very little knowledge on how to run a motel, guest house or lodge and they double booked for Easter. When I got down there, there were a hundred fifty guests in a place which held one hundred. The boys had turned on free alcohol so when I got there, everybody was having a wow of a party and the next morning there was a big mix up with beds. The boys had borrowed all over the village and mixed couples, husbands and wives were in the wrong rooms and all sorts of things.

However the young people thought it wasn't that bad. They had lot of fun but one of the older married couples reported the whole incident to the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Although I was not direct lessee, I was a sub lessee of the company and the National Park wrote a long letter to me saying I had to dismiss the boys out of the Park for that incident, which I did.

EDIE: What were their names?

BILL: David and ? David was a little man and his friend, a big tall chap and I used to nickname them David and Goliath. I have got a mental block about that. It was an incident I was quite concerned about. They ran a ski shop in George Street.

Then after that I advertised again and that was when Rudi Schatzle and Chris took up the lease. They had quite a long lease of about fifteen years. They sold out the balance of their lease after ten or twelve years to a chap named Stapleton. I can't remember what he called it. Stapleton wasn't a successful operator. His wife was good but he was in deep water, he hadn't had that sort of experience and I finally had to take over the lodge and it became Bursill's Lodge again. I always let the lessee call the lodge whatever they wanted to because I considered it their business.

I ran the lodge for some twelve or eighteen months then leased it to Ferie Oosterhof who was Alpine Tours. Ferie has operated it ever since. It is still, I understand, in his name. Ferie came to me and brought the premises after he had operated it as a lessee for three years. He realised it was a good business so he brought the whole thing. But he wanted it called Bursill's forever because it was part of history so that it is how it is still Bursill's Lodge.

EDIE: You said you were making skis at one time.

BILL: Yes, one of the carpenters who built the carpentry in here. He had a big machine that was capable of making skis and he could see that I was very interested in skiing. So he asked that if I set him up somewhere, he could make skis in Australia. So I said certainly. I had the property in Campbelltown obviously. I got him set up in Campbelltown and supplied him with timbers and what not. He made quite a lot of skis for quite some time. We used to put laminate on the bottoms and on top we put laminated timber. They were quite successful but the fact that they weren't a well-known brand of skis, people wanted that name in front.

So that was when, obviously I had a young family who wanted to ski, I thought there is no way people in Australia can afford the very high prices for skis and bindings and everything that went with them. That's when I took a trip to Japan to see because I had heard they were making quite a good ski and found that that was the case. Whereas you would pay a hundred and fifty pounds for a pair of Heads or Red White Stars, I brought in first up, a thousand pairs of skis and sold them in the shop for three pounds ten shillings. That was the beginning of Bursill's Sports Gear company which is the Salomon distributors in Australia.

EDIE: When you went over to Japan, how did you set that up initially?

BILL: My son was doing his Masters at Washington State University and he told me about America where they were buying cheap skis. People called Anderson and Thompson from Seattle. I met up with the director of Anderson and Thompson in Tokyo. I went over especially to find out, and they more or less showed me the skis and said they were very successful in America because everybody could ski and buy these skis at such a reasonable price. They were well made. When they landed in Australia, we couldn't compete with them and make them as cheaply in Australia as I could buy them from Japan because of labour conditions. So I ended up sending the Australian hardwood over to Japan for them to make skis for me of Australian hardwood

because they lasted longer than the soft woods in Japan. You can appreciate the Australian conditions are very much tougher than anywhere else in the world, so we needed something which would stand up to the ski conditions here.

Because I brought in the skis at a cheap price, the local Sydney retailers didn't want to sell them because I was supplying them the skis for, say three pounds ten shillings. They wanted to get six pounds for them. They would normally get six pounds ten or something like that. Whereas they could buy a pair of Kneissel White Stars for one hundred pounds and sell them for one hundred and seventy or eighty pounds or whatever it was. So they weren't interested in cheap Japanese skis.

So I went down to Melbourne and the Melbourne people were quite happy to take them because the snow in Melbourne is closer to them. They were able to get out and drive there much quicker so many more people in Melbourne were skiing than there were in Sydney because of the distance. That started off the Bursill's Sports Gear which is now the biggest distributor of ski gear in Australia. It is run by my son Graham who was at the university in Denver and told me about Anderson and Fox.

I owned a sawmill at the time in Bowral. We were supplying scanling timber for the building trade around that area and around Campbelltown. When I first brought in these Japanese skis, I could see they were made of a timber called Atya. Atya was a hard maple timber but a very sort of soft timber by comparison to Australian timber, and our rugged conditions were breaking them up. Cheap as they were and while people were only paying six pounds for a pair of skis, they didn't want them broken. That was the reason I thought I would send over the Australian timber.

EDIE: Are you still going there?

BILL: No.

EDIE: What are you doing now?

BILL: We bought skis from France. Skiing became vastly different to what it was in those days. Even the beginners want the best skis so the skis are now quite an industry. Salomon make what they call the parabolic ski and they all follow Salomon. You couldn't sell wooden skis today. It has to be the best.

At the time the ski industry was so small and one of the reasons that the skis were so expensive. People couldn't afford them. Hire skis weren't as popular in those days just as much as they are now. The wooden skis that we were bringing in, we sold quite a lot to the hire people – that started the hiring off.

EDIE: So now the skis come from France?

BILL: Yes.

EDIE: Is there a problem with getting them in?

BILL: No, there is no tax on them. In those early days there was a tax of 60%, then a sales tax of another 20% on top of that, so 80% was tax. That has all been lifted.

EDIE: Why is there no tax now?

BILL: People have just demanded that they wanted to ski and it wasn't affecting the industry in Australia. There was nobody making ski equipment in Australia. So the government lifted all the taxes on them as direct imports.

EDIE: So they come over in ships now?

BILL: Yes, they come over in big containers and Bursill's Sports Gear is in Cleveland Street, Sydney, in a huge warehouse. It is a huge industry now.

EDIE: How many people does Bursill's Sports Gear employ?

BILL: Graham employs 35. He has a Melbourne warehouse as well. That is how it started because my own family skied, and a hundred odd pounds for a pair of skis for four kids was quite a lot of money. Everybody else was in the same boat.

EDIE: What did you do about boots back then?

BILL: In the early days we had army boots. Then there was a boot manufacturer here in Australia. We used to use their boots. Then I could see there was a very good boot coming out of Austria. They were all leather. There were no plastic boots in those days. Kastinger was the name of the people in Austria. So I went over to see Kastingers in Europe and told them we had problems with boots in Australia and could they produce a boot at a better price than the local one – which they could if I took a quantity. I took a quantity and Kastinger became a cheaper boot for everybody in Australia.

The same with bindings. We were getting bindings from Japan which were a fraction of the price of bindings in Europe. It got to the stage then when everybody followed suit. They went and got their gear where they could get the cheapest price and it became quite an industry.

EDIE: Now when you went over to Europe with Kastingers, what was that like? Did you meet the Kastinger people.

BILL: Yes, the old man Kastinger was alive and he had a son and daughter. He was running the business and he was teaching the son and daughter to run it. It was quite a family affair. If they could get a quantity for Australia, they would do it at a price. Everything was quantity. So that is why I decided to bite the bullet and ordered a quantity and it was up to me when they got here, to sell them. But the price sold them.

EDIE: Now what about your son in the ski industry, what he's doing.

BILL: Well Graham decided after his Master's degree at Washington State University that he would like to continue in the ski business that I had started in Australia while he was over there studying. The first thing we did was to ask him to go over to Europe and follow up with the Kastinger boots and see what other goods he could buy from Europe that we could sell from our company in Australia which was then Bursill Enterprises.

He followed up on the Kastingers and he went to Germany and got gear. He went to France and got the Salomon agency who were only manufacturing bindings at that stage. Then he went down to Italy and where the Italians were making a plastic boot, he got the Nordica agency.

The industry was growing in Australia so was our Bursill Enterprises which was our part of the ski industry. We were at Coogee in a little warehouse for a time, and the business got too big for the premises so we bought a place in George Street, Sydney. George Street became too small in that it was confined. It was so many floors but it was not good so we sold that and moved to a warehouse over in Ultimo. Eventually Ultimo became too small and we bought a very big warehouse in Chippendale which is where the warehouse is now.

The Salomon people went from manufacturing bindings, to manufacturing boots and then skis and then snowboards, so they are quite an industry on their own. You can buy everything now that is Salomon. They are into clothing and everything. So we needed that big space in Chippendale. Graham then bought himself another warehouse down in Collingwood, Melbourne.

EDIE: What are you finding that people are buying right now in skis?

BILL: Salomon would be the big seller because they are always progressive. They started off with the parabolic, the shaped skis as we call them. Their skis are relatively more expensive than the other skis so we don't supply the rental market like Rossignol do. Rossignol produce skis made down in Spain and places where they can get cheaper labour. Salomon consequently only supply the rental people who want exclusivety. It is a very good ski to rent.

Salomon boots would probably be still be the major boot in Australia. They seem to be able to keep ahead of all the others. Although we were the Nordica agents, once Salomon started to make boots, Nordica said "*Well we will have to cancel your agency because we can't let you have Salomon and Nordica as well*." After discussions we decided that we would stick with Salomon. It seemed to be the best of everything. It has proved to be so.

EDIE: Did you have nothing to do with clothing or ski poles?

BILL: Oh, yes. Salomon have just recently gone into clothing. But Graham's wife is quite good at clothing so she has her own brands and brings them in both from Hong Kong and the USA.

EDIE: What brands are those?

BILL: Couloir and Ski Tech. She buys the Couloir from Canada, and the Ski Tech she gets manufactured over in Hong Kong, China – like everything else now. She gets all types of ski gear and supplies the trade. It's quite a big part of the industry.

EDIE: What did you do in the old days about poles?

BILL: We manufactured our own in Australia for quite some time. We could see them being manufactured in Japan and we bought quite a lot from Japan in those early days of ski poles. But we then realised that Australia had the cheapest aluminium in the world and the best quality really, so we got people at Waterloo to make them.

EDIE: Why does Australia have the cheapest aluminium?

BILL: Because it is produced up at Weipa and we have got the biggest and best mines down in Tasmania too. We supply the world – Canada is the only other country that has the deposits that we have got.

EDIE: In the old days did you use wood for poles?

BILL: We used to bring the cane in from Japan when we had the cheap skis. Everything for skiing was why I went over to buy from Japan. The poles were bamboo then, the basket was made of bamboo and leather. The handles were leather. When we started to manufacture our own in Australia, we got plastic handles made and we used to jam them on to the tube.

Then it got to the stage, unless you had the name brand on everything, everyone wanted a name. So that although our ski poles were half the price of anybody else's, it meant a lot of labour and setting up another industry altogether making poles, like 10,000 at time. It got to the stage where people wanted the name of Rossignol or Salomon on their ski poles, or Salomon or whatever the latest ski racer with his name on them. It was just easier to give Salomon an order for everything.

EDIE: There was a tremendous land slide and the water came through Thredbo, and people were killed. What happened there with those lodges? Were you there? Could you tell me what happened?

BILL: Yes, apparently it all came out in court of course, what was the cause of it[(10)] They removed some willow trees on the bank. Of course, the willows were not Australian trees. The willow trees roots used to hold the bank together above the road. Also the drains became blocked and water was seeping out. The lodges that were up on the road were dependent on this softer ground that was there. It was just a combination of all things and I think they had had probably a big snow melt or something. They had a slab of timber across from a wooden lodge across to the road which gave way and came crashing down and took the lodges with them, the cars, the weight of the concrete slab which the cars were on. It was all part of it.

I was oblivious to it, I was asleep in my lodge down there, and couldn't make out why there was nobody at breakfast. Then I realised that there was something wrong

and my friend Jan, who was up at her lodge, she had known all about it because people were wandering in because they were directly underneath the slide, and closer to it. They had opened their lodge for all the rescue people. It was so sad, we couldn't stay in the village. We got out as soon as we could. It was bad news.

EDIE: Do you want to talk about Thredbo and how different it is now as compared to what it was when you first started there:

BILL: It is a growth situation. It is progress I think. There are a lot of beautiful lodges there now. It is top class as far as a resort is concerned. We still have the same problems with snow. You know it doesn't come some years. This year it is good snow. I think the snow making is becoming better. I think Thredbo will progress on as it has done all the time.

EDIE: Where will you be skiing when you go down?

BILL: I will be skiing on the main run. I'll be staying up at Roslyn Lodge which is close in the village. I generally stay at Bursill's but not in this particular case. Jan is driving me down. She is a member of Roslyn so we will be staying there . My daughter and her husband will be there. They will be in Penderlea where we've got lodges. Penderlea is outside the National Park so you are not under restrictions like you are in Thredbo which is very subject what the National Park wants and does not want. Graham has a lodge at Penderlea. Helen has one, and my eldest son Donald has one – they are all at Penderlea.

EDIE: So you are going to be speaking as keynote speaker at the Dinner? What is the occasion?

BILL: Yes. They just want to know really the beginnings of Thredbo because I am one of the last of the syndicate **(2)** that started Thredbo although my part was to build a commercial lodge. All the others are very ill or deceased.

EDIE: Is there a race going on?

BILL: Yes, the Austrian Masters. It is a slalom race. They have that every year and there is a handicap – as I am 87, I will probably get a big start ahead of everybody else.

EDIE: Who is going to be racing besides you?

BILL: All the old timers will be there, the Austrians, people from Sydney and Melbourne, the originals down there.

EDIE: Do you know any of their names.

BILL: Yes, there is Kurt Lance. Bob Arnott of biscuit fame – you know Arnott's Biscuits – there are just so many of them, I will meet them all at the dinner.

I don't usually go in the Australian ones, I usually go in a Salomon Cup, they call over there, where they give you a big handicap if you are my age – the oldest skier in

France. I might go in this year's race depending on how steep it is. I would like to ski until I am about 90 at least[11].

EDIE: Sure and why not? Would you like to say anything else at this point?

BILL: I think I have covered the lot.

EDIE: Will you donate this to Thredbo Historical Society?

BILL: Yes, there might be some history they don't know about.

End of interview

NOTES

In response to queries raised by Albert van der Lee, October 2002, the following notes prepared by Christina Webb, Honorary Secretary of the Thredbo Historical Society, are incorporated with this transcript.

1 (page 9)**:** The original lodge was named "The Lodge"
(E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

2 (pages 10 & 25): The original syndicate consisted of Tony Sponar, Thyne Reid, Eric Nichols, Geoffrey Hughes and Charles Anton (E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

3 (page 11): The Snowy huts used came from Guthega and had been owned by the Norwegian firm Selmer (E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

4: (page 12): Helmut Pfister was already teaching at Charlotte Pass prior to 1958. It is most likely that Leonard Erharter came to Australia as a result of Bob Arnott's visits to Austria in the 1950s (C Webb, January 2003) (Arnott, R. 1998)

5 (page 16)**:** "*All the original shareholders in Kosciusko Thredbo Limited received 11 Lend Lease shares for the 4 shares in K.T.L. I had 4000 K.T.L. shares and received 11,000 Lend Lease shares for same. Unfortunately, I sold the Lend Lease shares not long after the deal was done*." (W Bursill, 2002)

6 (page 17) Due to the death of Tony Sponar in November 2002, it remains unclear as to whether the chairlift wheels were 'rubberised' beyond Kareela or was this done after his departure from the management of Thredbo.

7 (page 18): Tony and Elisabeth Sponar lived at Bursill's rent free for two months after their termination of their engagement with the operation of Thredbo resort (E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

8 (page 18): The 4000 pounds referred to by Bill Bursill was paid by Thyne Reid to Tony Sponar for the purchase of huts and a rope tow in order to get Thredbo operating (E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

8 (page 18): Tony and Elisabeth Sponar then took up a one year permissive occupancy granted by the National Parks & Wildlife Service, of the burnt out staff quarters of the original Hotel Kosciusko. Tony and Elisabeth gained a lease some time later (E. Sponar, interview with C Webb, January, 2003).

9 (page 24): This incident was due to the collapse of the Alpine Way road above Thredbo village.

10 (page 26): Bill Bursill raced in the Austrian Masters Ski Race on 27 July, 2002 in the category 75 years and over. He placed fourth in the giant slalom race with a combined time of 3.07.73. A younger 82 year old Frank Prihoda was the winner of the category with a combined time of 2.06.66 (Kosciusko Thredbo Austrian Masters Race Results)