

## **Antonin (Tony) Sponar– An Oral History**

**Interviewed and Published by Klaus Hueneke, Jindabyne, 15<sup>th</sup> December 1986**



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## TONY SPONAR

Interviewed and Published by Klaus Hueneke, Jindabyne, December 15<sup>th</sup> 1986

*This is an interview with Tony Sponar at Jindabyne on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1986 by Klaus Hueneke. Tony was a hydrographer with the Snowy Mountains Authority from 1954 to 1957, as part of that did a ski trip from Happy Jack's Plain, through to Spencer's Creek which features in my coming book. He then during the 1950's, became a keen promoter of a resort at Thredbo which finally got off the ground in 1957. Then, in 1959 to 1966, Tony was involved in managing Sponar's Lakeside Inn, which was the servants' quarters of the old Kosciusko Hotel which burned down in 1951. He is also quite a good downhill skier, being a champion from way back.*

I was proprietor of Sponar's Lakeside Inn" from 1959 to 1966

*When were you born?*

8<sup>th</sup> April 1920.

And where were you born?

Prague, Czechoslovakia

*And what are your parents' names?*

My father has the same name, only it is pronounced differently – That is Antonin and Mother Bertha.

*That is a very German name, Bertha.*

Not really, that was a Czech name at that stage.

*I have got an aunt called Bertha, that is why, in the north of Germany.*

You have been born here?

*No. I was born in Germany. I came out when I was a boy. And where did you go to school?*

In Prague. After the primary school, I had more or less a technical line of education. High school was technical, and then I learned mechanics and electrical engineering, part of Prague University. It was the beginning of the war, and when the war started the universities were closed. And it was the end of formal education.

In the war I mostly, for the first few years, winter – ski instructor – and in summer I learned the trades of gilder and cabinet maker, because my father was in that line of business, and it fitted whatever the war years offered. But most of the time I spend skiing. I somehow managed to slip through the rules and all that, and although after the First World War, for a little while, started to study architecture. My mind was made up was so that I will have my future in anything with mountains and snow, which I managed eventually.

*How did you get out of not serving in the War? Were you a soldier at all?*

I was a Czech, and Hitler did not want Czechs to serve. He wanted us to work for him. I was supposed to work for him, but I think it is somewhere that article there, that I managed to get medical certificates that I had epilepsy.

*Oh yes, that is right. I read that. Yes.*

And with that I was able to slip through all those nets. Of course, if they had caught me I would have been shot.

*Oh, I see. It was that serious. So what happened then? You came to the end of the war and you, what, you slipped back across to Austria, or ---*



No I was supposed to either study or take over the family business. And already the clouds were – pretty much a bad indication that something is going to happen in Eastern Europe. I served in the military service, 1947, already in the new Czechoslovakian state, but it did not look well. And in 1948 I was in the Olympic Games, and straight after the Olympic Games the communists took over Czechoslovakia and I knew that I would not last there.

***Tony Sponar lauded in the Czech press for his 9<sup>th</sup> place in the combined (Downhill & Slalom) in the 1948 St Moritz Winter Olympic Games -***

So I started to plan to escape. As it happened, it was not necessary to escape. I managed again by certain ways to - actually I constructed, designed and constructed, the ski lift and I managed to secure permission to take the ski lift out of Czechoslovakia for the purpose of training the national team of Czechoslovakia.

*What sort of a lift was it? I mean, it seems very easily transportable.*

It was mounted on a jeep.

*Oh, right. So you used the motor of the jeep?*

Yes, the motor of the jeep. Yes. It was mounted on it and the jeep winched itself up the mountain into position at the top, and it had a huge winch in front which had on the end a series of T-bars; and these had to be taken down by one person, and the people got on to them and were towed up.

*So it was not a rope?*

It was a steel rope. I have a few pictures here. This was when it was installed in St. Christoph in Austria in the Arlberg. It winched itself up. I had sort skids under all four wheels, and 500 metres of steel rope. On the bottom – these were the prospective customers, these were all war cripples.

*Oh, they all have one leg.*

One leg, and there were about 12 Ts. And they got on to it and the motor was started. There had to be one driver and one or two to load. It was the first ski lift ever in St Christoph.

*Gee, they have changed a lot over the years, haven't they? Ski lifts have come a long way since that system.*

They were really grateful because, for instance, people like this find it extremely difficult to climb the mountain. They have to go sideways and carry everything in their arms. They were very grateful. It was a state-operated resort. And they were very glad that they had a means of transportation.

*St Christoph, that was in Austria?*

That is in the Arlberg, Austria. Yes Tyrol.

*And then did you also take that further, that lift?*

I took it to Australia with me, without the jeep. Just all the equipment which was necessary to convert again – I intended to buy a jeep in Australia, and then just install it on to that. It was suitable for that. I did that. I bought a jeep first, here in Australia. And I installed the lift. Well, then, I fell ill, and had to give that idea away for a few years.



**Tony Sponar with Frank Prihoda & his World War 2 Jeep & Karel Nekvapil**

*So how long did you then spend in Austria?*

In Austria, only two years, 48, 49. In 1950 we started for Australia and arrived January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1951. Easy to remember.

*Right. And when did you meet your wife.*

I met her already in Czechoslovakia. She is English and she worked for a film company, an American film company in Czechoslovakia. And then we married in Austria, in Innsbruck, and somehow through my wife's job in Austria, she worked for the International Refugee Organisation and for a while for the Australian Mission. And I could – I wanted to go to USA or Canada, but for that the waiting time was very long – 10 years for USA, 5 years for Canada. And these people from the Australian Mission suggested that there is snow in Australia and they need people who know something about snow and snow business, so I said "OK, why not?" Never looked back.

*Oh yes. What level did you teach in skiing, back home, back in Czechoslovakia?*

I was unbeaten Czechoslovakian champion at that stage.

*What in slalom or .....?*

Downhill and slalom. And I was – my best placing was in the Olympic Games, sixth, and I was placing regularly among the best then.

*So you came to Australia, what, in 1951?*

1951, yes. And already it was arranged that I would be employed as a ski instructor, because I was, as a refugee, under contract to do whatever the government requires, and that was as good as anything.

*Well, that was a pretty good job. You came over by ship, presumably, like lots of other people?*

Yes, yes.

*And who paid – were you assisted?*

Yes

*Fully assisted, what, by the Australian government or ...?*

The Australian government, yes; and, of course, that was a condition of the fully assisted people that they did whatever they were told to do for two years.

*Right. And you were told to be a ski instructor?*

Yes

*Did you know very much about Australia before you came?*

Very little.

*You knew it had snow, though?*

We learned only – it never occurred to me to think of Australia to migrate to, because .... because I know that skiing, as a business, as a sport, was developing very fast at that stage – just on the threshold of developing in the United States and Canada. And I wanted to be part of that. Nothing happened here in Australia. I did not know about that. But I thought if they have snow, well may be I will be able to put my foot into it.

*Because not many new Australians knew that Australia had snow, from what I can see.*

No, absolutely none. No idea, until these friends – we became friendly with the Australian Mission, and not until then did I know that there was skiing – as a sport in Australia. I knew there was snow but not any development.

*But did you bring any skis with you?*



Yes, of course I did, yes. A couple of pairs of skis, all this equipment for that, which was a huge wooden crate. And that wooden crate later became the first structure in Thredbo. I put it on the narrow edge, stood it up, what could get inside – the first structure ever there.

*A lot of people turned over those big crates into garages, I know where I lived in Orange, they did. They were so big.*

***Tony Sponar's 'Crate' – the first building standing in Thredbo***

Yes. This was not big. I made it myself, not that big. But it made a useful storage which you must lock up.

*So did you not spend any time in a migrant camp, then?*

Only very shortly before those – organisation of the government got through. So only about three months.

*Was that at Bonegilla?*

No, in Bathurst.

*Yes, that is right. There was a camp there.*

Yes, three months. At the beginning of April we arrive at the Hotel Kosciuszko. That was a government-run hotel, very nice. At that stage there was only a chalet at Charlotte's Pass, also government-run, and the Hotel Kosciuszko, as public accommodation for skiers. Also there were about thirty beds available at the Kiandra Hotel, plus very small – two buildings. One was a base camp between Charlotte and Smiggins, and at Smiggins there was a cafe, but no accommodation.

*Was that cafe run by Johnny Abbottsmith then?*

No, no. That cafe was also by the government – everything was run by the government.

*Oh, I see*

Everything at that stage was government, because the rules of the Park required it. And rules had to be changed, and they were changed for the first time for Thredbo, which I was part of.

*So were you there when the hotel burned down?*

Yes. A week after we arrived, it burned down.

*Oh, my God! What a welcome to Australia.*

But we used to joke about that.

*Before or after?*

No, after. We used to joke who put the match to it? Whether it was my wife or myself. I was actually one of the first ones to see the fire, because I was living in what is now called Sponar's. And I was on the second floor. And from the top I could see this big wooden building, and all of a sudden – I don't know I woke up at night – I saw these yellow lights jumping the ceiling, so I looked out the window, and there was already a nice decent fire on the roof. At that stage somebody started to scream and it went very fast. It was lucky that nobody was killed because it was very fast.

*Were there people sleeping in that part?*

There were. I was sleeping in this concrete building, which is Sponar's now, which was staff quarters. But I was so-called outside staff, and my wife was employed as inside staff, and we were not allowed to associate. She had to sleep somewhere else, and I had to sleep somewhere else.

*I see.*

So she slept in the hotel building, which was made out of wood, timber.

*But it had stone cladding in some parts.*

Only very few. The front entrance was stone cladding, but very, very little.

*It is funny, that. Because it makes it appear like a very solid building when you see all the photos of the front of it. But the rest of it was just wood. But what happened when the hotel burned down?*

Well, there was at that stage – the hotel had capacity of 156 guests. But it was run by government. It required 170 staff to run those 150 guests. And so most of the staff had to be dismissed, and we were lucky that we were transferred to the Charlotte's Pass chalet. I was a ski instructor, and my wife as a receptionist, which was so much better than the hotel, because the hotel never really was deep in snow, and I preferred to be deep in snow.

*So then you instructed that winter?*

Three years, yes.

*So you were at the Chalet for three years?*

1951, 52, 53 and 54; I was already with the Snowy.

*And did you do much trip skiing on the Main Range?*

Yes, quite a bit. In 1951, the Ski Tourers Association started to build Albina Hut, and Charles Anton was the president, a very active, energetic man, who organised everybody to help with that. So right from the beginning I sort of volunteered to take trips to Albina, transporting materials and all that goes with that. And then very early I also started to look at Thredbo Valley, because on the map it looked promising. It was the highest vertical drop for skiing. And finally in summer 51/52, the first summer I had a look at Thredbo. Thredbo was inaccessible at that stage.

*Did you walk in, or ride in?*

No, we rode in from the chalet, from Kosciusko Chalet.

*Across the tops?*

Yes.

*Across via Merritt's ...?*

Not Merritt's. There was another track, overgrown. I had a very good friend at the chalet, a joker from Cooma, who was a bushman, and he knew the tracks. It was not easy to find, and so we went into Thredbo Valley the first time.

*That was an old bridle track, was it? Was that an old route that they took cattle up?*

No, no. Cattle were apparently taken – according to Elyne Mitchell – were taken on the Merritt's Spur. I am not sure about that because it does not make any sense. It is very steep and was always overgrown. I am almost certain it must have been from Dead Horse Gap.

Yes

Because from Dead Horse Gap it is very easy. It has never been overgrown, crossing the river.

*That is my impression, too, that Dead Horse Gap was the access. So you rode across from the Chalet and you rode right down into the valley?*

Yes, and we finished down in the valley. We finished at a location which was at that stage already known as Horse Shoe Bend. Very good fishing, we were always fishing – and as it happened, it was very, very close to a location where only three years later the Australian Ski Association decided to hold National Downhill on the Thredbo slopes. They were very well advised because it was a very good run.

*They did that without having lifts there:*

Without any lifts, yes.

*They went across from the Chalet, did they?*

From the Chalet, they had to ski down and go up to the Chalet. As it happened, a girl racer broke her leg right on the bottom there. And they had to carry her all the way up to the Kangaroo Range and all the way to the Chalet, because there was no way of access from Jindabyne.

*But there was a bridle track along the river.*

There was a bridle track, yes. There was a bridle track, but the downhill finished more or less on the tree line. And to get through the bush would have been impossible to carry an injured person.

*But those slopes had been skied earlier in the 1940s.*

Yes, they had, yes.

*In the old Ski Year Book.*

Yes, that is right, yes.

*So did you then go over there and ski as well? The following winter?*

Not in the 1940s.

*No, after you did your horse ride to have a look at it, did you then ski it in the winter time?*

Only the first time when – I would have to search my memory. I must have, because at that stage I was a ski instructor. We were only two ski instructors in New South Wales at that stage.

*Who was the other one?*

Rudy Wirth, a Swiss fellow. And we were both at the Chalet, because there was nothing else anywhere. And we were - as ski instructors – it was almost our duty that we have to help with all the racing. And where ever the racing was, we had to set the courses, and often it was here and there. So already at that stage it was near the slopes of Thredbo valley – there were racing courses. And whether we wanted to or not, we had to go there.

*So there were other people who were already skiing those slopes.*

Yes, yes. I believe that first – well, Elyne Mitchell again records the first time skiing through Dead Horse Gap. And about 1943 – I have got it written down somewhere – Dr Peter Blaxland skied Thredbo slopes much lower down. Very probably went there down the bridle track in 1951.

*And you got the idea that this might be suitable for a resort. But what steps did you take then?*

I started to talk about it. And nobody would listen until one year it was 1954 when I was in charge of the meteorological station at Spencer's Creek. The job of ski instructor at the Chalet was inherited by Sasha Nekvapil. And one day I met her, I was at Spencer's Creek, which was only two kilometres from the Chalet, and she said she had found somebody who is interested in doing something about developing Thredbo valley. It was a Sydney architect by the name of Eric Nicholls. And he knew the ways of publicising and he did quite a few clever things, like inviting a Swiss designer of chairlifts to visit the mountains, which got publicity. And then people I used to talk to who would not listen to me, all of a sudden started to – "Oh, we want to be in it, we want to be in it." And that is how it started. Everybody wanted to be in it, but nobody wanted to put any money in it.



*I mean, skiing was so – it was the pioneering era still. Even then there was very little skiing in Australia. How did you – what were the factors that led you to think that something might take off? I mean, it was all an unknown. Now we look at it with hindsight. But in the 1950s it was all unknown.*

When I decided – it was during the War or may be already before the War that my future is in snow. And I started to look around and I travelled quite a lot, even during the War I travelled quite a lot. And I love the atmosphere of whatever this way of life of skiing brings along. I knew that it was the right, correct thing, and I wanted to be in it. And I believed that whenever there is snow there should be some kind of facilities to use the snow. So I was convinced that the same thing could happen in Australia; that it has to happen.

*So you got these people to visit the area, and so on. And then what was the first tangible thing that happened?*

Well, the first thing which happened was we very early formed a syndicate of four skiers, Charles Anton was one of them, Eric Nicholls and another man from Sydney. And this syndicate started to investigate ways of getting the thing under way. Of course, the worst problem was that nobody had any money for that. At that stage, it was actually in 1954 when Eric Nicholls, the Sydney architect, invited this chairlift designer from Switzerland, and we visited the mountains, which was damn good publicity.

At this stage it was known that the Snowy wanted to push roads through Thredbo valley, and connect with Victoria. And already the road was under construction, and it was possible to – I think the road, at the visit of this chairlift manufacturer – definitely was not through yet, but it was as far as – pushed through by bulldozer – as far as present Thredbo. I already had under investigation, several locations which I wanted for the resort of Thredbo, and I took this party to Thredbo valley by my jeep, and we walked up from the river, near this location which I mentioned to – Horseshoe Bend – and we walked right to the top, through the bush.



*Elizabeth Sponar gazing at the completely underdeveloped site of the future Thredbo in late 1956  
(Geoffrey Hughes Collection)*

And at that stage the chairlift manufacturer from Switzerland was very, very doubtful about the whole thing, because he had never seen anything. There was no road; there were no people; no nothing. Who wants to build a lift anywhere where there is absolutely nothing? Not only that, but with the jeep one would get bogged many times to get to the location only because they just used bulldozer pushes, nothing more. But it started to move. By sheer chance we found a man who had money. He was prepared to – his name was Thyne Reid – and he was prepared to finance the very beginning of ...

*What was his name?*

Thyne – T H Y N E – Reid. They were from the Hardy's people, Hardy's – Hardy Asbestos. John Reid is his nephew, who was the chairman of the Bicentennial. He is also the chairman of Hardy's, Hardy Asbestos.

*Right. So he put up some money?*

He used to say "I have to also put money for my little nephew."  
That is John Reid – he is not very little any more.

*No; and what? He put up some money for the chairlift?*

He put some in for the investigation purpose. Four huts were purchased at Munday Camp, which were left over for the Snowy by the contractors, Selmer Engineering, the Norwegian people who constructed Guthega. And we bought these huts for 500 pounds each, and we transported them to Thredbo. Not all of them, one at the first stage. (Amount? the original Roslyn was 100) And that became the Thredbo Lodge, the first hut, built in 1957. And right next door was a lodge which was also finished in '57, called Crackenback Ski Club. So in 1957 there were three – one was financed by the club, the other was financed by Thyne Reid. And I had the use of the Lodge rent free to run it as a business. Also a ski tow was constructed, not starting on the bottom, but starting in the middle of the slope, in the morning everybody to walk half an hour to the middle slopes before they could get to the ski tow.



*Tony Sponar building a bridge over the Thredbo River - 1956*

*Is this the same – it is not the jeep system?*

No, no. It was a rope tow.

*Was that somewhere near the middle station, that flat sort of – slightly flat?*

Yes that is where it started and finished near Kareela. And that was the only transportation at that stage. In the meantime, more people joined the syndicate and decided to float a public company.

*Who else came into it?*

Thyne Reid came into that, and in my days, Peter Lloyd. Peter Lloyd is a well-known aviator. He is, I think, president of an international body of aviators, or something like that. He used to have a car dealership, Peter Lloyd Austin, I think.

*Did that become a public company?*

It became a public company in 1958, but did not get anybody from the public.

*And people could buy shares?*

Yes.

*But they did not.*



No. So it was completely left to Thyne Reid to finance it. So by 1958, there were already 15 huts, and a chairlift. The huts were club huts, but the Lodge was enlarged to about three times its original size by 1958. And the chairlift was operational. And it was already a running concern.

***The Lodge & Crackenback Ski Club, alone in the Village – 1957 (Bruce Horsley)***

*Il see. So that company put up the money for the chairlift and built it?*

The company, it was actually Thyne Reid, but the company, yes.

*And who did the clearing of the ski runs?*

I did. Actually, the first chairlift line was not what became – where the chairlift was later built. I wanted to have it somewhere else, not very far, but for some reason, the planners in Sydney decided they did

not want it there, and they wanted it where it is at the moment, which has proven to be very great mistake right through the years, because my line – and I have pictures of that – was supposed to finish in the golf links, what are now the golf links at Thredbo.

*More in the shelter.*

More in the shelter, more snow. Every year there is at least three or four weeks longer skiing to the bottom. And it was a great mistake.

*And closer to the Spider Run, is it?*

Yes

*There is a chairlift that goes up that gully now.*

No, no. Nothing there. There is a chairlift – all these chairlifts start at the central point in the middle valley.

*You would have put that central point further up the valley?*

Exactly. Where the old tennis courts and the golf links are; and that would have been – Thredbo's reputation would have been much better if that had happened. Because Thredbo has a reputation that very seldom there is snow to the bottom which is true. But for every year to get three, four, five weeks extra without snowmaking of course in those days, would have been very much different, and to the village, nothing, absolutely nothing happened.

*You still have the problems of winds at the top, I suppose, no matter where you go:*

At that stage the technology of chairlifts were not good enough to take it into the wind. So we finished the first chairlift at Kareela where it was protected.

*What happened to the technology – what changed to enable it to go right up?*

I think it was simply that they did not dare.

*That is right, because the chairlift stayed the same, didn't it.*

Yes.

*The chairs stayed the same.*

I think that is all what it was. When Lend Lease took over in 1963, they said straight away – "Let's go right to the top with that." And they did. And well, they had to close every now and then. But not such much damage done.

*And you left that group?*

Yes, in 1958. It was not very pleasant, but it was the end.

*Why did you leave: Why did you --?*

They kicked me out.

*Oh, did they? I see. Oh well. That seems very strange, that they were able to do that. I would have thought that you were one of the prime – I mean – a person who, because you started the whole thing.*

Yes, there was – it is hard to explain. But I think there still is in business – a lot of jealousy. And any ideas, like the chairlift idea, for instance, I could not simply get through, and they said "no". They had no idea what it was about. And any suggestion, any planning I did, they always said "no". And then

started to do it a year later, but it was already too late. Something else happened. So, of course, I did not like it. I told them so. So they said "All right, you go." But in the meantime I signed a – what is the name for it – a certain contract that I would never be in competition with the company. But they kicked me out. I was not allowed to go into any kind of business in the Thredbo valley for about ten years or so. So I could not go there.

So I started to look around, and here was this burnt-out building at the old Hotel Kosciusko site. So I applied to the government and they were very glad to get rid of it because it was an eyesore, and so they gave me permission for occupancy of that for two years. And depending how well I am going to perform, that they will give me a lease, a long lease.

*Were the floors burnt out in the building too?*

No, the floors were concrete.

*Oh, were they?*

Yes, the floors were concrete, but between 1951 when it burnt out and 1959 when I took it over, a lot of skiers were camping in the building. And they used the floor – actually one and a half floors were burnt out, including the flooring. Which mean the flooring – although the floors were concrete, the flooring was timber. And the timber was burnt out in about the half the building, and the rest the campers used to start fires inside the building so that they had some warmth there. So eventually it was almost every bit of timber burnt inside, for campfires.

*And there was no roof over it at that stage?*

There was. The roof caved in pretty soon after the fire. The government decided that they will rebuild Hotel Kosciusko, and put that roof on very early after the fire. I forget which year it was, but it was very soon after the fire. Within possibly two years or so; and also the windows.

*They put all that in?*

They put the windows in, yes. So by the time I took over, it was weatherproof already.

*Do you have any records of when that was built, that whole thing?*

Yes.

*It was the servants' quarters?*

Yes, 1926. There is a plaque in the back of the building still there, when it was opened.

*Oh is that right?*

Yes.

*Because there were a number of lower buildings behind there before that?*

Yes, well, they were added up, like all the government is, you know, they build a little bit – originally the Hotel Kosciusko was very small. And it kept enlarging. I have some pictures of the original Hotel Kosciusko; and they kept enlarging all the time, and those outbuildings in the back, they remained after the fire. Actually one of the outbuildings was converted then into a public bar, and a man from Ireland who used to go to drink there – that was the only public bar there, there was. It had a dirt floor, and I helped. In summer was employed as a carpenter. So we built the first bar there out of what remained. The government would not put any money into materials, so we to pull down some buildings to make the counter for the bar.

*Who ran the bar?*

It was a dirt floor, and one of the remaining employees was, I think after the fire, about three or four, may be a bit more people – were employed to clear up and stay around. And as I say, Graham Chalker, the fellow I mentioned before, and I, we were the carpenters. So we built the first bar there, the first counter, in 1951.

*So did you also use those buildings to live in while you were fixing up to change the whole place into a chalet or a hotel?*

No. I had no access to those. And there was very little left of that. There was the postmistress, Mrs McManus, living there, and then there was – when I came in 1959, I think it was only Mrs McManus who remained from all the staff there. She was the postmistress. And they still had these buildings which were empty and rotting. They were all wooden.

*So what did you start doing when you got the lease to the building?*

Well once I got permission for occupancy, I started to wash the walls, because there were so – and tried to find out what condition it was in; and as it happened, least of all affected by the fire was the second floor of the building. Everything was burnt out on the top. Everything was burnt out on the bottom, but the second floor was least affected. So I decided to use the second floor as accommodation; do absolutely nothing about the staircases and things like that – they were terrible, slime and water running and dirty. But there was no time. I got permit for occupancy, I got in Easter. I had to be open for winter, so...

*So you had to install a kitchen?*

There was a – also on the ground floor – there was one corner of the building was least affected; and during those intervening years between the fire and me taking over, they cleaned up this corner and put a kitchen there. It was pretty cosy little kitchen; and whatever staff remained there; they used to eat in this kitchen. And for a while there was an old laundress living there, and she used to cook in the kitchen for the remaining staff. Originally, there were a few, about five, but by the time I arrived I think it was only Mrs McManus left.

*So you operated that first winter, in 1959.*

I repaired it. I cleaned up about one third of the ground floor, and used the kitchen, and we had a small room which was the lounge, lounge and dining room combined, very small with entrance in the back, because the front was – it was still falling off – the masonry, and there was no door even in the front.

*That was very primitive.*

Very primitive.

*But you got some customers?*

Yes, yes. There was no accommodation. After the fire, all there was in the whole NSW snowfields, was 130 beds after the fire in 1951... Only 100 beds at Kosciusko Chalet, and Charlotte's Pass, and 30 beds in Kiandra, and people wanted to ski.

*But by 1959 Thredbo was already off the ground.*

Thredbo was off the ground.

*Perisher had a few lodges, I think.*

Perisher had a few, yes, Snow Revellers... In 1959 actually Perisher opened. The Sundeck opened the same year as I opened, 1959 - the Sundeck and one T-bar.

*But you had enough customers to bring in enough money...?*

Yes, because people were keen and there was nowhere to stay. And I got a contract with a sporting firm called Mick Simmons, who actually guaranteed me certain occupancy, and with their publicity we were able to give reasonable business.

*How many beds did you have at first?*

Thirty beds. Eventually I finished with officially one hundred, unofficially more.

*And so you slowly got enough money together to restore the rest of it:*

Yes

*And then you built some more things around the bottom too, didn't you?*

Yes. By 1964 it was already finished. Five years was in this state...

*You must have worked pretty hard.*

Yes I did.

*But your wife was working with you?*

Yes. That first year, the first winter, most of the winter we were alone, just thirty people.

*Just the two of you?*

Yes.

*Cooking and...*



***Sponar's Lakeside Inn – (Peter Southwell – Keely Collection)***

Everything. I made the beds. She was cooking. I was serving.

*And the next year you employed someone?*

Oh yes. Next year, by 1963 we had already – yes, every year one extra floor opened, and more space on the bottom. In 1963, it was already the third floor – was already operational for accommodation

*I mean, it is a very big building from the look of it.*

Yes

*It seems as though it could hold a couple of hundred people?*

Well, I don't think it would have been permitted by the Park. The Park actually insisted that I have only 100 beds.

*And that is pretty large by Park standards, isn't it? I mean, most of the lodges only have 30 or 35.*

Yes. This is right, but somehow the Park's regulations seem to be less strict when you got a bit lower down. Wilson's Valley Motel is able to have large bed numbers. They want to protect as much as they can higher up.

*And then in 1966 you handed over the management to your wife, did you? And you went to do other things: Was that about the time?*

It was a bit earlier than that. It was 1964. I still was there. I was still around for emergencies. But I started to make films in 1964, and that consumed almost all my time. It was something new; and I had to learn it, and my wife proved capable of doing, so why not:

*And she enjoyed it?*

No.

*O, she didn't?*

I think she did, but she liked to be bossy as well.

*She liked to be bossy, oh, I see.*

The more employees there was to push around ---

*You would not have done much skiing for those few years.*

I did none at all. I had no mind for it because- absolutely consuming work to try to do something about it. None at all until I stopped making films. Then I said, well, it is about time that I start to play. It was 1968.

*But making films was playing, too. Surely, wasn't it or did you –*

Well, it was hard work because I had to learn it.

*But you did not think of it – did you make money? Did you go out to make money from your films?*

I tried, but I did not. I won an Australian Film Award, but I did not make any money.

*What was the film called?*

“Which Mountain”.

*Right. And there were some others. That was the one you made in the Snowy Mountains, was it”*

No. I made – I was the stage stringer for Channel 9, Sydney, and I did all these short documentaries and news for them. I had an open – a sort of open invitation to film whatever there is newsworthy, and so I did. And of course, I used quite a lot to publicise Sponar's which I did. And it was very good.

*That sounds like a good system.*

Whenever snow fell, of course, I got out to show there is plenty of snow around. And it worked quite well.

*Did you and your wife manage to have children at all along the way?*

We had a daughter, yes.

*Where is she now?*

She died in a car accident.



*That was unfortunate. How long ago?*

1971.

*And did you build the swimming pool at ---?*

Yes

*You got what – I guess you got someone else to dig the hole?*

Yes, yes.

*Was it heated?*

Yes, it was heated. I wanted that lake in front, which became a bit swampy. I wanted to make it bigger. And I got the Park's permission to build up the dam there more. I did, and it looked beautiful, and then came the biggest floods there ever at Kosciusko, it burst the dam completely ... the lake..

*Really? It drained totally?*

It was completely destroyed – that road around the Diggers Creek. It took away the power station. I had built a little power station there.

*Yes, that is right. The remains are still there.*

Yes, that is right. It took it away – it got right through it, the water. And of course, I wanted the lake back, but this time I had to pay for it.

*What year was this when the big flood came through?*

I forget which year it could have been – it could have been about 1963, '64. I could find it somewhere. The Snowy Mountains Authority also was hired to repair the wall.

*I never realised that. And did you then build it higher again?*

No, no.

*Back to the old level.*

Yes. Actually, while we had – we had a fantastic opening for that bigger lake. I had pamphlets printed, where they stated, you know, how much material was used on the building – building that extra height of the dam. It was very – supposed to be funny – and Sir William Hudson, who was the chief of the Snowy was invited to open the extra dam, and how many litres of water there was extra, and how much power – it was all a joke, naturally. But if all the concrete was put into a column of concrete between Sydney and Melbourne, it would be one quarter of an inch high and one eighth of an inch wide. I still have got those invitations somewhere here. It was a big party, but unfortunately it did not last ...

*No, because the original dam, I think, was built by gold miners, wasn't it, they say?*

I am not sure. They say – I am not sure, because I never read anything about that. Because there is the other reservoir there – higher up – for the water supply.

*For the Kosciusko Hotel?*

Yes. That is a very nice little lake. I gave it a name – Rainbow Lake. And I see now that they use the name.

*Did you use the water from the lake for power generation?*



**Tony Sponar skating in front of Lakeside Inn - (Flora Elliott Collection)**

*So what did they use to do in the hotel before?*

Make their own power. They had three, either, I think, generators, down in the power station, plus a huge diesel outside the hotel. It was in that building which only disappeared about a year ago. Do you remember that building – it collapsed a few years back?

*Yes. Someone pulled it down, didn't they?*

I don't know.

*Surely, I think so.*

I have no idea. But the Soil Conservation used it as storage. But it was very rotten, very rotten. It was all the time falling something off; and only one day, I noticed that it was not there anymore, it was collapsing. So that was the power station.

*That was where the motors were? I see.*

But I used originally only the hydro one, which was also very troublesome.

*Who did you sell the Chalet to?*

Yes.

*Oh you did. You had a wheel down the bottom, did you?*

Yes, in that power station, yes. It was extremely ancient and neglected a lot of trouble. I used that until about 1963, 64, but only two of three years I used it, because it was very troublesome. I bought a generator. I had a generator installed already in 1963, I remember. And then 1965 came, about 1965, some council power.

*You had to have your own power?*

Yes.

*That was the only power you could – you had to make your own power?*

Yes.

A fellow name Maurice Green, a keen skier from Sydney.

*What year was that?*

1980.

*So you were still the lease holders – you and your wife were still in charge of the place?*

Yes. On my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday I sold out.

*Right. So you were involved with that for 21 years?*

Yes.

*Oh, I did not realise that. So your wife was manager for quite a few years:*

Yes, yes. That water from the Rainbow Lake was not the only water used for power generation, but when the power generation stopped, it was also the water supply, but it had to have a fantastic height, of course, because it was 400 metres...

*No, it would be in metres, it would be feet, maybe.*

No, no. 400 feet, yes. But still, you could not use it daily, because all the taps would blow off. So it had to have feeding tanks on the slope behind; and of course, I had to look after all this. I had to look after the power generation. I had to look after the water supply, after – we had a very good, for the time sewage treatment, which was very much praised by the health inspector who visited, at that stage already, which is still there, which is in...

## **Tape 2**

*What were the characteristics of the sewerage treatment plant that made it so efficient?*

Well, I don't know enough about it. But it had troughs which worked on overbalancing as the water was dripping into it, and then it overbalanced ... the effluent was all the time naturally put through all the filters, and they were very happy about it. At one stage they asked me to do more about effluent, which I did. I got from the Snowy those huge ventilation pipes which they used in the tunnels, and I buried them in flat for the ... trenches and all that. But everybody was happy about that.

*Because it is a major issue now, isn't it?*

Yes, very much.

*Sewerage from Perisher, Thredbo and Guthega too.*

Yes. Even in 1980 when I got out. I saw that one of the stumbling blocks may be that the health people will require the new owner to put a treatment in which already then, was very expensive. It would have cost as much as I got for the place. But they didn't. They were happy.

*So it was not all that difficult to get the place going again? I mean, it was a bit primitive but you could manage.*

Yes. The water was there. The sewer was particularly not available, because it was all overgrown. There were bushes inside the pipes. The pipes were one and a half kilometres long. And everything broken up. The manholes were filled with rubbish. The concrete blocks which covered them were smashed up, and they sunk down into the manholes. So the sewerage was not really available. It was worse and worse, but through the years as blockages occurred, we had to dig and find where the blockages were and clear them. That was my work also.

*Did people ski around there very much? You still had a poma I think?*

In 1964 I put a poma lift on the Kerry Course, which was just around the corner. It was good, but one learnt with the skiers all the time, and one thing I learnt that people really want to ski where there are a lot of people around, although they complain there is too much waiting, but they would not ski where there is only a handful. So already Smiggins was functioning; Perisher was functioning; and I simply did not get enough business on this tow, on this poma lift, for the reason that there were only at the best, fifty people skiing.

*Do people still use some of the other tracks that have been cut: I mean, one had been cut right up to...?*

No, no, none at all. They were right to the top and they were nice tracks. I used them myself, if I could ever get somebody to drive that ... machine. I would get towed up and ski down in deep snow. I love deep snow skiing. So if I find a good driver who would take me up and down – but that was after I started skiing again. I started skiing in 1968 again.

*So when you worked on the Snowy Scheme that started, what in...?*

I started in 1954.

*1954. And did you start as a hydrographer?*

Yes. I wanted to be employed by the hydrographic section because, for some reason or other, there were quite a number of my friends, Czech friends, working for them. The hydrographic section was almost composed of Czechs.

*Yes, this is very unusual in the Snowy Scheme. I finding this again and again, people telling me that such and such a nationality was in charge of that, more. The Italians were in the tunnels, blasting and involved with the earth; the Germans were on the technical side.*

They were surveyors. Germans were surveyors.

*There was another group. The English and Australians tended to be in the administration.*

Yes

*In Cooma.*

Yes

*The poles – I don't know about them. What were the Poles, the Polish?*

I don't think they had any speciality. But I know that when I moved to Cabramurra, our office, hydrographic office, was beside surveyors, who were Germans; on the other side the drillers, because we were three, investigation. And drillers were Australians, for some reason.

*Right. And then the Slovenians, they were more the chain gangs and helping with the surveying, I think, out in the hills.*

Yes, yes. They were the helpers in this, yes.

*I mean. I don't think it was intentionally designed this way.*

I think it just that happened that a couple of Czechs were all of a sudden or accidentally joined hydrography, and while there were Czechs, well, the other said "We will join."

*Because it was not just because of the skiing. I mean, hydrographers did a lot of skiing, didn't they, by comparison with other workers.*

Yes.

*So for those who had a skiing background, it must have been quite attractive to join hydrography.*

Yes, it was, yes. And it was an extremely interesting job, a very interesting job. I was hired as – although it was the hydrography section – but in hydrography as well as I think, some other investigation branches, I had to start as a chainman Class 2, which was the lowest paid in the Snowy.

*You had to?*

Yes. Everybody had to.

*It was a little bit more than Class 1, was it?*

No, it was worse. You first had Class 2 – if I remember – it was the other way round. But I know that there were two classes of chainmen, and we started all on the lowest paid job, but very soon, they started to ask me to do things like – well one of my first jobs, I remember, was to ride to the Tin Mines with the horse boss, on pack horses.

*Who was in charge of the horses?*

Harvey, a fellow called Harvey.

*So you rode out to the Tin Mines?*

Yes, we had to ride to the Tin Mines to find a location for a gauging station on the Upper Murray. And it was very interesting.

*Did you put that one in? That one on the Tin Mine Creek, I think?*

The Tin Mine Creek is where the Upper Murray – we found the location on this particular day – and it was put in later by some kind of building gang. But later I put in several gauging stations all around; and this was an interesting trip. I remember on the way back, my horse got a terrible gash in his stomach. It did not look like that it would survive. And I had to walk the rest of journey. Because the horse was lame, I took it into the Jacobs River into deep water and tried to wash it down, and there was blood and a big gash – but somehow he finished the trip all right.

*That is right – the old access was via Jacobs River wasn't it?*



*The SMA Power Wagon – Jacob's River – mid – 1950's*

Yes

*There was no road in.*

Well, there was a bridle track. There was a jeep track as far as Jacobs River, and from there on, was a bridle track. But without me knowing at that stage, about two weeks after this trip, they let me know from Cooma, "Now, you are in charge, so build a road to the Tin Mines." So they said, "We will get the power – you get three Poles." Yes, I had three Poles there.

*Three what?*

Poles, Polish fellows.

*Ah, yes.*

Three Poles, and an Irish bulldozer driver. "And you build a road."

*Oh, I see. That was a quick promotion from a clerk to chainman.*

Well, that was the way the Snowy operated. As soon as somebody showed some kind of prowess, they used him. They were fantastic. That was Sir William Hudson – he was a fantastic man. He forced everybody – "Use him. If he has any promise, use him."

*That was his dictum?*

Yes. Sir William Hudson, very soon, when I started with the Snowy I was the lowest paid employee, he learned that I was already agitating for Thredbo; and he called me to his office, and all my bosses said, "He is going to sack you because you are not supposed to have any other interests in the Snowy." And he said, "We are building the road; we will seal it as soon as we can; and if you ever need anything in relation to Thredbo, come direct to me."

*That is interesting. Why would he do that, I wonder?*

He liked the mountains to come alive, the potential of the mountains. And any functions originally – he would be there, anything which had anything to do with promotion. He liked public relations very much. It was his ideas, those public relations by the buses. He wanted to promote the mountains.

*He had a fantastic public relations department. The way they churned out little plastic models, brochures, pamphlets, trips for school children.*

Yes. And the buses, all the time, buses. They accommodated all that. This is only later, after I became established in the mountains, I had, not really an argument with him, but sort of friendly discussion. I wanted a little bit of his business off these buses. And he wanted to keep them all by himself, every one – these camps like Island Bend and Cabramurra and all of them had very nice accommodation for buses; and I tried to talk him into letting me have 'a little bit of it' and I achieved that.

*Did you?*

Yes, at one stage I was open year round and almost every day of the year I had a bus.

*Did you: And they were people coming to look at the Snowy Scheme?*

Yes

*But otherwise, all those visitors were all accommodated and fed at the big camps?*

At the camps, yes. They were very nicely built, the accommodation – very warm and comfortable. Good food and plenty of it. It was an interesting time, although I spent only four years there. But it was so

interesting that it was so free of any industrial problems. Everybody wanted to go ahead, and nobody asked for higher wages, better conditions; and everything was just harmonious.

*I was talking to Danny Colman the other day and he said that – he showed me a photo of the wooden base, the sled, that the motor was mounted on I think, for that first lift at Thredbo, that was dragged up the hill. Apparently he built the base. Do you remember that? It was a big wooden sled thing. He must have towed it up the hill side.*

Yes, that would have been – that 1957 one. Yes, that was quite correct. It was a very heavy motor, and it was pushed by manpower, only manpower pushed it up.

*Pushed it up the hill?*

Up the hill, yes.

*That big thing:*

Yes. I don't know if it is the same one, but if it the one which started at the middle slopes of Thredbo, it must be the one. Otherwise, 1958, we had a lot of trouble getting the first generator – not the generator – but the motor for the chairlift. A lot of trouble. It was bogged here in Wollondibby for a long time. And when it arrived, it arrived when it was snowing, and we had to build a kind of ramp out of earth to unload it. There were no facilities, no cranes, no nothing.

*Now they fly the pylons in with a helicopter.*

Our generator, which arrived at Thredbo in 1958, was in a tent, and that one took about two months to arrive, because it was bogged here in Wollondibby.

*And when you worked for the Snowy, what was the first camp you stayed?*

Well the first year they used me for these kinds of jobs, like building the road.

*Out to the Tin Mines?*

Up to the Tin Mines, and we had to establish our camp. We were given tents ... and once a week I took the wagon to Jindabyne to buy supplies for the fellows; and we used to shoot kangaroos and catch trout, and eat anything that came along. So I was just from camp to camp. I was in Nimmo Camp. From Nimmo I built several gauging stations on the Gungahlin tributaries, Burunbargee, and so on. But the next winter, they put me charge of Spencer's Creek met station. That was – do you know where it was?

*Yes, on that little knoll.*

Yes. So I had that, and two Czechs working with me. That was very interesting, measuring snow, water. A lot of skiing. I mean a lot of skiing. We averaged 10 kilometres a day; and it is not easy to average with blizzards and all that. Right through the winter that was our average.

*At Spencer's Creek you had huts.*

Yes. At Spencer's Creek we had huts, very comfortable huts. But before that it was tents, and sometimes camps. There was a camp at Nimmo where there was accommodation.

*Was it right near Nimmo Hill*

It was right on the Eucumbene River.

*Oh yes, on the road in near that bridge, just downstream?*

Yes,

*So some of them were established camps with little cabins?*

Yes. As long as they were close enough so that we could sort of go to the work from there in a reasonable time. Otherwise it was tents. Like Jacobs River.

*They were double-skin tents, were they?*

...Heavy tents.

*Heavy canvas with a sort of roof over the top, I think.*

I do not remember exactly, but it could have been the case. We had a lot of trouble with rats, of course.

*Rats? What, getting into food supplies and things?*

Yes, biting.

*Biting you?*

Yes. I don't know what we used to do. We used to dig a trench around and put kerosene into it, I think or diesel, something like that. They had no floors, these tents.

*Oh, right they would come in under the sides. But they were that bad they would bite you in the night?*

Oh, they were obnoxious. When I was doing Thredbo there was a hut at Dead Horse Gap – those rats, Jesus. They were biting! Another hut I used to sleep in at Snowy Plains, also rats.

*Really? Because I mean I have heard them at night. I have slept in the huts, but almost never got bitten.*

But they crawl over you every now and then, not very often. But it is possibly the memory which remains ingrained, that you were bitten by a rat.

*I know, it is an awful thought. It is hard enough just going to sleep knowing that they are going to be rats in the night. It is an awful thought.*

We are going – a party of friends – we are going camping this week in the Snowy Plains. And I cautioned them to be ready for the rats.

*Are you going to take a tent with a floor in it this time?*

Probably.

*And you also spent some time at Cabramurra, but that was later?*

Well, after this winter, they asked me to go to Cabramurra, and I became the regional hydrographic officer, which was quite a big promotion, from chainman second class! Which I did, and I had then a team of – I think it was five teams. I had one team in Geehi, and team in Gordon's Camp; one team in Bob's Hole, and our own team – that is four teams; and I had to sort of organise them. The Geehi one went as far as Tom Groggin, all the stations around there, Geehi area, and top station. Gordon's Camp – sometimes I had to travel through Victoria to Wombat's Creek on the other side, the beginning of the Murray River. Everyone had big regions; and we had to keep them supplied. We had a friendly competition with the drillers, whose vehicle can cross the Tumut River at the highest possible level.

*How many vehicles did you lose?*

One day it was very high. Of course, I knew the levels, and I took our wagon out in the middle, of course, I started to float down. And on the other side – we were in contact by radio – waiting for supplies. The Gordon Camp fellows with a Land Rover, they could not cross with this Land Rover, so I tried to get



them supplies by water. But it was winter, bloody freezing ... so there was absolutely no other way than to get out into the water – get the winch out on the other side, and winch it out.

*You winched it across?*

Yes, yes. It was all right. For some reason, I had funny pyjamas underneath, and they were cotton pyjamas; and as I got wet, the sleeves started to be longer and longer, and the trousers; and I could not move because I did not want to undress because it was cold enough.

*But you did not have to wade through the river?*

Yes. I had to wade through it. That was Tumut Pond. There was no bridge.

*You could not throw a rope across and pull a wire over or something: you just had to....?*

I had to go through the river to start with, because I was in the middle of the river, and the current was very strong.

*Right, so you did lose that vehicle?*

No, no, no. The vehicle was there, but stuck on rocks in a very high current; and there was no way for me to get out. So I had to go into the water.

*Of course, that is right. You were stalled, yes?*

Not stalled. It was bogged. It was bogged on the rocks. It got hung on rocks, and it was a very heavy vehicle, those power wagons – they are Dutch (?); and the only way for me was to bring the wagon to the other side and then the fellows were able to help. They had their own Land Rovers mobile, they winched me out then.

*And who got the award for going through the highest water?*

Oh, we were leading. After that, I lost track. But we definitely led for that one.

*Did you do much overtime? Did you work much overtime?*

I did not want to, because I like my free time. I was working at that stage, all the time already on Thredbo, and I needed all the free time – I needed all the weekends. My family, wife and child, were living in what is called New Jindabyne, at the “Fitness” camp. So I wanted every weekend for myself. We were offered it. Sometimes we had to when there were floods. But I did not want any overtime.

*Oh, I see. When there was a lot rain, there was more work. Everybody out and measure the stream flow?*

Yes. Because the floods are very important to register, to get the curve you know. Hydrography depends on establishing the curve of the flow, and with a certain amount of height of the river, they want to get the curve right, so that in future reference they know when there is so much rain, with so much snow, how much power generation how much irrigation water will be available; and we had to establish that.

*There were no automatic recording devices?*

There were. There were recording devices for the height of the water, but not recording the flow of the water.

*The speed?*

Yes. Not the flow, not the amount of the water. There were recording devices to record the height in the pool. But assuming it was a very high reading, say two metres reading, two metres height in the reading, and it was very high, we still had to go into the water with our instruments and measure the actual cubic feet per second, it was in those days how many cubic feet per second. We still had to do

that. With big rivers like the Snowy, and the Tumut, lower down we had flying foxes across them; and we did from the flying foxes with big weights. That is why our team in Geehi – they had to go to the Murray River at Tom Groggin – they had to have the vehicles because these weights were very heavy. And it took up to sixteen hours to get from Geehi to Tom Groggin, winching when it was wet and very bad track. But the instruments were pretty heavy.

*Oh, I see. So that the best times for the gauging were also the worst times for getting around, because it was the wettest times.*

Yes, yes. We had plenty of gauging to finish to have the lower part of the curve because it was the easiest one. So it was only confirmation of what we knew already, anyhow. But the higher ones, it had to be done. My first year Spencer's Creek, I was the only one there. But it was a funny winter, 1954 and there was plenty of snow. It started to rain like hell in August; and we had to go out and do the gauging. The Snowy broke out completely, and started to run over the top of the snow, and then take the snow with that, and we had to try somehow to measure that, which is not easy. We did not know how much water flows under and how much was the snow. Of course, quite often in winter we fell in the water. We had to dig out the creeks with shovels, and then start to measure it. We had waders with us. But every now and then we had ledges to support us, the ledge would fall down and would fall in the water, and then from Wilson's Valley we had to go in the wet gear back to Spencer's Creek to warm up. But it was interesting.

*Yes. But a lot of that was on skis, wasn't it?*

Oh, that was on skis.

*But you had your waders in the pack with you?*

Wait a minute, we did not have waders. No, no. We did not have waders because they would have been too heavy. We tried to get first a section across the creek free of ice, and then dig a kind of ramp alongside the section on which we could stand. One has to measure every one and a half feet of the flow of the water, and that is what would have happened. These ramps which we built...

*Out of snow? You built ramps out of snow, like an artificial weir?*

Yes, out snow. They would collapse.

It was only to support the body, only to support us, because the depth of the snow was too much; we could not reach without instruments. We had to be close to the water to measure it. Our instruments were not built that way that you could stand – and of course – you would be digging for three hours, snow, and then measure the water and fall in the water; and go back to Spencer's Creek to warm up.

*You did not have a change of clothes?*

Sometimes we had. But we did not count much on this.

*Were you issued special gear by the SMA?*

We were, yes. We had gear. We had quite good gear. The skis were reasonable. They were sort of touring skis. I remember that one pair of skis I got, it had hollows in it, and the hollows filled with water; and every step it was chunk, chunk, and chunk! But the boots were all right, because we did a lot of walking. I have somewhere a picture here. That would have been a typical trip. We had the instruments for measuring snow, and inside the rucksacks we would have the instruments for measuring the flow; and this was a trip at Kunama Hut – some friends were there and we were passing by on the way to work – it might have been Club Lake. This fellow became then Australian champion cross country skier, because he had plenty of training.

*Who was that?*

Jake Rosedale. He still works for the Snowy.

*Rosedale. I have not heard of him. And that you are in the front in the photo?*

Yes. That was issued gear, all this.

*So, did you keep any pets at all, like a cat or a dog? Any at that time?*

I had – when I was with the hydrology, I had a cocker spaniel; and he went with me everywhere, on those Thredbo investigation trips, over the Main Range, and as much as possible he always – he seem to enjoy it very much, but always got cut feet from the ice and snow, always bled.

*He always ran behind you?*

Yes

*You did not put him in your pack?*

No, no

*I see, that was a very hardy dog*

Yes. And then somebody poisoned him here in Jindabyne. During those days some farmers did a lot of baiting here.

*Were there many cats and dogs in the camps?*

I do not remember. This dog stayed in Jindabyne here because that was where we lived; and I do not remember whether I had seen any.

*At Cabramurra?*

There must have been, but I do not remember.

*Did you have a garden anywhere at all?*

We had a little patch here in Jindabyne. But again, I visited only over the weekends, and always very busy with Thredbo at that stage.

*Oh you had two jobs for a while, in a way, didn't you? Two major interests.*

Yes, yes.

*What were the mountains like when you first came to the hotel in the early 1950s? Like, I am trying to get some idea of whether the mountains were eroding; whether they had been burning; how mountains compare then in the early '50s to now, fifteen years later.*

I did not take any notice, because it was not my training, not my interest. What struck me quite a lot, the amount of fences, right on the top of the mountains, which by now think they have just rotted away. There is plenty of them still around, I know that, but that struck me. How come that there was so much fencing done in the mountains.

*Did you see much stock?*

Interesting – very, very little. But one thing which lies very much in my mind is, we had a gauging station at Cootapatamba Creek – you know where it is, Cootapatamba:

Yes, yes.

And that one was much lower down than the lake is much lower down, about another kilometre below Cootapatamba Lake, downstream.

*Where the hut is?*

No, still more.

*Further down, yes, that is right. OK.*

Further down. And there was a herd of cattle right through the winter; and every time we went, I think, every two weeks to do a gauging, every time we went, the herd was still there and obviously none the worse for the experience.

*They were still getting feed under the snow?*

They were shifting slowly. They must have been getting feed under the snow. Sort of, you could see how they were shifting, but through that valley you could see down to Thredbo, all green in Thredbo valley. It struck me they must be bloody stupid that it had not occurred to them to shift to the lower slopes. But they survived. They definitely survived.

*How many were there?*

About fifteen, I would say; and even before that – my first year at Kosciusko Chalet, there was a stranded horse at what we called Foreman's Hut, I think.

*Oh yes, where the chimney still is, yes.*

Yes; and that horse survived the whole winter there, as high up as that.

*Really? A horse by itself, at Foreman's Hut.*

Yes; and then in spring time, we made a track for him, by foot, and put down hay, and he followed and we got him to Kosciusko Chalet; and he grew through the winter amazingly long hair. I have never seen a horse like that; and then in summer, the staff tried to ride it. We had quite a few horses at the Chalet at that time, but nobody was able to ride that horse.

*Do you think it was a brumby? I mean, do you think it was a wild one?*

I don't know. I don't think so. Wild ones – the highest I saw a wild one was at Island Bend. I never saw any brumbies any higher. Of course, there were plenty of them at Tin Mines.

*Yes. It is also unusual that it was just one horse. The brumbies usually roam in groups, I think. Did you see any cattle and sheep out Tin Mines way? No cattle and sheep by then?*

No, only brumbies, kangaroos.

*That is interesting. Did you meet any stockmen?*

I am trying to think how many trips I made to Tin Mines. It would not have been more than half a dozen, and I have never seen any stock there, no.

*Did you see much evidence of fire, of burning?*

I don't remember that, no.

*What about up Cabramurra way? Did you see much sign of fire?*

Unless one takes more notice of things – I was not asked to take any notice. But as one – all of a sudden it occurs to me that – why, for instance, there are these big trees in the gullies, and all the trees seem to

be the same age on the sides, and then one learns that it was before there were fires; and then also the original investigation of Thredbo, that I remember very well, you know, just walking through the bush, very thick undergrowth, you all the time kick into long old burnt logs, there must have been bush fires. But at that stage, already all the slopes seemed to have a growth of trees which were about the same age. Except in the gullies where there were stands of mountain ash, which were obviously preserved against bush fires.

*Was there much soil erosion? I mean, was there much bare ground?*

I don't remember that. But at that stage when the Park banned grazing, naturally I was all over the mountains all the time. I noticed that there was soil erosion. I don't know which year it was.

*That was 1957, that is right. Towards the end of your time with the SMA. That is when a lot of the grazing leases were phased out.*

That is when I started to take notice, because it got publicity.

*Yes. Do you think the Snowy Mountains Scheme caused much erosion in the mountains?*

I have not noticed any. I have not noticed any, and often think about it. I think that – the way I see it – it is a better place than it was before. Although I regret a few stretches of rivers, it used to be very interesting. A few stretches of river here – the Snowy – which was lost through this. I think the positive is much, much, more surpasses the negative, whatever happens.

*There are more positives than negatives?*

Yes, oh yes, definitely.

*Do you remember some of the rivers and creeks running brown because of silt and mud, and so on?*

Well, it was our job as well. We measured the silt as well; and naturally, there would be more silt after a flood than there would be at other times. But we never learned the results, because we sent the bottles to Scientific Services, and they analysed the results.

*And what do you feel about – the SMA – stabilising road batters and disturbed areas, used a lot of introduced species, so called exotics. Do you think they could have used more natives?*

It never occurred to anybody. We were Europeans and we very much like the look of European trees, seeing them. So it was pleasing for us - like Island Bend - well it is all exotics there; and it obviously has done the job very well, stabilising the road; and it definitely does not offend European eyes.

*I mean, it is just today, now, that it is – well – it became a national park many years ago. But today, you know national parks are seen to be more a place where you have native species, and you get rid of introduced species. But I suppose, well, there was very little knowledge about propagating native species, back in the 1950s. So I guess poplars and willows were very logical.*

I don't know what the views of the boss of the Snowy were at that stage. But he would have used anything which did the job, and he would have tried to please people who had some ideas and knew something about it, and that must have been the case. There are still places where nobody knows – I guess – and I almost sure. I know pockets of introduced species which I like very much, like little pine growth near Dainer's Gap that nobody knows about.

*Yes, I saw them. On the left of Dainer's Gap, going up, is it? On the left side?*

No, there are not any on the side, going down. You saw one which I have not seen!

*And Dainer's Gap is after the Hotel?*

Yes.

*Yes the one after the hotel.*

No, I am not aware of that one. There is a track down off to the reservoir, to Rainbow Lake. You know where that one is?

Yes.

Yes, somewhere there.

*No, just a little bit past, on the pass. You go up to the left and looking back towards the Main Range, but up on the left, there are – I saw five or six small pine trees.*

Did you?

*Some had been cut down some years ago, but they have come up again. I was surprised.*

You know Dane Wimbush?

*Yes, I know Dane Wimbush.*

He used to have an experimental place there. Whether he did it, I don't know.

*I saw the steel pegs where the plots were.*

Yes, that was it.

*Yes, I saw those, yes. But I was so surprised. Suddenly I saw these pine trees.*

Well I am not aware of that one. And I know of another one. This one is much older. I use it for Christmas trees. I just take the top off and in the next few years it has got two tops. So one can tell that I was there.

*Were they planted by the SMA, as trials?*

Yes, they were. I don't think it was trials. I think – it might have been some trials, this particular spot, which is my secret spot, is all kinds of trees; and I believe it was the first Snowy camp to build the road down to Island Bend.

*Right, yes, there are certainly a lot of exotics around the place.*

But, of course, you notice exotics when you drive along the road, because the roads were built, stabilised by exotics.

*That is right; and so, what would you say was the biggest change in the bush over the thirty five years. Like, if you were to say anything about comparing the amount of tree cover, shrubs, grasses, the state of the country today, compared to when you first saw it, or what you remember of it.*

Well, if it is the high country, I think the high country is better off. Because it was stabilised. I mean, above the tree line; and I would have to think about the medium country, because I don't really see much difference. The smell is still there, yes of the bush; and there are still dead trees lying around, dying naturally, and some branches broken off, and still feels well under foot. I do not see much difference.

*You are a keen stream fisherman, are you?*

Yes.

*You must have regretted the taming of some of the rivers like the Snowy?*

Some of it, yes. As I mentioned, these stretches were around Jindabyne, they disappeared. But again, I have these problems personally with my hip. I am not as mobile as I used to be, and started to be more a lake fisherman, of course.

*You just sit in a boat. Would you say that over all, the total fish population is now much greater, or less?*

Oh, of course it is.

*Because of the lakes?*

Of course, there is no doubt about it. Absolutely no doubt. Graham Chalker and I, when we went the first time to Thredbo fishing, and he was already a good fisherman, I was just learning only about fishing. We fished from the horse, and we, in all that expedition, we caught three trout. Now, if you go fishing to the Thredbo River, you have ten trout in no time.

*Really?*

Yes and better size. No doubt about it.

*And that is because of the lake acting as a feeding body, they move out from the lake.*

Yes; and sizes, oh. I used to catch some very good sizes. I must open this box which I have not opened for sixty years. Just at Bullock's Hut a year ago, and eight pounder on a fly which is quite a fish. So, they are here and –

*I suppose the sewage from Thredbo might be helping a little bit.*

It is quite possible. That is quite possible.

*More food, more feed more insects. There were trout heads on this.*

Oh, I see. It has all come apart, has it? They have rotted away. It is funny that they lasted so long. Then there was one on a wall at Sponar's – this one was caught at Thredbo in 1955, four pound four ounces. They lasted so well.

*And now they have had it. There is very little smell, just a bit fishy.*

May be it has never had access to air... Yes, there is no doubt about. There are stories of expeditions to Geehi from Kosciusko Chalet on horses. I walked with this fellow; we walked one summer from the Tops along the lady Oscar's Canyon into Geehi, which was a bloody horrible trip. There are waterfalls, and it was terrible, because we could not find ... and so we slept at Geehi, and tried to fish. We did not catch anything; and the next morning, we thought it would be much better if we follow the Townsend West Spur, and get on the West Spur in the first place, and then follow the spur, which was not a bad idea once you are on the spur. But to get to the spur through these saplings, which are so close, with a rucksack on the back, steep like that, and every step you slid down and bush closes against you. I became ill several times. I had tuberculosis and, this was one of those trips which caused an outbreak again.

During one outbreak I had to go to hospital for five months. No, nine months in the winter 1952, I was in Bonegilla Hospital for nine months. It was incurable at that stage; and then I had another spell in 1963. Again, I worked too hard, got another spell.

*You are lucky to be alive, in a way. It used to kill people, didn't it?*

Oh, very much, very much. I was lucky that, at that stage when I got it the first time, there were already antibiotics which they used at that stage; and then they found much better things to cure it. But even in 1963, the last time I got it, they advised me to have an operation, remove by surgery, because I was too active, they said and you will always get it again.

*And did you have an operation?*

I had an operation. They removed some of my lung. That was in 1963. So I had all these stop and goes, all the time.

*Yes, right. Sometimes the green light and sometimes the red light. Well, you would not have had much more time to do anything else, I suppose, if you were interested in Thredbo, and you were working on the SMA; and you also did fishing, were there any other hobbies you had?*

Well, after – that film making was a hobby. No doubt about that. After that and I thought it was a nice time to finish it, after I won the Australian Film Award, I started sailing seriously. I first got a smaller boat. Still got it in Jindabyne, and took it to sea, and tried to dare myself to go out to islands and things like that. It worked, so I bought a bigger one, and then I made some major trips, to New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga, New Caledonia and things like that.



**Tony, Elizabeth and Louise Sponar and Snizka - Hotel Kosciusko**

*Were they by yourself or with a crew?*

Half of it alone, and half of it with a crew.

*So you don't mind being alone at sea?*

No.

*So you did not mind being alone in the mountains either, I suppose, from time to time?*



Not at all. I remember the day when Kunama Lodge was destroyed by an avalanche. It was 1956, and I travelled from Kosciusko Chalet on the Main Range, to what is now Thredbo, there was nothing yet; and I was alone, and the blizzard was coming from the east, which was most unusual. I had a compass and I saw that something was wrong. It was a blizzard, a good one, no visibility at all, and the next day I was in Jindabyne and heard about disaster. It was an easterly blizzard which accumulated snow on the cornice above Kunama and which broke off and...

*A very unusual direction for a blizzard. Very unusual.*

Yes. I thought I got lost, you know, because I thought there was something wrong with my compass.

*It always comes from the west or the southwest.*

Yes; and I did all these trips alone, the investigation trips to Thredbo.

*Did you have any parties when you were working with the SMA? Like social entertainment:*

Oh yes, every now and then somebody was leaving, there was a big party and a Christmas party; and when I started at Sponar's, Island Bend was very well going, very well going; and they had a very nice community hall cum picture theatre; and the fellow in charge of public relations who organised it was doing a very good job, and we had fantastic parties there; and always the boss would arrive and talk to everybody, and everybody would have great fun; and not only parties, but there were twice a week, pictures, movies; and of course, there was no television, and they always had very good movies, up to date. And that was a very good social experience; and those movies had to go through. When there was Bundilla Camp -

### **Tape 3**

*To get the pictures through?*

That was the rule, the pictures must get through; and one day the Land Rover got bogged, it could not move, so they called the bulldozer and took half of Land Rover away...pictures.

*The Land Rover was so badly bogged, that it came half – it tore in half?*

Yes, a lot of stories – I don't know whether any of them – whether all or any were true. But I was led to believe that at Munyang they had to leave the bulldozer which they could not get out of the bog. So they left it there and built over it.

*Really?*

That is the story. There were very good stories all the time.

*Frank Rodwell told me of two bulldozers getting bogged near that camp at Bondilla; and they had to bring a third one. That was the last one they had, in order to get the other two out. Do you remember any gambling in the camps, or...?*

There was gambling at Island Bend. There was organised gaming, and prostitution for a little while, but it was always busted up pretty soon.

*Oh, was it?*

Yes. They would arrive from Sydney and have a nice time for a little while. But it would have been – Island Bend had quite a bit of gambling – it flourished quite a lot. I am not the type, so I don't know, but I knew the organisers. It was organised.

*Did you go rabbit shooting?*

Yes.

*Were there many rabbits around?*

I started rabbit shooting and got sick of it very soon because it was – myxomatosis was very bad; and once you killed a sick one, then you don't want to eat any more rabbits. I shot rabbits and I shot kangaroos, but the same story. I did not do it – so there were many rabbits. You know the Snowy Plains? Jesus, were there rabbits? Now that we talk about it, yes, there was a lot of erosion due to rabbits.

*In the Snowy Plains area?*

Snowy Plains and other – there were pieces of land which were bare, completely bare.

*Kiandra had it bad, too, didn't it, I think?*

And we at Sponar's, unbelievable it was, at one stage. Unbelievable; I used to joke, if I throw a brick out of the window I am bound to kill ten rabbits. I used to make the job. But then they disappeared. They ate everything. It was bare. I tried to have nice playgrounds with flowers and everything was eaten away.

*Are there any photos of these rabbits?*

No. I have never seen any.

*I have never seen any. It is so hard to believe. That is quite cold there.*

Yes. I may have forgotten about the rabbits, if I did not remember this joke which I created. It was a slight exaggeration, but...

*Well, even if it was only half true, it is still a lot of rabbits. You would hit five rabbits with one brick instead of ten. That is pretty good.*

Animals never came as high as Sponar's. Once a kangaroo was killed down off Guthega, but that is the only one I remember, as I said; and once there was an emu right at Dainer's Gap.

*Oh, was there? An emu on Dainer's Gap? Well, come up from the Snowy, I suppose down from the gorge.*

At Rennix Gap, not Dainer's.

*What about wild horses, did they come up to Digger's Creek?*

Well, I saw one wild horse. I was fishing at Island Bend and I saw it on the other bank, on the left bank.

*Only down at Island Bend; they never came up – only one you saw down there?*

Only one.

*Ever?*

Ever, yes. It never had a reputation that says there should be wild horses on that side of the Snowy there. Plenty of them came when we had our camp, and wild pigs. That was between Cabramurra and Tumbarumba ... on the left bank of the Tumut.

*Did anyone else go pig shooting, or –*

I don't remember. I don't remember. I would have liked to, but at that stage – and it was already when I was on the Snowy, I had given up shooting, and I was in the country. It was a fairly big country there.

*Do you remember any fights between people at the camps?*

I don't remember, no. I think they were generally very harmonious.

*And you got on with your workmates all right?*

Oh yes, yes.

*I think the only main group that seemed to have squabbles was the Slovenes – was the two groups of Yugoslavs. Apparently, people have told me they used to be at each other at times.*

But I never witnessed anything like that. When I was on the wages bracket with the Snowy, I had to eat in the so-called wages barracks and sleep in the so-called wages barracks. When you became what was called staff, then you have staff accommodation and staff eating facilities, and staff car, and everything. So I moved out – with all these people on the wages. I never noticed any disagreement anywhere.

*Was there a big difference between what the wages people got in terms of accommodation and food.*

It was rougher. It was simpler. But again – even when I was on staff, and had to go in the field at two camps – well, there was no staff accommodation, so I had exactly the same as the wages.

*Did you ever meet Major Clews?*

Oh, yes, yes.

*What do you remember about him?*

Jolly fellow. He went out of his way always to have fun – typical – I would say typical – I think I know the type of these loners, and I am one of them. I can be - what is the expression? Sociable and extrovert and all that; and he was like that.

*But at that; other times, very solitary. He was a bachelor, I think.*

Yes. Most of the time he was living there alone, but you visited him and he would do anything; and stories! How kangaroos eat his towels –

*Kangaroos eat his towels?*

Yes, carried them away and eat his soap – he never stopped talking; and of course he was probably two weeks without human contact at all ---

*Apparently he had false teeth, or something. They used to pop out every so often with all his talking. Were there any practical jokers?*

I was.

*What was your bigger practical joke?*

That one which I remember best is – we Czechs – we love all these very ripe, smelly cheeses, very stinky cheese - impossible stinky cheeses. We always used to tease each other, the drillers, the hydrographers and surveyors; and once I noticed that nobody was in the drillers' office, so I got a wrapper of this stinky cheese and stuck it under the table in their office. About two days later they started to dig under the floor! Because we Czechs, we knew what was there! So, I did all the time something crazy.

*What else did you do?*

I can't remember. But this one I can remember. I always pulled somebody else's leg, yes. Plenty of them.

*Did anyone ever pull your leg? And get away with it?*

I don't remember. I seem to have spent a lot of time thinking about these practical jokes... oh, there were a lot of occasions, but I would have to think hard about it.

*Apparently in one of the tunnels, when they made the last blast to break through, they put an extra load of dynamite in, and all the dignitaries were there waiting for this big occasion, and it blew all their hard hats off, and blew them all backwards a few feet. That was one of the biggest practical jokes I have heard of. I don't know whether it was true.*

There was not much contact, as I remember, between us outdoor people and those who were in the tunnels, for some reason. They had different camps, the tunnel people.

*Oh, I see, yes, because they were contractors. They did not work for the SMA, did they?*

Some of them – some of the tunnels, I think were done by the SMA. I'm almost certain they were, because SMA always used to boast when there was another world record in tunnelling, and all that. And the SMA used to get the credit for that.

*Well, I thought most of the tunnels were overseas contractors...*

I may be wrong, but I know definitely the building, the dams were contract. The tunnels – you had better check on that one. I think many were done by the Snowy's.

*Did the SMA look after you? In terms of your work conditions: in terms of...*

There was no complaint.

*Everyone seems to accept what was presented at that period in our history.*

Yes, Yes. About two or three years ago, a fellow called Oliver visited Cooma. He was old already, but still a high official in the Australian Workers' Union; and he got for some reason big publicity from the Cooma Monaro Express, and all interviews; and he was saying how the Australian Workers Union in the early 1950s was so well organised in the Snowy – bloody bullshit! I never heard of one member of the Australian Workers – or for that matter – any mischief of all done by the unions. I don't know why they published this, because it was not true, simply not true; and I started right on the bottom. I would have heard something, in the four years; and as far as I know there was no trouble ever.

*There was some resentment, I think, about paying dues to the unions, wasn't there: Because then no-one ever saw them*

Nobody was ever asked.

*Oh, you did not have to pay?*

Not at all.

*So the unions were not active at all.*

Absolutely not. That is what I am saying. This man Oliver, he claimed that everybody was a member of a union and how well organised they were; and it was not true. I never heard of any union member; and that is why I say I know nobody – you can ask Danny Collman for instance. He has been all the time with the Snowy, whether he ever heard anything about it. I was with them only four years, but Danny has been all the time.

*Yes, that is right. Were you able to – if you had suggestions for improving conditions, or doing things in a different way, or in a better way were you able to – were they receptive? I mean, the bosses, were they receptive to new ideas?*

You would not have any idea where to go.

*You would not?*

No. Absolutely none; we had no complaints and I think people like me – I burned my bridges. I was a political refugee and I could not go back there; and I was – that time when I was accepted by Australia I had already my first bout of tuberculosis, and they took me despite that. They knew it.

*Oh, they knew that? That you had already had tuberculosis back in Austria?*

And I was grateful that I had somewhere to go, that is, talking for myself.

*What sort of condition – I mean – how did people get TB? Was it because of lack of proper food, or is because of cold conditions, or...*

I don't know. It must be inclination – inheritance and inclination – I went into military service in 1947 and there was a viewing check- up of the lungs, no pictures taken; and I remember that the doctor, who was viewing, asked me whether I had any trouble ever. That is all what I remember; and when I applied for Australia in 1948, in Innsbruck, they discovered already a big hole in my lungs. I went for five months to hospital, and it all closed, and I was, with a little of pushing from the Australian Commission, I was free to go.

*So you were lucky in a way.*

Oh yes.

*You could have had to stay in Austria, I suppose.*

Well, there were countries already – were accepting these people.

*You could have gone to Canada or...*

Sweden accepted people, yes. Sweden was accepting people. Otherwise, nobody in the world.

No.

Because it was incurable at that stage, and contagious among people – that is why they were so concerned in Australia when it renewed, because in Australia there was very little known tuberculosis. Consequently, people did not have natural defences; and it was very, very catching, whereas in Europe there were a lot of natural defences, immunities. I read somewhere that some nations – I think the Israel do not get it at all, because they have so much immunity in their bodies.

*Did you smoke?*

Yes, yes. I smoked.

*I suppose you had to give that up.*

I don't think that had much to do with it – I gave it up with the last bout in 1963 – twenty three years ago. I gave it up, but I don't think they objected to it that much. Never asked in the hospitals and I took a lot of time to stop smoking.

*Yes, my mother, when we came to Australia – I remember my mother had to have her varicose veins removed, partly removed – before we could come to Australia, yes, back in 1953.*

1953, you came?

*Yes. Well we came in 1954, but she had to have those operations before. So they had reservations about that.*

That is interesting. How old was she then?

*She was 43.*

43, well, that is a stage where they still expect people to work, and I suppose varicose veins are a bit of a handicap.

*Although it has never handicapped my mother - she still walked to the top of Kosciusko last year when she was 75.*

75, that is very good.

*So you had no problems with the SMA as your employer?*

Absolutely none. They had a bit of a problem with me.

*Sounds like they like you, too. I mean, they liked the idea of someone getting on with the job and showing enterprise, and you showed that. So that seemed to be all right. I read on the memorial in Cooma that 120 died during the building of the Scheme. Did you know any of the people who died?*

No. They were usually accidents on the construction site and in the tunnels. As I mentioned, we did not have contact for some reason with those. They were living somewhere else. Also we had little contact with field construction which was a division; and we more or less kept to our investigation division, which was a very interesting division. Our ex- division head, he died recently...

*Oh yes?*

Incidentally he was in the Hotel Kosciusko fire. He was on the first floor and surrounded by flames, and jumped into a courtyard and broke both his ankles - completely surrounded by fire. If there was a victim of that fire, it should have been him, but somehow he got out. I don't know whether they carried him out or something.

*And he jumped into the courtyard and fire was all around him.*

Fire all around, yes; and he broke both his ankles. This is true because I asked him later about this, and he said it. I had heard about it at that stage. It was April, and pretty cold. People always ask what people – "It must have been cold outside." I said, "You either went closer to the fire or further away from the fire."

*I suppose it burned the whole night. It was hot the whole night.*

Yes, it was hot all right.

*And what do you think of the Snowy Scheme? Do you think it was a good idea?*

Oh yes.

*They have put the dams in and –*

Yes, it is progress, yes. No doubt. I often think about that, and in my mind there is absolutely no doubt.

*Even though it stopped the flow of some of the rivers; it has flooded large areas which were farming land, and now it has caused some salt problems. The irrigation has caused salt problems out west in the irrigation areas.*

That is unfortunate, yes. I realise that, yes, in the Murray, yes.

*In the Riverina.*

I know that. Last year I purposely followed the Murray from the mouth right up – I always follow that.

By car?

By car, I planned to slow down, but I was in – something went wrong. I went to Tibet, and from Tibet I had to rush to Grand Prix in Adelaide

*Were you trekking in Tibet? Were you walking?*

A little bit, yes.

*And so when you drove down the Riverina, did you see much evidence of salt?*

No, I have not noticed it. But I have, of course, followed the story and followed the pictures, and it must be pretty bad, the salt. Nothing can be done about that; well, it is not the Snowy Mountain Scheme's fault. Nobody was aware of it at that stage. It is like AIDS.

*You see, most of the power now comes from coal fired power stations in Sydney and Newcastle, and the Snowy only supplies the peak, I think.*

Yes, yes, that is right. But even at those stages, it was always set, and knew that right from the beginning that this was not a basic load, this was for peak load. Sir William Hudson always used to – in his speeches – he said “The power, although it is, by legislation, the main thing of the Scheme, it is not the most important thing. The most important thing is the water which will flow inland.” But of course he did not know that would cause damage as well. Nobody knew that.

*So do you think the Scheme could be built today, if someone proposed it today?*

No. Because the Greenies would be against it.

*Oh, I see. Do you think the Greenies are strong enough, do you? Do you think the Greenies have got enough numbers to stop it?*

I don't know. They manage in other parts of the country sometime. This is too big. If it was rain forest, well may be. They can be shouted down. But not a big scheme like. I don't think they would have any chance. But I am glad, what a nice lake we have got here.

*Yes, you have certainly got a nice view from here.*

I have built a beautiful pontoon on it, which I built in 1971, fifteen years ago, and go floating on the pontoon, and parties – thirty people on the pontoon. That would not be possible if it was not here; and of course, I would not be living in Jindabyne. I don't think I would be if the lake was not here. But possibly I would because of the snow.

*In some ways it is a paradox that the Snowy – I mean, before the Snowy came, this was rural: it was horse and buggy days, and you still had the grazing in the high country; and to some extent the grazing, combined with burning, was causing some damage; and the Snowy, in a sense, because the lever for pushing out the grazing in order to improve the catchment. So in ways the Greenies have the SMA to thank to get rid of grazing which has improved the rest of the Park, 90 percent of the Park or more, because the Snowy Scheme has only affected a small part of it; and in turn, of course, the Snowy Scheme has enabled things like Thredbo and other resorts to develop. How far do you think, should this be allowed to go: On the one hand, you have got a very small part of Australia, which is pretty rare in Australia – mountains covered with snow; it has got a high ecological, wildlife habitat value. But it does also have the snow which attracts people by the thousands. How far do you think – where – at what point should development of that kind stop? Have we reached the balance: Can we have many more resorts?*

Yes.

*I mean, should even more the Main Range be developed for downhill skiing, for instance?*

Yes, I believe that. It does not do any damage. It is only – the way it goes, there is absolutely no damage; and I don't believe in this, what they call "visual pollution." I don't believe at all in that.

*It does not affect you:*

I don't believe that. Look, I am very much influenced too by what happens in the rest of the world; and if you look at beautiful Swiss photographs of the mountains, the photograph is no good if there is not some human element in there. If there is not a church, and a little house, and ... power lines there. But chairlifts do not – absolutely do not offend me. To contrary, I think it belongs to the mountains, to the snow.

*So you would not mind a chairlift going up...*

Leave Kosciusko for the walkers.

*All right.*

Leave Kosciusko to the walkers, but there are other mountains which – you will never see anybody there. Why should they be protected if nobody wants to see them anyhow?

*What about – like for instance – up the Guthega River towards Mount Tate – would you...*

Mount Tate was – at one stage – was already permitted for development. I don't think it would be wise because the weather is bad there. I don't think it – often very bad visibility, because it has not got trees; it has not got rocks, and all that; and you need all that to be able to ski. It would not be wise, but I would be in favour – at one stage it was already permitted, and only because the man who got the rights, went broke he did not go ahead.

*Where else would you like to – I mean...*

Well, no doubt, - and it is almost permitted – suggested by the Park that the Paralyser will be opened and access will be by the extension of the Ski tube. I think the Park will insist upon that. But it is a nice little neat area.

*So it would be another branch that would go off under Mount Perisher and come out –*

If they don't change their minds, or if the Ski-tube does not go broke, and all that goes along with that. That would be it. But even without that, it is a neat little area; and, of course, through the years I have become wiser and as I am not able to ski as I used to, I feel much more with the average skier. An average skier is the beginner, and the novice and the intermediate, and they need facilities. They need facilities for them, and this Paralyser would be a neat little one to open up.

Of course, I don't believe those figures which the tour people are producing. That is not true – 40,000 skiers in the Perisher Range. It is not possible. It is too many. At the moment the capacity is 16,000 and they are talking about 40,000 there. But these people will still be allowed to go ahead. It is not a very good area, those Twin Valleys. But if anybody wants to invest, it is not damaging; and Thredbo should be allowed to extend if they wish to. There is no damage done there.

*How do you feel about accommodation, which seems to cause a lot more problems? Accommodation in the alpine areas; where the snow actually falls? Particularly the sewage problem; the transport problems, the garbage problems and so on.*

Well, you are talking, apparently, about Perisher. Well, Perisher was bloody badly designed – designed by the Park. The Park had done all the damage there, because they insisted – instead of European-style village like Thredbo, where the services are all concentrated in one spot, they put a bit up there, a bit out there, long access routes everywhere, long sewage lines, long water lines. It is just the Park's fault; and if anything happens – well, everybody is concerned with that now – that the accommodation is out of the bounds.



*Yes, it seems to be.*

Yes, so all right. But it will be very bad if all of a sudden the Park changes its mind again, and says “OK, back to the mountains.” Because Jindabyne and all this, is growing because they were expelled from there, so by now, it is the right thing to do so.

*But would you say that the development of the mountains is unlimited? I mean, where would you put the limits?*

I would put quite a bit more. At the moment, I think it is one per cent of the Park, isn't it: One per cent of the Park is developed, isn't it: One per cent of the Park is developed.

*I don't know.*

I think it is one per cent. I would go to three per cent, easy, because it does not do any damage. Lower down, it does not; and this visual impact, what they have with Blue Cow, that is so fantastic – stupid. They hid the main building, yet the big, ugly water tower is visible from everywhere.

*Is that what it, the big white thing?*

Yes – Jesus Christ! Buildings which could be beautiful, this must be hidden, but that water tower that must be there.

*I see.*

But they destroyed the concept of Blue Cow. I was very closely associated with Blue Cow. It is my baby too. I was the first one to suggest it in 1968, for a study of the Park. But where the Park insisted they put the centre, the building, it is out of snow, it is out of everywhere; and before you start skiing you have to start walking.

*I see.*

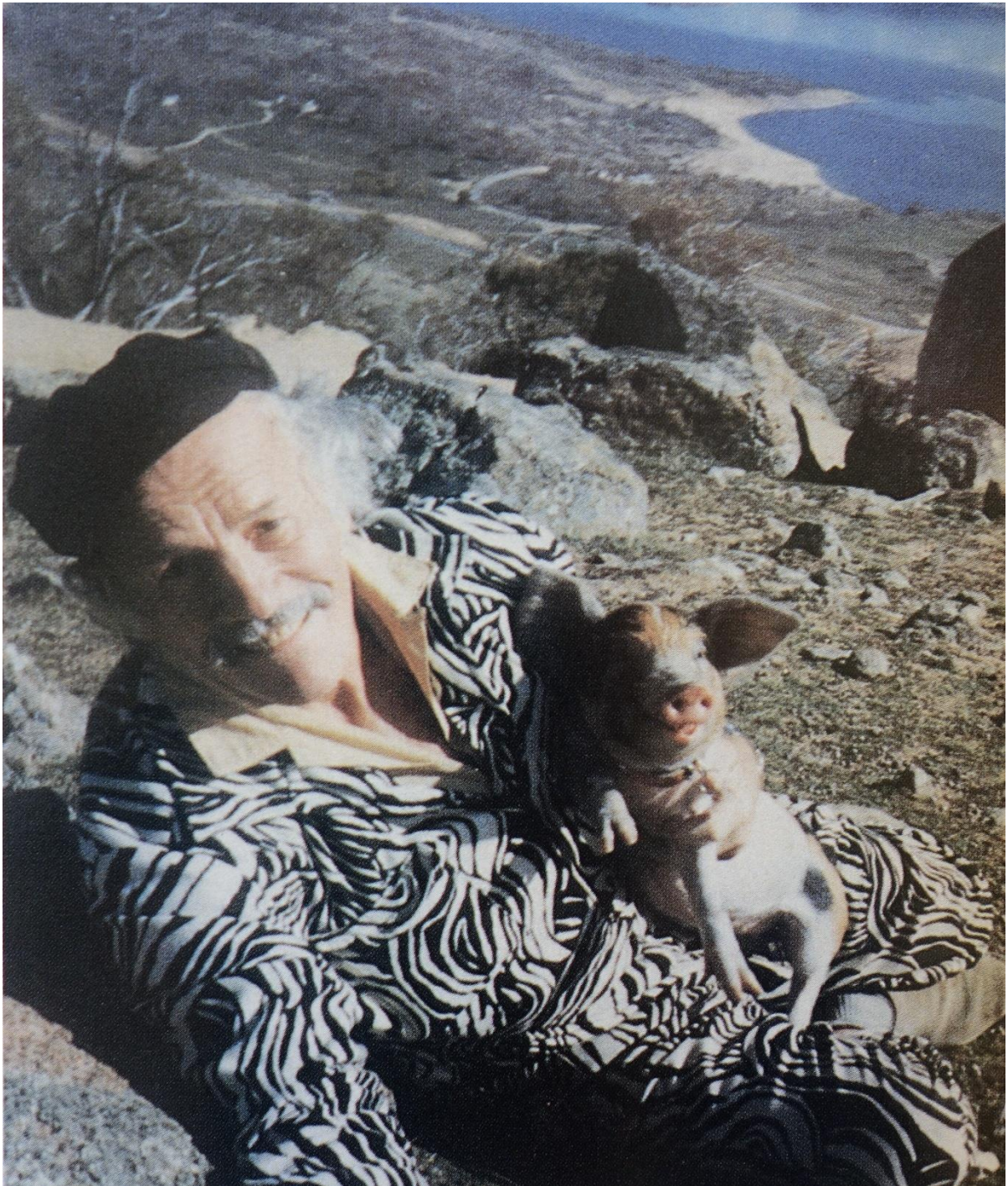
With heavy boots and all that you have now, and try to get back – to start walking uphill.

*Is it too windy there, or...*

It is exposed to sun, the snow disappears very early, and the best runs for novices, intermediate, you cannot reach skiing down. You have to start walking. It is a short walk, but still people don't want to walk. After all, it is business which tries to attract customers, and customers who find out that going to Perisher is much easier because you do not need to walk, they will go to Perisher. They will not go to Blue Cow.

*I think I have just about asked you every question that I can think of. I would not mind looking through some of your photos, if that is possible.*

I don't know what I have. It is extremely disorganised. (The remaining 4 pages of the transcript relates to discussion of Tony Sponar's collection.)



*With Piggy on Jinderboine Hill in 1983*