

THE CHALET FIRE CHARLOTTE'S PASS

By J. E. Biggs

THE fire took place very early on the morning of Monday, August 8th, 1938. The whole affair was unpleasant, but never dangerous, and no one suffered much more than they usually do on the long drag to the Hotel. The trip is never pleasant, and six or seven hours in the open or in tin sheds did not provide a good preparation. The cause of the fire, as is usually the case, can only be surmised. No one saw it start. The most probable cause was that the iron flue from the boilers, either corroded or burnt through where it passes through the ceiling of the boiler room, and so ignited either the ceiling or the floor of the bathroom, or both.* On Sunday evening everybody was in bed relatively early by 11.30 p.m., when the engine was turned off, and with it the lights. About 1.30 p.m. we woke to a smell of smoke, and very soon there were sounds of movement near the drying room. The first alarm was given by Miss Henderson, of the office staff, who was inhabiting the Burrow. She called George Day, who passed the word around. We got up to see what was the matter, and heard that there was a fire in the drying room. But on arrival it was obvious that the fire was in the boiler room and more serious. The fire fighting appliances were unable to make any impression. The fire was then attacked from the top, from the bathroom, but there was no hope, as the cracks between the floor boards were showing a good deal of flame. The cover over the cavity through which various pipes pass between the mirrors and basins was taken off in the hope of getting better access; the only result was large gusts of flames. By this time it was evident that the Chalet would have to be evacuated. The job of rousing everyone was surprisingly easy in the main, and those who weren't already awakened must have at least been disturbed. The men's dormitories were by this time fairly full of smoke and, of course, very dark. However, there was no confusion, and so far as possible everyone got into their ski-ing clothes. This could not be done in every case, as some had clothes and boots in the drying room; although these were all got out there was great difficulty in finding the correct ones in the dark. The women's dormitory, not being in close contact with the fire, was better off from the point of view of smoke. Its occupants were aroused, and got dressed; in quite a short time everyone was up and out of the dormitories. So far as can be gathered, only one person was gassed by the smoke. This was George Day, who, in his usual way, was doing six men's work and wouldn't leave. He recovered quickly, so probably the attack was not serious.

All that was left was to save what movable things there were in the front portion, mainly skis and sticks. These were taken out and the various pieces of luggage which had been thrown out of the windows were collected into heaps. Opportunity was taken to check up to ensure that no one was missing, by ascertaining from each dining table group the names of those at each table. Having done this, the immediate necessity was to keep everyone together and see that no one wandered away or attempted to leave for Betts' Camp or the Hotel. Mr. and Mrs. Day made a similar check on the staff. The staff had a much rougher spin than the guests, as their clothing was not suited to the conditions. Most of them were only able to get into their ordinary staff uniforms and shoes, which were not at all suited to the outdoor conditions which they had to face. Very few of them could ski, so their transference to Betts' Camp and ultimately to the

*In the opinion of the manager the fire was caused by fusing of electric wires.—
Editor.



E. McNeil.

Charlotte's Pass, 2 a.m., August 8, 1938.

Courtesy the "Sun."



4

Hotel was difficult and very unpleasant; they were forced to walk from the Chalet to Betts' Camp and later, on Monday, through snow conditions which were difficult enough to ski. The tractors were not available, being under repair.

The heat was sufficient to keep everyone warm. Spare clothing was shared with those who had not sufficient. Boots were sorted out and ski put into pairs where their owners could easily find them. The weather, fortunately, was not bad. Snow was falling steadily, but with only a light breeze, and apart from the difficulty of walking in the deep snow, conditions could hardly have been better.

The fire forced its way against a light breeze towards the front of the building, so that in this direction its progress was slow; in the opposite direction, aided by this breeze and the draught through the open doors, it soon enveloped the back portions, the store, engine room, staff quarters, etc. This is very clearly shown in the photographs which were taken. By about 2 a.m. the building had been abandoned and everyone fitted out with clothing and boots.

As soon as the fire was discovered, efforts were made to get into touch with both Betts' Camp and the Hotel by telephone. Betts' was raised very quickly, but the Hotel was not, and it was not until about 7.30 a.m. that the news got through. By this time, of course, all the guests had left the Chalet for Betts' Camp. The delay in getting word through to the Hotel was of little importance, as events turned out. No help could have got through in less than 5 hours, owing to the soft snow conditions. Actually, no help was required, except for minor details. By 3 a.m. nothing was left of the Chalet, except the four chimneys, the kitchen range, and a mass of twisted iron and pipes. The detached tin sheds were still intact, the woodshed, tractor, garage, feed shed, ski-lift shed, and the cow-shed. The latter was not used by anyone except the cows, in spite of what appeared in the papers. The guests and staff were distributed in these sheds, and settled down for the rest of the night, to keep as warm and comfortable as possible.

Photographs. L. W. Nicholls and E. Broad.



By the time dawn broke, everyone was cold and another hour would have made discomfort a painful experience. The Betts' Camp residents responded nobly and came over to render assistance. They went back to Betts' and brought over tinned café-au-lait and soup. This was brewed in a kerosene tin and served in the tins which originally held it. The brew was not very appetising, but at least it was hot and welcome.

As soon as light came those who had full clothes and equipment were gathered into parties of suitable size, and set off for Betts'. In an hour everyone had left. A responsible group followed last, to see that no one dropped out or got into difficulties. With dawn came a change in the weather, which soon was a fair blizzard with low visibility. After breakfast practically everyone pushed on to the Hotel. After Betts' the weather improved a great deal, the wind dropped and the snow ceased, while the sun shone through gaps in the clouds. A party from the Hotel met most of the refugees near Piper's Gap, but even though hot drinks and soup were available at Smiggins', it is doubtful if anyone stopped, owing to the very much improved weather conditions. The trip from Betts' to the Hotel was one of the best I have ever had. Snow conditions were good the whole way, there being no bare patches of mud; the track was fast and comfortable, and a continuous run was possible from the top of Piper's Gap to the bottom of Daner's. It was fortunate that the usual mud and slush from Piper's to the Hotel was covered, as this would have been the last straw to many. The Hotel had made preparations for us, and as many spare clothes as the guests could lend were distributed. Those who had come down from Sydney on Sunday night were held up in Cooma for Monday and Monday night, until the congestion eased. Mr. and Mrs. Speet looked after us all in their usual pleasant and efficient manner. In spite of the complete disorganisation of all the club functions, the usual cocktail party was held on Monday night, at the Hotel instead of the Chalet. Every member of the club in residence was present, even the one casualty who had a torn and cut hand. This indicates how unnecessary were the very sensational press reports.

Looking back over what has probably been Kosciusko's most spectacular and sensational public performance, several conclusions are fairly evident. (1) A complete justification of the existence of all skiing clubs. One cannot help but feel that a heterogeneous collection of guests, unknown to one another and unaccustomed to the place, would have suffered. There would have been no recognised leaders or authority, and no one would have known the capabilities of the others. It seems certain that there would have been confusion, and probably some panic, in evacuating the building, and the homeless would have been difficult to keep together once they were outside. On the actual occasion, any attempt to leave the scene, such as to try to reach Betts' Camp would have been highly dangerous, except for an experienced skier. To come from Betts' was possible, as the fire was a beacon. There would have been divided councils and individual schemes about what to do, and someone would have suffered in the scrambles. (2) Everyone would have been better off if no attempt had been made to extinguish the fire. If the time thus spent had been used to gather together clothes and gear, practically everyone would have escaped loss. As it was, a few whose energies were directed in this direction made practically a 100% save. (3) Some detached shelter must always be available near the main buildings in case of fire at the Hotel, Betts' Camp and any new Chalet. The iron sheds existing at the time of the fire were invaluable. Any new building should be designed so as to make it possible to confine a fire to one portion. (4) There must be improved and reliable communication between the Chalet, Betts' Camp and the Hotel, both as regards telephone and mechanical transport. At the time of the fire, both tractors were out of commission and there was no means of communicating with the Hotel quickly, as there was no provision there for anyone to answer the telephone during the night. Very little imagination is needed to picture instances where the availability of both telephone and tractors

would have been of paramount necessity. (5) Sufficient fire-fighting appliances should be provided and, if possible, a night watchman. Fire drill should be practised fairly frequently, so that there will always be enough experienced people in residence to see that the balance are doing the right things and to render assistance where necessary.

It is easy to see what should have been done now and to provide for similar contingencies in the future, but it must be borne in mind that next time everything will be different and the old solutions and methods will not suffice. In all, the Kosciusko Alpine Club can congratulate itself on doing a very good job. Individually and collectively, members were a credit to themselves, the club and ski-ing. They kept their heads, did as they were asked, and kept cheerful, making it easy to deal with the situation and make the best of the conditions. The lighter side would take a long time to tell, and to a stranger, viewing the event from a safe distance in comfort, the unconcern and casualness of all would have seemed amusing, and the newspaper reports, stranger still. To mention individuals is to make invidious distinctions. The two Day children were the only children present, and they were a credit to their parents. Even in the smoke and dark, with the whole Chalet full of blundering figures, they never gave the slightest trouble. The club captain, John Douglas, was ubiquitous, and saw to everyone's comfort and safety, between efforts to quell the fire, organise the evacuation, arrange the disposal of all in the various huts and the dispatch of the various groups to Betts' and the Hotel. The only job he did badly was when he helped to burn the café-au-lait. Breakspear was a tower of strength too, especially during Monday, when he acted as porter between the ruins and Betts'. Gelling did a great job in getting through to the Hotel by sunrise, in spite of the heavy snow conditions.

George Day did so much and so well, that few realised he was present. No one could have done more, and few would have attempted so much. Some idea of his indefatigability can be gained from the fact that he and his assistants started to dismantle the broken-down tractors before the fire was out. To him and Mrs. Day go the thanks of all the K.A.C. members, and their sympathy for the loss they must have experienced. We sympathise too with the staff, whose loss of personal possessions and their jobs must have been serious. The casualties were two—one guest tore his hand and finger on a nail when getting through a window, and one of the staff injured her ankle through falling into an inspection pit in the tractor garage.

We hope that a new Chalet will rise, improved, enlarged, and full of the old charm, from the ashes, to accommodate some of what in a few years will be the five thousand people, who were present at the Chalet fire.

REFLECTIONS IN SYDNEY

By V. G. Wesche

TO us skiers in Sydney the news of the Chalet fire was of intense personal interest and one thirsted for details. The reason was probably not so much that we might have suffered financial loss or that the building had pleasant associations, but that there were few of us who had not at times visualised a hurried evacuation into the snow while our boots burned with the Chalet. Boots. That was the first question that leapt to our thoughts: how did they get on for boots? The press were reassuring, as they had given the public some pretty harrowing details, including the waist-deep journey of Tom Gillings, the Kosciusko guide, but had nowhere mentioned any barefoot stuff. But, still, we could imagine a nightmare search in the dark.