



Photo-Young Skiers c.1895

## Skiing as a Sport was Born in Australia (?)

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### Its Origin and Development

During the severe winter of 1861, skiing as a sport, came to life in the gold-mining township of Kiandra, New South Wales. Situated in the valley where the Eucumbene rises, at the northern end of the Main Range of the Snowy Mountains, 40 miles from Mt. Kosciusko, the village is surrounded by snow-gum forests, deep valleys, rivers and mountains.

Historians give credit to Norwegian miners for making our first ski, called "snow-shoes" or "snow- skates" which were used as a means of conveyance during the winter of 1860. But it was not until 1861 that a record of skiing as a sport was published in the local newspapers.

Sir Arnold Lunn in his book "History of Skiing" says that skiing as a sport may be said to date from the first visit of the Telemark peasants to Christiania (now Oslo) in 1870. An Englishman named Somerville, an associate of E.C. Richardson (called the father of skiing in Switzerland) claims to have seen the first Telemark peasants who in 1879 taught the inhabitants of Christiania, what skiing really was. It would appear that Lunn was not aware that skiing as a sport had been well established in Kiandra for over a decade, before the sport, as such, was introduced to Christiania. This is hard to understand (his book was published in 1927) as in the late 1800's Norwegian miners returning home from the Australian goldfields brought photographic records and stories of the "snow- shoe riders" and the Snow-shoe Carnival. The first "British Ski Year Book" was published in 1905, and the first article by an Australian authority on skiing, Charles Kerry, appeared in the British Year Book of 1906.

Arnold Lunn does however refer to the use of ski in Tasmania by fur hunters in the 1830's. Ski of a type are known to have been in use in Europe for some thousands of years but E.C. Richardson seems to sum up the situation by stating "skiing as an art - or sport - whatever you like to call it - as distinct from a means of getting across the snow, originated in Telemark, but how, or why, nobody knows". In view of the evidence of these noted skiers Australia can justly claim that skiing as a sport had its beginnings in this country.

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Mr. Jacob Vaage, Director of the Ski Museum in Oslo, advised that the oldest ski club in Norway "Trysil Skytter og Skiløberforening", (Trysil Shooting and Ski Club) was organised 20th May 1861, but no details are available as to its skiing activities. If contrary, to our English authorities, skiing as a sport did take place through this club, then Australia shares equal honours with Norway in the world of modern skiing as the birthplace of the sport. However Sir Herbert H. Schlink, one of our most noted skiing pioneers, authoritatively states that skiing as a sport started in Australia.

In tracing the development of Australian ski, the type of country, snow conditions and use, as in Europe influenced the design. The first snow-shoes were said to be made of palings turned up at the front and about four feet long, with straps to put the feet in. In Europe the design varied from short curved boards, with sealskin fixed to them permanently, for climbing up mountain passes, to the exaggerated valley ski of different length one ski long and broad, the other short and secondary. The evolution of the Snow-shoe or Kiandra Kick-ins quickly developed from the palings to a ski of equal length, varying in size from 8 to 10 feet, six inches wide and one inch thick, with a large tip. This was the ski most suited to our heavy snow and type of terrain.

Australia arrived quite independently of the outside world in the technical development of ski and skiing. First because of its distant geographical position in the last century, secondly in point of time as mentioned before. It was further evidenced by terms and names. The word ski was not adopted in Kiandra until early 1920's but was in use on the Kosciusko side at the turn of the century. It is believed that the word is a slight corruption of the Scandinavian pronunciation of ski (she...shoe). A skier was called a "snow-shoe rider", and to invite a fellow to ski the term used "lets goshoeing", or "strap on your Kick-ins". If a rider fell it was called a "Toss or Capsize". A turn was called a "Butterpat", a succession of quick step turns.

Snow-shoes were made during the summer months from selected straight grained mountain ash, the finer the grain, the faster the ski. High in ravines large tall trees were felled and dragged by bullock team to one of several creeks. For twelve months the logs lay submerged to season then with the coming of summer, the logs were brought to town, cut into 8" lengths and split into quarters. From the

straight face, planks 6" wide and 2" thick were cut again and split in two. One end shaped to a point and placed in a deep pot of boiling water for one hour. The tips of the skis were fixed into a bending devise called a "set" given a fifteen inch tip, and left for 24 hours. To dry out the ski, in shape, they were hung in the chimney which had the added effect of hardening the timber. At this important stage the ski had to be watched for too much chimney - hanging produced a brittle ski. A finished ski had a smooth polished running surface, flat without camber, extremely light and ornamental markings were to individual taste. Basically, ski design did not alter much during the first forty years. But with competition came the need to ski faster. To such a degree was the skill of downhill running developed that the "rider" with the best wax won the race. This was the next technical advance, producing the ultimate in waxes called "Moko", hard fast wax made from resin, boiled oil, bees-wax and other unknown additives. Secret recipes were passed from father to son and remain so to this day. The origin of the name is not known, story has it, the Chinese called the wax "make-go" shortened to Moko.

In the latter part of the 1800's several ski makers stood out as craftsmen, gaining reputation as the champion riders sought their skis. One, William Crease, introduced grooves to the flat running surface of the snow-shoe. These skis were called "artificial grained snow-shoes", deriving the name from the tool used, an artificial grainer. The underside of the ski contained many grooves to a depth of 1/8 inch. This was a great advance over the flat surface shoe which at high speed required exceptional balance and control to maintain direction. Visitors to the area called them "butterpats". The improvement in technique required even greater directional control, which led to the three, then two groove shoe.

A snow-shoe rider had a distinctive running style, feet wide apart and knees bent. Over rough and icy patches the rider crouched down with feet wider apart for greater 'stability'. To ski faster after momentum was attained each leg was moved forward alternately, not striking out sideways as in skating, but fore and aft movement as in walking. Turning with long ski, wide apart, was difficult but the riders used a step turn or skating step. This style of turn no doubt was brought about by running through timber, where stemming would require much more room. The skating step was also used to gain speed on the flat part of the run. On hard snow a parallel type of christiania was executed with feet apart which often resulted in the rider sliding right round finishing backwards down the hill.



Photo: Cross-country skiers c.1895

The rider carried a pole called a "brake-stick", to balance himself and assist him up hill, but good riders did not carry a brake-stick when skiing, they were never used when racing. Quoting E.C. Richardson - "In Telemark a short pole of ash-wood was carried, but the skier ran without sticks, with bent knees rather than a wide spoor and the hands extended well in front".

The sport of skiing in Australia no doubt owes its development and advance to the Kiandra Snow-shoe Club which fostered competition throughout the winter, highlighting each July with a two day Snowshoe Carnival. The Club was racing in 1864 but it is believed that it was in existence prior to that year. In the 1920's the pioneers of the district met and changed the name to the Kiandra Pioneer Ski Club 1870. The decision to fix the year 1870 was brought about by argument as to whether the club was formed prior to 1864, during that year or in 1867.

Lack of record of the actual year was unfortunate for Australia as the Club cannot claim to be the oldest ski club in the world, but could be the oldest existing ski club as there is no evidence that the Trysil Shooting and Ski Club is still active.

#### Editor's Note:

In the chronological history of skiing which appears in Sir Arnold Lunn's book, "The Story of Skiing" the following entries appear:

- 1855. C.C.T. Bjerknes (Norway) pioneered skiing in Australia.
- 1866. Iverslokken. First ski races in vicinity of Christiania.
- 1867. A snowshoe (i.e. ski club) founded at La Porte, California.
- 1868. The first appearance of the Telemark skiers in Christiania. First public discussion about skiing technique in Norwegian press.

*Reprinted from 1962 Ski Yearbook*

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