

## The Skiing Swaggie

Late afternoon on 21 August 1936 four ski tourers stumbled into Cope Hut. Their journey from Fitzgerald's Hut had been a "white hell." Their entry in the Cope Hut visitor's book provides some insight of their experience:

*Terrific N.W. wind with maddening drift snow as well as snowing intermittently. Owing to hard icy patches we had often to shoulder our skis. Never will the members of the party forget the ordeal of literally crawling over the ice to this hut from the pole line.*

The men, members of the *Ski Club of Victoria (S.C.V.)*, were dismayed to discover that they were immediately compelled to venture back out in the blizzard to collect wood. The scarcity of firewood was totally unexpected as it was tradition that hut users ensured ample supplies were always left for those that followed. **The lack of firewood was attributed to a "hobo" found in the hut when the group arrived.**

Four days later another entry provided some details of this lone occupant. He was, according to Bill Robertson, "*surely the most extraordinary snow traveller in existence.*" The description of the man was akin to that of the swagman who walked the roads of rural Australia, getting by on transient labouring jobs and living off the land.

*He was literally dressed in rags, and although he carried a self-made wheat-sack pack, he had very little food. His skis were a couple of slabs hewn out of snow gums with the natural bend from the trunk to limb forming the upward toe turns. Each was over seven feet long, one being a few inches shorter than the other. The bindings were an indescribable mixture of wombat hide (self-tanned), rope and wire, and his "ski boots" were rubber waders. For stocks he used a couple of sharpened snow gum sticks with cross-pieces tied on with wombat hide for handles.*

The extraordinary circumstances of the encounter with the solo traveller above the snowland led to one of the S.C.V. party talking to the press. An article titled "**The Mystery Man of the Bogongs**" appeared in the Sydney illustrated magazine, "*Smiths Weekly*" on 12 September 1936 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page25420477>>. Refer to the actual article included below this report.

**The "skiing swagman" identified as H Price**, was a "*sterling bushman. . . quite self-contained in a Robinson Crusoe fashion.*" He had made his two bowie knives, ski bindings, leggings and carried a rifle, frying pan, billy and a possum-skin sleeping bag.

Since he set out alone in early June from the Crooked River area in Gippsland Price had covered over 160 kilometres. Following the Wongungarra River to the foot of Mt Selwyn he had made his way to Mt St Bernard and Mt Hotham. A route via Whiskey Flat then took him down over the Cobungra River to the Bogong High Plains. Price

reportedly had intended to go to Tawonga Hut, but after erring with the pole line had spent a night in the snow near No. 1 Pole. From there he made for Cope Hut.

Unrelenting blizzards kept Price at Cope Hut for at least five days, conditions which also confined the S.C.V. party to Fitzgerald's Hut and were to have disastrous consequences for another party (*Cleve Cole tragedy*) of three ski tourers on Mt Bogong.

The weather improved the morning after the S.C.V. party arrived and Price set out for Kelly's Hut. He evidently prolonged his sojourn above the snow line by availing himself of stores cached at the huts pre-winter for touring parties! By midday the blizzard had been rekindled and Price, having mended a broken ski at the S.E.C Hut, reappeared. In the meantime, two of the S.C.V. men collected stores from Middle Creek Spur. They learned from Tom and Brendan Fitzgerald from Shannonvale of the death of Cleve Cole after he, Mick Hull and Howard Michell had been caught out in the blizzard on Mt Bogong.

Despite the dire news the next morning in driving sleet and wind Price again set out for Kelly's Hut, according to Robertson, *"refusing our offer to accompanying him part of the way - thus continuing a meandering of the mountains which appears to be so aimless."*

After two more days of strong winds, heavy rain and driving snow the party at Cope Hut decided to curtail their trip, but first committed to replenishing the wood supplies.

On the 25 August their last entry in the Cope Hut book recorded that *"we had the only decent fire since our arrival last Friday. There is plenty of wood for the next party. We only hope the hobo we have found here does not return to burn what we have left."*

*With thanks to Di Patterson for permission to use this article that was printed in Ken Bell's This Week – August 2020*

**See below to read the actual newspaper article from  
the 'Smith's Weekly' – 12 September 1936.**



# THE MYSTERY MAN OF THE BOGONGS

Smith's  
Weekly  
12 Sept 1936

**PICTURED** here is H. Price, generally known as the skiing swagman.

Travelling on skis which are crude slabs hewn from snow gum trees—the natural bend from trunk to limb forming the upward toe turns—and carrying a rifle, a frying pan, a billy, a tomahawk, a possum-skin sleeping bag, and a wheat-sack shoulder pack, this remarkable wanderer is at present touring across the Bogong High Plains—that vast Victorian snowfield, where a few days ago

three skiers were lost for eight days one of them dying later from exposure.

Bad weather and difficult mountain country seem to hold no terrors for Price, for he is a sterling bushman and is quite self-contained in a Robinson Crusoe fashion. He has made his own two





**H. PRICE**—the ski-ing swagman.

bowie knives The bindings on his skis, and his boot laces and leggings, are made from wombat hide which he tanned in a hollow log during his journey.

In more than ten weeks of wandering on foot and skis, he has been on only six miles of made road in a trip of over 100 miles—most of it through some of the roughest and most isolated snow country in Australia.

Setting out from Crooked River, in Gippsland he has pushed upstream along the Wongungarra River, through tangled scrub and tall timber, to the

foot of Mount Selwyn—an isolated peak of the unsurveyed Barry Mountains,

*which few Australians have ever seen. From there he made along the Dividing Range to The Twins and Mount St. Bernard; and thence to Hotham Heights—the highest house in Australia.*

*Ignoring advice to turn back to a safer and snowless route, he then went on to Whisky Flat, from where he plunged into particularly wild country, and eventually found his way across the turbulent Cobungra River, and on to the Bogong High Plains. Here he spent a night out in the snow before finding his way to Cope Hut, where he arrived in a blizzard and almost starving.*

*After spending six days there, with a terrific blizzard raging outside, he set off in driving wind and sleet for Kelly's Hut—seven miles across an undulating field of snow and ice. He reached Kelly's safely, whence he will doubtless continue his apparently aimless meandering over the mountains.*