

# ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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## NEWSLETTER

'Snowy River Mail', Wednesday evening, March 17, 1937:

### THE SNOWY

O.S.G.

**"And the Snowy River riders on the mountains  
make their home  
Where the river runs those giant hills between."**

A. B. Patterson's spirited ballad of ringing whips and racing hoofs has made the Snowy River a name familiar in regions widely scattered throughout Australia. In Paraguay, and in London, in Alaska, in Rhodesia, in the South Seas, and in the East, too, wherever Australians have lived, the name has probably been heard. Associated with Orbost the river has gained world fame among Agricultural Scientists. It is a river that has caused Electrical Engineers to dream of power stations and widespread transmission lines. It is a river that has presented Water Engineers with a baffling problem.

In shape, the course of the Snowy is like a huge question mark. It is a river, approximately, three hundred miles long; 138 miles, the curve and part of the stem of the mark, being in New South Wales; the rest, traversing Victoria to the Southern Ocean, having crossed the border some three miles south of Mount Trooper.

Rising on the slopes of Mount Kosciusko, the river has cut for itself a course in the granite, slate, and sandstone rocks, and flows, a narrow, rapid torrent, in a circuitous course across the naturally clear Monaro Plateau. Thence it takes as southerly direction and descends into the Snowy River Valley, at a point where the Tongaro River flows in. At this point, also, is Jacobs Ladder, a steep, narrow track in the mountain-side — once the only way by which stock from this part of the Monaro could be brought to the

Bairnsdale market. In this area the country is mostly of granite, much of the stone being soft, and crumbly. Twenty seven miles is the approximate length of the valley and the mountains rising from each side of the river are so steep and high that, within a comparatively short distance the climate on top is quite different from that at river's edge. Here is found the Snowy River Pine, a tree with delicate, graceful foliage, and timber that is white ant proof. The Mallee pine appears to be a smaller relative. Where the Deddick river flows in, at a southern end of the valley, a steel and concrete bridge has been erected, and a drover's journey has been shortened by almost two hundred miles. The 1934 flood wrecked the first structure before it was officially opened. The piles of the



**McKillop's Bridge during reconstruction**

wrecked structure were heightened, and last year, the bridge was rebuilt. Continuing its course through rocky, wooded, and precipitous

country, the home of the lyrebird, the wallaby, and the dingo the river, now much wider sweeps on to Campbell's Knob, nine miles below the Deddick junction. From the river's banks, on both sides, the mountains rise almost sheer for 2000 feet. Box, messmate, and stringy dark grow densely, and it is said that more magnificent river and mountain scenery is not to be found elsewhere in Australia. A stretch of rapids is next encountered, and then, still flowing south, the Snowy is joined by the Buchan coming in from the west. Here the river takes a south-easterly trend. The bend is wide, and of pure rock, but the banks as still the mountain sides. In one part the waters are uncannily quiet, and in another, near the Bete Bolong Creek, a gorge twenty or thirty feet wide, and as many feet deep has been cut in the granite bed. Sixteen miles below the junction of the Buchan River the mountains are suddenly left, and for twenty miles the Snowy winds with diminished, but still strong, current through the closely settled flats of the Bete Bolong, Jarrahmond, and Orbest, to finally enter the Southern Ocean through a wide and beautiful estuary at Marlo.



**Snowy River Entrance at Marlo, 1889**

Compared with the length of the river the area of country drained is very large — 3,500 square miles in the New South Wales and 1,320 square miles in Victoria. About 5,000 square miles in all. Why this is so, is that, from close to its source to within a few miles of its mouth, a multitude of tributaries pour their waters into the main stream. Who discovered them, these many rivlets that race down the mountains, twisting and turning for miles, through forest and jungle? No one knows. Cattlemen, sheepmen, miners, and surveyors one supposes. Whoever they were their work was well done, and the names on the map are their memorials. Some of the names give us a hint as to who the adventurers were, others preserve for us all the musical beauty of the aboriginal tongue — McLaughlin, and Rodger, Eucumbene, Tooginbooka, Jingallala, and Robindarra, such are a

few of the titles of the Snowy's tributaries.

In the highlands of the river's tract is the sheep and cattle country. From Jarrahmond to Marlo are the rich, exceedingly rich, flats — in reality flood plains. For ages since its original course was altered the Snowy has been transporting a variety of silt from the basaltic mountains lime, also, from the Buchan area has come down. Successive floods have deposited this burden over wide areas on both banks, layer after layer, till, at the present time there is an average depth of seventeen feet of silt over an area of 30,000 acres. No wonder that the fertility of these flats is to be compared only with that of the most famous deltas in the world! On farms along the Snowy maize has been grown in the same paddock for thirty consecutive years. Cattle brought down from the Monaro and fattened on the flats find ready buyers in the city markets. Dairying and pig raising are two profitable industries also carried on; and the value of maize, peas, and beans grown here has, in peak periods, amounted to £133,000.

Floods had made the Snowy River flats and floods have devastated them. River Snowy has been a very good servant. Man's task is now to prevent him from becoming a very bad master for any length of time, however short. To this end farmers at Bete Bolong had lengths of levee bank constructed after the 1925 flood. In 1934, however, the worst flood since 1893 occurred. The mad waters broke through the protecting bank, and played such havoc with the farm lands that a loan was raised, and the farmers, themselves, immediately set to work strengthening the original bank, and extending it along the whole of the river frontage from hill to hill. Now the farms in this area have a grass grown rampart, twenty feet high in one place, in front of them. Behind them are the hills. To drain the basin thus formed a channel has been cut through the flats. It has access to the river, and near its mouth flood gates have been fitted. When the Snowy is in flood its imprisoned waters escape to low lying levels through great gaps which they tear out of the natural banks and flats. Across some of the gaps, locally known as gulches, Gilbert's Gulch, Watt's Gulch, Watt's Gulch, etc, engineers have built earthen banks, which they have sown with quick growing fibrous-rooted grass. Landholders along the Marlo road have sought to protect themselves from personal harm in times of flood by erecting their homes on piles six or seven feet high. Much has been done, but though levee banks have been built, and though tons of snags have been dragged from the river in order to let the water have unhindered passage to the sea the Snowy has not yet been brought under control,

and when the next flood comes the trail of its raging passage will again be marked by sand strewn pastures, eroded banks, and piles over the debris, as well as fresh strewn silt. The river takes and the river gives. That is the secret of recoveries from past disasters. The danger now is that more will be taken than is given. The last big flood tore away acres of land, and brought down tons of sand. Although this sand is unlike that transported by other



**Reconstructing Marlo Road at Gilbert's Gulch following a flood in the 1950s**

rivers in that it will eventually "work up" into good agricultural land it takes some years to do so. This period is, of course, one of no, or low return, and that is one of the main reasons why the floodwaters must be checked as soon as possible. A curious phenomena of these floods is that they occur during the summer months, not as a result of melting snow, but because of heavy rain in the mountains. According to the weather Bureau officials the climate of the Snowy River watershed differs from that in other parts of southern Victoria, and south-east New South Wales. Due to closed depressions off the south-east coast, and "southerlies" ahead of the cyclones a frequency of heavy downpours occurs during the period from September to January. In this period the second highest average rainfall for the year is recorded. The normal yearly fall is from thirty to forty inches; Kiandra receiving sixty three inches. When driving rain sets in from the east, and continues for three or four days floods are to be expected. By the time the floodwaters reach the flat country the weather there has generally cleared, and the day may be one of flawless sky and summer heat. Then down come the Buchan waters, the waters from Kiandra follow, and in a few hours the harmless river of a five foot summer level is a raging, foam-flecked terror. Should the Brodribb be in full spate, the Snowy "backs up", and still greater toll is taken of crops and cattle. The highest flood known was that of 1870. The Snowy, in places, then reached a height of

sixty feet. In 1893, a thirty three feet flood came down, and in 1934 a flood of about the same size did thousands of pounds worth of damage.

Concerning the discovery and naming of the Snowy, little is known. During the '30's settlement spread to the Monaro tableland, and it is thought that the Snowy was named in 1832. George McKillop led a party into Gippsland in 1835. He succeeded in reaching Omeo, or "Strathdownie" as he called it; crossing the Snowy three times during his journey. Four years later Angus MacMillan coming through from the Monaro, also encountered and crossed the same river. Howitt, the same man who was chosen to lead an expedition in search of the ill-fated Burke and Wills party, carried out the survey. Reports of the new "Land of Promise" must have quickly gone abroad, though, for by 1851 pastoral holdings extended from Lochend and Brodribb in the south through Buchan, Gelantipy, and Woolgoramarang to the border. The lower area was taken up as early as 1842. The son of a Scottish doctor, Mr. Peter Imlay used the Eastern side of the Lower Snowy as a cattle run in that year, but, the blacks becoming hostile, he returned to the settled Monaro. A Mr. Arch McLeod then took possession under Crown Licence. Later Sir William Clarke, was the owner, and it was his son, Sir Rupert, who subdivided and sold the lots now comprising the township of Orbost.

The flats have attracted many settlers, the highlands are heavily timbered and mineralized, copper, lead and bismuth have been prospected and fairly large quantities of gold have been obtained at various times. In 1860 a rich find was made at Kiandra and a rush of ten or twelve thousand miners ensued.

Such is the Snowy and the land through which it passes. Many Australian rivers are larger, but none are swifter. The magnificence of its mountain ranges is breath-taking, and flats is lovely beyond description. The wealth of its land is immense; seeing the mica glinting in the water at the river's edge a Cortez or Pizarro would have surely, and aptly, named it, not Snowy, but Río de Oro — the River of Gold.

(Material to the above article came chiefly from information forwarded by Various Government Departments to the pupils of the Bete Bolong school who, last year, took the Snowy as a geography project; the Victorian Historical Society, and a local resident who led a party up the river to its source.)

[Mr. Oswald S. Green taught at Bete Bolong State School until he was appointed to Rokewood Junction in August 1937.]