



Rodney Collman – An Oral History

**Interviewed by Jerry Krejzar at Happy Jacks Thredbo, 12th September
2020**



*Pam and Danny with their children Darryl, David and Rodney
Photo: Geoffrey F Hughes - 1956*

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**Rod Collman Interviewed by Jerry Krejzar at Happy Jacks,
Thredbo, 12th September 2020**

I am Jerry Krejzar and I am sitting here with Rod Collman at Happy Jacks in Thredbo with the intention of recording Rod's and the family's Oral History. The date is the 16th September 2020. Rod are you agreeable that the recording of your Oral History be transcribed and held in the Thredbo Historical Societies archives for research purposes and you will share the copyright with the society so that the public will be able to access it at the Thredbo Alpine Museum.

Certainly Jerry I am looking forward to it.

That's great Rod, so let's start way back with your grandparents, what can you remember about your grandparents?

I can remember my grandparents really clearly actually – they lived just above us in the old Jindabyne town, and very interesting history, my grandfather had a horse and cart and he used to travel the Kosciusko road. Now dad worked with him as a young boy, and when I look back now to hear these stories – pretty tough stuff Jerry isn't it?

It is, so what were the stories that you remember that really stood out in those former times, those pioneering times?

The pioneering times; really I can't pick one particular thing, there were so many things, but I think we were really so fortunate to grow up with the mountains here – seeing how Thredbo has grown – I can start but there were so many areas; starting of course with mum and dad and the grandparents.

Getting back to your grandparents – when were they born and where?

They were born here locally; my grandmother was a Jamieson and my granddad of course a Collman – Danny my father, he was born in 1930 and he was the youngest, quite a big family actually.

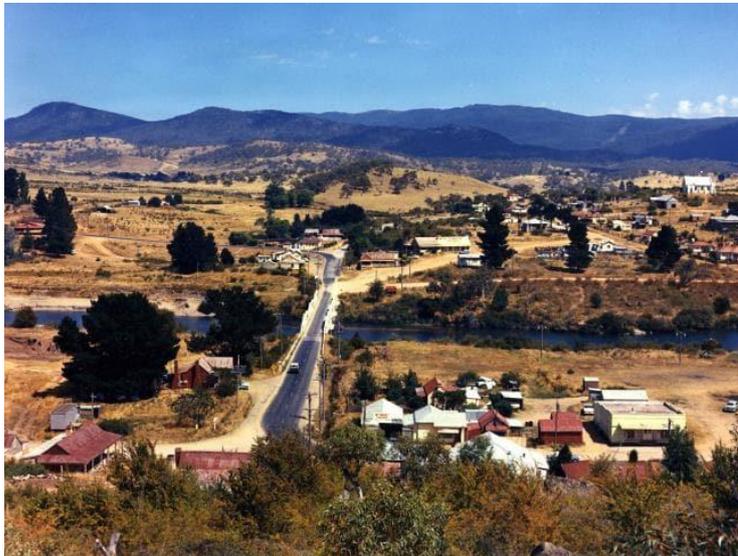
Now we are talking about Danny your father.

Yes Danny my father.

So your grandparents lived in town?

Yes in Jindabyne they didn't move they, surprisingly they stayed there and right up to the time they

So you mean to say that Danny and your mother lived in the same house as your grandparents?



The Catholic Church, far right, Old Jindabyne early 1960's

No, no, we grew up in a house, actually it was a lovely spot, it was a house overlooking the Snowy River. Granma and grandpa lived up on the hill, just below the Catholic Church actually, that was their little plot there and dad as a

youngster he worked with grandpa up on the Kosciusko road and various other - I think back in those days it was the DMR, Department of Main Roads – in its infancy if you like using tip carts to gravel the roads. But dad ventured into – he got into his skiing if you like – through people, Geoff McClutchey was a guy who was a good friend of dad's.

So you say that dad was born in 1930

1930 in Cooma hospital.

And a number of kids in the family.

Yes eight kids in the family, and of course they've all passed on, none of the family are left; it was a couple of years ago that dad's older brothers passed away, we lost the last two.

So work-wise you say he started on the DMR as such.

Yes, yes it was surprising he had a lot of – I would say very mixed, a lot of work as a youngster he did quite a few things, I think he was even breaking horses – he had a little go at that with a couple of the local graziers. But his involvement in moving towards the snow came with

Geoff McClutchey, and the main development as you know was up on the Kosciusko side, it got going before Thredbo, Thredbo was 58 wasn't it?

Yes 57, 58.

Yes when things started to happen here. Dad very quickly got interested in skiing in the old Kosciusko area.

Before we get to Danny let us step back a bit; what can you remember about the township before it got flooded? The township in Jindabyne because you would have been living there before that happened; before we skip to Thredbo let's talk about that.



Snowy River scene - 1958

Oh yea, living in town, swimming in the river, mum taking us to school in the old Austin A40 with that thrashed gearbox, and us kids sitting in the back having a go at mum over the clashing of the gears. Yea we had a nice school with big pine trees, we used to get the pine nuts and eat them.

Well I remember driving across the river in 58 – obviously there was the bridge before it got flooded - and I am just wondering – I can't even remember when it was flooded.

It was about 66 when the actually....

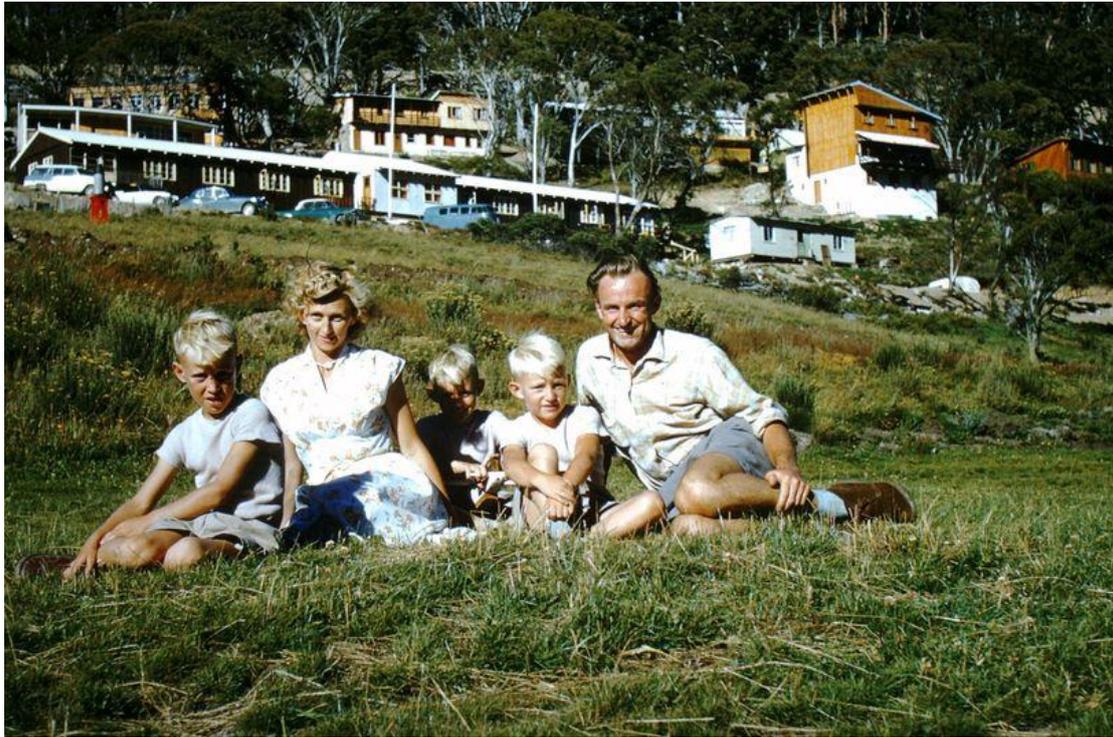
You would have just been.....

I was born in 51 so....

A bit of time running around the old place.

As kids we kept ourselves pretty busy – catching frogs making tadpoles and fishing.

Anybody in the family - trout fishing at that time?



The Collman family L to R - Rodney, Pam, David, Darryl and Danny -Thredbo 1960's

Oh yea, all of us; dad got involved in it and as birthday presents we got fishing rods!

How do you see the changes now in fishing compared too back then?

It's been a big change – you would have to say it's more advanced way, way more advanced – the fishing equipment they have got – the techniques, they can use electronic equipment now, fish-finders, things we were dreaming about if we could have now. We used worms, and frogs, naughty but...

Well I remember, and its part of that story, when I first came to Thredbo as a fourteen year old, my good friend was about six or eight, we used to catch grasshoppers and sell them for a schilling to the other trout fishermen.

Some good pocket money that way, yea, yea.

Well let's get back to Danny with Geoff McClutchey. Geoff McClutchey was involved in the Ski Patrol with Danny of course.

No, no we are getting ahead here. Ahead of coming to Thredbo and the Patrol, Kosciusko had a lift up there and they had quite a good run, Geoff McClutchey took him up there and of course dad took the skis.

I see, the name, I also placed Geoff McClutchey with the foundation years of the Thredbo Ski Patrol.

Yes Geoff's in there too.

One step back we go to the years' way before Thredbo.

Not that much Jerry, I think at the most we are looking at only about four or five years.

Before Thredbo; so what happened then, the Kosciusko Hotel?

Yea, he was up there up there for a few years - mum was working in the Hotel when they met, and of course they hit it off and that was it, Mister and Missus Collman - dad was a ski-instructor - it didn't take him too long and he started teaching and they moved to Jindabyne, that was when they got the house and of course the kids came along and.....

What year do you think that was, 52?

Actually my brother Wayne who passed away, he was born in 1950 – we would have moved in there about 1948.

I know that he won a NSW Jump Championship in 1949, he had some successes.

Yes he did, but what he had to do was forfeit his professional status, because as a ski-instructor you are a professional – he had to forfeit that so he could become an amateur again - once he did that he could start skiing and racing – of course he was very successful.

Was he, so do you know much about his successes?

Yea he won the National, in 56 he had a terrific year – of course we are jumping ahead a bit there aren't we?

We are - Rod we missed a bit - that bit about Abbottsmith and Mc McClutchey, that connection there.



They were connected but we have a bit of a time difference there. Johnny Abbottsmith had the rope-tow at Smiggins Holes.

What year?

Dog sled team used by Johnny Abbottsmith at Spencer's Creek for Search & Rescue work - 1951

We are looking at early 50's mid 50's - 53 through to 56, 57 – he had snow-cats and also at Charlotte's Pass we had The Chalet at Charlotte's Pass – that comes into play as well, dad he did some skiing up there.



Supplies by tractor & sled from Smiggin's Holes into Spencer's Creek Dam site area - 1950

Johnny Abbottsmith had the over-snow, he had The Weasel snow-cats, he transported people from there down to Smiggins Holes – that was the first over-snow transport so there is some history in that too.

That went on for a number of years before your father came over here. (Thredbo).

In fact it continued because Johnny stayed over there with his business, with his rope-tow and what developed from that as well. It's a funny thing dad came here (Thredbo) organizing the trails, getting the first lift in and at the same time he was moving around, he would be back over there, so he wasn't just staying in Thredbo the whole time he was getting pulled away to the other side back over there for a day or two.

The siren of the Snowy Mountains attracted him.

Exactly

The involvement in Thredbo, those first years we see him involved in the rope-tow, and can you remember much about that?

Not a heck of a lot, I know I have got some photos. Geoffrey Hughes he was good, he got some funding to build the unit, the power and the gearbox for the tow. And dad helped him with it - I am not sure that they put it together in Jindabyne – they got the drive unit and everything that they put together there. Dad got it up by a truck and they used the winch on the unit to pull itself up the hill - it just winched itself up to the spot where it was going in.



The first Ski Lift and International Harvester Tractor engine and gearbox and locally produced Drive unit - Danny Collman on the back as it is self-winched up to position - 1957

Well Danny must have been involved considerably – he got the gear on the truck and

all that – did he have engineering skills?

I think you could say more ‘bushy’ engineering skills like most of the locals down here, you develop these industrial engineering skills just in your normal day to day, farmers and general, back in those days you had to, you couldn’t call on engineers from further on, Cooma or elsewhere.

You say those years were 57 or 58 probably or 57 is more likely for the rope-tow was put in – things happened sequentially. He was involved with Tommy.

They did -Tommy and he were great friends and they worked on the Snowy together - dad got a job with Tommy.

Did he talk much about his Snowy Mountains Authority work?

Dad? Yea, because we were living with him all through those years we knew what was going on – he didn’t talk about work much, not with us boys, we wouldn’t talk about it at the table about that sort of thing – more confined to when we were off doing things together.

Getting back to the start of the Ski Patrol what about that, we know that he was one of the pioneers.

Adrian Studley was another one of the guys.

One of the first Captains.

He was one of the first – actually there is quite a group of local skiers that mustered and got together for the first Ski Patrol, the team.

We have got the names – it’s just that Danny was quite influential.

Yea dad was really keen - gee we haven’t got any of the originals, I think they have all gone. Tommy was in it for.... Tommy is still with us and he is still skiing which is great; really holding the baton up there, at Thredbo. I think the early development, in the early history of

This Prospectus is dated the 3rd day of March, 1958. A copy of this Prospectus has been filed for registration as required by Section 136 of the Companies Act 1936 of the State of New South Wales. The Registrar-General takes no responsibility for the contents of this Prospectus.

KOSCIUSKO THREDBO LIMITED
(Incorporated under the Companies Act 1936 of the State of New South Wales on the Seventeenth day of May, 1957.)

PROSPECTUS
OF
AN ISSUE AT PAR OF
100,000 ORDINARY SHARES OF £1 EACH

AUTHORISED CAPITAL	
250,000 Shares of £1 each	£250,000
ISSUED CAPITAL:	
15,661 Ordinary Shares of £1 each issued as fully paid-up to Kosciusko Chairlift and Thredbo Hotel Syndicate under terms of Deed of Assignment dated 21st January, 1958	£15,661
13,037 Ordinary Shares of £1 each, issued for cash	£13,039
Capital to be issued in terms of this Prospectus:	
100,000 Ordinary Shares of £1 each, now offered for public subscription	£100,000
The shares will be payable 10/- on application and the balance of 10/- will be called by the Directors at their discretion, but not before 1st June, 1958.	
If so desired the full amount of £1 per share may be paid on application.	
Note: An over subscription may be accepted at the discretion of the directors.	
HELD IN RESERVE:	
21,300 Ordinary Shares of £1 each	£121,300
	£250,000

Kosciusko Thredbo original share prospectus March 1958

Thredbo it went really smoothly and easily for those first few years. Of course later on we had problems as you know pretty serious problems. Crackenback chairlift when it broke down, but all in all I think that they were great times and you would have to say that a heck of a lot was done with very little funding. In fact I think there were a million shares of one pound that was sold to get Thredbo going – in those days a million pounds was a lot and achieved so much but today it's a pittance to try and do anything.

Well just to progress in years because I did not join the patrol until 1969, I was a trainee in 1969, but one of my first experiences in actually being involved as a trainee; I came out of 'The Catwalk' and we have a 10/40 somebody that was injured, no radios in those days. And Danny comes on the scene and I think it might have been a break, the patient is patched up, and Danny said, 'get on the back' (of the akja); I have never moved so fast on skis to the Medical Centre! In terms of Ski Patrol protocol it wouldn't happen these days – but we are talking about those days, still pretty much the pioneer years, where you did not worry about taking a patient down rapidly, (ski-racer speed), you never do that nowadays you side-slip down the hill.

Are they still using the same akja's?

Yes. Now what about Danny's racing career?

Oh yea he had an interesting racing career - there were Snowy Races, the Balmain Cup was a race that he won a few times and Victoria; there was always rivalry between the Victorians and NSW, so the plan was to go down to Victoria and decimate them, and it used to happen quite regularly. In 1949 he won the NSW Jump Championship that was his first successful move, moving into jumping



Danny Collman, winner of the N.S.W. Men's Slalom Championship. Photo: Don Cowie.

N.S.W. Alpine Championships

The New South Wales Alpine Championships of 1957 resulted in a clean sweep for Danny Collman. After years of minor placings in the big races Danny overshadowed his rivals to win the Slalom by 8.2 seconds, the downhill by 12 seconds and the giant Slalom by 11.4 seconds.

The three races were held at Crackenback on the August Bank Holiday weekend. The slalom attracted a field of

ready—GO" instead of "Five, four, three, two, one, GO". It would be hard to think of a more fatuous question than "Are you ready" 2½ seconds before the start of a slalom race.

Helmut Sieder a 21 year old Austrian of great promise but little control and less command of English departed from the starting line before the starter had said "Go." He missed a gate but was awarded a re-run because the starter had in fact never said "Go" at any stage. He then put in two good runs for a total

A clean sweep for Danny Collman in the 1957 NSW Alpine Championships

which he was quite successful at jumping; but his main forte was, he liked, giant slalom; he was good at slalom but GS that was what he really liked giant slalom and more downhill. ¹

So how well known was he in those years?

He was well known and of course the others, Billy Day was of his friends, you could say he was a rival, and also a very good skier.

Christine Smith, Peter Brockhoff all of these people were good.

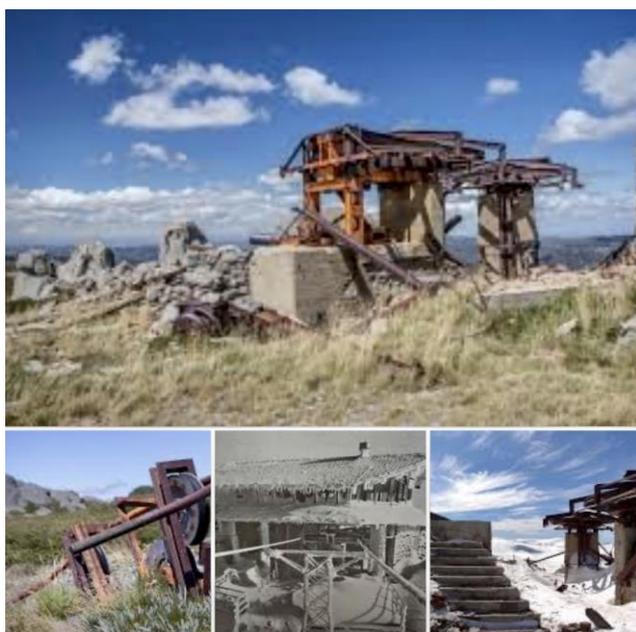
They held the races in Twin Valleys or on the main Range?



Twin Valley's lift-line 1960's with intact gondolas

I don't know much about that, they were keen to open up Twin Valleys, The Resort, but of course it never happened. Apparently they did, they put in some courses over there and they raced but I don't think it lasted long Jerry.

Then the lift went in and of course it failed because of the wind and by that time I think Thredbo was set up.



Twin Valleys as it stands today

Thredbo was hooking along pretty well when they decided to build the Twin Valleys lift to Charlotte's Pass – I have put up some interesting material on that (Roof of Australia – Facebook page). It's sad in a way that they had not developed it – probably if they had split it into three chairlifts it would have been more successful, and the gondolas, all they were using

were chairlift chairs with a hood, and they would have fared better had they used proper gondolas.

They never withstood the wind, in those years across those flat sections.

One of the biggest problems was that they were too light, with proper gondolas they are heavier, much heavier and if you have four or six people in those - I spoke to somebody who builds them and he said that was a lot of the problem – had they been made more heavy-duty they would not have had the problems they had.

Now what about yourself, let's talk about you a little bit – about your schooling in Jindabyne, you went to school there?

We went to Jindabyne Public School, which was good as kids' yea; and then once Jindabyne was flooded, well actually just before Jindabyne was flooded the dam was being constructed and dad had moved, he was working with the Snowy, and he was working in hydrology, which of course is the measuring of water, river gauging and this sort of thing; we moved into New Jindabyne township, which was the Snowy township where the Sporting Camp was there, that was all barracks full of workers and quite a few chaps worked there – it was quite a workforce – so we had a school at Jindabyne, Jindabyne Dam School it was called, our own kids went there, so a transition from the old town and then moving up to where we were, and of course they had built the New Jindabyne so you got three Jindabynes' if you like.

What sort of culture and society in the town - tell us a few stories.

They didn't make anything for us, it was the multi-culture that we had. All the Europeans of course were here, your involvement with Europeans which was phenomenal right round the Snowy Scheme; and I often say it's a darn shame that kids everywhere can't experience what we did getting to know Europeans and other cultures because you embrace it as kids you know because you are meeting the other kids, you get to eat their food, they get to eat your food and you become the closest of friends; and it's got nothing to do from where you came from.

Well I have always maintained that at Thredbo was the crucible of Australian multiculturalism, and that was probably the same for Jindabyne.

Well you could say the same for Jindabyne and I think we were so fortunate with Thredbo and all of the region of the Snowy Scheme which was built, because let's face it was one big melting pot - we had them from everywhere (laughter).

How has that changed over successive decades?

Here locally, Cooma is full of European people, no, no it is, it is; I feel quite cranky sometimes.....

Of course bit is 'Aussiefied' you've got European names but it's a bit just like me..... Rod what was this that Danny had?

Danny had a good nickname, very appropriate, 'Hollow-legs Collman' now if you hear it you would think what that would be about, but it's very interesting – Dan had a very bad accident below Island Bend back in the construction times, and he crashed into another Land rover and it was a very bad head-on. Dad went out through the windscreen and he managed, luckily, because he survived we know because he continued on; what they call the panic bar in the Land rover had two good bends where his knees crashed into the bar – so 'Rubber-Legs Collman' – yea quite a story that and a very lucky man to survive and of course those strong legs carried him through his skiing career if you like.

Did it affect his skiing career?

Look it didn't, it didn't, I don't think it was his actual knees that hit the bar it must have been below his knees, but boy oh boy it just goes to show doesn't it – it didn't affect his skiing then of course as the years went by he got himself involved in the Ski Patrol here – he was a Ski Patrol Captain for I don't know for how many years and then gradually all the other boys that were in the Ski Patrol, they became Captains - I think the advancement in the Ski Patrol over the years is fantastic, the training – virtually in some ways up to a paramedic standard.

Yes that is the case.

Yea that is the case.

So just getting back to you – you explained about the multicultural aspect in Jindabyne and the Snowy's - both of us see that as a great positive for the region – how do you see the region now with a whole lot

of younger people coming in the fact that skiing has changed to some extent, to the tourist aspect, coming into Jindabyne you probably see a difference there.

You do but I think really the tourists that come through the area now – I don't think they are embracing it the way we did, of course we lived here and it was so natural for us, being born to it if you like. But by the same token I think we have got so many Europeans, and people from all over the world visit the Scheme and Thredbo and all the other resorts, that's terrific to think that isn't it? So there we are getting that influence of the multicultural side of it.

It hasn't changed in that respect.

It's probably good that it has worked that way, yea yea.

All right, thanks very much for your time and for the interview and of course I take it you do not mind that this interview will be transcribed and available to the public in the Thredbo Alpine Museum.

Terrific, that's good Jerry, I hope we can do it again.

POSTSCRIPT-1

Danny Collman, 1930 - 1992

Danny was born in Jindabyne in 1930, the youngest of six children. His family were descendents of Monaro pioneers who first settled in Boloco in the early 19th century.

Danny didn't put on skis until he left school in 1945 and he went to work at the Kosciusko Hotel with Johnny Abbot-Smith. He took to skis quickly and by 1947 he was working as a ski instructor at the Hotel.

In 1949 he won the NSW jump championship, this was followed by many more racing and jumping successes and in 1957 when Thredbo hosted the NSW Alpine Championship's downhill events, Danny captained the NSW Team and won the Men's slalom by 8.2 seconds; the giant slalom by 11.4 seconds and the downhill by 12 seconds. Later this particular downhill was described as probably the most dangerous ski race yet held in Australia. Danny also represented Australia a number of times in the Inter-Dominion races with New Zealand, he was Vice-Captain of the Australian team in 1958. He had been chosen as a member of the Australian Olympic Team to go to Oslo in 1950, but it was a time where you had to fund yourself and family finances didn't allow him to go.

It was in Thredbo that Danny really left his mark. He and Geoffrey Hughes built the first ski lift, a nut-cracker rope tow, which later became part of the Crackenback lift. He was engaged as an axe-man and cut the first ski run in Thredbo, a narrow gap in the trees to start with which was later expanded to the broad snow runs we have today. Danny was a co-founder of the Thredbo Ski Patrol in 1958.

Danny's job as a Hydrographer (1950 - 1990) with the Snowy Mountains Authority took him all over the Main Range on a regular basis, a job which he thoroughly enjoyed because it allowed him to ski in spectacular, remote places while on the job.