

Whose Idea was Thredbo? Who Founded It? And Who Deserves the Credit?

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If these questions were asked of the aficionados of Thredbo today, the chances are that the most frequent response to all of them would be “Tony Sponar and Charles Anton”. Both, after all, have had their names perpetuated in T-bars on the upper slopes, their stories have been told often in print, film and video and Geoffrey Hughes’ famous photo of the pair pondering what should happen on the mountain has become emblematic of Thredbo. But no one or two individuals gave rise to the resort. Several people had the idea of Thredbo, and even more contributed to the decisions that saw skifield development take root there.

Sadly as far as Anton and Sponar are concerned, the matter of their respective contributions has become contentious. A video produced in 2006 by Helen Malcher (*Charles Anton, the Main Range and Thredbo, 1950-1962*) promotes the cause of Anton, some believe by reducing that of Sponar. Her video has been sternly criticised, one person (Tom Schrecker, himself a contributor to Thredbo on several fronts in years past) resigning from the Thredbo Historical Society over it. Schrecker and others, including Thredbo identity Frank Prihoda, believe that the video disparaged Sponar’s role in the Thredbo story: they were disappointed when the Society refused to disassociate itself from it.

In the light of the controversy it is perhaps useful, six decades on from the birth of Thredbo, to identify the roles of the key figures more clearly than they are perceived in the minds of the many for whom Thredbo is important. Who did what on the way to the establishment of Thredbo, and how important were their contributions? Considering these questions will help us to weigh the contributions not only of Anton and Sponar but also those of others who played substantial roles.

The Idea of Thredbo

All foundings are preceded by ideas. Sponar certainly had the notion of a world-class Australian skiing resort with long runs like those he had known in Europe, and he pursued his idea with vigour. But others had the idea before him and wrote about it, nominating the valley of the upper Thredbo River as a place — perhaps the only place in Australia — with the necessary attributes of long slopes with a variety of terrain. Famed author Elyne Mitchell nominated the valley in 1942 in her classic *Australia’s Alps* as a fine site for an alpine village and resort. As far as is known this is the first reference in print to the skiing potential of the south-facing flank of the Ramshead Range.

A few years later, in 1947, Venn Wesche, a prominent figure in Australian skiing circles, predicted with fine precision in the *Australian and New Zealand Ski Year Book* the idea that was to become Thredbo. “One day”, he wrote, “there will, of course, be a road up the river from Jindabyne and a lift up to the top from the hotel at Friday Flat.”

The use of the words “of course” is significant, as is the choice of “the” (not “a”) to describe the hotel. They imply an inevitability, which Wesche pictured at the exact place that a decade later became the site of the village of Thredbo and its first chairlift. His view would

have been widely known in the Australian skiing community of the time: the *Ski Year Book* was the bible of the sport for decades both before and after the middle of the century.

So the idea of a ski resort in the upper Thredbo valley was in the minds of Australian skiers before the arrival of Sponar in the Snowy Mountains in 1951. By then many had skied from the Chalet to the Ramshead Range and gazed down into the valley of the Thredbo River. A few, probably soon after the opening of the old Kosciusko Hotel in 1909, must have enjoyed the plunge from the range towards the river, and increasing numbers in later years tried it as far as they could before trees and scrub brought a halt. Wendy Cross in *Australian Skiing: the First 100 Years* cites Peter Blaxland and others skiing from the range to the river in 1943 and Tom and Elyne Mitchell doing the run down to Dead Horse Gap six years earlier. Several skied the 'Thredbo fall' in the first few years after World War II, too: among them were Jill McDonald in 1946 and Bill Davy in 1948 and 1950. Both wrote about it in the *Ski Year Book*.

And long before, the men who staffed the meteorological station on Mt Kosciuszko around the turn of the twentieth century traversed the same slopes. They slid on rudimentary skis down Merritts Spur on their way to Jindabyne for supplies.

So by mid-century, the valley of the Thredbo was both known to and well regarded in Australia's skiing fraternity. Bill Davy called it "a skiing ground better than I had seen on the main range", and Charles Anton waxed lyrical about it to a small party that stood atop Saturday Peak in 1950 and gazed down at the site of the future Thredbo. The skiable slope was longer than any others to the east of the main range, and it was free of trees and scrub for a considerable distance. It was isolated, but a road from Jindabyne to Dead Horse Gap and beyond would soon open it up for development and for skiing.

The Search for the Site and the Forming of the Syndicate

The story of the search for what became Thredbo is covered by Sponar in his autobiography (*Snow in Australia: that's news to me*) and in Geoffrey Hughes' *Starting Thredbo*. Both men were players in the search for a site for a skiing resort and in the decisions that were made to get Thredbo under way. They are the only members of Thredbo's founding syndicate who wrote about what led to development there.

Sponar wrote in his book of being told in 1951 by a man in an army slouch hat of long slopes to the south of Charlotte Pass. These had a drop of perhaps 3000 feet (over 900 metres) from the Ramshead Range to the Thredbo River — the very slopes that Elyne Mitchell and Venn Wesche had identified. During the summer of 1951-52, according to an interview recorded by Klaus Hueneke in 1986, Sponar first saw them from the top of the range.

More than two years later, Sponar was introduced by his friend Sasha Nekvapil to Eric Nicholls, a Sydney architect and town planner. Nicholls listened with interest to Sponar's ideas for a ski resort in the valley and (according to *Snow in Australia*) "proposed ways of getting the project under way". This would involve generating publicity, seeking financial support and finding someone who could install a chairlift. Nicholls also spoke to Charles Anton (the President of the Ski Tourers' Association and already known to Sponar) and Geoffrey Hughes (a Sydney solicitor and a member of the Ski Club of Australia), and the four men decided to form a syndicate, seek a lease over an area in the valley of the Thredbo River and begin developing a resort there.

Searching in 1954 and 1955, they pored over detailed Snowy Mountains Authority contour maps and hiked on skis and on foot along the Ramshead Range and on its south-facing slopes. They considered Dead Horse Gap, the Twin Valleys (where the national championships on the George Chisholm Run in 1953 and 1954 had showcased the Thredbo fall as a site for racing) and other places, put the idea of a resort village to the trustees of the Kosciusko State Park and began seeking business backing for their proposed venture.

Through the contacts of Nicholls and Hughes, Thyne Reid joined the group in 1955. Reid's business record and considerable wealth made him the obvious person to become the syndicate's chairman. By the end of 1955 the Friday Flat site had been agreed, and in 1957 Kosciusko Thredbo Pty Ltd was formed. A lease was signed soon afterwards.

A Video and a Controversy

Helen Malcher's video is informative and makes excellent use of film and photos from the 1950s. It comments on Sponar's writing in his autobiography about his "hidden valley" (the Thredbo), implying that he claimed to have "discovered" it, had the "vision" of a resort there and was the "founder" of what developed as Thredbo. Autobiographies, Malcher points out, can be dangerous, vehicles for the egos of people wanting their achievements to be favourably recorded for posterity. Sponar's book is not without flaws on this score: it suggests that he alone determined Thredbo's site and that he asked the other members of the syndicate to join him in the venture. In fact the siting decision was a collective one, many people having input, and the syndicate's origins probably lay with Nicholls and Hughes whose involvement Sponar accepted — and willingly, because he needed it.

But the video goes too far in its criticism, to the point that it can be seen as slanted. The term "hidden valley" (which was known to Aboriginal people for thousands of years and cattlemen for decades) is not best seen as a claim on sole ownership: better, perhaps, to think of it as describing a romantic vision. "Discovery", too, does not necessarily mean the finding of something that was previously completely unknown. One can discover a thing for oneself that is already known to others. And it cannot be denied that Sponar had a "vision" for a European-style ski resort and came to see the valley of the Thredbo as the place to realise it. Others had a similar vision — Venn Wesche for one — but Sponar acted on his. He worked long and hard for his St Anton in Australia.

Sponar describes the contributions of the other members of the syndicate, with the exception of Hughes whose name is not mentioned in *Snow in Australia*. He and Hughes fell into serious disagreement in 1957 and their relationship soured. It is also clear that Sponar disliked Reid and had differences with Nicholls. But he recognised the roles of Anton, Nicholls and Reid in the story, including the vital importance of Reid and his money. Sponar does not claim all the credit for Thredbo.

In elevating Anton's role in the story to the same level as Sponar's or higher, it is likely that Malcher (Anton's former secretary and close confidant) was protecting her friend's legacy in the mountains. She criticised Sponar's autobiography for having gilded his own personal lily, but her video did something similar on Anton's behalf. It claimed that Sponar exaggerated his role, especially in regard to leadership in the establishment of Thredbo, and that a corrective was needed — in Anton's favour. From this perspective evolved a controversy.

The Contributions of the Members of the Syndicate

Where the truth lies in all this is not easy to fathom. But it is possible to appraise the contributions of the five syndicate members between 1954, when Sponar met Nicholls, and 1958 when Thredbo was taking shape on the ground. Nicholls is the least well known of the syndicate publicly, but his business contacts in the early part of this period were critical and he made good on his promise to find a chairlift manufacturer and obtain newspaper publicity for the proposal to develop a ski resort. Older than the other members of the syndicate, he probably played little part in the field search for the site for Thredbo, but it was he who coined the name of the Kosciusko Chairlift and Thredbo Hotel Syndicate as part of the goal of attracting publicity: the word "Kosciusko" was well known and important in marketing terms. Nicholls was also involved in preparing for the negotiations that led to the lease being granted over the site of Thredbo and the slopes opposite.

Once Reid came on board, Nicholls probably deferred to him on important decisions such as the siting of the tourist hotel which was to be the centrepiece of the village. He was then instrumental in surveying the village to form lots for clubs and businesspeople to build lodges upon. Large lots were created, allowing room for the original mostly small lodges to be expanded later and providing generous space for car parking.

Anton's role was quite different. As the leader of the Ski Tourers Association, he pioneered the development of a chain of mountain huts including Lake Albina, Kunama and, at Thredbo in 1958 and 1959, Roslyn and Kareela: he and the STA thus supported the infant resort when not many Australians wanted to invest in what must have seemed a risky venture. Anton was also a wizard at obtaining publicity for the projects in which he was involved, a fine networker and experienced in negotiating with the Kosciusko State Park Trust. His STA owed money to the Trust, though, which may not have been helpful to the syndicate especially since he wanted the debt waived. But he had enthusiasm for high country projects, he knew how to get things done and he participated strongly in the search for the site of Thredbo. His main interest was in the creation of huts for ski tourers, and Thredbo was to help him achieve his goals in that endeavour.

Hughes had experience in leasehold negotiations and drafted the documents which led to the agreement with the Park Trust. He too had good business contacts, was probably the key to Thyne Reid's joining the syndicate, had a sense of the need not to invite competition by publicising too heavily the benefits of the Thredbo area before a lease had been secured over it (in *Starting Thredbo* he mentions cautioning the enthusiastic Anton on this score), and had access to a personal network made up largely of young skiers from the legal fraternity who were to commit themselves to the infant Thredbo. Like Anton, Hughes played a significant part in the search for a site for the resort. Moreover he fashioned the first lift in time for the winter of 1957. His rope tow, cobbled together from spare parts, was important in providing access to Thredbo's slopes in the first season — and promoting them.

Sponar was the skiing expert who led the search for the site of Thredbo. He had a deeper understanding of the skiing requirements of a mountain resort than any of the others, and his search had been under way for more than two years when Nicholls, Hughes and Anton joined him. Sponar thought Friday Flat superior to the Twin Valleys site further down the Ramshead Range: that location was favoured by some in the skiing community of the time including Olympian Bob Arnott. But most who had a view favoured Friday Flat. According to

Bill Bursill, a 40-strong party of skiers and businessmen visiting late in 1955 agreed that it was the place at which Thredbo should be built.

Multi-talented and hard-working, Sponar laboured with others over the summer of 1956-57 to clear a line for the chairlift. He then erected the hut that became the company's headquarters and hotel, cleared trees for the ski slopes and showed people around as they selected their lodge sites. In addition he managed with his wife the operation of the nascent village and helped people get started on their building projects.

But Sponar tended to get ahead of his partners on important matters like defining the line for the chair. Chafing at what he considered the naivete and ignorance of his partners and believing that he alone knew what was needed, he antagonised Reid with what must have been taken as arrogance. His chosen line was deemed to be badly sited, given the need to locate the large tourist hotel near its base but in a well-drained position, and he was accused of wasting the syndicate's money. For his part, Sponar believed that the slopes next to his chair line would have given better runs in relation to the fall line along with a slightly longer snow-lie season at the foot of the mountain — because of the more south-facing aspect there than the replacement line accessed. Some skiers agree with Sponar on this even today.

Reid was the man with the money and accordingly the man with most of the power in the first years of Kosciusko Thredbo. The golden rule is that “he who has the gold makes the rules”, and Reid unquestionably had the gold. He led the early on-the-ground decisions, and eventually he fired Sponar whose fingerprints on the built environment of Thredbo were in the end fainter than they might have been. Sponar was marginalised in the decision making, and eventually he was sidelined completely. Understandably, he felt bitter about being “exiled” and unable to play a full part in fulfilling his dream.

Without Reid, Kosciusko Thredbo could not have begun to meet the lease requirements. But even his money was not enough to develop the resort to the level required. His final gift to Thredbo was to find in Lend Lease a company with the resources to take it further.

The skills and capacities of the five men were different, as were their contributions to the Thredbo story. Weighing those contributions is not easy because it is akin to comparing apples and oranges. But the five formed a collective which, despite the clashes and the enmity between its members, initiated a significant resort. That was a signal achievement.

Probably, the two who were most central to the early development of the project were Sponar and Reid — the former with his vision, his long and thorough search for the site and his on-site work for the infant resort, and the latter with the investment wealth and hard-nosed decision-making in which the village was seen as being as important as the ski slopes. Nicholls, Anton and Hughes all played positive roles but they were in important ways less critical than those of Sponar and Reid. Anton's fame, in the end, had more to do with developing high-country huts and ski touring than with the story of Thredbo itself.

Conclusion

The idea of Thredbo clearly pre-dated Sponar's arrival in the mountains: many in Australia's small skiing community by 1950 knew of Friday Flat and the southern flank of the Ramshead Range and had pondered a haven for skiing there. Then, between 1954 and 1958, several

others apart from the syndicate members and company directors were involved in the founding of the resort. Some were outsiders: Sir William Hudson (the Commissioner of the Snowy Mountains Authority) helped the fledgling company by organising the cutting of the access road from the Alpine Way to the village site and providing labour to cut the chairlift line. Hudson sought to promote not only the Snowy Scheme but the mountains generally, and the Thredbo venture fitted his broader objective.

Others who played important roles in the first two or three years of Thredbo were Sponar's wife Elisabeth, builders Bela Racsko and Steve Szeloczky, the accommodation-providing Deseos (Kornel and Suzanne), Nekvapils (Sasha and Karel), Bill Bursill and Hughes' mother Margaret, and ski instructors Leonhard Erharter and Helmut Pfister. Many people helped the place, once initiated, to take root.

But it is surely true that Sponar's role was central, indeed indispensable to the beginnings of Thredbo. He has an honoured place which is well merited; rightly, he has been accorded great credit for his efforts. Nobody else played a bigger part. Geoffrey Hughes, no friend of Sponar in the late 1950s but generous to his rival in *Starting Thredbo*, generally supports Sponar's version of the story of the conception and birth of Thredbo. The place could not have got traction without Reid, but without Sponar in the Snowy Mountains in the 1950s it is probable that it would not have been founded when it was. It might not even have been founded at the site at which it grew.

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