



Echo from the Mountains

Victorian High Country Huts Association Inc - A0043804Y

A Quarterly Newsletter Volume 18 Number 2 September 2020

President's Message and AGM

I do hope this message finds you safe and well. This year has certainly found all of us with new challenges and opportunities.

We are well on our way with planning future works. There have been many meetings and discussions with land managers, individuals, and groups with determinations on the process for moving forward with rebuilds, conservation works and the ongoing maintenance with all huts.

With Covid well entrenched, the Committee has decided to take up the Consumers Affairs Victoria's offer to postpone this year's AGM for three months effective from the planned date in November to an AGM in February. The new date and proposed location will be announced after the November committee meeting. The Committee will meet electronically if not in person as per our Constitution.

The Committee has continued to hold its quarterly meetings via a Zoom meeting, which was a little challenging at the first, but we are now well in the swing of things with our meetings quick and effective.

Having the AGM in a Zoom environment is a different matter. Given video style meetings are not accessible to many of our membership, we thought it prudent to make the time for when we can all meet, to re-establish friendships and have time to develop new bonds. A time to talk huts, share history and absorb the community that is the Victorian High Country Huts Association.

I look forward to seeing you in person in the New Year.

Allen Skilton
VHCHA President

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Christmas Gifts Sorted!

Who really wants to go and wander around the shops to do our Christmas shopping after all the Covid-19 restrictions? Not you? Not me either. I will be doing all my shopping online this Christmas, and my starting point in buying Australian begins right here.



Why not give everyone a beautifully printed calendar featuring our high country huts? The photos submitted each year seem to get better and better.

We also have beautiful books worthy of sitting on any coffee table, and stocking stuffers in the shape of stubby coolers and caps, badges and stickers.

All merchandise helps support the work we do preserving and rebuilding our fabulous huts.

Place your orders for delivery anywhere in Australia at www.hutsvictoria.org.au/shop



www.hutsvictoria.org.au/shop

Spargo's Hut - A Gold Mine of History

Nestled in a shallow saddle below Golden Point, across Swindler's Creek and opposite the Hotham Village, Spargos Hut has endured the winter snows and summer fires of the Victorian Alps for more than 90 years now.

Constructed of locally sourced snow gum posts with rough-dressed timbers, it is clad in corrugated iron sheeting, hauled to site on the backs of hardy men who built it in the years before the Great Depression. Over time the hut was equipped with furniture and fittings, with many of the larger items carted out in a hand-made wheelbarrow.

The ceiling is lined with tar paper and the walls of the main room are lined with plywood panels. Some of the skillion walls have a remnant hessian lining. The floor of the hut is earth with random flat slate-stone flagstones and some linoleum sections directly on top of the natural ground. In front of the fireplace are placed thin gauge steel flat-sheets. Two Victorian Colonial (six-pane) window sashes are on the north-east wall, providing natural light to the main room.

Away from the main paths of the High Plains and Mt Hotham, Spargo's has avoided the crowds of visitors that frequent huts of similar vintage like Cope Hut or Cleve Cole. It's a quiet retreat, isolated in its little glen, a silent witness to the years of hard struggle and perseverance of its builder, the mountain legend, Bill Spargo.

Spargo and his brothers and their mates were following in the footsteps of miners who discovered payable gold in the Upper Dargo River adjacent to Mount Hotham in the 1860's, that brought a tradition of prospecting activity to the area. Further discovery of gold was associated with the ancient river system beneath the High plains basalt, extending from Mount Fainter to the north and the Dargo High Plains to the south. The Golden Point lead adjacent to Spargo's Hut is likely to have been discovered and worked in those early days.

Bill Spargo was born in Bairnsdale in 1888 and spent his childhood mostly in Wangaratta. He was educated in engineering and spent his formative years on the goldfields at Sunnyside near Mt Wills. Bill was a keen skier, starting in about 1906 when mining at Mt Wills. He was a member of the Ski Club of Victoria from 1925.

In 1921 Spargo was made superintendent of the Mt Hotham section of the alpine road for the Country Roads Board (CRB) and was important in the construction of galvanised-iron huts at Boggy Creek, Dinner Plain, Whiskey Flat, Diamantina and Blowhard. By 1924 the Hotham road was declared a "Main Road", carrying up to 100 cars a day. That led to the construction of the original stone Hotham Heights Chalet and Bill Spargo was appointed Manager.

Initially the Chalet received guests during the period when the road was open. By 1928 it was accommodating up to 20 guests for 12 months of the year. Winter access involved horses and cross-country

skiing. Bill Spargo's brother Cecil and wife, Nellie Spargo assisted with the running of the Chalet.

Bill's passion for gold prospecting was never far from his mind and the Golden Point hut was built around this time. In 1930 he discovered a small reef near Grimsley's Southern Cross reef near Little Higginbotham, a quarter of a mile from the Hotham Heights Chalet.

In 1933 Victorian Railways purchased the Hotham Heights Chalet from the CRB and the Spargo family moved away. But not Bill. He moved into his 'cabin' at Golden Point and suffered years of extreme poverty, scratching some income from his prospecting work amongst the alluvial gravels that are exposed along the edges of the eroding basalt capping. It was during this period that Spargo became known as the "Hotham Hermit".



Photo: Sent by Douglas Alison believed to be 1950s

The Black Friday bushfires of 1939 devastated the Alps and Spargo found himself cornered in his little tin hut on Golden Point. Knowing his own dire situation, he filled every available vessel with water from a small mining ditch diverted to the doorway of his hut. He was able to save his hut from the fire by soaking its walls as the fire approached. He survived what must have been a desperate day, the only other potential escape from a terrible death was the loaded rifle he kept at the ready.

After the fires, the landscape was opened as never before, with vegetation razed and rocks and reefs not visible previously now in plain sight. In 1941, after a day's prospecting towards the West Kiewa from Mt Loch, Bill made the discovery of his lifetime.

Coming home to Golden Point on a different route, he found quartz embedded in the ground. Looking harder he saw it was rich with gold. Bill developed and worked the Red Robin Mine for ten years. The folklore is that he saw a Flame Robin taken by a Hawk just before the discovery of the reef. In the first year, two tons of ore produced 173 ounces of gold. He sold the lease in 1951, retiring to Stradbroke Island in Queensland. He passed away in Brisbane in 1959 aged 74. The Red Robin Mine was worked for some decades after, yielding gold to men of the same ilk as Bill, hardened, tenacious and driven to succeed.

Spargo's Hut History cont:

Spargo's hut is now listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and included on the Alpine Resorts Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay. Mount Hotham Alpine Resort Management Board commissioned a report in 2018 to plan for the conservation, management and maintenance of the State Heritage listed Spargo's Hut. Designed to address the longer-term management and conservation of the iconic building, it contemplates issues that may arise with increased visitation to the site and the harsh environmental conditions that the 90-year-old building experiences.



Photo: Graeme Butler 2004

Last year, Bill's nephew, Neville Spargo reached out to the VHCHA for assistance with the work now required to protect and conserve Spargo's Hut for the generations to come. The Mt Hotham RMB Conservation plan, compiled by Andrew Swift, is a comprehensive template for the necessary structural repairs. It is an excellent document, laying out very specifically the work that needs to be done, some of which is fairly urgent. Some preliminary

discussions with Mt Hotham RMB led to developing a firm plan for works to commence in late Autumn 2020. We had 25 volunteers set to prepare the replacement timber required from fire killed snow gum harvested by the Resort staff. The COVID 19 pandemic derailed that effectively. At this point we would hope to be able to be walking the track to Golden Point later this Spring to get the work started in earnest.

Photo: Stephen Paterson

Spargo's is yet another High Country Hut that tells the story of European exploration, development and residence in a part of the Alps that calls to many of us. Bill Spargo was neither a visiting cattleman nor a winter tourist. He had the tenacity to live above the snow line year round in a time when the technology and creature comforts we carry up the mountains today would have been considered as pure science fiction. I know that those that make the trip to do the work of the VHCHA will do so partly in tribute to the pioneers of Bill's generation, people with a strength of character and personal resilience to which we can only aspire.

*Much of this article owes its origin in the great work of Andrew Swift, author of the Conservation report prepared for the Mount Hotham Alpine Resort Management Board. This article is largely a summary of parts of that document.

Words prepared by Lachie Gales

Photo below: Stephen Paterson 2019



“Where did it begin for you?”

Continuing the series, in this edition I have asked our newest HMO Area 3 - Chris Millgate to give us an insight into his love of huts and how he came to be involved with VHCHA.

What was your introduction to the High Country Huts?

My introduction to the High Country huts began about fifteen years ago with some mates and a newly acquired 4x4, albeit an old petrol Prado. We did the tourist loop to Craig's hut and dropped back into Mansfield for the night.

Do you have a favourite hut?

I have two favourite huts, Kelly's Hut and Howitt Hut. Kelly's because that is the first hut I have worked on since becoming a member and HMO for region 3 and Howitt because I have spent some memorable times up there with mates and family. My first trip to Howitt's was in the Spring, grassy plains, tee shirts and plenty of beers. The driving was easy and relaxing. The second trip was in June, just before the tracks closed. We had anticipated a little snow but that was an understatement. We ended up having plenty in the overnight fall, tee shirts were changed for beanies and coats. (We still had plenty of beers).

Driving in the snow presented challenges for the novice. As most readers to this newsletter would agree it doesn't matter what time of the year you go, the High Country is always beautiful and challenging.

Whilst it seems like a lifetime ago (my daughter and son pictured below right are now 20 and 23) the memories never fade.



(Max, Darcy, Jessica and Jack)

How did you become involved with VHCHA?

I became involved with VHCHA in 2018 after “talking about it” for years. We were at the 100 year Wonangatta reunion and the VHCHA Committee had set up a tent. “Time to get on board”, I thought. Since then I can only express how fantastic it is to be involved with people

who have a phenomenal passion for preservation of these great Victorian assets.

The committee also provides links to Parks Victoria and local communities with volunteers attending for the hut maintenance.

If you are looking for a reason to jump on board, now more than ever is the time. With the 2019 fire and COVID, there will be a need to keep it local and what a great time to get out and see Victoria.

Stay safe!

Words and photos: Chris Milgate HMO 3



Do you have a favourite hut experience that you would like to share? It is our connection to the huts that drives us to preserve them for the future. We would love to hear from you.

Please email words and attach your photos as a .jpg to: Editor@hutsvictoria.org.au

Below is one of the first hut photos taken by me, back in 1988; Guys Hut Bryces Plain. The photo was taken on a horseriding trip with the late Jack Lovick.

Editor - Sue Paterson.



Welcome New Members

It is always a joy to welcome new members to our Association. We hope you enjoy your involvement in whichever form that may take, from getting down and dirty on a work party, or reading our newsletters and knowing that your membership fee goes towards preserving a part of our Alpine Heritage.

We extend a heartfelt welcome to:

Andrew McAllister	Geoff Cope
Keith Ouranios	Shane Regan
Carl Voss	Ray White
Jim & Hillary Hawson	Mark Denton
Damien Hutchinson	Amy Gross
Scott Wyatt	Michelle Gerstman
Philip Hart	Patrick Taylor

Vale David Marsicano

In our June Edition we welcomed Mt Buller Motorcycle Adventures as new members.

David Marsicano, the owner and operator of MBMA, tragically and suddenly passed away at the end of August of an unexpected medical condition. "Big Dave" was widely known and loved by the Mt Buller community and beyond.

Our deepest condolences to his partner Niki, his family and friends at this very difficult time.

Your Donations Hard at Work

Planning is underway for the many projects that have had to wait thanks to the impact of Covid on all activities.

There will be a lot of rebuilding over the next few years and every dollar goes directly to huts works.

We gratefully acknowledge the following for their support:

John Finn	Richard Kraus
Terry Torrison	Sheryl Tedford
Bill Sherriff	Robert Halley-Frame
Li Choong	David Oldfield

Our Facebook following has now hit 47,000!

The High Country Huts have never had so much public exposure.

A number of our Facebook followers have been fortunate enough to be able to make the most of the easing of Covid restrictions in Regional Victoria to get up to the High Country. There are many wonderful photos being shared to our page. Have a look at the ever growing gallery of photos.

The below photo was taken recently by Amy Gee.

CGS Hut Sunday 27th September 2020. Note the "escape ladder" so people can enter and exit from the loft door in heavy snowfalls.



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<https://www.facebook.com/hutsvic>

**Thank
You!**

HMO Contact List

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Area names are general geographic names only and do not reflect the extent or number of huts in each area.

Existing Hut Maintenance Areas remain unchanged, however your committee has reviewed and re-defined all areas so that there is now a more even distribution of huts within each area.

Changes to areas have been minor, however it may take some time for our hut maintenance officers to become familiar with changes. During the next few months we ask that all enquiries be directed **firstly to our Hut Maintenance Coordinator** at hmc@hutsvictoria.org.au, Wayne will respond or redirect enquiries to the appropriate area on your behalf.

DONATIONS

We appreciate that there is a great deal of financial stress in the community right now. If you are able, and wish to, you can make a donation or purchase via our online store.

We will need as much as possible in the kitty for rebuilding our lost huts.

The website is

<https://www.hutsvictoria.org.au/shop>

(to make a donation just select multiples of \$5 to make the total you wish to donate).

Contacting us

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Newsletter Contributions:

It's always exciting to receive a member contribution. Do you have a favourite hut story to share? Please send stories preferably by email. When sending photographs please don't include them in the text document but attach them as a separate .jpg or .pdf file, to editor@hutsvictoria.org.au.