

THE VERY EARLY YEARS OF WATER SKING AND THE GEELONG WATER SKI CLUB

History from memory. Bob Appleton. (Asst by John Barrett)

In the early to mid 1950's, water skiing was little known in Australia mainly due I believe to import tariffs. Outboard motors were appearing from America but, strangely predominantly in South Australia. That's where my first 'power-pack' came from. An 18hp Johnson!

I was employed at Allerton Shoes in Geelong West and the owner, Cliff Allerton bought the 18hp Johnson that later was to become mine. Cliff had a bay side property at St. Leonards and we would go down there every Saturday afternoon to help him with a few chores. Making a ramp to launch his boat was one welcome job! Why? Because he would take us skiing when it was finished! Skis and skiing equipment were not easy to obtain at this time so we made our own. Six foot length of timber were put through all sorts of treatments to get the bend into them, the favourite method was to boil the end in a 44 gallon drum and then clamp the end into a specially made jig. Strangely, some timbers would slowly straighten whilst skiing! A little disconcerting!! Foot bindings were cut from truck inner tubes, a lawnmower handle was used as a ski handle and the rope was a length of clothesline.

While this was going on, several businessmen including Cliff Allerton, John Taylor, of J. C. Taylor's, Doctor Gough Taylor (no relation), Don Roydhouse, Daryl & Lindsay Heath, Joe Robinson and some others formed the 'Outboard Motor Club' or a similar name. They operated from the corner of the Barwon River just upstream from the start of the mile. Guy & Jane Carlton were skiing with Goff Taylor with Guy getting an American ski, hollow plastic if I remember correctly.

Cliff Allerton bought a 40hp Johnson (Johnson was the flavour of the month at that time) and I obtained his old 18hp. To this I attached a 15ft. bond wood 'Benson & Shaw', named it 'ROVA' and this was John & Ron Barrett's (and my) toy for a few years. Fancy learning to single ski behind an 18hp Johnson and a 15ft boat!! But they did. In fact, we got a few up onto 2 skis! We skied the Barwon, the bay and Lake Modewarre. In fact, anywhere where we thought the water was flat enough!

I believe a meeting was held in the Western district Car club rooms, McCurdies Road in 1960 to discuss forming a ski club at Wilson's Road. I registered 'ROVA' with the club in 1961. Sadly, the relationship between skiers & rowers was becoming difficult and only Sundays would to be made available for water skiers on the mile. There were instances of skiers passing a rowing eight on one side while the tow boat passed on the other!

'ROVA' was discarded when John Barrett built his first ski boat with a 45hp Mercury in 1963 followed by a second in 1964 with a 75hp McCulloch. Through 1965 John had the advantage of several boats from McEwans Marine where he was working!. We performed giant whips at Wilsons Road, skied at Fyans Street and the mile while somewhere in there, the GWSC was formed after Kevin Bell, Gough Taylor, Don Roydhouse and others who had been skiing at Fyans Street and on the mile, started skiing on the river at the present site of our club. They were the founders of our great waterski club.

Some of the names I can recall from this era (with the help of John Barrett) are Guy & Jane Carlton. Gough Taylor & his family, Ian & Russell Morris, Neece Ganim & his family (Krithia), Frank Walker and the Walker family, Frank Swain and sons Austin and Murray and daughter in law Paula (who became our secretary), the Roydhouses, Steve Kittely, Bruce Owen, John Reynolds and Gil Gordon, Ken Fagg & family, Ron Rankin with "Hiawatha", Joe Robinson, John & Brian Backwell, Ron Reid & his daughter Brenda (who John thinks was an IMT barrel girl), Geoff Fulton, Deryk Esler (who sadly, was later killed at Wilsons Rd) and Kevin Mills with a 45hp McCulloch boat. (Time dictates that "the late" should be appended to many names.)

When we were skiing at Fyans Street, some Americans, brought to Australia by Alcoa, befriended us, especially while John and Ron Barrett and I skied through winter and summer frequenting the end of Fyans Street constantly. They were Bob Blassingame & family (he was construction manager for Alcoa), Homer Garen & Bill Woods, (Fords) and Postie Booth, an American U2 Pilot based at Avalon. While on the mile, Frank Swain, was introducing inboard boats to the ski scene.

Later, our skiing took us all to new heights - literally.

In 1969, Ron Barrett purchased an army disposal parachute after seeing parasailing in an American magazine. Using the machinery at Allerton Shoes on non working days, slots were cut and hemmed in the back, side panels were added for stability and tests carried out. A car's seatbelt release was added, with a "ripcord" hanging from it to enable the "flyer" to release himself should trouble strike.

I recall getting a modicum of lift when I had the 'chute on a short line attached to the clothes hoist in a howling Northerly! It was a 'cut and test' then more tests. In the paddock at the back of the Club house. I was 'strapped' in, a line attached to the chute and to John's truck.

Two assistants held the 'chute open into the wind as John hit the accelerator! I was just reaching a "tippy-toe-long-stride-leaving-the-ground" gait when the line snapped! The seatbelt release flew back and hit me on the forehead fair and square between the eyes! The wind caught the chute and started dragging me in reverse across

the paddock as I tried to release myself. My support? crew followed as the blood oozed into my eyes! To us, at that stage – just a mere set-back!!

At first trick skis were used to slither along the bank to the water until the 'flier' was airborne. Then we found that a couple of steps would be enough to get us into the air. From that point there was no looking back! Up! Up! And away!!

John Reynolds and his Seacraft, "Big Daddy" proved to be a very useful 'chute tower! There was coverage in our local press that claimed we had reached 500 feet! Although the Victorian Water Skier of May/June '69 claimed only 300 feet! Photographs are available!

Then there was the period of the newsletter when E-mail, photo-copiers, scanners etc hadn't been invented and newsletters were produced on Remington typewriters or even hand written, sent to Melbourne to Bruce Owens (whose workplace had some sort of copier) for typing, duplicating and back to me for distribution!. Can't remember the name of it, but there was a time when the newsletter was typed, pressed over a sort of wax bed then one at a time, pages were laid on the wax imprint and a roller run over them to make copies, one by one! PLUS, they were hand delivering at the weekend! Copies of newsletters of the 1970's still exist!

Then there was that weekend, 22/23 April 1972 when 22 members worked over 9/10ths of a mile to bring a water supply to the club. The newsletter of the 11th of May describes it all!

The 'driver' and overall supervisor of the project was David Beretta! An \$8,500 trench digger from Keith Norris, a couple of trucks from Slim Batty and a tractor from Gil Gordon. 9/10ths of a mile! Doesn't sound far, but by golly, over two and a half weekends and an Anzac day was hard yakka!

At a rough count, I wrote the newsletter from February 1971 printed and distributed over 17,000 pages!! A lot of which were assembled by hand!!

Bob Appleton. OAM.

PS. I have a heap of newsletters from which you might be able to glean more information of the club at that time. I know I received a letter from an irate mum who said my gags were not suitable for the younger members we were getting at that time!!