International face of wool industry

George Howard Michell AC
Wool industry leader, arts patron, pioneer skier
Born: August 3, 1913; Adelaide
Died: June 26, 2012; Adelaide

HOWARD was born to George Henry Michell and Catherine and educated at Prince Alfred College. Like his father, he was to be a leading player in the Australian wool industry, eclipsing all previous wool processors. He would also emerge as one of the Art Gallery of South Australia's key benefactors.

Howard was active in many sports, from water-skiing to hot air ballooning, but an enduring story dates back to the 1930s and his fascination for cross-country skiing in the Australian Alps at a time when they were a winter-time wilderness.

Howard, aged 23, set out with two experienced Victorian skiers to climb the 1000 vertical metres to the Mt Bogong summit ridge. As they climbed a dense fog set in followed by gale-force winds and heavy sleet and snow. With visibility at less than 2m and with their tracks invisible on the icy ground they could not find their way back down the mountain.

After hours of struggle they dug a snow cave in a small steep gully, and for the next three days and four nights they waited as a blizzard continued outside.

Hunger forced them to re-enter the blizzard and eventually force their way to Big River. One of the trio, Cleve Cole, was unable to continue, so Howard struck out in search of help, leaving Mick Hull to look after his companion.

Despite not having eaten for days, he followed the river downhill for two days until he found a farmhouse and raised the alarm. Cleve Cole died within a few hours of being brought out.

Howard had frostbitten fingers and toes and lost two toes from the experience.
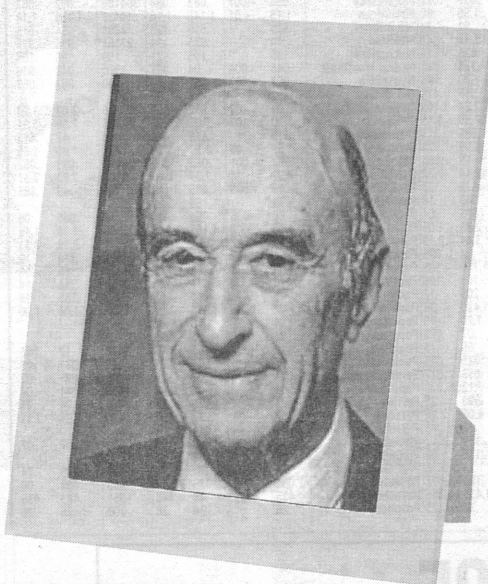
The ordeal suffered by the three men led to a better understanding of how severe and long blizzards could be on Mt Bogong and resulted in the establishment of snow lines and refuge huts in the area. Today, one of those is the Michell Hut.

A couple of years after this adventure, Howard married (Valerie) Christine Tipping and continued what was to become a 60-year directorship of the family company, GH Michell and Sons.

In 1870 Howard's grandfather, bootmaker George Henry Michell, had started buying wool and sheepskins from local farmers and scouring them in the River Wakefield near his Undalya home. He would dry and pack the wool by hand and send it to auction in London.

The company expanded, moving to Hindmarsh in Adelaide, and buying out wool processors around the country. By the time he became managing director, Howard was buying 10-15 per cent of the entire Australian wool clip. He consolidated it to its present Salisbury site in 1973, but also drove an international expansion of the company's wool and tannery operations as far away as China and Ireland.

He served the next 20 years as chairman, and was one of the international faces of Australia's wool industry, holding senior industry positions.

The corporate entity changed to Michell Group of Companies reflecting Howard's ever-broadening business interests, including establishing a merchant bank, Michell NDB.

Buying out other wool processors had also made Michells a major property owner. When Howard closed down the company's former Hughes wool processing operations at Botany Bay in Sydney in 1987 he set up Lakes Business Park, leasing out 8ha of prime business facilities.

In another property deal in 1997 the Michells sold off a $60 million slice of their pastoral empire in the Riverina. During Howard's time, the Michell family was often near or at the top of the SA rich list, despite its sometimes strenuous efforts to keep details of its activities and investments out of the public eye.

Howard was president of SA's Water-Ski Club and Royal Aero Club and was awarded his Companion to the Order of Australia in 1990 for services to the wool industry and to the arts.

Keen supporters of the performing and visual arts, Howard and Christine helped the Art Gallery of South Australia buy some key works and establish the gallery's foundation in 1980. They also created an endowment to buy works of young and emerging artists at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Howard is survived by children Sandy, Liddy, Henry and Edwin, and many grand children and great grandchildren.