



New horizons: mountain men Chris Stoney (front) and Bruce McCormack. Picture: BRUCE MAGILTON

Their lifestyle on a high

MANSFIELD has been blessed with alpine scenery and a man-made bounty that has helped it thrive while towns in less scenic settings have died.

Forty years ago, this stop on the road to Mt Buller was a rugged timber and farming town. Skiing was regarded as a foreign sport for the affluent.

Now the big timber trucks have been replaced by four-wheel drives of "Toorak cowboys" and there are more ski hire shops than there were sawmills.

The winter hideaway for those who cannot afford to stay at the mountain resort chalets also has confirmed its place as a summer base, serving holidaymakers on man-made Lake Eildon.

And the families of high country cattlemen have seen this generation open their lonely, spectacular alpine pastures to tourist trail rides to help make their farms viable.

The Man From Snowy River movie success came at a time when the town approached a crossroad because of the end of its reign as Victoria's sawmill capital. In the 1970s, there were still 14 mills in town and 42 in the area. One mill is left.

Trains stopped running and Mansfield also lost electricity industry jobs. Its Forestry Commission and Country Roads Board depots closed.

But the town was perfectly

By NEIL WILSON

placed for wealth to start trickling in along the arteries from Melbourne — the Melba and Hume highways.

The Man From Snowy River encouraged the re-awakening among city people of the gentle pace of rural life, with scenic Mansfield the perfect location for a getaway.

Melbourne professionals started buying farms. The population increased from 1920 to 2526 in 15 years.

At that time it was still a town which shut at night. You could not get a meal after 8 o'clock.

Now the Mansfield Hotel will serve a gourmet meal late into the evening.

Owner Susan Crow doubts if her bank would have lent the \$350,000 needed for renovations if it had been for a country pub in a traditional farming town.

The 100-plus jobs lost in timber and farming from 1981 to 1996 were replaced by nearly 360 new ones.

There were 155 in tourism and hospitality, three times the

number previously employed in these industries.

Mansfield's retail and wholesale jobs have doubled since 1981. Construction industry jobs also nearly doubled as the town made a seemingly seamless transition from primary centre to cafe lifestyle.

And the town services development on Mt Buller.

But Mansfield does share many of the concerns of other towns, particularly over a lack of careers outside

hospitality for the young.

And many townspeople are pushing to try to reverse the

forced 1995 municipal marriage to Benalla, which saw Mansfield's depot lose 12 jobs.

The town's four real estate offices advertise houses handy to the shops from about \$100,000, and family residences on Summerset Rise estate for \$170,000. Blocks with services bring up to \$80,000 for 4ha.

Agent John Cannavan said affluent Melbourne families were looking at estates which might top \$800,000.

Local grocer Ken Marks, who started in the family store in

1953, has had to expand three times. He employs 94 people.

"As the timber and SEC jobs went, we were lucky enough to have people coming in for the holidays, affluent people in summer and winter," he said. "It just sort of happened, we are lucky."

The only bank to close, the Bank of Melbourne, now is in his supermarket, along with a butcher and bakery. Three other banks have busy branches.

About 20 shops have been built since the late 1980s, and around the corner is a rival supermarket.

Some of the original mountain cattlemen families — the Stoneys, McCormacks and Lovicks — lead tours to their mountain pastures.

Chris Stoney said one of the hardest challenges for the old Mansfield families had been to embrace tourism as a way of keeping their farms viable.

"I reckon the town had a real identity crisis 10 years ago between the locals accepting tourists and rejecting them as outsiders," Mr Stoney said.

"Now servicing the tourist industry is the biggest provider of jobs and we've come to accept what is almost a new culture. It's become a lifestyle town."

“The town had a real identity crisis 10 years ago”