

PRUDENCE PARKER– An Oral History

**Interviewed by Christina Webb,
Bimblegumbie, 942 Alpine Way, Jindabyne, 5th September 2016**



Prudence Parker

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An interview conducted by Christina Webb

It is Monday 5th September 2016, and I am interviewing for the Thredbo Historical Society, Prudence Parker at her home Bimblegumbie on the Alpine Way, just south of Jindabyne en route to Thredbo. This is about Pru and her time working in Thredbo Ski Resort, her marriage to the ski instructor Max Parker, the construction of Bimblegumbie, the 2003 bush fires and Bimblegumbie, its operations and the garden.

To place you history, what your grandparent names and where did they come from? Were they Australian

My grandparents? They were Irish with Italian descent.

Do you remember when they came to Australia?

They were born here. My great great grandparents on the MacDonald side were convicts. He was a convict, and she was too.

Have you any idea of the crime committed?

I think it was just dealing with small things, petty theft.

That is on one side, and on the other side?

Maternal or paternal? That was the paternal.

And on the maternal?

They weren't convicts. They were here for a long time. On my mother's side it was Italian and Irish. They were the Millers. My grandmother was Jean Daley Miller. On my father's side it was all Scottish – the MacDonalds.

Tell me a little bit about your own parents.

My father was Hector Paul Fitz Allan MacDonald, a grazier in North Queensland near Rockhampton. My mother, Jean Ann Miller was self educated. They had a tourist property in Cleveland, in the Moreton Bay area of Queensland. Then she was an interior decorator in Brisbane. Then we moved to New South Wales. My father died when I was seventeen. My parents split when I was ten.

Did your mother bring you up?

Yes.

So where were you born?

I was born in Brisbane.

I went to Milton Primary. Before that I was in Thornlands Primary up until the age of ten.

Is Thornlandss where you spent most of your childhood?

Yes. I went to Brisbane State High for one year, and then we moved to New South Wales. I lived in Wahroonga and went to Hornsby Girls High.

What did you do after you left school?

I became a legal secretary in the middle of the city.

Tell me a little bit about it. Tell me about your raging years.

I was a “mod”. I was not a “rocker”. I liked modern clothes. My mother made my clothes or I found interesting clothes in the middle of the city. I was a bargain hunter even then. I lived in Wahroonga, so I went to lots of parties and functions. I can’t tell you too much.

I always liked modern clothes. As a redhead I didn’t mind standing out and wearing something a bit different. My mother liked modern stuff as well. In Wahroonga a lot of things were very conservative and I always loved the mix of the modern with the old. I just didn’t like one style so that has remained with me for the rest of my life, being eclectic.

What about the parties?

All on the “North Shore” I was interested in meeting people and knowing different types of people. I joined the Liberals. I joined the Killara Young Libs – not the Liberal Party but I joined the Young Libs because they had great parties and they had very interesting discussions. That taught me a little bit about politics, which is an interest that has remained with me – not that I ever wanted to be part of the aristocracy. I enjoyed really nice restaurants, dancing in the middle of the city at time when you got dressed up and go to balls, university balls. In the 1960s I went to many Baccus balls, other functions, special events and dinners at the Australia Square Tower. Yes, I had a very social life in Sydney.

I went to Thredbo in 1970 because I had fallen in love with skiing and also I wanted to surprise a boyfriend – my boyfriend at the time. I wanted to surprise him in Thredbo. I worked for Lend Lease and the design director, Barry Wynn at Lend Lease. When I said I wanted to get a job in Thredbo, that was very easy as Lend Lease owned the village at the time. I did not need any other reference except his.

How old were you then?

I was twenty one or twenty two. I waited for my friend to come to Thredbo and he took two weeks to get there. I was working as a receptionist in the hotel, living in Staff Lodge, right in the middle of the village.

As I was used to going out, two weeks was a long time not to go out, so another receptionist and I got dressed up and we went to the Keller. I wore a white satin, bell bottomed pant suit. When I went to the Keller there were so many interesting looking men there, I was a little bit nervous.



Pru Parker outside Twynam Lodge

Is the white satin ski suit about now?

It was not a ski suit. It was an evening outfit for going dancing in the Keller.

Had you worn it in Sydney?

Yes, I had worn it in Sydney. It was a beautiful white silky satin with pearls on the neck line and very nicely cut pants.

Was it a low neckline?

It was a V-neckline and long, slightly belled sleeves.

Have you got a photo of it?

I don't know, I might be able to find it because I don't throw things away. I know I have the top but I don't know if I have the pants.

And of the handsome young men in the Keller Bar, who took you home?

The very first night, that very first night I went to the Keller there was a man leaning, sitting on the bench opposite the bar, and I looked at him and he looked at me, and I thought " Oh, Oh, I look a little bit out of my depth with that man because he looks a bit more than I can handle." To cut a very long story short, within two weeks we were engaged. And that man was Max Parker.

So did the boyfriend from Sydney ever arrive?

He did, but I didn't break the date with Max, so that sort of said something.

What was Max's background?

He was Austrian. He was working at Fleets at the time. He had worked in Smiggins, the Chalet. As well as being in Thredbo, he had been in the mountains for quite a few years.

What would have been his age then?

He was thirteen years older than me. He was very debonair. I was very impressionable.

When did you get married?

We got married in 1970 in October after a ski romance that lasted a few months. I met at the end of June – and we got married in October.



Pru and Max Parker

Where did you live in Thredbo after your marriage?

We lived in Twynam Lodge.

What did you do up at Twynam?

Max was the caretaker and I became the caretaker of Twynam Lodge whilst Max pursued his interests. Yes – very well put. I was everything at the Lodge, the cleaner, the head housekeeper, everything.

What about the job with Lend Lease?

I left the Reception when I married.

Who was the manager of the Thredbo Alpine Hotel when you were working there?

Harold Droga.

When did you start skiing?

I started skiing in my mid-teenage years and I skied in Perisher. The first year I skied was in 1964 when there was massive snow everywhere and I laughed and loved every second of it. For the two weeks in Perisher I stayed at Telemark Lodge with ten girls and the whole thing was enough to make anybody fall in love with the snow. Then I went back again in 1968 and stayed at Rock Creek in Perisher and still loved it. Though the experience was not as euphoric as '64, but the snow was still fantastic so I never thought there was anything like not much snow around. It was always fantastic with snow around. I went back in 1970 thinking the same and it was a bit different.

Did Max take you skiing?

Yes. He taught me the whole season. He taught me because he wasn't working as a ski instructor, that first time in 1970. He became a full time employed ski instructor after that. So he was there all the time, waiting for me to finish at Reception at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and walk me home.

Harold Droga told me at one stage that I was mixing with the wrong type of man for me - "I was a nice girl and I should not be seeing this man." He banned me from the hotel because he did not want me to see this man. Well I had nowhere to go then except into this man's apartment where he cooked me dinner because I had nowhere to eat, because in those days you ate at the hotel. Yes so I was not allowed to go there, so I had nowhere to go except to get to know Max better. So I can thank my marriage to Max to Harold Droga, really.

What happened with all the cleaning? What did that result in?

I looked after Twynam Lodge for seven years after that, doing the cleaning, the guests, the Khalbetzers, who owned Twynam Lodge - he was Dieter Khalbetzer.

So Simi arrived?

Simi was born in '72. She was born in Sydney at the Mater. I didn't trust Cooma.

How did your mother deal with all this?

My mother was fine. She actually organised the wedding. The wedding was at my old home in Wahroonga, in Edgeworth David Avenue where it joins Junction Road.

After the wedding I came back to Thredbo. In those days in Thredbo you had to do many different jobs to make a living. You probably still do. So I did waitressing at Rudi's – Leo's I think it was called then. During the summer, housework at Sasha's and Candlelight. I worked at Twynam for the whole winter.

Why did you leave Thredbo and when did you build Bimblegumbie?



Twynam Lodge

The Khalbetzers were the very wealthy owners of Twynam and I believed that they would not need to commercially rent their lodge. Therefore, as having a two year old child I needed to have some security. I wanted to have somewhere to live and we could not afford to buy anything in Thredbo. In those days you had to have a commercial lodge or a club lodge and so we started looking for land. I convinced my mother, with Max's approval, to help in the purchase of the land and the building of the house.

Who owned the land? From whom did you purchase the land?

We purchased the land from a chap called George Hilder who had subdivided the land and was living in what is now Crackenback Cottage. He had Crackenback Cottage and Farm. He sold us this land and then he sold Crackenback Farm to the Youngs. When we bought this land here, having worked for a solicitor, I told my mother "I don't trust this man." I told my solicitor for whom I had worked in Sydney "I don't trust this man, so you have got to be very careful, because I think this property is not ours until we get the deeds." That was the case. We did get the deeds; we did get it through, but it did take a long time. He did sell other land at Wollondibby twice.

From whom did he buy the Wollondibby Estate?

I would say it was Harrison who owned it.

Tell me about the building of Bimblegumbie? Were you still with Max? Yes, I was still married. My mother bought a kit home to start with. It was all delivered here and Max was a fine cabinet maker, but not a house builder. It was the first house he built and I was the labourer. We camped here every night so that nobody could come and take the whole house away. One person was always here. I lived in Twynam and we built the first part of the house in



The entrance sign to Bimblegumbie

the summer of 1977/78. Then my mother stayed here in 1977. I did one more year at Twynam and the Khalbetzers did, as I thought they would: they rented the apartments at Twynam out for long leases. So therefore I needed a home. So I moved to Bimblegumbie and Max moved to Golden Eagle.

Who owned Golden Eagle at that stage?

Golden Eagle was owned by four different families, four different apartments. He had the caretaker's apartment downstairs for the rest of his life that he spent in Thredbo. He did a good job there. We finished the first part of the building and I moved to Bimblegumbie.

I needed a job. I did have a job lined up at Lend Lease in Canberra after exhausting all avenues in Thredbo. On the Friday when I was supposed to start work in Canberra for the managing director of Lend Lease in Canberra, the hotel rang me offering me a job doing the reservations at the hotel in Thredbo. But because I didn't want to leave my five year old daughter, I took the job in Thredbo doing reservations.

Which year was that?

1978. In the first year it was a very busy year and you couldn't find accommodation. A cheeky person kept ringing me, a single person and I jokingly said he could stay at my place which was down the road. I came home and told my Mum that I had booked her room out. She was a little bit dismayed but that was the beginning of Bimblegumbie because he brought friends back the next weekend and then they brought friends back.

Where did you accommodate them?

Well we slept in one room and they took up the other rooms.

You and Max and?

No, Max never lived here . He stayed at Golden Eagle.

Were you still married?

Yes, at that stage. But he was working. It was ski time and he was working. He was a very dedicated ski instructor and they didn't get any time off.

So that was the start of Bimblegumbie?

Yes, the start in 1978. In two years it will be forty years. My God. OK. This year it is forty years since we bought the land. Pretty good, isn't it?

The fortieth anniversary. Fantastic. What about where your mother slept. Where did she sleep in summer?

Over the years, at the end of every winter we had a little bit of money so we built something, or improved something, or changed something. It was all bed and breakfast to start with. My mother cooked dinners at night for guests. It started off quite small and then, organically, the buildings just grew. My mother and my daughter, until my daughter went to boarding school, moved from one room to another during winter, which was a

little bit hard, but it worked. My mother started the garden. She was passionate about the garden.

Going back to Simi, she went to Jindabyne Primary School?

She went to Jindabyne Primary School.



Simi Parker and friends - Left to right: (?) Alex MacDonald, Sam Plangger, Jamieson Young, Sarah Chapelle, Ms Ethrerington, Sarah Young, Katya Plangger, and Henry Young. Crackenback Farm 1978

And from there, when she went to high school?

There were no choices. Simi didn't want to go to Cooma and I couldn't drive her to the bus every morning because that was a very busy time for us with people trying to get up the mountains really early so it was never going to work. So she went to boarding school. She had the choice of going to Canberra Grammar or a Catholic boarding school at Yass. She liked the idea of the smaller school at Yass – we are not Catholic but she went there.

Did she go through to her High School Certificate?

No, not at that school, she ended up going to Chatswood High for one year, then she went to the International Independent School in Sydney and then she went to college. She has been working at Parliament House, now in IT. Since her first job she has been in the same building. How do you leave Parliament House? So she is still doing IT in different areas.

Has she found a partner?

She doesn't live with anybody at the moment but she has someone special in her life – a male. She has lots of friends in Canberra. She is not really passionate about skiing so she doesn't come home a great deal during the winter. She has come home and done a winter here, two years ago when she wanted to get away from her job in Parliament House in Canberra and try something different.

She didn't work in Sydney?

No.

Let's go back to your mother, moving her out of the bedroom – she sacrificed that comfort. She was passionate about the garden.

Absolutely. She was a very good cook, self taught but delicious and very healthy food. She cured herself of breast cancer, in so doing changed her diet and therefore my guests never ate any foods that were not healthy, though we tried not to let them know it.

Would you be so kind to describe what sort of dishes she came up with for the guests?

Lots of vegetables, nothing with too much sugar in it at all, all homemade, no preservatives, no greasy food at all, yes it was just really good yummy healthy delicious country food, a lot of flavour.

How old was your mother when she passed away?

My mother passed away when she was eighty eight years.

When did she get the breast cancer?

When she was sixty

And she had no treatment at all?

She had a major mastectomy. So when we bought this land, she was recovering from ray treatment – not chemotherapy – ray treatment. My mother and I were always close. She did go to live in Canberra when she was in her eighties because she could not release the reins. So I became the cook and I became responsible for everything and relinquish my mother from the mental torment of too much work as an older person.

Now what about the garden?

The idea of the whole garden, and the whole property, is to make it fit into the nature, to use compost, permaculture. We were in drought for twenty years or more so that taught you a lot, the hardship of no water. My mother grew a lot of herbs. I have a glass collection now to take over from where her geraniums were in the house because all the time because you are supposed to have colour, where she had lots of geraniums. So now I have a full colourful collection of glass in that window. My mother was driven. She was very driven by the property, by the guests. She had high standards. She was a driving force.

Who continues to work in the garden now where your mother left off?

Two years before my mother moved, and Craig came to work here. He is absolutely passionate about gardening. He is quite artistic too. So in the last twenty years – he has been here twenty years now – he has moulded and dealt with water, no water, permaculture, bush fire where we were totally burnt out. My mother was quite happy to hand over the gardening to him.

Tell me about the bushfire!

In 2003 the bushfires started in Victoria and they just started coming. They began in December 2002. They closed the road a week before they hit us in January 2003. They

closed the Alpine Way and they evacuated Thredbo and wanted everybody on the Alpine Way to evacuate. This was a week before the eve of the Canberra fires, which was a totally different fire. My daughter had come home and packed the car up with photos, which made it very hard for me to find photos after that, and other things of emotional value and took it back to Canberra, whereupon her street was burning at the same time.

So for a week we waited with the Thredbo Alpine Way closed. Our neighbour Jim Chapelle rang us and said "The fire is coming." You could see it coming because it had blown over the little saddle in the hill. So there was Craig and myself. We were ready. We were dressed in overalls and hats, with fire hoses ready. A young Japanese chap, an eighteen year old helper, staying with us and he refused to leave. So he stayed with us. We each had a fire hose. Those fire hoses had been laid in the ground when we built the little house over there and took the opportunity to lay the fire fighting system down in the ground just in case we ever needed it.

Where did the water come from to fight the fires?

We have got three five-thousand gallon tanks for fire fighting, that have always been there, just in case.

So the fire was coming?

The fire was coming. It came down the hill and I saw it land in the bush close and I told Craig to quickly "Go and put it out!" and of course it was very funny, because we realised that it was really only just like a little match. The whole place went up. It did take a few hours. We fought the fire. It blew over the road and then came back up the hill. So it came down the hill. It came back up the hill. The corner here stopped it from going to Sasha's Farm, but it came straight at us. So after a couple of hours we were totally surrounded. All the buildings were totally surrounded but we were very lucky, we had the fire hoses and there were three of us. Yes, we were very lucky.

How many hours was it before you could breathe again.

About 4.15 pm it started and at 7.45 pm, we knew that we had won.

Did you get any help from the Wollondibby Fire Brigade?

No, they were not game to come up the road. I guess they were scared they wouldn't get out.

What happened to your neighbours?

Crackenback Farm – they had the bushfire brigade there.

What about the houses down the road here?

Sasha's Farm over the road and Spike Milliken's – Spike was fighting the fire in another direction and his family had been evacuated – we tried to stop the fire from going across our road to get there and eventually someone came back in time to put out the fire that was close to their house. So that was good. Because of the geography here – we built on the ridge and we found out that after the fires that we had built in a perfect position for a fire.

A great credit to you.

The adrenelin is fantastic – of winning - of having a fire hose.

And afterwards you were probably exhausted for two or three days.

The come down terrible, especially when they send people who are not trained in – what do you call that department that goes around trying to help people in disasters? They are not trained and so when they come and yell at you after you have been burnt out and they yell at you “The fire is coming! You should leave” and they yell at you within three inches of your face, it is very unnerving. That affected me more.

So now with your garden and the surrounds, there is really no evidence that you experienced that massive fire around your place.

Only if you look at the regrowth, the wattles and the gum trees are all around the same height and they are much denser. So if we have a fire now, it will be harder. But Craig spends many, many days and hours, raking and clearing the main part around the house and the buildings.

Had you done that before the 2003 fires?

We had done that but there was less to clear than there is now. He had done that. He had raked because it was very dry.

What about Max?

We divorced in 1978. I think it was 1978 and he remarried ten years later.

Where did he live then?

He lived in Golden Eagle and his wife lived in Melbourne. She would come up and ski with him. When he retired from the ski school in Thredbo, he went to live in Melbourne and he built a house totally out of timber in Marysville. Unfortunately that house was burnt in the bush fires in Victoria.

Was he alive then?

No.

What did he die of?

Maxi died of some form of cancer but they never found the main part.

So there is now you and Simi, and Craig and Millie!

Yes. Millie is a bush girl. We go walking all around the mountains every day.

How far do you walk every day?

About an hour in the early morning, but not when I have guests. Reginald, the big dog – Craig’s dog – he has trained both of us to go for a walk and he loves going for a fast walk. Millie comes too. Her mother died this year – she was a beautiful dog – she was fifteen.

Tell me, you have recovered very well from an injury.

I have had three major injuries – I don’t know when I can ski again. With a broken Ascetabulum – the cuff into which the femur sits. I broke the cuff in Canada on ice seven years ago. I was all pinned back together again so they could send me home but the worst injury was breaking the femur just above the knee five years ago, I think now. That was a

major injury. I didn't do that skiing. I did that here putting wood on the fire at night. I just tripped and tripped with a big piece of wood but it didn't heal. I didn't have a good operation and so after two and a half years of major pain, I had a bone graft and then it started to heal. I had a different operation. It started to heal and then last year, for the first winter, I could walk.

Then in July last year, I slid down the mountain here and broke my tibia and fibula. I have got major injuries on the left hand side of my body, so I get a bit nervous about skiing. Someone has told me about these great skis that are a little bit wide – Kastle skis. Then another guest told me about something you can wear around your hip and leg, so that even if you don't have complete strength in that leg, you can still ski. So next year I might look at that. Even just for fun!

Is there anything you would like to add to your story?

Yes, I would like to add that Thredbo has been an absolute major part of my life. Yes a major part of my life. Some of the best evenings and times I have ever had, were in the Keller and running around the village from lodge to lodge, wishing people "Happy New Year!" The original owners of the lodges in Thredbo – the Europeans – were absolutely wonderful. I do miss the Europeans in the village. They brought a certain fascination and interest that Australians can only benefit from.

Yes, I was a Thredbo Girl.



Max and Pru Parker with Simi on the way!



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This is an agreement between the **INTERVIEWEE** and **THS** (please fill in your details):

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I have been asked and have agreed to be interviewed by THS, subject to this agreement and as part of the Museum's programs. The Museum has advised me that it wishes to preserve the Interview as part of THS's collection. Once the Interview is preserved at THS, I understand that it can be used by the Museum for a variety of purposes including, but not limited to, exhibition, research, education material, public presentations, publication, website, broadcast and transmission unless I place restrictions hereunder on any of those uses.

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