

THREDBO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

JANE & JEFF STRANEY – An Oral History

**Interviewed by Christina Webb,
410 Weston's Road, Crackenback, September 18th, 2016**



Jane & Jeff Straney

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JANE AND JEFF STRANEY – AN ORAL HISTORY

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This is Chrissi Webb. I'm sitting here talking to Jane and Jeff Straney at their home "Emu Ground" at the end of Weston's Road, high up on the top of the range between the Barry Way and the Alpine Way. It is 4,000 feet (1,200 metres) above sea level. If it was a little bit colder, it would really snow here today. The date is September 18th, 2016.

Jane and Jeff, just to place you in history. Jane, where did your grand-parents come from?

Jane: My grandparents were born in Australia

On the maternal or the paternal side?

Jane: Both families came originally from Scotland. My grandfather on the maternal side was head of Queensland Primaries. He played a major role in the early days of Qantas, at Winton.

And then they moved down to Brisbane, didn't they?

Jane: Yes. He was head of Queensland Primaries which was representing country people.

He was a politician then?

Jane: No. He was the head of Queensland Primaries, a big rural firm.

Jeff: Like Elders, Goldsborough Mort and that sort of thing. Queensland Primaries were like stock and station agents with branches all over the place.

And on the paternal side?

Jane: My grandfather was a surveyor in country Queensland back in the days when they used oxen and drays out in the western part of Queensland. I think he was at Surat. When my father was born, he and his mother left the camps and moved to Brisbane, and he was sent to Brisbane Boys College as a small boy where he stayed his entire school life. He was quite a sporting person. Mum and Dad had three daughters – I was the middle one.

Your mother's name was?

Jane: Campbell.

And your father was?

Jane: Cadell. We had a pretty normal growing up (as you did in those days) which were the late forties, early fifties.

You went to a primary school in Brisbane?

Jane: Yes. I went to Ascot State School. Following that I went to Clayfield College which was the sister school to Brisbane Boys College. It was an independent church school – actually Methodist, Presbyterian. I left there and went nursing for a time.

Jeff what was your background?

Jeff: I've got a history of the Straneys that goes back a hundred years. I can only remember just my grandfather. He had a property on the Lachlan River between Forbes and Condobolin at a place called Bedgerabong which means a big tree by the stream. Bedgerabong: the big tree; bong: the stream – the Lachlan. I grew up there on a farm. Grazing, irrigation, a bit of everything, it was part of a scheme called the Jemalong Irrigation Scheme which was broken up into blocks for settlers.

Was your grandfather a soldier settler?

Jeff: No, but the Jemalong Irrigation Scheme was like the Riverina. It was one big huge property of a million acres, then after the Second World War they cut it all up into irrigation properties. Each soldier got 650 acres which is the old one square mile.

On the maternal side, my mother was a Thompson. My grandfather was a Thompson on the sailing ships. He came out from Scotland and he was backwards and forwards. He ended up as a captain and he stayed in Australia. He was one of the few captains that could bring his own sailing ship into Sydney Harbour without a pilot. My grandmother married him in Australia.

He settled in Australia and used to sail between England and Australia, backwards and forwards, it was about a nine month trip. When he came to Australia he did coastal shipping, Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane. With that he was allowed to take his own ship in without a pilot because he did all this work on the Australian coast. He sailed square riggers.

Do you have any log-books

Jeff: We have got a hell of a lot about model ships he made. One took him six months to make, but he has got another one which is in the Maritime Museum that took six years to build. It was under full sail – it wasn't the Cutty Sark but it looked like the Cutty Sark. (The Cutty Sark was the fastest windjammer that used to come from England to Australia, bringing migrants out and taking wool back.)

A full pay load either way. You then grew up on the farm at Bedgerabong?

Jeff: Bedgerabong between Forbes and Condobolin on the Lachlan. Like all boys growing up on a farm, I went shearing.

Did you go to boarding school in Sydney

Jeff: No, just the local school in Forbes. I went shearing and things like that. I got sick of that, went to Sydney and worked in different jobs in Sydney – NSW Leagues Clubs – I did

a wine and spirits course at the technical college in Sydney and then I joined Qantas as a steward. In the meantime, I also did an apprenticeship as a carpenter.

Jane, you went nursing, where did you train?

Jane: I didn't last long at nursing. It was too much hard work for me! That was at Brisbane General Hospital, which for a seventeen year old was a bit of an eye opener. You were sent to nurse in the orthopaedic wards, infectious wards – where they had all the tetanus cases and things. So I left that, did a secretarial course, worked for an architect and then joined TAA as opposed to QANTAS. I flew with TAA for three or four years, going to New Guinea, Perth, Birdsville, Mt Isa, Darwin, all over Australia. Then I came down to Sydney and applied and got a job with QANTAS. That is when I met Jeff.

How did you come to meet Jeff?

Jane: We were on a flight to London and back. Jeff was a steward and I was a hostess, and the QANTAS pilots went on strike.

Which year was that?

Jane: 1968. We ended up having five days in Tehran, called Persia in those days.

Jeff: We went skiing whilst the pilots were on strike. Persia has got mountains just outside Tehran, that go up to 16,000 feet, brilliant skiing. I can show you some photos of the skiing. So Jane and myself first went ice skating, then skiing.

What was the name of the resort in Persia?

Jeff: There were two. One was called Shim Shak. There were two main resorts.

Jane: They were outright skiing places.

Were they close to the Cedars of Lebanon.

Jeff: No. Persia is right up on the Russian border, just sixty miles from the Russian border – the Caspian Sea.

Jane: That of course was when the Shah was in control.

Jeff: He built a ski resort there but I forget the actual altitude that it went up to, but it was three chairlifts to get up to the top of the mountain. So he had a six months ski season because early in the season, they would ride to the top of the mountain, then they would close it down and they would ski the lower two chairs. Then in the full season, they would just ski the bottom. As the snow retreated, they would open up the next one and the next one, and at the end of the season you could only ski the top of the mountain. That was when the Shah was there. Once Jane did an article for a magazine about it and a lady took her through the Shah's apartment.

Jane: There weren't many lodges up in the mountains because it was only 60 kilometres from Tehran, so it was mainly day skiing.

Jeff: It was brilliant, then the ayatollah Khomeini came in and everything closed, everything. Any way that is when we met.

Jane: In those days girls weren't allowed to be married when working for QANTAS, and we decided after a couple of trips to Thredbo, that we would like to build down here. So I resigned from QANTAS and Jeff had plans and things drawn up for the House of Ullr.

Why did you choose the name "Ullr"

Jeff: Ullr is the legendary Norse God of travellers and winter. In those days if you fancied a girl you gave her an Ullr medallion. You could buy these medallions. Ullr is normally depicted like a Father Christmas on skis with a bow and arrow. That was the big thing. If you fancied a girl you would buy her an Ullr badge.

Jane: The legendary god Ullr spreads a white blanket over the ground in winter. Of course, the name for a lodge is so important.

Jeff: There was Thor, Odin – he was one of the Norse gods.

So you married before you moved to Thredbo?

Jeff: No, we started building the lodge in late 1969

Jane: and we got married in 1971 before we opened the lodge. We married in Sydney and went for a skiing holiday to Falls Creek which had all this snow but it wasn't open because it wasn't the June Long Weekend.

Did you not realise that it wouldn't be open?

Jeff: No, we thought it would be because there was so much snow about. Thredbo was open.

Jane: Falls Creek didn't open until the June Long Weekend. It didn't matter how much snow they had.

Jeff: But I had been working on the Ski Patrol through the seasons, from 1964 until 1970 when I wasn't flying.

I understand you said that Jeff said to you "Would you like to build ski lodge and then will you marry me?"

Jane: I said "yes". That's right. Exactly how it was.

Jeff, tell me about the building of the House of Ullr? Who was your builder? Who was your architect?

Jeff: The architect when we first started it was a guy who was around here – he was a builder in Sydney called Geoff Goodwin. Jeff drew up the first set of plans, but he wasn't an architect, he was a builder – he had built blocks of flats in Sydney and things like that. There was a Swiss guy on the Thredbo Ski Patrol called Reine Walldenberger and he was a Swiss architect. He took Geoff's drawings which they wouldn't accept because they didn't have the correct ABC initials after his name but Geoff was a qualified builder. Reine used Albert van der Lee's office and he drew up the plans, and they were approved for the House of Ullr. So we submitted them and they accepted Reine's drawings.



Jeff and Jane Straney

Jane: Not to begin with because where the shops and the T-Bar buildings are, that is what we originally had our plans for.

Jeff: For the first site, we drew them up and submitted them, then KT called us in and said they had decided to do that development themselves (I won't go into the whole story.) But we had a conflict regarding the liquor licence and site. All was eventually sorted out with the new site being where the House of Ullr now stands. The company said they said they were going to do it. (Black Bear and Rudi's were the only licensees then.)

Back to the building, so you finally got a different site to the one you had asked for, and then you got a liquor licence.

Jeff: It was a wine bar licence in those days.

Was it a public restaurant?

Jane: It was a steak house with a wine bar.

You said you built it, who was on your building team?

Jeff: The guys that did the rock work were Ivo Deubler, Norbert and Ulf Kucharski – they did most of the rock work. Tony Renfors and Matti Hapasari were Finnish carpenters, myself. Jimmy Rose was our labourer – he was a Scottish instructor. The year we started was summer of 1969/70.

When did you finish?

Jeff: In 1971. It was quite funny because when we started on the second building site, we didn't realise that a creek came down through there. It ran underneath (now) Bernti's, at ten feet down we were still digging up tomato sauce bottles. The footings went down a bloody long way. It was a gully and they used it as a rubbish tip. It went down right beside the service station.



Did they divert the creek then? What happened?

Jeff: It was only a creek when it ran wet.

The House of Ullr

It would have been some sort of a drain

Jeff: It was just a little gully that came down the mountain from above Tyrola.

Did you have to divert it?

Jeff: No, they just put the highway through – the Alpine Way. By that stage there was a heap of lodges built in that area.

Then the road collapsed many years later.

Jeff: Yes.

So you opened in 1971. Who did the interior decorating?

Jeff: Jane, she did the white goods, etc, all that sort of stuff

Where did you get all your materials to decorate the lodge? Furnishings and everything?

Jane: I was on a pretty tight budget at the time. I think I had \$1,000 or was it \$2,000 to do each apartment, the stove, the fridge, the carpet, the curtains, the bedspreads, the linen.

Did you do a lot of sewing yourself?

Jane: I made the first set of curtains and decided that it was far easier to have them done professionally.

Whereabouts?

Jane: You are asking me things that were a long time ago. There were a couple of suppliers in Sydney who catered for motels and that sort of thing.

Jeff: Just another little thing, I will throw in, which did not apply only to us – back then but two or three years before that – the building suppliers for here were Ziggi Tietz at Berridale, apart from that there was Haines in Cooma at that stage but nothing in Jindabyne, for building materials and stuff. Ziggi was brilliant to the Thredbo people. (Many people were building in those days.) When we went there and worked out what we wanted (we bought everything through him even the cabinet making – there was a German guy as well who could make cupboards), Ziggi said to us “Jeff and Jane, don’t worry about bills. You just get it built and you can fix me up when you start earning money.” And that is the way it went for us and I believe for others too.

Jane: In those days everything was done on a hand shake. But we didn’t do the steak house then, that was later. We had these huge doors at the front which were supposed to be a garage, but of course, you only needed two inches of snow and you couldn’t use them. So they just sat vacant for a few years, then this area became the steakhouse.

It is important that I get to know the story of the building of the lodge, that is the main feature of your life in Thredbo. How many bedrooms did you have?

Jeff: There were thirteen self contained apartments.

And how many beds?

Jeff: Sixty two I think.

Did you ever extend that bed number?

Jeff: No.

Then the staff, how many staff did you employ?

Jane: Three girls in the lodge with me and then casual staff when we had the steak house.

Jeff: They were all local guys, Errol Hanlon, Bill Bloomfield – they were guys working on the mountain and at night they would become barmen and waiters.

Jane: The ski instructors used to come down and show their movies, and people sat around.

You said you built the lodge before you married, when was that?

Jane: 1971

Jeff: Jane worked for the company in the Resort Centre, in those days during the building of the lodge.

Jane: Jeff was building, I was working for the company.

Essentially you left QANTAS, the year you started building the lodge.

Jeff: 1969.

Jane: Probably the same year but earlier.

When did you begin working full time at the lodge?

Jane: February or March. Yes I think once I had a lodge of my own, the other lodge owners would have been a bit concerned that a bigger proportion of the bookings came our way.

Were you able to open in summer then?

Jeff: We opened twelve months of the year and in the early seventies we were nearly booked out each winter, by the end of February. It was not only us, all the lodges were the same. They would be booking for the next winter, because we were getting so much snow in those days. In Jindabyne there was virtually no accommodation except for Lake Jindabyne Hotel. There were a few lodges and houses.

All the night life in those days was in Thredbo - Thredbo and the pubs in Perisher. You went skiing, you stayed in the ski resort. And all the staff used to live in Thredbo.

Jane: You accommodated your own staff and that was when the tariff in off-peak winter was \$12 per person per night. In the steak house the salad bar, steak, an Idaho potato, a carafe of wine was \$4.75.

Jeff: And Irish Coffee. Because the idea of the Irish Coffee - in the steak house you got your carafe of wine, the steak, the salad bar and all the bits, but to get them out of the restaurant so that we

could get more people in the steakhouse, there was free Irish Coffee and it was served in the bar. As soon as they had finished their dinner, they would go down to the bar.

Did you have a new chef each season?

Jane: Oh no. It was cook your own.

And what about the breakfasts?



Ron Duncan and Jane Straney

Jane: We only did breakfasts for the buses because the apartments were self contained. They all had their own kitchens.

Jeff: But believe it or not, after we did that and opened the steak house, then the company opened a steak house in the Bistro.

Jane: The idea of the steak house actually came from Hawaii. In those days they used to have salad bars. That was an idea we picked up when we were both in QANTAS.

Jeff: We had a big griller going and the big exhaust fan, and that was it. You got a raw steak, a cooked Idaho potato and salad.

Jane: You got soup too. We didn't have a chef but we had a guy for dishwashing.

Jeff: They were all young, ski instructors or lift operators, or whatever.

Jane: They either worked behind the bar or prepared the salads, etc.

Jeff: So it was a good second job for the staff

And their accommodation, they already had it in the village?

Jeff: The Company had their own Valley Terminal, etc.

Jane: And quite often it was one or two of our house girls who worked at night and helped with the salads.

Where did most of your clients come?

Jeff: Summer clientele in those days were very much Melbourne, the rag trade - people from Melbourne.

Jane: There were a lot of Jewish people because they were used to having mountain holidays in summer, as opposed to Australians who were beach people. Yes, I think there were a few weeks in summer where you only took weekly bookings - between Christmas and about the 12th January. It was a very busy time.

It was Harold Droga, who was the man, who really pushed Thredbo for the summer because he came from Melbourne originally, I think

Tell me, did you have time to get a holiday?

Jane: Yes because from the end of October until Christmas, there was nothing.



Jane Straney relaxes, 1973

Jeff: For about six weeks, there was really just nothing. Everyone is sick of winter. It's gone. Everyone wants to go to Noosa or the Sunshine Coast.

Jane: The main maintenance was done in February, March. You had to be there because that was when people used to book too. They didn't wait until May or June to do their booking.

The length of the bookings?

Jeff: Sunday to Sunday, no weekends.

Jane: Sometimes early in the season or late in the season, you took bus groups just for Saturday nights. It was only in the off peak in the fringe of the ski season, that you took bus tours. They would walk into the lobby at 6 am on Saturday morning, accidentally drop their flagon of red wine in the lobby and you had to turn around and cook breakfast for thirty five of them.

Jeff: Because they used to come in early in the morning, drop their bags off, have breakfast and go up the mountain because people were in the apartments. They couldn't get into their rooms. People were supposed to leave by 10 in the morning but by that time all the bus kids would be up the mountain, skiing. Then they would come off the mountain and the rooms would be ready.

In those days there were no snowboarders, only skiing and a bit of langlaufing.

You could also go up the mountain and be pulled by the snow cats. There were snow cat tours on the Main Range.

Jane: Each year, I think we used to have a weekend in September we would take our regular clients up behind the snow cats.



**Jane and Jeff Straney snow cat skiing
on the Main Range**

For how many years did you operate the House of Ullr?

Jane: Only seven. It seemed like a long time when you were in your late twenties or early thirties but actually it was only seven years.

In which year did you sell the lodge?

Jane: 1978.

What did you do then?

Jane: We bought this little farm on the Alpine Way. We started buying back stuff in Manly. After we sold the House of Ullr, we didn't have any money before we sold the House of Ullr.

Jeff: I had a house at Curl Curl which I sold and bought a block of four flats in Manly. Then I converted them into six flats in Manly so we went back to Manly after quite a bit of wheeling and dealing.

When did you buy the Fullr Farm?

Jeff: We bought Fullr Farm whilst we were at Thredbo.

Did you ever live at Fullr Farm?

Jane: As soon as we sold the House of Ullr, we lived there and that was our base for thirty years, I suppose. We used to go to Sydney from there and renovate properties, or we had a little restaurant on the beach at Fairy Bower. I think that in the end we had about twenty four apartments and we sold all of them to do something in Hervey Bay which wasn't the smartest move we ever made, but there you go!

Tell me about Hervey Bay?

Jeff: We bought a waterfront property with a Council lease, and built a sort of semi marina and another restaurant, a seafood restaurant right up on the waterfront block at the top end of Hervey Bay.

Jane: We had that for about fourteen years.

Jeff: We sold it and came back down to Fullr Farm.

What were you running on Fullr Farm?

Jeff: We started off with cashmere goats and this led to Scottish Highland cattle.

Jane: There was more money to be made in village staff accommodation, once they stopped having them in Thredbo. Two thirds of our house used to convert to staff accommodation for three months of winter.

Jeff: It began as a shed. I bought a shed for \$700 in Sydney, as in just a big metal framed shed. In the meantime in a hurry, I built a little A-frame for Jane and myself to live in whilst we were backwards and forwards when we left Thredbo. Then we decided to build a two-bedroom apartment in this big shed. We built that. Then there was someone who couldn't get accommodation for their staff. So in the shed I built another four-bedroom apartment in this big shed. Then somebody else wanted an apartment, not virtually self contained, but there would be four bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom. So we had that for staff.

Jane: But only for the three months of winter.

Where did your farming equipment go?

Jane: I don't think we could afford much farming equipment.

Jeff: I had a little bull dozer.

Which year was this?

Jeff: The late '80s.

Jane: But we had done all the things in Manly prior to Hervey Bay.

When did you move up here from Fullr Farm?

Jane: Only seven years ago, in 2009, because that was 100 acres and this, Emu Ground was 300 acres. Being 300 acres, Jeff could carry more Highland cattle. Also being right on the Alpine Way – we decided we would be off the main road.



Michelle's staff Lucy & Isa, Jane Straney & Michelle Reichinger

From whom did you buy the property and when did you purchase it?

Jeff: We bought it in the late '80s from Trevor Thompson's father, Joe. We owned this and then we sold this to Bernti's lodge which called it Emu Ground. Several years later we again bought it.

Was it at a reduced cost?

Jeff: Oh no, it was probably pretty OK. Things were selling around here. The first subdivision here was the Wollondibby one which was done by Harrison, Jackson and Doc Shedden.

The Wollondibby Estate?

Jeff: Yes, that was twenty two 100 acre blocks, a total of 22,000 acres. Then Joe Thompson, he owned all this area. They kept the bottom part where Judy and Trevor live now.

Jeff: When we first came to Thredbo (when Jane was working at the hotel), we stayed where Norbert used to live, on the Barry Way there used to be a little stone cottage like the one at Wollondibby, we used to live in that whilst we were building the House of Ullr. Jane would go up and go to Beryl Clifford's lodge, have a shower and clean herself up and go and work for the company.

Jane: Well we moved into Norbert's stone cottage when we came up from our honeymoon.

Jeff: We came to Thredbo the long way round, the original access to this property was on the Barry Way. There was nothing in this old stone hut and we used to have to go out and light the fire first thing in the morning, pick up the coals and hold them under the rain water tap to get some water. It was very basic. I think every night we would go out in those days, we would go out shooting foxes because fox skins were bringing about \$50 a head. It looked like it was the only time that it looked like having control over the feral foxes, when the fox skins were worth big money. The reason why they were bringing in big money was that rabies, most foxes were from Germany in the fox farms and the rabies got into the fox farms and they had to destroy all these foxes. Suddenly "Who's got foxes?" so we were getting \$50 a skin.

They were the red foxes?

Jeff: Yes, the Australian red foxes which is the biggest scourge of Australian flora and fauna. Cats and foxes, they should be a \$100 a head and it would solve half the problem.

Jane: At lambing time especially because the foxes have no natural predators. From memory I think we bought this place back from the bank for about three times for what we sold it for. Well the house had been added to it.

Jeff: We put the road in to sell it off and Trish actually put the house on it, but nothing like this. We took the roof off and redid the kitchen. This sunroom was the back of the house. We changed it quite a bit over two or three years.

Did Trish and Glenn ever live up here?

Jane: Yes. Trish did, also Albert but I don't believe Glenn did. There is a little apartment there at the end which was originally part of the house but they closed it off for Albert.

Jeff: They ran it like a lodge. They had it for staff first off. They used to do all Bernti's laundry here. That is why we have a huge laundry.

Where does the water come from up here?

Jeff: Here, a bore and rain water from the huge roof area. The bore never runs dry. There is a creek that runs down the back of the property but that is a kilometre down the back. It goes down towards Trevor Thompson's on the Barry Way side.

Now you are up here and you've got

Jeff: Bower birds, five border collies and fifty head of Scottish Highland cattle. They are pretty self sufficient. Ray, he's been around for years, he does rock work. He worked for Ronnie Duncan, ski tuning and all that sort of stuff for many years. He is actually a carpenter by trade, so in winter he helps with the cattle.

Jane and Jeff I would like to thank you very much for allowing me to interview you. As you know I am doing this on behalf of the Thredbo Historical Society. It will be transcribed.

Are you happy for it to be transcribed and be available for people researching Thredbo in years to come and it will be available for people to read in the Ski Museum?

Jane: I would be very happy.

Oral History Interview Agreement

In this agreement, the interviewee assigns copyright to Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated. Your recorded interview will become part of Thredbo Historical Society's collection, where it will be preserved for future researchers. The Thredbo Winter Sports Museum is grateful for your participation in this oral history project.

This is an agreement between the **INTERVIEWEE** and the **Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated** (please fill in your details):

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I have been asked and have agreed to be interviewed by Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated, 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 Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated's collection. Once the Interview is preserved at Thredbo Historical Society Incorporated, 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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