

# May's modesty masks a marvellous life

by Lindel GREGGERY

*At first glance, you wouldn't pick that self-effacing Far North Queensland Brahman breeder May Smith OAM has led a life that is as dramatic and interesting as something you would read in a Bryce Courtenay novel.*

Seventy-four-year-old May, who features prominently in the *Who's Who of Australian Women*, was born in Cooktown in September 1934 to Irene and Pat Upton of Bamboo Station, near Coen. Tragically, her father died just 10 months after her birth, after being struck on the head by an Aborigine while out fencing.

"My mother and an Aboriginal stockman carried my father on a makeshift stretcher between two horses and rode for 22 miles to Musgrave Station for help, carrying me and my three-year-old brother on their laps," she said.

"My father was taken by light aircraft to Cooktown Hospital but died of a slow brain haemorrhage 10 days later at the age of 34."

A visit back to Bamboo Station last year, which has now been subdivided, reminded May of how difficult that fateful journey was.

"It was the most awful country, there were no roads and it was so isolated. I really appreciated the trials and tribulations my poor mother must have gone through living there."

She also discovered on that trip that the perpetrator of the attack, who had been caught and sentenced to five years on Palm Island, was still alive and now in his 90s, living in north Queensland.

After the murder, May's mother, who was four months pregnant at the time of her husband's death, moved with her children into Mossman and remarried five years later. Her mother was the daughter of Ernest Neill who owned Koolburra Station in Cape York Peninsula and the family were great friends with the pioneering Shepherd family from neighbouring Musgrave Station.

"Mary Shepherd was mum's bridesmaid when she married my father and during the 1940s four of the Shepherd children came to Mossman and lived with us during the school months," said May.

Her fondest memories are of spending the school holidays at Musgrave Station, despite the arduous journey to get there.

"We had to travel to Cairns by bus and then up to Cooktown in a very small plane and then we caught the rail motor from Cooktown to Laura," she recalls.

"From there we rode on the Shepherd's T Model Ford truck, sitting on 12 months supply of groceries for the station. The only track there was followed the telegraph line and it took us two days to travel the 105 miles from Laura to Musgrave."



*Phil and May Smith at this year's World Brahman Congress in Texas*

Because of the wet season, the trip back was even longer, taking four days on horseback to get from Musgrave to Laura.

May remembers galloping through the bush at Musgrave and skinny dipping in the Hann River with someone stationed on the bank as a lookout for crocodiles.

The idyllic holidays stopped when she was 13 and finished school. Although offered a scholarship for boarding school, her stepfather didn't believe in further education for girls, so May worked at the local telephone exchange until she was 16 then entered nursing. Because she was unable to be registered as a nurse before the age of 21, May travelled to Bundaberg to complete her midwifery training and at age 22 married Phil Smith.

"Phil was born in Bundaberg and he came to visit his uncle in Mossman for one week in 1953, met me and stayed," said May.

Phil worked at the Mossman Mill as Foreman Carpenter before going out on his own as a builder in 1962.

The couple had two daughters and May spent 14 years out of nursing, however she was by no means idle. When a friend's relative was shot and there was no access to blood products in Mossman, May started up the Red Cross Blood Bank in the town and was convenor of the service from 1964 to 1972 and a Red Cross member until 1999.

In 1972, at age 38, May returned to the Mossman Hospital where she stayed for the next 30 years as Director of Nursing. An ongoing quest for knowledge led May to complete her Diploma of Nursing Administration, followed by a Bachelor of Arts, but it was her Masters of Science that really propelled her onto the world stage. Her thesis was on *Mycobacterium ulcerans*, a flesh eating bacterium induced skin ulcer related to leprosy and tuberculosis. Although found in 30 countries and known overseas as Buruli ulcer, it only occurs in two regions of Australia, between Mossman and the Daintree River, where it is known as Daintree ulcer, and in south-east Victoria, where it is called the Bairnsdale ulcer. While quite rare in Australia, with only 66 cases in 2006, overseas the incidence is much higher, especially in rural West and sub-Saharan Africa where there have been tens of thousands of cases in the past 20 years. The ulcer is treated by combination drug therapy, surgical removal of dead tissue and surrounding areas, followed by skin grafts.

"They've never been able to find out how you get it," said May. "Although it can be found in the ground and in insects, the source has still not been found."

As a member of the International *Mycobacterium Ulcerans* Study Team and World Health Organization Buruli Ulcer Group, May visited the prestigious Pasteur Institute in Belgium and was invited to present findings from her thesis at conferences in Melbourne, the United States, Africa and Switzerland.

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In 2002 she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her services to nursing and her research into Mycobacterium ulcerans.

"Oh that," she jokes when asked about the Queen's Birthday honour. "I'm not really into things like that, but Phil thinks it's wonderful."

May would much rather talk about the course she instigated that enables rural and remote nurses to administer drugs to patients and which is now being adopted in other states. Or about the training she initiated to enable nurses to operate ECG machines and defibrillators to provide emergency coronary care in rural hospitals.

"I still dream about nursing, you know," she said.

After leaving the hospital system in 2000, May worked for the Royal Flying Doctors Service, running the Quality Improvement Enhancement Program for two years, and then worked from home as a nurse educator until last year when Phil became ill.

May said she was now channeling all her energy into her beloved Upton Park Brahman stud, founded six years ago on 280 hectares in the mountains at Julatten near Port Douglas.

"We previously ran a Brahman/Charolais cross herd of 350 head quite successfully but the ticks started getting into us," said May.

"It was also starting to get hard work for older people and we thought we would retire and start up a Brahman stud."

They initially bought a Cherokee blood herd from Ron Bauer but since 2004 have focused on Hudgins genetics, using artificial insemination and embryo transfer over nine top quality donor females purchased from Brahrock, Lancefield and FBC M studs for up to \$8500 each.

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To date they have branded 55 ET calves using high quality semen from Australia and the United States.

May does the AI herself, after gaining her qualifications by default.

"Years ago Phil went to the Gold Coast to do an AI course and I went as an observer. After the first morning, after looking at all the uteruses in buckets, Phil said 'they can jam that', so because we'd paid \$500 and driven all the way to the Gold Coast I ended up doing the AI course."

May is passionate about securing the best semen available but was becoming increasingly frustrated with the limited availability of semen from JD Hudgins Ranch in Texas.

"I sent an email to Bubba Hudgins and (jokingly) said that 'if you were in Queensland we'd have the CJC onto you', as this was supposed to be free enterprise yet all the JDH semen was tied up."

"He said, 'well, you've certainly drawn my attention to this matter' and it's not going to happen any more."

To date the Smith's artificial breeding programs have used semen from JDH Mr Deeds Manso (imp), Aristotle, Mr V8 440/4 and 666/3, JDH Mr Ebenezer Manso and JDH Mr Manso 946/3, among others.

May is currently on the lookout for a tenth donor female and would also love to import a bull from the United States if the protocols allow.

Upton Park has sold registered cattle at Mareeba and Charters Towers, peaking at \$6000 for heifers, \$5500 for embryos and \$3500 for bulls.

May said the highlight of their "cattle life" had been attending this year's World Brahman Congress in Texas.

"What a delight to meet up with the people both in America and those from Australia who have done so much towards improving the Brahman herd, and to travel with such wonderful company on the way." 