

# Good-bye to a Territory legend

> By Mary Groves

IN THE early hours of Wednesday July 31, Joe Groves, a great Territory pastoral pioneer passed on, leaving his wife Mary, his daughters Paula and Mary Lyn, his sons Joey, Stephen, Col and sixteen wonderful grand-children.

Joe was a drover, a cattleman, and a horseman of great repute, who arrived in the Territory from Queensland in 1959 originally to buy Mataranka Station.

Although that fell through, he could see the prospects and returned as a horse-breaker and a wild stock contractor.

Contracting in those days was done on horse-back by throwing huge bulls by the tail, bringing up the coachers and (horse) shouldering those bulls into the coachers to quiet them.

Living in the swag with only Aboriginal stockmen as company, Joe soon learned to appreciate their lore and bush savvy and worked with them to become very successful in retrieving hard-won, but great results from the animals that roamed the huge tracts of untouched land that comprised what was considered Australia's last frontier.

He fell in love, not only with the place but with the little lass from the Mataranka store who became his wife, business partner and mother to their four children.

Part instigator of the inaugural Australian Rough Riders Association, Joe would work only long enough to compete, successfully, in the southern rodeo circuit, but his carefree life soon became a thing of the past when the babies arrived.

The roaming life on horseback and in the swag soon became impractical and gradually, caravans were introduced.

As the business grew, trucks and 4WD's cut down as bull-catchers became more practical, but he never grew out of billy tea.

Always a man with great foresight, Joe not only pioneered vehicle-catching but was one of the first to use Bell helicopters for mustering and the business started to blossom.

One of the last of the old time drovers, he ran away from home at twelve to go droving.

He continued droving until he took the last mob to leave the territory, 1000 head from Moroak Station to Dajarra in Queensland on April 18



1962.

He completed this drive across the Barkly with only two Aboriginal stockmen as company, miraculously arriving after many months, all intact.

This historical journey and his Mataranka days has been documented in the memoir, 'An Outback Life' by Mary Groves.

In the early 70's Joe bought My Dream, a Bucks King filly, as a rodeo pick-up horse.

His mates talked him into racing her and she won everything she started in, forcing others to buy better horses to beat her, consequently, registered racing in the Territory became reality.

When Joe won a cup, the after-parties were great fun.

No one parties like a bushy. Joe's impressive racing string became successful with his daughter, Paula, his trainer while he earned the bucks to support his now obsession.

He won cups and broke track records from Alice to Broome to Darwin.

His dream was to win the Darwin Cup.

Beaten by a whisker on many occasions, sadly, his wish was not fulfilled - but, because he passed away during the Darwin Carnival and his service was held on Cup day, the family has concluded that, if he couldn't be there physically, he had

planned to be in Darwin in spirit.

Those that knew him will probably feel his presence, or remember him yarning around the bar with the boys, wearing the customary cowboy hat at a jaunty angle, or tangling with some trouble maker in the members bar.

He never suffered fools lightly.

He was almost deaf, a conquest in itself, but could lip-read, much to the surprise and detriment of some.

After the last race on Cup day was always a favourite time for the whole racing fraternity to relax on the lawns outside the bar.

In the tropical evening breezes they would socialize and mull over the exciting events of the day, and

strategize for the next Darwin Cup that could never come soon enough.

Joe managed Fitzroy station in the 70's then, after buying Prices Springs, was talked into catching buffalo for the export market by Sid Parker.

After the nerve-wrecking inaugural load, he went on from strength to strength as a buffalo harvester, using the bionic arm and helicopters.

He was soon trucking out up to 3000 head a week.

When Woolner Station became available, Joe took another leap of faith to purchase that and we lived happily there for eight years.

During this time, J&M Groves secured the first of their cattle road-trains and helicopters which grew into the large livestock haulage fleet managed by Joey.

Part of the successful family enterprise was Paula, managing the Woolner Wildlife Helicopter Safaris using the fleet of helicopters that Stephen eventually managed. A sense of humour was a pre-requisite to employment with Joe. He had a mischievous sense of humour and was not averse to setting the cat amongst the pigeons with neighbouring property managers when mustering. The dreaded BTEC decimated the buffalo herds on Woolner forcing its sale and Joe went into retirement for about six weeks. Not surprisingly, boredom drove him to buying an ex-peanut farm on the Daly River as a hay and fattening block to run export steers, so once again he had intuited the industry's direction.

Joe's hard life finally caught up with him and his back gave out. While residing on the Gold Coast with family for the past six years, his heart has always faced north. He loved to feed his wild birds and enjoyed his grandkids, but I am sure that his spirit will now follow his heart back to the land that he loved and helped to settle in those wild pre-IT days, before television, mobile phones and internet banking... In those days a man's handshake was his contract. They were sociable days, when neighbors' would come for a barbeque and leave three days later. But life moves on, leaving only memories and legends. Joe leaves us with a legend of a loving husband and father, loveable rogue, great cattle and horseman, a thorough gentleman and above all, a true Territory pioneer.

**Early General News  
deadline is 12noon Friday.  
Classified deadline is  
1.30pm Monday for the  
Wednesday edition.**

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