

NEWS

An extraordinary life

THIS year, the region lost one of its own: Dr Goff Letts passed away on March 10 at 95.

But the loss was felt just as keenly in the Top End; Dr Letts led the Northern Territory, as the first Majority Leader in 1974, has been credited with controlling the cattle disease bovine pleuropneumonia and spearheaded crocodile management, saving them from feared extinction.

Friends described him as an inspirational leader, a man of substance, and a worker of good. Colleagues held him in the highest regard. He lived an extraordinary life, but it is best described in his memoirs in his own words, "Throughout it all, life's rules and lessons were being learned. Foremost among them was the recognition that family values and kinship are the keystones of our society."

The Goff Letts story began in Donald in Victoria on January 18, 1928. It was a life he described as a happy one.

But it included delivering the local newspaper, which his father owned and edited, on frosty mornings, with only the baker's oven to stop off and warm by, sleeping in a tent in the garden for a cool breeze on hot nights, burning cow pats to keep the mosquitoes away, and doing everyday chores like getting coal for the fire. One of four boys, he slept in the sleepout, a closed-in verandah with fly-wire screening instead of glass for windows. It was common practice as it doubled as an extra bedroom in homes during that era. He recalled his mother would come in at night and brush the fine dust from their eyes. But he wrote, "That sleepout produced a medical doctor, a Veterinary



Dr Goff Letts - an outstanding life - but he never forgot the values of his country upbringing. File Photo

Surgeon, an award-winning journalist, and an Australian Diplomat."

Despite the country going through the War and the Depression, he said living in Donald was a wonderful life.

After receiving a scholarship to attend university, he began his professional life as a veterinarian in Victoria.

He married Joyce Crosby in 1952, and soon after, an appointment in the Northern Territory beckoned.

This move north included roles in conserving and managing the buffalo herds in the Northern Territory, a political career, saving crocodiles, camping rough, leeches, scorpions, and snakes, swimming naked in streams to collect mussels, black billy tea, and the birth of three of the six Letts children.

He was soon appointed district veterinary officer for the northern region in Darwin and followed this with

the appointment of Assistant Director of the Animal Industry Branch. He chaired the Northern Territory Wildlife Council and was a member of the Lands Board from 1964 to 1970.

His work in the Northern Territory led to his appointment on the veterinary team formed by the Commonwealth government to attack the rare livestock disease bovine pleuropneumonia.

Again his childhood in Donald and his veterinary career combined led him to areas of conservation. His relationship with the Aboriginal communities was best described in a letter home to his parents. After spending time with an Aboriginal community in the outback, he wrote, "This is a place of flashing smiles and unbounded friendship. In two weeks, I have not heard a baby cry. These people, who place little store on material values, enjoy

a level of happiness that few white suburbanites will ever know."

His political career began in 1970. John Flynn AM wrote in the foreword of Mr Letts's memoirs, "Frustration with remote control of Northern Territory affairs by Canberra prompted a move into politics, and he became known as the Father of Self Government. He was the First Majority Leader of the Northern Territory. He was the architect of a merger between the Liberal Party and his own Country Party, which is how the Country Liberal Party acquired its name. He was in office as the Premier of the NT from 1974 to 1977, the Country Party from 1966 to 1974, the Country Liberal Party from 1974 to 1981, and as an Independent from 1981, according to political records. He described 1974 as the most turbulent of his life, good and bad.

In the first Legislative Assembly election, 17 of the 19 seats were won by the Country Liberal Party, two by Independents, while Labor failed to score one win. The CLP held office for two decades.

Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin while he was in Donald visiting his parents. He returned to a flattened city with two of his children missing.

As the Majority Leader and Chief Secretary duty called, he bathed at a fire hydrant in the street, tried calming the community on the ABC, and then set about restoring Darwin. His children were found safe and sound three days later.

During his time in politics, the Territory Legislative Council passed a new law to enable Aboriginals, individually or in groups, to get legal tenure over land in reserves, including Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt. After returning south to

Victoria from the Northern Territory in 1984, he served on many boards and administrative positions.

"History was made during the nine years I chaired the Wimmera Mallee Regional Water Authority. A water-saving pipeline system replaced a wasteful channel distribution network," he wrote. This project was credited with bringing water to the Wimmera at a crucial time in the region.

His eulogy described him as a man of fun; He danced down the aisle with the minister after Church one Sunday. He wore a black ballgown at a community event to celebrate a young Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. But he was wise; he knew when to speak when to be silent, and how to silence a room along with everything else he did. He mingled with the Queen when she visited the Northern Territory and hosted a visit by Prince Charles and Princess Diana when they visited Uluru.

To list his accomplishments and the official offices he held during his life is a book and cannot be done justice here. When he wrote his memoir 'Where Brolgas Dance', the first of two books he planned to write, it was as much to record what he had done but so events and circumstances would not be forgotten and so that things that had not been recorded would be. His memoirs explore his extraordinary life as a vet, conservationist, politician, newspaper editor, author, and innovator, yet represent aspects of his life that were most important to him - family and nature.

He is survived by his wife Joyce, children Ewan, Jan, Marion, Malcolm, Jack, Fiona, and families.

- Sheryl Lowe