

Margaret Gwendoline Keats MBE BVSc

Margaret Keats was born into a large pastoral family at *Weilmoringle* – a sheep station north-east of Bourke, in northern NSW, in 1895. She was educated at the Melbourne Church of England Girls Grammar School from which she matriculated in 1916, with passes in English, French, Latin, German, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry Physics and Chemistry. This gave her entrance to the four year course in veterinary science at the first Australian Faculty of Veterinary Science at Melbourne University.

Although taking several years to complete her first year subjects she passed all other years without problems and completed the course in 1922. She obtained unconditional registration to practise in her own right from the Veterinary Board of Victoria, becoming number 194 on their register, and formally graduated on 21 April 1923.

Returning to the family property at *Gonn* Station, near Barham on the NSW bank of the Murray River, she embarked on her avowed ambition to look after their own animals – an ambition perhaps inspired by her childhood experiences on a property affected by economic depression and the unsuitability of some of the sheep breeds then available to withstand the rigours of the Australian climate and soils.

However, knowledge of her new skills soon spread and she established a single-handed practice in north west Victoria, extending from the South Australian border, along the Murray to Balranald and south to Bendigo, from a base in Kerang. For many years she was assisted by one of their stockmen, Fred Schramm. She remained the only veterinarian in the area until the 1950s and became well known to farmers throughout the area – often assisting those severely affected by the natural disasters and economic depression of the 1930s by reducing or remitting her fees. She was so well respected that, when times improved, her support was recognised through several presentations from farmer groups and the award of Membership of the British Empire in 1959.

As there were no government veterinary services in the area until the 1950s and no support from the government for veterinarians in private practice undertaking stock inspection, she achieved the singular honour of being appointed a Border Inspector of Stock in 1925. To provide the necessary legal authority to inspect stock crossing the river at Gonn Crossing she was appointed a Commissioner of the High Court, as women in Victoria were still unable to act even as Justices of the Peace. Through this appointment she became the first woman veterinarian in Australia to conduct government business.

Following World War 1 the Victorian Mallee districts became increasingly urbanised through the establishment of soldier settlement schemes and townships. Horses gave way to tractors and trucks for farm power and transport, and people kept dogs and cats as pets. Margaret adapted to these changes, being keen to try new techniques and being frequently one of the first to do so. She kept abreast of scientific advances by regularly attending meetings of the fledgling Australian Veterinary Association – driving to Melbourne and back once a month – and by talking with locums, whom she employed in the 1950s. In 1962 she employed a permanent assistant – Emily Maudsley – but remained in practice until her death on 6 April 1970, aged 75.

In addition to her devotion to caring for animals she was a successful owner and breeder of racehorses, three times winning the Kerang Cup with *Fight On* – a horse she had bred. Her skills in equine surgery were acknowledged when she demonstrated a standing cryptorchidectomy on a horse before her colleagues at an Australian Veterinary Association meeting in 1965. Through her professional life she remained the honorary veterinary surgeon to the Kerang, Swan Hill, Moulamein and Gunbower Turf Clubs, the Kerang Trotting Club and the Kerang Agriculture Society.

The Mallee communities remember her through the collection of Keats memorabilia at the Kerang Historical Society Museum. The practice she established in 1922 has remained in the hands of women veterinarians. She is remembered by the profession as one who was utterly dedicated to it, becoming a role model for men and women entering rural practice and showing that there could be a long-term future for women in the profession.

Reference and Further Reading

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October 2002