

OBITUARY: Don Maskey, AM

PROMINENT: Don Maskey at home after receiving news of his AM award in 2004. Picture: Peter Stoop



Hunter Thomas Donald Maskey, AM,

1937-2015

HARD-working meat industry icon and much loved family man Don Maskey will be remembered as a larger-than-life storyteller who could find the humour in any situation.

The prominent Novocastrian and prolific *Newcastle Herald* letter writer passed away at his home on January 6, a day after his 78th birthday.

His wife Libby said his life was “just one big story.”

“Don used to always say, ‘I could never read a book, but I could write one,’” she said. “And he was just so funny.”

He would have loved to have heard some of the comments from the “young ones” at his funeral.

“They know Don Don went to heaven, and that the angels came to get him, and so at the funeral one of them said, ‘So what’s in the box?’.

“Now Don would have loved that!” Libby said.

“He would’ve said something like, ‘Well it’s not chocolate’.

“He just loved family.”

Don did eventually put pen to paper to reflect on “a good life, well spent” in a family memoir.

Born at Silverton’s Hospital on January 5, 1937, Don was named after his father, Hunter Harvest “Denny” Maskey, as well as legendary Australian cricketer Sir Donald Bradman.

The story goes that Denny wouldn’t leave for the hospital until after Bradman had scored his century.

It was touch and go as to what would happen first – Bradman’s century or Don’s arrival.

Don grew up in the hard years at the end of the Great Depression. He had an older sister and brother, Gloria and John.

The family lived in a shack at “Tin Hole”, near the Fernleigh Track tunnel.

His mother Margaret “Nellie” Maskey made all of their clothes, including underwear, which she made out of inner flour bags.

The family moved to Bennetts Green, and Don’s father established a piggery at the back of the property, now known as Ringal Valley.

Don left school in a hurry to “get on with the business of life”, and while trying to break into the meat industry, he took a job delivering bread from a horse-drawn cart.

The job only lasted two weeks. Rain initially smudged customer names in his order book, and then his horse Toby wandered off and pulled the fence he was tethered to with him.

Finally, Toby bolted across the main highway with a helpless, yelling Maskey on top of the wayward cart.

Don was only 20 years old when he started his own butcher shop in Patrick Street, Merewether, in September 1957. His father helped with the money while he saved what he could by selling tomatoes by the side of the Pacific Highway each weekend.

Eventually, Don built up the business and owned a chain of butcher shops.

He rose to become chairman of the National Meat Retail Council.

During the 1960s, Don was among the meat industry leaders who successfully lobbied government to establish a tech – now TAFE – course for apprentice butchers in NSW.

In June 2004, official recognition came for the plain-talking, no-nonsense, retired butcher when he became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the Queen’s Birthday honours.

He was acknowledged for services to the meat industry, particularly for education, training and apprenticeships and for tirelessly promoting the industry.

Since his passing, the Australian Meat Industry Council has announced the Don Maskey Perpetual Trophy will be awarded each year to the NSW Apprentice of the Year.

Don was married three times. To Maureen in 1958, Lucinda in 1974, and Libby in 1996.

He had two children and three grandchildren.

“He was like a magnet to people,” Libby said. “We always had a house full of family and friends.”

They had made such a good team because they were so alike. They had the same values and lust for life.

When diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension, the couple “didn’t sit back and let it happen”.

“We fought to the last,” Libby said. “But when Don could no longer go out to the world, the world came to him.

“People flew in from all over the place to see him. The staff at hospital used to fight over who was going to look after him.”

On his prolific letter writing to the Newcastle Herald, Libby said Don had been a “man with an opinion.”

“He’d sometimes run things by me and he mightn’t have gotten much of a reaction, so the Herald was the next best thing,” Libby laughed.

“He was an amazing person.”