

May Bennett

Mother, Matriarch but Above All a Great Teacher

BY JOHN MOELAERT

The tree-lined driveway winds its way to a neatly manicured lawn with flowering bushes. A brook babbles nearby. The trees shield the seven and one-half acre estate from the traffic noise. A sense of peace is inescapable.

Traveling around the last curve, the old mansion suddenly rises before one's eyes. It stands with dignity, but without vanity. It exudes a utilitarian strength without opulence. It shares many fine qualities with May Bennett whose home it was for 52 years. Built in 1912 for former Kelowna Mayor F. R. E. de Hart it has become a green oasis of tranquility, seemingly left behind by time and situated right in the midst of a city hustling and bustling with the effects of yet another construction boom. It is not possible to enter the house without stepping into history. Photographs and mementos of days long past, stately furniture and dark walls propel the visitor into a time warp.

Annie Elizabeth May Richards was born into a Scottish immigrant mining family in Wellington on Vancouver Island on May 27, 1897. She died in Kelowna on September 4 at the age of 92.

May's life, which spanned nearly a century, was as fascinating as a spellbinding novel. Rev. Albert Baldeo summed it up well during the memorial service that was attended by nearly 300 people in her honour at St. Paul's United Church: "This is not a time of darkness or tragedy, but a celebration of

a life lived to the fullest."

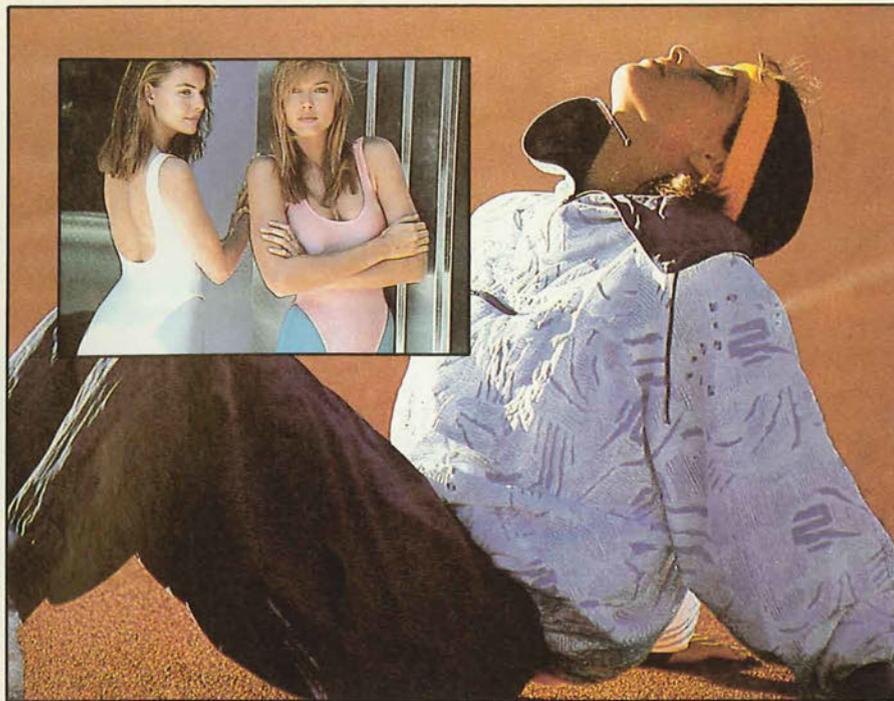
May indeed lived her life to the fullest. She was no stranger to hardships, but instead of breaking her spirit they strengthened it. While still a young girl, she and her brother and sister fell victim to a scarlet fever epidemic which was sweeping Vancouver Island. A complication developed in the form of a large abscess on the back of her neck and the family doctor used her father's jackknife right in the kitchen to excise the swelling.

Shortly after the family moved to Edmonton and at the age of only 17, May started teaching in a one-room prairie school house. "Mother taught grade one to eight and had 40 to 50 students," recalls Anita, May's oldest child. "Remembering those experiences, including a bumpy two and one-half mile horseback ride to school each day, she felt students and teachers today have no reason to complain."

At her church she met a neatly dressed fellow with a tweed cap who worked at a hardware store. They hit it off right from the start. Apart from May, the hardware business and politics were the key interests of this man, three years her junior. She married W. A. C. (Cecil) Bennett on July 11, 1927 and was married to him almost 53 years. They bought their



Newly elected premier casts admiring glance at his wife on the grounds of their Kelowna home (1952).



"A SIGN OF THE TIMES" - An Exclusive Sportswear Store for the Nineties Woman."

- Fitnesswear
- Racquetwear
- Leisurewear
- Golfwear
- Warm-ups
- Sports Bras
- Skiwear



SPORTS' FOR HER
Women's Sportswear Specialists

#305 - 2339 Hwy 97N
Dilworth Centre
Kelowna
861-3714

"Losing 45 pounds was a cinch."



The Diet Center program transformed Liz Doggett from a depressed, overweight, stay-at-home into an attractive aerobics instructor.

"Diet Center makes it easy," Liz says. "I had investigated all the other 'diet' programs, but there was no comparison. Diet Center gives you personal attention and sound nutrition. Since I lost weight at Diet Center, every day is exciting and happy. I feel better physically as well as mentally."

Diet Center can change your life. Call today for a free consultation.

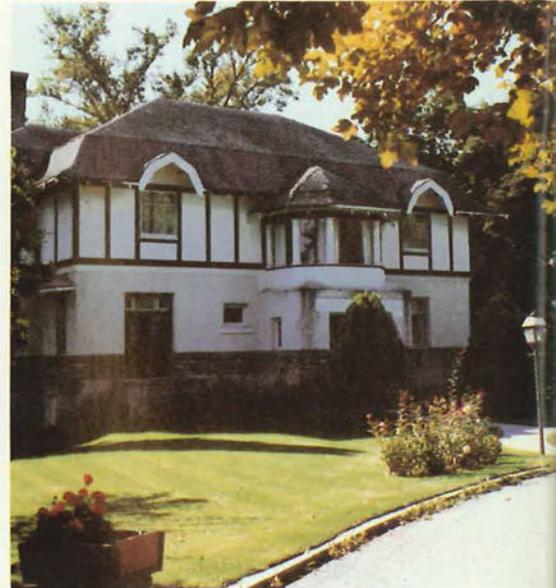
Diet Center
The weight loss professionals.

© 1986 Diet Center, Inc. Weight loss varies with each individual.

#105 - "The Courtyard" 1449 St. Paul Street - Kelowna · 762-2500
#208 - 483 Ellis Street - Penticton · 493-4066

first store shortly after and soon May was busy minding the business as well as their first-born, Anita.

The Depression made things very difficult and they decided to move to B.C. They bankrolled the trip by selling everything they could do without (including Anita's ragdoll) and headed west in the family car. They settled in Kelowna where Cecil bought a hardware store. Sales were



Seventy-seven-year-old mansion stands as silent testimony of many years of history. slow and competition was fierce. Often receipts were not even enough to meet business expenses.

By 1932 the family had expanded by two sons: Russell and William. Three weeks before Bill Bennet was born, a young woman by the name of Winnifred Earl was hired to help May for a few months. The new arrangement worked out so well, Winnie stayed for 57 years! She became a member of the family and May's close friend and companion.

Winnie, now 78, almost stayed until the very end. Ill health forced her to leave the Bennett home last December when she became a part-time housekeeper, but remained a full-time friend. She visited May for the last time the day before she died. Winnie not only was a diligent worker and friend of the family, but she looked after her parents who lived nearby until their deaths. Not surprisingly, she was too busy to get married and raise a family of her own.

During the memorial service the two front pews were reserved for the Bennett family. The diminutive friend of more than half a century sat fittingly between them.

What does she remember most about May? "She was always down to earth, thoughtful and considerate of everyone's feelings," Winnie says. "She had that special talent of putting people at ease."

May also had a talent for keeping her composure, no matter how awkward the circumstances. One morning in 1946 May came down early in the morning to find a

strange man sleeping on the couch near the fireplace.

"What are YOU doing here?" she asked, Winnie recalls.

"What are YOU doing here," the man responded undauntedly.

"I live here," May explained.

The man then left without an explanation or apology. They later found his hat in the bushes outside. It had a Winnipeg address inside. They never found out the identity of the owner.



Winnie Earl spent over half a century with May Bennett as housekeeper and friend.

Winnie recalls when Cecil (W. A. C.) Bennett entered politics. Cecil Bennett was first elected to the B.C. Legislature as a Conservative on Trafalgar Day, October 21, 1941, and things were never the same since. He later crossed the floor and sat as an independent. Soon after he became the leader of the fledgling Social Credit Party and in 1952 became the premier of this province, a position he held for 20 years until his defeat by the New Democratic Party in 1972. He died in 1979 which by coincidence is the house number of the Bennett residence on Ethel Street. His son, Bill Bennett, was B.C. premier from 1975 until 1986, putting the Bennetts in the highest political office in B.C. for just over 30 years.

May and her husband had a simple agreement: he would run the province and she would run the house. It worked out very well. May wasn't very interested in politics, but she was very interested in her husband's success and well-being. She never tried to take the spotlight, but was always working in the background.

Cecil Bennett was well aware of the vital role his wife played in his personal life as well as his political career. Shortly before his death he said: "May never spoke for me on a public platform, but she spoke for me every day of her life in the way that she lived. Every success that I ever had, in business or in politics, I owe to her companionship and her truly great love through all the years."

To May that was simply the way it



matinucue



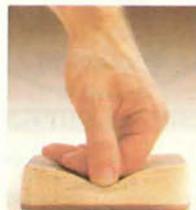
BLACK KNIGHT

#405 - 2339 Hwy 97N.
Dilworth Centre
Kelowna

861-8681

"Men's apparel at its finest."

**Before you buy any other Bathtub,
call me about a soft sell.**



Introducing the Soft Bathtub. Manufactured right in Kelowna this revolutionary tub has been marketed throughout North America and Japan.

Contractor Inquiries Welcome

Call Randy Kinniburgh at 861-3244 for FREE brochure or more information.

"I know you'll enjoy the Soft Bathtub, call me and I'll make sure to deliver your free brochure."

Randy Kinniburgh

MOSTLY COTTON
CLOTHING CO.

Towne Centre Mall
565 - Bernard Ave.
762-8384

Dare to be different

Death and dying are natural, integral parts of living. Private service.
Offering assistance and support through the grieving process.



Grief Consultant

Suite 200
1455 Ellis St.
Kelowna, B.C.

Open for referral
3 days/week, Tues., Wed.,
Thurs. 9 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

Starting Sept. 19, 1989

860-9970

HAUBER
Sporting Life

Exclusively
at

The L. & A. Collection

FINE FASHIONS

"Where style is never out of fashion."

423 Bernard Ave., Kelowna
762-8832

should be. "Cecil worked very hard, you know. Harder than anyone ever realized. He needed a well-run, comfortable home where he could just relax and forget about his problems for awhile. I always saw that as my first and most important job," she explained.

Having weathered many problems successfully early in life, neither May nor Cecil were willing to give their three children everything on a silver platter. "We always were given job lists. Some permanent ones, some occasional ones," Anita explains. "One of my permanent jobs was to dust the front staircase every week."

Was it a benefit for the three Bennett children to have a mother who was a teacher while going through school themselves? "Definitely," Anita says. "Actually they both helped us with our school work. Father was a great mathematician."

Anita became a teacher herself and later married Geoffrey Tozer. Russell and Bill followed in their father's footsteps and entered the business world, running the Bennett stores while their father was running the province.

While not involved in party politics as such, May Bennett nevertheless met many politicians and various dignitaries as the wife of the premier. It was a role for which she had no training, but which she handled very well. She simply was herself.

For example, during a meeting with Queen Elizabeth on the royal yacht, they did not discuss matters of state, but instead talked about raising children and how to care properly for fruit trees. Not everybody liked her, of course. Pierre Trudeau, for example. But then May wasn't very fond of him either.

May was always interested in people right to the end of her life. When she found herself surrounded by flowers in hospital, she got up and gave one flower to each patient in the public ward until there were none left.

May ended her career as a school teacher in 1927, but in fact she remained a teacher all her life. She taught not by lecturing, but by example. Her genuine interest in people and her ready willingness to help where she could made her a very special person to people from all walks of life.

The Bennett estate is very quiet now and the large house seems almost forlorn. Yet, to the sensitive ear the presence and sounds of countless visitors who came here over the years can still be heard. In the mind's eye one can still see the thousands of people who crowd the grounds during the Bennetts' famous annual strawberry teas. These popular gatherings were often larger than the total population of Kelowna in 1937 when the Bennetts first moved into their Ethel Street residence.

Like May herself, all these are memories now, but the teacher's lesson lives on. Said Kelowna MLA Cliff Serwa: "She was the best possible example of a woman who provided leadership by example." ■