

Noosa's Queen of Gossip

24/06/2020

By Phil Jarratt

Susie Osmaston, now 78 and looking and sounding a decade younger, sums up her Cassandra years thus: "I met the deadline for 23 years, through desertion, near-suicide, falling in love, marriage, honeymoons, falling out of love, eloping, a hysterectomy, but pneumonia was a bit much. Then I tottered downstairs to write the last column, and signed off with, 'It's time to smell the roses'."

And that's pretty much what she and husband John have been doing for the past decade – his golf, their bridge days, and the shared joy of grandkids. But to many long-term Noosa residents, Susie will always be "Cassandra", the much-loved and sometimes-feared compiler of Noosa's only real gossip column, starting back in the days when the town was still small enough to wander down Hastings Street at dusk on a Friday and naughtily note who was drinking or dining at close quarters with whom.

But, over a glass of rose on her verdant garden deck, Susie says she never operated like that, was never so brazen. "I had another job so I had to exercise a bit of decorum."

Indeed she did. In the '80s and '90s Noosa was a hotbed of political intrigue (some say it still is) with environmental and development lobbies at each other's throats, and for much of this time Susie was in the thick of it, working first for local State MP Gordon Simpson and later for Mayor Noel Playford at Noosa Shire Council. At a time when it was crucial for Noosa environmentalists to get a hearing with the LNP government, she was the conduit.

But Susie O has been in the thick of the action for most of her colourful life. Born in Perth as Singapore fell (a correlation her mother never let her forget), she enjoyed a blessed childhood in the leafy glades of Mosman Park until her branch manager father ("Perth was a branch manager town in those days," she recalls) was recalled to head office in Sydney when she was an only-slightly rebellious teenager at a time when rock and roll, television and the Olympics combined to drag Menzies' Australia into the modern world.

She won a scholarship to university but her father insisted she do a secretarial course first and review her academic options in a year. Says Susie: "By the time next year came around

I was working for a psychiatrist, romantically involved and going out to dinner parties with fascinating and exciting people, so there was no way I was going back to school."

Instead she went to Melbourne with the first of her "three-and-a-half" husbands, a part-French much older gentleman whose hyphenated full name was too long for the marriage certificate but who wowed her with his savoir faire and his way around a wine list.

Unfortunately, No. 1 was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and the need for a decent wage to get through the grueling carer years saw Susie take up her first position in proximity to men in power, working with the publisher of The Age newspaper, Ranald Macdonald. She remembers holding a rampaging Rupert Murdoch at bay when he was trying to storm The Age office with an offer to buy, just one of the occasions that brought her closer to the quirky genius Macdonald.

After the death of her husband, she met "the half" and began holidaying at his family's Gippsland seaside cottage, where over Christmas the Melbourne smart set would gather to swim, eat and drink. Here she met the Amos family, who had recently made the sea-change to a place called Noosa, and loved it. Following several exploratory visits, Susie and the half had a huge caravan towed up the highway, bought two blocks on a bare subdivision called Noosa Sound, and vowed never to leave Noosa, if not each other.

Susie took a job as a receptionist at Pine Trees Resort on Hastings Street, joined the party circuit with the likes of local larrikins Mumbles Walker, Billy Wardell and Debbie Higgin, and in the fullness of time eloped with Michael Prenzler, whose passion for her was only exceeded by his passion to own an FM radio licence. With investor friends, they bought 4GY and got the licence, but Gympie didn't like interlopers so they sold for a healthy profit two years later and took a six-month sabbatical in Europe, but the marriage didn't last.

Back in Noosa, Susie began contributing snippets to a social column that Noosa News editor Julie Lake compiled. Soon she was contributing so much that she was asked to take it over. In the mid-1980s, Cassandra was born at a heady time in Noosa's social history. "Dame" Ida Duncan was the doyenne, but she was only one of a colourful list of characters. Leonie Palmer and a new generation of charming Frenchmen were creating a gourmet heaven on Hastings Street while power couples like the Glosters were making news every week, and society sniper Col Smyth always had a column item in his back pocket.

And, of course, sometimes there was a bit of naughtiness. Susie says she only got in trouble once, when a waiter passed on a detailed report of shenanigans at a private party, which she gleefully reported. When the inevitable complaints and threats reached her boss, he told her: "If you'd written that report about my party, I'd have sent you roses! You made them all sound fascinating!"

Husband of 27 years, former businessman and restaurateur (Going Pasta) John Osmaston doesn't get a number like the others, because this one's a "lifer". Gentleman Johnny refills our rose glasses and remembers a couple of names from the past for his bride. She beams at him.

Susie O may have retired from the Noosa limelight, but she is still shining.