

LIVING Legends



GEORGIA MAE
ERICKSON

Queen of the
Llano Estacado



*There is no greater treasure than the legacy of
love and friendship we leave behind.
That legacy is what we make of it.*

Georgia Mae Smith Erickson has lived her life making friends. Not just acquaintances, but friends who hold her in high esteem, appreciating her dedication and loyalty, her sunny disposition and sharing in the laughter of her antics. Her friends appreciate Georgia Mae's qualities of determination, self-confidence, and an absolute unwillingness to complain about anything.

She is known for saying "WONderful!" and meaning it about whatever it is because to her everything is, indeed, "WONderful." Especially her life.

The diminutive granddaughter of pioneer Hank Smith, Georgia Mae wears that badge with pride. Seldom does an occasion present itself when she doesn't bring up "Aunt or Uncle Hank," as they were known. In fact, keeping the memory of these special people alive may be on her foremost "To Do List."

The Smiths were fortunate to have a granddaughter who is not shy about taking center stage on any occasion to talk about her forebears: the first white settlers in this part of Texas, the first post-mistress (who held the position for 38 years), buffalo hunter, farmer, rancher, hotel manager and much more. Their two-story stone house was built in Blanco Canyon in what became Crosby County. Even the Francisco Vázquez de Coronado expedition in the 1540s is a part of Georgia Mae's past. The Spaniards traveled through the area and left proof of the fact, which thrills this pioneer woman to no end.

With such deep roots in the South Plains of Texas, it is amazing she ever left. It may be more amazing that she returned, after 40 years living a life so different from the one to which she was born.

"I was a little country girl from West Texas who had gone to a little country school," she said. "I started at Texas Tech when I was 14, studying nutrition in the School of Home Economics." She graduated in 1936 and moved to the Northeast, where the second phase of her life unfolded. As a very young woman, she worked in Washington, D.C., where she met many important people, among them Eleanor Roosevelt and U.S. Rep. George Mahon of Texas, who became a mentor and friend.

In 1942 at age 25, Georgia Mae left Washington, D.C., to become director of food service for the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co. She worked for a man named Stanley Gustav Ericson. "We fell in love, and it was George and Helen Mahon who gave me permission to marry Stanley," she said. "Mr. Mahon wanted to meet Stanley to be sure he was worthy of me," she added, laughing.

The two were married on September 29, 1951, in Georgetown, where they lived until moving to Darien, Conn. Georgia Mae recalls their happy years together, as they embraced the Northeast while keeping in touch with her Texas roots. They traveled to Crosbyton often, and Stanley learned to respect the area that was so important to his wife. Although they had no children of their own, their extended "family" included many.

Her greatest heartache came with Stanley's death in 1976, and she was suddenly faced with the decision to stay in the Northeast, which had been her home for 40 years, or leave her long-time friends and return to the country where she had lived only through her early teens. The decision was not a hard one. She packed away her city clothes, pulled on her boots, and never looked back. Her roots grew deep in the Crosbyton land.

Besides the heritage she treasures, which includes her German and Scottish ancestry, Georgia Mae has many loves. Among them are cooking and cookbooks, which she has collected throughout her life,



The dignity and self-confidence of a true pioneer

granddaughter.

In Lubbock, her support has been evident at the National Ranching Heritage Center, a "WONderful" museum and historical park, where she is a charter member, former president, and the official and only Special Ambassador, a title awarded to her by the board of the Ranching Heritage Association. The National Ranching Heritage Center has special significance to her because of her interests in history, preservation, and her own family heritage.

Georgia Mae is active in the Texas Association of Museums, Texas State Historical Association, West Texas Historical Association,

Westerners International, National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, and many other history-based organizations. She has been recognized and honored by practically all of them for her dedication and service.

Preservation of the past does not overshadow her attention to the future, especially as it relates to Texas Tech's Restaurant, Hotel and Institutional Management program. Academic courses team with

real-life experience as students prepare for the kinds of careers she enjoyed in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Connecticut. Georgia Mae can often be seen lunching with friends at Skyview's Restaurant, where students in the RHIM program comprise the staff and benefit from her scholarships.

A profile of Georgia Mae Smith

Ericson would not be complete without naming some of the

impressive recognitions bestowed upon her. Among them are the Cowgirl Hall of Fame's Fern Sawyer Award; Texas Association of Museum's Jo Stewart Randal Trustee Award; Caprock Girl Scouts Council's Woman of Distinction; Women in Communication's George Mahon Award; the College of Human Sciences Distinguished Alumna Award; Texas Historical Commission's Glenna Morgan Award; Lubbock's Philanthropist of the Year designation; and Texas Tech University's Distinguished Alumna and Lauro F. Cavazos Awards, the latter presented just recently on Oct. 17, 2003.

For some people, age brings ill-temper and a disagreeable demeanor. For Georgia Mae, it has brought out her sense of humor. Not too long ago, when John Montford was Chancellor of Texas Tech, a private reception was held for a visiting foreign dignitary. Georgia Mae was invited. As she approached the head of the receiving line, Mr. Montford introduced her, saying, "Queen Noir, I'd like you to meet Georgia Mae Ericson," to which Georgia Mae bowed slightly, smiled impishly and said, "I am pleased to meet you. I am Queen of the Llano Estacado."

And you know, she really is.

as well as music, whether it comes from a harp or a fiddle. She enjoys wildlife and shares her Crosbyton ranch with numerous critters and birds and bison. Her home there was constructed using native rock, and it's filled with sunlight. Casa del Sol is a modern solar home built on land owned by her family for more than a century. It is situated midway between what's left of Aunt and Uncle Hank's rock house and her parents' farm house, where she grew up.

Throughout her life, Georgia Mae has had a passion for museums. The Crosby County Pioneer Memorial Museum and Community Center is dear to her heart. It was built in 1957 to resemble the original Hank Smith home. It is filled with items that once belonged to the Smiths, all made available by their



Georgia Mae has hosted many friends and dignitaries in her Crosbyton home, among them author James Michener during his writing of the novel, Texas.



Ericson makes acceptance remarks following her designation as Distinguished Alumna of the Texas Tech College of Human Sciences in 1983.