LES TANNER - 1999

By Corrie Perkin

Born 15-6-1927, Died 23-7-2001

"Funerals are no place to say goodbye," *Age* cartoonist Les Tanner once wrote in his 'Saturday Tanner' column. He was right. The pub is a much better place.

And so it was on Friday, as the mist settled on the Carlton Gardens over the road, that a group of Les Tanner's friends and colleagues gathered with members of the Tanner clan to farewell their mate.

It was not the raucous affair one might expect of a journo turn. Tanner was 74 when he died and his carousing days had long ago given way to the occasional quiet drink on a Sunday afternoon at his favorite Fitzroy watering hole. At Friday's service, his daughter Judith explained how only hours before his heart attack … she had "helped him dress in his nicest clothes and pork-pie hat to go down to the pub where it was his ritual to listen to Dixieland jazz each week".

Earlier, around 100 people had gathered in a chapel at Fawkner Cemetery to pay tribute to the man his sister Gwen Deamer described as having "star quality". Cartoonist Peter Nicholson, who worked with Tanner at *The Age* for many years before moving to *The Australian*, spoke of the older man's generosity with younger artists. "You can't really separate Les' own brilliant personal contribution to Australian cartooning and journalism from the real friendship and encouragement he gave to his colleagues," he said. "For him it was part of his personality and part of the job."

There were plenty of laughs during the service. At the door was a large Michael Leunig cartoon, in memory of Les. Its gentle sadness brought a smile and a tear to everyone who read it. Family members, including Les' three children, recalled the funny moments of living with a man whose wit brought a sparkle to domestic life.

And then there was the music: Fred Astaire's version of *'They Can't Take That away From Me'*, followed by a melancholy Jimmy Durante singing *'I'll Be Seeing You'*, a Tanner favorite.

Leslie Mervyn Tanner was born in Sydney on June 15, 1927. In 1967, after a successful career with Sir Frank Packer's publications, he was offered a job at *The Age*. For the next 30 years, Tanner was one of the paper's great contributors - both in pictures and words - and his influence, both on *The Age* and the community it served, was immense.

Tanner was a heavy smoker, and in the early 1970s the habit caught up with him. For several months he had radiation treatment for throat cancer, and then one day he haemorrhaged at work. He was rushed to hospital where, he later described, his throat was cut.

"They explained they would have to remove my larynx,'' Tanner told *The National Times* in 1979. "I didn't care at that stage of the game, I suppose, all I wanted to do was breathe. The implications don't really hit, you kid yourself that it'll be OK. That you'll worry about the talk bit after you've breathed again. So they operated. I woke up feeling fine, but I couldn't speak any more.''

For a man who had always commanded attention with his funny yarns and passionate arguments, it was the cruelest blow. Until the late 1970s, when he discovered a German voice machine that could pick up the vibration in his throat and turn it into robotic words, Tanner's only form of communication was with a pen and notepad.

Tanner started drinking heavily, and was in and out of hospital regularly. "The terrible thing was the amount of anger I found in me, trying to make people understand the simplest thing,'' he said in *The National Times* interview. Thankfully, with the support of his wife Peg, who died in 1996, and the encouragement of his editors, Tanner was able to continue working.

On Friday, the crowd recalled the good and bad times. Among those swapping stories were former *Age* editors and executives, feature writers, retired sub-editors, artists, and fellow cartoonists Nicholson, John Spooner and Bruce Petty. All spoke admiringly of Tanner's resilience, his wit and his charm. "He left a great trail of warmth, good fun and

analysis,'' Petty said of his friend.

In an industry where cub reporters are now called interns, and front pages are designed on computer screens and not hot metal trays, Les Tanner was one of the great characters. At the Pump House hotel, the scene of Friday's wake, his family had put together a big pinboard of Les' life. It reminded everyone of how times change - how, these days, journalists are more likely to come from a university campus than the Tanner-style school of hard knocks. There were photos of Les, the child actor. Les, the army man in post-war occupied Japan. Les, hamming it up on the Sydney stage. His early years as a cartoonist on *The Bulletin*. Then later, at The Age, Tanner in the cartoonists' room with Ron Tandberg, John Spooner and Michael Leunig. It doesn't get much better than that.

The most moving photos were those with his family, in particular with his arms around his adored wife. They reminded us that despite the public ownership of Tanner, he was also a private family man, and his passing leaves a big gap in the lives of those he loved.

Judith Tanner, who had cared for her father since her mother's death, said in her eulogy: "I last saw him alive at about six o'clock. He was buzzing his voice machine at the radio because Julia (her daughter) had the - shock, horror! - footy on, and he hated that.

"On Monday he was gone. I would have nursed him for another 500 years if he'd wanted to stay around, but he had a long overdue rendezvous with mum. He was the best of dads, and an endless source of knowledge, wisdom, wit and advice.

"I love you, my darling dad, and I guess I'll be seeing you in all kinds of well-known places - in my heart and my mind's eye, for the rest of my life. And then some.''

This article was first published in *The Sunday Age*