

MISS EMILY WILLMETT

(1867 - 1927)

A PROMINENT NQRA LADY SHOOTER IN THE EARLY 1900s

The first detailed record of an NQRA ladies competition was in 1899 at Charters Towers. The Northern Miner, on 3rd May 1899, reported that “the ladies of Charters Towers made a new departure in sporting matters yesterday by inaugurating a Ladies Rifle Club”. Records show that ladies events were also shot at Proserpine in the early 1900s. Indeed there were small groups of lady shooters across North Queensland at the time with Townsville hosting a shoot in 1908 for 28 ladies, all being coached by members of the Townsville Rifle Club.

Newspaper reports identified Miss Emily Willmett as one of the pioneers of ladies’ shooting in North Queensland, being among the group of ladies who were active target rifle shooters in the early 1900s. So who was Emily Willmett and how did she become involved in the sport of long range rifle shooting?

The Willmett Family

Emily, the fourth daughter (sixth child), of Thankful and Anne Willmett, was born at Rockhampton on 28th December 1867. Eventually the Willmett family took up residence in Townsville in 1870, five years after Townsville was founded. Thankful and Anne Willmett had 10 children but unfortunately not all survived to adulthood. Emily’s three younger brothers, Fred, Walter and Percy, were born in Townsville.



Willmett Family photograph circa 1872

(Thankful Willmett on the right and a young Emily Willmett on the right, front row)

Source: *Pioneers of North Queensland – a project of the Family History Association 2001, page 142*

Indeed the Willmetts were pioneers of early Townsville and would exert influence on the community and broader region in the years to follow. The Willmetts family were prominent in the Townsville business community owning and operating Willmetts's company. Emily's father, Thankful Percy Willmetts, was Mayor of Townsville in 1879, 1880, 1882, 1885 and 1902. Emily's brothers Walter and Percy both served in the Queensland Defence Force and fought in the South African Boer War. Her brother, Fred, attained the rank of Captain within the Kennedy Regiment.

Understandably Emily was influenced by the family vocation and from about 1902 to 1919, she managed the Charters Towers branch of the family business which included two book stores. Emily is listed in Electoral Rolls as "stationer". Emily never married.

On her retirement from the family business, Emily moved to a cottage, "Seaforth", she had built at Pinecliffe, Manly, New South Wales where she died on 22nd October 1927. She was cremated on 24th December 1927 at Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney. Her ashes are interred in Townsville's West End Cemetery at the family grave site where her mother, Anne Willmetts who died in 1899 aged 63 years, and her father Thankful Willmetts who died in 1907 aged 76 years, rest.

Emily – Rifle Shooter

Rifle shooting was a favoured sport with the Willmetts family with Emily's younger brothers joining the Townsville Rifle Club at an early age. Fred Willmetts was an active shooter as early as the 1899 and both Fred (born 1872) and Percy (born 1877) were reported in the Townsville Rifle Club results in 1909. It is thought that Emily may have been influenced to participate in the sport by her younger brothers and her brother-in-law, Robert Bruce Taylor, who was honoured with Life Membership of the Townsville Rifle Association (Pioneers of North Queensland, page 123).

Emily was introduced to the Townsville Rifle Club before becoming involved with the Charters Towers Rifle Club when she moved there to manage the family's two bookshops. Emily remained a supporter of the Townsville Rifle Club donating an annual trophy.

Emily achieved shooting success in 1903 and 1904 and on each occasions was awarded a gold medal. Little is known about the 1903 award however the 1904 medal won at Charters Towers during the North Queensland Rifle Association's Annual Competition resulted in considerable publicity with the event being recorded in some detail.

Engraving on the medal makes it clear the name of the 1904 competition was the Ladies Match and this competition was shot in conjunction with the 1904 Kings Prize shoot. The report in the North Queensland Register on Monday 8th August 1904 states that seven ladies competed in the Ladies Match. The competitors included Miss Willmetts, Mrs Thompson, Mrs McKedie, Mrs Rattray, Mrs Carroll, Mrs Mattingly and Miss Carr. The match was a seven round competition shot over 300 yards.

The Register report includes a photograph of the winner of the Ladies Match, Miss Emily Willmet. While not a great photograph, it is worth including as it shows the concern at the time for a lady's modesty – a blanket has been draped over Emily's legs.



Emily Willmet shooting at Charters Towers 1904

Fortunately an excellent photograph of Emily's winning target has been preserved for posterity. Her winning score was 33 out of a 35 possible. Ladies shot on a target with a slightly larger bullseye than men. The actual dimensions of the target were not recorded.

LADIES' MATCH

£5, divided into six prizes. Seven rounds at 300 yards. Coaching allowed.



Emily Willmett's seven scoring shots at 300 yards

Seven ladies competed, with the following results:

Miss Willmett	(53) 5555454—33
Mrs Thompson	(4) 5453555—32
Mrs McKedie	(44)4540555—28
Mrs Rattray	(34) 4335334—25
Mrs Carroll	(50)0423003—12
Mrs Mattingly	(00) 0003200— 5
Miss Carr	(00) 000???? — 5

Emily's 1904 Medal

Emily received the NQRA gold medal inscribed with her name, the year 1904 and Score of 53.



The gold medal for the 1904 Ladies Match (both sides)

The score of 53 appears to be an error as the Ladies Match was contested over one distance only – 300 yards. Upon examining the score achieved for each shot fired, it is surmised that the first two sighters, 5 and 3, may have been incorrectly taken as the score accredited to Emily. Without specific evidence, the score engraved on this 116 year old medal is likely to remain a mystery.

Conclusion

Emily's 1903 and 1904 gold medals were treasured by her to the extent she itemised them both in her will, with Fred receiving the 1903 medal and Percy the 1904 medal. Unfortunately the 1903 medal has been lost.



Edwin Percy George Willmet and his family: from left, Majorie Louise Pretoria, Theresa, Phyllis Jeane, Percy, and Edwin Pilcher, circa 1914. A second son, Ian Hamilton, was born in 1915

Source: Townsville Bulletin Newspaper 27th November 2007

The 1904 medal, willed to Emily's brother, Percy, was later given to Percy's son, Pilcher. Pilcher Willmet retained the medal in his family passing it onto his eldest daughter and Emily's great niece, Mrs Margaret Workman who lives in Perth. Mrs Workman has instructed that Emily's 1904 medal be gifted to Townsville Marksmen Rifle Club for display to the current and future long range shooting enthusiasts.

The Captain and Members of the Townsville Marksmen Rifle Club are very grateful and proud to receive such a historic medal and will arrange for it to be suitably framed to remember and recognise one of the first North Queensland lady shooters from the early 1900s. Further, this medal may have greater significance in that it appears to be one of the first shooting specific trophies presented to a lady competitor since the sport began in North Queensland in 1885.

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I wish to acknowledge the research effort and support received from Mr John Weir (Emily Willmetts's great nephew) and Mr Dick Crozier (Sarina Rifle Club, NQRA). Their contribution has enabled me to uncover the story behind Emily Willmetts and this historic medal won by Emily and graciously donated by Mrs Margaret Workman to the Townsville Marksmen Rifle Club. Thank you.

Information contained within this article has been gathered from:

- a. NQRA's History – 'So You Went Target Rifle Shooting' launched on 17 May 2019
- b. Pioneers of North Queensland – a project of the Family History Association 2001
- c. Various newspaper articles located via TROVE such as the North Queensland Register, Monday 8 August 1904
- d. Townsville Bulletin Newspaper dated 27 November 2007
- e. Engraving on the 1904 Ladies Match Medal awarded to Emily Willmetts

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