

GOODBYE TO A PIECE OF COOBER PEDY HISTORY

An historic Coober Pedy landmark, the old Lutheran Hall on the corner of Hutchison Street and Post Office Hill Road, has disappeared to make way for new development.

The property, which was purchased by South Australian College of Technical and Further Education has recently seen buildings removed and excavation completed in preparation for the construction of TAFE's new premises.

Meanwhile, TAFE is temporarily located in the old Drive-in building.

Twenty-seven years ago the Lutheran Church Mission Hall was opened to serve the community.

Pastor C. Eckerman from Koonibba officially opened the Church on 24th October, 1964, on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church's Board of Aborigine Missions. He brought "two truckloads of Koonibba natives" with him to participate in the opening.

Although there was no church building until 1964, Lutheran Archives show that the first resident Lutheran to serve in Coober Pedy was Mr Paul



*Pastor Fred Traeger and wife Gertie.
Photo courtesy Rhonda Traeger*

Koehne in 1957. Mr Koehne, a layman, operated the general store.

He was followed in 1958 by Mr Ed Meyer. Mr Meyer's stay here was short lived, one month in all, due to his wife's illness.

In April of 1959 they sent Pastor Fred H. Traeger to Coober Pedy to serve the needs of the Aboriginal Community. As land had now been set aside for use by the Aboriginal people, the Government and the Lutheran Church set up a medical room, garage and store.

His appointment came from the Church, but the government was assisting to finance the work, so both had stipulated his duties with the main ones being: "To concentrate on teaching the essentials of the Christian faith to the native children" - Church duty.

"To act as opal buyer and shop-keeper for the Aborigines so they would not be exploited" - Government duty.

Pastor Traeger's first service was held in the open air at Eight Mile on 10th May, 1959. Thirty-one people attended the service with five children being baptised.

The week after his arrival, Mrs Carlaw, a nurse responsible for Aboriginal Health went on holidays. Pastor Traeger was left in charge.

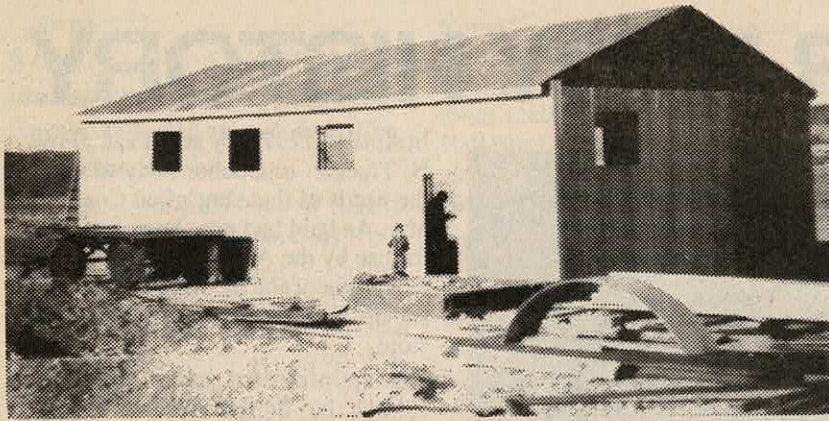
An influenza epidemic spread through the Aboriginal community and, in spite of doing everything humanly possible, three people died. The influenza left the remaining members of the community very weak and malnourished.

Pastor Traeger stated in his 1965 report: "I drove to Mabel Creek Station, bought five sheep, killed them, bought several bags of potatoes and rice, a few tins of curry, borrowed a stove, for as yet we had no stove, set it up outside and my wife started cooking. We fed them for several weeks. When they began to pick up, they wanted to go and camp at the Eight Mile diggings, where the white men were getting opal in large quantities.



*Pastor Traeger preaching in a camp, 1960.
Photo courtesy Rhonda Traeger*

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*Building the Lutheran Hall in 1964.
Photo courtesy Rhonda Traeger*

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I loaded them up on the utility with all their belongings. After making many trips they were finally all there. They had their camp there for several years. They used to find good opal and a good quantity of it. During this period they lived well. I carted their water for them as well as rations and supplies. And I bought their opal. I found this opal buying the most difficult of all my duties."

Pastor Traeger sold over £30,000 worth of opal for the Aborigines in his first year here.

As to his Church duties, Pastor Traeger

found the children to be very shy with little grasp of the English language. What was needed was a school.

The Education Department sent up an official to meet with the locals who said "I will be willing to recommend that a school be started for the nine white children living here, but I wouldn't be interested in the natives."

When Pastor Traeger queried him on this his reply was, "Mr Traeger, they wouldn't be able to speak the language."

Pastor Traeger then replied, "You don't require New Australian children to speak the language before you take them into your schools."



*The Lutheran Mission and Store, 1962.
Photo courtesy Rhonda Traeger*

School was started on the 2nd February, 1960, in the 'Old Community Hall' - which was on Lot 6 - with twenty-one Aboriginal children. The nine white children were away for the summer.

Services were first conducted in the open air, until Coober Pedy Community Hall was built on Lot 6.

The Lutherans purchased Lot 10 from Mr R.A. Roberts for £500, on which to build their church. The three-quarter acre lot had a one-room dugout measuring 27' x 9', a gas stove and a refrigerator.

The Hall building materials cost £1,020 and were hauled to Coober Pedy from Adelaide on the Koonibba Mission truck and trailer.



The old organ from the Church

On the day the building materials left Adelaide, a volunteer work party, led by Reg Schuster, left Freeling with three fully loaded utilities and one trailer. The work party travelled the 633 miles arriving in Coober Pedy at 11.45pm.

Within ten days they had almost completed the building. A few more corrugated iron sheets were still needed to finish the front near the door, so more had to be ordered.

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On the way to Coober Pedy from Kingoonya, the truck tipped over and ... what a mess ... about sixty dozen eggs were smashed all over the corrugated iron sheets. This meant more work for the volunteers. All the hardened egg had to be laboriously scraped off the iron sheets before they could be nailed up!

Pastor Traeger said in his report, "We have erected a small church building, which they, the native people, regard as their own church, and in which they will gather on Sundays and receive instruction, admonition and comfort."

According to the 1965 Church report, there were 126 adults and 120 children under the spiritual care of the Lutheran Church. This total of 246 people was an amazing number for Coober Pedy in 1965.

As Pastor Traeger's double position of part-time missionary and full-time Government Welfare Officer was just too much for one man, he relinquished his Welfare position in 1960.

He and his wife Gertie bought a small cottage in the main street and supported themselves by running a General Store and buying some opal from the Aborigines.

The actual store building was erected in front of their cottage and originally called the "Lutheran Mission and Store". This name was later changed to "Traeger's General Store", when family members came to assist them. Fred Traeger retired in 1967 at the age of 70 years.

The "Store" eventually became the "Coober Pedy Motel" up until 1968 when Traeger and his wife left Coober Pedy. It was purchased from Traegers by John Andrea. The site is now occupied by the Desert Cave.

After Traeger's retirement, Audley D. Grieger, a lay missionary, was the next Lutheran to serve Coober Pedy. Grieger was here from 1967 until 1972 when Kevin G. Schrapel, another lay missionary, took over from him, serving until 1978. Kevin and Ruth Schrapel created possibly the finest



*The Lutheran Hall looking down the main street in the sixties
Photo courtesy of Rhonda Traeger*

garden in town outside their dugout-mansie. This garden was fed only by waste water.

The Church was very active during these years; there were Services every Sunday; a drop-in centre was opened; there were many activities for young people; a "family club" was quite successful.

Church activities were well-attended, especially by the Aboriginal people, so more room was required. A large building extension was then moved from Maralinga to Coober Pedy around 1976 for this purpose.

Many events took place in the Church Hall. Robin and Jean Walker were married there on 31st July, 1971, and Debbie Heath was also married there. The funeral for Debbie's father, Don Heath, was held there in 1969.

There have been no Lutheran Ministers in residence in Coober Pedy since 1978. Services are presently held at the Coober Pedy Medical Centre and are conducted by Pastor

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Demolition underway on the site

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Robert Winderlich, who makes the journey up from Ferryden Park, Adelaide, every six weeks.

Over the years the Lutheran Hall itself has served our community well. In 1972 Coober Pedy's first Pre-School was opened in the Hall, continuing there for several months until the present Pre-School building was completed.

Darwin's Cyclone Tracy, in 1974, created a special use for the Hall.

Cyclone victims, whose battered cars would still function, were evacuating South via the Stuart Highway. Many were still in shock and had left with only the clothes on their backs.

Kevin Schrapel and Nieta Brown, of the Department of Community Welfare, organised a twenty-four hour relief facility for victims there. The Hall was filled with donations of free clothing and food and free accommodation was organised.

The community support was overwhelming.

When Mick Lucas & Sons burned to the ground on Race Weekend of 1981, business was set up in the Lutheran Hall - it was trading-as-usual for the next five months until Lucas' were able to rebuild.

The Hall has also been used as a Court House, the venue for Pantomimes, Concerts and a Fashion Parade for the Country Women's Association.

TAFE moved into the Hall in 1983.



The bell from the old Lutheran Church now tolls only for visitors to the home of Mr and Mrs Syd Harris.



The original Lutheran Church Hall has been moved to Hospital Road next to the Hospital where it will be used once again by an Aboriginal Christian group.

The Christian Fellowship group have been holding meetings in a smaller building there which they have outgrown so the old Lutheran Hall is most welcomed by them.

The extension to the original hall - TAFE Administration building - will be moved to the new RSL block on Seventeen Mile Road, between Radiator & Sheetmetal and Lion's Club. This move will not take place until August or September, 1992, as the extension will be used by the building contractors during the new construction.

There is no doubt, though, the old Hall will continue to perform many useful functions in its new life...

**Anne Johnson
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Historical Society**