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Thursday 18 July 2013

END OF AN ERA - THE OUTBACK BIDS FAREWELL TO THE PLATE FAMILY

by Stephen Staines

The 12th of July 2013 will be remembered as the day the outback collectively shed a tear for the departure of the Plates from Oodnadatta. People travelled from far and wide to give the Plate family collective hugs and kisses for thanks for their pioneering spirit that helped keep a little town on the map for so many years. What Oodnadatta lacked in size it makes up for in spirit and that spirit was on display in all its glory last Friday in Oodna-bloody-datta!

The celebrations began at 3:30pm at the place formerly known as the Oodnadatta Airstrip. Father Paul Bourke was the MC for the event and opened the proceedings. He soon introduced the Hon Gail Gago, Minister for Local Government / State Relations and Regional Development. Minister Gago gave a touching and respectful speech that painted a picture of a man that the State Government had a long and somewhat difficult relationship with. Despite this, her presence was acknowledgement by the State of his value and contribution to his community and the region. Gail spoke of his endless letters to Ministers and government departments demanding better services for the outback. She described a man that had an undeniable impact. She spoke of his love of Oodnadatta, his passion for the outback, his unwavering concern for the safety of travellers and his tireless, voluntary work to ensure the Oodnadatta airstrip was maintained and remained serviced at all times.

It was at some point during Minister Gago's speech that I thought of Adam and, that if he was watching, how droll the situation must have appeared to him. He was no fan of governments. Thomas Paine once famously said that "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one." This could have easily been Adam's words. He didn't particularly like government or its minions and he certainly wasn't afraid to let them know it! No doubt the irony of the situation would have given him some amusement and resulted in that wry smile of his creeping across his expression.

Lynn gave a short, impromptu speech that brought a tear to the eye of many in attendance.

Ned Loades, School Principal and current Chairman of the Oodnadatta Progress Association closed off the formalities at the Airport with a frank and honest speech that captured the nature and the character of the man being honoured. He spoke of Adam's involvement and commitment to the community and the controversy that, more often than not, came as part of the package. He spoke of Adam's relentless capacity to work, come rain, hail or insufferable heat. Such a common trait in so many outback pioneers. He was the "can do man", the "go to guy" in the community. If something needed to be done at the school Adam would lend a hand. Something need fixing? Adam will be able to fix it! Don't know where to get that part? Adam will know.

"I reckon that one day Nike came to Oodnadatta and saw Adam at the Pink Roadhouse and that's where they got their slogan 'Just Do It'", said Ned.

Ned is right, if Adam saw something that he thought needed to be done, he just did it.

Ned continued with a description of Adam's broad knowledge on many subjects.



Adam's 92 year old mother Jocelyn, his wife Lynn and their three daughters Tilly, Ruby, Alice, with Lynn's sister Annie Trevillion and Fr Paul Burke after Minister Gago officially named the facility the "Adam Plate Aerodrome".

"Adam often amazed me and others with his wide breadth of knowledge and interests including his motor sport, his irrational like of Peugeots, his love of fiats, Porsches, boats, bikes, politics, stock market, local and personal history, trucks, building, tourism and the list goes on and on."

He spoke of Adam's commitment as a father and that he wanted the best for his kids.

"He was a proud father of his four children and he wanted the best school for them and the community. So Adam did what Adam always did best: he worked towards his vision and he set about making the best school possible."

Ned's speech was not all strawberries and cream though. He spoke of Adam's ability to get along so well with children but that he often clashed with adults; especially many of those that ever sat on the Oodnadatta Progress Association with him.

"His passion for our community made it hard for Adam to work within the structure of a committee. This is not unusual for many people who are driven and have great vision. Like the famous saying goes; a Camel is a horse designed by a committee!"

I think if Adam was watching he would have been very proud of Mr Loades. He said some things that would have upset a few people but they were words that needed to be said. Maybe there was a little bit of Adam speaking through Ned that day...

"Adam understood that handing over an asset for one dollar meant losing control of what was owned by the Progress Association and ultimately our community."

The airstrip, that was owned by the Oodnadatta Progress Association, was sold to the State Government for a dollar (yes \$1.00!). Adam fought for years for ownership of the airport to remain in the hands of the Oodnadatta Progress Association but sadly that battle was eventually lost. Ned explained that the sale has resulted in a loss of refuelling capacity and therefore a massive reduction in air traffic. Adam knew this would occur. Whilst it remained in Progress hands, they could avoid much of the rules and regulations that governments shackle themselves and society with. The detrimental impact was immediately felt by the community.

"The reduced numbers of people stopping here as they fly over the country has truly led to a loss of vibrancy for our town and increased the sense of isolation just that little bit more. We used to have a lot of planes landing here and we would laugh to see those tourists using a pink sack truck to take their groceries back to their tent next to their plane," Ned continued.

"The small number of people that made the decision to sell our airstrip, no longer live in this town. They did not have a long term vision for maintaining vibrancy and economic development, and failed to consult meaningfully with the wider community. Adam was frustrated and angered by the narrow thinking that led to such a drastic and irreversible decision, directed in part at Adam himself. Yet it didn't in any way deter his spirit, and he was quickly out there lobbying for the best deal possible for the future."

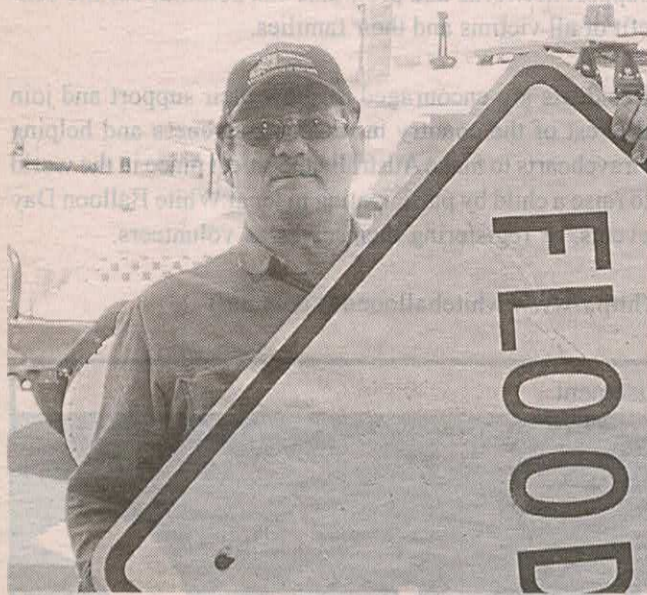
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SERVING THE OPAL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD SINCE 1982

by Stephen Staines

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Ned's speech was followed by a heartfelt tribute by one of Adam's best mates, Trevor Wright of Wrightsair fame. Trevor is the unofficial Mayor of William Creek and another great visionary in the outback.



Adam Plate, activist, family man, community member, visionary, legend

Trevor and his pilots did a "missing man formation" flyover, an aerial salute performed at funerals and memorials typically in memory of a fallen pilot. It was a show of great respect by Trevor to his fallen comrade. Trevor - you did your mate proud.

Adam's mother Jocelyn, Linnie and his daughters Alice, Tilly and Ruby, were close at hand as Minister Gago cut the ribbon officially naming the facility the "Adam Plate Aerodrome". This was followed by a blessing of the aerodrome performed by Fr Paul.

It is fitting that the Airport that Adam loved so much and fought for so hard for so long will now forever bear his name. Even in his passing his fighting spirit lives on in those people he touched and I see this as possibly Adam's final victory.

In the words of the great Ghandi and quoted by Mr Loades during his speech:

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

The party soon migrated over to the Pink Roadhouse where the Plates treated all of their friends and family to a free barbecue, outback hospitality at its finest.

The barbecue was followed by a number of speeches. The Plates bidding the outback farewell and those that love them and will miss them recounted entertaining anecdotes of Adam, Linnie, Jack Alice, Tilly and Ruby's time in Oodnadatta.

The evening's ceremonies began with an introduction by the MC, Alice Plate, to long-time friend and companion to the Plate family, Audrey Wonga, who performed a Welcome to Country. Alice then invited her mum to the stage.

Linnie started her speech by thanking everyone for coming but paid special tribute to Adam's 92 year old mother, Jocelyn Plate, who had travelled from Sydney to be there.

"I have no doubt Adam inherited some of his tenaciousness from his mother," said Linnie.

Linnie then gave a detailed recount of Adam (a surfer rebel from Sydney) and her (a city girl hippie from Canberra) adventure from Alice Springs to Oodnadatta in 1975 with 6 camels, 6 horses and 50 donkeys. She went on to quote Adam on their arrival in Oodnadatta.

"We were seduced by the exotic nature of hard conditions, the broad landscape and community feel of Oodnadatta, said Adam..." But Linnie remembered it a little differently. "Hmmm, well I was seduced by Adam and happy to give this new rough and tumble town a go," she said.

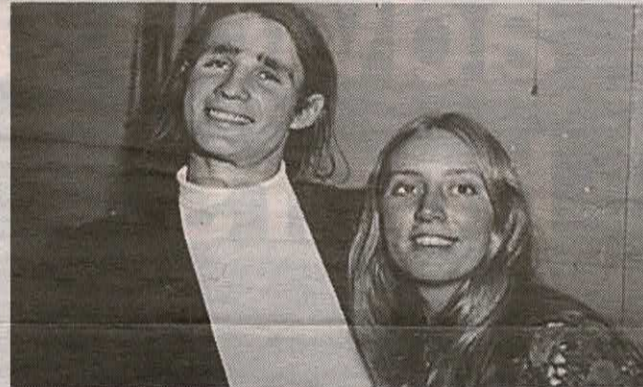
"Oodnadatta had a certain charm. We were hippies, looking for the meaning of life, and there was a real appeal about the place where you could do anything, be anyone, and no-one seemed to care."

Linnie described the many locals that the famous Pink Roadhouse employed over the years. The Plates were also pioneers in employment initiatives being the first in the region to import foreigners for employment in the tourism and hospitality industry. They also started the original Mail Run Tour now owned by Peter Rowe.

She went on to pay tribute to her current "rock" at the Pink Roadhouse and manager for the past 6 years, Hayley Nunn.

Linnie's focus was people and service at the roadhouse whilst Adam's was the workshop and advocating for better infrastructure and services whilst at the same time fighting back the tendrils of bureaucracy that groped into the outback like a kraken blindly searching for prey.

An amusing and typical anecdote was when, in early 2000, Adam and Linnie landed in the Environment Court in Adelaide because Adam had graded some roads out the back of Oodnadatta in the Neales River floodplain without permission. After many trips to Adelaide to attend court, Adam was asked to do some rehabilitation work as punishment for his initiative. A week later a big flood did all the rehab for them.



Adam and Linnie in the 70's shortly after their arrival in Oodnadatta

Linnie spoke of raising a family in Oodnadatta in the 80s. The freedom and safety of growing up in Oodnadatta coupled with boarding school at Pembroke College in Adelaide resulted in the "the best of both worlds for their education".

Linnie went on to share some personal and amusing letters with the gathering.

In 1992 Alice wrote:

"Dear Mum, Dad and family

It has been very strict at dinner lately. And tomorrow we have to go to church!! Which I hate because it is too boring.

My piano teacher is really nice. I had a softball practice for the first time. It was good but I couldn't believe how weak they are at sport. Oodnadatta kids would beat them by far!"

In 1994 Tilly aged 10 wrote:

"Dear Alice

Look, I really know I said I hate you, but I already miss you even though you have only been gone one day."

The happy times were shared but also the truly devastating times...

"But it was when our son Jack died in 1999 in a road accident at the age of 20 the Oodnadatta community wrapped around our family and helped us struggle through the almost unbearable pain. They watched over us and fed us and allowed us to grieve."

Linnie went on to explain that the past year, since Adam's passing, has been the most difficult year of her life. She has managed to keep moving forward with the unwavering support of her twin sister Annie as well as her many friends and family and the entire Oodnadatta community.

Linnie closed her speech with the following words:

"I can tell you that I know I am going to miss Oodnadatta far more than you will ever imagine. I love being part of the Oodnadatta community and I know my family feel the same, so thank you!"

Alice, Tilly and Ruby then gave a joint speech paying tribute to their mum and dad and described the values that they instilled within them as well as imparting many amusing experiences of life growing up in Oodnadatta.

Tony Williams (Mount Barry Station and President of the Oodnadatta Bronco Branding committee) and Eddie Nunn (Macumba Station and President of the Oodnadatta Race Club committee) and Roseanne Woodford all gave speeches that included amusing tales of the Plates time in Oodnadatta.

The formalities ended, the music was cranked up and the bar flowed freely. A good night was had by all.

I managed to snag a little of Linnie's time at one point in the evening to ask her what she was going to do without the roadhouse. I half expected to hear a hint of regret in her voice and trepidation of imminent change... but I should have known better. That flame for adventure and the great unknown that burns deep in the souls of all pioneers never stops smouldering and I have little doubt that the change will stoke those flames and Linnie's spirit will be all the more richer for it.

As the wee hours of the morning kicked in I found myself once again, possibly for the final time, at the Plate's dining room table, enjoying their hospitality, surrounded by good company, with a glass of neat scotch in my hand, just as it would have been if Adam was there. I pondered the situation for a moment and thought to myself, "This is what life is all about..." It wasn't a Dewars Adam, but hey, nothing is perfect!

With every ending comes a new beginning. Neville and Adriana Jacobs, former publicans at William Creek and Penong, the outback welcomes you back and we look forward to seeing you at the Pink Roadhouse in September!

Despite the fact that change is an inevitable part of life, I can't help but think, someday in September, the sun will rise and slowly creep across the majestic gibber plains and bathe the Davenport Range in its warm glow as it has done for millennia, but the entire outback will be a little less magic without the Plates in Oodnadatta.

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Outback legend honoured with Oodnadatta aerodrome dedication

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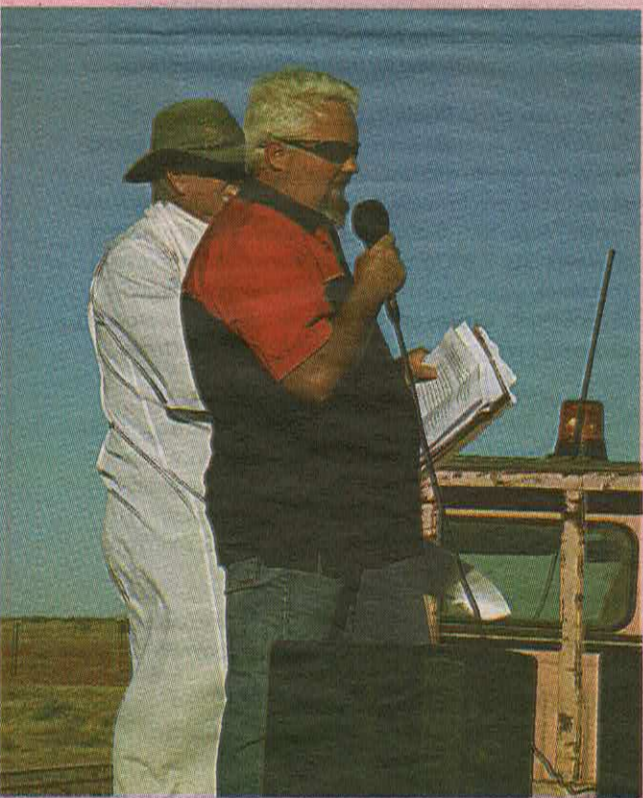


Guests at combined Farewell to Lynn and family and the naming of the Adam Plate Aerodrome

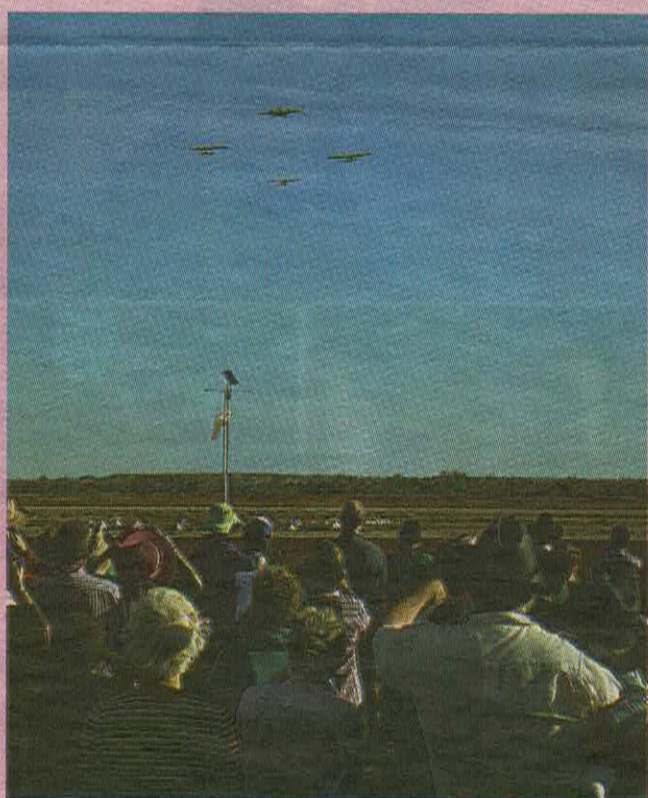
The late Adam Plate, co-owner of the famous Pink Roadhouse at Oodnadatta, was honoured Friday, 12 July, 2013 with Minister for State/Local Government Relations and Regional Development Gail Gago dedicating the Oodnadatta aerodrome in his memory.



The Hon. Gail Gago dedicates the Oodnadatta aerodrome in memory of Adam Plate



Ned Loades Oodnadatta School Principal and good friend of the Plate's spoke of his respect for Adam and his many achievements



Trevor Wright and Wright's Air Pilots fly across the Adam Plate Aerodrome in the "missing man formation", to honour the naming

The aerodrome is an important transit stop for private and commercial light aircraft flights, and is a centre for scenic flights over Lake Eyre and surrounding areas.

It is also used by the Royal Flying Doctor Service for medical clinics and patient transfers as well as medical emergency evacuations, with about 50 stops at the airstrip each year.

In Oodnadatta for the naming ceremony, Ms Gago said that this commemoration suitably reflects Mr Plate's untrammelled, adventurous spirit.

"For travellers and residents alike, Adam Plate's name was synonymous with the Outback. His passion and vision for the Outback were extraordinary," Ms Gago said.

"Adam and his wife Lynn were famously 'just passing through' with camels and donkeys in 1975 and never left. Over the next 40 years they became advocates for tourism development and the improvement of services and amenities for the Far North.

"The service they have provided at the Pink Roadhouse since the mid-eighties has held the Far North of South Australia together—providing travellers with a warm welcome, generous assistance, vital supplies, and expert local advice.

"Adam lobbied to name the road from Marla to Marree the Oodnadatta Track, and established life-saving UHF radio communication networks for travellers and pastoralists.

"For more than 20 years Adam also maintained and managed the aerodrome, helping to ensure it remained open and provided access for emergency services, locals and visitors.

"I am honoured to dedicate the aerodrome in his memory."

The aerodrome was significantly refurbished in 2012 under the Australian Government's Remote Aerodrome Safety Program, with the project jointly funded by the Federal Department of Infrastructure and Transport and the South Australian Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure.

The upgrade now provides emergency response aircraft with reliable 24 hour access, improving safety and response times for emergency services and the travelling public in the event of a critical incident.

The aerodrome is owned by the Outback Communities Authority and managed with the assistance of the Oodnadatta Community.



The Plate women stand in prayer while Father Paul Burke blesses the Adam Plate Aerodrome



Guests at the Aerodrome ceremony, held on the airstrip prepare to move to the Pink Roadhouse for the Plate's farewell party

Photos: Stephen Staines