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## A tribute to Peter Caust

Underground Books owner Peter Caust left Coober Pedy in December 98 after a 28 year association with the Far North of SA. His new base is Darwin.

In typical Peter style, he refused to be interviewed, down playing his contribution to Coober Pedy. Fortunately, a lot of folk who knew Peter felt compelled to have his story in print. I volunteered to interview Peter and with a lot of bullying record the following incredible life story.

Peter's trademarks are his bright coloured shirts, his cropped hair and his camera. He is always interested in his surroundings, in people, recording the changes on film. He is constantly busy with many projects on the go at once.

### First Official Posting

Peter grew up in Western Australia, but moved to South Australia in his teens with his parents and brothers. He trained at Wattle Park Teachers College in Adelaide in the late 1960s, majoring in Art.

His first two-year posting was at Coober Pedy Area School in 1970, which boasted seven teachers and 143 kids, compared to the 50 staff today. Peter recalls, "I knew Coober Pedy was on a main road, but had no idea it was a dirt main road."

In Peter's first three weeks the temperatures never got below 113 degrees Fahrenheit and staff accommodation was above ground in a transportable ATCO wowik iron framed dog box. Every evening was spent in the hotel trying to cool down. Peter found he liked Greek drinks.

Peter taught 43 Grade 3-4 students. The current Director of Nursing, Tanya Wolfe, was one of Peter's students. There was no assistant. Author Colin Thiele, of "Fire in the Stone" fame, visited the school. There was no town electricity, no school electricity. A 32 volt generator powered the staff accommodation, and a cord extended to the school when necessary.

### Seasoned Teacher

Peter's two year stint in Coober Pedy gave him every teaching experience



Peter Caust

possible, he said, and he took up Alberton in Port Adelaide for the next two years. Coober Pedy friends lured Peter back for visits during this time. In 1974 around Easter time, after big rains, the Education Department offered Peter a one year teaching contract at Anna Creek Station, 170kms west of Coober Pedy. They were unsure of the number of students because of the transience of Aboriginal workers. Peter was encouraged when he saw the names of some of the Anna Creek children were familiar from his Coober Pedy teaching.

He was flown to William Creek, a town of ten folk, and driven to Anna Creek Station fifteen kilometres away. Peter knew Anna Creek was the biggest station in Australia, The Kidman Manager's name was Dick Nunn, wife Connie, and 40 people lived there. On arrival Peter found the schoolies accommodation was flooded, mice infested and unliveable. He moved into the visitor's quarters.

Peter's one year turned into two at Anna Creek Station. He taught an age range from 11 to 24 years. He said the isolation was difficult and the teaching fantastic. He had to write individual math programs for each kid. The job taught Peter to be "more organised", although I suspect he was anyway. He

enjoyed the countryside as much as the people, all meticulously recorded in photographs and sixteen mm home movies. He studied the Pitjantjatjara language course. He has fond memories of his mini moke crammed with 13 kids after school, heading off to the local dam.

### Meeting Peter

I first met Peter in Oodnadatta when he brought the Anna Creek kids to participate in a sports day at the school. Jean Woods (Marree) was his capable assistant. He popped up in Oodnadatta from time to time, visiting teacher friends. In 1975 he attended the Oodnadatta Race Meeting, and wrote a poem called "The Oodnadatta Fling" with Connie Nunn. I can't help myself, Peter, I have to reproduce one of the ten stanzas;

The Galloping Darts  
A guy missed the board  
Not once but two times  
And on the third he scored.  
Fifty-nine would you believe?  
"Good God" and "Oh Lord",  
We couldn't believe it  
So we roared and we roared.  
Was it some number  
just next to sixty?  
or had, by some chance

Continued page 22

# A tribute to Peter Caust - cont. from page 10

The judges fixed it?

In 1976 Peter took one year's study leave to complete his Teaching Diploma. He continued to visit Coober Pedy in holidays.

## Teaching

Mid 1977 Peter returned to Coober Pedy in Special Education. He said his reasons for returning were firstly he had a job, and secondly he had not experienced the country around Coober Pedy. A new school had been built, school numbers had escalated to 450 and the staff to 35. Town power had been installed in 1972 and there were even some bitumen roads.

Peter continued in Special Education in 1978, taking a yr 8 class of 10 students, mainly Aboriginal. He bought his first piece of real estate, a dugout for his home. He and a fellow teacher and partner Alana Mellor and Alana's children Gideon and Nicole became a favourite family. They did many camping trips to waterholes, Oodnadatta and Dalhousie, taking extra school children on these excursions.

Peter's Father died in 1978 and he took long service leave at the end of the year to spend time with his Mother, Mary.

In 1979 Peter was the Youth Support Worker based within the Coober Pedy School. The position was Aboriginal funded, working in the community. Peter commented, it is hard to assess the success of that job.

Around this time Peter was the Coordinator of the Outback Festival, held on race weekend annually, a member of the Progress Association and the Hospital Board. From 1978 to 1983 Peter voluntarily looked after the swimming pool. He was responsible for supervision of the pool roster, cleaning and chemicals. Coin vote concerts raised money for that pool. He and Alana established the Coober Pedy Swimming club and supervised after school training. Swimming trips included Alice Springs and Woomera.

From 1980 to 1983 Peter went back into classroom teaching with two other teachers. He took leave from the Education Department in 1984 and 1985 but stayed in Coober Pedy. He coordinated the Community Mural Painting on Lucas Supermarket wall in 1984.

## Coober Pedy Times

The Coober Pedy Times was established in 1982 by Peter and Alana and Neville and Stella Hyatt, initially at the Coober Pedy School. During his leave, Peter ran the Coober Pedy Times on a voluntary basis, from his dugout. In 1985 Peter purchased more real estate and set up Underground Books.

Peter is enthusiastic recalling this era of his life. It was an interesting time. A whole new set of skills had to be learnt to run a newspaper. For example, Peter and any volunteers had to produce to a deadline, tackle photography, graphics, typing, advertising and diplomacy. They had to run the paper as a small business with a committee of volunteers.

1985/86/87 saw Peter as Opal Festival Coordinator, once again, while Underground Books expanded into a tourist information centre and stationery supplier.

Peter remembers the Coober Pedy Times purchased the office building in Post Office Hill Road in 1988/89 and employed a multi-skilled worker to produce the newspaper, a teacher called Carrie Motley.

Peter continued relief teaching to 1991 and says he has no regrets changing his career path.

## Changes

During the 1990s Peter's community involvement expanded from Coober Pedy Times into business and tourism. He was on committees such as the Business and Tourism Association, Outback and Regional Tourism and the Coober Pedy Historical Society.

In 1991 Alana left Coober Pedy to live in Adelaide permanently. They decided to go their separate ways. Peter wanted a change from twenty years in the outback. During 1992 and 1993 he took his first long term break. He lived and worked in Alice Springs and Cairns. I can imagine he was the best unpaid ambassador Coober Pedy could ever want during that time away.

Even though Peter had kept in touch, we loved him coming back to live in Coober Pedy in 1994. He put Underground Books up for sale and threatened to leave. It is still for sale today.

1990 to 1997 Peter leased some Underground Books space to the Last Resort Cafe and created the Underground Book Gallery for exhibitions of local artists. His idea was, "to assist in the art world education of locals and allow them to view art". Peter established his tour company, Perentie Outback Tours in 1994. Passengers were taken on a three day outback camping adventure, travelling all dirt roads.

The environmental experience, as Peter preferred to call it, visited the Painted Desert and the Simpson Desert. It was promoted as five star luxury camping in a swag. Peter was an excellent guide and cook, photographer and story teller.

By 1998 Peter was determined to move away from Coober Pedy. He resigned from all committees except the Coober Pedy Historical Society. He enjoyed playing music on local Dusty Radio two hours a week. He sorted out his possessions and sold off what he didn't need in Darwin. Repeated pleadings from his friends to stay fell on deaf ears. He said "Coober Pedy is still a wonderful place to live underground and work underground. It is time for me to move on".

My family value our friendship with Peter, he is Uncle to our children. He has given us a wonderful photographic record of our friendship. I miss his vitality, the conversation and the company.

I see Peter as a tireless community worker, a link between folk on stations and in outback towns and the cities. He is not the sort of person to display awards on the wall. His famous photo cards and fly nets he brushes away with a sweep of a hand. Peter hopes to set up a bookshop in Darwin in 1999 and, no great surprise, has already picked the name - "Absolutely Books and Cards. He says there will be a well travelled track between Darwin and Coober Pedy with his regular visits to manage Underground Books. He wants to sell the Coober Pedy business and his dugout, the sooner or better.

Lynnie Plate

TO <sup>Gulisano family</sup>  
<sup>Robert + Jean Walker</sup>  
PETER CAUST

# THANK YOU

FOR

FOUNDING  
LOBBYING FOR  
VOLUNTEERING FOR  
ENCOURAGING

PROMOTING  
FINANCING  
TEACHING  
PROTECTING

ADMINISTERING  
ADVANCING  
CONTRIBUTING TO  
HELPING

# COOPER PEDY'S

ARTS  
ENVIRONMENT  
SWIMMING  
PHOTOGRAPHY

EDUCATION  
NEWSPAPER  
BUSINESS  
CONSERVATION

DALHOUSIE TOUR  
TOURISM  
OPAL FESTIVAL  
LOCAL HISTORY

PROGRESS  
ASSOCIATION

GOOD BOOKS  
& CARDS

TOURIST  
INFORMATION

FOR MORE HOURS, DAYS, NIGHTS, WEEKENDS, HOLIDAYS,  
YEARS... THAN WE COULD EVER HOPE TO CALCULATE...

*J. Grace, Anne Johnson, Phil & Heta, Sue, Yvonne, L. Watts, Rose P/O, A. Hammer, GLENYS VEENSTRA, RAMONA SKAENYA, M.D. CORO, M. Blöbel, Coober Pedy CHILDRENS CENTRE, David Brown, Michelle, Langdon, AND YOUR MANY STATION FRIENDS!, B. Hammermeister, Judy & Brian Underwood, Robert & Bonnie, Helen & Bonnie, Ann Kapadopoulos, KATHRYN & CHRIS, Mandy, Doreen, Shelley, Anne + Joel, Barbara Spurr, John Grant, Beth, Jeff, Dion, Joel, Maja and Alec, Bozena Slowinska, Chris + Taylor, Mandy Sparrow, Jo Lavinopoulos, Thanks - Bernice Sternberg, Stella Opp, Paul Arthur, Narelle Perry, Kirsty & Alby, Maristella Gulisano*

*TRAC Students & Co-ordinators, TAFE Staff, KATHRYN & CHRIS, HARTLAND, Jenni & Mike, Shane & Boys, James Committee, Judi James, Photo courtesy of Peter Caust*

*Yester, Mabel, Tanua Smith, Robert Harris*

*Robyn + Jean Walker, Gulisano family, Lois + Brown, Bobby Brown, Ralya ISVARI*

*Mabel Lachbwick & family, Cheryl Broad, Harris and tribe*