

Welcome Back to Coober Pedy

The Welcome Back to Coober Pedy Reunion held on Easter Sunday was an exciting culmination of the Centenary Opal Festival long weekend. Previous residents came back to renew friendships dating back 20, 30, 40, 50 years or more. Even though the words, "you haven't changed," were heard, there's no doubt that the name tags helped with identification of old friends.

In the CPAS gym there were history displays from many clubs, volunteer organisations and services including Mine Rescue/SES, Karate Club, the local Churches, Historical Society, Coober Pedy Hospital, Coober Pedy Amateur Race Club, Drive-in, Motor Race Club, Coober Pedy Area School, SAPOL, Coober Pedy Opal Fields Golf Club, Shooters Club and others. The Historical Society Wall Hanging depicting opal mining in Coober Pedy 1915-2015 was also on display after being shown at the Gem Trade Show on Saturday 4th April

The photo display of Dag Johnson (Yuncas) drew groups of people eager to meet Yuncas and hear his stories about Coober Pedy in the 1950's. Born in Norway, he came to Coober Pedy as a teenager in 1956. He was on his way to the Melbourne Olympics when he got side-tracked by the opal fields and he never got to the Games. Yuncas was a pilot with his own plane as well as an opal miner and he flew many mercy flights. His return to Coober Pedy included surprise meetings with two men that he remembered as skinny children. Peter Edwards showed him the bullet that was eventually removed after his life was saved by Yuncas. Greg Dunstan nearly lost an eye but his sight was saved. Yuncas had to fly his plane low to avoid further damage by pressure. Dag's comprehensive collection of photos from the 1950's and early 60's matched by his memory for names, dates, places and incidents made his display a popular gathering point.

Outside there was an open-air combined faith Easter Service at 10am. The Songbird Story telling Tent was erected on the Oval but later moved to the gym. A barbecue lunch, cooked by volunteers, with salads from Maxine from John's Pizza and Historical Society members, were served from the Canteen where Broni Lesue and many volunteers kept food available for the 250 people who attended, followed later by afternoon tea. Tables were set up under marquees and classroom verandas so people could continue to catch up over a meal in the shade. After an official speech of welcome at 2 pm on the school oval from Mayor Steve Staines, the school choir performed, Ishka and Bili read poems, Emily Sirbescu sang and then music was provided by Barry Lewis.

In the Library where the Oral History project was underway people could hardly move. They were meeting and greeting, looking at the Library photo displays watching films in the meeting room and waiting to be interviewed. Two film makers were available to record people's recollections of their days in Coober Pedy. Dave Laslett, stationed in the story telling area of the library asked for first impressions of the town and interesting stories. Rob Staines was a roving photographer capturing people's stories about mining, mining machinery and drive-in, or pre-drive-in, experiences. Full advantage was taken of this unique opportunity to capture Coober Pedy's unique social history.

Feedback from participants indicates that meeting up with old friends was the highlight of the Centenary.

Leonie, granddaughter of Edna Brewster, said, "My favourite part of the Centenary was finding out that the people who lived next door to me fifty years ago, were 'living' next door to me at the Oasis Caravan Park."

Lisa Carroll wrote, "I enjoyed seeing Peter visiting with old mates, He really had lots of memories to share with so many."

The Welcome Back Reunion was organised by Judy Underwood, Jenny Davison and Sue Britt of the Centenary Reunion Subcommittee and the Coober Pedy Historical Society. They thank all the volunteers who helped with setting up, food donations and cleanup, Coober Pedy Area School for the use of the gym and classroom furniture, Library staff for their support before, during and after the Oral Histories filming, Damien for sound equipment and the DCCP Works Department for setting up and removing tables, chairs, display boards, and shade shelters.