

— I N M E M O R I A M —

WILLIS “PETE” PETERSON

1923 – 2020

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE THIS WAY. The narrative was scripted differently. Like *Rudy*, or any episode of *Lassie*, I'd imagined a storybook ending. One with Pete holding this issue in his hands. Seeing his byline again, after so many decades since his last — and almost 70 years since his first. But Pete passed away just a few weeks before this issue went to press.

I was staring at a Colorado River toad along the Arizona Trail when I got the news. “Hello Robert,” his daughter, Cynthia, said. “I wanted to let you know that we lost Dad last night. I was able to be with him at the end.”

People will try to tell me that the toad was Pete. That he was there to say goodbye. But I think it was just a toad. Still, the stare-down was symbolic. Pete found his way into this magazine by staring at wildlife for hours at a time. And then making remarkable photographs of the animals he'd studied. “His images have a naturalist's interpretation combined with poetic artistry,” former Editor Joe Stacey said.

Pete was a gifted writer, too. He learned from his mother, who taught him how to apply literary styles and techniques to produce what's known as creative nonfiction. His words and photographs are among the many professional triumphs of a humble man. He was most proud, however, of his 67-year marriage to Roberta and the love of his children.

By any measure, Willis “Pete” Peterson had a wonderful life. We've been privileged to showcase his work in *Arizona Highways* since 1953. And I was honored to call him my friend.

THERE'S A STACK OF LETTERS ON MY DESK — the *Letters to the Editor*. Reading them is something I savor, like the fleeting moments when one of my 9-year-old daughters asks to hold my hand. About a year and a half ago, I was looking through the pile when I noticed a name: Willis Peterson. *That's interesting*, I thought. *That guy has the same name as one of our old-timers ... it couldn't possibly be the same Willis Peterson.*

The letter referenced a story we'd done on the Colorado River. And then the guy with the same name wrote: “I have many pictures of the river, before the dam was built. I have a lot of stories, too. *Arizona Highways* has been a part of my life since 1952, when Raymond Carlson wrote a short note saying, ‘These are the best wildlife pictures I've ever seen.’ It would be super to have someone from the magazine drop by and take a look at my scrapbooks.”

It was the same Willis Peterson.

I wrote back to Pete that afternoon. I was eager to meet him. And see his scrapbooks. I couldn't believe that one of the legends



was living just down the street.

Like so many photographers, Pete's legacy began with a box camera, a birthday gift in 1937. He was 14. Later, after studying photography at Phoenix College and Arizona State College (now ASU), Pete was offered a job as staff photographer for *The Arizona Republic*. His first story for us, as a freelancer, was published in May 1953. “Willis Peterson spent most of his vaca-

tions for two summers photographing the beaver at work, at play and in repose,” Mr. Carlson wrote. “We are grateful for his vivid portrait of our furry mountain friend.”

Our editor emeritus was a Willis Peterson devotee, and so were editors and curators across the country. *National Geographic*, *Audubon*, *Reader's Digest*, the American Museum of Natural History ... the list of those he impressed is long. And all of those accomplishments are meticulously cataloged in several oversized scrapbooks that are kept on a coffee table in his midcentury living room.

He would show them to me with the enthusiasm of a pirate captain showing his sailing masters a map to the lost treasure. Pete — *he insisted I call him Pete* — could talk for hours about his impressive portfolio and his many adventures. A favorite subject was a river trip down the Colorado in 1953. Last August, he graciously donated his images from that trip to this magazine. He also wrote a manuscript to accompany them.

We talked about the story one day in his living room. Like a kid who'd found a Hank Aaron rookie card, he told me about finding a metaphor. “Remember the part in the story where the boys are climbing the rock?” he asked. “The metaphor came to me in the middle of the night.” Then he shared the sentence: “They start climbing and scooting, as though they're turbo-charged caterpillars in the craziest race you have ever seen.” Creative nonfiction.

In one of his last letters to me, Pete alluded to the elephant in his living room. Until then, it never occurred to me that he wouldn't be around to see his story in print — he seemed so strong and determined. The realization made my heart sink. Now, my heart is broken.

“I've overlooked the fact that the second day of August is my birthday,” he wrote. “If I live that long, I'll be 97. What a ride I've had.”

Indeed you have, my friend.

Happy birthday, Pete. May you rest in peace.

— ROBERT STIEVE, *EDITOR*
 Follow me on Instagram: @arizonahighways

There was nothing there. Just a hand-scribbled note on a paper plate. “Trees,” it said, followed by an unfamiliar street address. There was no inflatable Santa towering over the entryway. No wood smoke in the air. Worse, there weren’t any trees. Just a paper plate and an empty lot. It was like going over the river and through the woods, only to find out that Grandma was gone and no one had bothered to tell you.

“I guess they’ve moved again,” I said to my girls, as I turned the car around and turned on a Christmas song by Taylor Swift. Turns out, the mysterious note led to a local nursery, not a new address for Tim Mitchell’s Christmas Trees. My 9-year-old twins were shattered. We’d always gone to Tim’s on the first Friday night in December. We’d go when it was dark, when we’d need a sweater. And maybe a beanie. It wasn’t wintry,



Tim Mitchell’s Christmas Trees, Seventh Avenue and Osborn Road, Phoenix, circa 1955

but the arid landscape would be disguised by the darkness and the cool air, unwitting conspirators in the illusion that we were at a Dickensian tree lot in Cornhill instead of a lot in the Sonoran Desert.

Tim Mitchell’s legacy began in 1950, when he set up shop at Central and Van Buren. Like Frisbees and Hula-Hoops, his downtown Phoenix tree lot took off. Although people lined up for his noble firs, it was the allure of the affable family that kept them coming back. *For seven decades.* And as the line of enthusiasts grew, so did the number of lots. For a while, in the 1970s, the Mitchells had as many as 22, including my favorite at 32nd Street and Camelback. Although Mr. Mitchell passed away in 1992, his family continued on. Until last year. “It was a wonderful life for my family,” Jayne Mitchell says. “As a kid, I’d split my time between Arizona and Oregon, where we grew our trees. And I got to meet so many incredible people. We had third and fourth generations of families coming to us.”

Sadly, after almost 70 years, all of Tim Mitchell’s tree lots

are gone. It’s another hole in my daughters’ world. As parents, we desperately want to protect our children from disappointment and prolong their innocence. But kids are getting used to disappointment. The coronavirus has derailed their childhood and robbed them along the way. In the spring, my girls lost out on three months of third grade. They lost the daily luau in the lunchroom and the liberation of the playground. And they lost the lifelines to their best friends and their heroes — Ms. Meyer and Ms. Seeger. Then, over the summer, they lost out on Camp Tamakwa, the quintessential summer camp in Canada’s Algonquin Provincial Park. Like almost everything around them, it was canceled. Now, this month, their long-awaited trip to upstate New York, where they were hoping for a white Christmas, has been scrapped, as well.

I would like to think that my girls will handle the latest disappointment like the *Whos* in *Who-ville* — *Fah who foraze! Dah who doraze! Welcome Christmas, come this way!* — but they’re just kids, and no matter how much perspective I offer, it’ll be another setback in a year that’s already had so many. To them, the coronavirus is like Scut Farkus, the yellow-eyed bully who lurks around every corner. Someday, though, they’ll look back and realize how fortunate they were. Despite the disappointments, they won’t have to look across the table at an empty seat this holiday season. That’s not the case for the families of more than 210,000 Americans and a million men and women around the world.

The numbers are staggering. And the loss of life is set against a backdrop of escalating civil unrest, record unemployment and catastrophic wildfires, including fires in Arizona that ravaged the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson and the Four Peaks Wilderness east of Phoenix — when the snow level drops to 4,000 feet, I can see the frosting on the Four Peaks from my front yard.

It’s been a bad year, but we have to believe that 2021 will be better. A good place to begin is with benevolence. I tell my daughters there are two ways to be: You either care about the people you don’t know. Or you don’t. It’s pretty simple. And they’re taught to be kind, too. “One rule. Two words. Be kind.” Not everyone who will read this magazine believes in Christmas, and even fewer care about Christmas trees, but I hope the tranquility of what you’ll see inside helps evoke the *spirit* of Christmas. That feeling of lightheartedness, love and good cheer. Of peace on Earth, human righteousness and decency.

The mission in life is not merely to survive, Maya Angelou said, “but to thrive, and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style.” Those things aren’t the province of any one religion or ideology. They’re things we can all strive for in the coming year.

Meanwhile, whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or just a few days at home alone with your children, happy holidays, and thank you for spending another year with *Arizona Highways*.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

Follow me on Instagram: @arizonahighways



I've never met Mary Hinwood.

I'd like to, but I haven't. Regrettably, I don't know much about her, either. All I know is that she lives in Tucson, her handwriting looks a lot like my grandmother's — *the Zaner-Bloser method* — and she's kindhearted. She's also a subscriber to this magazine. That's our connection. The ink and paper. The fresh collection of words and photographs that we harvest for her every month. She's especially inspired by the "beautiful photographs." So am I. It's another connection.

Until a few weeks ago, I'd never heard of Mary Hinwood. Nevertheless, despite the anonymity, she sent us a Christmas card — like a second cousin in Narragansett, we made her list. Thank you, Ms. Hinwood. We're much obliged.

Bruce Reynolds sent us a card, too. He lives in Huntington Beach, California, and his handwriting is elegant — a generous man born with the calligraphy gene. He included a poem and a salutation: "Gracious Season's Greetings and Youthful Yuletide Yodelings to you, Robert, and the entire publishing staff. May you be abundantly blessed with good health, peace, prosperity and fulfillment in the days ahead."

Letters. Yes, we get letters. A lot of letters. And opening them is a sacred ritual for me, especially those that are handwritten and delivered through rain, snow, sleet and hail. I'll never know the joy that doctors and nurses feel when they discharge a COVID patient who's spent months in the hospital. Or the pride a teacher feels by simply being a teacher. But relative to what I've experienced so far as an editor, the back-and-forth with our readers is the greatest reward.

Even when those readers aren't happy, like the gentleman who called me a "liberal" because of the inclusive tone of my December column. Or the woman who said she wouldn't go out to slop the hogs dressed the way I'm dressed in my editor's photo. Or the man who couldn't understand why our recent story about Desert View Watchtower referenced an effort by the National Park Service to make amends with the Indigenous people who have a physical, spiritual and cultural connection to the Grand Canyon. "Heaven forbid that someone is kept from picking up piñon seeds or selling their goods inside the park boundaries," he wrote. "I stop reading the articles when I come across your attempts at political and social indoctrination, and the magazine goes in the trash." He went on like that for 637 words. (By comparison, this column is 978 words.)

We hear from both extremes, but most of the response is somewhere in between. Like the letter from Aaron De Baiso, who works as a paraprofessional at Bayview Elementary in Proctor, Minnesota. "These challenging times mean that I'm working in the classroom more," he wrote. "After reading your December 2020 issue, I've decided to show my students the wonderful

array of photographs in that issue. By doing this, I hope they'll develop a greater curiosity, appreciation, respect and understanding of locations outside of Minnesota. Geography is essential to education. Your magazine will make a wonderful addition to my lesson plan."

We hear from students, too. One of them, Julija Kordež, is studying photography at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. She asked me about David Muench. Specifically, she wanted to know about his first photograph in the magazine. "Our lecturer, Tanja Verlak, who is a well-known Slovenian photographer, tasked us with finding an interesting photo and discovering more about its author," she said. "After researching a few nature photographers, I found one with such an amazing portfolio — David Muench. I started collecting sources from which I would make a presentation, and I was more than impressed that at the age of only 18, he'd already had a photograph published in a well-known magazine — *Arizona Highways*." That image appeared on the cover of our January 1952 issue. I sent a copy of it to Ms. Kordež. About a month later, as we were going to press with this issue, she wrote back: "Greetings from snowy and frozen Slovenia. I have presented my research, and my teacher was really excited."

Like Ms. Kordež, Rory MacLeod was looking for something specific. "I've enjoyed some of your recent issues," he wrote from his island home off the west coast of Scotland. "They've been sent to me by a generous couple who made my acquaintance when they visited the Isle of Skye. The reason for getting in touch is to request a copy of the May 2020 edition. I'm particularly interested in your title piece: *Native Peoples: Stories of Hardship and Hope*." That's one of my favorite issues from last year. We sent a copy of it to Mr. MacLeod.

Rory MacLeod, Julija Kordež, Aaron De Baiso, Bruce Reynolds, Mary Hinwood ... they're among the thousands of readers who write to us every year. And so is Lynne Werle. She sent a letter about our *Letters to the Editor*: "I'm always amazed at the diverse and completely opposite opinions and reactions you get to your stories from various readers. In November 2020, you had a reader so disappointed in your Maynard Dixon issue that he found it a total waste of space, while at the same time, three other readers were delighted with the choice and the coverage. I guess that can make your monthly decisions quite challenging."

Yes. It does.

"We inhabit a universe that is characterized by diversity," Desmond Tutu said. With subscribers in all 50 states and more than 100 countries around the world, our audience is a reflection of that. The common denominator, I believe, is a profound appreciation for the history, culture and landscape of Arizona. It's something we're privileged to share with you every month, through words, photographs, ink and paper. And we're grateful for the commentary you give in return.

Thank you for taking the time to write.

— ROBERT STIEVE, EDITOR

Follow me on Instagram: @arizonahighways