

— 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*  
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