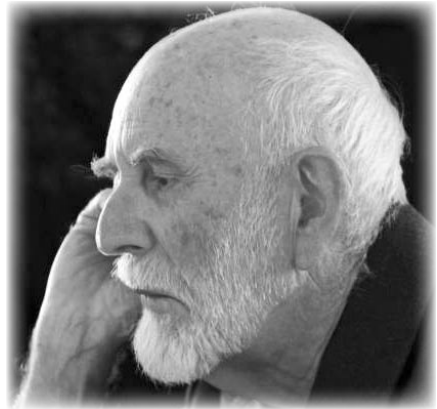


Peter Smits (1920 – 2008)

It is with sadness that tidings of the death of Peter Smits, past President of ASSA, were received. He died on 13 June 2008 in hospital as a result of post operative pneumonia a few days before his 88th birthday.

Peter was born in Parkview, Johannesburg on 25 June 1920, the son of Basil Smits, a solicitor, and Zoe Ford, daughter of a Johannesburg pioneer and developer of Fordsburg, one of Johannesburg's first two residential suburbs (the other being Jeppe's Town). After matriculating at King Edward VII School Peter went to the University of Cape Town in 1939 to study Mechanical Engineering. In June 1940, like many other students, Peter left university and signed up with the IV Armoured Cars. The unit went directly to Egypt early in 1941, arriving there amid frequent air raids – the Allied troops had just escaped from Greece as that country fell to the advancing Axis Army.

While serving in the Western desert, Peter first observed the stars and became interested in astronomy. Thereafter he was assigned as an instructor to the Armoured Car Training School, operated by the British Eleventh Hussars and Kings Dragoon Guards Regiments. Soon after returning to South Africa with his unit in mid-1943, Peter was demobilised and returned to his studies (Mechanical Engineering), graduating in July 1946. He joined the SAR&H (South African Railways & Harbours) in Cape Town, as a Pupil Engineer and spent two to four weeks in each of their many



workshops doing manual work (at R25 a month!) before becoming an Assistant Engineer. Following six years of service with the SAR&H – during which time he had seven transfers and got married – Peter joined Shell South Africa in Johannesburg.

It was here that he joined the Astronomical Society of South Africa and some months later became secretary of the local Centre. Members of the Centre, under the guidance of Dr Finsen at the Union Observatory, used to help conduct the Observatory's open public visitor's evenings on Saturdays. It was at this time that Peter Smits began his studies of variable stars using the Union Observatory's 9-inch Reunert Telescope.

In 1958, after moving to Cape Town, Peter, together with other members of the Cape Centre, began conducting the visitors evenings at the Royal Observatory, under the guidance of Dr Stoy, Her Majesty's

Astronomer at the Cape. Peter was allowed use of the 24-inch McClean telescope to re-calibrate certain variable star fields. At the same time he became the representative for one of the Centres on the Society Council. Peter was elected President of the Astronomical Society for the 1959-60 session. He made it his duty to visit as many of the observatories in South Africa as possible. During these visits he built up a collection of pictures of these Institutions (the photographs are kept in the archives of ASSA).

When Sir Richard van der Riet Woolley arrived to set up SAAO, all amateurs were banned from the Observatory and Peter's work on the McClean came to an end. For a while Council, Society and Centre meetings also had to be held off-site. Only much later was access re-allowed.

Cape Town got its first planetarium projector in 1960. It arrived in a box without any instructions. Peter was given the job of figuring out how it worked. It was set up at the Goodwood Showgrounds where he presented regular public shows.

Until he retired from Shell in February 1983, Peter was very busy. His duties involved writing manuals and lecturing on safety and security measures in Shell depots and installations throughout South Africa, South-West Africa (Namibia) and Mozambique (Maputo). However, he managed to maintain his interest in astronomy and always carried astronomical literature with him on his travels.

Soon after Peter moved to Plettenberg Bay in 1993, Jan Hers, who lived at Sedgefield, established the Garden Route Centre, serving the coastline from Mossel Bay to Plettenberg Bay. Peter became a committee member until July 2005 and frequently presented talks on various subjects.

Peter Smits and his wife Connie, a botanist, also joined the University of the Third Age (U3A), a world-wide association of retired persons interested in gaining a better knowledge of various subjects. Peter ran several courses on basic astronomy for both the Knysna and Plettenberg Bay branches, while Connie did the same for botanical subjects. Peter and Connie were married for 56 years, had three children (Anne, Derck and Jean), three grand-daughters and a grandson. Derck is Associate Professor of Astronomy at UNISA.

Apart from astronomy, Peter had many other hobbies and interests, which included carpentry, stamp collecting, geology, archaeology, palaeontology and genealogy. He was also interested in cinematography and was the first person to film mice pollinating certain proteas, a project he worked on in collaboration with John Rourke from Kirstenbosch.

Peter was one of ASSA's most conscientious Presidents. Systematic observations like the ones that he did form the mainstay of astronomy as a science. He will be missed by all. ☆