



Mrs Wendy Dalla, missing from the ACT since 1975. (Photo taken in 1963)

The information relating to the relationship between Wendy and Peter preceding the disappearance, compiled from the statements of friends, colleagues and family members, suggests fiery, and at times unpredictable, interactions. Although Peter Dalla continued to maintain that his relationship with Wendy was quite good, the opinions of other closely related persons indicated to the contrary.

The work colleagues of Wendy suggested a tense relationship between husband and wife, with Wendy totally subservient to an overbearing partner.

The disappearance

At some time between September 23 and September 25, 1975, Wendy Dalla disappeared from the Canberra area. Police records reveal that Peter Dalla first reported the issue concerning his missing wife at 10:16pm on September 25, 1975. A Missing Friend Report was lodged by the ACT Police the next day. Within the original Missing Friend Report submitted by Sergeant Bryan Warren, Peter Dalla stated that Wendy departed at approximately 8:20pm on September 25 to visit the local shops. According to the report, Peter claimed that it was definitely dark when Wendy left; an assertion coinciding with records indicating that the sun set in Canberra at 6:01pm on September 25, 1975.

On the alleged day of the disappearance, a fact confirmed by both the Legislative Drafting Institute and Peter Dalla, is that Wendy did not attend work. Due to illness, Wendy had not appeared at work for the entire week beginning September 23, 1975. The day the Missing Friend Report was lodged, the director of the Legislative Drafting Institute, received a letter containing information suggesting a voluntary departure by Wendy. The letter, apparently written by Wendy, expressed dismay with her current domestic situation, stated an intention to leave the family and contained an apology for causing the Legislative Drafting Institute the difficulties inherent to such a hasty departure.

Immediately after Wendy disappeared, by way of explanation, Peter Dalla offered to friends and family members that Wendy had departed permanently, of her own volition and with a man in the armed forces. Symbolic of his belief in the finality of Wendy's departure, Peter Dalla immediately requested that his mother-in-law care for the children in the future.

When submitting the original Missing Friend Report it is written that Peter Dalla appeared vague and unconcerned for his wife's welfare. Furthermore, after initially viewing the case, Sergeant Warren queried the truthfulness of the statement made by Peter Dalla.

Twenty year mystery with missing Canberra woman

By Cassandra Wyer, ACT Media Liaison

Married for 11 years and the mother of three young children, Wendy Dalla disappeared without trace in September 1975 from the Canberra suburb of Cook and the reason for her disappearance remains unexplained to this day.

The sudden nature of her disappearance caused police and family members to express considerable concern for her welfare, but the investigation at the time was not able to reach a conclusion. After 18 years, Detective Constable Juani O'Reilly, from Belconnen Station, re-opened the investigation in an effort to discover the truth.

Wendy Brown was born in 1945 and became Wendy Dalla when she married to Peter Dalla at age 19. The couple took up residence in Wagga and started a family, firstly with a son, followed by twin daughters.

Immediately prior to the fateful disappearance, the family was living in Cook, a Canberra suburb, where Peter was unemployed and Wendy worked as a clerical officer for the Legislative Drafting Institute.

Although Wendy's colleagues did not mention knowledge or evidence of an abusive relationship, friends of the Dalla family have stated that they believe verbal and physical abuse did occur within the household. Relations from both sides of the family, corroborate this assertion and recalled numerable incidents of violent interaction between the couple.

All people interviewed in respect to the interpersonal structure of the Dalla family recollected a strong, loving and protective relationship between Wendy and the children. Adult witnesses recall a dedicated and caring mother who continually embraced additional employment opportunities in order to gain extra financial supplementation for the family. The eldest child also revealed numerous instances whereby his mother was subjected to spousal abuse in an apparent attempt to protect the welfare and safety of the children.

During the immediate period preceding Wendy's disappearance, he recalled an increase in the violent and erratic behaviours of his father toward immediate family members. At this time, as Peter was unemployed, in addition to full time employment with the Legislative Drafting Institute, Wendy was undertaking extra work in order to supplement and maintain the household income.

The time factor

The exact time and day that Wendy departed continues to be a source of contention and contradiction. The last contact initiated by Wendy Dalla was received by her employer on September 23, 1975. Wendy, therefore, disappeared sometime during the three-day period of September 23–25.

Peter submitted that Wendy decided to visit the local shops at 8:20pm on September 25 in order to purchase biscuits for a friend expected to visit later that evening. However, when queried, the owner of the store recalled that in 1975, the shop was closed by 8pm. As an immediate resident of the area, it must be wondered how Wendy could not be aware of such a fact.

The visitor in question, when interviewed, stated that it was in fact daylight when he arrived at the Dalla house. The eldest child also confirmed that he believed it was daylight when his mother disappeared. The statements provided by these witnesses directly contradict the information offered by Peter Dalla in 1975. When later interviewed in 1993, Peter Dalla altered the original departure time, stating he was now certain that Wendy left for the shops in the early afternoon, when it was still daylight.

Other inconsistencies

The presence of the visitor remains another issue yet to be satisfactorily resolved. While Peter Dalla remained adamant that an appointed time had been arranged for the visitor to arrive, the visitor contends that his arrival at the Dalla house was at the request of Peter Dalla for assistance in relation to his missing wife, and not due to any prior arrangement to meet that evening.

Sergeant Johanna Wendler of the ACT police lodged a Supplementary Missing Friend Report in relation to Wendy Dalla on September 29, 1975. After minimal success, in October of 1975, Sergeant Wendler forwarded the file concerning Wendy Dalla to the Missing Persons Bureau of the Victoria Police. The subsequent report from the Bureau to the ACT Police dated November 10, 1975 indicated there was no success in ascertaining the location of the subject, Wendy Dalla.

Peter Dalla refuted the finding of the Missing Persons Bureau and stated adamantly that Wendy disappeared of her own free will and was living in Melbourne. In support of this claim, Peter offered a letter supposedly received from the Missing Persons Bureau of the Victoria Police indicating that Wendy had been located.



To assist with recent inquiries a digitally aged image of Wendy Dalla was circulated.

Peter claimed this indication had been inscribed on an envelope by Victoria Police investigators. The contents of the inscription, however, were not made available to police until 1993 when the legal counsel of Peter Dalla forwarded the subject matter of the letter etchings to the AFP. When queried in relation to the letter, Peter Dalla stated that a personal message, with delivery instructions, was addressed to Wendy and distributed to Missing Persons Bureau in Melbourne through the ACT Police. Peter Dalla asserted that this letter was later returned from the Victoria Police with an inscription stating:

...The Missing Persons Bureau Russell St Melbourne. Reported missing to Canberra. Understand was located by Vic Police but was not prepared to ????(sic) be interviewed again and be given this information as a matter of urgency for her to contact him...

This assertion by Peter Dalla is unable to be confirmed, nor contradicted, from the information obtained by police during the current investigation.

Any records maintained by the Victoria Missing Persons Bureau have since been destroyed. Despite the negative response from the Victoria Police, within the report submitted by Sergeant Wendler, it was stated that the information relating to bank transactions suggested evidence that the missing friend, Wendy Dalla, was possibly in Melbourne. Unfortunately, records of the Commonwealth Bank from this period no longer exist. Therefore, the occurrence, and involvement of Wendy Dalla in these transactions, is unable to be officially confirmed or denied.

On November 18, 1975, the file investigating the disappearance of Wendy Dalla was closed by the ACT Police. Despite the questions raised by the strange circumstances of the disappearance, it was commonly assumed that Wendy Dalla has purposely disappeared in order to escape a strained domestic situation. The case was briefly re-opened by the ACT Police in 1976, with little new information on the matter forthcoming.

The mystery continues

The location of Wendy Dalla gradually faded from the immediate memories of the general public. However, the Dalla family remained known to the police, mainly in relation to the welfare of the children. The state removed the three children from the care of Peter Dalla after consideration of evidence suggesting physical abuse against the eldest child. Although the son confirms such abuse occurred, both Peter Dalla and a daughter continue to deny that any violence occurred within the family unit.

On the basis of interviews with those in contact with Peter Dalla, as time progressed he continued to appear emotionless in regard to the mystery surrounding the location of his wife. The nonchalance of Peter Dalla in relation to his wife's departure appears consistent with his assertion that Wendy disappeared voluntarily and deliberately in order to begin a new life elsewhere. Peter remained adamant that Wendy disappeared of her own free will and was living interstate, nominating the states of Victoria, Queensland and South Australia to several people.

During this period of several years following the disappearance, according to witnesses, Peter Dalla offered several other stories to explain the fate of Wendy. Allegedly Peter has stated that Wendy was suffering from either a terminal disease or insanity. These claims have been unable to be substantiated by investigators. Friends and relatives of Wendy do not recall prolonged medical treatment also, ACT welfare and psychiatric services failed to locate records of Wendy Dalla. Peter also convincingly claimed that Wendy left Canberra with a man in the armed forces. No evidence to support this claim was discovered when this notion was examined by police either in 1975 or 1993. Another apparent declaration made by Peter was that Wendy was being protected and kept from the family by the police and/or ASIO. Again, when this allegation was addressed by investigators, no substantiating evidence was revealed.

Case re-opened

In 1993, Peter Dalla applied to the court to have Wendy declared legally deceased. In response to the court application submitted by the legal counsel of Peter Dalla, the earlier Missing Friend Reports were subject to further examination by AFP Detectives in Canberra. When examined in totality, the evidence presented by the reports demonstrates the glaring inconsistencies within the submissions from witnesses.

The discontinuity surrounding the time of departure, the anomaly in regard to whether the presence of the visitor was pre-arranged, the different explanations offered by Peter Dalla and the lack of information to confirm any existence of Wendy Dalla are the initial examples of a considerable number of inconsistent pieces of evidence within the Wendy Dalla case.

The entirety of these evidential inconsistencies led recent investigators to regard the disappearance as highly suspicious. The conclusion that Wendy Dalla disappeared of her own volition

was quickly revised. Based on the discontinuity of the case, it was wondered whether more sinister implications may be concluded. On this basis, Detective Constable O'Reilly used all recognised methods in an effort to discover the location of Wendy Dalla.

Relevant Commonwealth agencies within Australia were unable to provide any record of Wendy Dalla since her disappearance. Government Departments overseeing procedures such as taxation, Medicare and Social Security contain no record to confirm the location of Wendy under either her married or single names. Since 1975, the Department of Immigration records indicate that Wendy has not applied for a passport or left the country. Registrars overseeing births, deaths and marriages have been contacted all over Australia. No certificates were forthcoming to suggest that Wendy had died, changed her name or remarried. Examination of bank records failed to indicate any presence of the subject throughout NSW or Victoria. After an application was lodged by a daughter, the Salvation Army added Wendy Dalla to a list of missing persons and conducted an unsuccessful search. Despite an exhaustive search by government and private agencies, investigators have continually failed to confirm any trace of Wendy Dalla.

Reaching the conclusion that Wendy Dalla was most likely deceased, investigators analysed other alternatives to explain the fate of Wendy. This analysis involved examination of a possible grave site. The excavation occurred in 1994 at an address in Wagga. Accompanied by a university professor, investigators failed to obtain any definitive results from this procedure. Although nothing specific was located, a suspicious rectangular hole, measuring 60cm by 80cm, was discovered.

During 1994, to finalise the search for Wendy Dalla, investigators sought further public assistance. Information was released to the media requesting persons with any knowledge in regard to the location of Wendy Dalla to contact police. All avenues of the media were

used with interviews conducted on both radio and television, and age-enhanced photographs were released in conjunction with newspaper articles.

Several potential witnesses contacted police as a result of the media coverage. The information disclosed by these people revealed little information to confirm the precise fate of Wendy. The evidence offered predominantly related to the suggestion that Peter Dalla had a tendency toward violent interactions with partners in interpersonal relationships.

The mystery remains

Soon after the first series of articles were released by the *Canberra Times*, the body of Peter Dalla was discovered in a remote bushland area of NSW. No suspicious circumstances were evident and a note from Peter Dalla was later discovered stating that he had no knowledge of what had become of his wife.

A witness later revealed that Peter had become highly agitated about the publication of the newspaper articles and the re-opened police investigation.

The perennial question remains — what happened to Wendy Dalla? Those intimate with the case indicate a difficulty in believing that Wendy simply left the family and would not contact anyone for almost 20 years. Members of the public, police investigators and family members all have drawn their own conclusions based on the known evidence.

Perhaps the final opinion determining the fate of Wendy should be drawn from the statements of her son. After many police interviews over the years he still retains the conviction that Wendy would have never left of her own choice — she loved her children too much to turn her back on them.

Postscript

The ACT Coroner is currently reviewing the brief of evidence submitted by Detective Constable O'Reilly in order to make a determination on the status of Wendy Dalla.