



Rose's

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ROUND-UP

A privately-published monthly newsletter covering mainly snippets of Karoo history * Copyright: Rose Willis *
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JUST THE THING FOR CHRISTMAS

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Anyone interested in South Africa's ecclesiastical architecture and church history will find *A Platteland Pilgrimage* fascinating. Designed as a companion publication to the successful *101 Country Churches*, which Darryl Earl David and Philippe Menache produced in 2010, this 132-page A4, soft cover, full-colour book is packed with information on 102 churches across South Africa's nine provinces. However, their new book, with foreword by Gabriel Fagan, offers much more than the first. Excellently compiled and beautifully illustrated it includes a series of photographs of each church as well as interesting interior details such as pulpits, organs, galleries and some exquisite stained-glass windows. Many are quite stunning. In addition, the new book includes more historic detail and covers the role of each church in the community it serves and its relationship to the town or village where it is located. The book does not cover only Dutch Reformed edifices, most of which are extremely beautiful and many of which are based on European cathedrals, it includes Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic and Mission churches, as well as some picturesque school chapels. There are also snippets on alternative religious communities, such as Buddhists, who have temples in the vicinity of some hinterland towns. A full-colour, numbered map aids the reader in establishing exactly where each church is. The text includes invaluable information on the ideal times to visit and the best ways to photograph each building. Then, there is a four-page section with potted-pen details of the architects, among whom are some of SA's best-known church designers. Darryl, who is closely associated with the tiny Karoo town of Richmond, and a founder of its Book Town Festival, said: "Soon after I discovered the Karoo, I became aware of an unusual brand of tourism – church tourism. The magnificent churches of the hinterland captivate many and some enjoy photographing these buildings. This led to our first book. As soon as it reached the shelves, we knew we had to expand on it." *A Platteland Pilgrimage* took a year to write. "We enjoyed every step of this 'pilgrimage' even though it was tough at times," says Philippe. "We are convinced that we have a great offering here." The book, ISBN 978-0-620-54170-1, costs R250, plus R25 for postage. Contact Darryl (cowboys@sai.co.za) or Philippe (Philippe.menache@gmail.com) to order.

SPOTLIGHT ON SWARTBERG PASS

An Extended Public Works Programme, managed by a Cape-Town-based company, ANIX, has been operational in Prince Albert from September 27. This huge workforce, managed by eight supervisors, two of whom are women, has been trained as part of a poverty alleviation scheme. Workers started by concentrating on general landscaping in some areas of the village as well as on its outskirts. The main aim of the project, however, is the rehabilitation of the Swartberg Pass.

This will start in earnest in February next year and continue until December, 2013. The project will include compacting the road surface at embayments, improving the ramps at the “dansvloer”, rehabilitation of the storm water channels using natural stone, repairing of the dry-stone walls to an approved standard and the introduction of signage and plaques which will provide historical information along this breathtaking and important tourist route. Dilapidated items at all stopping points and view sites will be replaced. In addition, ablution and braai facilities are being planned for erection at the Eerstewater picnic site, states an article in the November issue of the *Prince Albert Friend*.

Season's Greetings to Round-Up Readers & Best Wishes for 2013

A HORSE FOR THE KINGDOM - BUT WHAT DO THEY NEED?

THE *Australian Journal*, published in early 1900, posed the question: What sort of horse does the army need? The aim was to position Australian horse breeders to become a main supplier to the British War Office. The article explained: “In South Africa soldiers are mounted on animals drawn from all ends of the earth; great round-hipped English chargers, light wiry Australians, mongrel Argentines, wonderful little Burmese ponies and last, but not least, Cape horses.” These were not as ineffective and worthless as one military writer had recently said. “It must be remembered that Boers are doing all their work on local horses, and their rapidity of movements clearly shows that these mounts are not useless.” Army horses could be divided into three classes – gun horses, mounted infantry horses and cavalry horses – the latter were the most difficult to acquire. “A cavalry horse is expected to carry about 19 stone and still move rapidly from place to place at a rate of at least nine miles an hour.” (This calculation was based on a cavalry saddle with full equipment, weighing about seven stone, a man of about 12 stone). “These horses are also expected to have pluck enough to charge at an enemy and cut him to pieces at the end of a long day. They also have to do scouting work, riding round hills and then need to flee at full gallop when under fire. A first-class Australian steeplechase horse would make an ideal cavalry horse; but needless to say there is no hope for profitably breeding these at the prices the Army is prepared to offer. Indeed few can breed such a horse. A good weight-carrying animal of quality, pace and power, would be worth more as a carriage horse, a gentleman's hackney, or a hunter, than as gun fodder. Any breeder who could supply active, fast, well-bred handsome horses, up to eighteen stone, would not need to wait for the Army to buy them. He would easily find buyers across the world for all he could breed.”

IN THE END IT BOILS DOWN TO MONEY

“In Australia the Army pays an average of £16 for a cavalry-type horse,” continued the *Australian Journal*. “The British Army, however, will pay up to £40 per head. Consequently, it is next to impossible to draw any fair comparison between the English and Australian cavalry horses as prices differ so widely. When war broke out in South Africa the New South Wales Lancers were supplied with police horses, many of which were worth £40 a head in Australia. In fact, if Australia had been raked from one end to the other no better horses would have been found. They were all well-bred, yet, beside the robust English cavalry horse, they looked light and weedy. Their loins were lighter, their quarters drooping, and in the eyes of the English authorities, they were all too slight in frame to command admiration. On the other hand English horses look lumbering and underbred to us. Without doubt British horses are as strong and sturdy

as they look. Even with 17 or 18 stone on their backs they do not get stressed, whereas, to be honest, our horses do feel the weight very much.”

A SHOCK TO AUSSIE VANITY

The war showed beyond any question that Australia did breed a weight-carrying charger in any way equal to the British horses, continued the *Australian Journal*. “This may come as a shock to the vanity of Australian breeders, but it is quite true. This was proved when Australia sent two chargers to South Africa for General Baden Powell. Each horse cost £100, and were the pride of the continent, but when they arrived it was clearly seen that every English cavalry regiment at the front could produce five or six officer's chargers which were handsomer, stronger and more up to the work than the two Australian horses. . Our horses certainly had quality, but the English horses were no mongrels. On enquiry we found that many of the officers in South Africa were riding their own hunters as chargers. Among those hunters was some splendid horseflesh. However, this war has also proved that well-bred horses are too delicate to stand pressure, stress, starvation and mismanagement. They become sick, refuse their food, and soon die. A war is hard on horses. Good horse, or bad horse, right type, or wrong type, the ill-treatment and hardships they have to undergo brings them all to one level and the ‘five-pound scrubber’ is quite as likely to survive as the finest specimen of the weight carrying charger. It is not the severity of the work they have to do which kills the horses, rather it is the wretched conditions under which they have to do this work. If the horses can be kept free from sickness, and be properly fed, they will be able to do all the Army’s work with the greatest of ease,” stated the journal.

MAN WHO ‘LED A CHARMED LIFE’ TREATS A DOCTOR

The life of a hinterland farmer was not easy in the 1880s. Not only did they have to be brave and courageous, they also had to have luck on their side. One frontier fighter, John Jarvis Bisset, who was said to have led a charmed life, came to South Africa with his parents in 1820 just before his second birthday. The family had not been here for long before young John was almost killed by an assegai. After that day he had many more narrow escapes. On one occasion, after being wounded in a skirmish he was racing for safety and help when he saw his friend Dr Stewart, of the Cape Mounted Rifles, leaning against a rock with blood pouring from a wound in his chest. Bisset gallantly turned his horse and raced to the doctor’s aid. As he dismounted and stepped towards his friend a second bullet hit struck the doctor in the head and Bisset found Dr Stewart’s blood and brains spattered over his face and jacket, writes F C Metrowich in *Frontier Flames*. Bisset managed to remount and stay on his horse even though blood was pouring from his own wounds. He knew he would faint, fall and bleed to death, if he did not quickly get help. A friend assisted with a tourniquet. Bisset then saw another doctor, Dr Fraser, “one of the finest officers in the services,” close by. He approached this man, but just as the doctor turned to examine Bisset, he fainted from fatigue. Forgetting, his own agony Bisset got the doctor a cup of tea. After drinking this the doctor was able to adjust the tourniquet and dress Bisset’s wounds. .

STILL IT WAS NOT THE END

Bisset was alive, but not out of danger. There was no means of transporting him from the battlefield, so there was still a chance that he might die. Eventually his comrades devised a plan, that caused poor Bisset even more agony yet, saved his life. Bisset wrote: “Two men got hold of me each taking an arm, their elbows well into my armpits, a third man stepped in between my

legs, and tucked a thigh under each of his arms. My face was towards the ground and in this unfortunate, uncomfortable and extremely painful manner I was carried to camp, on my 52nd birthday, my face scratching over mimosa bush, brambles and long grass.”

SAVED BY A TURKEY

John Jarvis Bisset fought in many more battles and suffered many other wounds. On day in high fever, “virtually at death’s door,” a turkey saved his life. F C Metrowich in *Frontier Flames* writes: “Day after day John Jarvis lay in high fever on the verge of death. His pulse deteriorated. He was delirious and a wound in his thigh was discharging great gouts of pus. There appeared to be no hope for him.” Then Dr Fraser who was again attending him found Mrs James had grabbed a turkey hen when she fled to the fort for protection. This bird laid a daily egg and this was used in an attempt to nourish Bisset. However on the 14th day, he was still in a coma and under the influence of morphine when the doctor heard ‘a death rattle’ in his throat.” Quite sure that Bisset had departed this life, Dr Fraser held a mirror to his face. His breathing was very shallow, so in a last desperate attempt to save his life the doctor poured a few drops of a stimulant down Bisset’s throat. The dying man coughed and regained consciousness. Only then when the blankets were stripped off his bed did the doctor find that Bisset was saturated with blood. An artery had burst. Bisset was so weak that the doctor could not retie it. He managed to keep Bisset alive until the bleeding stopped. Again Bisset survived. He died at the age of 74 at Folkestone, Kent.

SCREAMS SAVE FATHER

During the Anglo-Boer War Graaff-Reinet saw much rebel activity. On October 19, 1901, Veld Cornet Smit and some men from Commandant Van Deventer’s commando arrived at the farm, Bloemhof to round up all the mules, writes Bartle Logie in *Traveller’s Joy*. They captured owner Arthur Murray and forced him to run ahead of them. Arthur called out to his wife, Ellie, that he had been taken prisoner and she, fearing that they would be looted, gathered all the food and sent her daughter Eleanor to hide it in a nearby hollow tree. A Boer stopped the girl and asked what she was carrying. “Nothing,” she said. “All right, put it where your mother told you,” he replied. She did and the Boers took the food. Just then four-year old Billie Murray ran out to see what was causing the commotion. When he saw soldiers and his captive father he began to scream. The Boers released Arthur, but rode off with the mules.

HE ATE, DRANK, SPAT AND

William John Burchell came across several rather curious fellows on his travels through the Karoo. He mentions meeting a rather unusual farmer in the Bokkeveld near Ongeluk’s River, which at the time was “quite dry, except for two or three puddles of bad water”. They parked their wagons in the riverbed where an abundance of Karoo thorn trees afforded shelter from a violent south-easterly wind, which had sprung up. “We had scarcely released the oxen from their yokes when we were visited by a boor. We accompanied him to a miserable hut close by to purchase some sheep. His only food was mutton without bread or any kind of vegetables. His sheep were numerous and thriving though they fed on nothing but bushes. He had no large cattle because the Karoo does not produce proper grassy pasture for cows and oxen. Our visitor’s place in the scale of civilization would be nearly at the bottom, if not below zero. His mental powers seemed to have lowered themselves down to the level of those cattle which were the only concern of his thoughts. He seemed to possess a mere animal existence: he could eat meat, drink a dram,

smoke a pipe, spit and practise some other disgusting vulgarities; which last enjoyments he indulged in without ceremony and almost without cessation. He seldom spoke because he had nothing to say. His lifeless eyes betrayed the vacancy of his mind. He was, however, invited to our wagons and treated civilly.”

AND SO THE SILENCE VANISHES

The rail brought many changes to the Karoo. “At old wayside outspans and other places, where travellers might once have begged piteously for a bite to eat, there now are bright-faced, big-hearted, jovial railway men who will bid them to come to their cottage and dine,” wrote a correspondent of the *Cape Monthly Magazine of May 1878*. “At some stops travellers can see the remains of a stone “scherm” (shelter) built long ago by circuit advocates seeking a night’s rest. Now (in 1878) close nearby stands an extensive hotel where ‘one can be as happy as in a palace’, and large railway works, staffed by friendly workers. The quiet of the Karoo has disappeared and busy scenes have come. Cuttings and embankments are everywhere. In February the material train was running to Vleifontein, two days from Uitkyk. Soon the rail will reach Grootfontein, and that will be only about two days from Beaufort.”

AN EXHILIRATING RIDE

“Every old Karoo traveller remembers Buffels River. It is about a day from Grootfontein, which is two days ride south of Beaufort West.” states another item in the *Cape Monthly Magazine*. “Two roads diverge about five hours after Grootfontein. The Ghoup Road, the one on the right hand, goes on to Greeff’s (outside present day Laingsburg) and thence to Ceres and eventually to Worcester. At Buffels River one finds large workshops, establishments, a neat engineer’s house and cottages, scattered around among the thorn trees. A few hundred yards on the Beaufort side of the Buffels River stands a railway engine. The reality then dawns. This is no dream. The railway engine - named ‘South Africa’ - stands ready for a run to Vleifontein. Next morning at six, by special permission, we boarded a material train – that is to say trucks – and took an exhilarating ride to Matjiesfontein. We arrived seven thirty and saved a full day of tired mules and sandy travel. We rattled off from Buffels River imagining ourselves in paradise. At Matjiesfontein I was astonished to see large establishments, a crowd, a busy booking office, telegraph office and hotel. The telegraph, of course, accompanies the rail. One sees lines running alongside the rail tracks throughout the dreary Karoo. This certainly is the seventh wonder of South Africa. I can only imagine the change in a year or two when stations dot the map and telegraphs tap news and information across the length and breadth of the land. It is true that from 6 am to 6 p.m you have only done 95 miles, but reckon on the saving of time and animals and the comfort for travelers. Change is simply wonderful. From April 28, 1878, there will be a train that can travel from Matjiesfontein to Cape Town in a day. Before long all complaints against the Karoo will be gone and it will be easy to reach anyone who lives inland.”

***Whatever failures I have known, whatever errors I have committed, whatever follies I have witnessed in public and private life, have been the consequences of action without thought. -
Bernard Baruch***