



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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NO HOLIDAYS FOR THESE LEARNERS

The quality of schooling and state of education is given much publicity these days, but in 1851 a frontier school mistress stood no nonsense and took an arbitrary decision. Mrs. Eedes principal of the Retreat Boarding School for Young Ladies in Grahamstown, simply informed parents that half year school holidays had been cancelled. According to the *Cape Frontier Times* of June, 1851, she took this step because she was not entirely satisfied with the performance of the girls in her care. They were not doing as well as they could in all subjects, so she informed their parents not to collect them for the holidays because special courses in English, French, ancient and modern history, music, landscape drawing, flower painting, reading, mapping, the use of globes, and so on had been arranged. Their skills in all these subjects were sadly lacking, she said.

NOT A MAN TO CROSS

Lord Charles Somerset, the man who lent his family name to Beaufort West and several other hinterland places was not a man to cross. His reversed many decisions made by Sir Rufane Donkin, who acted as governor while he was in England. His arrogant need to be right at all times caused him to butt heads with men like John Fairburn and Dr. Philip, who hoped to start a literary society. They ignored his demands to desist, so in a fit of fury, he closed the Government Gardens, their favourite meeting place, under the pretext of revamping the avenues. This annoyed many other citizens who also enjoyed walks in the gardens. In other acts of petty tyranny Lord Charles appointed his private secretary as examiner and taster of wines, brandies and other liquors. Penalties for “improper quality” rocketed, retail licenses were difficult to acquire and many sticky regulations, which badly affected hinterland farmers, were introduced.

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

After completing his apprenticeship at a wool firm in 1880, Yorkshire-born John William Jagger, 21, came to seek his fortune at the Cape. He was filled with boundless energy and enthusiasm. Shortly after arrival he found work with the general dealers Gordon, Mitchell and company and his experiences as a commercial traveller into the interior make interesting reading. One of his first trips was to Beaufort West in a Cape cart drawn by horses. Once there Jagger hired a hotel room for showing his samples. He quickly set them out, then raced from shop to shop introducing himself and inviting the owners to come and see his wares. The shopkeepers found this approach very odd. There were used to being invited to view samples over drinks and cigars, so few went, but those who did found Jagger's samples and prices excellent. They placed orders and once their stocks arrived they were able to undercut competitors who were selling similar products obtained at higher prices from other suppliers. Next time Jagger came to town, there was no need to rush around issuing invitations to drum up business. Virtually every shopkeeper came to see his samples and he left with a record number of orders. By the time Jagger was 24 he had started his own business as a soft goods importer with Albin Flemming, a friend. Jagger was an impatient man, hard on himself and his staff. He ran his business on paternalistic lines, says Rene de Villiers in *Better Than They Knew*. As owner-manager he kept his finger on everything. Nothing was too small to escape his attention.

A LUCKY ESCAPE ...

Few know that William John Burchell, one of South Africa's best known early hinterland explorers, also contributed to the country's medical history. Roger Stewart pays tribute to his expertise in this field in an article entitled *William Burchell's Medical Challenges* in the *S A Medical Journal*, Vol 4 of 2012. "His vivid, sometimes poignant descriptions, graphically tell of some of the health risks endured by early travellers in this country and his description of medical ministrations to his companions reveal a depth of care for 'fellow creatures'", writes Roger. One day Burchell received a relatively minor, but potentially serious wound, when a gun accidentally discharged in the Roggeveld district, about 20 km south-south-west of present-day Fraserburg and he had to treat himself. He was adjusting the hair trigger of a flintlock firearm after Speelman, one of his assistants, had 'put it out of order'. Roger says: "Assuming the gun was unloaded, Burchell cocked it and pulled the trigger. Although there was no priming in the pan, the gun fired. 'By a providential guidance' the ball passed between the two men, but the flash from the pan scorched Burchell's eye, and rendered him blind for the remainder of the day. The pain and inflammation were eventually alleviated by continued bathing with warm water. Next day his sight returned, and he continued on his way as soon as the painful operation of picking the grains out of his face had been attended to."

... BUT NOT LUCKY IN LOVE

Burchell was not so lucky in love. In his mid twenties he took up a position as schoolmaster and acting botanist on the island of St Helena. His fiancée set out to join him in 1807, but on arrival announced a change of heart, saying that she decided to marry the captain of the ship on which she had travelled. Burchell remained a bachelor for the rest of his life. He died by his own hand in a clumsy suicide at the age of 82 in 1863. Burchell is hailed as one of the world's the most prolific collectors of botanical and zoological specimens. While in South Africa, he collected and categorized 50 000 specimens of plants, seeds and bulbs, and 10 000 specimens of insects, animal skins, skeletons and fish. .

MOVING ENCOUNTER WITH A DREADFUL MALADY

In the Fraserburg area, Burchell had a moving encounter with a 'dreadful and incurable malady.' A *trekboer* asked him to visit his wagons where his daughter lay very ill. "The girl and her mother had 'hopes of some cheering opinion, but I was shocked the moment I beheld her and I was obliged to intimate to her father that her disorder was incurable. I saw too plainly to be mistaken, all the symptoms of a loathsome disorder. (The girl was suffering from advanced leprosy.) The girl, who once possessed some beauty, now had dreadful features because of this disgusting disease.' Burchell suspected that measles had played a role in disturbing her immune response. He stated that, soon after inoculation a few years earlier, the girl had suffered measles, which seemed to aggravate the inoculation site. "I wished that chance had not thrown me in their way to open their eyes to her hopeless situation. I could offer neither remedy nor mitigation, so I left this unhappy family with the most heartfelt commiseration." he wrote.

SCOTTISH DOCTOR FINDS LOVE IN CRADOCK

Paisley-born, Robert McLachlan Armstrong, 23, was one of the first members of this clan to marry in South Africa. He studied medicine at the Andersonian Institute in Glasgow and after qualifying as a doctor and surgeon was sent to this country as a naval surgeon and doctor. In 1838 he accompanied Sir George Napier on his first visit to Grahamstown, Blockdrift, Graaff-Reinet and Cradock, where he lost his heart to Jane Agnes Mary Taylor, the beautiful daughter of Ceylon-born Antonia Francina (van Geysel) and Dutch Reformed church minister John Taylor. Jane Agnes had been born in Beaufort West, where her father had first ministered to a far-flung flock. He was sent to Cradock by Lord Charles Somerset and he served the people of the Karoo for over 40 years. As soon as Robert met Jane Agnes in the *Pastorie* in Cradock, he knew she was the woman of his dreams. He was given "an honourable discharge" to marry her. They settled in Cradock where he served the community as its first doctor. Robert and Jane had five children.

UNNERVING WELCOME TO NEW HOME ...

First impressions of the hinterland left many regretting that they had ever left home. Rev William Shaw records that many lost hope in this new land and “gloom spread over their countenances”. To some the land appeared sterile and covered in stunted bushes. They were disappointed by the craggy, stony hills which were relieved by very little verdure. “This waste of wilderness was dull and disappointing. Their disillusionment was not lessened when they arrived at their locations,” he wrote. “It is not easy to describe our feelings. Our Dutch wagon driver indicated we had reached our location, took our boxes out of the vehicle, put them on the ground, cracked his whip and drove away, bidding us ‘*goeden dag*.’ My wife sat down on one box and I on another. We looked at each other, but this was no time for sentiment, so we began pitching our tent and when that was accomplished we moved into it our trunks, bedding and other things.” Dumped on the veld with their goods and chattels and left to their own resources must have been most unsettling. The women in particular must have needed all their courage to adapt to this primitive environment, wrote F C Metrowich in *Frontier Flames*. The men too could have drawn little comfort when Colonel Cuyler said: “Gentlemen, never leave your guns at home.”

... AND THINGS GOT WORSE

Many settlers found that things went steadily downhill in their new homeland. One frontiersman wrote. “My wheat, two months ago the most promising I ever saw, is now cut down and in heaps for burning. The rust utterly destroyed it. Not a grain could be saved. In the drought grubs attacked the barley just under the surface and I reaped little more than I sowed. My Indian corn was injured by caterpillars, the cabbages were destroyed by lice, the beans scorched by hot winds. The potatoes are good, but I have only a few. The cows are dry for want of grass. On Saturday, while watching by the sick bed of my dear little girl (bitten by a snake while running over the veld without shoes or stockings) till she died, I was startled by the cry of wild dogs. I ran to the window and saw about thirty of these ferocious animals. Before I could drive them off they killed 20 of my 27 sheep. I stood for a moment thinking of my misery – my dead child – my dead crops – my ruined flock. God’s will be done. I have need of fortitude to bear up against such accumulated misery.” The settlers learned the hard way, they overcame the bitterest trials and turned a savage wilderness into a panorama of picturesque homesteads, bequeathing a heritage of which any nation might be proud, states F C Meterowich in *Frontier Flames*.

DEATH BY MISADVENTURE

A trip to church in 1929 cost Hudson Robert McComb, 63, his life. At the inquest his wife, told assistant magistrate P J Burger that Hudson had left home at 18h30 on the evening of July 31, 1929, in fine health and good spirits. She expected him home as usual by 20h45, yet when he did not arrive she was not unduly worried. She simply imagined he had been delayed chatting with friends. However, when he still was not home at 22h00 she sent his son, Lex and a family friend, Mr Bailey, in search of him. They found no trace of him. This was quite unprecedented for Hudson, still his wife did not panic because he was “a reliable and steady” man. Next morning, Mina, a young serving girl found Hudson’s body on the bank of the Komani River on her way to work. She ran to town and reported her gruesome find to Detective-Constable Labuschagne. Neither Mina nor the detective knew Hudson, but when the district surgeon arrived, he was able to identify him. The district surgeon examined the body and finding no signs of foul play, decided Hudson had died of exposure. Hudson it seemed had decided to take a short cut home and had crossed the river at a spot different from his normal route. From evidence on the bank it was also clear to see where Hudson had lost his footing on the slippery muddy bank, and how difficult it had been for him to scramble up the steep grassy bank in the dark. The doctor concluded that after Hudson had managed to crawl up the bank, he would have been exhausted and so decided to rest for a while. This cost him his life. The magistrate asked Mrs McComb about a financial loss which Hudson had experienced through his brother’s business, but she said he had not been upset or depressed by it. He had taken it in his stride.

TRAVELLED ACROSS A DREARY, WEARY STRETCH

"I came to Beaufort West from a long way inland," wrote a correspondent of the *Cape Monthly Magazine of May, 1878*. I was very glad to reach this town as I had come from far over dry, thirsty, dreary, weary country. The sight of the dam was a pleasure to my tired eyes. I had long dwelt inland and the progress of the town since I had last seen it was very marked. In some respects it was hardly the place I remembered. I missed the jovial figure and portly presence of "old Hume," the well-known hotelier of older days, nevertheless I found a clean and well-conducted hotel. The butter was not like liquid mustard, the towels were clean, the bread good and, the "draught" beer, a luxury. All too soon I had to leave for Cape Town. I was hardly out of town on the south side when I felt as if I was out of civilisation. You get this feeling when you leave Beaufort West and cast a long lingering look across the vast expanse of land that lies ahead. It is a scene of loneliness and a silence, different from any other in the world. Beaufort West, is a break in the dullness, an oasis in the desert, I looked forward to seeing the practical improvements I had heard of on the railway."

A COMMON SENSE HOST LIGHTENS THE ROAD

"The road from Beaufort West is a Karoo road," continued the writer. "It goes up and down, down and up, in and out, round and about. It is very dry and dusty. The Karoo mimosa clothes the banks of the river, which has a broad, clean, dry sandy bed that tempts traveller to use it for a comfortable and sheltered night's outspan, but often they get a rude awakening. Getting to Steyn's Kraal was a relief, then on to Klein Letjes Bosch and Groot Letjes Bosch where the bright face, vigorous political tongue and commonsense of Mr Deas lightens one up a bit like a ray shining in darkness. From there it is on to Uitkyk and its oppressive silent solitude and then on again for some hours. A day and a half travelling from Beaufort West and the features of the old Karoo are still the same. They have been the same for fifteen, even fifty years and even when Barrow or Burchell travelled over the same ground. Then, suddenly we see a large sign with painted up letters announcing a wayside inn, The Royal Oak, Rietfontein. There is a crowd and bustle around the hostelry, where once former days, a struggling farmer dragged along his homely but miserable career with nothing to offer a passing traveller but biltong and fleas."

ASTONISHING PROGRESS IN THE HEART OF THE DRYLAND

The hotel's grand signboard was not the only change on this southbound route. "There is a camp beside a clump, almost grove of mimosas," wrote the correspondent. "It has tent upon tents and here scores of hard-working navvies and labourers all toiling away. "There are the rails!" I excitedly call out and simple as these precursors of progress may seem, they are astonishing in the Karoo. Earthworks are being thrown up steadily and the rails are being carefully laid in the heart of this solitude. Before long, this rail will creep into Beaufort and the town will become the terminus to the great interior. We who have until now travelled step by step will be able to hurry there. Perhaps in time the rail it will move on to the Orange River."

PREPARE TO TRAVEL

Fifteen years ago when one left Beaufort West to travel the 330 miles (± 551 km) to Cape Town one had to prepare almost as well as for a sea voyage to Europe. You had to be careful about your horseflesh – if this was crippled, it would strand you. One also had to be very particular about what went into your hamper. Water was a priority, so was patience along the route. The most cheerful society and companionship could pall on a long trip as one would become anxious for change and varied conversation. Apart from poor, dull, food and bad water there were scores of drawbacks to face before reaching Karooport, often with a sigh of relief and a lung-cheer of joy. A Cape Town trip could and did take a week or more – now only two days out of Beaufort West, one saw the rail. This raised great hopes for the future of travel.

Life is a rainbow which also includes black - Yevgeny Yevtushenko a Russian poet.

. His poem about Joseph Stalin ("Winter Station") earned him international attention and the enmity of Soviet leaders.