

A STREET CALLED BOOM — SOME GLIMPSES OF PIONEER KLERKSDORP

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EARLY DAYS

In 1865, twenty-eight years after Klerksdorp had been founded, James Taylor opened the doors of the dorp's first trading store. During 1871 he was joined in a partnership by Thomas Smith Leask, a retired elephant-hunter and trader. The store, known as "Taylor and Leask", was the only one at Klerksdorp and became the centre of the town's activities and the rendezvous of hunters and traders who brought ivory and skins from the "interior" (Matebeleland and Mashonaland) and refitted for their next expedition. Both Taylor and Leask were on friendly terms with the majority of the hunters and F.C. Selous, a prolific letter-writer, visited the town several times. In one of his letters he mentioned that it had cost him £1 600 to outfit at the Klerksdorp store. When Taylor died of fever in 1878, Thomas Leask bought out Mrs Taylor and re-established the firm on his own account, as "Thomas Leask and Co."

The Rev. Francois Coillard, who stayed with the Leask family in 1879, saw Klerksdorp as "a wretched hamlet stretching along the river for two or three miles". In 1885 the "dorp" was a collection of a few houses with only six English-speaking families: Leask, Hale, Siddle, Rae, Ravenstock (who later opened the Ravenstock Hotel) and Brown. (Alexander "Sandy" Brown had been connected with mining at Tati and married a daughter of the celebrated Boer hunter Piet Jacobs.)

Transport riding formed a considerable source of revenue and soon it became necessary to regulate traffic. A notice in the "Staatscourant" (Government Gazette) warned all transport riders that it would be illegal in future to drive across the Church Square or through the cemetery, or to make any new road, the only one on which it was permissible to travel being the public transport road. There was a weekly post-cart mail service from Kimberley which reached the town at 3 a.m. with the English mail on board. "Taylor and Leask" was the town's post office and Thomas Leask its unpaid postmaster. Klerksdorp was indeed the centre for business, and farmers came as far distant as 160 km with their products which they bartered for merchandise and groceries. Ivory came in at irregular intervals and hunters, traders, missionaries and travellers simply arrived, out of the blue, and outspanned at the shop where most of their business was transacted.

But the discovery of gold was just round the corner, and the old order was about to change.

THE GOLD RUSH

There is reason to believe that the famous explorer and geologist, Karl Mauch, prospected in the Klerksdorp-area as early as 1868. Almost twenty years later, in 1888, the gold discoveries on the Witwatersrand caused some stir and rumours of the existence of gold in the vicinity became very persistent. The fact that a local prospector had found good values goaded Thomas Leask into action and he promptly secured options on the mineral rights of a number of farms.

Herman Guest, the town's earliest historian, wrote the following about the discovery of gold, in the local newspaper *The Klerksdorp Mining Record*: "...Mr Leask got some specimens of gold-bearing banket from the Rand and its appearance struck him as being remarkably similar to some stones he had procured on the commonage for the foundation of a house, and he promptly set about searching for some of the same-looking rock. Mr J.J. Roos, and others, working with Mr Leask, started prospecting operations and soon found extensive outcrops of banket along the ridge now owned by Klerksdorp Estates. It was panned and some excitement was caused by the discovery of glittering specks of the precious metal in the bottom of the dish ..."

The discovery of those "precious specks" was soon common knowledge and people of all sorts, shapes and sizes descended on the town, intent on making their fortunes. The unprecedented influx soon caused the "dorp" to burst at the seams and new arrivals lived as best they could in tents, waggons, shacks and huts; one late-comer moved into a large machinery crate until something better came along. Hotels and bars sprang up like mushrooms and about 160 mining companies were formed, many of them soon to crash in financial ruin, to be refloated by others, or by new entrepreneurs, as soon as the pieces could be reassembled. The first building (1888) in the New Town rejoiced in the name of the "Bacchanalian Bar", one of about 60 popular "water-holes" in the town. From all accounts, water was not the most sought-after commodity in the bars — Barberton had over 200 pubs in its heyday!

At the same time the religious needs of the community were served, for in 1886 the first English church was built, followed by the first Wesleyan church a year later. A Methodist or Wesleyan church, a wood and iron structure, was built in the Old Town, near Frank's Corner, before the church in the New Town was built. The Dutch congregation celebrated the inauguration of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk building in 1882. According to H. Guest, the newly-established mining town in a short time "emerged from its first stage of a scattered collection of wood and iron shacks, tents and other shelters and was replaced by bricks and mortar and in a few years there appeared buildings of a more substantial nature, and hotels, churches, stores and offices were constructed."

The Klerksdorp Stock Exchange was opened in 1888 and it is recorded that on a particular day fifty stocks were called and sixty transactions were put through, an aggregate amount of £10 000 changing hands. The Exchange later became Klerksdorp's entertainment centre, a meeting place and, during the Anglo-Boer War, a burgher hospital. The Caledonian Ball — the social event of the year, for which tickets cost ten pounds per couple — was always held there. Lord Methuen later on accepted the chieftainship of the local Caledonian Society.

Several mining organisations were formed. Most of the original names of the mines have been lost; some of them, however, are known to have been prefixed by the name of an animal, with a "fontein" tagged on behind (e.g. "Otterfontein Gold Prospecting and Developing Syndicate", "Rhebokfontein"). Other names were more original, not the least of which were the "Silver Snake Mine", "Six Shot Syndicate", "Sheba", and "Worcester Hope", to name but a few. In November 1888 A. Molyneux, a local broker, advertised the shares of various mines: Nooitgedacht 31 — 32 shillings, Klerksdorp 21 shillings, Hartebeest Union 72 shillings, Worcester Hope 18 shillings and six pence and Rietfontein Highveldt 12 shillings.

A diggers' committee was formed in 1888 but apparently the only power it possessed was that of granting water rights. In January the following year a public meeting was called to deal with a plague of claim-jumping. About that time ex-President Stafford Parker of the Vaal River Diamond Fields moved from Barberton, where he had been market-master, to Klerksdorp. He later became a member of the Health Board Committee.

The Orkney Estate and Gold Mining Co. Ltd. — so called after Thomas Leask's birthplace in Scotland, and now a vast mining complex with its own township — issued a prospectus in February 1889. Its advertised capital was £10 000 in one-pound shares. The extent of

the property was 775 morgen and the capital of the company £70 000, of which only £15 000 was working capital. One of the provisional directors was Thomas Leask. March 27th 1889 was a great day in the town when the new building of the Klerksdorp Stock Exchange was formally opened. Mr Thomas Leask, the chairman, declared it open for business, "champagne flowed and glasses were filled ..." The institution flourished for about a year and the dividend for the first quarter's working amounted to 17½ per cent.

SLUMP AND DECAY

But, even then, behind the facade of prosperity and progress, decay had started. Wasteful and poor extraction methods, patchy outcrops, over-capitalization, and above all, complete lack of fundamental mining standards and methods, combined to spell out financial disaster. Business became dull and the stock and share trade dwindled. The majority of so-called mine managers had had no mining experience at all, and many spent most of their time in pubs in the town when they should have been on the properties concerned. One manager insisted that the workings of this mine, which called itself "Les-Dame-Des-Victoires" (Notre Dame des Victoires), had to be sufficiently high for him to carry out his inspection *without* having to remove his top hat.

In May 1889 the share market was slightly better — a week later exchange was dull. Brokers on one occasion wheeled out an American organ onto the steps of the Stock Exchange and with cello and guitar held an impromptu concert. A catchy song of that time, "Wait till the clouds roll by", proved a popular item.

The editor of *The Representative*, G.E. Vickers, in the last issue of this paper urged the establishment of a local Chamber of Commerce. In October 1889 H.M. Guest, who had taken the paper over and re-christened it *The Klerksdorp Mining Record*, repeated the plea. Early the following year the Klerksdorp Chamber of Commerce was formed with committee members Herman Guest, George Siddle and Thomas Leask among others. On January 18 1890 the Klerksdorp Chamber of Mines, with Leask as its first President and a membership of ten mines, was established. After the first slump and the consequent disappearance of some of the mines from the membership list, the two Chambers merged. This arrangement proved to be a sound one, particularly as the commercial community recognized that their well-being depended almost entirely on the existence of the mines.

The slump, however, persisted as mines dwindled and the mining aspect of the Chamber of Mines disappeared. Behind the scenes the rot had set in. *The Klerksdorp Mining Record* reported that the state of the share market was one of utter, total collapse, while brokers were playing cricket, sleeping or reading novels. In October 1890 the position was even worse and reports like these were common: "Stores closing down" or "Exchange silent". The mining population inspanned and departed towards the Reef. The prospects in Klerksdorp were so distressing that it appeared as if the mining industry was doomed. No ray of hope was apparent and the gloom that prevailed overwhelmed the population. To add insult to injury, the press reported that the new McArthur cyanide extraction process had produced excellent results. It was then unfortunately too late to mend the situation.

Waggons, tents, machinery and even houses were almost given away. Shopkeepers ruefully studied the latest lists of "fly-by-nights" and calculated their losses, and in the present business area of Church Street only three

Klerksdorp in the early days. Thomas Leask's trading store is prominent in the foreground.

PHOTOGRAPH: TRANSVAAL ARCHIVES DEPOT, PRETORIA



buildings were occupied. Stafford Parker advertised four stands for sale by raffle and moved to Johannesburg in November 1890. About this time, Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Winston Churchill, spent one night in Klerksdorp on his way from Kimberley to Rhodesia, and had little good to say about the town and less about the hotel he stayed in. At the Exchange he found a pig, dog, fowl and cat in occupation. Its former glory had passed away. It was reported that all that remained in the town were two men, a boy and a dog — perhaps the same one that lived at the Exchange — who met every evening on the steps of the Palace Hotel to discuss politics. What part the boy and dog played in these deliberations is obscure.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

The introduction in April 1890 of a new gold recovery process by Mr John S. McArthur and Dr Forrest (known as the McArthur Forrest Cyanide Process, and mentioned earlier) made it possible to recover most of the gold contents which had hitherto been lost. This process signalled a new era of prosperity and brought about a revival, since advantage was taken of the newly-discovered methods and cyanide plants were built on several local mines. Though the depression in the town was bad, several mines continued in production, and, coupled with agriculture, the slump was survived. Subsequent periods of depression and slumps have since hit the Klerksdorp district, but they have been mild in comparison with the dreadful experiences of 1889 and 1890.

During December 1892 Thomas Leask, Managing Director of the Nooitgedacht mine, brought a glimmer of hope to some 200 people whom he addressed at the mine. He told the crowd that one thousand ounces of gold had been extracted. His daughter Lulu started the engine of the newly-installed five-stamp battery. The conventional bottle of champagne was broken and refreshments were served.

After several mines had installed the new cyanide process, the gold output, which was merely about 7 000 ounces in 1890, increased to 10 967 in 1892 and 12 780

in 1893. By the end of 1895 there were 25 companies in existence and the gold output soared to a phenomenal 71 776 ounces — it now appeared as if the gold industry in Klerksdorp was firmly established and the depression of the late eighties was finally shaken off.

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Outside Vannece Building, where the Klerksdorp Stock Exchange once stood, is the street called Boom, meaning not a “tree”, as in Afrikaans, but a prosperous period. Where Woolworth’s now is once stood “The Globe”, a popular bar where the proprietress was none other than Miss Jennie Lynn, a well-known entertainer in her day, and a compassionate helper of those in need. Ada May, after whom the suburb is called, was a barmaid in one of the local pubs. Little else remains ...

Of such things is local history made. ■

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