

# Schaefer's Halt in the Weimershoek Valley - a Brief History

## Rocks and Ruins

Halfway between the towns of Lydenburg and Dullstroom, in the lovely Weimershoek Valley is the farm now called **Schaefer's Halt**. On this farm and on numerous others flanking the highland road between Belfast and Lydenburg, are numerous, abandoned ruined buildings, which add an air of mystery to this valley.

These stone houses were extremely well built and situated in commanding position near perennial springs. The stone was appropriated from Iron Age settlements in the area, some dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

By the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Koni people, under Pedi rule, lived in this area. In 1826, Mzilikazi's Matabele impis swept through the Highlands, decimated the population and pillaged the region. Thus, when Potgieter's Trek arrived in 1845, they found the area sparsely populated and finally settled here in 1847.

## Early Trekboer Days

Weimershoek, as the area became known, was first notarised in 1848, after a large portion of the Eastern Transvaal had been granted to the Boers by King Mswati, in exchange for 100 head of cattle.

The formal 'grondbrief' (Deed of Grant), signed by President Burgers, is dated 1876, and grants the title to one Gideon Johannes Joubert and sons.

The Joubert family was large, and as the children married, the land was subdivided and portioned out amongst the children. Stephanus Johannes Bothma, whose father was with Joubert on the Potgieter Trek, was linked by marriage to Joubert and became the first owner of Weimershoek Section B.

## Early days on the Farm

By 1888, SJ Bothma had built his farmstead near a perennial spring and close to the old wagon trail (the track is below the barn). This spring has been so reliable that the old ZASM (Zuid Afrikaanse Spoorweg Maatskappy) requested servitude in June 1913, for water to supply their steam engines. The weir and pipeline built by them are still there, and the farmstead still obtains its water from the ZASM dam. Quarries which supplied ballast are still visible, as are the remains of the Inn and store which served travellers on the wagon trail to the Eastern Transvaal.

Dullstroom was proclaimed as a town in 1892, and the old wagon trail became a busy route.

## Mampoer and Moonshine

An enterprising Bothma aunt, who lived in what is now 'The Snug', took advantage of the passing traffic, and sold her famous peach mampoer, brewed in the stone wagenhuis, from the nearby Marmerkop station, and to the nearby Inn. This trafficking in moonshine was entirely legal; as she had a permit to distil and trade. Annie Bothma fermented the peaches in a 'kuip', a suspended cow-hide bag, and was still trading in 1930. Old bottles are still found near her still.

## Weimershoek and the Wars

Military campaigns between the Boer Republic and the Pedi in 1876/77, and the British and the Pedi in 1877/78, after the British annexed the Transvaal, had no direct affect on Weimershoek, as most skirmishes were further to the north.

The First Anglo Boer War (1880/81), did however, see Colonel Anstruthers march from Lydenburg to Pretoria via the old wagon trail. Col Anstruthers 94<sup>th</sup> Foot Regiment was subsequently annihilated by the Boers at Bronkhorstspuit.

Mampuru, a Pedi chief in favour with the British, was hanged by the Boers for murdering a rival chief, Sekhukune. His name lives on in the notorious peach brandy still made in the area.

In the Second Anglo Boer War, the first contact at Weimershoek was made in September 1900. General Ian Hamilton's forces, despatched by Lord Roberts from Belfast, to support general Buller, who was advancing on Lydenburg from Machadodorp, encountered resistance from Louis Botha's burgers. Hamilton reached Weimershoek on the 5 September 1900.

The Boers were on the retreat and little resistance was encountered. On 6 September, the British forces entered Lydenburg, which was surrendered by the Sheriff. Sangars used by the Boers can still be seen on the farm next door.

### **Scorched Earth**

When Lord Kitchener succeeded Lord Roberts in January 1901, he implemented his notorious 'scorched earth' policy, and farm burning was enthusiastically carried out by the British soldiers. The farms in the Weimershoek Valley were not spared. Homesteads were torched, belongings smashed, livestock and crops appropriated and the women and children taken away to concentration camps at Belfast, Balmoral and Barberton.

The Compensation Claim submitted by SJ Bothma after the war, for damages to his property, lists the simple possessions of the trekboers and paints a poignant picture of life in those times.

The considerable detail of the claim enables us to compare the present structures on **Schaefer's Halt**, with those that were torched. Very little has been added or altered in the hundred odd years in between. In fact when restoration was undertaken in 2004, the remains of the burnt roof beams appeared to be in good condition and strong enough to last another hundred years! Quantities of crockery shards are regularly dug up around the homestead, and iron artifacts litter the old wagon trail.

Further down the valley, Zwagershoek, near present day Stonecutters Lodge, saw action from two of the Longtom Cannons.

### **After the War**

As for Bothma's compensation; the British severely pruned the claim, since Bothma was riding commando at the time, but he did receive 804 pounds.

The descendants of the Bothmas' continued to make their livelihood on the property by farming stock, fruit, vegetables and maize. In 1974 the remaining three Bothma children sold their farm. Wally Cronje, purchased it for use as a weekend home for R21, 000.00. Grazing was rented out to neighbouring farmers for cattle and sheep, but besides that, little farming was done. Minimal structural changes were made in the 35 years that followed. The result was that the original 'footprint' of the farm was easily traceable, and it was restored, as far as practically possible, close to the original style, in 2004.

The present name **Schaefer's Halt**, besides being the name of the owners, is a German word meaning 'shepherd'. The 'halt' is a reference to the old steam trains that stopped there to fill up their tanks from the spring.

In a way the new Schaefer's Halt is fulfilling its original purpose - a delightful spot to recharge and rest awhile!