

Witsand Stories

Here are a collection of interesting stories by Jan Langenhoven, a local historian from Witsand (also known as Whitesands). Anybody with stories or photographs on the history or people of Whitesands and Port Beaufort, can contact Jan by e-mail jan@langenhoven.net or write to Box 71, Whitesands 6666. His Afrikaans book titled Gooi Los! with many more stories on Witsand's fishermen has been published in 2012.

Witsand and Port Beaufort Info

Port Beaufort was founded long before Whitesands. It already got its name in 1817 from Lord Charles Somerset. It was, however, properly demarcated in 1831 when the governor of the Cape Colony granted a piece of land of 1419 morgen on the eastern bank of the Breede River to the Port Beaufort Mercantile Establishment who proposed to establish a harbour there. It did indeed develop into a flourishing port in the mid-1800s when the Barry's used the port to establish a coastal trade between the Overberg and Cape Town. (See story: Port Beaufort – a forgotten seaport). Port Beaufort stopped functioning as a port when the company of Barry and Nephews was liquidated in 1866. Eventually, the land known as Port Beaufort came into the hands of Mr Carlson, then Mr Ohlsson and finally, by a private act of parliament it became the private property of Mr Alfred Barry in 1929. It was, however, subdivided and the pieces sold to different buyers in 1831. The current Port Beaufort township borders directly on the township of Whitesands, and the two places are for all intents and purposes one unified town.

Whitesands/Witsand has a different origin altogether. It was part of the farm Westfield, which was the property of Captain Benjamin Moodie, who also owned Grootvadersbos in the Heidelberg district. Westfield bordered on the sea at St Sebastian Bay, and in the south western corner of the farm was a spot marked on early maps as "Whitesands" because of the moving white sand dunes in that area. The Moodies allowed the farmers and town folk to camp in the dunes during holidays. Around 1900 they also gave permission to fishermen to erect cottages in that sandy stretch, to pursue their profession. The demand for plots to erect holiday homes gradually increased and the Moodies asked a surveyor to measure out plots in the area. Eventually they sold the plots and the Whitesands part of the farm to Tomlinson and Rademan, shop owners in Whitesands, and it progressively developed into a popular holiday resort.

Today Whitesands/Witsand and Port Beaufort are a popular resort for fishermen and other holidaymakers. It offers magnificent views on the estuary against the backdrop of the Potteberg to the west. Visitors are often standing in awe when they gaze across the wide river mouth over the bay. The tidal flow of the river and the sheer beauty of the area create an unequalled tranquillity and peacefulness to the surroundings. It is a paradise to residents and visitors alike. For those interested in ecology, the dynamic interphase between river and ocean, the geological structures, the fynbos and duineveld flora and the abundant animal life could prove to be worthwhile study objects. For many others, the natural aesthetics brings about an inner conviction that God has painted on this canvas around the river mouth, one of His most beautiful paintings, to inspire us to give Him the glory as the great Creator. Port Beaufort – a forgotten seaport

It was Lord Charles Somerset, governor of the Cape Colony, who first called it a "port". He had the Breede river mouth examined in 1817 with a view of establishing its suitability for a harbour and then called the east bank of the river, Port Beaufort, after the title of his father, the Duke of Beaufort. However, trading vessels have been entering the river long before this date, but the dream of establishing a harbour in the river has only taken a giant leap forward when Captain Benjamin Moodie built a warehouse on the bank in the early 1820's. He convinced local farmers to invest in the scheme of erecting this store from where their produce could be shipped to Cape Town. Ships could ill-afford to wait for a cargo to be collected, and a warehouse full of grain would greatly facilitate the coastal trade. Moodie received the farm Westfield, adjacent to Port Beaufort, in 1820 as a grant from the Colonial government. Although his proximity to the port positioned him favourably to get the coastal trade on track, he was unable to convert Port Beaufort into a successful trade post. Joseph Barry made it happen.

Barry chartered a ship, the Duke of Gloucester, in 1822 to transport a load of rice and grain, of which the Overberg was in desperate need after a severe drought, from Cape Town to Port Beaufort. This venture made him a handsome profit

and he realised that there is a genuine need for regular trade between Cape Town and the Overberg. The only alternative to coastal trade is taking small loads of produce 300 km by ox-wagon to Cape Town through the rugged and untamed countryside and over the Hottentots Holland Mountains. Barry subsequently set up a shop at Port Beaufort when his two nephews joined him from England in 1823.

This was the start of the very successful company, Barry and Nephews, which prospered to such an extent that Port Beaufort became a busier harbour than Mosselbay. Barry and Nephews opened the Cape markets to the people of the Overberg and the company became the economic heartbeat of the Overberg, setting up shops all over the area from Swellendam to Mosselbay. The glory days of the Barry Empire was the 1840's and 50's.

In 1859 the Barrys had their own coastal steamer, the Kadie, built on the Clyde. The vessel brought cargo to Port Beaufort and also went 30 km up the Breede river to Malagas where the Barrys erected a store and shops, bringing goods much closer to their headquarters in Swellendam.

The Kadie probably crossed the treacherous bar of the Breede river mouth more than 240 times, but on 17 December 1865, it was wrecked on the rocks on the west bank of the Breede river mouth. This was a sad day for Port Beaufort. The most important port of the Overberg was given a blow it would never recover from. In 1866 Barry and Nephews went into liquidation. And today, about 140 years later, very few people know that Port Beaufort once ranked as "the central port of the Overberg".

Burman, J. 1964. The Cape's Forgotten Harbour, Personality, September 3.

Burrows, EH. 1952. Overberg Outspan. Swellendam Trust.

Speight, WL. 1934. South Africa's forgotten seaport. South African Railways and Harbours Magazine.

Coen Muller: Legendariere visserman van Witsand

Oom Coen (09.05.1893 – 31.08.1972) is al 35 jaar oorlede, maar sy nagedagtenis leef steeds voort op die klein kusdorpie waar hy byna sy hele lewe geslyt het. Hy was een van die ware karakters van die Suid-Kaap. 'n Man met 'n passie vir die see, alhoewel hy nooit geleer swem het nie. Hy het inderdaad verskeie kere oorleef nadat die skuit waarop hy was, omgeslaan of op die rotse geloop het. Hy het altyd gesê die see wil hom nie hê nie. Oom Coen het probeer om van visvang 'n lewe te maak in 'n tyd toe vis volop maar goedkoop was en vrieskaste onbekend. Hy en tant Sarie het 8 kinders in Witsand groot gemaak. Ten spyte van hul bitter armoede kan die kinders nie onthou dat hulle ooit honger gaan slaap het nie. Daar was altyd minstens vis om te eet.

Oom Coen het die see baie goed geken. Hy het as jongman saam met die ander Witsanders, lank voor die tyd van kragbote en buiteboordenjins, die viswaters van San Sebastiaanbaai met roeiskuite aangedurf. Hulle kon dit egter nie waag om deur die gevaarlike branders en strome in die riviermonding te roei nie. Hulle het eers met klein roeiskuitjies die rivier oorgesteek tot by die oewer aan Infanta se kant. Daarvandaan stap hulle dan tot by Fransfontein (tans bekend as Infanta) waar hulle die groot roeiskuit, wat tot 12 man kan dra, van sy lêplek op die oewer, insleep see toe. Dis baie veiliger om die see by Infanta binne te gaan omdat die branders klein is. Sodra die skuit vol lynvis gevang is, moes hulle terugroei en dan die klomp vis aanpiekel na die klein skuitjies op die rivieroewer, voor hulle kon terugkeer Witsand toe.

Oom Coen het dikwels ook harders getrek. Dit was groot seeharders wat soms in groot skole die riviermonding binnegekom het. Partymaal was daar 'n paar duisend in die net. Oom Coen het die harders dan op 'n perdekar aangery Heidelberg toe om dit daar te gaan smous. Maar as dit nie moontlik was nie, moes die harders nog dieselfde dag skoongemaak word en gesout word en opgehang word om te droog. Gedroogde vis kon later op die omliggende plase geruil word vir vars vleis of groente.

Oom Coen was soos meeste van sy vissermansvriende baie lief vir 'n wyntjie. Tant Sarie kon die drinkery nie veel nie en daarom het oom Coen sy bottel by sy boothuisie in die sand begrawe. Dis 'n klein sinkgeboutjie wat bokant die hoogwatermerk langs die rivier tussen die bosse op die sand gestaan het. Dis waar hy sy nette en visgoed gebêre het. En as hy lus was vir 'n knertsie het hy afgedrentel na sy "office" waar hy met 'n paar hale van sy groottoon in die koel, klam sand die bottel opgediep het. As tant Sarie haar dalk te sterk uitgelaat het oor die wyn, sou hy haar stilmaak en sê: "Ek is die groot rat en julle is kleintjies, julle draai om my!"

Die storie wat die meeste oor oom Coen vertel word, is sy gesprek met Ds Swart Willem van der Merwe van Heidelberg, toe oom Coen heelhuids en ongedeerd op die strand uitgespoel het nadat die skuit waarop hy was, omgeslaan het. Ds van der Merwe wou weet, seker gedagtig aan die wyndrinkery, of hy aan sy siel en ewige bestemming gedink het terwyl hy daar op die groot oseaan rondgedobber het. Antwoord oom Coen glo ewe droog: "Al waaroor ek gedink het, was wat van my sal word as ek dalk in Engeland uitspoel, Dominee weet mos ek kan nie 'n woord Engels praat nie!"

