

Pontoons (by SJ du Toit)

Contributed by SJ du Toit

Have you ever crossed a river by pontoon? Could it be that many Overbergers have never experienced the old romanticism of bygone days? The last pontoon which is still in operation in South Africa, is in the Overberg across the Breede River at Malgas.

Dutch travellers and expeditions came to many rivers they could not cross. They built floats and sometimes used a boat which they took with them knowing of a river ahead. Abraham de Haan built the first pontoon across the Berg River in the eighteenth century. The farm in that vicinity is called Oudepont (Old pontoon). Farmers in the area contributed to the upkeep of the pontoon which was in use for at least a century. There was a pontoon across the Little Brak River as well.

In the Overberg there were quite a few pontoons in use, such as the one across the Palmiet River — a difficult river when in flood. In 1885, a pontoon named Fredericka, was built across the Sonderend River between Stormsvlei and Swellendam. Another across the same river, was at the farm Vrede belonging to the Humans. They now have a guest house in the old Pont House where tourists can reminisce of days gone by.

Swellendam had a pontoon across the Breë River in the middle of the eighteenth century. A certain Gideon van Zyl operated crossings and the payment was by bartering farm produce. During the Barry reign, a strong pontoon was built at Malgas. The Barry stores were on the banks of the Breë River, which enabled their clients to bring their wagons right up to the counter, after the pontoon-crossing. James Holman, a blind traveller, used the pontoon one day and described it as a floating bridge 15 metres long and 4 metres wide. It was pulled across the river with ropes.

Sometimes accidents occurred when a wagon slipped off the pontoon and landed in the river. But this was not as bad as when a car would slip off and cause the owner many problems. The Malgas pontoon is now made safe with rails around the edges. The pontoon operator who served for decades, was Moxie Dunn. He stopped working only recently. The pontoon is one of our popular tourist attractions and is in operation from sunrise to sunset. Travelling from Witsand at the mouth of the Breede River, to Malgas and the N2 National Road, tourists can themselves experience this crossing of the river by pontoon.