

Bot River- Gateway to the Overberg

Contributed by S.J. Du Toit

Many Overberg towns started around a church where erven were surveyed and sold, and the town slowly developed. There are, however, a few exceptions. At Agulhas the village grew around the lighthouse. Bot River, the gateway to the Overberg, lies on the old farm Compagnies Drift, historical trading and bartering station of the VOC (Dutch East India Company). It is here that the village of Bot River slowly developed.

Compagnies drift took its name from the fording place in the Bot River where the Dutch East Indian Company officials came to barter butter with the Khoikhoi tribes. (The Afrikaans word for 'butter' is botter.) The Khoikhoi called the river Gouga which means plenty of butter or fat.

Jose Burman writes that Josias de Kock, the first owner of Compagnies Drift accommodated travellers at night, before they continued into the Overberg. It was also an outspan (resting place) on the Old Wagon Track and it continued as such for generations. The Bot River Hotel was probably built during the early 1890s and took over the duties of the traditional stopover.

Compagnies Drift, now smaller than the original farm, has been the property of Raoul and Jayne Beaumont for the past three decades. They restored the old cellar and make excellent wine for the local and export market. (Read of the farm in another story).

Bot River was the first farm where a permit was granted to sow wheat. The Overberg wheat belt stretches from Bot River to the southernmost point of the continent. Bot River was also the centre of onion production in the Caledon district. Owing to various factors, onions are not a number one product of the area now, but flower export has developed into a major industry. The Middelman family of Honingklip near Bot River is one of the largest exporters of South African wild flowers. (Read their story).

In later years, the Bot River Hotel was enlarged by the Kaplans who then owned it. The present owner, Mr Gey Van Pittius has had the hotel for almost 30 years. Mr Danie Malan who worked for Eskom (the national electricity supply utility) for many years, also ran the station café. All buses stopped at the café. A TV series called 'Nommer asseblief' (Number Please) put Bot River on the map. Many visitors insisted on seeing the exchange and meeting the characters portrayed in the 'soapie'.

A major event in the life of Bot River was the arrival of the railway line from Cape Town to Caledon in 1902. This was after track layers had pushed the line through the Hottentots-Holland mountain chain near Somerset West in a massive engineering feat and brought the village alive, allowing residents and trades people to journey to the metropolis of Cape Town quickly and easily. Conversely, it allowed city dwellers to see something of the countryside. Passengers and goods destined for further afield in the Overberg were then transported by bus from the Bot River station. The railroad service was introduced in 1912.

The line prospered for a time but then after the N2 national road was built and road transport became more popular, the line's usefulness diminished. Today, only special trains arrive at Bot River on excursions at holiday times and special occasions. One such occasion was the recent centenary of the opening of the station, in 2002, to which dignitaries were invited and took part in the festivities and attended a celebratory dinner. The station museum is being upgraded and is proving very popular. Trading stalls are set up on, and around the station during such times and locals and visitors alike, enjoy a day's fun.