

The Graaff-Reinet municipal location: Unemployment and poor relief during the Great Depression of 1929-1933¹

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Abstract

By focusing on a medium-sized rural town in South Africa during the period of the Great Depression broadly resulted in showing the effects and reactions that were, in general, indicative of worldwide trends but with specific regional and local impact. The core focus of this article then being those effects on a further microcosm of urban life, the residents of the Graaff-Reinet municipal “location” (township); the efforts to assist these residents as occupying the lowest rungs of the economic ladder; and the efforts through welfare charities and unemployment/poor relief schemes to alleviate the situation in town. But many of these charitable organisations themselves felt the pinch of “hard times” and as a consequence had to further curtail their poor relief programmes, which lead to further hardships for the “poorest of the poor” in town. This article further examines the efforts by various official bodies, inter alia the Town and Divisional Councils, to provide unemployment relief work via a number of work schemes. Among the latter were the road building projects in town and district, and the brickmaking scheme (which provided all the bricks for the building of the new power station started in June 1934).

Keywords: Graaff-Reinet; The Great Depression; Municipal location; Economic hardships; Social welfare; Poor relief and unemployment relief work creation; Economic recovery.

Introduction

The Great Depression of 1929-1933 was a worldwide phenomenon in which “no aspect of the economy, no part of the world, escaped devastation”.²

1 This article has been reworked from: A de V Minnaar, “Graaff-Reinet and the Great Depression (1929-1933)” (MA (History), 1978, Rhodes University, Grahamstown).

2 H Heaton, *The economic history of Europe* (New York, Harper & Row, 1948), p. 696.

Graaff-Reinet broadly illustrated the South African trends in that economic depression being a major wool producing district, as well as having the largest number of registered Merino sheep studs (a major income generator being the sale of merino breeding rams) in the country. The town itself was the headquarters of the South African Merino Ram Breeders Association. Being heavily dependent upon the sheep farming economy, the district's farmers, like the rest of agriculture in the country, "...were the most heavily hit [by the Great Depression] of all [the economic sectors]".³ The single most significant product of the district was wool, which at the time of the Great Depression was South Africa's second most important export after gold. Consequently the economic wellbeing of the district and town depended largely on the market performance of this product. During the Great Depression the price of wool dropped drastically and the Graaff-Reinet farmers suffered accordingly. By the end of the Great Depression the export value of wool had fallen by sixty-five per cent.⁴

The townspeople of Graaff-Reinet also experienced the ravages of the Great Depression, with the privations of the farming community impacting on all businesses, so much so that the economic downturn experienced by all led to the financial embarrassment of the two major local financial institutions, the Midland Agency and Trust Co. and the Graaff-Reinet Board of Executors, causing the latter's eventual collapse in 1932.⁵ This in turn led to the widespread hardship of everyone in town. Each section of the town and district's populace were economically interdependent but each with its own quirks and twists. The municipal location was a case in point, where what was happening elsewhere impacted on the life of its residents, but their responses and actions to survive the daily struggle were often, by necessity (socially and politically), different.

That the rate of business trading in town also dropped in conjunction to the hardships experienced by the district's farmers as the supply of cash money dwindled to a trickle was obvious from an Editorial towards the end of 1931

3 DW Kruger, *The making of a nation: A history of the Union of South Africa 1910-1960* (Cape Town, MacMillan, 1969), p. 158. (For an overview of the economic history of the Great Depression period, see also: B Freund, "South Africa: The Union Years, 1910-1948 - Political and Economic Foundations", R Ross, AK Mager & B Nasson (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa Volume 2: 1885-1994* (Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 211-253; N Natrass & J Seekings, "The Economy and Poverty in the Twentieth Century", R Ross, AK Mager & B Nasson (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa Volume 2: 1885-1994* (Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 518-572)

4 DG Franszen & HJJ Reynders, *Die ekonomiese lewe van Suid-Afrika* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1960), p. 60.

5 For detail of this see A Minnaar, "The collapse of the Graaff-Reinet Board of Executors during the Great Depression (1929/1934)", *Contree*, 19, January 1986, pp. 25-27.

in the local newspaper, *The Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, which pointed out that: “In a community like our own... the spending power diminishes with the increase of those out of work and lessening of the pay to those, whose services are retained.” This position was worsened by the fact that: “the ordinary source of supply of outside money – the sale of produce – has this year [1931] almost ceased.”⁶

Image 1: Graaff-Reinet street plan at the time of the Great Depression



Source: A de V Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet and the Great Depression (1929-1933)* (MA (History), 1978, Rhodes University, Grahamstown).

6 South African Library, Cape Town: Editorial, *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 9 December 1931. (The South African Library amalgamated in 1999 with the State Library, Pretoria to form the National Library).

The municipal location

Irrespective of the general hardships being experienced by the district and the town's inhabitants, that sector of the community made up by the residents of the municipal location, situated on the north-eastern outskirts of the town, undoubtedly suffered the most during the period of the Great Depression. This was not only as a consequence of occupying the lowest rungs of the economic ladder but as a consequence thereof they were also the first to be "let go" from any gainful employment they might have as itinerant seasonal fruit (grape) pickers for the "erfholders"⁷ in town, as seasonal wool sheep shearers on the farms in the district or as domestic workers or gardeners in town. Moreover, they were also those coming from the race groups designated as Coloured or Black and by the nature of the politics of the day were further discriminated against on the basis of race.

Poor living conditions

Poor living conditions in the municipal location area had early on in the Great Depression drawn criticism from various sources. One prominent citizen, and the local philanthropist, William Asher, had written to the Town Council, complaining of the appalling living conditions there, which he felt were a direct cause of the high death rate among the municipal location's children. In his hard hitting letter Asher blamed the "filthy and vermin infested" condition of the free rooms for paupers to the lack of attention by the Location Advisory Board and the Location Superintendent. Asher also deplored the prevailing poverty in the municipal location, stating that this was due to the insufficient wages (having been cut by most employers as a Depression cost-saving measure) being paid to the dwindling number of employed municipal location residents. He further alleged that the Municipality, by paying the "lowest wages in town" was the most to blame for the current situation.⁸

7 "Erfholders" being those who occupied or owned the large irrigated plots in town growing mainly grapes but other fruit as well and in some cases lucerne.

8 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Town Council Municipal Minutes, 25 February 1930, p. 560.

Image 2: Mayor H Urquhart



Source: Teddy Whitlock Private Collection, Graaff-Reinet.

The town's mayor, H Urquhart,⁹ was most disturbed by this letter of censure and had informed the Medical Officer of Health, Dr CJ van Schalkwyk, of its contents. In his report, Dr Van Schalkwyk reported that it was “practically impossible to do anything in the matter due to a shortage of funds.” Furthermore, that the municipal location residents were in no position to help themselves for they received “barely subsistence wages.”¹⁰ The wages in town being from 12 shillings and 15 pence (12^s/15^d) per week. (Farm labourers at the time were being paid at rates of between 10^s and 15^s per month but had the added advantage of receiving free housing and food rations from farmers). The Municipal Location Committee admitted that the wages they were paying “are definitely too low, but compare well with other centres [in the region].”¹¹

9 H Urquhart, was Graaff-Reinet's longest-serving mayor serving from 1915-1936, and was most sympathetic to the least privileged inhabitants of the town.

10 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Town Council Municipal Minutes, 25 February 1930, p. 561.

11 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 8 October 1933.

Somehow the residents of the municipal location managed to survive while still undergoing tremendous suffering. Some were lucky enough to be employed as domestic workers in town, receiving wages raging from 5^s to 20^s per month with a daily ration of food. Accordingly, in one of its reports to the Town Council the Municipal Location Committee had stated that “many of the males in the [L]ocation do not work, but live on the food brought home from the town.”

Other municipal location residents had to look elsewhere for assistance. The Municipal Location Superintendent estimated that there were between 150 and 200 municipal location residents that “are old, indigent and crippled and cannot possibly earn a living.” Those unable to find any benefactor or employer turned to begging in the streets of the town. The Location Superintendent had reported that “...it is obvious from the number who beg in town that destitution is rife.” Many of these destitute inhabitants of the municipal location lived in shack huts in overcrowded and filthy conditions.¹²

The townspeople were not totally unaware of the situation. The Rev AC File, the Methodist Church minister in town, wrote to the Town Council in 1933 asking them to take some action against “the increased begging by blind, crippled and wretchedly garbed people in town.” He further offered to raise money to maintain “these people” and keep them off the streets.¹³ The Town Council’s almost immediate response to this letter was to instruct the Municipal Location Superintendent to round up all the beggars and to investigate each case in order to decide which ones deserved pauper rations from the magistrate.¹⁴

Aid from charitable organisations

Some of the destitute municipal location residents were fortunate enough to receive help from the town’s Ladies Benevolent Society. This Society had been established in 1897 by the wife of Rev. Charles Murray. The work of this Society was entirely voluntary and its object was to: “relieve cases of distress and destitution amongst the poor of Graaff-Reinet irrespective of creed, colour

12 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 2 September 1930, p. 623.

13 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 15 August 1933, p. 210.

14 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: The Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 10 October 1933, p. 231.

or class, and especially to assist the aged and infirm.”¹⁵ The subscription for members of the society was one shilling per month, and this money, plus any other collected by the members of the Society, was spent on rent, food, wood, blankets and clothing for those whose need was greatest among the town’s residents. During the winter months each pensioner (on their books as being in need) was provided with a warm garment, and where necessary a thick blanket was given as well.¹⁶ However, if anyone received government food rations (for those declared indigent/paupers by the magistrate) would have their names removed from the Society’s list of the needy,¹⁷ but because of the difficult times being experienced, especially by the municipal location residents, it was decided that all pensioners and those receiving government rations would receive supplementary food rations. This consisted of eight pounds (lbs) of meal, one lb of rice, one lb of coffee, one-and-half lbs of sugar, one piece of soap and a packet of candles.¹⁸ At Christmas time the Society provided all pensioners with a 6^d parcel of meat and a ticket valued at 2^s6^d for groceries at any store in town.¹⁹ During the Great Depression period the Society had also managed to build six free rooms for the poor in the municipal location.²⁰

In their poor relief programme the Society was generously helped by the philanthropy of Mr W Asher, who in the winter of 1929 had distributed 350 blankets to the poor and had continued throughout the Great Depression to provide gifts of food, clothing and blankets to the municipal location residents.²¹ He had also provided twenty-four free rooms, shower baths, a maternity home and an open-air bioscope for municipal location residents. (He had previously in 1926 helped finance the dispensary and mortuary.)²² But bizarrely, the Town Council, resenting the fact that facilities were being

15 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes, Founding Meeting 1897.

16 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes. Annual Report, 1929.

17 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes, 26 September 1930.

18 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes, 30 July 1931.

19 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes, 27 November 1931.

20 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 21 February 1934.

21 Graaff-Reinet Welfare Societies Offices, Naude St, Graaff-Reinet: Ladies Benevolent Society Minutes, 15 December 1933.

22 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 30 September 1930, p. 632.

provided in the town's municipal location, stated that these extra "amenities" were only attracting "unwanted rural dwellers".²³ In addition, the Municipality felt that they were providing adequate services for the Location residents. The Town Council charged 4^s6^d per month site rent and 5^s6^d for single municipal rooms and 7^s6^d for double rooms. This charge included water and sanitation, the free water coming from central hydrants and standpipes. As far as sanitation was concerned, there were communal concrete rubbish bins at central points from which the rubbish was supposedly removed daily, as well as communal latrines at central points from where the buckets were also (supposed to be) removed daily.²⁴

The Town Council, in trying to answer their critics at the lack of any help or assistance during the Great Depression to municipal location residents, pointed to the fact that they had allowed the municipal location residents to keep livestock on their properties. But these properties were small, bare, denuded patches of ground, incapable of supporting more than a few scraggly chickens. The Town Council, well aware of the power of the town's ratepayers, and fearful of their wrath at election time, had, despite frequent applications by the Location Advisory Board, refused all privileges, as enjoyed by the town's ratepayer residents, with regard to the grazing of stock on the Town Commonage, to the municipal location residents.²⁵ One small concession the Town Council did grant to municipal location residents, in response to a petition from female Location residents asking for permission to gather firewood on the Town Commonage free of charge, was that: "the charge of 2^s6^d for quarterly wood permits be temporarily reduced to 2^s with effect from 1 November 1932."²⁶

Continuation of "benign neglect"

However, in 1934 the Town Council was rudely shaken from its complacency and benign economic neglect of the municipal location resident's dire living conditions and poverty. In 1934 the mayor had mistakenly attributed the

23 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 21 February 1934, p. 308.

24 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 16 August 1933, p. 299.

25 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 16 November 1932, p. 237.

26 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 12 September 1932, p. 97.

high death rate in the municipal location to the effects of “malnutrition and tuberculosis”. The Medical Officer of Health (MoH) reported that typhoid had broken out in the municipal location and he unequivocally blamed the Town Council, accusing them of failing to provide a slopwater removal service.²⁷ The Town Council were soon faced with a typhoid epidemic and were extremely worried since it was: “a case of self-preservation as all the servants in town came from the [L]ocation.”²⁸

It was not surprising that such an epidemic had broken out. According to the Municipal Census done in May 1933 there were 7 079 residents residing in the municipal location.²⁹ There were approximately 1 100 occupied hut sites and in most cases these buildings did not conform to the municipal regulations with regard to air space and were very overcrowded. Furthermore, for this large municipal location population there were only 160 sanitary conveniences, an average of 44 persons to each.³⁰ The MoH was then correct in assuming that the: “recent outbreak of typhoid fever [can] be directly ascribed to the lack of sufficient and proper sanitation”. What had aggravated the situation was the fact that there was no slopwater removal service. The residents of the 1 100 huts merely discarded their used water anywhere in the vicinity of their huts or shacks.

The Councillors’ agreed that the only way to overcome all the difficulties in respect of the municipal location would be to build a new one, but as Councillor Dr Laubscher (the local dentist) put it “he shuddered at the cost [in the present economic circumstances]”. The Town Council finally decided merely that: “...proper drains be built in the [L]ocation and that the Health Inspector be instructed to sink a few test holes to ascertain whether the soil is suitable for the cesspit system [as replacement for the bucket system then in use]”.³¹ But nothing more substantial was done.

So the lack of funds during the Great Depression caused the municipal location problems to be shelved. The effects of the Great Depression on the residents of the municipal location were exacerbated by the fact that all

27 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 30 January 1934, p. 263.

28 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 6 March 1932, p. 277.

29 3 632 from the then designated population race group of so-called Coloureds and 3 447 as Black.

30 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 6 March 1932, p. 277.

31 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 6 March 1932, p. 278.

residents, more so the municipal location residents, but also the organisations who had the care of their needs (the Town Council), as well as the charitable and welfare organisations, were extremely strapped for funds during this period of general economic hardship.

Financial problems of local bodies

Child welfare societies

A “Coloured and Native Child Welfare Society” for Graaff-Reinet had been formed in 1928 with Mr W Asher as its first president and Canon A Price as its first chairperson. This society was able to obtain the services of a qualified maternity nurse, A Jooste, and she did maternity work among the municipal location residents and distributed medicines for the minor ailments of the children (funded by this Society). Throughout the Great Depression this society struggled on with no assistance from the government. Their only source of income was from the periodic grants from the Municipality, the *Vroue-Sendingbond*, the Ladies’ Benevolent Society and what was collected in the way of subscriptions or donations from the public. In 1932 the Society, for the first time in its history, experienced a shortfall of £53 in its operating funds and had to resort to drawing on reserves to cover this shortfall. During the Great Depression these sources dwindled “owing to the Depression the Society had great difficulty in collecting funds [in 1932].”³² The Society never fully recovered from the effects of the Great Depression. They eventually became affiliated to the town’s “European” Child Welfare Society in 1940.

The Child Welfare Societies were not the only organisations to suffer from an acute shortage of funds. Societies like the *Vroue-Sendingbond*, Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereeniging, the Ladies Benevolent Society, the Poor Funds of the Methodist and Anglican churches and the Armsorg of the Dutch Reformed Church, all had to cut down on their welfare activities during the Great Depression period. Other organisations like the Town Council and the Divisional Council had to take drastic steps to remain solvent. The ratepayers, feeling the pinch of hard times, neglected to pay their rates and arrears began building up.

³² Graaff-Reinet Child Welfare Society, 14 Acacia St, Kroonvale, Graaff-Reinet: Coloured and Native Child Welfare Society Minutes, 9 November 1932.

Town and Divisional Councils

Both the Town Council and the Divisional Council were aware of these funding shortage problems, and took certain measures to try and strengthen their own financial positions. At the Town Council meeting on 18 July 1929, which debated the financial estimates for 1930, the mayor, H Urquhart, had emphatically stated that the Finance Committee of the Council had thoroughly investigated the question of expenditure and had ascertained that the position could not be regarded as satisfactory.³³

This made it easy for the mayor to order the Finance and General Purposes Committee to scrutinise the expenditures, in an attempt to find where the Town Council could cut expenses. In their report dated 31 July 1930 the Committee recommended that all work, beyond that of absolute and essential necessity, be discontinued immediately. Furthermore, that spending be brought down to the irreducible minimum. To carry out this policy the Committee suggested the dismissal of certain employees take place. Coupled to this, they recommended the reduction, by ten per cent, of all salaries and wages of those officials and employees whose services must be retained. They ended the report by stressing that: “[This] is a step taken with very keen regret but the financial position calls for extraordinary measures and there appears to be no alternative.”³⁴

The thinking of the Divisional Council on the matter was identical. The Finance Committee of this body reported at the August 1930 meeting that savings on road building and maintenance was essential. In addition, that two of the district’s road parties be disbanded with their members being let go (“af te dank”). This disbandment would hopefully lead to a saving of £600 for the year. But again the labourers in both road works parties (and those becoming unemployed with the cessation of all municipal work except those of an “essential” nature) being largely from the municipal location (the two foremen were white).³⁵

The Town Council, on the other hand, encountered obstacles to its economy proposals, especially concerning its recommendation for a voluntary

33 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 18 July 1929, p. 486.

34 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Finance Committee, 31 July 1930, pp. 68-69.

35 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 12 August 1930.

acceptance of a ten per cent reduction in the wages of municipal employees. There was much opposition from employees with the Town Council's decision to institute a ten per cent reduction in the wages of all municipal employees. So much so that the employees made an appeal to the South African Municipal Employees Association for them to come and arbitrate through the Labour Department's Conciliation Board.³⁶ The employee's spokesperson had at a Council meeting threatened the mayor saying that the Council "could not possibly win the case" and in any case such recourse to a Conciliation Board would be "expensive". Faced with this opposition and their precarious financial position at the time, the Town Council backed down and rescinded the decision to reduce wages by ten per cent but did close down a number of other work projects by simply ceasing funding them and such project workers being "let go" since the work had "come to an end".³⁷

But the matter of a ten per cent wage reduction was merely held in abeyance (mid-1930) for in the face of a worsening financial position the Town Council was forced to review the position in January 1932. On 26 January 1932 the Town Council received a petition signed by forty-two ratepayers requesting it (Town Council) to reduce the salaries of certain officials and to dispense of the services of others.³⁸ Finally it was decided, once again, to investigate the possibility of a general reduction in municipal employee's salaries. The mayor announced his intention of meeting with employees to explain the reasons for the Town Council's proposals. Soon after this a meeting was held between the Finance Committee and a Sub-Committee of employees. The Sub-Committee had expressed their willingness to accept a five per cent reduction on condition that the proposed water rate levy of 1^d in the £ was passed and that increments were paid as usual. The Town Council had recommended that salaries over £150 per annum be reduced by fifteen per cent and salaries and wages under £150 per annum by ten per cent. This meeting ended in a deadlock and the municipal employees again appealed to the South African Municipal Employees Association for assistance in resolving the problem.³⁹

36 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 2 August 1930, p. 625.

37 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 21 August 1930.

38 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 26 January 1932, p. 3.

39 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 11 June 1932, p. 52.

Municipal location account

Another area of financial anxiety for the Town Council was the Municipal location account. The revenue collected from this source was dropping steadily (income from the Municipal location account falling from £1 343 for the period July 1929-June 1930 to £1 082 for the period July 1930-June 1931.⁴⁰

The Council could not understand the continual deficits of the Municipal location account, until the pastor of the Coloured Congregational Church, HJ Theron, requested an interview with the Town Council. He revealed that there were irregularities taking place in the collection of room rents and the issuance of receipts. Some inhabitants were being asked to pay twice, while others were being forced to leave council houses if they were unable to pay. The Location Superintendent, J Brown, denied Theron's accusations and alleged that the pastor was "nothing but an agitator". But, on the Council investigating the matter, it was found that the location superintendent was in fact guilty of misappropriating location fees and rents. He had done this by issuing false receipts, changing the amount on the receipts kept by the municipal office in the location and by charging twice in some cases.⁴¹

The financial situation of the municipal location did not improve even after the location superintendent was discharged. The Location Committee reported on 23 February 1933 that: "Your committee view, with alarm the increase in the location outstandings as at 31 December 1932. The [new] superintendent reports that most of the debtors are out of employment... This state of affairs simply cannot be allowed to continue".⁴²

But the problem continued and the Location Committee, in its report on 16 August 1933, came to the conclusion that: "If steps are not taken at an early date to bring about a restoration of the location finances, the Council will eventually be faced with the necessity of increasing the town rate to meet the deficits on the native revenue account".⁴³

40 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 8 July 1932, p. 145.

41 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 2 December 1932, p. 244.

42 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 23 February 1933, p. 266.

43 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 16 August 1933, p. 299.

By the end of 1933 the position was serious with the Location Committee reporting that:

...the total costs of administration [of the municipal location] are approximately £3 000 per annum. Only by strenuous efforts on the part of the staff is it possible to secure a like amount of revenue. Arrear rent at 31 December 1933 totalled £2 900, while large amounts are written off annually. A considerable portion of the arrears mentioned may be regarded as bad and irrecoverable.⁴⁴

All these arrears and bad debts were a clear indication of the high levels of unemployment, deprivation and extreme hardship being experienced by municipal location inhabitants.

Besides all these financial problems, the Town Council had to contend with the serious problem of unemployment amongst the citizens, which had, in particular in the municipal location, risen during the Great Depression, and providing unemployment relief was another severe drain on the Council's stretched finances.

Unemployment and unemployment relief

Poor relief

Unemployment relief was separate and distinct from poor relief and welfare. Poor relief was associated with the problem of poor Whiteism as outlined by the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry of 1927-1932. This poor relief was administered by the magistrate who allocated rations to those poor white families who were destitute and reduced o financial difficulties. The magistrate was assisted in this job by the welfare organisations of Graaff-Reinet, who collaborated in drawing up lists of those most in need, for distributions of these rations. While whites received poor relief first, coloured and black persons also received such government poor relief although there was a discrepancy in the amount and kind of rations received. As the Great Depression deepened, the welfare organisations tried to increase the poor relief but were handicapped by the lack of funds.

⁴⁴ Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 21 February 1934, p. 308.

Increase in numbers of unemployed

However, the main problem became the large increase in the numbers of unemployed. These unemployed genuinely wanted work, and a Labour Bureau was established at the local Post Office and administered by the Postmaster. Here, those who were out of work, could hand in their names and become officially listed as unemployed.

Image 3: Graaff-Reinet Magistrates Court (incorporating Post Office)



Source: William Roe Photographic Collection, Graaff-Reinet.

The growth of the problem can be traced in the annual reports of the Magistrate. In 1930 he reported that “only a few cases of unemployment dealt with”,⁴⁵ but by 1931 the problem had burgeoned with “about 100 Europeans out of work owing to bad times. There is much native and coloured unemployment”.⁴⁶

The Town Council was well aware of this problem. On 16 November 1931 the Town Council made application to the Provincial Administration for a loan of £5 000, in terms of the Housing Act No: 35 of 1920, for the purpose of establishing a sub-economic housing scheme in Graaff-Reinet. In motivating their application the Town Council stated that “with the granting of the loan, steps will immediately be taken to absorb as much unemployed labour as possible”. Construction of this Municipal Housing Scheme began early in 1932 and provided employment to thirty-two white and eighteen

⁴⁵ Magistrates Offices, Cnr Somerst & Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Magistracy, Annual Report 1930.

⁴⁶ Magistrates Offices, Cnr Somerst & Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Magistracy, Annual Report 1931.

coloured men.⁴⁷ The scheme provided employment for six months to this limited number of the town's unemployed.⁴⁸

On New Year's Day 1932, Graaff-Reinet had experienced severe floods. Trees were uprooted and water furrows damaged. Temporary employment for the repair work of the damage was given to one hundred "non-white" men from the town's ranks of unemployed. Unfortunately this work was only temporary in nature, though Postmaster Cocking continued with his efforts to place unemployed men in work to try, in a small way, to alleviate the suffering of their families.

Image 4: Dr Karl Bremer



Source: Teddy Whitlock Private Collection, Graaff-Reinet.

⁴⁷ South African Library, Cape Town: Letter HR Cocking –Editor, *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 18 May 1932 [Cocking was the Postmaster in charge of the Post Office Labour Exchange].

⁴⁸ Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Correspondence: Housing Scheme 1930-1932.

Unemployment relief loan

On the advice of Dr Karl Bremer, the local MP,⁴⁹ the Town Council applied to the Department of Labour for an unemployment relief loan. The Town Council called a public meeting on 7 September 1932 to consider their proposal to raise an unemployment relief loan of £1 640. The mayor in opening the meeting, outlined the negotiations that had taken place so far. The Government would grant the Town Council a loan of £1 640 at five per cent interest and repayable after ten years. Added to this amount the Government would provide a subsidy of £1 640. With this sum of £3 280, it was proposed to employ one-hundred and twenty-five white males and a similar number of “non-white” males. These men were to be used on road construction and the tarring of the streets in town. The Council’s loan proposal was passed by a vote of forty-four with eight against.⁵⁰ This road construction scheme of the Municipality provided much needed employment for the unemployed of Graaff-Reinet. While it was of a temporary nature, lasting only as long as the money lasted, it was much appreciated by those who had been out of work.

The Divisional Council also provided unemployment relief but on a much smaller scale. They had enquired about the possibility of an unemployment relief loan as early as 8 December 1931. They had passed a resolution applying to the Provincial Council for a subsidy of £1 800 with which to provide work for forty unemployed men at a rate of 3s per day for twelve months.⁵¹ Three months later they received a letter from the Administrator of the Cape granting them £500 for unemployment relief. They were then able to employ thirty men for roadworks.⁵²

In September 1932, on re-applying for additional unemployment relief funding, the Divisional Council had received a letter from the Provincial Administration approving a ninety per cent subsidy of £940, ten per cent of which would be a loan to the Divisional Council. On receipt of this letter it was decided to send out a road work party consisting of fifty white labourers under foreman D Wolmarans. The foreman received 7s6d per day while the

49 Dr Bremer practised as a medical doctor in Graaff-Reinet from 1919-1931 and was the Graaff-Reinet constituency representative in Parliament in 1924 and 1929-1942. He later became a National Minister of Health in the Malan Cabinet (1951-1953).

50 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 7 September 1932, p. 85.

51 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 8 December 1931.

52 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 8 March 1932.

workers received 3s per day. Another road gang consisting of twenty coloured people under a foreman, WJ Schoeman, was also sent out.⁵³

So by the middle of September 1932 the unemployment relief programmes of Graaff-Reinet and district were well under way. The Municipality had initiated their road construction scheme by appointing twenty-seven men to the crusher plant at the stone quarry two miles outside of town. It would take two to three weeks to put the crusher plant in order but when this was achieved it was planned to work two shifts a day to speed up the work. In the meantime, fifty men had been appointed to start on the preparatory work on the roads and the magistrate had agreed to grant three weeks rations to those who had as yet not been employed.⁵⁴ But these unemployed would be provided with work only as long as the loan lasted. The Public Works Committee of the Town Council had estimated that the whole scheme, including implements and materials, would cost £5 216. The Town Clerk thought that the scheme would last up to 31 March 1933 but after that date it was difficult to estimate whether further funding would be available to continue the relief work. The Town Council was well aware that it would find it difficult to continue with this relief work since, beside the Government subsidy of £2 460 and their loan of £1 640, they had by February 1933 spent approximately £2 200 on plant, implements and materials out of ordinary income and “this, of course, cannot go on much longer”.⁵⁵

The Divisional Council took the initiative in March 1933 by appointing two councillors, PF de Klerk and PA Luckhoff to meet with the local MP, Dr Bremer.⁵⁶ These two councillors, joined by two town councillors, AA Kingwill and H Urquhart, interviewed Dr Bremer.⁵⁷ As a result of this interview, Dr Bremer wrote a letter to the Minister of Labour, Col Creswell, mentioning that Graaff-Reinet had applied for a further subsidy of £2 700 and a loan of £1 080 for three months from 1 April 1933. Bremer had further stated that the Municipality was unable to finance the extra expenditure entailed in carrying out this unemployment relief work, unless the Department of

53 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 13 September 1932.

54 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 12 September 1932, p. 86.

55 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Public Works Committee, 17 February 1933.

56 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 14 March 1933.

57 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 18 March 1933, p. 126.

Labour allowed them to use a portion of the £1 080 loan for implements, materials and costs of overseeing.⁵⁸ At the same time the Divisional Council had put in an application for a subsidy to provide employment for one hundred unemployed for a period of three months.⁵⁹

Subsidised unemployment relief work comes to an end

The situation was indeed urgent, especially with the present relief work scheduled to end on the 31 March 1933, and with the prospect of approximately “400 unemployed walking the streets of the town”.⁶⁰

At the end of March 1933 the Town Council had found that it still had a balance of £300 left from their previous loan of £1 600. They applied to the Department of Labour for permission to use this amount to keep two hundred and fifty white and coloured men, who had been unemployed since the 3 April 1933, in work for as long as the money lasted. This was granted, but the Department was not prepared to accept the Council’s terms for the furtherance of relief works.⁶¹ The Town Council were extremely concerned over the position and at the Town Council meeting on 5 April 1933, they instructed the Town Clerk to inform the magistrate that at “the end of the coming week 250 men would be discharged and that these men would probably apply to him for rations.”⁶² The Finance Committee also recommended that, in view of the many applications for rations from the unemployed who had no immediate prospect of employment, fifty unemployed men be taken on weekly by the Municipality on the basis of one week’s work for one month’s food rations, since the magistrate was no longer prepared to issue rations unless the unemployed were prepared to work for them.⁶³

58 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Correspondence: Unemployment Relief - Bremer-Creswell, 17 March 1933.

59 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 11 April 1933.

60 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 18 March 1933, p. 126.

61 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Correspondence: Unemployment Relief – Dept of Labour-Town Council, 29 March 1933; Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 15 April 1933, p. 158; South African Library, Cape Town: *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 24 April 1933.

62 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 15 April 1933, p. 158.

63 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Finance Committee, 4 April 1933, p. 279.

While the Municipal unemployment relief was coming to an end the Divisional Council was able to procure another ninety per cent subsidy of £940 for relief work on the roads and was able to continue its repair works on various roads in the district.⁶⁴ Accordingly the Divisional Council was able to keep their one hundred workers in work for most of 1933. In June 1933 they had applied for another subsidy to keep these one hundred unemployed in work for a further three months from 1 July 1933. On 11 July 1933 the secretary of the Divisional Council was able to report that they had been granted a hundred per cent subsidy of £810 to be used to continue the Divisional Council's relief work in the District, until the whole had been spent.⁶⁵

However, with the cessation of the Municipal relief works in April 1933, the suffering by families of the unemployed, compounded by the almost four years of economic hardships, again came to the fore. In a letter to the *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, the mayor, H Urquhart, had stressed the position of the unemployed whose "wives and children are destitute or below the bread line". To discuss the situation and find means of alleviating their plight, he invited all interested to attend a public meeting in the Town Hall on 20 May 1933.⁶⁶ After long discussions detailing the situation prevailing amongst the unemployed, the best the Town Council could offer, since "everybody is so hard up owing to prevailing conditions and the Board's [Graaff-Reinet Board of Executors] failure",⁶⁷ was to pass a motion that: "a meeting of all charitable associations and other local bodies be convened to devise ways and means of relieving the situation".⁶⁸

The "hunger march"

The position of the unemployed was so desperate that a number of them held a "hunger march" through the town on 20 April 1933, when the:

... hunger marchers in scores passed down Graaff-Reinet's main street on their way to the Government building to obtain rations. The first batch marched

64 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 24 April 1933.

65 Divisional Council Offices, Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Divisional Council Minutes, 11 July 1933.

66 South African Library, Cape Town: *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 18 May 1932.

67 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Correspondence: K Bremer-Unemployment Relief, 18 May 1932 [Bremer was the local MP].

68 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 18 May 1932, p. 44.

in twos and they were followed by many others in irregular formations. Eventually a crowd of European and non-European men packed themselves at the main entrance to the magistrate's office... where one week's rations were issued to 168 white men [and] 145 non-Europeans.⁶⁹

These rations were not very substantial, a white married man received eight pounds of meal, half a pound of coffee, half a pound of salt and two pounds of meat per week, while a white single man received exactly half of the above ration. Non-whites were on a slightly different ration receiving twenty-five pounds of mealies or mealie-meal, one pound of fat and one pound of salt per month. This ration was obviously inadequate and many of the municipal location inhabitants supplemented their diet, in season, with the juicy fruit from the prickly pear that thickly covered the hillside surrounding the Location.⁷⁰ Some residents subsisted on this fruit and as a result found themselves suffering from bleeding gums and vitamin deficiency.⁷¹ The Town Council frowned upon the practice of prickly pear eating, maintaining that it enabled location residents to survive without making an attempt to seek work, while prickly pear syrup was used for the brewing of a potent home-brew liquor.⁷²

The Location Committee of the Town Council readily conceded that there was much unemployment and overcrowding in the location. The superintendent of the location, however, found it difficult to calculate how many able-bodied men were unemployed, as a large proportion of them lived on the earning and rations of their womenfolk or on piecework in or near town. He attributed the start of the overcrowding of the location to the fact that when the Van Ryneveld's Pass Dam had been built in 1920-24, many non-white labourers had been brought in from other areas to help with the work, but when this project was completed those persons had remained in Graaff-Reinet. The superintendent had also listed other reasons for the continual influx into town of such persons as:⁷³

(a) All farms being netted [fenced]; (b) The location is a dumping ground for aged farm servants; (c) The quantity of prickly pear growing in the vicinity of

69 South African Library, Cape Town: Editorial, *Graaff-Reinet Advertiser*, 22 April 33

70 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 16 August 1933, p. 299.

71 Interview W Kingwill (Farmer Blaauwater, Graaff-Reinet)/A Minnaar (Researcher, Department of History, Rhodes University, Grahamstown), 22 February 1978.

72 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 16 August 1933, p. 299.

73 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 8 October 1933, p. 314.

the town; (d) ... large numbers are drifting to urban areas where educational facilities are available; (e) The system known as “keeping the door open” whereby registered owners of huts and rooms leave the location with their families to take up work on the farms, and allow another family to occupy the house in the meantime. After a while they become tired of or too old to work [on the farms] and return to the location to take up residence. The council is then faced with the difficulty of finding accommodation for the family who occupied the hut while the owner was away. (f) The amount of charity provided by a local philanthropist. Many facilities have been provided for which the local authority is grateful. The location, however, is only attracting people from all over the country and the Council’s difficulties are being increased.

Rendering services in lieu of arrear rents

In an attempt to alleviate the situation in the municipal location, the superintendent had suggested that those unemployed location residents, far in arrear with their rents, be given the opportunity of rendering service in the location in order to secure a proportionate write-off of their arrears. This scheme was intended to enable other important maintenance work to be attended to. The Location Committee recommended that the scheme be started initially with twenty-five men, with each labourer being supplied weekly with eight pounds of mealies and eight pounds of mealie meal, and that every fortnight a sum of 18s be written off his arrear rent.⁷⁴

In a last desperate attempt to halt the overcrowding and the unemployment in the municipal location area, the Location Committee recommended that:⁷⁵

... a formal application be made to His Excellency the Governor-General to issue a proclamation declaring that after a date to be specified therein, no native may enter the urban area from the purpose of seeking or undertaking employment or of residing therein, otherwise than in accordance with conditions to be prescribed in such proclamation.

74 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 29 June 1933, p. 291.

75 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Location Committee, 1 March 1934, p. 340.

Mooted jam factory leads to building of a new power station

One other scheme worth mentioning in the context of unemployment relief was the mooted jam factory scheme in town. Its establishment was intended to utilise surplus fruit grown on the “erfholder” irrigation plots in town and nearby villages like Adendorp and Kendrew. These were all served by the irrigation scheme of the Van Ryneveld’s Pass Dam on the Sundays River on the northern outskirts of the town. Its establishment was also motivated by claiming that local labour was considered to be cheaper than other centres in the region, while the Town Council was prepared to provide a site rent free.⁷⁶ Although not getting off the ground, the jam factory proposal had unintended spinoffs in terms of reducing the town’s unemployment. When the jam factory scheme was investigated it was brought to the attention of the Town Council by the Town Engineer that it would be impossible to supply additional electrical power required by the factory by the existing power plant.⁷⁷ As a consequence the Town Council appointed a consulting engineer from Cape Town, GV Adendorff, who estimated that the building of a new power station in town would cost in the region of £30 000.⁷⁸ The Council decided to go ahead with the new electricity scheme as they “hoped to be able to use local labour to give work to the unemployed.” A loan was negotiated with the SA Old Mutual Co., the signing of which only took place on 30 November 1933.⁷⁹ In early 1934 the Town Clerk proceeded to Cape Town to get the necessary authorisations to start building the new electricity scheme power station. At the beginning of June 1934 work began on the new power station.⁸⁰ In the building of the power station, only local labour (besides the consulting engineer) was used, while a considerable saving was also made by the use of locally manufactured bricks.

76 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 14 January 1930, p. 544; 23 January 1930, p. 551.

77 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 25 February 1930, p. 562.

78 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 12 August 1932, p. 89.

79 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 3 November 1933, p. 236.

80 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 13 February 1934, p. 266; 3 June 1934, p. 341.

Use of locally manufactured bricks

Behind the manufacture of these local bricks lay another scheme by the Town Council to provide employment to the unemployed in the town. The Municipal brickfields lay just south of the town situated on the banks of the Sundays River. In the economic hardships of the times it was found that in order to secure any business the brickmakers underbid each other. With this fierce competition most of the brickmakers found themselves in dire straits, starving and unable to pay their Municipal brickfields rents.⁸¹ By September 1931 the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that they were bartering bricks at a great loss to obtain food for their families. It had become impossible under their present circumstances for them to pay their rents with the result that their arrears were increasing monthly. The Finance Committee had then recommended that the Town Council should take complete control of the brickfields and fix a price for all bricks.⁸² The Town Council acted on this recommendation with the brickmakers and drew up an agreement whereby the Council would assume control of all brick selling from the brickfields. All orders for bricks were to be placed with the Town Clerk and payment for bricks supplied would be done through the Town Clerk. The Town Council also set fixed prices for all grades of bricks. The agreement was made on condition that should any brickmaker at the Municipal brickfields dispose of their bricks through any person other than the Town Clerk, they would receive immediate notice to quit the brickfields.⁸³

Other conditions contained in the agreement, were that rent would be reduced on all brickfield claims to 10^s per month and the Council would take over the large number of unsold bricks the brickmakers had on hand in lieu of arrear rent. Further, that any brickmaker who had disposed of none of his bricks in any one week be paid the sum of 12^s6^d for five hundred first grade clinker bricks delivered to the Municipal yard. By August 1932 a total of 70 000 bricks had been collected in the Municipal yard by the implementation of this last condition.

81 Interview G Muller (Road Construction Foreman during Great Depression)/A Minnaar (Researcher, Department of History, Rhodes University, Grahamstown), 15 July 1978; Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Finance Committee, 16 September 1931, p. 158.

82 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Finance Committee, 16 September 1931, p. 158.

83 Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Reports: Finance Committee, 1 October 1931, p. 161.

This agreement stabilised the economic situation at the brickfields and allowed the brickmakers to make at least a nominal living and survive the further economic deprivations of the Great Depression. In January 1933 one of the brickmakers, JJ Wessels, had travelled to Cape Town, and had an interview with the Minister of Labour and advised him that “Graaff-Reinet [brickmakers] could produce the best blue hard brick in the Union [of South Africa]” and when he mentioned the price for which Graaff-Reinet bricks could be made the “Minister of Labour would hardly believe that bricks could be manufactured so cheaply.”⁸⁴ The Government accordingly provided an amount of £3 000 on the scheme to manufacture bricks locally on a large scale, under Municipal supervision, for the Public works Department. Eventually the Municipality re-organised the worker gangs on the Municipal brickfields and was able to absorb an additional 75 men on this brickmaking scheme. This scheme was able, before the Government subsidy expired, to provide all the bricks needed for the building of the new power station which was started in mid-1934 thereby providing many unemployed labourers (besides the 75 working at the brickworks) manual work on its building.

In this and other ways, attempts were made to reduce the number of unemployed in Graaff-Reinet. In this manner such schemes inputted money into the local economy with its trickle-down effect to local businesses and the employment or re-employment of unemployed in other sectors (e.g. as domestic workers or gardeners). But, throughout the Great Depression, unemployment had remained a serious problem that could not be completely overcome. It was only with the general economic recovery in 1934-1935 that this problem was reduced to negligible proportions.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, during the Great Depression era, unemployment and its attendant hardships was a serious problem in Graaff-Reinet, as in all other parts of the country. Unfortunately, though the hardships of that sector of the population labelled non-white (coloureds and blacks) and largely residing in the municipal location area, suffered greater hardships than the so-called white sector of the town’s residents, by the nature of the times in the 1930s, most of the relief measures implemented in the town and district favoured

⁸⁴ Town Council Municipal Records, Municipal Offices, Town Hall, 5 Somerset St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Municipal Minutes, 3 June 1933, p. 181.

first employing whites, then coloureds and only lastly blacks.

But, as the worldwide economic recovery started to trickle down from mid-1934 onwards, some of the allied work/job creation schemes in town also had an economic trickle-down effect on the lower economic rungs of the town's residents.

The improvement in agricultural prices in the district also had an impact on the general welfare of the town's residents. This was illustrated in the improvements in the average export price of wool for October 1933 which was 10d per lb as compared to the 4¾d per lb for October 1932. This had improved to 11d per lb in June 1934. (In many cases the excellent quality of wool grown in the Graaff-Reinet district received a better price than the national average of 11.1d per lb).⁸⁵ This improvement also led to a better demand for Merino stud rams (a major income generator for farmers in the district and sold to other farmers by the registered stud breeders).

At the Annual National Merino Ram sales held in Bloemfontein every February and August, the improvement in the wool price led to the February 1933 ram sales being "far better than last February [1932]... [But] the absolute dearth of cash prevented the average of £4.10s [per ram] from being higher".⁸⁶ This was ascribed to the fact that the better wool price had not yet filtered through to farmers by way of ready cash. By the August 1934 ram sales, the hoped for improvement seemed to have taken place in the sale of stud rams. At the February 1934 ram sales, Graaff-Reinet farmer and Merino Stud Breeder, SH Rubidge, had obtained an average price of £13 per ram sold as compared to his average of £6.13s, which he received at the February 1933 ram sales. This in turn had been better than his average of £4.12s.6d received at the February 1932 ram sales.⁸⁷ By the August 1934 ram sales it was obvious to the Merino ram breeders that full confidence had returned to the wool farmers. At these ram sales SH Rubidge's average price per ram sold had risen to a healthy £21. At the same time the top price paid for a ram at the August 1934 ram sales was £270, which was much better than the top price of £80 for a ram at the August 1933 ram sales.

While the farmers of the Graaff-Reinet district began to enjoy more prosperous times, so too the economic situation in the town improved. As

85 South African Library, Cape Town: *The Organised Wool Farmer*, February 1933; July 1934.

86 Wellwood Farm Diaries, Wellwood, Graaff-Reinet, 22 February 1933.

87 Wellwood Diaries, 21 February 1934.

more money began to be circulated with the improvement of the wool and ram price, so too did the inflow of cash into local businesses. However, the improvement only began in mid-1933 and then only slowly. But in 1934 and 1935 the flow of cash improved dramatically over the figures of the previous Great Depression years.⁸⁸

This general prosperity in town gradually reached the poorer sections of the community, but the unemployment position improved even more slowly. In 1933 the Magistrate still struggled to find work and rations for “n groot aantal werklose” [a large number of unemployed].⁸⁹ By 1934 there were still a number of unemployed in town but the Magistrate was able to report that the “werkloosheid posisie het baie verbeter gedurende die jaar” [1934] [the unemployment position had improved greatly during the year].⁹⁰ By 1935 the unemployed position had almost been overcome as the Postmaster (in charge of the town’s Labour Bureau) was able to inform the Magistrate that he was in a position to find work for anyone who applied for it, with the result that “only a few work-shy individuals are out of employment.”⁹¹ This improvement in the unemployment position was helped by the start in 1934 on the reconstruction of the main road to Middelburg (100 kilometres north of Graaff-Reinet) along national road standards with the first fourteen miles (22.4 kilometres) tarred by 1936.⁹²

In the ensuing years, Graaff-Reinet fully recovered from the economic hardships of the Great Depression, remained an important rural town serving an ever widening area, as the surrounding smaller towns and villages slowly stagnated.

88 An example of this increase from Journal and Cash Books, Watermeyer & Co. 1928-1935 [Land, stock and furniture auctioneers of Graaff-Reinet].

89 Magistrates Offices, Cnr Somerst & Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Magistracy: Annual Report 1933.

90 Magistrates Offices, Cnr Somerst & Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Magistracy: Annual Report 1934.

91 Magistrates Offices, Cnr Somerst & Church St, Graaff-Reinet: Graaff-Reinet Magistracy: Annual Report 1935.

92 Interview W Kingwill (Farmer Blaauwater, Graaff-Reinet)/A Minnaar (Researcher, Department of History, Rhodes University, Grahamstown), 22 February 1978.

