

Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn: Mercantile self-interest and the communication debate of the later 19th Century*

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The topographical and geological characteristics of the Southern Cape¹ region tended to leave this region isolated from socio-economic developments that occurred within the wider colonial context of the 19th Century. It was thus a difficult area to "open up" for market and mercantile purposes. The anti-clinal and synclinal mountain ranges, and the intense warping, folding, overfolding and thrust faulting characteristics of these ranges, hampered early transport in this region of the Cape. Ravines, gorges and the mountainous interior needed to be overcome and bridged for economic development to keep pace with other areas of the Cape. Compounding the situation was the fact that there were virtually no navigable rivers in the Southern Cape.

Historiographically historians have also tended to ignore the pretensions of the region to wider and more full coverage. Only André Appel's "Die distrik Oudtshoorn tot die tagtigerjare van die 19de eeu", Julianne Wilson's "A Changing Rural Economy and its implications for the Overberg, 1838-1872" and J.J. Smit's "Die paaie, passe en riveroorgange in Suid-Kaapland, 1806-1858" may rank as serious historical attempts to cover the history of the wider Southern Cape region. The district of Mossel Bay (originally Aliwal South) has been particularly neglected from any comprehensive study, although aspects have been variously touched on.²

This article thus attempts to uncover one aspect of the history of the Southern Cape region, that of economic activity, and this within the context of road and rail development. It furthermore attempts to explain how and why this region was neglected economically and what the reaction of the people, as voiced through the newspapers of the time, was to this neglect. Oudtshoorn, a district within this region, saw her economic future and continued development in linking up with the rail

development taking place to the north and east. The Mossel Bay fraternity sought to combine with their Oudtshoorn neighbours in a united bid for rail linkage. They were however soon at odds with Oudtshoorn as they realized they were being left to fight their own battle with the Cape Government. In the end both districts failed and were neglected for a period of about two decades while rail development continued to take place elsewhere. For Oudtshoorn the consolation prize was a mountain road pass link to this rail development, for Mossel Bay only thwarted potential, and dreams of a more unified Southern Cape, Cape Colony and South Africa.

Economic, agricultural and communication development

Because farmers in this region in the later 18th Century and the early 19th century were cut off from markets for their produce, there was little stimulus for industry. Thus, to unlock the agricultural potential of the Southern Cape, and especially areas such as the rich and fertile Congo valley and the Little Karoo, good road links, mountain passes and, later, railway links were essential.

As the agricultural and market opportunities at George and Mossel Bay developed during the 19th Century, so the Little Karoo also benefited, for the routes over the Montagu and Robinson Passes (replacing the older Cradock Pass and Attaquas Kloof which ran over the Outeniqua and Langeberge Mountain ranges, in 1847 and 1869, respectively) provided those much needed transport links for this relatively isolated region. With the settlement of Oudtshoorn officially taking root in 1848, there were even greater opportunities for the farmers of the Little Karoo to increase agricultural

Aspects of this article are discussed in more detail in an M.A. thesis submitted to Stellenbosch University by the same author, the title being: "Thomas Bain, Road Building and the Zwartberg Pass".

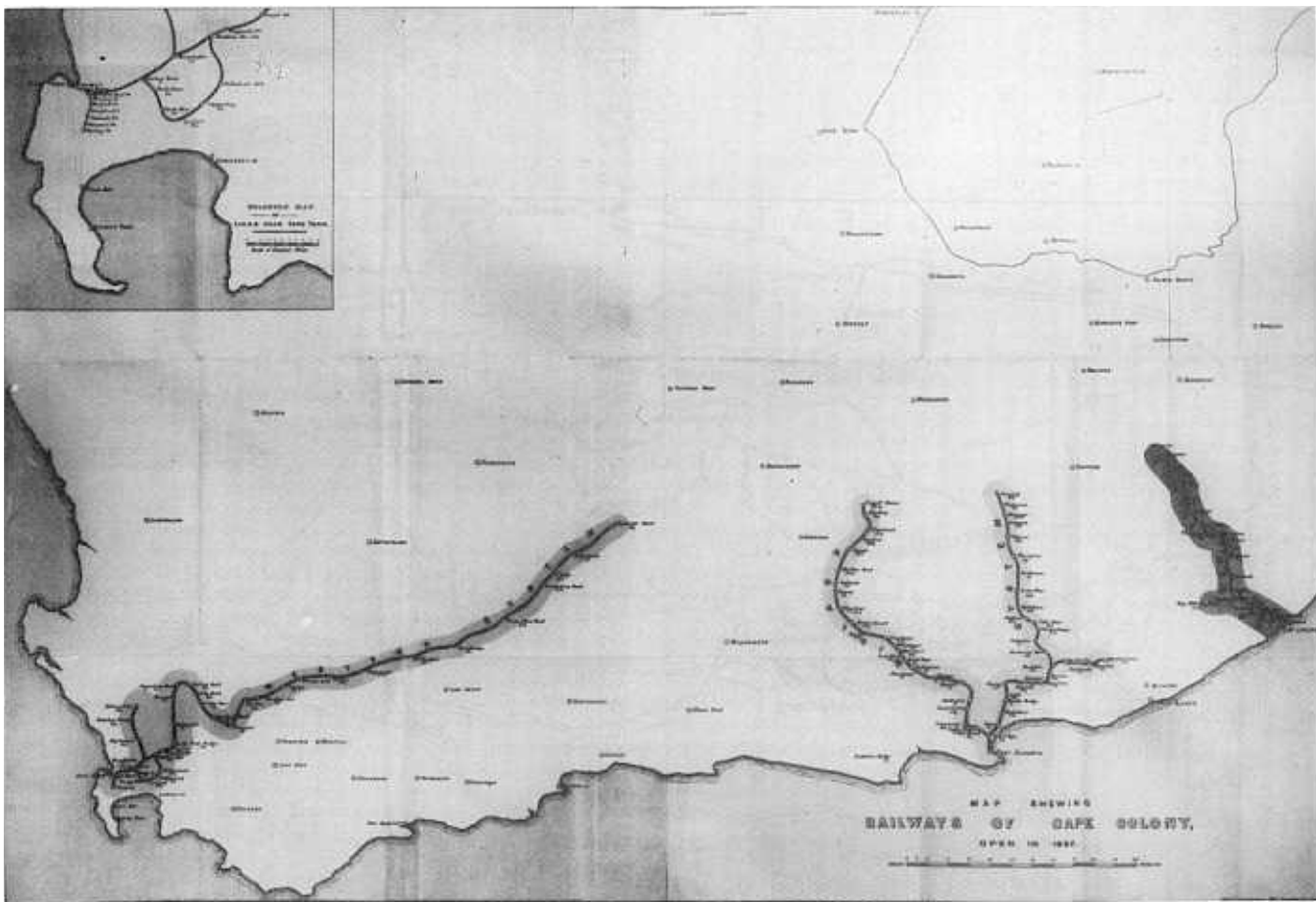
marketing) process developed fairly evenly until diamonds were discovered, and railway construction began accelerating as a result.

The development of the Cape railway system was, in contrast to the progressive and systematic economic (market) and road development and “unlocking” as mentioned above, uneven. Kimberley and the mineral wealth discovered was the obvious first objective for the railway lines to reach. This unbalanced economic and mercantile development and the rush to link Kimberley with the coastal ports of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London affected the potential for growth in various other regions of the country. The Southern Cape was one of these regions to be detrimentally affected and it was in this context that the communication debate of the 1880s took place.

The importance of Mossel Bay as harbour

In the period before 1879 Mossel Bay was a relatively important regional sea-port.⁶ Although trade increased in the decade of the 1870s the discovery of diamonds and the consequent railway links from the ports of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth to the interior and/or Kimberley began to detrimentally affect trade through this “lesser” port.

There was also a difference of opinion concerning the importance and geographical extent of Mossel Bay as harbour. In contrast to the traders and merchants of the Mossel Bay district who saw their village as being the natural sea-port to approximately 12 000 square miles (31 080 km²) of regional hinterland, there were those who viewed the port as being of lesser value and of



Map showing Railways of Cape Colony open in 1882. Source : C.A.D., G. 33-82, p. 96.

The inhabitants of the Little Karoo, and Outdshoorn in particular, now sought to channel their produce on to the towns of the north and to the railway route to Beaufort West and Kimberley, this generally to the detriment of Mossel Bay for it meant that this town was no longer needed for port and market purposes.

serving a smaller area; that is, as being an outlet to only approximately 300 square miles (777 km²) of coastal and district hinterland.⁷ This difference of opinion came to the fore during the period of railway development and was thus to be used in arguments for or against Mossel Bay being included in any railway extension scheme to or from the Little Karoo.

What also becomes apparent then is that from 1879 the port of Mossel Bay began ceding her natural "backyard" to the ports of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth as railway lines linked these ports to the interior,⁸ and as other road communication outlets linked this "backyard" to these interior railway lines (Beaufort West, Prince Albert Road Station and Klipplaat are stations in point). Mossel Bay's backyard thus shrank and the implications for this district's economic activity were bleak.

Oudtshoorn, another town and district in the Southern Cape affected by the rail links to the interior, was known as the "pantry of the Colony",⁹ this by virtue of the fact that this district produced cereals, vegetables and fruit in enviable quantities. It was also well-known for its highly ranked agricultural potential. An analysis of census statistics further reveals that Oudtshoorn ranked 24th in the Colony as far as numbers of oxen were concerned; it was first in ostrich numbers - 16,33 ostriches to the square mile as opposed to 5,8 in the next most dense district; it was the third highest wheat producer, the fourth highest sweet potato producer, the second highest pumpkin producer, the ninth highest red wine producer, the fourth highest brandy producer, the highest vinegar producer, the second highest raisin producer, the highest dried fruit producer, the sixth highest hanepoot vinestock producer; and had 11 750 morgen (9 517,5 hectares) out of the Colony's total 137 160 morgen (111 099,6 hectares) under irrigation.¹⁰ Agriculturally this should have been adequate proof of the value of this region and proof of the necessity of rail links to this region. Oudtshoorn and her neighbouring districts (like Mossel Bay and George) in the Southern Cape also contributed one eighth of the general revenue of the Colony¹¹ as well as being home to a significant proportion of the Cape's population.¹²

The division of Oudtshoorn was rich.¹³ Besides producing goods to the value of £305 350 per annum and having landed property valued at nearly £1 million, Oudtshoorn itself was a thriving village in 1879. It had a number of churches, the Dutch Reformed Church which was able to seat 3 000 people having just been built (c.1879). It was part of the Little Karoo which was approximately 100 miles (160,9 km) in length, extending from the district of Uniondale in the east to the district of Ladismith in the west. Breadth-wise the division ranged between 35 to 60 miles (56,3 to 96,5 km), the area in total equalling 1,781 square miles (4612,8 km²).

Agriculturally and commercially it was therefore of significant importance to Oudtshoorn and to the Colony to have another road and/or railway link northward. The diamonds of Kimberley, however, proved more glittering to the Colony than the fruit of the soil and this became the major vehicle/consideration generating

railway development. As a result, neighbourly considerations became of lesser importance to the Oudtshoorn district and they now sought a link to this railway development, even if it meant a road or pass link. A pass over the Zwartberg would provide a more direct market link to Kimberley, and as railway development was also pointed in this direction, this was clearly the way to go.

By 1878, the date from which the Zwartberg Pass was petitioned, the little Karoo had several entrances and exits (as mentioned earlier). In addition to those already mentioned, two main routes crossed the Zwartberg range, namely: Meiring's Poort (opened in 1858) and Seven Weeks Poort (opened in 1862)¹⁴ linking the Little Karoo to the Great Karoo. The distance from Oudtshoorn to Prince Albert Road Station via Meiring's Poort was 96 miles (154,4 km). A direct route across the Zwartberg would make the distance 62 miles (99,7 km). The trip around Meiring's Poort was therefore a 34-mile (54,7 km) detour which travellers and farmers, seeking a market for their produce, had to make on their journey between Oudtshoorn and Prince Albert. This would usually have been an extra two to three day journey for heavily laden ox wagons. After Prince Albert, the next destination for these 19th Century travellers was Prince Albert Road Station. It was argued that the Pass would be an outlet for over 3 000 vehicles per annum, and that besides other economic, market and communication benefits, it would open up vast tracts of Crown Land on the Zwartberg, to be used for grazing and possibly plantations. The pass would certainly benefit the Little Karoo and wider community by saving time and distances to be travelled.¹⁵

The development of the route via Seven Weeks Poort was not seen as a viable option. Besides the distance to consider, the Oudtshoorn and Little Karoo producers used Meiring's Poort in preference to Seven Weeks Poort (both however were flood susceptible), for from Klaarstroom they had three options: (a) to Prince Albert and on to Prince Albert Road Station; (b) on to Beaufort West; and (c) east to Willowmore and the Klipplaat Station on the Midlands railway line. Most of their produce did in fact go east.¹⁶

The communication debate

The most pressing consideration as to whether the Zwartberg Pass should be built or not was related to the "call" by the inhabitants of the Little Karoo and surrounding areas for a railway link. In his survey and report on the proposed pass, Thomas Bain strongly recommended that it be built. He claimed it would be a major feeder to the Beaufort West railway.

However, Bain did state that the people of Oudtshoorn were expecting a branch railway from Beaufort West to Klaarstroom, and that they were strongly agitating for a railway link from Mount Stewart to Oudtshoorn through Swanepoel's Poort and Willowmore. If this idea was being entertained, stated Bain, and it did in fact become a reality, it would then not be necessary to build the Zwartberg Pass as traffic and trade would go eastward instead.¹⁷

It was against this statement that the people and the Divisional Council of Oudtshoorn strongly protested. Two interesting questions arise: (i) was it perhaps to ensure that the traffic and trade did not in fact all go eastward, but that Oudtshoorn traffic and trade be directed westward to the Western Province, that helped promote the Zwartberg Pass? and (ii) was it not precisely for this reason as well that the railway link to the Midlands system (see map showing lines from Port Elizabeth to Graaff Reinet and Cradock respectively), took so long to be built? Answers to these questions will never really be clear.

The Cape government had decided to work on railway links to the diamond fields from the ports of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London simultaneously. Thus three divisions or railway line development systems were created: the Western System (from Cape Town), the Midlands System (from Port Elizabeth) and the Eastern System (from East London). The development of these systems excluded the Southern Cape (the Little Karoo and the ports of Port Beaufort, Mossel Bay, Knysna and Plettenberg Bay) for at least two decades as the rush to link the interior and the mineral centres to the ports took priority. When one looks at the map showing the railways of the Cape Colony which were open in 1882,¹⁸ a striking feature is the tentacle-like manner in which the railways reach into the interior from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London. The area between and below an imaginary arc drawn from Somerset West, Robertson, Ladismith, Willowmore to Humansdorp is glaringly neglected. We've already seen that topographically it was a difficult region to "open up". Linked to this was the resultant cost factor of between two to three million pounds that a railway link to the Southern Cape would cost. This was obviously very difficult for the Cape Parliament to sanction "in consequence of a period of depression which had passed over South Africa, and from which the Cape Colony had not yet emerged."¹⁹ In addition the question of a Customs Union and railway connections with neighbouring states and colonies was more pressing.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is not without some justification that the inhabitants of the Southern Cape and adjacent regions felt "badly done by" with regard to the lack of railway links being made available to them. It is obvious that the Little Karoo was detrimentally affected. The Zwartberg Pass and other road entrances and exits to this region sought to redress this imbalance. However, in the early twentieth century these routes (road

entrances and exits) had to ultimately cede their full potential and usage to railway transportation that now came to link this region to the greater South African railway network.

The *Oudtshoorn Courant* and *Mossel Bay Advertiser* and, to a much lesser extent, the *Beaufort Courier* and *The George and Knysna Herald*, followed the railway debate as it affected their regions and the railway development of the Colony in general in vivid and emotional detail for a period of almost ten years. This started with the demand for various surveys in 1879 and culminated in comments made at the banquet on the occasion of the official opening of the Zwartberg Pass in January 1888.²¹ The initial close co-operation, united aim and sentiments expressed, as reflected mainly in the newspapers of these regions, the *Oudtshoorn Courant* and *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, make interesting reading.²² Any co-operation however, soon degenerated into regionalism, self-interest, name-calling and bickering when it became apparent that Oudtshoorn, the Little Karoo and the Southern Cape were not getting the railway link/s they were anticipating.²³ It was also in this context that the opening of the Olifants River Bridge in the Oudtshoorn district was "boycotted" by the Mossel Bay fraternity.

The history of the building of the Olifants River Bridge (also known as the Victoria Bridge, or Styl's Drift Bridge) and its demise/failure is interesting. It was the first major public work of this nature constructed by the government in the Little Karoo and, along with Irrigation Development and the building of the Zwartberg Pass, a measuring rod as to the extent to which the Colonial Government was/was not prepared to develop the Little Karoo at that stage.

A bridge over the Olifants River was first called for in 1876 to facilitate uninterrupted communication between Oudtshoorn, Mossel Bay and George. The matter was taken to Parliament, and John X. Merriman, the then Commissioner of Public Works, visited certain sites at the beginning of 1877. However, it was only in 1880 that Parliament granted funds for the building of the bridge. The progress of the work was carefully monitored by the *Oudtshoorn Courant* as the bridge was seen to be of immense social and economic benefit to the public. The opening of the bridge was a grand occasion, spoilt perhaps by the non-attendance of any representatives from Mossel Bay.²⁴

The use of the Zwartberg Pass vs the Mossel Bay Harbour

The *Mossel Bay Advertiser* and *Oudtshoorn Courant* also recorded a debate that arose during 1886 concerning whether it was cheaper for Oudtshoorn inhabitants to receive and forward freight via the Mossel Bay Harbour, or via the Zwartberg Pass from where it

Conclusion

The potential that Mossel Bay had shown in the years up to the 1870s was thwarted in the following decade. The town fought to protect this potential for growth upon which depended its economic livelihood and its port's future. Unfortunately for Mossel Bay the railway revolution that followed on the heels of the discovery of wealth (diamonds and gold) took trade away from the Southern Cape generally, and her port specifically, and she took on the position of remaining a South African port of secondary importance.

The town of Oudtshoorn, initially seeking a united bid and lobbying with Mossel Bay for the railway system to come into and through the Little Karoo, now started hedging her bets and looking to her own interests. The building of the Zwartberg Pass within this context was thus only a short term answer and a link for her to the railway system. With the coming of the railways to this region from 1906, the foundations for an economically more unified Southern Cape region were finally laid.

ENDNOTES

For the purposes of this article the region of the Southern Cape includes the area from the Storms River to Port Beaufort and runs as far north as Prince Albert. The term district is used to refer to a town and its immediate environs. See also S. Steyn (ed), Off The Beaten Track, (Cape Town, 1986), pp. 245-259, 261; T.V. Bulpin, Reader's Digest Illustrated Guide to Southern Africa, (Cape Town, 1980), pp. 79, 94, 95, 112. The Southern Cape region is variously defined here.

A.L. Muller, "Coastal Shipping and the Early Development of the Southern Cape", *Contree*, No. 18, July 1985; D.E. Nel, *Die Hawe en Fabrieksnywerhede van Mosselbaai* (Stellenbosch, 1947).

A. Appel, "Die distrik Oudtshoorn tot die tagtigerjare van die 19de eeu: 'n sosio-ekonomiese studie", *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 1988, II., pp. 103-117.

(Cape Archives Depot - hereinafter CAD) C.O. 2794 Letters Received from Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate, Uitenhage and George, 1828-1841 : Mr Bergh - Mr Bell, 17/10/1840, no. 40.

C.G.W. Schumann, *Structural changes and business cycles in South Africa, 1806-1936*, (London, 1938), pp. 31-33.

⁶ A.L. Muller, "Coastal Shipping and the Early Development of the Southern Cape", *Contree*, No. 18, July 1985, p. 11; D.E. Nel, *Die Hawe en Fabrieksnywerhede van Mosselbaai*, (Stellenbosch, 1947), p. 12; Crail Cards, File 61: J. Coope reporting on Cape Colony Harbours - 1877 (South Africa Library); J.J. Smit, Die paaie, passe en rivieroorange in Suid-Kaapland, 1806-1858 (Unpublished D.Litt. et

Phil. UNISA, 1974), p. 53; J.E. Wilson, A changing rural economy and its implications for the Overberg, 1838-1872 (Unpublished D.Litt. et Phil, UNISA, 1990), pp. 84-85.

CAD *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 31/3/1886 (Letter to Editor); PWD 2/33 Letters Received, Chief Inspector : T. Bain - Acting Chief Inspector, 30/3/1882.

⁸ D.E. Nel, *Die Hawe en Fabrieksnywerhede van Mosselbaai*, p. 20.

⁹ *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 25/9/1884.

¹⁰ CAD G. 91-'83 Reports by Civil Commissioners and Resident Magistrates and District Surgeons for the year ended 31 December, 1882: G. 6-'92 Census 1891, pp. 434-463. The measurements here are calculated at 1 morgen = c.2 acres, and, 1 acre = 0,405 hectares *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 27/1/1880.

¹¹ *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 7/5/1885.

¹² *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 20/5/1885 (1875 census statistics). 48,005 people lives in the districts of Oudtshoorn, George, Mossel Bay, Riversdale and Knysna. The district of Oudtshoorn itself had a population of 15,000.

G. McCann, "The Ostrich bounces back", *Your Garden Route Companion*, Vol. 3, 1990; Anon., *Oudtshoorn and its farms*, (Oudtshoorn, 1914), p. 21.

¹⁴ CAD A. 63-'80 Petition of Inhabitant of Oudtshoorn, June 1880, pp. 1-2; A. 56-'79 Petition of Landed Proprietors of Oudtshoorn, 19/7/1879, pp. 1-3.

¹⁵ CAD A. 11-'81: Select Committee Report on Prince Albert Loan Bill, May 1881, p. 4; A. 44/'79 Return in compliance with a resolution of the Honourable the Legislative council, dated 22 July 1879.

¹⁶ CAD M. 3/3044 : Map to accompany Mr Bain's report upon the destruction of Meiring's Poort, 22/6/1885.

All the distances mentioned above in the text were taken from the map drawn by Thomas Bain upon the destruction of Meirings Poort after the floods of 1885.

¹⁷ CAD PWD 1/280 Letters Received, Road and building Works officials: T. Bain - J. Forde, 24/7/1879.

¹⁸ CAD G. 33/'82 Report of the General Manager of Railways for the year 1881, Appendix, p. 96.

Beaufort Courier, 17/1/1888; *The George and Knysna Herald*, 18/1/1888; *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 18/1/1888; *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 17/1/1888.

²⁰ *Beaufort Courier*, 17/1/1888.

²¹ *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 16/7/1879, 23/7/1879, 27/1/1880, 3/2/1880, 23/3/1880, 27/4/1880, 8/6/1880, 15/6/1880, 29/6/1880, 14/6/1881, 21/6/1881, 27/9/1881, 7/3/1882, 4/7/1882, 3/7/1883, 25/9/1884, 7/5/1885, 21/5/1885, 11/2/1886, 18/2/1886, 18/3/1886, 25/3/1886, 29/4/1886, 7/7/1887, 14/7/1887, 15/9/1887, 10/11/1887 and 18/1/1888; *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 6/8/1879, 20/8/1879, 27/8/1879, 3/9/1879, 29/10/1879, 12/11/1879, 19/11/1879, 4/2/1880, 25/2/1880, 3/3/1880, 31/3/1880, 9/6/1880, 7/7/1880, 14/7/1880, 1/9/1880, 6/10/1880, 15/6/1881, 20/7/1881, 20/5/1885, 17/1/1886, 31/3/1886 and 6/7/1886; *Beaufort*

Courier, 10/2/1880 and 20/5/1880, *The George and Knysna Herald*, 11/1/1888 and 18/1/1888.

Oudtshoorn Courant, 31/3/1880 and 7/3/1882; *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 25/2/1880, 31/3/1880 and 31/3/1886.

Oudtshoorn Courant, 18/2/1886, 11/2/1886, 18/3/1886 and 10/11/1887; PWD 2/761 Memoranda and Reports on Parliamentary Motions : Report of meeting, Ladismith, 14/4/1888; *Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 31/3/1850 and 1/9/1880; *The Oudtshoorn Courant*, 1/4/1886.

A. Appel : "Die distrik Oudtshoorn", p. 209; *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 29/5/1883; *The Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 30/5/1883; *Oudtshoorn Courant*, 8/2/1881, 15/3/1881, 22/3/1881, 3/1/1882, 10/1/1882, 17/1/1882, 13/6/1882, 31/10/1882, 21/11/1882, 28/11/1882, 3/5/1883, 29/5/1883.

Parcel Expenses

Expenses via Mossel Bay vs Probable expenses via the Zwartberg Pass

Bills of lading (sic) and wagon hire	3/6	Parcel per rail	5/9
Freight	10/6	Agency at Prince Albert Road Station	1/3
Carriage to Oudtshoorn	1/3	Carriage to Oudtshoorn	2/6
Total	19/8		9/6

Oudtshoorn Courant, 29/4/1886

Parcel Expenses

<u>Via Mossel Bay</u>	£	s	d
Bills of lading and cartage to docks	0	5	
Freight for 1/2 ton or 1000 lbs	0	10	
Landing and Forwarding, including Wharfage at Mossel Bay on a value of 30	0	9	0
Carriage to Oudtshoorn @ 1s.6d. per 100 lbs	0	15	0
Agency	0	2	6
Total	2	2	6

Via Prince Albert Road Station and Zwartberg Pass

Wagon or cart to railway station	0	1	6
1000 lbs @ 5s.6 d. per 100 lbs to Prince Albert Road Station	2	15	0
Carriage to Oudtshoorn at 2s 6d per 100 lbs	1	5	0
Agency	0	4	6
Total	4	6	0

Mossel Bay Advertiser, 5/5/1886.

Mossel Bay Advertiser, 14/4/1886. They do not give a breakdown of costs.

Mossel Bay Advertiser, 27/8/1879, 17/12/1879, 25/2/1880, 8/2/1882 and 21/4/1886.

Oudtshoorn Courant, 15/10/1885; CAD G. 91-83 Reports by Civil Commissioners and Resident Magistrate and District Surgeons for the year ended 31st December 1882, p. 87; A. Appel, "Die distrik Oudtshoorn", p. 199.

Beaufort Courier, 17/1/1888 - The "Transvaal Gold Fields ... (were) thought to be the salvation" of the Colony's depression and were thus the direction in which railway development was pointed.

Mossel Bay Advertiser, June to December 1880 compared with the period June to December 1888.