

Race, class and comfort on rural buses, 1925-1955*

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IT WAS DURING 1912 that the South African Railways (SAR), launched its so-called Road Motor Service (RMS). The venture served two main purposes. Firstly, in the days before extensive private car ownership, scheduled RMS buses or lorries transported passengers and small, low-rated cargoes on routes where the density and regularity of traffic did not warrant construction of a branch-line railway. Holiday-makers, farmers, as well as householders and general dealers in small towns were the chief beneficiaries. Secondly, plying between small settlements, scattered farmsteads and railway heads, the RMS effectively extended the geographical reach of the railways and, as a feeder service, increased the volumes of train traffic.

During its first decade the RMS grew slowly, and by the end of 1924 the total route length of the network was only 387 km. In the same year a small fleet of buses carried approximately 190 000 passengers. In the period 1925-1930, the RMS expanded rapidly. The addition of 78 new routes in 1926-1927 increased the route length of the RMS network twenty-fold. The fleet grew correspondingly, and the number of bus passengers increased by a factor of twelve. The period after 1940 to the mid-1950s was the last when there was spectacular growth in the number of bus passengers and in the geographical coverage of the RMS. In 1938 the RMS route length surpassed that of the railways and continued to grow. In the course of the Second World War the number of bus passengers doubled, reaching 11 million in 1945. Passenger totals reached a peak at nearly 18 million in 1954, and four years later, sales of third-class tickets (mostly to black passengers) surpassed first-class sales (mostly to white passengers) for the first time.¹

At the outset, the viability of RMS operations hinged on dual-purpose vehicles which could transport passengers as well as freight, because the volume and regularity of both forms of traffic was unpredictable. Passenger traffic fluctuated erratically in concert with the periodic business and social trips made in rural communities. The traffic in milk and cream (the backbone of RMS freight) was fairly predictable, but not so cargoes such as fertilizer, fencing material, small poultry and livestock, fruit, household parcels and consignments to trading stores.

In time, and in places where the volume of black passenger traffic was high and steady, the RMS replaced dual-purpose vehicles by buses which were designed to carry passengers only. Elsewhere, modernization of the RMS fleet involved the introduction of buses on which freight and passengers were separated more effectively in three distinctive compartments. Generally speaking, the first-class section of the so-called 'tri-compo' vehicles was reserved unofficially for whites. Rather than use the centre compartment for black passengers travelling on either first-class or second-class tickets, and the rear compartment for third-class passengers and freight, both compartments were given third-class status. Depending on local arrangements, all black passengers were settled in one section and freight in the other, or some effort was made to seat 'better class' blacks alone in the centre compartment.

On spasmodically patronized services, there was no economic justification for operating tri-compos. It was also economically impractical to maintain a fleet of standby vehicles, and shift these to routes where increased capacity was needed temporarily: the long distances between RMS depots, and the bad roads, were severe handicaps.² The alternative was to increase the size of the RMS fleet and

operate vehicles dedicated to either black or white passengers. Covering the capital expenses and inflated operating costs by raising tariffs would have stunted expansion of the RMS and curtailed agricultural development. Buses with longer chassis and more powerful engines would have enabled more judicious partitioning of passengers and freight, and would have allowed the introduction of class distinctions among black passengers, but these proposals were not always financially viable.³ As an interim measure which offered some flexibility, trailers were hitched to buses so as to increase carrying capacity, but the extra weight strained bus engines especially in wet weather, and impaired manoeuvrability on tortuous roads.⁴

COMPLAINTS FROM WHITE PASSENGERS

White users of the RMS had two chief complaints about travel conditions on RMS vehicles. Firstly, they complained bitterly about black passengers being accommodated in the rear in the freight compartment where they squatted among milk, butter, cream, meat and maize, and damaged the produce by their weight, or allegedly contaminated it. Farmers associations in the Rustenburg and Griquatown districts, and the creamery at Senekal, were among those who voiced their concern about the transport of perishables and black passengers in such close proximity.⁵ Some complaints were channelled through parliament which was told on one occasion that it was 'inconvenient and unpleasant to consume foodstuffs on which natives have been sitting'. Acting on behalf of the Vaalwater Farmers Association, the National Party Member of Parliament for Waterberg, J.G. Strijdom, likewise informed the House in 1946 about the 'disgraceful' and 'unsavoury' RMS service in the Potgietersrus, Rustenburg en Waterberg districts.⁶

NB: All archival references are to materials in the Central Archives Depot, Pretoria.

¹ G.H. Pirie, 'Railway operated road transport and the South African space economy, *South African Geographer* 13 (1985), pp. 39-50.

² SAS 1960 (RTS 214/1) (henceforth RTS 1): System Manager (Cape Town) — General Manager, 16.1.1948.

³ SAS 1959 (RTS 214/0) (henceforth RTS 0): General Manager — System Manager (Durban), 27.1.1930; SAS 1961 (RTS 214/6) (henceforth RTS 6): System Manager — General Manager, 7.8.1935.

⁴ RTS 0: General Manager — P.G.W. Grobler (Minister of Lands), 13.10.1925; SAS 1961 (RTS 214/8) (henceforth RTS 8): System Manager (Pretoria) — General Manager, 19.1.1932.

⁵ RTS 0: Secretary, Northam Farmers Association — General Manager, 7.10.1925; Secretary, Hay Farmers Association — Divisional Superintendent (Kimberley), 30.7.1927; Divisional Superintendent (Port Elizabeth) — General Manager, 16.9.1927; SAS 1960 (RTS 214/5) (henceforth RTS 5): System Manager (Bloemfontein) — General Manager (Johannesburg), 23.11.1931.

⁶ Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly* (henceforth *Hansard*), 28.2.1945, col. 2457; 21.2.1946, col. 2198.

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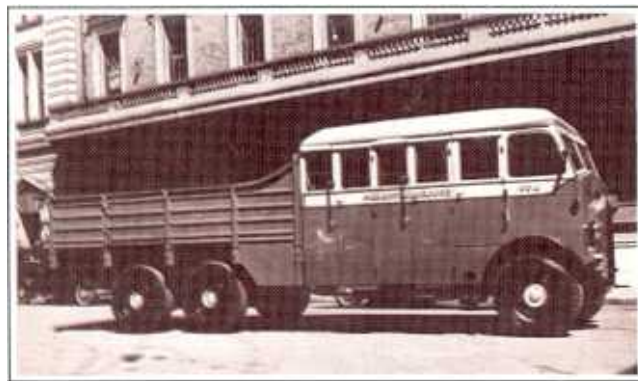
Early model, roofed dual-purpose vehicle. Passenger seat and partition just visible. Wire netting and roll-down blinds offered some protection.*

The second major complaint which whites had about the RMS concerned the racial mixing which occurred when black people were admitted to 'first-class' seating. Doubtless there were whites who would have appreciated a range of racially-segregated fare classes on RMS buses, but the desire for distinctive fare classes was never as obvious as the preference for impermeable race classes. The first signs of protest about racial intermingling on the RMS emerged in the mid-1920s in the Rustenburg, Calvinia and Zeerust districts.⁷ Other white organizations which aired complaints were the Cape Province Agricultural Union in 1928, and the Transkeian Territories European Civic Association in 1931.⁸ In 1938, the suggestion was made to the RMS in Johannesburg that six seats be set aside at the rear of every bus so that white passengers would not have to endure the 'unbearable stench' of some blacks, and so that the name of the RMS could be upheld.⁹ Years later, Strijdom remarked again in parliament on the 'bitterly unpleasant' travel experiences endured by white women who were 'cooped up the whole day with a bunch of natives'.¹⁰

Even on the relatively short distance metropolitan services such as those between Edenvale and Germiston, Johannesburg and Vereeniging, whites took great exception to just a single black passenger in an RMS bus. Some threatened violence, while others fled the buses in protest.¹¹ Matters did not improve instantly after the election of the National Party government in 1948 and, in 1949, 25 residents of Kalkfontein petitioned Strijdom, then Minister of Lands and Irrigation, about 'scandalous' racial intermingling on the Vaalwater-Stockpoort service.¹²

Complaints such as these would have been far more numerous had white bus drivers not taken it upon themselves in many instances to eject black passengers. In Edenvale, for example, a bus driver evicted an Indian storekeeper from his bus because he thought it better to lose one passenger than twelve who objected to the Indian's presence.¹³ And, even though there might not be any white passengers in sight at a bus station and there were vacant seats aboard a bus, drivers who wanted to avoid friction sometimes excluded black first-class ticket holders on the grounds that whites were expected aboard later on in the journey.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, whites who had bought third-class tickets in anticipation of there being no black passengers, expected to be moved into the first-class if blacks boarded en route.¹⁵

One particular form of racial mixing that drew unfavourable comment from whites was the alternating use which black and white passengers made of seating on the same



Late model, dual-purpose vehicle with completely enclosed passenger section.

bus. A National Party Member of Parliament took up the matter on behalf of the white residents of Riversdale where a bus generally used to transport whites was diverted to ferry African builders after a vehicle breakdown. In 1948 a deputation of whites from Zeerust visited the Minister of Railways to air their complaints. At Potgietersrus, a concerned white mother protested that transporting schoolchildren in buses which had been used previously to carry Africans demeaned young Afrikaners: even if the RMS staff sterilized the compartment a thousand times, she said, the fact is they were still 'Native seats'.¹⁶ The same concern shown by the parents of Chinese schoolgirls carried rather less weight.¹⁷

Many of the detailed and protracted investigations made by the RMS into the objections lodged by whites ended in a stalemate. The view taken by senior officers of the RMS was that whites often exaggerated their complaints, and that they were isolated. For instance, criticism about the number of Indian passengers on RMS buses in Rustenburg in 1928 drew the retort that the only Indians who had been admitted to the first-class were a family of merchants of 'high class' who were 'very good supporters' of the RMS.¹⁸ Similarly,

⁷ RTS 0: J.J. Venter — P.G.W. Grobler (Minister of Lands), 8.7.1925; Assistant Private Secretary — Minister of Railways (henceforth Minister) — General Manager, 14.10.1925; Organising Secretary, National Party of the Transvaal — Assistant General Manager, 15.1.1926; SAS 1960 (RTS 214/4) (henceforth RTS 4): Mayor W. Holden — Minister of Interior, 27.2.1928; System Manager (Cape Town) — General Manager, 15.12.1928; SAS 1961 (RTS 214/7) (henceforth RTS 7): E.J. Sterley — Station Master (Zeerust), 20.1.1930; Petition from W.A. Lombard and 81 others — Minister, 24.1.1930; Secretary, Dwarsberg Boerevereniging — General Manager, 1.6.1932.

⁸ RTS 0: System Manager (Kimberley) — General Manager, 24.9.1928; Copy of Civic Association resolution, 26.8.1931.

⁹ RTS 1: Suggestions and Inventions Committee — RMS Manager, 4.4.1938.

¹⁰ *Hansard*, 28.2.1945, col. 2480.

¹¹ *Transvaler*, 2.3.1938 (Letter from R.J. Wolmarans); RTS 6: Acting Chief Rates Officer — General Manager, 27.4.1945; RTS 7: H.G. Prinsloo — J.G. Strijdom, 21.1.1947; telegrams from J.M. van Huyssteen and 45 others, and from M.J. de Klerk and 66 others, c. July 1941.

¹² RTS 8: Petition to J.G. Strijdom, 23.1.1949.

¹³ RTS 0: D.F. Buys — Goods and Passenger Agent, Germiston, 28.10.1927.

¹⁴ RTS 1: System Manager (Cape Town) — General Manager, 6.2.1930; SAS 1960 (RTS 214/2) (henceforth RTS 2): F. Hendrikse — General Manager, 9.1.1931.

¹⁵ RTS 0: System Manager (East London) — General Manager, 29.4.1932.

¹⁶ RTS 1: General Manager — Acting System Manager (Cape Town), 25.1.1945; RTS 7: Administrative Secretary, Ministry of Transport — General Manager, 16.7.1948; SAS 1960 (RTS 214/3) (henceforth RTS 3): Administrative Secretary — N.C. Meyer, 29.10.1948; RTS 8: Mrs J.W. Dereksen — Minister, 21.4.1949.

¹⁷ RTS 7: General Manager — Consul General for China, 24.2.1951; General Manager — System Manager, 11.6.1956; *Rand Daily Mail*, 2.3.1955.

¹⁸ RTS 0: Secretary, Railways and Harbours Board — General Manager, 5.10.1928; System Manager (Western Transvaal) — General Manager, 30.10.1928.

*All photographs by courtesy of Public Relations, South African Transport Services (Spoornet).



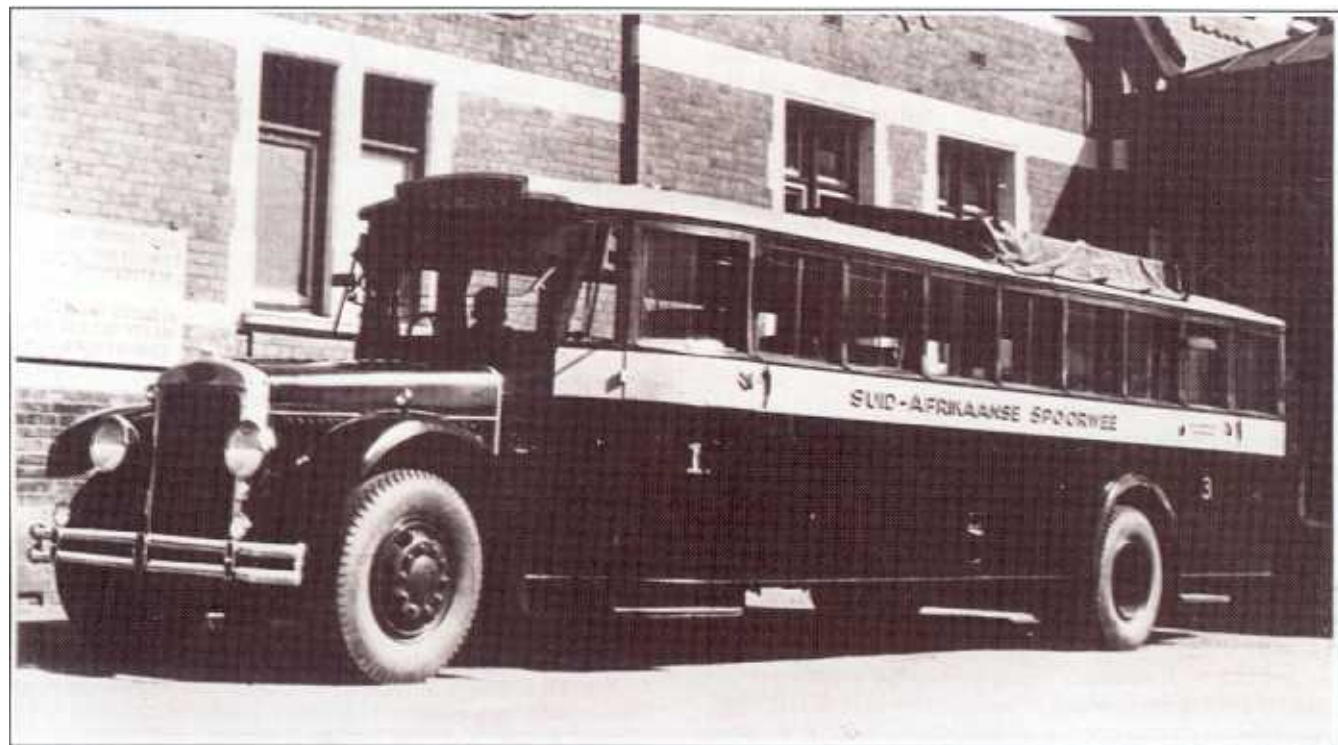
Passenger bus showing windows and curtains in front passenger section and wire mesh and roll-down blinds in rear section.

relatively few whites complained publically about the coloured school principal who for years travelled on an RMS bus in the Johannesburg area.¹⁹ Complaints were also made by interfering whites who assumed that white passengers whom they had seen sitting with blacks had been put there against their will. In fact, as happened once in the Fouriesburg and Vaalwater areas, whites might choose to travel in the third-class rather than wait for the bus to make a second trip. Conversely, the African seen sitting in the first-class on the Zeerust-Wonderboom service was an African chief who could not be accommodated in the third-class which was full, and whose presence in the first-class was acceptable to the solitary white woman ensconced there.²⁰

COMPLAINTS FROM BLACK PASSENGERS

A common objection raised by black users of the RMS was their exposure to the elements when travelling among freight which, in the early models of vehicle, was carried on open platforms. Heavily laden buses churned up dust off dirt roads, choking passengers, hurting their eyes and dirtying their clothing. The tarpaulins which the RMS provided offered some protection, and they did help shelter people

Passenger bus at Pietermaritzburg, First-class is for whites, third-class for 'Non-Europeans'. Note the rooftop luggage rack.



from the rain and wind, but they were scant shield from the cold or the heat. Nevertheless, in some respects they were better than the windowless, airless and dark freight trailers in which blacks were sometimes expected to travel. These cells were frightening and stifling and made it more likely than ever that passengers would miss seeing their destination or hearing its name called out.²¹

The discomfort persisted even on vehicles in which black passengers were given seats and on which there was shelter. Writing about the 'depressing and tedious' travel in the Rustenburg district in the early 1940s, the reputed community leader, Ellen Kuzwayo, recalls:

The railway bus in those years was slow and very uncomfortable: the seats were not upholstered, and although there were window panes, the bus collected so much dust that by the end of the journey the passengers were covered with a reddish powder, as most of the roads were still not tarred. In summer all were sweating and sweltering in the intense heat; in winter, the cold was aggravated by the wind which rushed in through all the crevices and left the unheated vehicle freezing cold.²²

The weather was not the only source of discomfort to black passengers travelling in the third class. Regardless of the fares which were about half the first-class fares, it was also very unpleasant travelling among dirty and reeking loads of sheep, pigs, goats, fowls, hides, lime, oranges, pineapples, guano, flour, petrol drums, coal bags and bales of wool.²³

¹⁹ RTS 7: System Manager — J.W. Joubert, 9.12.1935; Foreman Ticket Examiner — System Manager, 30.4.1937.

²⁰ *Die Volksblad*, 12.10.1932; RTS 5: System Manager (Bloemfontein) — General Manager, 29.10.1932; RTS 7: System Manager (Johannesburg) — Secretary, Dwarsberg Boerevereniging, 1.7.1932; Minister — J.G. Strijdom, 27.6.1949.

²¹ RTS 6: Minute No. 15, Pondoland General Council Session, 2.6.1930.

²² E. Kuzwayo, *Call me woman* (London, 1985), p. 120.

²³ RTS 0: A.F.S. Mankarana — General Manager, 6.3.1928; RTS 7: Chief J. Mabalane — General Manager, 24.10.1928; RTS 5: L.N.R. Mopeli, E. Mohale and M. Mootsae — Minister, 26.3.1935; RTS 3: C.H. Malcomess — Minister 16.5.1938; Circle Secretary and District Executive Officer, APO — General Manager, 10.10.1946; RTS 1: Letter from J. Swart — *Cape Times*, 14.7.1942; SAS 1962 (RTS 214/10) (henceforth RTS 10); R.V.S. Thema — RMS Manager, 5.8.1942; RTS 8: J.D. Rheinhallt-Jones — General Manager, 14.8.1942; *Hansard*, 17.2.1944, col. 1482.

The novelist, Noni Jabavu, remembers not only the 'squealing pigs and hens strung up and contained in pillow-cases', but also the lethal personal possessions: the knobkerries and fighting sticks which African men habitually carried. Like Kuzwayo, she too remembers the bulky groceries, suitcases, bundles of blankets, portable gramophones, satchels of mechanical tools, tin trunks, Singer sewing-machines and cooking utensils which aggravated the cramped conditions.²⁴ Not least, it was dangerous travelling with heavy freight consignments which could tip and fall as buses lurched over poor roads. Passengers were sometimes lucky to escape with only torn clothes. Injuries were not uncommon, and rumours did circulate about deaths.²⁵

As if having to travel among freight was not miserable enough, black passengers were also expected to clamber up and down from their perches among the poles, wire, milk cans, parcels, crates and sacks wherever freight was loaded and unloaded. The age or sex of a passenger was of no consideration, and even 'respectable' African women surrounded by milk cans, chicken coops and agricultural implements would be 'hurled up and down at each halt'. In some instances black passengers were also expected to help load and unload freight.²⁶ Matters did not necessarily improve after the introduction of tri-compo vehicles. Some bus drivers were so accustomed to directing Africans to the freight compartment that they continued their habit while putting mail bags and milk cans inside the bus.²⁷

In addition to complaining about the atrocious physical conditions of RMS travel, black passengers also objected to the classlessness of the RMS buses. 'Every kind of "sophisticated" or "backward, primitive" seemed to be represented', wrote Jabavu.²⁸ In 1926, fourteen Indian traders at Wolmaransstad complained not only about having to travel among hides, merchandise and luggage, but also about sitting with 'filthy natives'. 'We are not of the lower class of Indian', they noted, 'but of the foremost merchants of this town'. Similar protests were made by the Indian Chamber of Commerce at Newcastle, and by Indian storekeepers in the vicinity of Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Zeerust and Edenvale.²⁹

Several prominent Indian political organizations took up the matter of inadequate social differentiation with the authorities. In 1940, when the RMS announced that it would operate a 'whites only' bus service between Germiston and Modderfontein, the Transvaal Indian Congress and the Agent-General for India took the matter as far as the Minister of Railways and threatened legal action. Accordingly, the RMS was advised to reserve some rear seats for Indian passengers instead. Later, in 1947, when the proposal was made to bar Indians from Johannesburg-Vereeniging buses, the local branch of the Transvaal Indian Congress voiced its protest, but without success.³⁰

Among the many coloured people who protested about the failure to cater for social differences among black passengers were teachers from coloured schools in the Beaufort West, Citrusdal, Hanover, Kenhardt and Willowmore districts,³¹ as well as two coloured Swaziland citizens and 21 coloured voters from Uniondale. Several coloureds were careful to reassure the RMS that they did not expect to travel with whites.³² Symptomatic of deep anxiety, in households as far apart as Umtata and Piet Retief, coloured parents were anxious that their children should not travel among Africans. Once, the driver of the Umtata-Kokstad bus was told explicitly in the case of a girl, 'whatever you do, don't put her behind with natives'.³³ The attitude was common. In 1944, 198 residents at Mara, as well as coloureds in Zululand, registered their disapproval of sometimes having to travel



Milk cans being loaded in the rear of a RMS vehicle at the Vryburg creamery.

with 'kaffers'. From Keetmanshoop came the complaint about 'respectable Coloureds and Ovamboes' being herded together.³⁴ Similarly, in 1947, the principal of a coloured primary school at Niewoudtville complained vigorously about scruffy Africans and their dirty bundles travelling alongside educated, well-respected coloured people.³⁵

On several occasions, coloured bus passengers seeking effective intervention and redress for their complaints made representations through public channels. For instance, in 1931, coloured voters such as those at Colesberg lodged objections with their Member of Parliament and the Coloured Public Association, and complaints from Kuruman and Colesberg were routed via the Institute of Race Relations.³⁶ Memoranda and deputations were also organized by the Ladismith branches of the African Peoples' Organisation (APO) and the Coloured Advisory Council (CAC). In 1944 these bodies noted that many class-conscious

²⁴ Kuzwayo, *Call me woman*, p. 120; also N. Jabavu, *The Ochre People* (London, 1963), pp. 123-125.

²⁵ RTS 10: Affidavit from M. Hlope — Swaziland police, 5.7.1928; RTS 0: G.A. Stagler — General Manager, 3.9.1928; RTS 6: A.H. Mbata — General Manager, 30.6.1931; RTS 8: G. Boulanger — System Manager (Pretoria), 29.3.1932.

²⁶ RTS 8: G. Boulanger — System Manager (Pretoria), 29.3.1932; *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 28.3.1934 (Letter from J.J. Jorha).

²⁷ RTS 8: Extract from Commercial Agency Report (Pretoria) for the six months ended June 1936; RTS 2: General Manager — System Manager (Kimberley), 31.1.1941; RTS 5: General Manager — C.H. Malcomess, 30.11.1944.

²⁸ Jabavu, *The Ochre People*.

²⁹ RTS 0: Fourteen traders — General Manager, 26.10.1926; M.M. Nana & Co. — Divisional Superintendent (Pretoria), 2.7.1925; O.J. Christopher (Secretary, Newcastle and Dundee Indian Chamber of Commerce) — General Manager, 11.12.1929; RTS 8: A.S. Bokhary — System Manager, 3.10.1935; Bokhary — General Manager, 27.6.1945; RTS 7: A. Mohamed — Station Master (Zeerust), 22.1.1930; G. Nabee — Manager, 6.3.1933; J.E. Wayar — System Manager (Johannesburg), 20.1.1938; A.C. Chand — Station Master (Zeerust), 5.12.1940; Bokhary — System Manager (Johannesburg), 4.5.1942.

³⁰ RTS 7: General Manager — System Manager (Johannesburg), 27.5.1940 and 29.3.1947; General Manager — Minister, 27.9.1940; Minister's Administrative Secretary — General Manager, 3.12.1940; Acting General Manager — System Manager, 6.6.1947; M.V. Mahomed — System Manager (Johannesburg), 30.1.1947.

³¹ RTS 0: W.G. Klaassen — System Manager (Johannesburg), 8.2.1930; RTS 2: L.V.M. Jenneke — RMS Manager, 23.12.1930; RTS 3: K. January — General Manager, 1.4.1931; F.C. Pieterse — General Manager, 11.4.1931; RTS 4: J.J. Anthony — Assistant General Manager (Cape Town), 3.3.1928; SAS 1960 (RTS 214/9) (henceforth RTS 9); A. de Leeuw — System Manager (Windhoek), 28.8.1930.

³² RTS 3: J. Kleinhans — C.W. Malan (Minister), 12.10.1928; RTS 10: F.A. Carr — General Manager, 20.7.1929; System Manager to Station Master (Piet Retief), 28.5.1935; A.C. Nunn — System Manager, 23.12.1936.

³³ RTS 6: Handwritten note from G.S. Mundell, 27.3.1939; RTS 10: O. Henwood — General Manager, 10.5.1943 and 23.12.1943.

³⁴ RTS 8: G. Buys — Divisional Manager (Pretoria), 4.3.1944; RTS 6: S. Forbes and 20 others — Minister, 20.6.1944; RTS 9: J.D. Strydom — General Manager, 2.2.1945.

³⁵ RTS 1: B. Lakey, Niewoudtville — General Manager, 24.11.1947.

³⁶ RTS 5: K. Fillis — Dr. Lamprecht, 11.5.1931; C.M. Petersen (Secretary, Coloured Public Association of Colesberg) — Minister, 23.7.1931; RTS 2: General Manager — System Manager (Kimberley), 18.5.1935.

coloured people disliked having to share a bus compartment with anybody whom they regarded as socially inferior, coloureds included.³⁷ The acting Governor General of Swaziland and the Transkeian Coloured Union also made an issue of the absence of passenger class distinctions on the RMS. In his reply the general manager revealed the attitude in the organization in 1946: '... it is not policy, nor would it be practicable, to make a distinction between the various classes of non-Europeans'.³⁸

Like Indians and coloureds, educated, middle-class Africans also made it clear that they would welcome first-class or second-class accommodation on RMS buses. Prominent among those who did so were articulate schoolteachers from the Pearston, Fraserburg, Zeerust and Kimberley areas, one of whom wrote sharply that the treatment of Africans on the RMS was 'nothing but an act of cruelty'.³⁹ An African priest, and the interpreter of the Swaziland Administration, filed complaints about the RMS service between Breyten and Bremersdorp.⁴⁰ African tribal chiefs also sought permission to travel in greater comfort in the first-class. One such person from the Zeerust area was L.M. Mangope, later President of Bophuthatswana.⁴¹ In the 1920s the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU), and some bus users in Swaziland and the Transkei, were among those self-styled 'civilised' Africans who complained about the indiscriminate mixing of Africans on RMS buses.⁴² An ordained African minister who was principal of a school in Mbabane, Swaziland, was emphatic that he would rather not travel at all than sit 'in the behind hole'. He urged the RMS to reserve a few seats for 'respectable natives'. Later, in 1936, 'superior' Africans from Pondoland declared their unwillingness to travel with 'blanket natives'. The latter's 'filthy language' polluted the bus even when parsons were present, and in the stuffy and congested third-class people vomited over each other. Like coloured people, Africans also said they did not want to sit with whites, but 'people who have been to school want to be treated fairly'.⁴³

Other representative bodies which agitated about the inferior accommodation given to African passengers included the Swaziland Progressive Association, the Transvaal Native Congress, the United Transkeian Territories General Council (UTTGC), and the Natives' Representative Council. Among others, these bodies urged that the RMS provide shelter at bus halts, arrange better and more frequent toilet stops, employ black drivers who could speak an African language and identify with the manner of African passengers. Requests were also made to improve the dirty, crowded and classless accommodation for black passengers, especially for 'the more civilised Natives, the aged and sickly'.⁴⁴ In one or more of these categories there would have been tribal chiefs. Specific representations were made on their behalf by an Assistant Native Commissioner, by an African Local Council in the Zeerust area, and by R.V.S. Thema, then a

Early dual-purpose vehicle at Kazerne, Johannesburg. The open rear platform was used for freight and/or black passengers.



Dual-purpose vehicle in Pondoland. Note the small enclosed seating section behind the driver.

member of the Natives' Representative Council.⁴⁵ Based on representations he received from Africans, Senator C.H. Malcomess also campaigned for the introduction of a superior class of travel for African clergy, for members of the Natives' Representative Council, and for African passengers whose frailty or illness merited compassion.⁴⁶

The desirability of class differentiation among African passengers was expressed with some force also in relation to women and girls, especially those who travelled in the company of the rough Transkei 'join boys' contracted to work on the mines. The Tabankulu Farmers Association, the Methodist Church, the UTTGC and the Federation of Womens' Institutes of Natal, Zululand, East Griqualand and Pondoland, all argued that finer class divisions would end the insults to and assaults of African women.⁴⁷

After making inquiries, the RMS responded to some complaints from black passengers by offering to refund fares and/or by apologising for inconvenience. Alternatively, the RMS contended that complaints were 'very rare' and 'very much exaggerated'. Even so, general manager W.W. Hoy did

³⁷ RTS 1: General Manager — Minister, 18 and 20.4.1944; CAC deputation — Minister, 19.4.1944; Chief Superintendent (Staff) — RMS Manager, 12.6.1944; General Manager — System Manager (Cape Town), 14.6.1944; F.P. Joshua (CAC Secretary) — Secretary for Social Welfare, 30.1.1945.

³⁸ RTS 4: S.A. Bandle — General Manager, 28.1.1946; General Manager — Bandle, 9.3.1946; RTS 8: Acting Governor General — General Manager, 13.3.1946.

³⁹ RTS 0: E.P. Mafeeto — Station Master (Zeerust), 3.3.1927; E.T. Madingoane — A.J. Stals, 11.7.1927; RTS 2: Letter from J. Hlaba, 13.4.1928; RTS 3: H. Kota — System Manager (Cape Town), 10.10.1935.

⁴⁰ RTS 10: F.F. Sepamla — General Manager, 7.9.1928; J.B. Mabona — Assistant General Manager, 21.10.1930.

⁴¹ RTS 7: L.M. Mangope — System Manager (Johannesburg), 22.2.1935.

⁴² RTS 0: Assistant General Manager (Natal) — General Manager, 9.9.1927; A.P.J. Maduna (General Organising Secretary, ICU) — RMS Manager, 25.9.1928; SAS 2034 (RTS 710/R5): Petition (containing 135 signatures) from Swaziland — General Manager, 30.6.1928.

⁴³ RTS 0: Rev. O. Ncamu — General Manager, 10.1.1928; Minutes of Road Transport Officers' meeting, 17.9.1936; RTS 6: UTTGC, Minute No. 33, 1936 session.

⁴⁴ RTS 0: A.P.J. Maduna (General Organising Secretary, ICU) — RMS Manager, 25.9.1928; RTS 8: M. Mphahlele (General Secretary, Transvaal Native Congress) — System Manager (Johannesburg), 23.12.1931; RTS 10: F.F. Sepamla (Honorary Secretary, Swaziland Progressive Association) — Assistant Commissioner, 4.7.1931 and 7.7.1931; RTS 6: Extracts from the UTTGC Minutes, 2.6.1930, 19.3.1931, 4.4.1932 and 29.3.1933; U.G.12-1941, U.G.13-1942 and U.G.11-1945, Union of South Africa, *Proceedings of the Natives' Representative Council*; RTS 4: UTTGC, Minute No. 19, 1941 session; NTS 9492 (98/400)(1): UTTGC, Minutes No. 14 and 16, January 1944; No. 66, July 1945; No. 66, August 1947.

⁴⁵ RTS 7: Secretary, Moiloa Reserve Local Council — Station Master (Zeerust), 7.7.1937; RTS 8: J.S. de Wet (Assistant Native Commissioner) — Native Commissioner (Pretoria), 22.8.1938; RTS 10: R.V.S. Thema — General Manager, 5.8.1942.

⁴⁶ RTS 3: C.H. Malcomess — Minister, 16.5.1938; RTS 2: Malcomess — Minister, 3.9.1940; RTS 5: General Manager — Malcomess, 30.11.1944.

⁴⁷ RTS 0: I. Guzana (Secretary, Tabankulu Farmers Association) — General Manager, 1.8.1930; RTS 6: Secretary, Methodist Synod, Clarkesbury District — System Manager (Durban), 23.7.1935; Honorary Secretary, Federation of Womens' Institutes — General Manager, 4.6.1934 and 19.10.1935.

once concede privately that 'the third class accommodation is not good, but we cannot better it at present'. Later, in 1932, G. Boulanger, the acting Native Traffic Inspector, noted that it was impossible to camouflage the meagre comfort which the RMS offered black passengers. There were also occasions when the RMS management criticized its own staff, as when the general manager judged one driver's behaviour to have been 'most indiscreet and uncalled for': he refused a Rev. Damon a first-class seat although the minister held an appropriate ticket and there were not whites in the compartment.⁴⁸

Some of the tedious and meticulous investigations which the RMS conducted into black passengers' allegations of poor service foundered on contradictory evidence. Accusations were followed by counter-accusations, RMS employees lashing out at the unco-operative and opportunistic behaviour of some black passengers. The Rev. A.J.C. Abrahamse, for instance, was said by a station master to have acted 'aggressively and insultingly, determined to make an incident'.⁴⁹ Similarly, the station master at Botrivier defended himself against accusations from coloured passengers by citing provocation: 'malcontents' had followed him about the platform shouting remarks, pointing their fingers in his face, cursing him for his 'rotten arrangements' and asking whether he thought they were perhaps Africans or even animals.⁵⁰

RMS RESPONSES

The ability of the RMS to do anything substantial about criticisms of its service was limited partly by financial considerations. It was relatively easy to install luggage racks on the roofs of buses, to have drivers protect freight from damage and contamination by covering it with tarpaulins, and to reserve a seat in the third-class for 'better class' blacks, but it was economically impossible to provide service that would accommodate every surge in traffic that was generally slight.⁵¹ In view of this limitation, yet being confronted by the persistent difficulty of accommodating black and white passengers simultaneously, RMS officials asked on more than one occasion whether they were legally entitled to exclude

Passenger bus and freight trailer at Pietersburg, with African passengers boarding at the rear.

black people from the first-class section of RMS buses. As early as 1926, however, the Government Attorney advised that the 1916 Railway Regulation Act did not permit enforced racial segregation on RMS vehicles.⁵²

Accordingly, the RMS limited racial mixing in the first-class by preventing black passengers from purchasing combined bus and train tickets for first-class travel. Instead they were obliged to ask at the railway station where they disembarked if there were vacancies in the first-class compartments of buses.⁵³ Introduced in 1930, the measure was intended to end complaints from black people who, having alighted from first-class or second-class train compartments, presumed that their through-tickets guaranteed them superior seating on the buses for their onward journey. In 1936, after obtaining a more favourable interpretation of the regulations under which it operated, the RMS began to refuse first-class ticket sales to Africans unless there was a segregated first-class compartment for them.⁵⁴ By this time, the proportion of all ticket sales in the first-class had reached its peak (86%).

Before the 1936 restriction was in place, the best that the RMS management could do to limit racial friction was to urge all its staff to exercise utmost tact and patience when dealing with black passengers.⁵⁵ This was especially neces-

⁴⁸ RTS 4: General Manager — A.J.C. Abrahamse, 27.5.1931; RTS 0: General Manager — Minister, 17.8.1927 (handwritten footnote); RTS 8: G. Boulanger — System Manager (Pretoria), 29.3.1932, p. 5; RTS 9: General Manager — System Manager (Windhoek), 13.6.1930.

⁴⁹ RTS 4: A.J.C. Abrahamse — General Manager, 24.3.1931; J.J.M. Prins and A.M. Bruyns — Station Master (Klawer), 7.4.1931; RTS 3: J.P. Strydom — System Manager (Port Elizabeth), 1.5.1931.

⁵⁰ RTS 1: Station Master (Botrivier) — System Manager (Cape Town), 8.6.1944.

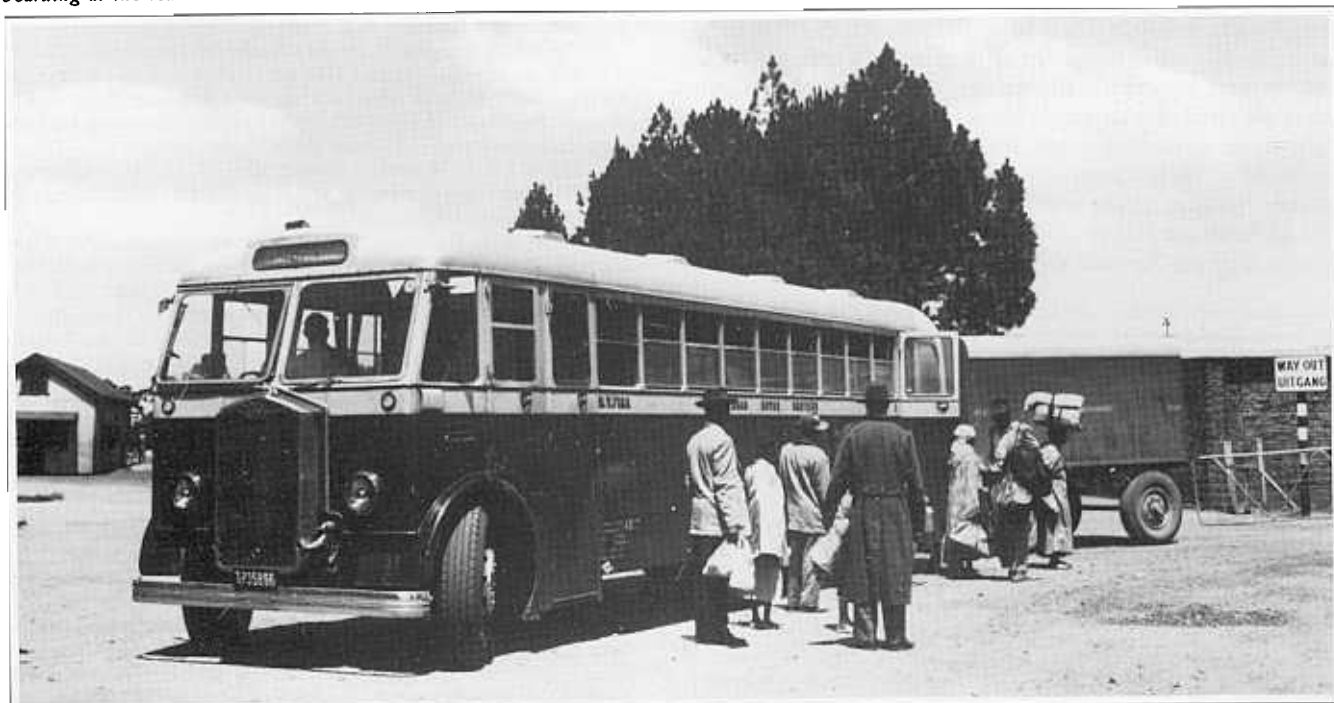
⁵¹ RTS 0: General Manager — Divisional Superintendents, Assistant General Managers, and Station Masters, 5.10.1927; RTS 3: Minister's Secretary — FT. Bates, 21.1.1929; RTS 7: Minister's Secretary — W.A. Lombard, 18.3.1930.

⁵² RTS 0: General Manager — Attorney General, 17.11.1926; Government Attorney — General Manager, 3.12.1926.

⁵³ RTS 9: General Manager — All System Managers, 20.8.1930; RTS 4: General Manager — System Manager (Cape Town), 20.5.1931.

⁵⁴ RTS 0: General Manager — Assistant Government Attorney, 24.3.1936; Law advisers — Assistant Government Attorney, 6.4.1936; Acting General Manager — Divisional Superintendents, 11.6.1936.

⁵⁵ See e.g. RTS 10: Notice to all drivers and assistants, Swaziland, February 1929.



sary in view of the reluctance of successive general managers to lay down a hard-and-fast-rule about excluding black passengers from RMS buses altogether. Instead, ticketing clerks and drivers were given discretion to deal as they saw fit with each request for a first-class seat from black passengers. This meant selective admission to the first class depending on the appearance of the black person and on the number of white first-class passengers.⁵⁶ The hope was that a measure of flexibility would more often than not meet the needs of passengers such as Indians of the 'storekeeper class', 'distinguished personages' such as the president or the secretary of the British Indian Association, and office bearers in organizations such as the Students Christian Association.⁵⁷

Urging tact was one thing, exercising it was another. The records show that the patience of some RMS staff was severely strained. Their own resentment about the relentless criticism of their work was aggravated by misunderstandings such as that of a black passenger in the Middelburg district who complained about his wife being refused first-class seating when she did not even have a first-class ticket. There was also a strong feeling that the efforts of RMS personnel to accommodate black passengers under trying circumstances were not always appreciated. Pandering to 'the superior whims' of one coloured clergyman, for example, the RMS had lost some white patronage. At Richmond, the clerk-in-charge was most irritated by the failure of coloured people to travel after confirming their passage, and after he had taken the trouble to clean and disinfect a freight compartment and refuse a load of fifteen sheep. Not least, there was suspicion that some complaints were bogus in as much as they were orchestrated by taxi operators who hoped to exploit disenchanted passengers, and who went to the lengths of paying agitators' bus fares.⁵⁸

The frustration and suspicions harboured by RMS staff who were harassed, bad-tempered or blatantly racist, spilled over on occasion into rough and abusive treatment. It was not only a resident of Ventersburg who could have written that he had been scolded, sworn at and treated worse than a dog. Two coloured women (one of whom was semi-paralysed) who were locked into the luggage compartment of a bus for five hours had equal cause for bitterness.⁵⁹

Black people were not the only ones who registered concern. In 1945 a white person wrote to the *Cape Times* that 'inoffensive people are frequently jostled and spoken to in a manner most degrading to our over-vaunted white civilisation'. The penalty for such behaviour was greater than the immediate hurt which it occasioned; the bad manners of RMS staff could destroy whatever goodwill there was among black passengers. As the nursing superintendent at the Mission Hospital near Kuruman warned, black passengers were aware of wartime vehicle shortages and travelled in the rear of lorries 'in good spirit', but the attitude of white drivers and officials hardly cheered or encouraged them. Not least of the annoyances for black passengers was the way in which some clerks would refrain from selling tickets until the last moment when it was clear that there would not even be white latecomers.⁶⁰

The incivility of at least some RMS staff did not go unnoticed by senior officers who responded to complaints by writing letters of apology to aggrieved and inconvenienced passengers, and by refunding the difference between the first-class and third-class fare. A notable case involved the principal of an African school in Cape Town whom RMS staff had taunted with the remark that the only way Africans could travel first class was on foot. Simultaneously, the general manager admonished a driver and his assistant for their tactless and discourteous behaviour. In another instance, the



Wooden planks, sacks, drums and milk cans being loaded between bench seats in the rear compartment of a RMS vehicle, Beitlehem.

RMS transferred staff who were 'temperamentally unsuited' to working among blacks.⁶¹ Mostly, however, the RMS management resorted to circulars notifying depots about the many complaints which were received, the volume of which 'astounded' one official.⁶²

CONCLUSION

Relative to the millions of passengers transported by the RMS between 1925 and 1955, the volume of complaints about the travel facilities for black and white passengers was small indeed. Despite the glaring racial inequalities in comfort and class on the dual-purpose buses especially, no legal action or mass boycott was ever attempted. For most people, mobility of whatever quality was better than none at all. Nevertheless, a significant minority of both black and white passengers protested about the physical or social conditions of travel. Objections were received from places and communities across the length and breadth of South Africa, and they were usually investigated with painstaking care. In a highly centralized administration, the complaints involved senior railway managers in a considerable amount of paperwork; management of racial separation was never simply confined to ticket issuing clerks, bus drivers or bus depot managers. Structural improvements and adjustments in the RMS were undertaken where the economics of bus operation in an erratic passenger market were permitted, but these changes were route-specific and gradual. Consequently, conditions and customs varied in different parts of the RMS system, unlike on the railways proper where the transport technology and operating conditions were more uniform. □

⁵⁶ RTS 0: General Manager — P.G.W. Grobler (Minister of Lands), 13.10.1925; General Manager — Divisional Manager (Kimberley), 1.11.1926; Assistant General Manager — General Manager, 6.9.1927; RTS 9: General Manager — System Manager (Windhoek), 11.9.1930.

⁵⁷ RTS 3: General Manager — System Manager (Port Elizabeth), 23.11.1928; RTS 0: Acting General Manager — G.B. Molefe, 30.4.1931.

⁵⁸ RTS 3: General Manager — S.S. Malange, 29.8.1934; J.P. Strydom — System Manager (Port Elizabeth), 1.5.1931; RTS 9: Letter from Station Master (Putzonderwater), 26.6.1930; RTS 2: System Manager (Kimberley) — Acting General Manager, 12.8.1937.

⁵⁹ RTS 5: S.N.B. Duiker — Administrator of Buses (sic), Pretoria, 2.1.1937; RTS 1: System Manager (Cape Town) — General Manager, 8.1.1945; F.P. Joshua — Secretary for Social Welfare, 30.1.1945.

⁶⁰ *Cape Times*, 30.8.1945; RTS 2: I. Cordon, Kuruman — Native Commissioner, 27.10.1943.

⁶¹ RTS 10: J.D. Mkize — General Manager, 28.8.1940; General Manager — Mkize, 20.9.1940; RMS Manager — Clerk-in-Charge, Bremsersdorp, 20.9.1940; General Manager — Resident Commissioner, Mbabane, 9.11.1942.

⁶² RTS 5: Notice from Acting System Manager (East London), 28.4.1945; Notice G 416, 3.4.1946; RTS 1: Notice from System Manager (Cape Town), 9.7.1945.