

PARYS ON THE VAAL

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EARLY HISTORY OF THE REGION

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the northern part of the present Orange Free State was the abode of Bushman hunters and one of the first south-moving Bantu tribes, the Leghoya. These two peoples not only maintained good neighbourly relations but also went so far as to intermarry. This peaceful co-existence came to an end when the wars of extermination or *difaqane* swept through central southern Africa in the 1820's. Large parts of the country were laid waste and the ways of life of the surviving inhabitants were changed drastically. To add insult to injury the remaining population was pestered by the plundering attacks of the Matebele from the north and the Griquas and Korannas from the south, attacks which made their already miserable life almost unbearable.¹

Thus, when A.H. Potgieter's party reached the Vet River in 1836 the only inhabitants they encountered were the mutilated remains of the Bataung clan under their chief Makwana, who lived to the north near the Sand River. Makwana begged Commandant Potgieter for his protection against the Matebele of Mzilikazi, and eventually he made a treaty of friendship with Makwana by which, in exchange for cattle and protection, most of the land between the Vet and Vaal rivers became the property of the Voortrekkers.²

Commandant Potgieter left his trek in this area when he and a party rode off to inspect the country to the north. During his absence his followers and other parties scattered over the whole area, while others were bold enough to cross the Vaal River into Matebele country. Mzilikazi was not prepared to put up with what he probably regarded as trespassing on his property and on 24 August 1836 the hunting expedition of Stephanus Erasmus was attacked without warning. Only a few men, including Erasmus, escaped with their lives and warned other parties in the vicinity. But the message did not reach all the parties, and others who received it paid no attention. One of the less fortunate was the Liebenberg-trek which at that stage was camped north of the Vaal River right opposite the site of the present Parys. A second Matebele patrol attacked and slew almost all of them, taking three of the Liebenberg children with them.³

These tragic events were only the start of more serious race conflicts, which did not subside until the Matebele capital was attacked in 1838 and Mzilikazi and his people fled across the Limpopo. This, however, did not settle the question about the final destination of the Great Trek. Piet Retief, who for various reasons regarded the High Veld unsuitable for settlement, had in mind the uninhabited regions in Natal between the Tugela and Umzimvubu rivers as the final home of the Voortrekkers. Potgieter participated hesitantly in this venture but eventually returned to the High Veld. Here, after the fall of the Natal Republic as a result of the British Occupation, the Potchefstroom-Winburg Republic was established formally on 9 April 1844.⁴

THE FIRST TOWNS

Although White settlement in the northern parts of the present Free State started at an early date, the inhabitants were for a long period without the amenities of civilization associated with towns and cities. When the British Government annexed this territory in February 1848 towns were non-existent north of the twenty-eighth degree of latitude. Two decades later, only seven of the twenty-one towns in the Orange Free State were situated north of the Vet River. Kroonstad, the first to be established in the north-western part of the Orange Free

State, was at that stage the town closest to the area known today as the Parys district.⁵

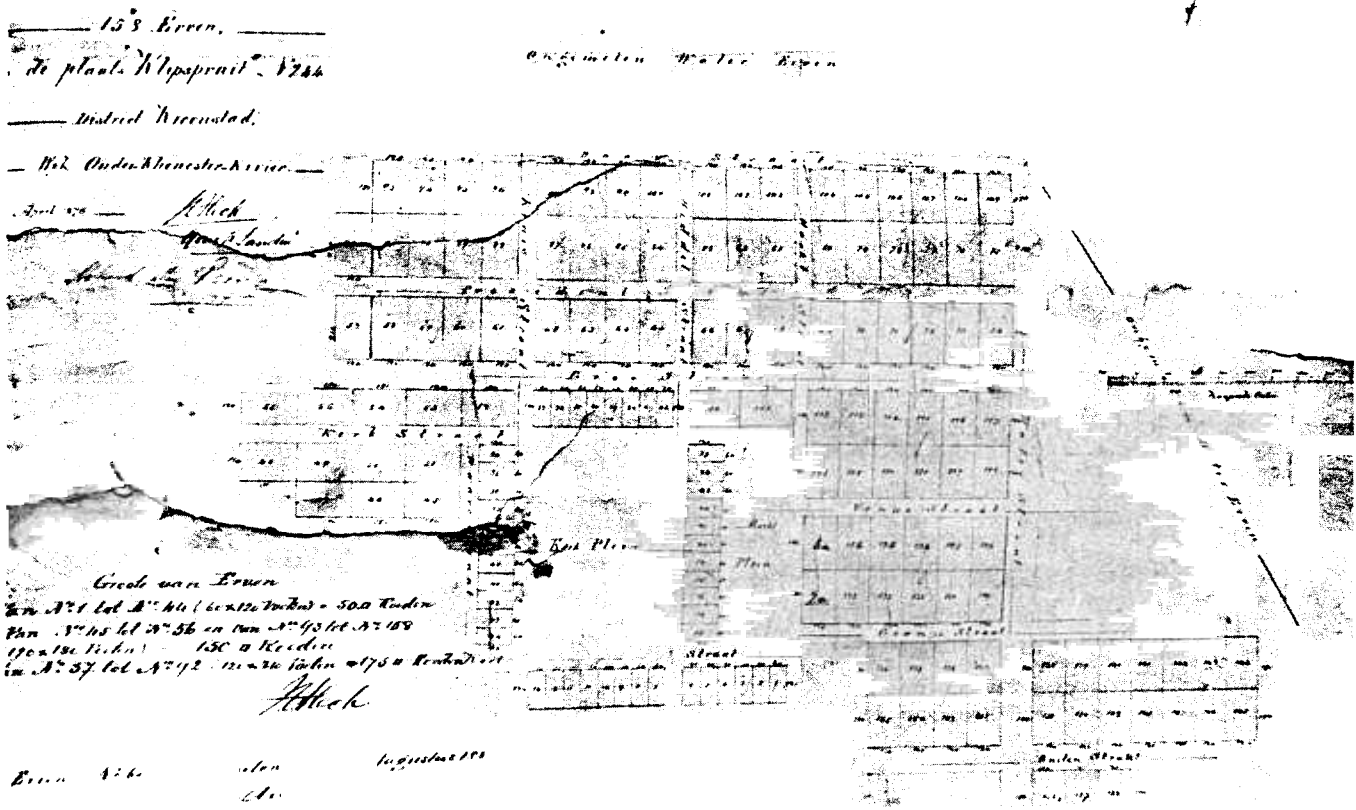
The great distances the inhabitants had to travel, usually over bad and sometimes untraversable roads, were incentives to the establishment of towns. This was so particularly in the northern region where they were few and far between. No wonder then that in the two decades following 1870 ten of the fourteen new towns in the Orange Free State were established to the north of the Vet River. Parys was one of these.⁶

The ever-increasing population to the north-west of Kroonstad compelled the Ring of the Dutch Reformed Church at Kroonstad to consider the advisability of forming another congregation north of the Rhenoster River. This was approved, but it is not clear whether or not the Ring actually decided on the location. However, in the course of 1874 the owners of the farm Klipspruit on the Vaal River, the Van Coller brothers and the widow, Mrs Davel, were approached by Messrs Wouter de Villiers, J.G. Luyt and J.C. Fleck, a land surveyor, the object of their visit being to induce them to lay the farm out as a township. But the owners refused, and now the owners of the farm Vischgat, sixteen kilometers downstream and a little away from the river, were approached. This time the delegations succeeded and the town of Vredefort was laid out.⁷

Thus started the long and undignified rivalry between the two neighbouring towns. The owners of the farm Klipspruit realised their mistake and went back on their decision. In April 1876 Mr Fleck surveyed 158 erven on the farm Klipspruit No. 244 in the Ward Onder-Rhenoster-River of the Kroonstad district, and another 142 in August the following year. The name *Parys* appears on neither of these plans and is attributed to the German land surveyor, C. Schilbach, who took part in

J. WALTON, *Early Ghoya settlement in the Orange Free State* (Bloemfontein, 1965), pp. 3, 29 *et seq.*

2. H.S. PRETORIUS and D.W. KRUGER, *Voortrekker-argief-stukke 1829-1849* (Pretoria, 1937), pp. 26, 30 and 317; E.A. WALKER, *The great trek* (London, 1970), pp. 117-118.
3. WALKER, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 328-329.
5. S.W. KEMP, 'n *Beplanningstudie van die verstedeliking van die Oranje-Vrystaat* (D.Sc. thesis, UP, Pretoria, 1968), p.7 *et seq.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Parys Post*, 8.4.1927.



Probably the first plan of erven surveyed on the farm Klipspruit where Parys was established in 1876.
 PHOTOGRAPH: A.G. OBERHOLSTER, WITH PERMISSION OF THE FREE STATE ARCHIVES DEPOT

the siege of Paris, and years later likened the Vaal to the Seine, prophesying that one day "a big town would lie on both sides of the river with the Vaal running through it as the Seine runs through Paris."⁸

At first neither Parys nor Vredefort made spectacular progress. They competed with each other for official recognition as towns, and as religious and administrative centres. Despite objections in the OFS Volksraad to the many church towns that had sprung up all over the country and were causing the government unnecessary expenditure, Vredefort was granted town status in May 1881. Parys was likewise recognised by the Volksraad one year later, on 16 May 1882.⁹ In January 1883 the town regulations for Parys were published and approved by the Volksraad on 18 May 1883.¹⁰

DEVELOPMENT OF PARYS

Official recognition, Parys and its inhabitants soon learnt from experience, does not automatically ensure progress and prosperity. Within three years the state of affairs in the town had deteriorated so much that the Volksraad was asked to approve that the town be taken over from its owners by the government. Members in favour of the take-over referred to the advantageous location of the town and the bright future that was expected. Others, however, blamed the situation on the indolence and negligence of the inhabitants, and eventually it was decided that the Government would not take it over.¹¹

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 was of the greatest importance to the future development of Parys. Whether the local government was aware of this is doubtful, if town planning is any criterion. Suddenly the town was on an important highway and within easy reach of the most important market in all South Africa.

The sudden prosperity in Parys is reflected in urban demographic statistics which indicate that the White population reached the 375 mark in 1890. Compared with present-day standards this figure may seem insignificant. Nevertheless the historical fact is that it placed Parys among the ten biggest towns in the Orange Free State at that stage.¹²

The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 put an end to all progress and development and started a period of destruction. Although no pitched battle took place in the immediate vicinity of Parys, the inhabitants did not escape the effects of war. Soon after hostilities had broken out, burghers from Parys were commandeered to take part in the struggle in Natal. Many of them were captured and sent to prisoner-of-war camps. The remaining inhabitants suffered badly from the British drives in this area which were aimed at capturing Gen C.R. de Wet. In their efforts to make conditions difficult for De Wet the British embarked on large-scale destruction. In the period March to August 1901 more than 700 000 live-stock, 1 012 vehicles, and 1 000 bags of flour were

8. *Parys Post*, 15.4.1927.
 9. OVS-VOLKSRAAD, *Notulen der verrichtingen*, 21.5.1881 pp. 169-173, and 16.5.1882, pp.212-213.
 10. *Gouvernements Courant van den Oranjevrijstaat*, 3.1.1883 en OVS-VOLKSRAAD, *Notulen* ..., 18.5.1883, p.92.
 11. OVS-VOLKSRAAD, *Notulen* ..., 18.5.1885, pp.138-139.
 12. KEMP, *op. cit.*, pp.67-68.

removed from ten Orange Free State districts, including Heilbron, of which Parys was part at that stage. Lord Kitchener confirmed in a progress report of May 1901 that no supplies were left in the Parys-Reitzburg area after Gen. Elliot had been through it in April 1901.¹³

AFTER THE WAR

When peace came in 1902 the people of Parys had to make a fresh start in more than one way. Not only were most of the buildings in the town destroyed, but human relations likewise. The war was over, but not the antagonism between the Bitter-enders and the Hands-uppers. It is on record that Bitter-enders refused to serve with Handsuppers on the same Church Council.

But more important issues were pressing for attention. Even before the war began, economic changes with far-reaching social implications were taking place in South Africa. The economic situation originated in the gradual growth of the rural population, a growth which rendered it impossible for everybody to make a living on the land. Hardly any provision was made to accommodate the ever-increasing stream of unemployed and landless Poor Whites drifting into the towns and cities, a phenomenon aggravated by the Anglo-Boer War. Objectively considered, however, despite the hatred and destruction of the war the situation brought its own particular benefits, and to Parys as well. Sir Alfred Milner, who just before the war had admitted to Sir James Molteno his determination to break the dominion of Afrikanerdom, was faced with the task of rebuilding the conquered Boer republics. Even while the war was in progress he was devising schemes to rebuild the economy, not only of the conquered areas but of Southern Africa as a whole. His plans were to have far-reaching effects on mining, agriculture, communication, the application of law and order, and the development of local government.¹⁴

When the war was over the government set about solving the predicaments of people in refugee and Prisoner of War camps. Even where families were able to return to their farms, the problems were bad enough, but for the landless class, with nowhere to go, they were almost insurmountable. Where were they to be settled?

It was pointed out to the Orange River Colony Government by a former State Secretary of the Orange Free State that the people who had been bywoners (squatters) before the war, and whose only earthly wealth lay in a few personal belongings, had in most instances lost everything during the war. Unless the government did something for them, they would all be reduced to Poor Whites.

The government reacted quickly and as early as July 1902 established relief works in the Orange River Colony. The object of the Relief Works Department was to provide employment for indigent burghers and in this way help to release from the refugee camps people whom it would otherwise be impossible to settle anywhere.¹⁵

One of the first five camps erected in the Colony was started in January 1903, at Parys on the Vaal, and the town eventually benefited in two ways from this scheme. The idea was to construct an irrigation canal leading off from the Vaal River just above the town and running to a point some 16 kilometres lower down. However, while the survey of that work was still in progress and until it was completed, the men were employed on the earthworks of a railway line which was eventually

to connect Parys with the main line. On 27 May 1904, during the fourth session of the Legislative Council of the Orange River Colony, the Acting Lieutenant Governor, Mr H.F. Wilson, announced in his opening speech that "the earthworks of the branch from Parys to the main line near Grootvlei Siding, which have been entirely constructed as a relief work, are nearing completion, and it is hoped that this small but useful addition to the railway system may be handed over fully equipped, with the exception of rolling stock, to the authorities of the Central South African Railways before the conclusion of the year."¹⁶ Mr Wilson, however, was somewhat over-optimistic, as the Dover-Parys railway line was only completed on 22 December 1905. For Parys it must have been one of the most cherished Christmas presents in its history.¹⁷

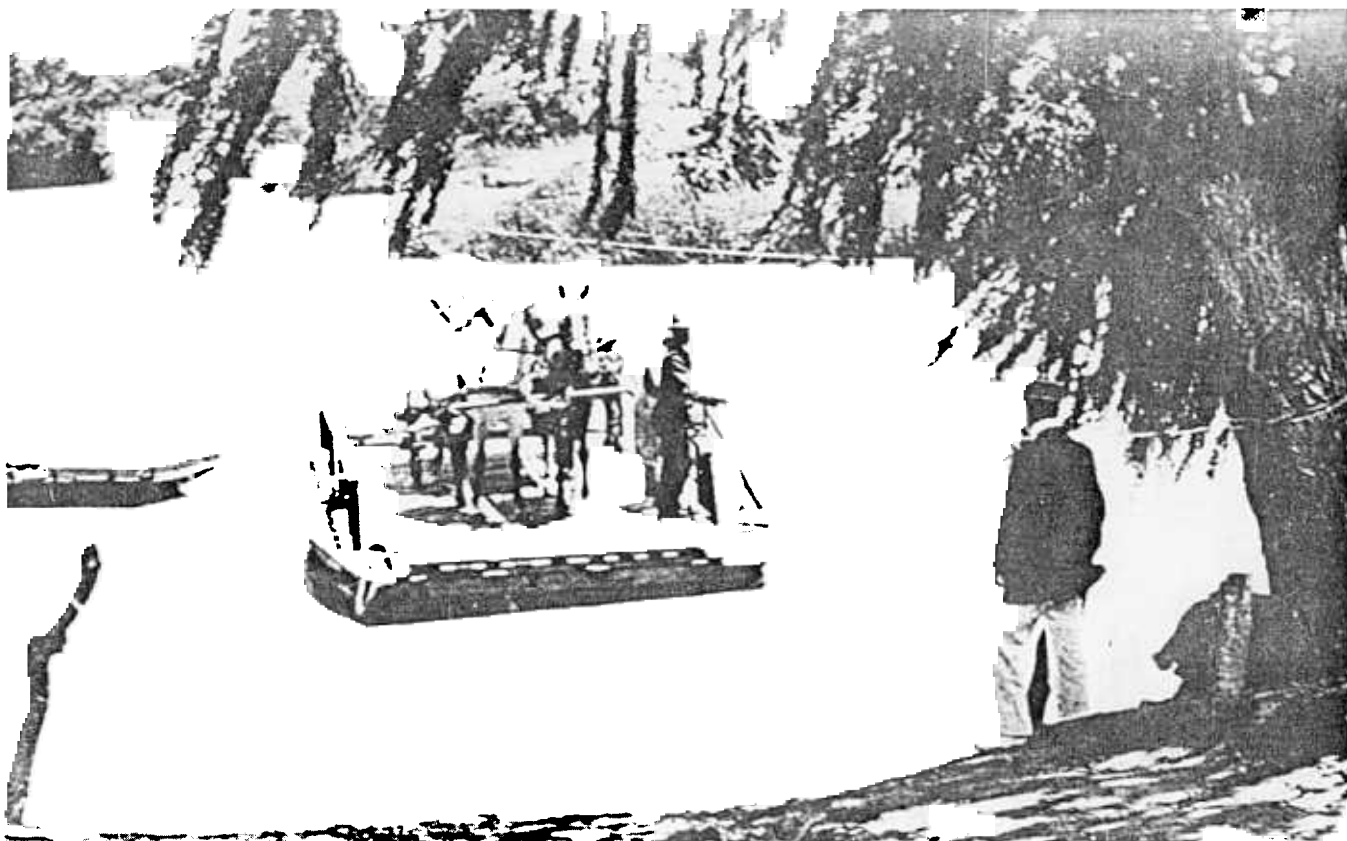
The relief works proved to be only a limited success. They were not the answer to the Poor White problem, either then or in the long run. The bad post-war conditions, which followed as a matter of course, were made worse by a devastating drought that scourged the country in 1903. Already impoverished and with their property in ruins, the disheartened farmers were now faced with failure of crops. In Parys, it was reported, whole families were without anything to eat. The numbers of the Poor Whites increased by the day. According to a report of a commission appointed to inquire into their position in the Orange River Colony, forty Poor White families, that is about 250 souls of which some 175 were children, were living in Parys in about 1907. In most instances the heads of families were doing a little home gardening to earn a living.¹⁸

The Resident Magistrate of Parys considered it necessary for steps to be taken to assist the ever-increasing Poor White population. He recommended, among other things, the fostering of small local industries, such as fruit-drying, basket-making and a creamery.¹⁹

ECONOMIC PROGRESS

Despite their misfortunes, setbacks and long-term problems, the people of the Orange River Colony showed a marvellous resilience. When in October 1903 the Spring rains began to fall, everything seemed to change for the better almost immediately. In some districts the recovery was so complete that a stranger visiting the Colony in 1904 would hardly have guessed that the country had passed through three years of war and two of drought. Just as important was the fact that the tension between Handsuppers and Bitter-enders was easing, largely owing to the influence of leaders such as Generals De Wet and Hertzog.²⁰

13. C.J.H. KRUGER, *Militêre bewind in die Oranje-Vrystaat, Maart 1900—Januarie 1901* (M.A. thesis, UP, Pretoria, 1958), p.144 et seq. and A.P.J. VAN RENSBURG, *Die ekonomiese herstel van die Afrikaner in die Oranjerivier-Kolonie 1902—1907*, *Archives year book for South African history* 13(2), 1967, p.172.
14. VAN RENSBURG, *op. cit.*, p.204 et seq.
15. G.B. BEAK, *The aftermath of War* (London, 1906), p.68.
16. O.R.C. LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, *Debates*, 27.5.1904.
17. J.M. PELS, *The history of transport development in the Orange Free State from 1903 to 1936* (M.Comm. thesis, USA, Pretoria, 1937), p.25.
18. *Report of the Commission appointed by the government of the ORC to enquire into the position and circumstances of poor whites in the ORC* (c. 1908).
19. *Ibid.*
20. VAN RENSBURG, *op. cit.*, p.312.



Pont crossing the Vaal River at Parys.

PHOTOGRAPH: FREE STATE ARCHIVES DEPOT

Gradually industrial and agricultural progress, without which it would have been impossible to improve the economic and social conditions in the towns and cities, began to take place.

The Dover-Parys railway line completed in 1905 did not provide for the transport needs of the region. In 1925 it was reckoned that only 50% of the land suitable for intensive mealie production was being used because of insufficient transport. The Railway Board's recommendations in 1925 to extend and complete the Dover-Parys line to Vredefort were incentives to further regional development.²¹

Before the coming of the railways the most important link which Parys had with the outside world was the road to the north. In the early days it was no easy task to cross the Vaal River, especially in the rainy season. The pont service that was introduced was indifferent, and so dangerous that farmers on the Transvaal side preferred to travel the 50 odd kilometers to Potchefstroom by road, rather than face the trouble and expense of the pont crossing. Thus for a long time Parys felt that a bridge across the Vaal River was no more than its due. It was only in 1914 that work on the bridge began and was not finished and opened to traffic until the end of 1915.²² This was an important development as it widened the scope of Parys as a service centre considerably. Parys also benefited greatly from the passing in 1935 of the National Roads Act, which was of extreme importance to road communication in South Africa. The 1 760-km-long central route dividing the country longitudinally passed through Parys and linked it with all the important centres, including the Witwatersrand.

One of the first industries to come to Parys was jam-making: a jam factory was established in February 1905.

By July that year the factory had a staff of 17 White employees, and in the financial year 1906–07 farmers sold approximately 40 tons of fruit to the factory.²⁴

The infra-structure for an agriculturally-based economy was finally laid when in 1910 a 1 000-metre long weir across the Vaal River was completed. This project made it possible to irrigate 2 000 acres; it incidentally created a lake approximately 8 km long with immense recreational potential.²⁵

The availability of enough water led to another important development when the town council decided to use the balance of water to generate electric power. Thus in December 1912 electricity was introduced after the com-

Bridge across the Vaal River at Parys in 1915.

PHOTOGRAPH: FREE STATE ARCHIVES DEPOT



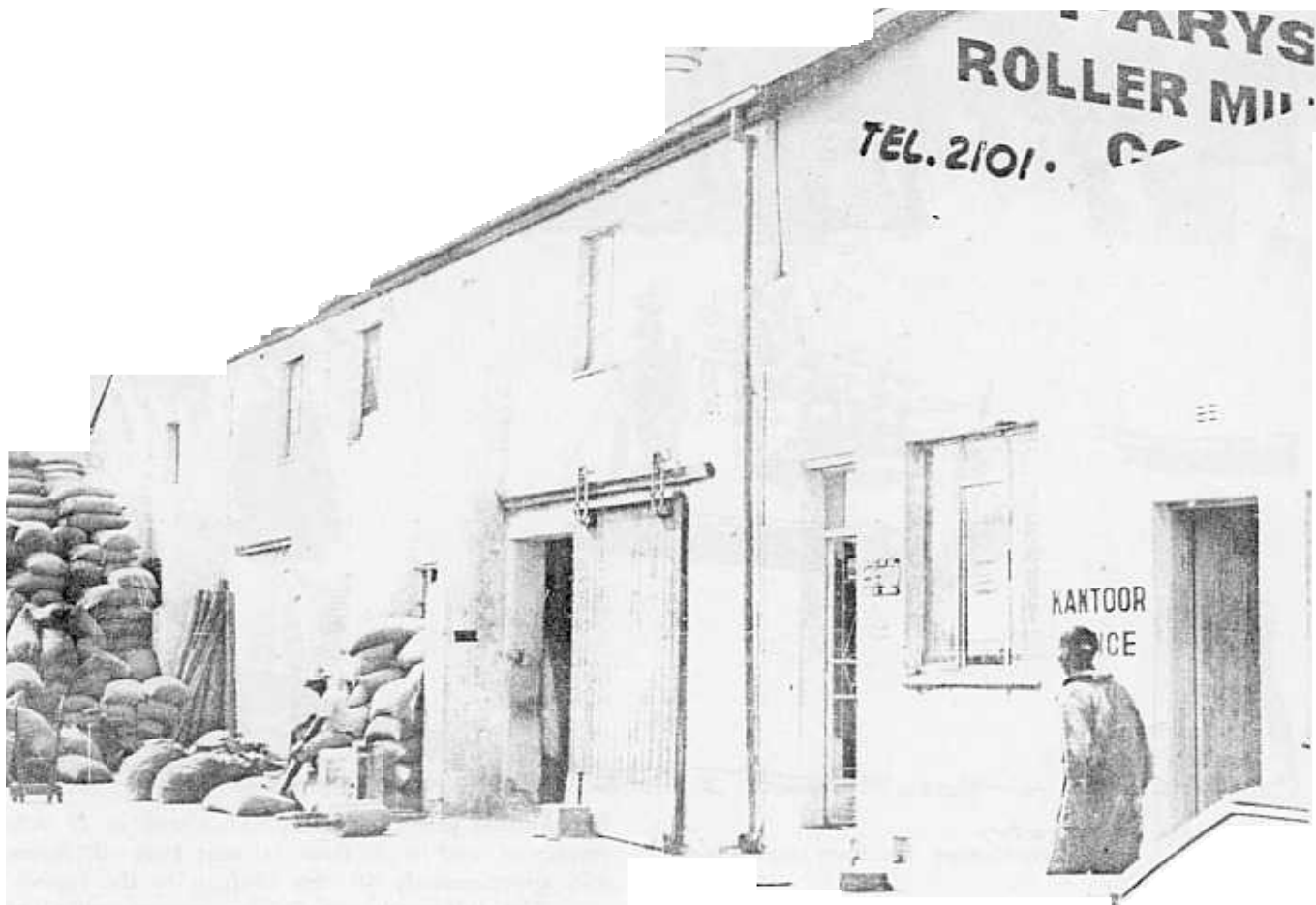
21. PELS, *op. cit.*, p.95.

22. *Parys Post*, 12.5.1927

23. PELS, *op. cit.*, p.61.

24. VAN RENSBURG, *op. cit.*, p.320.

25. J.F. McRAE (ed.), *The Orange Free State: its pastoral, agricultural and industrial resources*, (London, c. 1912), p.363.



Parys Roller Milling Company. The central portion on the photograph is the original building erected in 1919.

PHOTOGRAPH: A.G. OBERHOLSTER

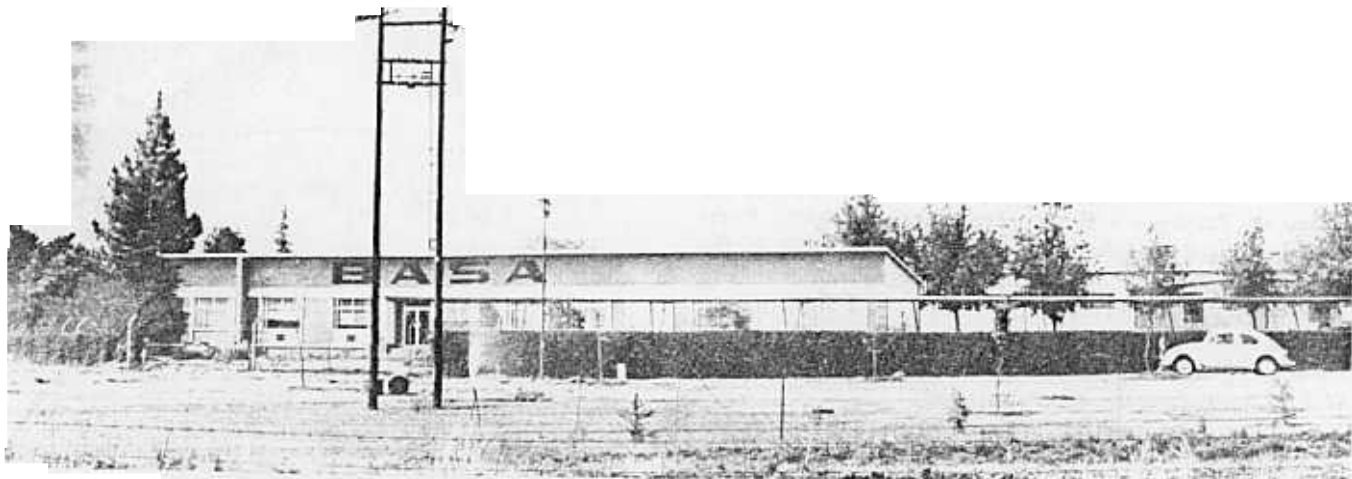
pletion of the town's own power station.²⁶ Today, however, Parys gets its electricity from the ESCOM network.²⁷

The jam factory was followed by other industries. Shortly after Union a condensed-milk factory, the first of its kind in the interior of South Africa, was established with the assistance of the government and the town council. In addition a spinning and weaving depot was opened where excellent cloth, blankets, and rugs were manufactured.²⁸

Most of the Parys industries depend on the agricul-

BASA (Pty.) Ltd., manufacturers of high tensile fasteners.

PHOTOGRAPH: A.G. OBERHOLSTER



tural produce of the region. The Vaal River Boeren Tabak Maatschappij was established to handle the locally-grown tobacco crop on co-operative principles.²⁹ Tobacco is still one of the most important agricultural products of this region.

In 1919 the brothers Max and Louis Benjamin erected a roller mill, and in so doing rendered an important service to the local community. This firm is still doing business as the Parys Roller Milling Co. (Pty.) Ltd.³⁰

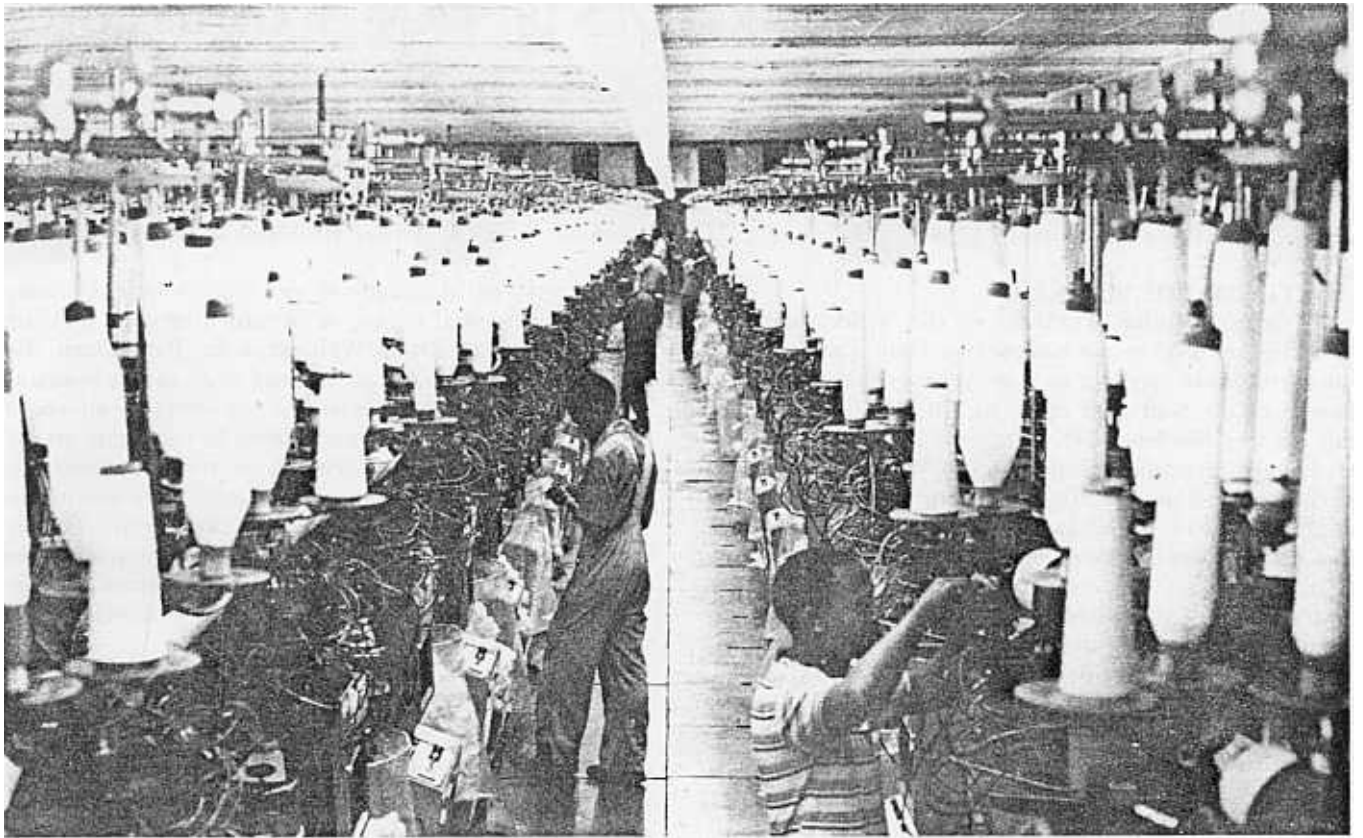
26. *Parys Post*, 5.5.1927.

27. *Official South African municipal year book 1977* (Pretoria, 1977), p.215.

28. McRAE, *op. cit.*, p.365.

29. PARYS MUNICIPALITY AND SAR & H, *Parys, Orange Free State* (1927), p.22.

30. Information given by Mr E. Benjamin, Parys.



Knitting machines in the ARWA hosiery factory.

PHOTOGRAPH: A.G. OBERHOLSTER

In recent years a number of very sophisticated industries have come to Parys. One of them, BASA (Pty.) Ltd., has a very interesting history. On his way to Australia to investigate the possibilities of expanding the German firm Bauer and Schaurte, Dr Schaurte stopped over in Cape Town where he met Mr H.J. Klopper, M.P. for Parys and later Speaker of the House of Assembly. Mr Klopper persuaded Dr Schaurte to visit Parys and eventually he decided to open a factory to manufacture bolts and nuts.

With Mr E. Olig as manager the factory went into production in 1951 and was the first in South Africa in the field of high tensile fasteners. This firm was taken over by National Bolts Ltd. of Boksburg, but continues to produce and to supply specialized parts to government departments, the motor industry and the manufacturers of farming equipment. Under the management of Mr

R.A. Kirkham the factory is a good example of a balanced capital and labour intensive industry, giving employment to 360 Black and 142 White workers.³¹

Another industry of which Parys is rightly proud is ARWA (Pty.) Ltd., one of the leading hosiery manufacturers in the country. The mother organization was started in 1872 by August Robert Wieland in the German town of Auerbach. It opened business in Parys in 1951 as Parys Hosiery (Pty.) Ltd. Today it employs more than 500 Blacks and 150 Whites.³²

At a time when several Orange Free State towns are declining Parys is steadily growing. It is one of the very few towns in this province that can boast of a constantly-increasing White population, e.g. from 375 in 1890 to 8 000 in 1977. The words of a visitor to Parys in 1911 have proved to be prophetic: "Parijs may well be called the gem of the Vaal. It is bound to go ahead even if the inhabitants were asleep, which they are not. What somnolence remains will speedily be disturbed by the progress which must follow the natural advantages of the district."³³ ■

The leading hosiery manufacturers in the RSA, ARWA (Pty.) Ltd.

PHOTOGRAPH: A.G. OBERHOLSTER



31. Information given by Mr R.A. Kirkham, Parys.

32. Information from ARWA-brochure, and given by Mr Bridger, Parys.

33. *The Bloemfontein Post*, 13.12 1911: Supplement — Picturesque Parys.