

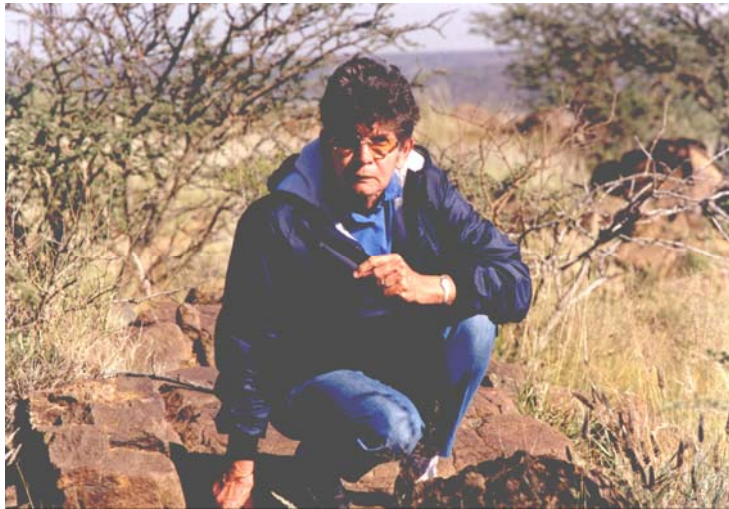
DOORNBULT

at Oranjerivierstasie

There's a gentle, somewhat chilly, breeze blowing over the graveyard from the north. On it, I can detect a faint scent of *boegoe*. To my right, a male cicada trills out his tireless song from amongst the *asbosse* which now grow where once a hospital garden was laid out. My companions behind me are bent over double examining the ground and quietly exchanging observations. I find myself reflecting on the morose tranquillity in the place.

We're standing in the veld at the eastern edge of *Doornbult*, a farm in the Hopetown district. This is no ordinary farm where pastoral activities are focussed solely on cattle, ostriches, sheep or cash crops. This is home of Lemmer and Rina Wiid, and of their three farmer sons; and the site of Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen's headquarters prior to his march north along the railway line to relieve Kimberley and also one of Field Marshall Lord Robert's many concentration camps. The Wiids bought the farm five years ago and have spent the last while painstakingly researching its history, restoring its archaeological sites and relating tales of people and the ravages of war to the visitors who arrive in ever-increasing numbers to explore this place.

Rina is a teacher by training, a farmer's wife by occupation and an historian by chance. Though slight of build, a firm hand-shake and a direct gaze is your introduction to a radiant, engaging personality. When pressed, she'll quietly avow to her simplicity, to her devotion to her husband, family and community, and to her mission of telling all those willing to listen of Orange River Station as it was at the turn of the century.



Rina Wiid in the veld

Lord Methuen used Orange River Station as a staging post for the relief of Kimberley. He established a series of fortifications around the area; Fort Frederick above the river on its northern bank, a blockhouse (one of 8600 to be built throughout the country) at the southern end of the old railway bridge, and a series of entrenchments on the crests of the *koppies* which overlook the station. All were linked by heliograph to his headquarters below. A gentle stroll up the "cannon paths" which were cleared for the installation of his 15-pounders takes you directly to these fortifications, most of which remain in excellent condition.



Block house in defence of the railway line cross the Orange River at Oranjerivierstasie

Some 8,000 to 16,000 soldiers were bivouacked along the railway-line either side of Orange River Station. One can visit the sites of these encampments, of the British hospital, and of the east-facing graveyard set against a hill, the final resting place of numerous blacks, mostly women and children, who died of disease and accident, when in the service of the British.



Orange River Station Post-office 1899 [AG 7129]

Orange River Station is much changed from those days. Gone is the prefabricated post-office which was established in 1884. However, there remains the original telegraph pole marked "*Siemens Brothers & Co., London*", which once hugged its side. Across the line, a large corrugated-iron building (formerly an hotel built in the 1880's) bathes in *Eau de Algemenehandelaar* and there is an equally old, unsophisticated flat-roofed dwelling nearby, built of sun-baked mud and straw brick together with its artesian well, used to this day. Victorian semaphore railway signals set on cast-iron gentries still stand along-side the train lines, as do elevated water-tanks and hoses which, until recently, fed the boilers of the great 25NC's steam locomotives which worked the "Steel Kyalami" between Kimberley and De Aar.



19th century cottages and artesian well



19th century hotel and *Algemenehandelaar*

South of the station lies *Doornbult* proper. Formerly the family estate of the Du Toits, the farm was proclaimed in 1845. In April 1901, on this land, the British established a concentration camp which was to house 1600 people. Both Field Marshall Lord Roberts and Major-General Lord Kitchener were of the opinion that the *boer* female was a powerful influence in ensuring that the menfolk continued their struggle against the British. From November 1900, they applied a “*scorched-earth*” policy in an attempt to combat this influence. 3000 farmsteads and more than 40 towns in the Oranje Vrij Staat alone were burnt, live-stock slaughtered. The women, children and elderly men, together with many of their black staff, were brought in open cattle trucks from all over the southern Free State to this place.



Concentration Camp hospital with artesian well dug by women and children in the fore-ground

Nestling against the rail-track is a stone building (formerly the camp hospital, now a museum), with an artesian well out front. This was excavated by the women and children of the camp. Close by, is the simple cemetery where more than 500 people (mainly children) were to be buried in graves dug by the camp inmates themselves. In 1901, torrential rains, chalky ground and a high water table all conspired to envelope these environs in a foetid smell of death. Through the endeavours of Lemmer and Rina, today the cemetery is preserved, most graves having the dignity of a name. One gravestone remains adorned by a simple flower fashioned out of tin all those years ago.

But it is out in the serenity of the veld, over a kilometre away, that one engages the true history of the place. There one stumbles across the detritus of a time long past, for the earth is strewn with artefacts of archaeological interest. There is “the bird cage”, a wire “cell” created to restrain the unco-operative in conditions of baking heat by day and punishing frost by night. Here are the simple kitchen utensils fashioned of wire and black metal; lead sealed tins – chicken soup, salmon., bully-beef, cacao,

condensed milk – which, when used to heat food, caused lead poisoning. Here are bottles – aqua glass, gin, ink, medicine, perfume, whiskey ; and shards of pottery – glazed earthenware kitchen jars and transfer-printed porcelain. Here are the spent coals of campfires, boot-scrappers fashioned from serried ranks of buried tins, and raised stony ground where canvas tents once stood.



To this day, camp detritus lies in the veld

Water was drawn once a day from outside the camp hospital over to the east, carried in primitive containers, and had to satisfy the requirements of both hygiene and nutrition. The succulent *asbosse* when burnt provided ash which substituted for soap. Emily Hobhouse, representing the South African Women and Children Distress Fund, visited the camp and was horrified at the conditions she found and disgusted at the high mortality rate. Following a later visit to South Africa from the Liberal Unionist, Mrs Millicent Fawcett, conditions were to improve with the provision of soap and wash basins, kitchen utensils and milk for babies.

This is a place filled with pathos. During the South African War, over 160,000 people were to be interned in such camps; of these, at least 27,000 died of starvation or disease. *Doornbult* and Orange River Station represent the most complete archaeological site of its type in South Africa. And the tale of it, and those times, gives new meaning to much that is our present.



Rock redoubt for ordinance on *Kannonkoppie*, overlooking the Orange River