

KENNETH G. GIBBON: The Collector and a Ruhleben Collection

KENNETH G. GIBBON an avid collector, already had an extensive firearm and pistol collection before he became interested in military medals. His collecting tastes have been diverse and have included bottles, crested china, corkscrews and bottle openers – as well as postcards.

He was born in Kroonstad in the OFS, on the 8th September 1927. After his schooling he served an apprenticeship with the Modder "B" Gold Mine and qualified as an electrician. He joined the Merchant Navy in 1950 and this led him to have a particular interest in naval medals.

Recalling the fun he had in those days, he spoke sentimentally about the friendliness and encouragement shown to him by fellow collectors during his early Cape Town days. He fondly mentioned one occasion when he received a consignment of a number of naval QSAs "on approval" from Baldwin's in London (those were the days!). He was rather doubtful about the naming on one of these medals: this was awarded to a Surgeon and was engraved, rather than impressed. The late Frank Mitchell assured him that it was genuine, but Ken was not convinced. My dad, being a Medical Doctor himself, suggested that, rather than return the medal to Baldwin's he would offer a suitable swap. With some deliberation Ken chose what he considered to be a good exchange. However, on seeing Ken's choice my dad expressed surprise and promptly added a second medal. Such are his happy memories of his early days of medal collecting. Over the years, Ken assembled an extensive medal collection with a significant presence of naval QSAs. It included a representative array of Victorian medals of South African interest to Colonial and imperial units. He has been a bachelor all his life - but he was very keen on medals awarded to women. His sub-collection of Boer War nursing awards includes several outstanding items.

In the early 1970s, Ken moved to the Transvaal where he was a founder member of the Military Medal Society of South Africa, he is popular with his fellow collectors and in a quiet way has contributed much to our hobby. Father time is now beginning to take its toll and having reached his more senior years, he decided to let go of his temporary custodianship of the collection that he has cherished for so long.

At the end of 1990/beginning of 1991, four military history enthusiasts, namely Selby Webster, Tom Ely, Howard Hordy, and Ken Gibbon, started meeting on a regular basis to share their interest and knowledge. They formed the Benoni Military History Society. By the mid-1990s, the Society was drawing members from further afield, especially from Springs and Brakpan, and so it was decided to change the name to the East Rand Military History Society.

Researcher & Member of Executive Committee BOKSBURG HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Many people were fascinated by Ken Gibbon's display of rare postcards featuring the Chinese miners at East Rand Proprietary Mine (ERPM)

It was June 1901 – what happened to the Boer casualties is not recorded

More than two decades later, our late B.H.A. stalwart, Ken Gibbon, grew up at Modder Bee Mine, which coincidentally is some kilometres east of Benoni and New Kleinfontein Gold Mine. Ken recalled that as a boy, while walking through the veld with friends, he had come across trenches somewhere east of Alliance station, but south of what is now Daveyton. Ken always wished that he had kept the artefacts and souvenirs that he had found at the trenches. Could these have been the trenches from which the Boers had mounted their attacks on New Kleinfontein Gold Mine? Incidentally, New Kleinfontein Gold Mine was originally Kleinfontein Gold Mine, having been named after one of the original four farms which surrounded the 'Uitval Grond' that became the mining village of Benoni due to the problems of extracting the gold from the quartz. As we saw in 'Boksburg 185 000 years ago' (July 2007), it was not until Messrs. Simmer & Jack brought the cyanide patent that the mines could run at a profit. A number of gold mines had subsequently closed down, including Kleinfontein. According to the late Selby Webster, a compatriot of Ken Gibbon and a co-founder of the East Rand Military History Society, the government of the Z.A.R. was suspicious of fraud and tax evasion by the mines, and thus forbade the mines to register under their original names. The mine managers effectively got around this by simply prefixing the original name with 'New' – hence New Kleinfontein Gold Mine.

Ken and I tried many times to locate these trenches, but to no avail – even despite the 'OK Bazaars' company car being negotiated down gravel tracks and along old footpaths. We eventually surmised what had become of the trenches – they were, according to Ken's recollections, now somewhere in the vast mielie fields between Eastvale Alliance station and Daveyton. A tractor had perhaps got stuck in a trench, and the farmer then had it filled in to prevent a similar occurrence

I grew up in what was then rural Fairleads, and at the time there were many isolated farm graves on various smallholdings. But, on a hillside, a couple of rows of neatly-kept graves were often visited in wonderment by a young lad, accompanied by an ever-faithful Collie dog, in the vicinity of his own home. These graves still appear in my dreams, although they are no longer part of my conscious memory. My late father recalled that these graves were well kept until 1964. Probably the old Boer who had maintained them over the years had been laid to rest himself, and we moved out of the area the following year. My father had, over the years, reminded me that I had visited these graves – so I was academically aware of their existence. Could the Boers who attacked New Kleinfontein Mine in June 1901 have ridden from these trenches that Ken Gibbon had found? And could those Burghers who had fallen on the fateful day in June 1901 have been buried on a hillside in Fairleads?

Obituary

Ken Gibbon

Ken Gibbon of Benoni, the postcard expert and collector of Benoni, passed away at the end of last year. He was 77. Ken was born in Kroonstad, but grew up and spent most of his life in Benoni. He was an inveterate collector with interests in topical postcards of Southern Africa, antique bottles, medals and military history of South Africa. His extensive postcard collection, some of which was exhibited at the Benoni '94 Nationals, was sold recently at Stephan Welz.

References:

- City Coins. Catalogue (No. 54) of Orders, Decorations and Campaign Medals. Part I. The Kenneth G Gibbon Collection. December 2004
- Military History Journal Vol 12 No 3 - June 2002. South African Military Heritage Round-up: East Rand Military History Society. Tom Ely
- South African Antique Bottle Collectors Registry.
<http://www.antiquebottles.co.za/Pages/Collectors.htm>
- The South African Philatelist February 2005 [Vol.81; No.1. Whole # 868] p.003 - Obituary Ken Gibbon.

South Africa: Trove of Postal Treasures Passes Through Sale

Business Day

Tuesday 14 December 2004

Johannesburg — *Strong auction realises R2,5m*

AN AUCTION themed around postage and the postal history of the world, held by Stephan Welz on Tuesday, was one the best and strongest held by the auction house in a long time, with realisations of about R2,5m.

allAfrica.com: South Africa: Trove of Postal Treasures Passes ...

14 Dec 2004 ... Howard Green, of *Stephan Welz*, says there was "an incredibly good" collection of *postcards*. "*Postcard* collecting is becoming very popular ...

The former owner of this collection was Kenneth G Gibbon of Benoni; born Kroonstad 8th September 1927 died Benoni late 2004. Thought of as an avid and inveterate collector, he collected antique bottles, crested china, corkscrews and bottle-openers, firearms and pistols, badges, medals, and other military ephemera (the whole extraordinary medal collection sold December 2004 by City Coins), and postcards of Southern Africa (the collection sold December 2004 by Stephan Welz & Co., including his renowned sequence of rare postcards featuring the Chinese miners at ERPM). He was a member of Military Medal Society of South Africa and of the Boksburg Historical Association.

The Ruhleben Collection – bought by myself in 2004 - though peripheral to his mainstream interests, attracted his attention because of its very unique nature. In a letter to John D Heys of Guestling (1992) he recounts the following: “when I acquired an album of postcards and a bundle of papers I wasn’t very impressed. Until I stripped out the album and sorted out the postcards into their categories and then into a rough sequence, did I see the interest and possible research potential. So I decided to keep them and find out more about the p.o.w. camps in WWI especially Ruhleben” He went on to list the contents of the reconstituted collection, then much as it is to-day.

Useful reference:

Author: Stibbe, Matthew.

British civilian internees in Germany: The Ruhleben camp 1914 -18

Publ: Manchester University Press, 2008