



## Tortoises, Midnight Thieves And Keeping Time Has Prince Albert's Irrigation Board On Its Toes

**T**wo farmers eye-balled each other over the water furrow running alongside the main street of the tiny Karoo town of Prince Albert. This was the 1960s and water to irrigate their small-holdings was scarce. It hadn't rained for months and the constant trickle of "lei" water from a spring in the Swartberg Mountains was all they could rely on to feed their crops.

"You are stealing my water," accused one brandishing a spade. "This is my water," spat the other also raising a spade.

Defiantly the first man tried to

close the furrow into his neighbour's dam.

"Touch that water and I will stop you with this spade." The second lunged at his neighbour threatening to knock his knees out from underneath him. A crowd was growing to watch the fight but after a few tense minutes the second farmer closed his furrow and allowed his neighbour to have water.

"Now it's your turn," he said looking at his watch.

The first farmer glared at him. "Your watch is slow," he grumbled.

"No, your watch is fast."

Squinting under the harsh light of the Karoo the two sun-browned old men examined each other's watches. It was true – one was too fast and the other was too slow. Neither knew for sure when his "lei" water turn started or ended. At that moment the church clock struck the hour.

"The church clock is never wrong," said the representative from the town's Irrigation Board who, relieved that the spades had finally been laid down, spoke up for the first time. "Why don't you both set



*Sas de Kock, chairman of the Kweekvallei Irrigation Board in the Karoo town of Prince Albert checks the "lei" water sluice gate outside his home*

your watches by the church clock and then maybe next week you won't fight."

Reluctantly the men changed their watches. The following week, when it was once more time for them to take water, they suspiciously studied the church clock as the "lei water" trickled into one small dam and then the other. For the first time in years both agreed on the other's time for water.

From that day onwards the "lei

water" turns in Prince Albert have run strictly to the time on the church clock – it's the only way ownership of this scarce resource in the remote semi-desert village hasn't ended in murder.

This story, told by the chairman of Prince Albert's Kweekvallei Irrigation Board, former police major Sas De Kock, highlights the importance of proper management of water in an environment where regular rainfall is unpredictable.

The role of the Kweekvallei Irrigation Board is to ensure that furrows are in working order and to oversee repairs, says de Kock who has been involved with supervising water use in the village since 1985. "It's up to the individuals who have water rights to take their turn at the times allocated and to keep their furrows in good repair," he says.

Understanding that the success of his farm depends on water de Kock has made it his business to work with the Irrigation Board.

"One cannot assume the water will come by itself," he says, "before my 'lei' water turn on a Saturday night I check all along the furrows to ensure there are no blockages and that my water will come."

When his precious water hours are over it's another man's turn. "There is no turning back the clock – your have you chance to take water and that's it."

Once or twice de Kock has cleared a mound of clawing desperate tortoises caught in the grids of the furrows and stopping the stream. Recently he removed a dead duiker blocking the flow.

"Everybody who uses water needs to take this responsibility," he says, "it's not only the role of the Irrigation Board."

The Kweekvallei Irrigation Board is an elected committee of volunteers who meet several times a year at a home in town to discuss water issues, deal with problems and enjoy a cup of coffee together. Most members have lived in the Karoo town all their lives and understand the scarcity of the resource they have to share.

"It's important to know the history of water in the town," says secre-



tary Ina Burger, "it gives you a context when dealing with problems. De Kock points out that, according to the new Water Act of 1998, the name of the board is soon to change to the Water User's Association.

"Our function will stay the same," he says.

Over the years the lack of water, man's greed and nature's tendency to interfere in the smooth running of the "lei water" has meant the Kweekvallei Irrigation Board has had a lot more on its plate than maintaining furrows.

In the Karoo water is either too scarce or comes in a flood, explains de Kock.

To make his point he tells the story of the late Oom Christian Myburgh of the farm Slagterspoort and the filling of the Gamkapoort Dam in 1970.

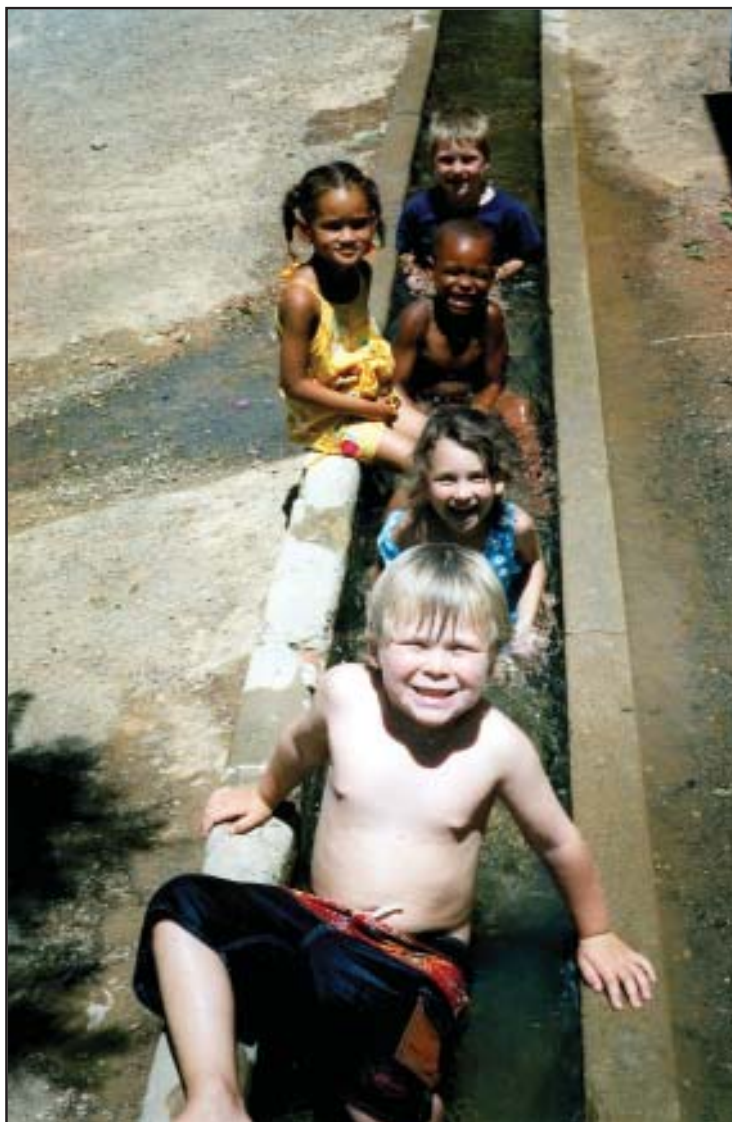
One of the farmers asked the chief engineer how long it would take before the new dam was full. The engineer thought about it for a moment then said it would take at least ten years.

Oom Christian shook his head. "What do you think Oom Chris?" asked the others.

"When the rain comes it will take two days," said the old man. A little while later the Gamka River came down in flood and, as Oom Christian predicated, the dam filled and overflowed in less than 48 hours.

"There is no half measures in the Karoo," says de Kock, "it's always too much or too little."

A small spring, called the Fonteintjie, that flows from a source high in the



*These Prince Albert nursery schoolers can't resist the lure of the "lei" water when it comes rushing past their playground every Monday for the school's water turn*

Swartberg Mountains, has fed the Karoo town ever since the first Dutch settler Zacharias De Beer secured a loan farm from the Cape Colony government in 1762.

De Beer called his farm Kweekvallei (Fertile Valley) an unusual name for a farm in this dry setting. What he had though was a steady trickle of water from the mountains enabling him to grow vegetables, plant fruit trees and keep livestock. Very soon De Beer's children were marrying and raising families on Kweekvallei

and so the foundations of a village were laid.

By 1939, when the first Kweekvallei Irrigation Board was established, the existing "lei" water system was already in place and farmers in the town relied on the stone-lined furrows to channel their water onto their lands. Until that time the townsfolk had shared the water without too much infighting but it was becoming more and more apparent that, with the increasing number of settlers in the village, a

board was needed to manage this shared resource.

On July 26, 1940 the town's Irrigation Board was proclaimed. A chairman was chosen and a committee of board members elected. From then on minutes were kept at all meetings and farmers given the opportunity to raise problems relating to their supply of water. Today, 64 years later, the religiously kept minutes of Irrigation Board meetings provides a fascinating insight into the intimate history of the town.

On June 17 1953 for instance the board was in deep discussion as to the future positioning of a dam for Prince Albert while damage to the furrows caused by a flash flood was also cause for concern.

In 1964 there was a surge of requests to close sections of the furrows due to building work in the town. The Irrigation Board debated the issue and decided they could refuse these requests but that if they allowed any closures the property owner was responsible for keeping the furrow in good repair. Seventeen years later unexpected lightning-caused fires in the mountains had the Irrigation Board discussing the viability of controlled burning in future to prevent flooding and erosion.

"These are all issues that played a crucial role in the lives of farmers and their families at the time," says Burger, "they were debates that could raise tempers, make or break a farm and impacted on the way our town developed."

Today De Kock, Burger and many Irrigation Board members are still involved in supervising the steady flow of water into Prince Albert. "There are ongoing problems with people stealing water," says Burger.

Little tricks like a stone under a sluice-gate or taking 15 minutes from the farmer at the bottom of town who takes his turn in the middle of the night are old hat. "By the time the farmer sees his water isn't coming and has driven around trying to find who is taking it, the water is on its way again," says De Kock.

Has anyone ever been prosecuted for stealing water?

"Complaints are laid with the police but unless you catch the thief in the act it's hard to prove," he says. Most often a representative from the Irrigation Board has a friendly chat with the person they believe is causing the problem.

"They always blame the labour," he says, "it's amazing how many times I've heard it was the gardener's fault."

Payment for water is minimal but the little the Irrigation Board collects from farmers keeps the furrows in good repair and pays an occasional labourer to unblock the grids when litter and plant growth threatens to impede the flow. The municipality also has an allocation of water for household use – 17 hours of full stream "lei" water a week.

An ongoing issue in Prince Albert is the damage caused by the roots of alien blue gum trees to the furrows lining the town's streets. Another problem is the increasing number of property owners not resident in town who don't understand the importance of taking their "lei" water turn. This sometimes leads to flooding and damage to properties further downstream.

The Irrigation Board is also in discussion with the municipality for funds to lay a pipeline from the weir at the entrance to the Swartberg

Pass to the Municipal Reservoir – a distance of 6km.

"This will do a lot to minimise evaporation and save water," says de Kock.

Nevertheless the "lei" water is an age-old system that works for the town and, there is no question, that its quaint appeal is part of what attracts tourists and new residents to Prince Albert.

"We've been through drought and flood but I have never known the 'lei' water to stop," says De Kock, "it's been very low sometimes but that steady trickle has always flowed. I pray I never live to see the day when the water doesn't come."

