



KAKAMAS – Oasis in the desert

The recent floods in the Lower Orange River again emphasised the important contribution of irrigated agricultural in the Green Kalahari to the country's economy and food basket. Lani van Vuuren turns back the clock to the birth of Kakamas, a principal centre in the region.

From a settlement barely producing enough food for its inhabitants Kakamas is now known the world over for its export grapes, wines and raisins.

From mid-1895 to late 1896 a severe drought raged over large parts of South Africa. At the same time rinderpest, a fatal cattle disease, swept through southern Africa. In the Transvaal alone, half of the farmers' cattle herds were wiped out. Then the South African War broke out in 1899. Apart from killing thousands of people, mostly

civilians, the war finally crushed the Republics' farming communities through Britain's Scorched Earth Policy, which saw an estimated 30 000 farmsteads being destroyed in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Most of the herds in the Boer republics were decimated, with crops and implements destroyed.

These events brought thousands

of farmers to their knees, and many found themselves without income and on the brink of starvation. Those that did not become *bywoners* (labourers who provided their services in exchange for privileges such as housing and grazing) on other farms flocked to cities in search of work. The majority of these termed 'poor whites' or *Armlankes* were

Afrikaans-speaking and members of the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church).

Following repeated calls to the church to alleviate poverty among members of its congregation, the idea of establishing labour colonies was born. It was thought that these colonies, which would be established around irrigation schemes, would not only help clothe and feed poor families, but also enrich their spiritual lives and improve their education (one in ten poor whites were totally illiterate in those days).

In 1894, the church investigated several sites for the establishment of such a settlement and, in the end settled on an area on the banks of the Orange River. The area came highly recommended by Rev. Christiaan Hendrick Wilhelm Schröder who had established a mission station among the local Korana people at Olyvenhoutsdrift (now Upington) in 1871. Schröder, of German parentage and a carpenter by trade, had successfully constructed a water canal in Upington several years earlier. Upon completion in 1883, the canal was 32 km long.

WATER AND THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH

Kakamas was not the only irrigation settlement established by the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1908 the church purchased six farms in the Rouxville district along the Orange River in the Free State with the aim of establishing an irrigation settlement there. A weir was constructed on the north bank of the river close to Aliwal North along with a main canal of 9 km. This work was completed in 1912. The settlement, to be known as Goedemoed, was officially opened on 23 March, 1913.

Every settler received 3,5 ha with a total irrigable area of 513 ha. Similar to Kakamas the church retained ownership of the land, with rent of £10 a year payable. By 1922, there were 80 families settled at Goedemoed.

THE START OF THE KAKAMAS SCHEME

In 1897, the Cape government granted the church two farms, *Soetap* and *Kakamas*, on the left bank of the Orange River for the establishment of its irrigation settlement. Schröder would become the settlement's first Superintendent. A canal had to be built to enable irrigation on the scheme. Government engineers estimated that such a canal would cost £29 000 to be constructed, however, Schröder

reckoned it would only cost £5 000 if done 'the Boer way'.

Famed trader Japie Lutz, who had assisted Schröder in the construction of the Upington canal, came to assist the reverend in the design of the canal (interestingly, he had no engineering qualifications) and work started on the left bank (or south) furrow on 4 July, 1898. On the Sunday prior to the start of the project a special church service was held to pray for the success of the project and Schröder personally visited the tent of every prospective settler who had arrived to work on the scheme.

The Kakamas canals were initially earth furrows which were later improved and concreted by the Department of Water Affairs.



Lani van Vuuren



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to which spirit levels were attached, were used as instruments to determine the levels of the canals.

By April 1899 the left bank furrow was completed to about the eleventh kilometre where the first erven were cut up for the 60 men who had worked the longest. Lots were drawn for choice of plot, each being 5 ha in extent. Livestock could be grazed on communal land. No work was undertaken during the South African War, but construction resumed following the signing of the peace accord and, in 1908, the left bank furrow (35 km long), with extension to Marchand, was finally completed. This was followed by the completion of the 43 km-long right bank (north) furrow in 1912. For this purpose the church purchased 9 farms or portions of farms. The scheme was financed entirely by the church through collections at Sunday services across the country.

The canals feature exceptional dry piling of the stone along rocky slopes which can still be seen today. By dry piling instead of excavating through rock, the settlers were able to cut the overall costs of the canals considerably. FE Kanthack, who was later to become Director of Irrigation

More than a hundred years after their construction, the Kakamas canals still play a crucial role in agriculture in the Northern Cape.

The site for the intake was chosen at Neus, just upstream of the Neus Falls, where the river drops some 9 m. White labour only was used and labourers were paid three shillings a day and promised allotted pieces of irrigation land for their efforts. Food and clothing was supplied to them at cost price from a specially constructed warehouse. The first shops at Kakamas grew out of this warehouse (by 1945 there were four trading stores). On 18 July, the first

school with 30 pupils was opened in a canvas tent.

Construction was not easy going. Most of the men were inexperienced and ill equipped for the hard physical labour and the harsh conditions on site took its toll. Merely getting materials and equipment to Kakamas proved quite a challenge. The nearest railway ended at De Aar some 418 km away and all tools, dynamite, and others materials had to be transported from there by wagon. Rifles,



Remnants of the original water wheels can still be viewed at Kakamas. The wheels were used in lieu of pumps to transfer water to irrigate higher-lying areas. They have all been declared national monuments.

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(the forerunner to the Department of Water Affairs) was highly impressed with Lutz's work when he visited the scheme in 1911. "The 6 000 yards of drystone walling, much of which is of very considerable height, is all of first class workmanship and besides being highly efficient there is a finish about Lutz's work which is rarely to be found in work not carried out under direct professional control," he said.

For the north bank furrow two tunnels were also required, the longest being 192 m. From time to time the furrows were extended to bring more area under irrigation.

LIFE AT THE SETTLEMENT

Not just any person could come and live at Kakamas. Settlers were carefully screened – they had to be men with families, had to prove they were poor, and had to be of 'good conduct' (no 'squatters, vagrants or vagabonds' allowed). Applications were submitted to the Superintendent at Kakamas

through their local church minister. By 1945 there were 574 families on the scheme, and the total (white) population was around 3 500. The main products grown were sultanas, wheat, peas, beans and usurn.

Each settler was allowed a leading sluice consisting of a short pipe 150 mm in diameter with stopper, which they were allowed to open for eight to ten hours a week (in periods of low rainfall the allowance was reduced accordingly). The farmers themselves were responsible for cleaning the furrows. Each man was responsible for the maintenance of the length running along his plot, the common portions being maintained by a system of calling up labour. The plots remained the property of the church, and an annual rent of £10 was paid. If after the probationary period of five years the settler proved himself, he was allowed to stay on the plot.

A very strict code of conduct was followed with severe implications for those who violated the rules. Settlers were required to be neat and tidy, and all plots had to be kept clear of weeds. Fencing had to be kept in good repair, and pigs and poultry found wandering outside dedicated areas were summarily shot. The Christian observance of Sunday was

compulsory for adults and children, as was education. No dancing, swearing, filthy language, drunkenness, or immorality was allowed and the sale or making of liquor was strictly prohibited. All new settlers had to undersign a document whereby they agreed to abide by these rules. Those who transgressed could be fined up to £5 or removed from the settlement.

One of the most endearing characters of Kakamas was Ouma Chrissie Viviers, who with her husband joined the labour settlement in 1904. In the absence of a hospital or clinic she served the community dutifully as a nurse for many decades. She had no formal training, but relied on her own Boer remedies and was a competent midwife. It is said that no distance was too far for her to travel, and not even the Orange River in flood could prevent her from reaching her patients. During the outbreak of Spanish Influenza in 1918, the Kakamas community was found to be far less affected than the rest of the region, thanks to Ouma Chrissie's traditional medicines. Not even the arrival of Dr Van Niekerk in 1927 stemmed the flow of patients to her door. She still saw patients up to her death in 1940. □

A close-up of a water wheel.



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