



THE HISTORY OF 'ROCK VALE'

FORMALLY KNOWN AS

PORTION 2 OF 'HARTEBEEST KUIL'

Compiled by: Lennard G. de Klerk

"ROCK VALE".

To the home of the floods and thunder,  
To her pale dry healing blue-  
To the lift of the great Cape combers,  
And the smell of the baked Karoo.

Rudyard Kipling ("The Native-Born" 1894)

The history of "Rock Vale" goes back nearly 200 years, when, on the 18th April 1817, 3000 morgan of land named "Hartbeest Kuil" was granted to Piet (Pieter) Johannes Goosen de Oude (baptised 1754) by the then Governor, His Excellency Lt. General Lord Charles Somerset. This was in recognition for his contribution to the defence of the eastern border of the Cape Colony. Goosen was 63 years old when this grant was made.

Piet Goosen had previously been living at the mouth of the Fish River in 1803 and had married to Anna Botha, daughter of Willem Botha and Dorothea Gous on 6 February 1785 at Graaf-Reniet.

Pieter Hendrik Goosen (Piet Goosen's nephew) and Willem Jacobus Botha jointly, purchased the farm on 11 March 1830 from Piet Goosen.

As there were problems with the registration of the farm onto their names, they were compelled to petition Colonel John Hare, Lieut. Governor of the Eastern Province, to get the farm correctly registered in their names. This problem was corrected by the Civil Commissioner's office on the 25 May 1841.

It is interesting to note that at that time Pieter Johannes Goosen's neighbours were Willem Botha at "Vergulde Vlees" Hendrik Lombard at "Draaihoek" and, in the South West, Piet Nel, who had made an application to farm. Today there are still Lombards, Bothas and Nels in this area.

"Hartebeest Kuil" was subsequently sub-divided into three separate farms, and on 12th November 1878 Portion 2 of "Hartebeest Kuil", (now known as "Rock Vale") measuring 1280 morgan 407.34 sq. Roods, was sold to Johannes Stephanus Jacobus Joubert. He in turn sold it to William Lewis (my great grandfather) on 29th September 1885.

William Lewis was born in Whitehaven, Cumberland, England, on 22nd January 1835 and he arrived in Port Elizabeth on 19th March 1855 on the barque of 851 tons, the "Ealing Grove". He had served an apprenticeship as a carpenter, but was referred to as a wood cleaver or carver of wood. There was a great demand for men who made and repaired wagons, and who manufactured wooden wheels and spokes.

It is recorded that William Lewis ran a business as a carriage maker on the Sundays River, near Barclay Bridge, for a number of years. During this time he

married Sarah Rudman in St. Paul's Anglican Church, Port Elizabeth, on 5th November 1867. Early in 1874 he moved to "Bracefield", the farm of William Watson, his brother-in-law, who had married Emma Sophia Rudman, his wife's elder sister. William Watson died at "Bracefield" on the 5th August 1875 and William stayed on at "Bracefield" for approximately 11 years to assist his sister-in-law with the farming operations before he purchased "Rock Vale".

My grandfather, Herbert Benjamin Lewis, was born at "Bracefield" on 13th February 1874 and baptised at the newly erected little Methodist church at Russell Park. William Lewis had assisted with the building of this little church by doing all the woodwork for the roof and by building the pulpit, which is still in use today.

There were many comments that William Lewis was a progressive farmer, but from the information I have gathered, he was constantly borrowing money from his brother Joseph who was a very well known blacksmith in Port Elizabeth. He also took a second bond on the farm.

On the 2nd March 1898 William Lewis came across a man slaughtering one of his sheep in the dry riverbed very close to where the present homestead now stands. He had a revolver with him and shot the man in the stomach. Unknown to William a second man was sharpening his knife a few metres away. When William shot the thief the second man, named Appolis, came up behind him and cut his throat from ear to ear.

One of William's friends named Wessels, passed him lying on the side of the road but thought that he was asleep and continued on his horesback journey. On his return Wessels found William Lewis still lying in the same place and discovered he was dead. The police at Middleton were summoned and found the man whom William had shot lying in the arms of his wife. He told the police that the name of the man who had cut William's throat was Appolis, and that he had disappeared with William's revolver. The shot man died a short while later. He was buried where a ploughed land was later made, across the main road from where the present residence now stands. (my grandfather, Herbert Benjamin Lewis, acknowledges that he ploughed over the grave when he extended his lands).

A few days later Appolis was arrested at Commadagga by two police constables. They took Appolis to a house where they were entertained by a woman who provided them with lunch, while Appolis was left outside, tied to a tree. After they had finished their meal they discovered that Appolis had escaped, never to be recaptured.

There was an inquiry into the escape and the two policemen were charged with negligence. The white policeman was found not guilty but the coloured policeman was found guilty and dismissed from the service.

The following were the children of William and Sarah Elizabeth Lewis:

- 1) Edith Juliana.      Born: Moddersrift on the Sundays River, 5 June 1869  
                             Married: Thomas Henry Hall, 19 October 1892.
- 2) Margaret Jane.     Born: Port Elizabeth, 5 October 1870.  
                             Married: Alexander Hunter Kerr, 11 July 1892.
- 3) Herbert Benjamin. Born: "Bracefield", district Somerset East, 13 February 1874  
                             Married: Elsje (Ellen) Dorothea de Klerk, 19 August 1903
- 4) William Watson.    Born: "Bracefield" district Somerset East, 25 July 1876.  
                             Married: Myrtle Johanna Peacock, 9 August 1905.

William Lewis was buried behind the Middleton Hotel, in a private graveyard belonging to the Websters, who owned the hotel. The family believed that the farm would have to be sold as it was an intestate estate and each of the four children and his wife would have to get an equal share. The younger son William Watson Lewis was not interested in farming with his brother and neither Herbert Benjamin nor his younger brother could raise sufficient funds to pay the rest of the family their share.

Soon after the death of William an auction was held where much of the equipment, tools, furniture, sheep and cattle were sold in an effort to raise as much capital for distribution to the family members.

Eventually Herbert Lewis persuaded Alexander Hunter Kerr, his brother-in-law (husband of Margaret Jane nee Lewis), to purchase the farm in a partnership, with each holding a 50% share. Herbert went to work for the Cape Government Railways as a fireman/driver until 1907, by which time he had earned enough to buy Alexander Kerr's share of the farm.

Herbert Benjamin continued to farm at "Rock Vale" until his death on 25th September 1957. His eldest son, Norman Benjamin farmed with him from about 1947 on a 50-50 basis. My grandmother (Ellen) had the life usufruct of the farm and Norman continued to manage the farm on her behalf until his death on 17 May 1968.

From 1968, the farm was under the government's stock reduction scheme and no farming took place on "Rock Vale". Norman's estate was finalised and eventually settled and on the 1st March 1977 two transfers took place simultaneously. The farm was transferred to the estate of the late Catharina Maria Lewis (nee Nel) known as Tienie, (born: 22 April 1912 and wife of Norman Benjamin) who had died on the 23rd December 1974. On the same day it was transferred to her surviving son, Philip Daniel Steven Lewis (born: 6th January 1952). He had no interest in farming and on 23rd August 1980 he sold it to Marthinus Johannes Lombard (born: 3rd December 1955).

When Dr. Leander Starr Jamison had failed at his notorious raid on the Reef and he had lost the election for Premier of the Cape to John X. Merriman, in 1908, Rudyard Kipling wrote the poem "If" to him and one of the verses so aptly describes the exact qualities of the farmers of the Little Karoo that I knew.

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it one pitch-and-toss,  
And loose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after you have gone  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which say to them: "Hold on!"

After 95 years there were no more Lewises on "Rock Vale". For me it was very sad as I had spent every school holiday on "Rock Vale" and even when working I always spent some of my annual leave there. I walked many a pair of shoes through in that veld and learned much about the Karoo and to love it. I admired the values of those loyal folk who had the tenacity to carry on farming through the severest drought, and always found something to joke about, and who always found time to help a less fortunate neighbour or friend.

It is indeed strange that when Piet Goosen was granted the farm in 1817 one of his neighbours was a Lombard and now after 160 years a Lombard should purchase "Rock Vale".

There are a few old ruins of stone buildings on the farm. The ruins near the gate of the old railway line to the Fish River are the ruins of the hospital which was erected 1875-77 when they built the line going north. Near the old hospital are a number of unmarked graves of the labourers who died while laying the line.

There is a further ruin. In the camp where the present homestead stands, looking towards the Fish River, are the remains of Piet Goosen's original homestead.

Since Marthinus Lombard purchased "Rock Vale" I have not been able to update my records, and therefore, am unable to furnish any further information on my beloved "Rock Vale". However, the cost of this brief history is one cup of coffee and the privilege of spending one hour walking in the veldt I so loved.

If there are any question you my have about "Rock Vale" please do not hesitate to ask. I will do my very best to assist where I am able.

Len de Klerk  
P O Box 184  
FLORIDA HILLS  
1716

Phone : (011) 763-0585  
email : gaillen@mweb.co.za