



LEVEL HEADED: It could be 1955 as a visitor's beautifully restored Plymouth saloon gives way to Sandstone's 'Kalahari' steam locomotive at a rural road crossing

Pictures: PAUL ASH

THERE was once a good writer who described the whistle of a steam train as sounding like a Paul Desmond solo floating over the trees. Now Paul Desmond — he of the gigantic 1959 hit *Take Five* with Dave Brubeck — could blow a horn like nobody else. He could blow better than high-pressure steam rushing through a valve, and people came from all over to hear him play with Brubeck's quartet.

I don't have any of Paul Desmond records, not even *Take Five*, but every time I hear that lonesome train whistle blow, I think of him and his happy Selmer Super Action alto sax.

You need mountains and quiet and a working engine for the tune to come together and there are not many places left in the world today where steam locomotives still go about their daily work. A

BACK ON THE TRACKS

An assortment of historic trains and vehicles are set to fire up for a Free State festival. By Paul Ash

copper mine in Botswana. China. Darjeeling in India. The Harz Mountains in Germany or the San Juan Mountains in Colorado between May and October.

There is also another possibility, on a farm in the eastern Free State, where for one

week every April, the sounds of locomotive whistles and steam engines working hard echo off the sandstone cliffs.

Sandstone Estates, near Ficksburg, is a proper commercial farm, thousands of hectares of wheat and maize stretching

between the Caledon River and the Ficksburg-Bethlehem road. The farm's west side is dominated by a hulking sandstone buttress from which you can see clear across the fields to the Caledon River and Lesotho and the blue Maluti Mountains beyond. It is epic country, good enough to write the opening pages of a novel. Ah, but this land is beautiful.

But Sandstone is not like most other farms. For one thing, it has its own railway, 26km of narrow-gauge track that loops around the buttress and runs across the fields and over the crest of a hill as if it is trying to escape to Lesotho.

The farm also has a vast collection of historic vehicles — steam locomotives and rail wagons, tractors, buses, a handful of military vehicles and lots of agricultural machinery. There are

threshers, harvesters and ploughs reprieved from rusting senility on South African farms. There is a shed full of tractors from the great names in American and British farming: Allis Chalmers, Massey Ferguson, Fordson Major, Lanz Bulldog and John Deere.

Remarkably, most of the machines are in working order.

Even though Sandstone Estates is a commercial farm, it is in many ways a living museum in which a 60-year-old bulldozer or a geriatric tipper truck will often be pressed into service because, as the Sandstone website notes, the machinery is anything but obsolete. "Slow-revving engines consuming small amounts of fuel tick away quietly but they do get the job done."

For most of the year, the farm goes quietly about its business, ploughing, planting and waiting.

In April, when the maize is