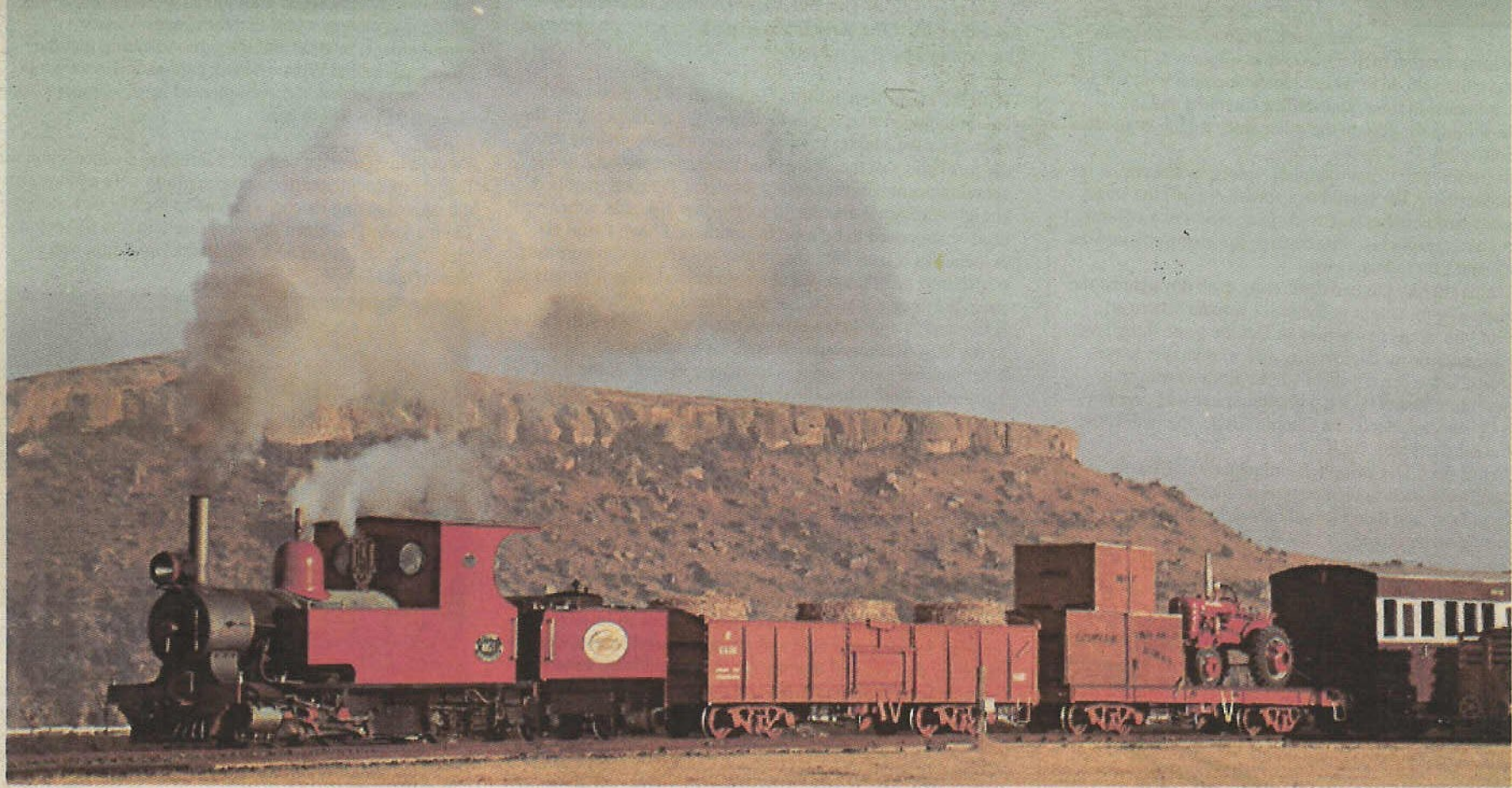




SANDSTONE CHOO-TJOES!

Donve Fullard

Ten kilometers from Ficksburg on the R26, Juanita and her two sisters wink at you from under a roof on the left hand side of the road. The three steam locomotives are the key to several Pandora's boxes at Sandstone Estates. One day, if you are lucky enough to attend a festival or event, you may catch a ride past Pandora's pond in one of the steam trains housed in the enormous sheds on the farm. Heritage assets includes vintage vehicles, agricultural and engineering equipment and are gathered from all over South Africa. A dedicated team works full-time on restoring steam locomotives, some which have been saved from being cut up. An unusual blend of preservation and commercial operation is evident as farm produce at the Estate is moved by the use of steam rather than road haulage. The company has been focused on the development of rail usage and have tried to promote the use of the Bloemfontein-Bethlehem railway line as an alternative means of transport in the Eastern Free State. The idea was to boost tourism and also to uplift communities along the line. Unfortunately a cooperative working arrangement with

Spoornet has yet to be secured. Cosmos-, Cherry-, Winter Steam- and Photographic Festivals have been celebrated at the Estate but in a recent press-release (15 December) the directors stated "it seems obvious that the days of public events at the Estate are over." At the same time the Megapower 2010 event was cancelled when it became obvious that participants were affected negatively on being invoiced. According to the manager of Steam Operations at Sandstone Estate, they were looking forward to try and break the world record by pulling one hundred trucks with a steam locomotive on a narrow gauge. Sadly there will be no stoking of fires for eighteen simultaneously steaming locomotives in 2010. Sandstone Estate has appealed to authorities to recognize the fact that a well-managed rail network is a vital component in the growth and development of an agricultural and industrial economy such as South Africa's. The dilemma of Spoornet has been discussed over two decades at exhibitions and conferences such as Africarail where delegates from all over the world offered their input. Yet, the country's rail and road networks continue to deteriorate more rapidly than they can be repaired, wagons and railway lines are being cut up and stations are turning to ruins. "Making Rail the preferred transport mode in

Africa in the 21st century" as suggested by Botswana's Minister of Works at a conference remains a pipe-dream. Train Safaris still run tourists into the African bush whilst South Africans contend with passenger trains linking only important cities. The SA earned rand cannot buy the old world atmosphere created in wooden compartments with leather bunks and silver service in saloon dining cars. Walking with Gert Jubileus, passionate traindriver on a platform next to an elegant, dark green locomotive from Beira in a shed at the Estate, I was briefly transported to the songs of railtracks, the bustle of people when stations were the centre of communities and the hissing sound of steam as a train speeds on through the wide open spaces of Africa, horizons and big skies overhead. Gert says brides-to-be love choosing a steam locomotive from their collection to celebrate their special day. Trips are tailored to suit the needs of the couple. According to the directors of the Sandstone Steam Railroad Company, the Estate will continue to be a private preservation centre and will open its doors to groups who organize themselves in such a way that expectations can be met. "Obviously, all things come at a price."