



Living heritage on display in the Free State

Johan Norval

Steam locomotives, tractors, cars and aeroplanes from a bygone era continue to work on a picturesque prize farm in the Eastern Free State. The rare sight of different vehicles from an era which stretches back over a century strutted their stuff during a recent steam event.

The highlight during the steam extravaganza at the Sandstone Heritage Trust, just north of Ficksburg was the anniversary of the commissioning of one of the first steam locomotives in the then South West Africa.

The Sandstone Heritage Trust 2ft narrow gauge railway in the Eastern Free State is regarded as one of the best railway destinations in the world. Sandstone's NG 15 No. 17 locomotive which dates back to 1931 was once the only working example of the NG15 class in the world.

To celebrate this heritage milestone a steam gala was held over eight days and was attended by visitors from all over the world.

The driving force behind the Trust, who is living his preservation dream, is Mr. Wilfred Mole. Preservationist, globetrotter and philanthropist are only some of the facets of a man who has developed an exceptional historical legacy in the Eastern Free State.

His preservation initiative also serves as an international bridge which promotes rural tourism in South Africa.

But steam does not run through his veins like most of his visitors. They are mostly steam fanatics who travel the world to experience steam safaris and to photograph their beloved trains.

Mole landed up in the world of the preservation of vintage tractors and locomotives by chance. His nostalgic streak comes from his childhood where he remembered when cattle were transported by train and when the rural communities were connected by an efficient railway system. This is the driving force in his efforts to re-create the spirit of olden days at the heritage museum.

If Mole was to have his way he would like to try and ensure that the rural history of South Africa is re-established with all its facets, like the people, animals and machinery and to see them get the necessary respect they deserve.

Asked what was closest to his heart, it was the span of oxen which have been trained at great cost and effort to pull the old ox wagons.

If any old antiques cross his path he tries to let them find their rightful places on the farm, for example the old gramophone which is displayed in the old wagon shed next to the station. Mole and the Sandstone Heritage Trust acquired the farm in the 1990's from the Wille family who had owned it since 1840. They are therefore only the second owners over the last 170 years.

The transfer of the farm came with a collection of veteran tractors like a Lanz Bulldog, Field Marshalls and old John Deeres which at the time were still in use.

The collection of veterans which include his father's old Massey Fergusons, which dated back to their farming days in Swaziland in the 1950's, have since been seen regularly at events.

Later with the label of preservationist around his neck, Mole was asked to become involved with moving about 4000 tons of steel from a museum at Midmar near Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu Natal. At the time the museum had a narrow gauge railway system with two working Garratt steam locomotives as well as an impressive static display which included old motor cars, commercial vehicles and tractors.

The end result of this was the establishment of a typical narrow gauge railway system on Sandstone.

Once the railway bug had bitten the collection continued to grow at every opportunity that presented itself.

Fortunately for Mole there are still expert craftsmen who began their careers in the steam era and who are more than willing to assist with restorations.

One of the team of nine involved is the distinguished craftsman Lukas Nel from the world-renowned Steam Workshop in Bloemfontein.

Nel has rebuilt over 20 locomotives for Sandstone over the last 12 years and is busy with another seven, all of which are unique.

The most recent project is the restoration of an NGG11 which is possibly one of the oldest Garratt locomotives in the world.

According to Mole, Nel's engineering expertise is up with the best in the world. What sets him apart from other craftsmen is that he takes on locomotives which are generally considered un-restorable.

The Heritage Trust focuses only on locomotives which did service in Southern Africa. According to Mole the previous colonies of Angola and Mozambique produce some of the most interesting collectibles. This can be attributed to the thriving sugar industry which the Portuguese established in the 1880's.

Some of the locomotives that came out of Angola have recently been restored by the Sandstone Heritage Trust and are now in working condition. The rest are waiting to have life breathed into them by Nel and his craftsmen.

Tractor Collection

South Africa's biggest?

The Sandstone Heritage Trust's collection of veteran tractors and old machinery is estimated to be the most comprehensive in private ownership in South Africa.

Mr. Chris Wilson from Pietermaritzburg is one of the most enthusiastic contributors who has restored up to 25 of the Sandstone tractor collection. Most of this work has been done on John Deeres.

According to Wilson many of the tractors in the Sandstone collection are in good working order. The models range from the primitive giants of the early 1920's to the relatively sophisticated John Deeres of the 1950's.

Two outstanding veterans, the American Emerson Brantingham Big 4-30 from 1913 and the Rumely Oil Pull are the only examples of these two primitive models in South Africa. Only a few of these can be found in their country of origin. "To see veterans like this in South Africa is an absolute privilege" says Wilson. "These tractors were designed to exploit the North American prairies". Only limited numbers of these were produced and only a handful of them have survived.

Wilson believes that the Big 4 is one of the rarest and most desirable tractors in the world and an avid collector would willingly pay R1 million to get their hands on one.

Other rare tractors in the collection are the Waterloo Boy, the predecessor of the famous John Deere series and the Marshall MP6 of which only 290 were ever produced. A similar tractor was recently auctioned in Britain for about £ 60 000 (approximately R 760 000.00). "Sandstone's Marshall MP6 is totally restored and in excellent condition" says Wilson.

Other veterans in the collection which are also much in demand by overseas collectors are the single-cylinder diesels like the Lanz and the Field Marshall.

Sandstone also owns an extensive collection of twin-cylinder John Deeres which demonstrates the complete development of the brand from 1920 to 1950. The collection also boasts International Harvesters ranging from the interesting Farmall Regular of the 1920's to the seasoned McCormicks and the famous Farmalls which range from the M to the H models.

A large part of this collection was acquired through a single transaction with the late Mr Jannie Du Toit from the Western Cape. Other familiar names at Sandstone include are the four wheel drive Massey-Harris, the early Deutz tractors and a Porsche.

“Yes, Porsche to the surprise of the uninitiated, also manufactured tractors” says Wilson. There are also more common veterans in the collection, for example Fordsons, Fergusons, David Brown and Case. In addition to tractors the collection includes vintage implements such as simple ploughs, cultivators, threshing machines and vintage trailed harvesters.

Wilson says that the collection does not only gather dust in the many barns on the farm. Several harvest demonstrations have been held at Sandstone where these veterans have been exhibited and put to work. On one of these farmers’ days more than 100 veterans ploughed a field all at the same time. This concept resonated overseas with a similar events taking place in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and England where the record was broken each time. Sandstone later held an event where more than 700 veterans ploughed the same piece of land. Ireland currently holds the Guinness World Record.

Landbou Weekblad questions....

Mr. Wilfred Mole

What is your greatest driving force in life?

To run Sandstone not as a museum but as a living heritage centre. I aspire to record and preserve examples of rural life.

What have been the highlights in your life?

It was a proud moment when, a year ago, on behalf of my organic farm Lower Pertwood in Wiltshire, I received an award for the prettiest farm in the Western and South- western part of Britain at the British House of Lords.

Enthusiast – Visitors come from far and wide

The latest Sandstone Steam Safari again attracted steam enthusiasts from all over the world. Tourists from America, Switzerland, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada and Britain made up some of the guests who attended the event which was held at the end of March. Teams of people were on duty and the chef had to be on his toes to feed almost 120 guests daily.

The guests can be divided into two groups – the overseas guests who came for the full 8 days and the South African visitors who came for a day or two. The daily program varied and more than one day was required to experience most of the veterans. Changing weather conditions also limited the number of activities that could be presented.

Mr. Wilfred Mole from the Sandstone Heritage Trust says: “The Trust is not a destination for Tom, Dick and Harry due to the fact that visitors need some understanding of the importance of the collection and they need to have an enthusiasm for the exhibition for it to be appreciated.

Mr. Aidan McCarthy from Johannesburg is a local supporter of the Sandstone Steam Event. He openly admits that as a steam fanatic, he is “a little bit crazy”. He earns his bread and butter in the I.T. industry but assists in his free time in restoring steam locomotives. He regularly spends his annual holiday at Sandstone which according to him is a photographer’s steam paradise.

Mr. Kit Meredith, a financier from Guernsey in the English Channel near the Normandy coast, was born in Kenya. He remembers trains from his formative years in Cape Town. Because his new island home does not sport a rail network, he enjoys the nostalgia provided by a hearty breakfast followed by a train journey like he can experience on Sandstone.

Meredith is not necessarily a steam fanatic but is taken with everything related to industrial heritage like the preservation of veteran tractors at Sandstone. According to him Sandstone is one of the biggest private initiatives in the world where veteran tractors are preserved on a huge scale for the next generation.

Mr. Werner Windbergs from Colorado in America is on his fourth trip to South Africa and if he gets his way, the steam trains will see him again soon. In 1984 he also enjoyed a local Steam Safari. As a child, during the Second World War he grew up in a factory in Munich where his father worked on steam trains.

Mr. David Mickle from Victoria in Australia is a collector in his own right. As owner of, amongst other things a steamroller and a steam truck, he travels the world to ride on Steam Safaris.

Another group of dedicated steam enthusiasts also attended the proceedings. Their task was to steam the nearly 20 iconic steam locomotives on the farm on a daily basis so that they could be paraded for the visitors.