



Karoo Cameos Series
Hosted by the Karoo Development Foundation

WOLWEFONTEIN

Home of an Old Hotel and the Wolf Wind

By Rose Willis
rosewillis705@gmail.com

2021

Series editor: Prof Doreen Atkinson
doreen@karoofoundation.co.za



ROSE WILLIS is the author of *The Karoo Cookbook* (2008), as well as the monthly e-journal *Rose's Round-up*. She co-authored *Yeomen of the Karoo: The Story of the Imperial Yeomanry Hospital at Deelfontein*, with Arnold van Dyk and Kay de Villiers (2016).

There are many memories at Wolwefontein, a hamlet north west of Kleinpoort in the middle of the Witteberg quartzite basin of the Klein Winterhoek Mountains. It is 126km from Port Elizabeth and 136km from Graaff Reinet and so is considered the halfway mark between the two, but Steytlerville (54km), Jansenville (60km), Kirkwood (45km) and Uitenhage (75km) are not far away.

It is a quaint place where life revolves around a charming country hotel, which often hosts tourists and researchers *en route* to Baviaanskloof, Addo Elephant Park or Cockscomb Mountain.

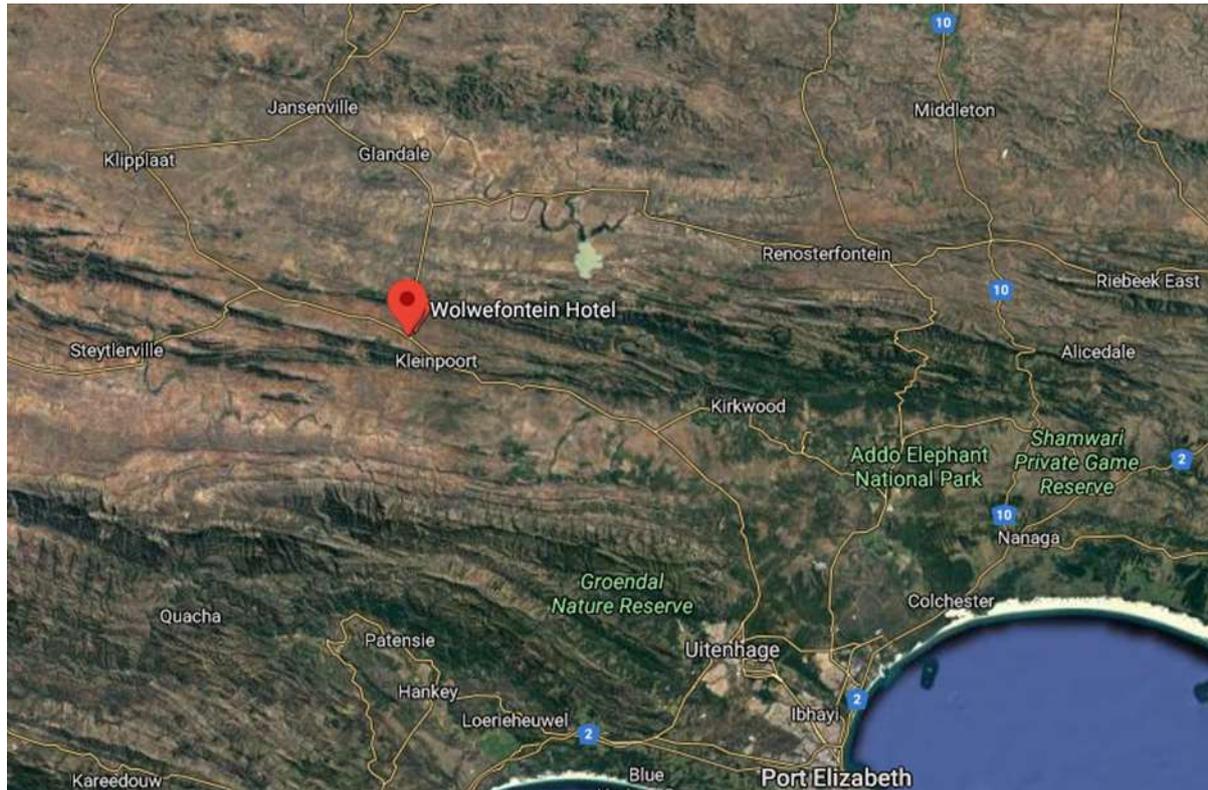
The railway station, overgrown with grass, offers good photo opportunities. Legend has it that the early settlers saw a wolf-like animal – possibly a hyena – drinking at the stream, and this gave rise to the name. The area is well known for a variety of interesting indigenous plants and succulents.



THE FIRST HOTEL

This first hotel was built in the 1890s to host travellers and pedlars along this route. The railway station followed in 1896 and soon became a focal point of the district and a social hub.

Then came the second hotel, built in 1920 by local farmer, Harry Watson, and a young Jewish lad, Hymie Glazer, who arrived in town with only a donkey and £2 in his pocket. Finding Hymie to be a likeable young man, Harry took him under his wing and together they got going on building a new hotel. When it was finished, Hymie turned the first hotel building into a shop.



From the outset, Hymie was keen to please his customers. He went out of his way to take care of their needs – nothing was ever too much trouble. Hymie dealt with all the passing *smouse* (pedlars) and bargained for the best prices for everything from exotic pomades and “brilliantine” – an essential for a slick hairstyle – to everyday household items, produce, linen and clothing. He developed the store into an excellent general dealership. His customers could buy all types of farming implements and anything from a pin to a motor car at Hymie’s store – and, if it wasn’t there he would order it. He was very successful and very well liked.

ONLY ONE OF FOUR

Wolwefontein Hotel, one of only four remaining railway hotels in South Africa, is the curator of many stories, some linked to the community and others to the railways. It was a popular stop for road travellers and for engine drivers. When the trains stopped at Wolwefontein to take on water at the station, the drivers often nipped up to the hotel to quench their own thirsts.

The hotel has been restored over the years to preserve its history and maintain its superb old world atmosphere. It is a tranquil place which perfectly replicates the bygone years of the 1920's in the Karoo. Its large comfortable standard rooms all reflect its history, but with “mod cons”. These days only a few share bathrooms, charmingly labelled “Men’s” and “Ladies”. Among its facilities are a huge family room and an up-to-date executive room with en-suite facilities and a private entrance.

The building has wooden floors and big windows to capture the fresh Karoo air. Its old pub, a friendly place, has a python skin and a preserved eland head on the wall, together with rows of signed sports caps. A fireplace encourages socialising on cold Karoo evenings.



TRAVELLED ACCORDING TO MENUS

In years gone by, the travelling sales fraternity timed their trips to coincide with the menu and arrived on the nights that their favourite dishes were served. Some stayed for a game of pool or cards - poker was a popular pastime. Some of these salesmen even stayed for the weekend. The road is a lonely place for those going about selling bits and pieces, but the warmth and friendship at Wolwefontein Hotel fixed that.

But, in typical frontier town fashion – just as happened in the Old West - liquor and loneliness often led to altercations and, on one Saturday night, a salesman and farmer had a disagreement which ended in a gun fight. The bullet scars were visible for years. After that locals referred to the place as Revolverfontein Hotel for quite a long time.

THE COMING OF THE LAKE

In 1917, when work started on Mentz Lake (later Darlington Dam) on the Sundays River, all building material and equipment was railed to Wolwefontein. From there, 28 000 tons of essentials were transported by 30 wagons and 300 donkeys to the site across a distance of about 40km. Work was completed in 1922, but the dam was only filled by 1928, because of an extensive drought.

The initiative to establish a largescale irrigation scheme in the Sundays River Valley can be traced back to an enterprising auctioneer, James Somers Kirkwood, who later gave his name to a little nearby town. Described as, “a tall man with a pleasing personality, flowing beard and smiling eyes”, he was an entrepreneurial fellow. He came to this valley in 1877 to auction the farm *Gouvernements Belooning* (Government's Reward) which had been granted to Field Cornet J S van Niekerk. It was one of the first farms in the Sundays River Valley given to leaders of burgher commandos for victories in the frontier wars of 1811 and 1812 by the then governor Sir John Francis Cradock.

THE SUNDAYS RIVER IRRIGATION COMPANY

The story goes that James Kirkwood rode into the valley at the time of a major flood and so could not reach the farm. He climbed to the top of a hill, today as the Lookout, and the view that he had of the valley from there took his breath away. It inspired him to such an extent that he bought the farm *Gouvernements Belooning* and settled there. Six years later, he owned 21 farms in the valley.

Because it was such a fertile area, he tried to interest his neighbours in an irrigation scheme, for which money was available from the government, but they were too suspicious to join him. Once again, he decided to go it alone and in December, 1883, founded the Sundays River Land and Irrigation Company. He tried to sell shares but not one was taken up. He died embittered, heart-broken and in poverty in 1889.

Years later in 1924, Philip Weyers, the main owner of land inundated by Lake Mentz, was awarded £27 000 in compensation and his successor Bertram Henderson was granted about £40 000 – and neither were visionaries.

MANY MORE OWNERS

Next on the scene was Philip W F Weyers, a former hawker, who had lost some cattle in the Wolwefontein area. He maintained that the Boers had shot his animals in the Bedrogfontein Pass. This loss so upset him that he turned to farming and acquired land in the Sundays River Valley. By 1905 he had planted fruit orchards and vineyards. A small settlement which included a hotel, post office, shop, smithy, several houses and outbuildings soon sprang up on the farm. He later sold this property to Bertram Henderson.

Later still, Dr Reginald Koettlitz, who accompanied Captain Robert Falcon Scott on his first Antarctic expedition as senior medical officer, acquired the land. Reputedly, he was unjustly blamed for an outbreak of scurvy on this expedition and he came to South Africa to settle in the Karoo.

Another famous man also had contact with this farm and dam. In 1913 Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, author of *Jock of the Bushveld*, came to this area and was also most impressed with its possibilities. When it was decided to create an irrigation dam to also control flood waters, he was appointed chairman of the Irrigation Board. The project had many setbacks, but neither drought, depression, nor disease in this barren Noorsveld could prevent the construction of this dam.

According to local legend, it was Colonel Hendrik Mentz, the then Minister of Land Affairs, who granted permission for the building of the dam. But he was not a popular fellow. When it was suggested that the dam be named in his honour, an irate local person loudly exclaimed: “Oh, damn Mentz!” To which he received a polite reply: “No, no, just Lake Mentz, will do!” In 1995 the “lake” was renamed the Darlington Dam to commemorate the little settlement that disappeared beneath its waters.

MANY SETBACKS

The construction of the dam experienced many setbacks, including material and machinery shortages caused by World War I. Added difficulties were unsuitable labour (returning soldiers were employed on the project, and they were totally unreliable), the 1918 influenza epidemic, and bubonic plague. Several organisations were involved, and in time a huge scam developed. Just after WWI, an adventurer compiled a series of brochures and advertisements aimed at enticing ex-servicemen to South Africa. They were published in the British press and featured photographs of orange orchards in California because there was only bush in the Sundays River Valley at the time.

There were also severe financial difficulties and, even though the Government eventually stepped in, the dam functioned at a loss of and £2,350,000 had to be written off. When the dam was filled, the little settlement of Darlington “drowned” as its buildings disappeared under the waters. Then came the problem of silt, and the dam walls had to be raised. Darlington Dam, the second biggest dam in the Cape, was incorporated into the Addo Elephant National Park in 2000.

HOW THE NOORSVELD GOT ITS NAME

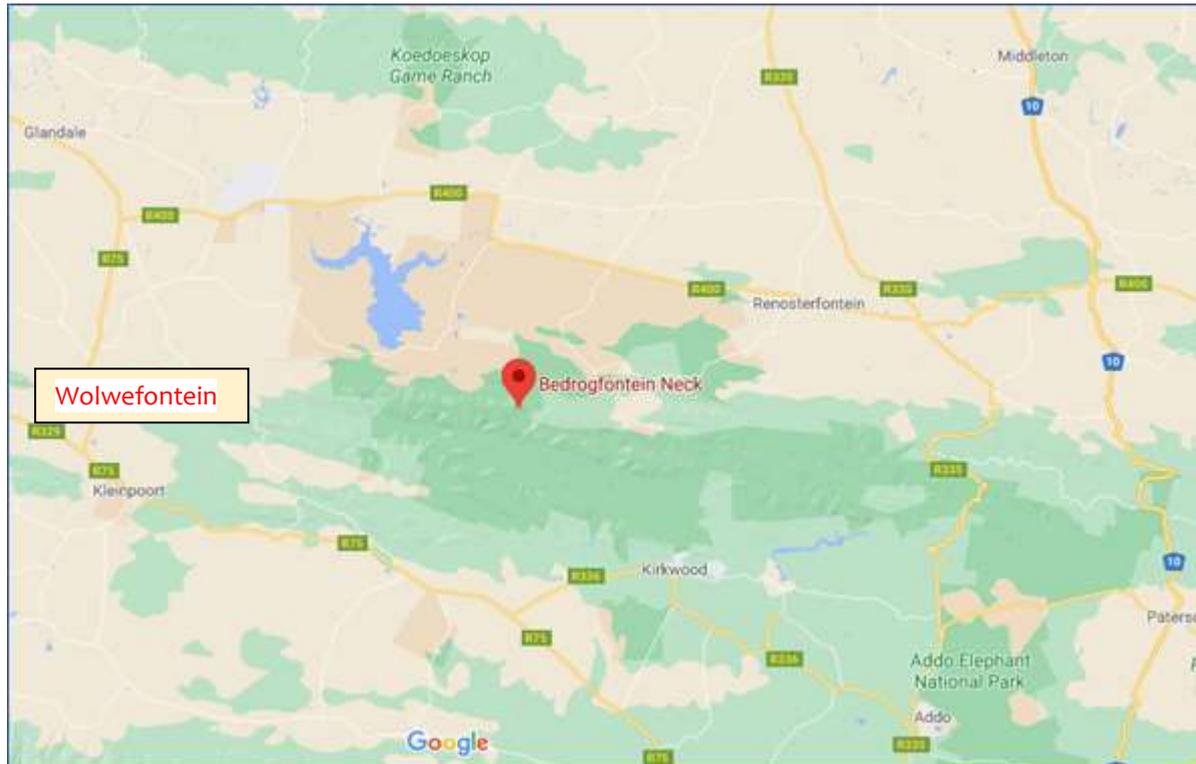
Noors is said to have evolved via Dutch from the English word “gorse” and refers to the cactus *Euphorbia coerulescens*. British settlers thought this spiky plant with its yellow flowers looked similar to the gorse which grows in England. This a small, columnar, thorny, leafless, succulent shrub has an irregular shape and stands between 0,5 - 1.5 m tall. It has a tufted crown of thick, short-jointed branches which are covered in stiff thorns. It grows prolifically around the Wolwefontein / Jansenville areas.

During times of drought, the Noors is often chopped up as fodder for livestock. Some Boer writers tell of horses being crippled by this thorny plant during the Anglo-Boer War.

ACTION DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

In November 1901, the Boers were aware that the British intended transporting cannons from Algoa Bay to the Free State and ZAR (old Transvaal Republic). General Jan Smuts decided that Philip Weyers’s mountain farm, Bedrogsfontein, would be an ideal place for an ambush as there the British had to travel through a steep, narrow *poort* (pass). He stationed two men from his commando in the *kloof* (gorge) and instructed them to fire two shots when the British moved through the pass.

It seemed a good plan, but it went awry. The donkeys pulling the cannons were unable to stay in their pairs, pulled loose from their harnesses and were injured. The British were forced to shoot two donkeys that became badly entangled. On hearing the shots, the Boers thought it was their signal to attack, but the British were nowhere near the ambush spot. The attack failed and the British, after a brief skirmish, were able to set off once again with their cannon.



SEEDS ALMOST KILLED A GENERAL

It was at Bedrogsfontein that General Smuts became ill during the Anglo-Boer War after eating cycad seeds. In *Commando* Denys Reitz says that supplies were running low, the men were starving and one sampled a pineapple-like fruit. He found it to his liking and soon others tucked in. Within half an hour the men were writhing in agony and the commando was leaderless. Towards dawn 20 men unable to stand were strapped to their saddles so that the commando could move on. Smuts was still comatose. He barely survived the ordeal. (In 1912, two Mpondo children died after eating similar seeds).

Today there is an interesting 4 x 4 trail known as the Bedrogsfontein Pass in the Addo Elephant Park. The route passes through a variety of vegetation types, from riverine thicket, afro-montane forest, fynbos and arid Nama-Karoo veld. It requires a 4 x 4 vehicle with good ground clearance and low range. It may be driven only from east to west and driving time is between 5 and 6 hours. It is suitable only for experienced drivers.

GIVE NOTICE BEFORE YOU DIE

In 1911, local farmers Harry and Louise Watson donated land to the community early in 2000 for a graveyard, but the ground was so rocky that Wolwefontein became the butt of a national joke. Newspapers carried a notice stating that if anyone in Wolwefontein intended dying it would be best to give a month's notice before doing so. "Failure to do this could mean you will not have a grave, because it takes that long to bore through the hard stone stratum."

The problem arose when an 86-year-old villager died. No grave was available, and none could be quickly dug, so he had to be buried next to the departed husband of a local granny. Authorities were red-faced. Normally, jack jammers were brought in to pre-prepare a few holes, and no one could explain what had happened.

But the problem was quickly corrected, and the old lady's grave was once again available for her!

THE WOLF WIND BRINGS THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY

With all that history, one could be forgiven for thinking the Wolwefontein is parked in the past. Not so! The hotel is set to become part of the e-mobility world with one of the country's electric vehicle charging stations in the hotel being part of a planned network for smart cars. Another sustainable business opportunity under investigation is solar and wind charge stations, to feed the national electricity grid. These are set to operate under the charming name of Wolf Wind Farms.

In September 2015, permission was granted for the construction of a 98 Mega-Watt wind energy facility with 24 turbines. It was built on Wolf Wind Farm at the top of the Klein Winterhoek Mountains, 5 km north of Wolwefontein.

The new technology has been combined with solar power in one turbine that greatly increases efficiency and electric energy output by reducing the static pressure behind the rotor blades. The turbines will not be noisy, they do not pose any danger to birds, and there is no light flicker off of the blades. This type of system will generate larger amounts of energy, thus improving the overall efficiency, viability and life of the project.

With this futuristic project in the neighbourhood, the ancient hamlet of Wolwefontein is entering the 21st Century on an impressive note.



Sources:

Drive Out Magazine; Village Life; News 24; *The Citizen* article by Jim Freeman; en.wikipedia.org; www.karoospace.co.za; www.getaway.co.za; www.wrc.org.za *Water History: Darlington Dam – S A's Troubled Lake*); www.llifile.com; www.mountainpassessouthafrica.co.za; local newspapers, *Commando* by Deneys Reitz; several tourism and travel websites; www.karooheartland.com; www.jansenville.co.za; Aurecon, *Proposed Wind Energy Facility and Associated Infrastructure on Wolf Wind Farm (Pty) Ltd, near Wolwefontein in the Eastern Cape (2018)*, www.aurecongroup.com.

Recommended citation: © Rose Willis (2021), Wolwefontein,: Home of an Old Hotel and the Wolf Wind, Monograph, Karoo Cameos series, Karoo Development Foundation, www.karoorfoundation.co.za