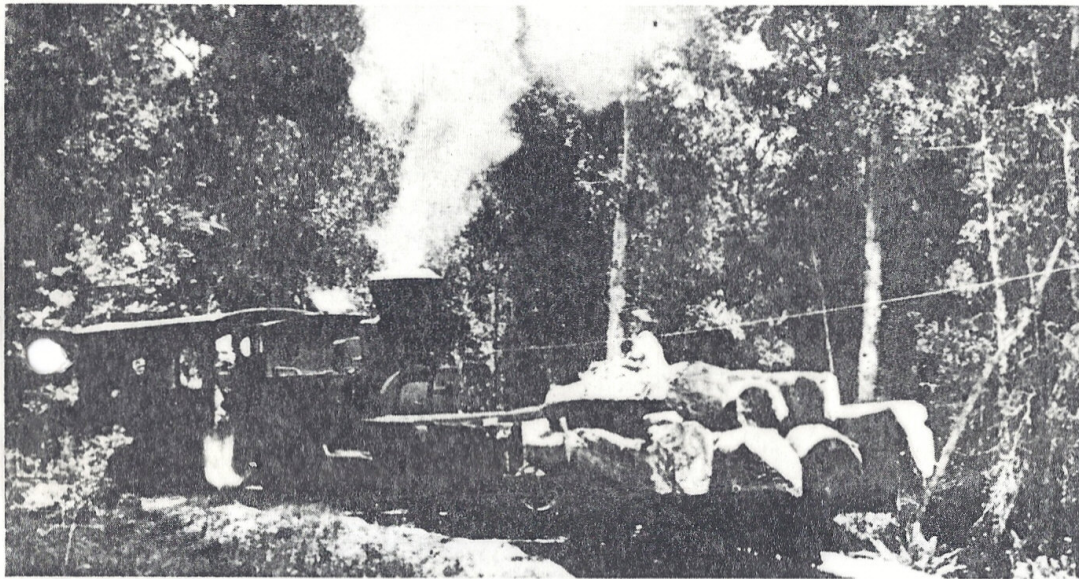


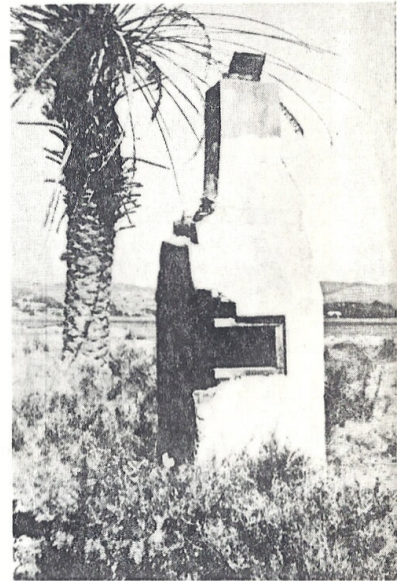
# Knysna's "Coffee Pot" Railway

by Allen Duff

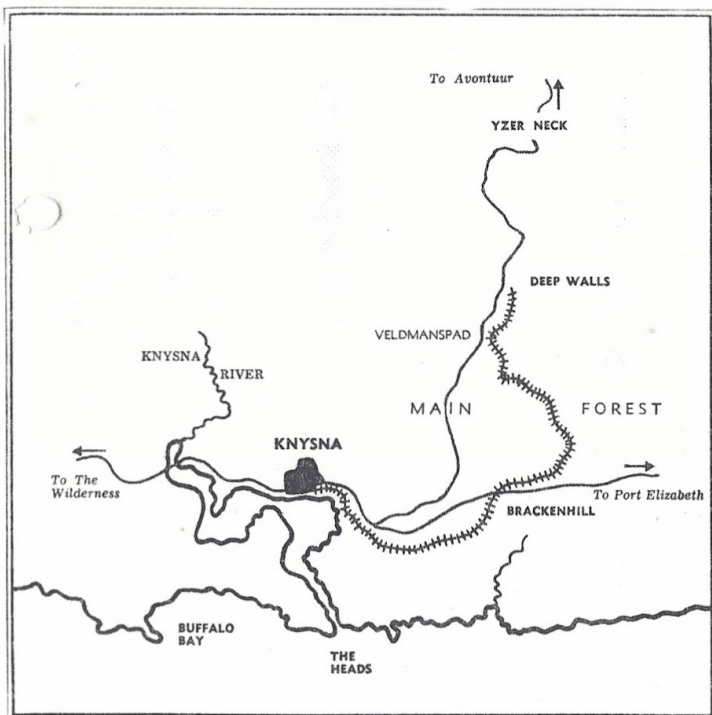
It was probably so nicknamed because the engine driver would halt his train, brew up coffee and invite the passengers to a lineside picnic!



One of the "Coffee Pots" puffs through the dense forest on its way to Knysna. The line was closed in 1949.



The remnants of a platelayers' hut.



The "Coffee Pot" route from Knysna to Deep Walls.

KNYSNA is famed for its forests. The soaring trees, riotous creepers and heavy under-growth make parts of the forests impenetrable. Yet, not many years ago, a narrow-gauge train wound its way through this dense vegetation.

It was a privately owned, 24in.-gauge railway and did useful service from 1907 to 1949. It was affectionately known as the "Coffee Pot" railway, though officially it was the South Western Railway, with Mr Charles Thesen as chairman and managing director.

The "Coffee Pot" ran from the east of Knysna and you can still find evidence of the line. The track and accessories were removed when the line was closed in 1949, but if you walk through the forest you can trace the route, though in parts indigenous growth has obscured what little remains of the track.

The idea of a railway for the district had been entertained for many years before the line was built. Before the turn of the century a new wharf was constructed, linked to the town by a causeway built across the marshy ground. Rails were laid over the causeway and trucks drawn by mules carried goods between town and ships.

An extract from a newspaper of the time expressed the townspeople's feelings on the subject of a railway. "Of course, Knysna, like every other town of similar size, is clamouring for a railway, but the people are not quite unanimous on that point. The majority think it will be the making of the port, but there are others who, when they contemplate the difficulties

attendant upon a rise of some 2,000 feet in 50 miles and the probable scarcity of freight, sigh as they look at the half-mile of metals on the causeway and say, 'That is all the railway Knysna will see for many years to come.'"

The "Coffee Pot" railway was born through the number of Knysna timber merchants who had grown impatient with ox-wagon transport and wanted to speed up the delivery of felled trees to the factory and to ships.

Persistent pressure from Knysna eventually persuaded the Cape Government to pass an Act of Parliament authorising the laying of 22 miles of track from the jetty to Deep Walls, east of Knysna, in the main forest.

While in Knysna recently I visited Mr Tom Botha, who was the guard on the "Coffee Pot". Now 76, he lives quietly with his wife at Rex's Rest not far from where the line used to twist its way up the hills to the Nek-kies.

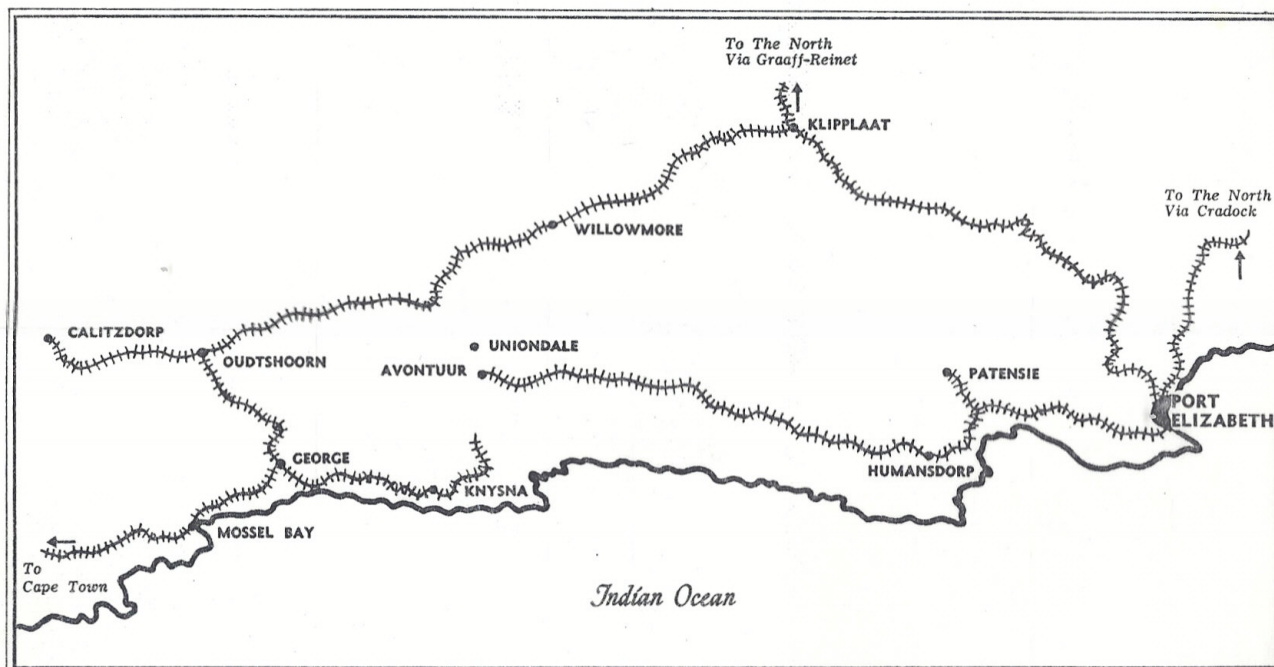
Tom Botha was at the railway's birth; and he was at its death. He was a member of the construction team in 1904 and well remembers Mr Westfelt, the Swedish engineer. Vivid are his memories of this early work of building embankments, ballasting, laying track and providing all the accessories of a railway.

Two station buildings were erected — one in Knysna (it serves today as a municipal T.B. clinic) and the other at Deep Walls. The latter, a wood-and-iron building measuring 20ft. by





Above: The old S.W.R. station building at Knysna, now a T.B. clinic. Centre: The "Coffee Pot's" water tank at Knysna. Behind it lies the lagoon. Right: Two employees of the old S.W.R. — Frederick Smith, assistant guard, and Lawrence Botha, fireman, son of Tom Botha — seen in the Knysna goods yard.



The South Western Railway in relation to the other lines that make up the South Western Districts system.

10ft., is now in Tom Botha's back garden as a toolshed!

The line was completed in 1907 and given a worthy baptism with free rides for the local dignitaries.

The train ran four times a week, leaving Knysna on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday (at 9 a.m.) and as a "passenger train" on Sunday.

"It wasn't really a passenger train," Mr Botha explained. "You see, we had only one coach, and everyone preferred to ride in the open trucks. We usually placed the engine in the middle of the train."

"At first there was only the 'Coffee Pot' engine. In later years three larger locomotives were added. They were numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4, in order of their arrival. No. 4 was quite large. It came in 1929. I remember this well because it was the year in which I got married. This engine could pull up to 15 fully-loaded trucks," recalled Tom.

"Our speed? Six miles an hour. It took two hours to the first station,

Bracken Hill. At noon we were at Parkes station and at 12.30 p.m. at Deep Walls terminal — Mr Templeman's mill".

From sea level the line climbed to 1,407ft. at Deep Walls. At Knysna there were branches down to the jetty and one up into the town to Parkes mill. From the station on Newhaven commonage the line crossed open country for some miles, cutting through Melkhoutkraal, the former estate of George Rex.

The train suffered only minor derailments. "Once, three trucks were left at the eight-mile post and they ran free and finally jumped the line at Horseshoe, three miles away.

"There was one serious accident, resulting in a child losing a hand. We were coming down from Deep Walls, approaching the three-mile post near George Rex's grave, when a three-year-old boy was knocked down by the trucks in front of the engine. I immediately applied the brakes and rescued the boy from under the

wheels. The engine was uncoupled and the boy was rushed into town to the doctor," said Tom.

For the passengers on the "Coffee Pot" the scenic beauty of the journey was a joy. At the leisurely pace of six miles an hour nothing was missed. And if a passenger wished to pick lineside flowers he just hopped off, gathered his bunch and rejoined the train.

If the train was running early engine driver Tom Kennet would stop the "Coffee Pot", brew up coffee and invite the passengers to a picnic under shady trees. This pleasant custom had practical value, too, for it ensured that the train would neither disturb the elephants during their afternoon nap nor arrive at Parkes station too early.

"Only once did we see elephants on the line. The whistle soon sent them trumpeting off into the forest. Often Tom Kennet, who died two years ago in Pretoria, and I had to clear tree trunks and branches from the line

after the elephants had crashed through the surrounding bush. They seemed to develop a particular contempt for the mileposts and were always pulling them out of the ground."

Fares were reasonable. Return trips to Bracken Hill, Parkes station and Deep Walls cost 2s., 2s. 6d. and 3s. 4d. The good rate was 4d a ton. Outgoing goods from Knysna were mainly sugar and meal sacks. There were stationmasters at Bracken Hill (Freddie Rabbets), Veldmanspad (Tom Perks) and Deep Walls (Jack Rex, a grandson of George Rex).

The line, which had cost almost R100,000, had been a brave venture, and it took the resourcefulness of Mr Charles Thesen to keep the railway operating successfully and economically.

Mr Thesen argued for the extension of the line northwards over the Tsitsikamma mountains to join the narrow-gauge railway in Langkloof, and even had the route surveyed. But the idea went no further.

*Continued overleaf.*



The map showing the proposed line was lost for about 30 years and recently came to light among documents dealing with the South Western Railway. The extension was to have been from Deep Walls to Avontuur, 38 miles away in the Langkloof. The Government, however, considered it less expensive to link Knysna to George by way of the Wilderness.

A few years ago the Cape Administrator, the late Dr Otto du Plessis, set out from Knysna with an exploring party to try to find the route to Avontuur fixed in the early survey. The map had not then been found and the party found it almost impossible to trace the track in the dense mountain vegetation. The idea of using this route for a trunk road to the north was abandoned.

The S.W.R. suffered severe blows in 1919 when the sleeper factory at Knysna was moved to Mossel Bay, and in 1928, when the Government's railway from George to Knysna was completed. The new line crippled the shipping trade, which eventually collapsed in 1954 when Knysna was closed as a seaport.

The opening of the George-Knysna line was the beginning of the end for the "Coffee Pot". By taking the shipping trade it removed the "Coffee Pot's" life-blood. But somehow, through floods, rising maintenance costs and trade depressions, the "Coffee Pot" kept going.

Although the George-Knysna line was stealing trade from the "Coffee Pot", it was not this "rival line" that dealt the death blow. This came from road transport. Movement of timber by road proved more economical, and on April 30, 1949, the "Coffee Pot" made her last journey.

A sugar concern bought the railway, except one engine which went to the Witwatersrand mines. Tom Botha was hired by the new owner to dismantle the railway. "I started from Deep Walls", he told me, "pulling up track and sleepers. John Westraad drove them down to Knysna, where I loaded them on the S.A.R. trucks for removal to their new home. It was a difficult task and took months."

I asked him about his life as guard. "It was a hard life, riding on an open truck most of the time. The heat and humidity some days were almost unbearable. I was the shunter, too. The 2ft-gauge train seemed toy-like in comparison with the 3ft. 6in-gauge S.A.R. engines and rolling stock. Our fuel was mainly wood."

While in Knysna I spoke to Mr Tom Willis, who has vivid memories of the old train. "We often used to go for picnics into the forest on the 'Coffee Pot'. Those were enjoyable times," he said.

"My father was an engineer and was responsible for putting the second loco together when it arrived. I was on the footplate with him the first time it went out."

One man who laments the passing of the "Coffee Pot" is Mr C. H. Roelofse. He is now working at Knysna station, and, with a touch of nostalgia, he pointed out the old station, now a T.B. clinic, the black watertank near by and the dilapidated engine sheds a little further away.

These sheds have been converted by the municipality to house lorries, but the black, soot-covered underside of the roof shows that this was once "home" to the small engines of the S.W.R.

Towards the lagoon, about 75 yards from the station, are the foundations and crumbling chimney of a building that was once the home of the S.W.R.'s platelayer, Mr Roelf Kamfer.

I followed the route of the line as it left Knysna. Today it is a footpath for a couple of miles. It is quite easy at this stage to discern its route as it skirts the lagoon on a small embankment. Here you will find an occasional piece of rotted sleeper and a few lengths of rusted rail used as fence supports.

Keep on and you cross the Leisure Isle and Heads road, over Melkhoutkraal, George Rex's old estate, and up the Nekkes into the Noetsie hills. But from here it is more difficult to follow the route, and the explorer has to force his way through thick undergrowth.

Knysna's "Coffee Pot" puffed its way in and out of the forests for 42 years. The Puffing Billy's whistle no longer pierces the air. The whistles today are at the factories, and the "Coffee Pot" railway is now just a part of the town's history. \$\$



## SHEEN cleans all leather

Every colour. Every shade.  
And polishes.  
And preserves.  
And conditions.  
One beautifier — for all  
shoes and accessories.

## Nugget SHEEN

