

Millwood House Museum Newsletter No 36 November 1990

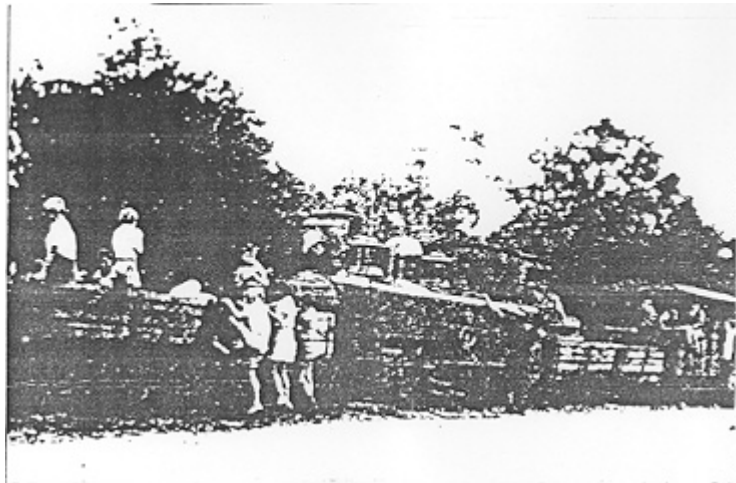
The "Coffee Pot"

The subject of this Newsletter is the little 2 ft. narrow gauge railway which used to run from the town to the forest, i.e. the South Western Railway - the Forest Train, or, as more affectionately known, the "Coffee Pot".

The transporting of timber in the late nineteenth century from the forest to the sawmills of Parkes and Templemans in Knysna, and to Thesens at Bracken Hill and then taking the finished goods to the jetty for export by steamers was a constant problem, particularly during the Anglo-Boer War. Mules and mule-drivers, previously used for this purpose, were recruited for the Imperial Army, and the drought and rinderpest had taken their toll of those other draught animals and beasts of burden, the oxen. In fact, the Knysna Forest Company (Parkes), were able to get only three to four loads of timber in for the mill over an entire week. To try and remedy this, George Parkes imported a traction engine in 1898 for haulage in the forest. But this proved impracticable on the poor roads, particularly when they were wet when the traction engine got badly stuck in the mud, and was not able to negotiate the many steep inclines. Some other solution to the problem had to be found.

Holiday Fun!

For those of us who grew up in Knysna, the "Coffee Pot" or South Western Railway was part of our holiday fun. An all-day picnic would be arranged when we would gather at the little corrugated iron station which stood in the lower end of town below what is now 'Rinzai Wood'. We would climb into the open trucks and sit on a canvas sailer on a bench placed there for us. If we were lucky we would return sitting on top of a pile of logs, which added to the fun of the day. If there were passengers for the caboose it would be put in front of the engine to prevent their eyes filling with smuts. I remember going on a Brownie picnic organised by Brown Owl, Miss Daisy Eberhard, which was an outing to look for maidenhair ferns in the forest streams.



A group of children eagerly clambering on to a truck placed in front of the "Coffee pot", on their way to a picnic in the forest. (Arthur Koppel)

The railway was built over a period of about three years from 1904 to 1907 and operated for about forty-two years, closing down on 30 April, 1949. As far back as 1883 when the first wooden jetty was built on Paarden Island, Messrs. Thesen and Co., shipping and timber merchants, were making enquiries about the feasibility of a small train to run from the jetty to the stores of the town of Knysna. This did not materialise because wooden rails were laid down and goods were brought up to the Customs House or Queen's warehouse in mule-drawn trucks. But the seed had been planted, and the idea of a regular railway to run between the Thesen sawmill in the forest at Bracken Hill and the town took root when Mr. C.W. Thesen approached Messrs. Arthur Koppel Ltd., a firm in Cape Town representing an engineering enterprise in Germany, for estimates of the cost of construction of such a railway for transporting timber.

Koppels offered to do a 'flying survey' and noted all the difficulties described of the line having to cross private, public and Government-owned land, of having to go up and down thickly-wooded hills and valleys and crossing rivers etc. The costs appeared to be prohibitive, so much so that Thesens decided to shelve the scheme and notified Koppels on 24 November 1901 to that effect.

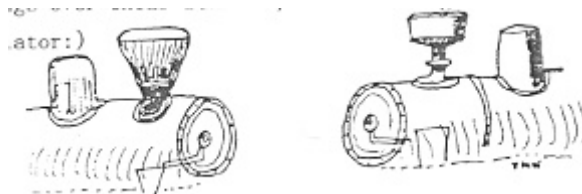
But then something happened to make them change their minds and they contacted Koppels again and asked for the survey to be done by one of their engineers. They then approached to Government in the persons of Dr. (later Sir) Thomas Smartt, Commissioner for Public Works and Mr. (also later Sir) Thomas Price, General Manager of the Cape Government Railways (C.G.R) who both came to Knysna to inspect the proposed route. Mr. Hicks, the Koppels engineer, carried out his survey, and soon the good news came that Mr. A. Douglass, Commissioner of Railways had agreed to grant a subsidy of £1000 per mile as soon as the necessary Act had been passed by Parliament. This was "The South-Western Railway Company, Limited, Act, 1904, No. 16, May 31, 1904" which was assented to on the 28 May, 1904.

Sleepers

The Government's interest in the forest railway was owing to the Cape Government Railway's need for more sources for railway sleepers and also, the possibility of the new line becoming a useful means of linking Knysna with the narrow-gauge railway which started at Avontuur. But they were not prepared to put up any more money at this stage for such a link. Although the excitement and interest in the new railway was intense in Knysna and the Divisional Council "unanimously" adopted a resolution to assist the South Western Railway Company in every way, Mr. I.W.O. Read grumbled that the farmers were still unable to reach a market for their products and that he hoped the line would be laid soon and on to Avontuur. Unfortunately this did not take place.

The Act

The Act gave the Authority to build the railway; defined the route the railway was to follow; authorised the extent of the various deviations; gave authority to construct stations and sidings; defined compensation for, and transfer of, land ownership where the railway crossed such land; gave the Government the right (if it suited them), to buy the Company after twelve months' notice; established the right to approve tariffs of passenger fares and goods; and (rightly), insisted on every engine to be fitted with spark arrestors (to prevent forest fires). These spark arrestors gave the engines their "coffee pots", fat, bulbous fittings over their funnels, or a fitting rather like the inside of a coffee percolator:).



The 'percolator' funnels of the locomotives.

Provision had also to be made for fire breaks of "at least ten feet wide within a distance of at least 30 feet on each side of the line. There were to be not less than three trains a week from terminus to terminus. Many provisos and conditions and safeguards (for the Government) were built into the Act, but being a private Bill this was to be expected.

The other private forest railway - Evelyn-Pirie Forest Railway

There was in fact to be only one other private forest railway in the Cape and that was the narrow gauge Evelyn-Pirie forest railway 16 miles out of Kingwilliamstown on the slopes of the Amatolas. It was owned and built by Mr. J.A. Howse a well-known saw-mill owner in the eastern Cape. The railway was built in 1910, was 2 and 1/2 miles long, starting at the saw-mill at an altitude of 2,320 ft. With the working out of the forest the Evelyn-Pirie Forest Railway closed down in 1917.

First Board Meeting of the SWR Co.

The South Western Railway Company held its first Board Meeting on 12 February 1904. Members of the Board were the brothers C.W. and Hjalmar Thesen, George Parkes, snr., H.P. Morgan and J.H. Templeman. Mr. C.W.

Thesen, the prime mover in the enterprise, was elected Chairman. Less than two months later the Company was formally registered, and the survey of the projected line completed. The cost of construction was initially estimated at a staggering £71,609, but the route was re-surveyed and a shorter way through the forest was found bringing down the estimated cost to a more manageable sum of £49,958. A Swedish engineer, Mr. C.A. Westfelt, was appointed to be in charge of construction, and work began in September of that same year. Only local men were employed on the construction and no work was let on contract.

Finances

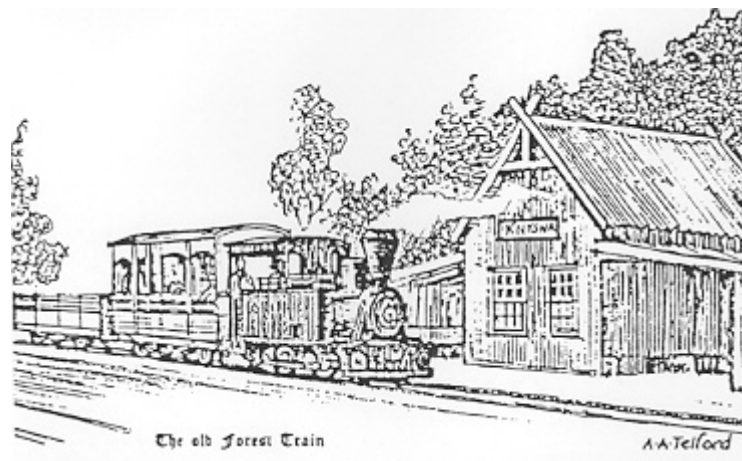
Nominal capital of the Company was £50,000, of which £14,350 was subscribed for by mostly the local public; £16,625 was Government subsidy, and £20,000 was in the form of Debentures held first by the Standard Bank, and then by the Government. Among the local subscribers were several members of the Thesen family, Messrs. Peter Hoethe, T. Bertelsen, H.P. Morgan, Carl Westfelt, George Parkes, snr., B. Wehrle, J. Krog, Mrs. Louis Ryan, Templeman Ltd., Coote Noble and Co., Estate Sarah Morris, Geo. Parkes & Sons, etc. A Trustee was appointed by the Government to represent the interests of their Debenture holders.

Construction

Construction took nearly three years, proceeding without too many engineering difficulties, and in May 1907 the South Western Railway was ready to start operating. The establishment of the little railway consisted of a Manager, a clerk, a ganger, 3 part-time stationmasters, viz. Jack Rex, Templeman station, Deepwalls; Freddie Rabbetts, Bracken Hill (Thesens'), and Tom Perks at Parkes Station (Veldtmanspad). Then there was 1 guard, 1 Engine Driver, Tom Kennett, 1 fireman and 10 railway workers. The old rails on the wharf were taken up early in 1907 and the new narrow gauge rails laid down by the Company. Branch lines were laid to Messrs. Coote Noble & Co., J.H. Templeman and Geo. Parkes & Sons.

There appear to be no records of any official opening of the South Western Railway after it was completed in 1907. On 31 July a large number of townspeople took advantage of the weekly half-holiday to take a trip on the train to Deep Walls and back, and earlier in the month the mayor, Mr. W.P. Cuthbert was: "loud in his praises of the beautiful scenery" when he travelled on the line from the little Knysna station, along the edge of the lagoon, across the hills and into the forest.

The Knysna station situated down below where Oracle Works and Rinzai wood are now, was a little corrugated iron building with a pitched roof and lean-to's on either side lined with wood on the inside.



The old Forest Train in front of Knysna Station.

"Water pirates"

The railway line skirted the lagoon across the properties of W.H. Mason (now Costa Sarda), Adam McIntosh (now Lagoonside Caravan Park) and W.P. Cuthbert (now Waterways) - a good flat shoreline safe from floodtides thanks to the Paarden Island causeway. Then it rose somewhat to cross the Heads road (George Rex Drive) just below the turn-off from the present N2 at what was then known as Keurdrift. A few yards east of Keurdrift was the first water tank (near the present Staniforth property), where with a canvas chute the engine would be "watered". It was at this spot, taking advantage of the water cascading down, that a group of local washerwomen used to gather to do their laundry. "Water pirates" they were dubbed! From here the line

continued to rise slightly across the lands of Melkhoutkraal (then owned by Mrs. G. Stroebel) and Hunter's Home, owned by Thomas and William Horn, and across the top of Woodbourne, passing George Rex's grave and across what is now the Industrial Area north of the Coloured cemetery, winding its way round the outskirts of Hornlee from the Hornlee Hotel and down following the curve of Fountain Road to the Noetzie road and climbing along the side of the hills at "the Horseshoe", making an almost complete circle to ease the gradient.

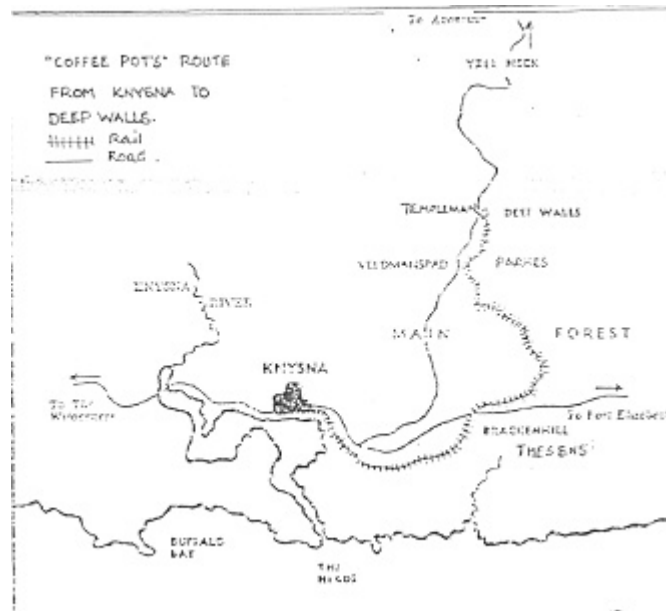
This particular area of fynbos was covered with watsonias in the summer and Tom Kennett, the genial engine driver, would readily stop anywhere along the route for those who wished to pick flowers.

Parkes Station

Then came the 8-mile siding where timber was sometimes loaded on to a truck which had been shunted off on to the spare line while the rest of the train carried on to the terminus. At the 12th mile was Bracken Hill Station, where Thesens had their saw-mill and a shop. The saw-mill was later to move to Paarden Island in the 1920s. From Bracken Hill the line went through the forest coming out just before Veldtmanpad, where it travelled alongside the road for a short distance to Parkes Station at mile 16. Here the Parkes's had a small settlement and shop and a saw-mill which they had taken over from Sheppard & Williams in 1892. Goods and mail were brought there by the "Coffee Pot". (The mail contract was quite a little shot in the arm for the Company and the "Coffee Pot" was a welcome postman right up to the terminus and back). If the Parkes's stationmaster's wife, known as "the Forest Fairy", wished to board the train here, a bench would have to be placed in one of the open trucks for her, as being a very heavy lady, she was quite unable to fit into the caboose!

Deep Walls

From the 18-mile siding the line carried on to its final station, Templeman, and the terminus at Deep Walls. Here there was a large open clearing in the forest which served as a central collecting depot for logs from the main forest. This was approximately four hours from Knysna by train, 20 miles by "Coffee Pot" and twelve miles by road - a gradual rise from sea level to 1,400 ft. (May I, at this point, stress the name is Deep Walls, not Diepwalle). The flat loading ground can be seen on the left of the road, and on the right was the home of the part-time stationmaster, Jack Rex, grandson of George Rex. He was succeeded by Sarah Van Rooyen, who was in turn, followed by Salmon Franszen. In Spring, narcissi and snowdrops can be seen still flowering where the stationmaster's garden used to be. Templeman's saw-mill was situated on the rise above the road.



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

Rolling Stock:

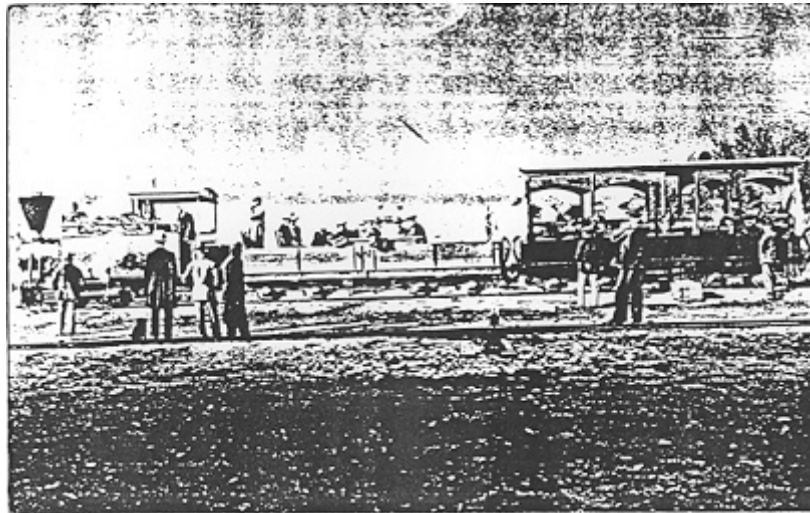
Engines -

- Orenstein & Koppel with side tank, in use from 1905. Re-tubed, 1936. Cost £915.

- Orenstein & Koppel with side tank, 150 h.p., in use from 1907, brought in on SS Agnar. Re-tubed, 1939.
- Orenstein & Koppel with side tank, in use from 1907. Re-tubed, 1936. Cost £915
- A Hendrie-designed engine bought 2nd-hand from Umzinto narrow gauge railway. Re-tubed 1941

Trucks and wagons:

There were 33 trucks: 15 bogies and 1 covered bogie; 14 small flat trucks; 1 large flat truck and 2 bogie body trucks. The trucks were designed to carry up to 70 tons of logs @ 4d per ton per mile, this tariff remaining practically unaltered, increasing by 0.8 of a penny by 1949 - after 42 years! Nor were logs the only freight the train carried - finished timber from the mills back to Knysna, goods for the shops and domestic freight was also carried - and of course, passengers too. (When Messrs. Geo. Parkes & Co. moved their saw-mill from the town to the Industrial Area, they donated 2 of the flat bogies left at the mill to Millwood House).



The first train to the forest.

The covered bogie or caboose cum-passenger "coach" was converted locally being equipped with wooden seats and arched "windows" with no glass and open to the elements. So when it rained the openings were boarded up which not only excluded all the light but also made it impossible to enjoy the scenery.

| South-Western Railway Company, Limited. | | | | | |
|---|---------|------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| Time-Table from 19th. July, 1907, until further notice | | | | | |
| STATIONS. | | MONDAY. | THURSDAY. | SATURDAY. | |
| Knysna | Dep. | 9.0 a.m. | 1.30 p.m. | 1.0 a.m. | |
| Bracken Hill | Arr. | 11.0 a.m. | 2.45 p.m. | 9.0 a.m. | |
| Bracken Hill | Dep. | 11.15 a.m. | 3.0 p.m. | 9.15 a.m. | |
| Parke's Station | Arr. | 12.20 p.m. | 3.45 p.m. | 10.20 a.m. | |
| Parke's Station | Dep. | 12.25 p.m. | 3.50 p.m. | 10.25 a.m. | |
| Templeman's Station | Arr. | 12.50 p.m. | 4.10 p.m. | 10.50 a.m. | |
| Templeman's Station | Dep. | 1.30 p.m. | 4.25 p.m. | 11.0 a.m. | |
| Parke's Station | Arr. | 1.55 p.m. | 4.45 p.m. | 11.25 a.m. | |
| Parke's Station | Dep. | 2.0 p.m. | 4.50 p.m. | 11.30 a.m. | |
| Bracken Hill | Arr. | 3.0 p.m. | 5.20 p.m. | 12.1 p.m. | |
| Bracken Hill | Dep. | 3.15 p.m. | 5.40 p.m. | 12.45 p.m. | |
| Knysna | Arr. | 5.15 p.m. | 7.0 p.m. | 4.5 p.m. | |
| SINGLE FARE. | | | | | |
| | | Knysna | Bracken Hill | Parke's | Templeman. |
| Knysna | — | 1s. | — | 1s. 4d. | 1s. 8d. |
| Bracken Hill | 1s. | — | 6d. | — | 8d. |
| Parke's | 1s. 4d. | 6d. | — | — | 6d. |
| Templeman | 1s. 8d. | 9d. | 6d. | — | — |
| Return Tickets, fare and a half available for seven days. | | | | | |
| Children under 3 years free, over three and under 12 half fare. | | | | | |
| Minimum charge sixpence. | | | | | |

The first time table, 1907.

Madeira-type chairs

When visitors from the Royal Hotel went on to the train for a day's outing my father sent down 2 Madeira-type chairs with a railway worker beforehand to be placed in an open truck for the benefit of the passenger.

Mr. H. Noren, first secretary and manager of the Railway who resigned to join up in World War I, noted that "quite a number of celebrities travelled in the passenger caboose, such as General Lord Methuen on his way to the Port Elizabeth Show, and Dr. (Sir) Leander Starr Jameson. "Dr. Jim", then Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, and Dr. Smartt and party, arrived quite unexpectedly in Knysna by car on 2 December, 1907, on a holiday trip (the P.M.'s first visit to Knysna). They visited the Heads and the jetty spending the night at the Criterion Hotel, inviting Mr. C.W. Thesen and Mr. Steytler to dinner. Next day they had their two motor cars loaded on to the train and travelled to Bracken Hill from where they went by cart to see the experimental station at Edinburgh. They then re-joined the "Coffee Pot" and proceeded to Deep Walls where they had their cars offloaded and continued their journey by road to Uniondale.



Mr. H. Noren, the first Manager of the South Western Railway.

The South Western Railway ran smoothly for the first few years and in 1909 it was already possible to set up a Sinking Fund for the replacement of rolling stock and other essentials, but hard times unfortunately, were around the corner.

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Notes:

George & Knysna Herald, 27/1/1904

Noren, H. Knysna and the forest railway. In The S.A.R Magazine, June, 1911.

George & Knysna Herald, 7/7/1907.

Moir, S.M. Twenty-four inches apart. Surrey, 1963. ill. facing p.65.

Noren, H. Ibid.

George & Knysna Herald, 11/12/1907.

Compiled and written by: Mrs. Margaret Parkes & V.M. Williams.



A graceful curve into the forest.

On completion of the railway in 1907, the Swedish engineer or so-called builder of the whole operation, Mr. Carl Westfelt, was offered the position of Manager of Company. This he declined, and his work completed, was soon to leave Knysna to return to Europe after putting up for auction his household effects on 8 January, 1908. It was then that Mr. H. Noren became the General Manager (he was already Secretary to the Board of Directors and kept that position, as did his successor).

Unique passenger tickets

From the very beginning the railway tariffs were very low. Return fares for passengers to Brackenhill, Parkes Station (at Veldtmanpad) and Templeman (to be later corrupted to 'Templeton') at Deep Walls were 2 shillings, 2 shillings and sixpence and three shillings and fourpence respectively, and as we saw in the last Newsletter, the goods rate was 4d per ton per mile. Passenger tickets were unique - no firm little pasteboard printed rectangles, but a paper receipt, the duplicate of a handwritten statement of name of passenger, starting point (name of station), destination, date, amount of fare and signature of issuer. This was written out twice, one copy for the passenger and the other (the counterfoil) remaining in the book. These counterfoils, what is more, were checked by the auditors (as it appeared in a report addressed to the General Manager, Cape Town by the System Manager, Port Elizabeth, S.A.R. & H., dated 10 March 1941). Ten tickets could not be traced! An amount of thirty-seven shillings and ninepence could not be accounted for. The collected tickets of the passengers, reported the auditor were not being daily matched up to counterfoils. What a treasure house of information to the researcher a bunch of those books of counterfoils would be to-day.

... In a hurry that day!

Passengers were wont to have very leisurely journeys on the 'Coffee Pot' line; the train rarely exceeded 6 miles an hour, particular beauty spots would be pointed out to the passengers by short blasts of the hooter, and on a lovely Spring day engine driver Tom Kennet, as everybody knew, would gladly stop the train for those who wished to pick flowers along the way. There were many prescribed stops on the way to take on water, to unhook empty trucks on sidings to be filled and hooked up again on the way home, and in fact, so leisurely was the pace that a favourite story goes that when the kindly Tom stopped the train one day to offer one of the regular heavily-burdened local washerwomen a lift, she called out no thank you but she was in a hurry that day!

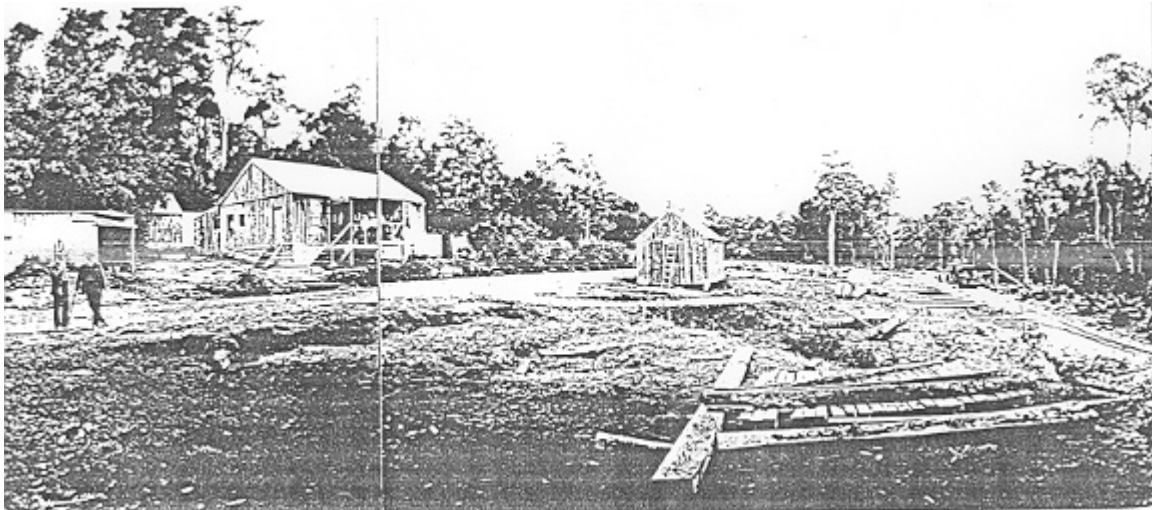
Discovery of Lignite

Running costs of the train were increasingly on the minds of the Directors of the Company. Up to 1911 the Railway had paid out only working expenses and the interest on the Debentures after allowing for depreciation of rolling stock etc. There was nothing over for Directors' fees or for the shareholders. There was at that time, a general depression in the timber industry, and the distance from and cost of transport to markets of other local products also inhibited local prosperity. But then a sudden wave of optimism swept away some of the gloom with the discovery of certain deposits of lignite in the forest and neighbouring parts of the country. The newly-formed Knysna Lignite Syndicate hoped to be able to supply their "brown coal", mined locally, to fire the boilers of the 'Coffee Pot' engines. Deposits had been found, amongst other places, as close as 50 yards from the railway line at Veldtmanpad near Parkes Station. Hopes were high, fortunes were dreamed of, the

lignite was sent to Salt River in the Cape to be made into briquettes for easy and convenient use to fire the boilers of ships and trains, but sadly, the quantity or quality was inadequate, and by mid-1911 the whole venture and the high expectations attending it, faded away. (see Newsletters no's 14 and 15).

"Cut in half"

In spite of the low goods tariff it was felt in some areas that the railway was being under-utilised. Pennies had to be "cut in half" apparently, according to 'Jack' (John, E.) Rex writing to the new Manager, John Alexander Wilson on 15 June 1915. From Templeman Station, Deep Walls, where he was Station Master, he advised lowering the tariff though '...on sleepers (only) to say threepence halfpenny each from here, and proportionately from the other stations. The train has to come up to this and often goes away empty, and as the track is downhill very little coal is used. I am sure if this were done the Rail would be more patronised.'



Jack Rex's house at Deep Walls illustrating the open area of the railway terminus

... From Engine Driver to Mayor

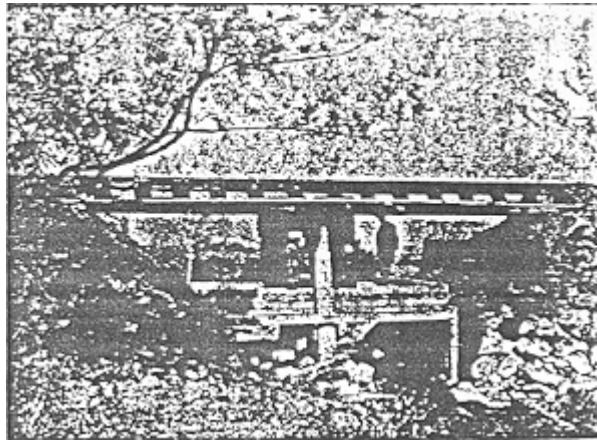
John Alexander Wilson was appointed General Manager of the Railway when Mr. H. Noren resigned to join the army in World War I. "Alex" (as he was always known) Wilson started his career as a railway man in England, serving his time with the Great Eastern Railway; later he went to sea as a ship's engineer on board Thesens' ss Agnar. It was an easy step then to take up the appointment with the South Western Railway following in the steps of his predecessor as General Manager of the Company and Secretary to the Board of Directors. Being a practical man he soon became a Jack-of-all-trades and when the leanest days came he ran the railway on a shoe-string. Which he had to do most of the time in fact, as there was rarely any money for extras. At times he acted as station master, booking clerk or engine driver all at once, running the railway practically singlehanded. In addition to this he played an important part in civic affairs acting as a town councillor for many years and serving as Mayor from 1939 - 1945. His wife and family seemed settled in England which meant that he had a good deal of spare time on his hands.

Mrs. Margaret Parkes recalls: "His Mayoress was my mother-in-law, Mrs. Roward Parkes. Alex was on the Council at the same time as my father, and Uncle Alex, as we knew him, called every Monday evening at our home. He and Father would discuss civic affairs until Father eventually fell asleep, Mother being left to hold the fort! During the war he was Chairman of the Governor General's Fund and was a familiar figure about town always with a cigarette in a cigarette holder. He died in Knysna aged 83, and his headstone was erected by his fellow Freemasons. He was also a J.P., and for 10/- would take you for your driver's licence test making you stop and re-start your car on the hill past the Rectory."

Floods

In earlier more difficult days in 1916, on 4 May, Knysna, after torrential rains throughout the entire District and beyond, was badly hit when the rivers came down in flood. The flood not only washed away the brand-new concrete bridge over the Knysna river but also all but washed away some of the little railway bridges in the forest over which the "Coffee Pots" hauled their truckloads of timber and occasional passengers. In some places, e.g. at the 15th mile, 1,820 tons of earth were washed away, and some of the embankments, especially

at the 10th mile, were also washed away. Filling and repairs were started immediately and before 2 June, a mere month later, when the first train was again able to run to Deep Walls, approximately 16,368 tons of material had been excavated, carried and deposited to replace what had been washed away.



Flood and washaway damage to the line.

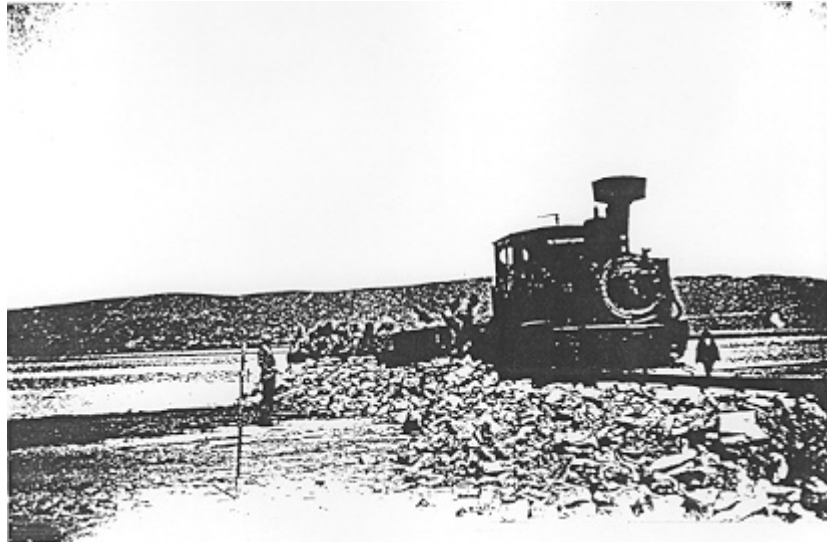
The railway had, of course, been put out of action while the repairs were on the go which meant a loss of traffic and loss of revenue. It was a bad year all round for the Company with World War I having caused a falling off of trade as a result of the reduction in the number of ships calling at the port. Meanwhile maintenance and general repairs had to continue to keep the rolling stock and the "permanent way" (the railway term for the "line") in good order.

Sleeper factory moved!

At last, in 1919, the Company made a profit and was able to pay a small (2%) dividend to its shareholders. Cost of Living allowances were paid to staff for the first time, and a small increase in tariffs, with the approval of the South African Railways, was adopted. That was the good news, but the bad news was that in that same year the Government moved the sleeper factory, i.e. the creosoting plant for railway sleepers, from Knysna to Mossel Bay. This was a real blow because it meant no more barrels of creosote to be brought to the port (mostly from Goole in Yorkshire) to be conveyed by the railway to the factory and no more treated sleepers to be conveyed by the railway back to the wharf for export, or to other points from where they would be taken to other destinations inland. Mr. C.W. Thesen wrote to the Government saying this was "a detrimental action ... which may have serious consequences to the South Western Railway and the district ... " and he wished to know whether the action constituted a breach of contract between the Government and the Company. The 'detrimental action' was a real hardship with many a repercussion to the fragile economy of the town but the dauntless Alex Wilson managed to find a new supply of insect-resistant wood and bought 1,000 wit els and hard pear sleepers @ 1/9d each. A little before the time he introduced an innovation to the line in the form of a motor trolley, a most comfortable conveyance whose motive power was provided at the rear by two local men. On the down grades the trolley required no help and sped along at about 20 miles an hour, "although," wrote the editor of the Knysna Mail and George Advocate on 7 January 1919, "... the rate of travelling might have been easily increased to sixty miles an hour where the fall of the line was particularly great."

New engine from Umzinto

Throughout the 1920s and '30s maintenance costs and taxation took their toll and soon another engine had to be bought. The S.A.R. was of assistance in this regard providing a 2nd-hand engine no longer required on the Umzinto line for the nominal sum of £600. The engine was in good condition and gave many years of service. But in 1927 perhaps the most serious blow which fell was when the S.A.R. finally connected Knysna with George by the standard 3 ft.6 ins. gauge line and any hopes that they would eventually take over the forest railway were dashed as all narrow gauge lines were considered to be obsolescent. Nevertheless the South Western Railway was to keep its "Coffee Pots" going, with many ups and downs , for another twenty years.



Forced to contribute to its own obsolescence, the "Coffee Pot" brings stones for the foundations for the new 3' 6" gauge railway bridge over the lagoon.

The resourceful Alex Wilson did his best and worked wonders making new water tanks from old boiler plates and re-tubing engines with 2nd-hand re-conditioned tubes and effecting every possible economy. All very necessary since revenues from the wharf had also decreased drastically because it soon became so much cheaper to bring goods to Knysna by train than by sea that the landing and shipping activities at the wharf died down with fewer ships coming into port with cargo.

Lack of stability

Over the years the Company was finding it increasingly difficult to pay the interest on the debentures owed to the Administration. On the death of Mr. Hjalmar Thesen in 1935, Mr. Thomas G.B. van Veen was appointed as Trustee (without fees or remuneration of any sort) for the debenture holders, i.e. the S.A.R. The Directors of the S.W.R. had been without fees almost from the beginning, and when some of them decided to pay themselves what they considered their due, they were obliged to re-fund the amounts as the finances were in such a parlous state. The Administration eventually agreed to reduce the interest on the debentures by £200 p.a., but even so, the Company seldom made enough money to pay even the reduced amount regularly. The whole vexed question became in the end one of the factors which brought about the demise of the S.W.R. There was increasingly a lack of stability; profit and loss literally see-sawed; in 1938 there was a debit balance of £879; in 1939, the railway had a "remarkable recovery", in 1937 the revenue from landing and shipping at the wharf took another knock when the privately owned petrol company transferred their business to Mossel Bay; at the end of 1939 there was a credit balance of £36 - after an amount of £500 had been paid towards the outstanding debentures interest, as well as £570 to Thesens towards the repayment of the working capital they had loaned the Company free of interest - and, in November and December of that same year, there were five trains instead of three running each week to cope with the increased demand! The Administration had come to the rescue by arranging with the state saw-mills at George to order timber through the Forest Department to be transported on the S.W.R. and proclaiming the Port Elizabeth-Knysna road a transportation route via Kruis Valley, Templeman and Concordia.



"Alex" Wilson

Loads were being "pirated"

The new Trustee for the debenture holders, Mr. L.C. Stokes, travelled the line, found it in good repair, was impressed to see the several water tanks made up from plates of scrapped engine boilers and the "Heath Robinson" telephone line patched up by the ingenuity of Alex Wilson. But road transport, competition for haulage by lorries, was now more openly rearing its ugly head. Loads were being "pirated" even along the transportation route proclaimed to protect the Railway. It was cheaper and quicker. The distance from the S.W.R. Knysna station by rail to the terminus of the line was 19 and a half miles, whereas by road, suitable for heavy transport, it was only 12 and a half miles. And there was no double handling. One of the timber merchants who had a contract with the Government to supply 5000 cu. ft. of yellowwood logs was known to be guilty of transporting them by road to Knysna even though they were supplied from a point close to the line, and even though he was a Director of the Railway Company. Nevertheless, in 1941 the year closed with a credit balance of £310 - quite a record!

Broken rails

In 1944 a Committee of three from the S.A.R. & H. came to Knysna to examine and report on the state of the "Coffee Pot" railway with a view to its being closed down. They interviewed Alex Wilson, Messrs. C.W. and H. Thesen and Mr. Ballenden of the Forestry Department. Corrosion was very bad on the line and "broken rails" were likely to become a problem, From the beginning of September it had already been stated that the line would carry no more passengers. At this stage it seemed that Thesens were the only concern interested in keeping it going as they had concessionary rights in certain pine forests a few miles beyond the railhead. But although the S.A.R. & H. recommended closing down the railway immediately because of the deterioration of the line, they were more or less forced to find means of keeping it going at least temporarily, because of the shortage at the time of motor transport caused by World War II. So it was decided to have the line re-conditioned with old rails at scrap rates of 30/- per ton from South West Africa which the Administration

would supply provided Thesens would put up the money. They were to advance approximately £4,000 as a loan which would be repaid out of profits (after the interest on the debentures was met).

In 1946 the re-laying of the track was completed with the second-hand rails and pronounced good for another 20 years. But safer rails were not the whole answer to the manifold problems of the little railway. After the end of the war it was used less and less. Messrs. Parkes & Sons found it uneconomical to rail their timber and now used private lorries, as did the Forestry Department, and when Thesens set up a new mill at Tentershoek about 10 miles beyond the terminus of the railway even they resorted to motor transport. This meant a drop in the Company's earnings of approx. £5,000 p.a. There was now no longer enough money to pay the wages of the few employees left.

Serious accident and liquidation

In 1947 the S.W.R. had its first and only serious accident, and became involved in litigation. It was sued by one Andries Johannes Fourie on behalf of his minor child, Andries Fourie, for an amount of £2,005 damages. The child lost his hand in the accident. Tom Botha recalled: "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 see the doctor. Although the S.W.R. won the case they had to pay costs, and this bolt from the blue turned out to be the final blow which brought about the demise of the "Coffee Pot" railway. The historic decision was taken on 7 November 1947 to liquidate the South Western Railway Company and close down the railway by the Chairman of the Board and the General Manager of the S.A.R. & H. The railway's assets were to be disposed of by tender. The highest tender which came in was £11,000, it was accepted, and the entire railway with the exception of one engine which went to the Witwatersrand, was sold to a sugar concern. The official closing date was fixed for 30 April 1949, and it was Tom Botha who drove the last train on the line. It was a sad day for the people of Knysna to have to bid farewell forever to their unique and beloved little 'Coffee Pot' railway.

Dismantling of the line

Mrs. E. Dickson and Tom Botha were to be responsible for the dismantling of the line, - every sleeper and coupling and piece of rail. Mrs. Dickson and her husband were Stationmaster and booking clerk at the S.W.R. Knysna station for the last seven years of the railway's life. They took over the responsibilities from the Gruels. (Mr. Gruel, one time steward on the ss Agnar, was well-remembered by many a Knysna pupil from their trips to school by sea). Mrs. Dickson recalls nostalgically some of the joy-rides in the 'Coffee Pot', particularly the moonlight picnics in the forest in the railway's happier days.

Tom Botha started pulling up the rails and sleepers at Deep Walls loading them on to the lorries driven daily to Knysna by John Westraad. Mrs. Dickson did the checking and then they were transhipped on to S.A.R. trucks to be railed to their destination. It was a difficult task and took over a year. Soon there was nothing left beyond a broken rail or two which was made use of to tether a goat or a pig in the backyard of a Hornlee cottage. The broad swathe which the line had cut through the forest and bush was inexorably re-claimed by the forest and bush; nearer the town buildings and new roads have obliterated its course. A modest monument remains however, in the form of a foot or two of rail set in the pavement on the right hand side of Long street diagonally opposite Thesen House. When you pass, pause a little and try and imagine the little train fussing and puffing through the town before climbing up to the forest all those years ago.

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Notes:

- Rex Family Papers. Box 5, item 308. In: South African Library, Cape Town.
- South Western Railway Co. Ltd., Directors' Report. 14 January, 1936.
- South Western Railway Co. Ltd., Manager's Report for year ending 1939.
- Duff, Allen. Knysna's "Coffee Pot Railway". In: Personality, 26.5.1966.

Compiled and written by: Mrs. Margaret Parkes & V.M. Williams.