

# THE ONE-HUMPED CAMEL IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: IMPORTS TO AND USE IN THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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## ABSTRACT

Rinderpest reached the Cape of Good Hope (CGH) in mid 1896. A massive death rate in cattle and especially, work oxen put the rural economy at risk from loss of transport and draught animals. The CGH government reacted quickly, importing camels from West Africa in February 1897, with a view to testing their susceptibility to rinderpest and their suitability for substituting for the roles of oxen. Small numbers of camels arrived in CGH over the next 15 years from Rhodesia (originally from India) and Egypt. In this early period, however, the few camels imported were used to substitute oxen only in postal deliveries in Gordonia, horses by police in the same area and occasionally for educational and exhibition purposes.

**Key words:** Novel introduction of domestic animals, police services, postal services, rinderpest.

Rinderpest was most probably introduced into subSaharan Africa from India or Arabia between 1887 and 1889 by cattle brought into Eritrea by the Italian Army (Mack, 1970; Rossiter, 1994). By early 1896, the disease had crossed the Zambezi, and in the course of its progress it had “mowed down the whole bovine race in its passage” (Coillard, 1898) and “hundreds of carcasses lay here and there, on the roadside, or piled up in the fields”. It had not reached South Africa by March 1896, because it was not reported in a survey of South Africa at that time (Wallace, 1896) but it must have done so very shortly afterwards. There are conflicting accounts of the numbers and percentages of the totally naïve population that succumbed to the disease. The rural economy was, however, at risk of total collapse as transport and cultivation of the land depended on the use of oxen.

The one-humped camel (*Camelus dromedarius*), also known as the Arabian camel and the dromedary, was probably among the last of the major domestic species to be put to regular use by man (Wilson, 1998). There is no firm evidence for its place of domestication, but the most likely geographical area is southern Arabia in what is now northeastern Yemen and western Oman. From this original centre of domestication, it spread rather quickly to its “natural” areas of distribution in the Near and Middle East, South Asia, the Horn of Africa and North Africa.

At a much later time it was introduced into “new” areas including Australia, North and South America, The Caribbean, Southeast Asia, southern and central Europe and – of particular relevance to this study – the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean off the west coast of Africa (Wilson, 1984). The conventional wisdom is that the principal role of the camel was that of transport and especially, the transport of people. That this was the camel’s role was reinforced in the popular mind set by pictures of well known or influential people – including Winston Churchill and the British explorer and Arab advisor Gertrude Bell – riding camels. In traditional camel-owning societies, however, the camel was above all a dairy animal and only secondarily a beast of burden. The misconception served the camel well, however, in its translation to new lands whither it was imported expressly to serve as a burden, transport and saddle animal. It fulfilled these tasks – helping to build railways, moving crops from farm to market, carrying the mail and taking police and armies to far flung places they would otherwise have had difficulty in reaching – in southern Africa for the better part of a hundred years from the 1880s to the 1980s. This paper draws on a variety of official and private historical sources in an attempt to portray the role of the camel in the development of South Africa but more especially of the territory that was the Cape of Good Hope.

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## Imports and Exports

The concept of using camels to assist in the development of southern Africa originated at least as early as 1861. A 4-page memorandum dated 27 May 1861 from Robert Moffat Junior – who described himself as a trader on the southeastern border of the Khalagare Wilderness – was sent to Richard Southey the Colonial Secretary (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO, Volume 4120, Reference M46). This was apparently a follow up to earlier enquiries by the Cape government in India as to the cost of purchasing camels there which had been established at about £10 per head. Moffat requested administrative assistance for the purchase of camels for his business. He declared that he was willing to deposit £150 with Government towards the cost of: (a) purchasing 2 males and 4 females or 1 male and 3 females, young and well trained; (b) 1 competent native attendant; and, (c) the whole number of pack saddles. He also engaged to pay additional expenses if necessary of landing them at Table Bay, feeding them and then shipping them to Walwich [sic] Bay where he required them. He also broached the possibility of obtaining camels from Zanzibar, but went on that he was “anxious that if entertained the matter may be kept quiet.” A note on the letter indicates that it was answered on 8 July but no trace of this reply has been found.

Some 33 years were then to elapse before there are other records of camels. A letter from J.C. Juta and Co., Booksellers, Publishers and Stationers of Cape Town dated 28 February 1894, addressed to Henry de Smith Esq of the Colonial Secretary's Office (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO, Volume 4296, Reference J4) acknowledges the receipt of a letter of yesterday's date [not found] being an order for Major Leonard's book on the camel and promises to deliver it on its publication. Major Leonard's seminal work on camel management and disease was in fact, published in 1894 (Leonard, 1894). Leonard – a former colonial veterinary officer who had seen much service in India and Egypt – immigrated to South Africa in 1895. Within a year of his arrival he embarked on a minicrusade for the introduction of the camel in to the southern African region (Leonard, 1896a; 1896b; 1896c; 1896d). In spite of his short period of stay, he was already convinced that the “development and expansion of our South African empire northward, to beyond the Zambesi [sic], towards the unknown interior” would best be achieved by the use of camels. The minicrusade he mounted – he even wrote to Rhodes and received

a polite but clearly negative reply (Leonard, 1896a) – met with little response. Leonard was, however, certain that “the day is at hand, and let all those who are interested in the future of South Africa hope it is not far distant” when camels would take their rightful place in the spectrum of domestic animals.

Very shortly after Leonard advocated their use, however, the first known batch of camels did arrive in South Africa (Cape of Good Hope). A voluminous correspondence preceded this historic moment that involved the Cape Government, the British Consulate in the Canary Islands, the British representative in Dakar in French West Africa [now Senegal], Chargeurs Réunis (United Cargo, who were the owners or agents of the boat that eventually transported the camels) and the Union Steam Navigation Company. The British Shipping Company was involved as it had been asked if it could divert its ship the “Greek” to Dakar to pick up 10 camels to which it replied that it could do so but for a cost of “not under £600 whether for one camel or ten” (letter 8 February, 1897). Clearly shocked at this enormous sum, the Department of Agriculture replied that such an expenditure would be “carefully considered.....and you will be informed” but it does not appear that they ever were. Shortly, prior to this (3 February 1897) a telegram had been received by the Under Secretary for Agriculture in response to earlier enquiries from the Consul in Teneriffe that there were plenty of camels in the Canaries and that he recommended the charter of a light steamer for their transport. On 6 February the Chargeurs Réunis agent in Cape Town was asked if he could obtain 10 camels for landing at Teneriffe or Dakar and on the 10<sup>th</sup> he sent a telegram to Paris office asking if they could “procure 10 camels to be shipped at Dakar per SS Ville de Pernambuco on account of Cape Government. Cost, insurance and freight landed at Cape Town, mortality (i.e. on board) on account of consigne”. A reply was received on 11 February that they could “ship 10 camels Teneriffe cost, insurance, freight 42 sterling landed Cape Town. Telegraph if in order”. This offer was accepted for “about 3 males and 7 females in prime of life and sound condition” on 12 February. Later that same day an attempt was made to cancel the order but “if difficulty will accept”. There clearly were difficulties as Chargeurs replied on 16 February that the “order cannot be cancelled camels will leave Teneriffe 25 February. Expected Cape Town second fortnight March”. A handwritten note was pinned to the incoming telegram to “inform Professor Koch that ‘camels are coming’ and ask for instructions”. The “Ville de Pernambuco” docked

at Cape Town on 27 March 1897 out of Teneriffe in the Canary Islands via Luanda (Angola) with 10 camels for the Cape Government on board (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). The number of 10 was that said by Professor Koch (telegram Koch to Agricola 5 February 1897, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052) to be necessary for “experimental purposes in connection with the rinderpest” epidemic that had swept through eastern and southern Africa in 1895-1896 and had killed up to 90% of the cattle herds (see Section on Use/ Experimental purposes and immunology hereafter).

The next camels to arrive in South Africa did so very early in the 20th century. A shipment of 7 dromedary camels (only 6 had set off but 1 produced a calf on the way) arriving from Suez on the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie ship “Kronprinz” was due at Durban on 7 May, 1901 en route to Cape Town. A request from Cape Town (Pitermaritzburg Archives Repository, Source CSO, Volume 1674, Reference 1901/3251) asks that the port officials secure the freight and see to transshipment. This event was the culmination of a series of exchanges between the Cape and Egyptian governments via the office of the Agents General of Egypt in Cairo and of the Cape in London<sup>1</sup>. A first enquiry went from the Cape to Egypt on 26 February and was followed by another on 13 March, 1899. The reply was that breeding camels of the type required could be purchased in Egypt for about £15 (Lord Cromer, Governor of Egypt to Sir David Tennant Chief Secretary, Cape of Good Hope, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). His Lordship went on to say that Mr Stanley Flower, the Director of the Egyptian Zoological Gardens “will be happy to offer his services for the selection and purchase of these camels” and would be prepared to go himself to Suez and see the camels put on board and properly housed. The Principal Veterinary Surgeon of the Egyptian Government had also undertaken to assist Flower in the inspection

of the animals. The Ost Afrika line appeared to offer the greatest facilities for the despatch of the animals at a charge of £35 per head from Suez to Cape Town with boxes and fodder being found by the shipper as well as providing the services of a ‘sais’: the fare for the latter would be £30 and there would be the “inconsiderable item” of his wages in addition to that. A hand written note on the copy of Cromer’s letter calculates the total cost at £330 – say £400 – and enquires of the cost in Western Australia to which the reply was £28<sup>2</sup>. A sum of £500 had been put in the “next year’s estimates” but “of course, no active steps can be taken till the money is voted”. There was further administrative correspondence on the subject culminating in a letter to the German Consul General in Cape Town requesting information on camels in South West Africa which the latter gentleman regretted he could not provide immediately but had taken steps to procure it (letter 29 May 1899 Under Secretary for Agriculture to German Consul General and reply of latter of 30 May, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). These camels were unfortunately not destined to leave their native land as due to an outbreak of plague the Ost Afrika S.S. Co had ceased booking passengers or cargo of any description until further notice (letter Mr S S Flower to Lord Cromer 12 August 1899, (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053).

The decision was now taken to try and obtain camels from Western Australia. Various internal memos discuss the pros and cons, the price of camels, the possibility and cost of shipping and the shipping lines which plied between Western Australia and the Cape. These culminated in a formal letter dated 26 September 1899 from the Cape under Secretary for Agriculture to his counterpart in Western Australia for assistance in the purchase of three male and three female camels that would be used for stud purposes and also for help with arranging for their shipment to Cape Town (Cape Town Archives Repository,

1. At this time the Acting Agent and Consul General in Cairo was Sir Rennell Rodd KCMG CB, born 1858 died 1941, diplomat and author, friend and correspondent of Oscar Wilde, British Ambassador in Rome 1908-1917, Conservative Member of Parliament for Marylebone 1928-1932, created 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Rennell of Rodd 1933.
2. The first camel imported to Australia – the sole survivor of 6 shipped from the Canary Islands – arrived at Port Adelaide in South Australia in 1849. Two more lately landed at Hobart in Tasmania were transhipped to Melbourne in December 1849. There were no further imports until 1860 when 24 camels and 3 Afghan handlers arrived in Melbourne from Karachi. A further 6 arrived from an unknown origin and some of these accompanied the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition and were later used in further exploration. The first large scale import of 121 camels (plus 28 donkeys, 80 sheep, 3 cattle and 1 quagga) was made by Sir Thomas Elder, these arriving at Port Augusta from Karachi in 1866 with 31 Afghans: 59 camels died of mange but the remainder formed the basis of the Australian breeding stock. By 1895, there were probably 6000 camels (including a very small number of Bactrians) in Australia of which more than half in Western Australia (McKnight, 1969).

Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The Australian Secretary replied on 1 November, 1899 to the effect that he was willing to help. Good camels of the desired type (with the females probably in calf) could be obtained in the goldfield of Calgoorlie at about £30, the cost of transferring them to Albany (farther south in Western Australia) would be £30 and sea freight would also be £30. He also strongly recommended that the camels be accompanied by an Afghan which would add a little to the cost. His further recommendation was that one of the male camels should be a two-humped one which he knew personally to be a very fine animal capable of carrying 12 cwt (600 kg): this was offered at £80 and he had placed it under offer at this price. A handwritten addition exercise written on the letter after its arrival at Cape Town calculated the cost of the two-humped camel at £140 and of five others at a total of £590. The letter was forwarded on 7 December 1899 to the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon for his information and favour of his remarks which were that he strongly recommended that the Afghan be engaged (and also for a period in the Cape) and the be purchased "fine bull camel be purchased. The next decision to be made was to reduce the number of camels to 5 instead of 6 as the cost would then be £410 leaving £90 for the Afghan syce, if the budget of £500 was not to be exceeded". An exchange of correspondence now ensued between the Cape and Albany relative to the exact cost of shipping the animals and the Afghan which provided no firm answer but which resulted in a demand for payment by Dalgety of Albany of the amount of £1-8-4 and 7/- for the telegrams they had sent. There was then a series of internal memos about the cost of Australian versus that of Egyptian camels and also the difficulty of getting a quote from Australia on the cost of shipment. Eventually, a decision was made to continue with imports from Egypt once the quarantine had been lifted.

On 17 August, 1900 Mr G A M Angelbeck of Keetmanshoop offered 6 to 8 camels to the Postmaster General, males and females, of which 2 were 2 years old at £40 for the males and £25 for the females at Angra Pequina (copy letter dated 17 August, 1900, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). This letter was forwarded to the Agriculture Department with a query as to whether it was making arrangements to obtain breeding bulls as if one of the post office

bulls died there would be a problem of renewal. The Under Secretary was rather sceptical of the low price if, as had been stated, the animals were good workers and preferred, as inspection at Angra Pequina<sup>3</sup> was impossible, to import camels that would be guaranteed of good quality (hand written memo 6 October, 1900, Under Secretary, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). It was eventually learned that the reason for the low price was that the water situation at Angra Pequina had improved and the camels could therefore, be replaced by oxen (ibid 8 October 1900). There is no indication as to the original provenance of these camels or how they came to be in private hands at such an early date.

Owing to the continued presence of plague in Egypt there was a reversion to Plan B, which is to obtain camels from Australia. It was decided that purchasing a bull at £80 was too risky an enterprise in view of the long transit. Contact was again made with the Western Australia Department of Agriculture requesting them to purchase, after veterinary examination 2 male and 3 female camels at £30 each, transfer them to Albany also at £30 each and ship them to the Cape at a further cost of £30 each (draft letter Under Secretary of Agriculture to Secretary of Agriculture Western Australia January 1900, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). As the Cape Authorities had been unable to identify a ship the Western Australian Department was asked to do this on its behalf. A payment order (draft) for £500 was enclosed with the request letter. The draft letter was subsequently amended for the purchase of 3 males and 2 females. Plan B was, however, very quickly to revert to Plan A. A telegram was sent to Western Australia on 25 January succinctly stating "my letter 11<sup>th</sup> instant withdrawn. Secretary Agriculture" (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The letter that followed in confirmation (14 February 1901) stated in explanation that the Egyptian Government was now in a position to fulfil the order made with them 18 months previously, that it was thought better to obtain them from there and requesting that Western Australia be good enough to return the draft for £500: this last action was done on 20 February (letter Western Australia Department of Agriculture to Under Secretary, Cape Town, Cape Town Archives

3. Angra Pequina probably refers to what is now Luderlitz/Lüderlitz situated on the Namibian coast at the boundary with the Republic of South Africa (26° 37 minutes south, 15° 9 minutes east): in 2007 there is an Angra Pequina farm at 27° 29 minutes south, 26° 33 minutes east in the Orange Free State but this seems unlikely to be the place referred to here.

Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). On 11 March 1901, a cable was received in Cape Town (Agent General London to Agricola, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053) to the effect that 6 camels would be shipped from Suez to Durban on 3 April at a cost of £25 per head plus one camelman free and one at £10, both without food. Messrs Bucknall Brothers of Strand Street Cape Town were immediately asked to undertake their shipment from Durban to Cape Town (Under Secretary of Agriculture, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). In the meantime, another private offer to sell camels again of unknown provenance to the Agriculture Department was made by Mr E F Hartung of Arriss, PO Zwartmodder Gordonia at £40 each for 3 adult males and 3 adult females and at £18 each for "foals" (Hartung to Under Secretary 6 February 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053); although the animals were specified to already have been in Great Namaqualand for 2½ years the offer was refused as the Department was committed to "establishing a good breed in the Colony".

No satisfactory answer being received from Bucknall Brothers with regard to shipment from Durban to Cape Town resort was made to the General Officer Commanding Lines of Communication Cape Town to see if he could get the camels, now known to be arriving at Durban about 7 May on board the "Kronprinz" and not the "Governor" as originally programmed, transhipped to one of the horse transports (Under Secretary of Agriculture 12 April 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). A letter was also written to the Principal Under Secretary Pietermaritzburg asking if he could provide assistance in the matter in collaboration with the Imperial District Naval Transport Officer, Durban who had received instructions to send the camels on by horse ship (Under Secretary of Agriculture 23 April, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The request to the army for assistance was then rescinded. The camels arrived in Durban on schedule on 7 May and were transhipped to the transport ship British Princess sailing Durban to Cape Town on 8 May (telegram, 7 May, Principal Under Secretary Pietermaritzburg to Under Secretary Cape Town, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The camels finally arrived in Cape Town on 13 May "in good condition" in the charge of the Corporal and Private

of the Egyptian Coastguard but in the course of their journey they had increased from 6 to 7 animals as one of the females had given birth to a calf (Under Secretary of Agriculture to Agent General London 15 May 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). This epic journey had taken 27 months from the first enquiry in February 1899 to mid May 1901. The camelmen were eventually returned to Suez but not without a plethora of administrative problems, but were accompanied by a certificate attesting to their good conduct plus £4 each for food on the way and one blanket each to replace those damaged on the inward journey (Under Secretary of Agriculture 23 May 1901 and 29 May 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). An account for £5.50 (five guineas) was eventually submitted by the Natal Government to that of the Cape for the services rendered in connection with the transhipment of the camels (Colonial Secretary's Office Natal ref 3251/01 to USA Cape Town 2 October 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052).

There are apparently mainly anecdotal accounts of 4 camels that arrived in the Cape in 1902 with an unnamed circus that were accompanied by their Egyptian handler Saali Salomon (Hauser, 1988). Horses in the circus did not like the smell of the camels and would "pull, kick and bite each other and who ever tries to hold them". The circus disposed of the camels by selling them to a Paarl farmer who thought he could use them for ploughing. This intended use was apparently unsuccessful. The camels were then sold on to another farmer and shopkeeper at Swartmodder near Upington who had a contract to supply a mail service between Rietfontein and Swartmodder. He tried to harness the camels to a Scotch cart but again this was not a successful enterprise. It seems probable that this relates to the Mier Camel Post.

In 1904, a further 4 camels were imported from Egypt for riding and breeding purposes. Two camels were imported for use at Walvis Bay in 1905. More camels were imported in 1911 from Egypt. Although, it appears that camels were generally imported from Sudan, 3 Berber animals were imported in 1926 and after being kept in quarantine at Cape Town were sent to Upington whence they trekked across the desert to Witdraai (Speight, 1929)

On 14 July 1904, the Commissioner Commanding the Cape Mounted Police wrote to the Under Colonial Secretary recommending "both on

the grounds of economy and utility" that 12 more camels be acquired to replace horses in Gordonia and Kuruman Districts (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO 8237, Reference X30). He went on to say that the 4 camels already at Gordonia were performing very well, preferred browse to forage or grain and one had covered almost 200 miles in just over 2 days: a further argument was that £750 was in the estimates for the purchase of camels. Following several exchanges, verbal and written and external and internal, the British South Africa Company (the government of Rhodesia) offered 12 camels - which had cost £45 for riding animals and £42-10 for draught ones landed at Beira at £60 each (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO 8237, Reference X30). The offer was eventually accepted but there were still several administrative obstacles to overcome before the camels finally made it to the Cape. The camels were to be transported by rail from Bulawayo to De Aar (hand written draft memorandum from CVS to Under Secretary for Agriculture, 11 November 1904 subsequently typewritten and signed by the Under Secretary, (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053). The CVS noted that the Agriculture Department had no objections and that the Colonial Secretary's Department should be advised. The Department of Agriculture "no objection" was, however, subject to conditions and precautions which had already been explained to Major Elliot (of the Cape Police service). These conditions noted that consent must be obtained from the Resident Commissioner of the British Protectorate (that is, Bechuanaland) for the camels to pass through that territory by rail, that the animals must be clean of ticks, the rail waggons must be closed at the bottom and up the sides and be thoroughly disinfected, and that no hay, forage or other food be put on board in Rhodesia but that the waggons could be bedded with saw dust: arrangements for forage and other provender were to be made at Palapye (in the then British Bechuanaland about 150 km south of Francistown). Once arrived at De Aar (some 650 km to the north of Cape Town), the waggons were to be taken to a place where manure and any remaining food could be burned and the waggons cleaned and disinfected. The CVS did not "consider that there is any danger of these camels carrying African Coast Fever but [...] suggest these precautions for the satisfaction of the public". On 30 November 1904. the Chief Traffic Manager wrote to the Under Secretary (ibid, Cape Town Archives) requesting that he inform the representative at Vryburg (250 km north of

Kimberley and a similar distance south of Mafeking) to arrange with the Station Master for the examination of the camels purchased from the BSA Co. He also indicated that the animals would be put on the rail waggons at Gwelo (approximately half way between Salisbury and Buluwayo) but could only be insured by the administration from Vryburg to De Aar. The expected departure was on "10 prox" (10 December) to reach Vryburg at 12:20 a.m. on 12 December but that these arrangements would be confirmed. The total distance by rail from Gwelo to De Aar would have been about 1600 km. There are several other exchanges of correspondence on this subject and especially on inspection right up to 12 December. The CVS recommended that the camel handlers in Rhodesia should be taken on in South Africa under the same terms and conditions to train the Cape Police but he was turned down by the Under Secretary for Agriculture who said that both the Law Department (for the police) and the Post Office were already well satisfied with their own management arrangements. There is also correspondence noting that camels in Rhodesia were infected by mange which prompted the Secretary of the Law Department to write to the Attorney General that camels imported to South Africa should be obtained from the same sources as the earlier imports. There was clearly a delay in the shipment of the camels as on 15 December 1904 C R Edmonds, MRCVS, Government Veterinary Surgeon, CGH certified in Bulawayo that the animals were in a sound and healthy condition (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO 8237, Reference X30). There is later internal correspondence in the Cape Archives regarding these camels after they had been received in CGH (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CO 8237, Reference X30). Sub-Inspector Currie collected the camels at De Aar, whither they had been delivered by Colonel Flint who had originally imported them to Rhodesia from India and wrote to the Officer Commanding 'S' Division of the Cape Mounted Police on 10 January 1905. He took charge of the camels on 20 December and found them to be in very poor condition which he attributed to their being tied down in trucks for 5 days without food or water. On the road from De Aar to Upington the camels, which in accordance with Colonel Flint's instructions had been receiving "no less than 32 lbs of oat hay and oats per diem", had to be rested as they were very footsore on account of the stony conditions. Currie also expressed his displeasure with the saddlery which was "sadly in want of repair; 6 saddles are absolutely useless and fastened together with bits of string".

Most probably, as a result of the import of camels from Rhodesia the Secretary for Agriculture received a letter dated 3 August 1904 from Manning & Leith of 31-32 Jeppe Arcade Johannesburg stating that they could supply any number of camels up to 50 at £50 per head and any number over 50 at £45 per head, cash on delivery CIF at Cape Town. A first consignment of up to 100 head could be landed at Cape Town in 4 weeks time and further lots within 2 months from date of order. The animals being offered were a picked lot, guaranteed over 6 years old, sound and well trained. Attendants and equipment could also be supplied at moderate rates.

Additional camels were imported from Egypt in 1910 (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 591, Reference R66). On 27 June, the British Agency at Hamleh in Egypt wrote to the High Commissioner of the Union of South Africa (Cape Department) in a reply to an enquiry from the latter that the Director General of the Coastguard Service of the Egyptian Government had kindly consented to lend his assistance in obtaining the 10 camels requested and shipping them by the East African route. He further added that the price of male camels in Cairo was approximately £20 and of females was £30. The British Agency was later (9 July 1910) authorised to purchase 8 male and 2 female camels for the Cape Mounted Police at a total cost of £220. On hearing of this initiative, the Postmaster General requested that 3 further female camels be purchased for his department if the first 10 had not already been despatched. He need not have worried as the purchase was to be deferred until October because Captain Hunter, "the Officer most competent to carry out the wishes of the Government" would be absent from Egypt until the 10<sup>th</sup> October (inter alia, letter from Acting Under Secretary for Agriculture to Acting Secretary for Agriculture, Pretoria dated 6 September). The High Commissioner in London had, however, already been informed by letter of 21 August from the Coast Guard Administration that purchase would be deferred until "the forthcoming season for the purchase of remounts viz. in December and January next" and that the additional 3 camels would be purchased at the price already quoted. The camels were not purchased at this time and a letter dated 9 February 1911 from Captain Hunter himself (Director General of the Coast Guard Administration) intimated that a party was proceeding to Sudan to purchase camels for the Coast Guard and that it was hoped that this party would also be able to obtain camels from there

for the Cape. On 26 March 1911, The Commissioner Commanding, Cape Mounted Police curtly requested to the Acting Under Secretary for Agriculture when his camels might be expected. He had obviously been left out of the "loop" of correspondence among the Egyptian Coast Guard, the High Commission in London and the Under Secretary for Agriculture in Cape town. The Under Secretary then wrote abruptly to the High Commission requesting information and received a reply from Captain Hunter dated 15 April 1911 to the effect that the camels purchased for the Union of South Africa would be ready for shipment from Suez "in about 8 weeks' time" and that in due course he would advise the name of the vessel, the departure date and the expected arrival date in Cape Town. On 3 May the Coast Guard informed the High Commissioner that the camels were on their way north from Wadi Halfa and would probably be ready for shipment on the 17<sup>th</sup> proximo (i.e., 17 June) and that he recommended insurance - against loss of the steamer only - of the animals at a cost of £1-1-0 per head. The High Commission replied (19 May) to the effect that they would arrange insurance covering all risks at a total cost of £5/5/-% and that it was not to be done in Cairo. A further hitch then arose as the German line with which it was proposed to ship the camels could only take batches of 3 and at monthly intervals and it was now proposed to ship as one batch with transshipment at Liverpool to which approval was given by the Under Secretary for Agriculture after having consulted verbally with the CMP and the Post Office. On 21 June 1911 the High Commission informed the Under Secretary for Agriculture that they had received information from Captain Hunter at Alexandria that he had accepted an offer from Messrs Donald Currie & Company to ship the camels direct to Cape Town by a steamer due to depart Alexandria on 27 July. The High Commissioner was of the opinion that this presented a much more satisfactory way as transshipment at Liverpool or London would have caused many difficulties. In a 2-word telegram dated 29 July 1911 the Agricultural Department in Cape Town was informed "camels shipped". A hand-written annotation of 2 August on the telegram noted that the camels were on the Goorkha due at Durban on 21 August. A pinned on note of 3 August instructs someone to telephone Major Transport and Mr Lingcross (GPO) of the date of delivery as they had agreed to make all arrangements for taking delivery and transshipping them to the connecting mail steamer for Cape Town. In the meantime a letter dated 8 July 1911 to the High Commissioner in

Cape Town from the Coast Guard provided details of the animals and associated costs and other matters. Freight of 13 camels was to cost £260 with a further £80 for the costs of the 4 Bedouins who were to accompany the animals. The Bedouins would receive an advance of one month's pay in Egypt and would be paid the balance on their return to Suez but they would need board and lodging in Cape Town whilst awaiting a return passage. Four camel slings that had been specially made for loading would also be sent as they would prove useful at Durban and Cape Town. A daily allowance for 40 days (the voyage was expected to take 32 days) of 10 lbs of dhurra maize (that is, sorghum) and 8 lbs of chopped straw was also to be loaded along with an ample supply of rice straw for bedding as well as blankets for the camels and accessories necessary for grooming and feeding. The Coast Guard also informed his excellency that on arrival from Sudan the camels had been put in quarantine for 3 weeks and that during this period one female had been discovered to be infected with trypanosomiasis and one male with filariasis. As it would be a fatal mistake to send these camels to South Africa they had been replaced by 2 males from Sudan in view of the near impossibility of purchasing females in Egypt. Finally, the Coast Guard exhorted the Cape Administration in future to order 3 or 4 camels on an annual basis instead of 12 or 13 after an interval of 5 or 6 years. Copies of the letter were sent to the police and the post office as well as, to the Acting Assistant Principal Veterinary Surgeon in Cape Town. Following various other purely bureaucratic exchanges of correspondence the Chief Railway Storekeeper in Cape Town was sent the Bill of Lading relative to the 13 camels that had arrived there on 3 September. In addition to the Bill of Lading the camels had been accompanied by detailed lists of the names and rates of pay of the Bedouin, of all the equipment and feed and bedding supplied and a minute description of each camel (and from which we learn that they were camels of the Bisharin Arabs of the Sudan and were purchased between 19 and 31 March 1911). The High Commissioner in London was then informed by the Under Secretary for Agriculture to pass on the Department's keen appreciation for the help provided by the Egyptian Coast Guard and also for the excellent work performed by the Bedouins accompanying the camels. The High Commissioner

in London then sent his bill for £840 for all expenses incurred together with a demand for the insurance account of Walsham Bros & Co, for £43-5-9 (for camels insured at £70 each for all risks including mortality at £5/5/-% with 10% discount on the original premium). The Commissioner Commanding, the Cape Mounted Police informed the Agriculture Department on 23 September that the camels had now been released from quarantine and were being sent to Upington on the 25<sup>th</sup> where the 3 females for the Postal Department would be handed over and then charged to them once the exact cost was known.

The perceived success of camels in postal and police work led to the Principal Veterinary Surgeon of the Transvaal Department of Agriculture enquiring, in October 1903, of the Cape police and postal departments on the possibility of purchasing camels from them (National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria File TAD 334 A17604). Both replied coolly that none was available as the camels they had were in constant use: the abrupt response has been attributed to continuing elements of hostility between the Cape and the Transvaal (Smith and van Shalkwyk, 2002).

## Use

### *Experimental purposes and immunology*

Rinderpest ravaged the cattle herds of eastern and southern Africa in 1883 when Thomson (1885) saw the disease in Masailand (for other accounts see Lugard, 1893; Hutcheon, 1897; Jack 1970). The first camels imported were for the express purpose of experimentation with regard to their susceptibility to rinderpest. Professor Koch<sup>4</sup> informed the USA that a minimum of 10 would be required to obtain "decisive results" (telegram Koch to Agricola 5 February 1897, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). By the time, the camels arrived at the Cape their use as experimental animals was no longer required as the "success which had attended the investigations at Kimberley rendered their use as contemplated for experimental purposes in connection with Rinderpest unnecessary" (unattributed and undated typescript but probably early February 1899, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). Two of the 10 original camels were nonetheless, sent to Kimberley and these arrived at

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4. Robert Koch (1843-1910), cofounder with Louis Pasteur of bacteriology/microbiology, isolated anthrax (*Bacillus anthracis*) 1877, tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*) 1882, and for which Nobel Prize Medicine in 1905 and Cholera vibrio (1883) although precedence was awarded in 1965 to *Vibrio cholera* discovered independently by Pacini in 1854. Also developed Koch's postulates: his pupils found the organisms responsible for diphtheria, typhoid, pneumonia, gonorrhoea, cerebrospinal meningitis, leprosy, bubonic plague, tetanus and syphilis. In addition to Germany and South Africa worked in Egypt, India and Java.



the Experimental Station Victoria Compound “in good order and condition” on 8 April 1897 (handwritten note of J W Phillips, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). These were quickly inoculated with “virulent rinderpest blood but without success – the animals proving to be immune to this disease” (unattributed and undated typescript but probably early February 1899, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). Neither animal, in fact, suffered any ill effects at all (telegram Turner to Agricola 28 April 1897, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). As the animals were not required for experiments instructions were given in July for the 2 camels to be put at the disposal of the police in Kimberley (Telegram Agricola to Turner at Victoria Compound 2 July 1897, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052).

### *Police*

As early as July 1897, informal enquiries were made by the Law Department about the possibility of their buying the 10 camels for the police service. On 8 July the USA instructed Dr Turner to place the 2 camels already at Kimberley at the disposal of the Commissioner of Police. The next day a letter indicated that Agriculture would be prepared to transfer the animals at cost, i.e. at £42 “a piece” (USA to Law Department 9 July 1897, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). A reply was sent from the Attorney General’s office on 15 July to the effect that the 2 camels at Kimberley would at present be sufficient for the requirements of the police as the events transpiring in Bechuanaland were keeping the police so busy that they would not have the means to utilise more camels for experiments. Initially at least the use of camels was not a success. Carrying a load of 300 lbs net they both failed “on every occasion” to complete the journey to Morokweng from Kimberley, a distance of just under 100 miles, in the 4 days allowed but this failure could perhaps in part have been attributed to “our ignorance of the animals ways and treatment”. A principal drawback was that the camels ate nothing on the veldt and therefore, had to carry 20-25 lbs of oat hay for each day of travel: in effect this meant that for a journey of only two days one sixth of the load was for the camels’ own nourishment (letter J H Fuller Inspector Commanding C Division to Commissioner Commanding, Cape Police District No 2 undated but c 20 February 1898, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445,

Reference 2052). A handwritten note by the police storekeeper put the cost of feed at 6 shillings per day at Vryberg and at 8 shillings and 6 pence at Morokweng. The Commissioner himself was of the opinion that the camels, being from Teneriffe or Las Palmas were possibly not of the right class as camels in Australia had been very successful and he suggested that further camels should be obtained from there or from Egypt (Letter Commissioner Kimberley to Secretary Law Department 24 February 1898, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). Inspector Fuller shortly changed his mind and wrote a positive report about the bull camel (the cow camel had slipped (miscarriage) a 3-month foetus and was unable to work) which had carried a load of 500 lbs “including Private Roberts who rode him” without any sign of fatigue for 48 miles from Ganesa (in Bechuanand) to Kimberley; the camels were also beginning to eat off the veldt. A recommendation was made that more appropriate riding and pack saddles be obtained from Australia at a cost of about £5 each (letter Fuller to Commissioner Commanding 1 March 1898, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). The cow camel failed to recover from her misfortune and had been shot on 20 April (memorandum Fuller to Commissioner No 2 District 28 April 1898, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052).

Following a verbal enquiry as to the availability of camels the Under Secretary for Agriculture wrote to the Secretary of the Law Department (letter 24 September 1902, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053) informing him that Agriculture was prepared to transfer one male camel from Egypt (£53.13.1), 2 females from Egypt (£107.6.2), 2 female camels from Senegal (£84.0.0) and 2 females the progeny of the preceding females (no cost) to the Law Department at a total cost of £244.19.3. It was almost a month later that the Secretary of the Law Department replied to the USA (letter 21 October, *ibid*) intimating that they would buy the camels for the police, as well as saddles and other equipment and that they would also take over any competent camel drivers. In total one riding saddle, one pack saddle and 6 sets of harness went with the camels to Kimberley as well as 2 camelmen. These last were sent back to Cape Town as a result of which “the savage camel has already sent one kaffir to hospital and severely damaged another” (handwritten note 27 November 1902, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053).

Captain T M Davidson wrote from Upington on 6 December 1903 on the performance of camels in Number 2 District (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source NA 703, Reference B2855 and, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053). He had then been in Gordonia District about 12 months, had no previous experience with camels but had set about studying them with a view to ascertaining whether they could be used for service in the Cape Police. Three men were trained to use the camels which travelled 600-700 miles per month and could penetrate parts of the district that horses could not owing to lack of water. Having started on a dry ration of 20 pounds per diem this was gradually reduced to 5 pounds with veldt grazing providing the rest of their nutrient requirements. The camels “think nothing of 50 to 70 miles through heavy country and journeys of 20 to 25 hours without water have been performed repeatedly”.

The USA seemed determined to put a higher profile on the camel. In a hand written note to the Editor of the Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope (17 May 1904, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053) he penned, “here is more material for your ‘review’ of the camel question”. He went on to add that the “article should give credit where it is deserved by pointing out that it was this Department that first introduced camels to the colony for experiment with rinderpest at the end of 1896 and that it was at the suggestion of the department that they were first used for carrying the Royal Mail in Gordonia & afterwards for police papers there”<sup>5</sup>

On 12 June 1904 the Resident Magistrate in Walfish Bay wrote to the Secretary to the Native Affairs Department suggesting “with a view to curtailing one of the most expensive items in the expenditure of this Establishment” the substitution of camels for horses for police patrol purposes (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source NA 703, Reference B2855<sup>6</sup>). This would be a much cheaper alternative as the patrols from the settlement to the borders of the district entailed a 50-mile ride over most trying sandy and desert country which told on horses (and which were being worked exceptionally hard at the time because of the war in the German hinterland) but

would be nothing to a camel. The initial reply was that there were no camels available but that a search was being made to find some. Another attempt by the magistrate to obtain camels was made on 19 July on the grounds that his horses were getting old and that horses newly imported by the Germans (to South West Africa) stamped into the territory (Walvis Bay) and risked transmitting glanders to the police horses. A second letter of the same date emphasised more strongly the problems of glanders, underlined the fact that in the present circumstances (with weary and sick horses), a man could not be sent across the German border for postal or telegraph services and suggesting that if camels were obtained from the Canary Islands the Union Castle Company could put into Walvis Bay to unload them. These elicited a letter dated 1 August 1904 from the Secretary to the Native Affairs Department to the Under Secretary for Agriculture enquiring as to the possibility of purchasing camels from the Canary Islands and the cost thereof. There then followed a change of magistrate at Walvis Bay. This second one – who was Resident Magistrate in an Acting capacity only – was much less enthusiastic of the virtues of camels, wrote to the Native Affairs Department (letter dated 11 November 1904) in this sense quoting the problems that had been encountered in the neighbouring German protectorate. He wrote again to the Native Affairs Department on 14 December attaching a note from the acting Governor of the German protectorate who was himself clearly not an ardent fan of the use of camels. Before this final note, however, the Secretary to the Native Affairs Department had already written a somewhat cursory letter to the Resident Magistrate on 28 November 1904 to the effect that it did not “appear necessary to take any further action in the matter of the proposed supply of camels for use in Walfish Bay”.

The circus camels were apparently then sold to the Cape Mounted Police for patrolling the German (Namibian) and Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) borders in the Kalahari. Although never stated explicitly, the impression is gained that Saali Salomon moved with the camels from buyer to buyer. Be this as it may Saali ended up at the Rietfontein Police Station where he was responsible for piercing

5. Such an article appeared in the Agricultural Journal Vol 24 No 6 pp 772-775 giving due credit to the Department and also raising some questions (also raised by the USA about susceptibility to common cattle diseases other than rinderpest).

6. This source (and several others) contains a 5-page memorandum by E Ross Townsend, Rhodesian Secretary for Agriculture, dated 7 December 1903 which details the performance of and provides other information on the Rhodesian camels. This memo, in various forms (and along with its derivatives and plagiarised versions). Rinderpest was distributed to many Cape departments and which probably was the basis of much decision taking by Cape officials.

the nostrils and making and fitting the nose studs used to steer the camels. The Cape Police also benefited from the services of Knobby Clark (Sergeant WH Clark, SAP) who had served in the Camel Corps in Egypt under Lord Kitchener (Speight, 1929; Hauser, 1988). A chap named Jacob Tities was one of many native policemen who were renowned for their usefulness and expertise (Speight, 1929). It was perhaps because of the combined expertise of Clark, Saali Salomon and the native police that the camel patrols were so successful. Some credit may also be given to the police's master saddler who designed a new saddle more appropriate to the welfare of beast and man than earlier models (Mould and Lane, 1933). An indication of the harshness of the country around Rietfontein can be gained from an account of a botanist travelling in that area at the end of 1898. Although, no direct mention is made of the police use of camels it was noted that "at Rietfontein our transport had broken down completely. Twelve of the team of 20 oxen were dead or abandoned, and those that remained were in a weakened and emaciated condition." (Pearson, 1910). The use of camels was, however, mentioned in the discussion that followed Pearson's presentation to the Royal Geographical Society by Sir Somerset French who noted that the Cape Colony Government had introduced camels for police and transport purposes and who went on to say "along the border of German South-West Africa the police patrols .... consider a messenger a safer means of conveying messages than the heliograph ..... and the post which runs between Zwart-Modder and Rietfontein on the German border is also conveyed by means of these animals." (Pearson, 1910).

The Commissioner of the Cape Mounted Police wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Defence and Police Branch on 5 April 1907 requesting authorisation to open a police station at Witdraai (Letter 459/07, Folio X8092). Witdraai is situated 55 miles from Rietfontein in Gordonia District near the junction of the main roads leading north and northeast towards German South West Africa and to the inland parts of the district. The Commissioner alleged these roads were used by several European squatters of bad character who were said to be dealing in arms and ammunition and to supply the natives with liquor in exchange for ostrich feathers, horns and skins. There were also a number of Bushmen who lived on game and "also help themselves largely to the farmers' cattle". It was impossible to police this area effectively from Rietfontein and "the moment a camel patrol leaves in that direction it is immediately known to the

suspected individuals who organised a system of signals with this end in view". The Assistant Resident Magistrate at Rietfontein was said to be in favour of the station and had already written to recommend its establishment. The station would cost very little as it was proposed to station only 3 camel men and one native detective who would live in a tent for the time being. In the remarkably short time of 5 days permission was granted (by the Under Colonial Secretary on behalf of the Colonial Secretary) for the station to be opened. At the same time "steps might be taken to quietly investigate the conduct of certain persons resident in the area concerned".

In December 1920, some 5 years after the South African Police had been formed in 1915 by amalgamation of the previous Colonial and Republican police forces, all the camel breeding stock was transferred from Rietfontein Police Station to Witdraai Police Station. With the breeding camels to Witdraai, went "three of our best coloured constables to do the breaking in and training. These men were Piet Tities, Arrie Bok and a black constable Johannes Diedericks". Johannes Diedericks had served with the old German Police before joining the South African Police and it was also during the transfer of breeding stock from Rietfontein to Witdraai that Saali Saloman was retired because of arthritis of the leg joints (Hauser, 1988).

There were an estimated 250 camels during 1923 at a depot at Hofmeyer. These comprised 11 already trained, 12 being trained, 50 5-6 year olds, 12 4-5 year olds, 107 younger than 4 years old, 45 breeding cows, 10 personal and postage camels and 3 bulls. In this herd, cows and bulls with the highest standard and best possible characteristics were selected and used in a breeding programme. According to Zondach (1991) the objective of this breeding programme was to improve the quality of the herd but continuous inbreeding resulted in the opposite. This was apparently rectified by introducing new blood lines and through proper management (Nolte, 2003).

The breeding of camels at Witdraai must have started immediately and must have gone exceptionally well. By 1922 there are documents about "exchange of camels, camels as presents and sale of camels". Again in 1929-1930 "Disposal by Police of surplus camels". There is one document dated 1938, which indicates the owner of Witdraai as JJB Maritz. In 1948 the camel breeding stock at Hofmeyer in Namibia (then South West Africa) was transferred to Witdraai. At its peak, Witdraai had as many as 300 or even 400 camels. Perhaps, Witdraai

**SALE  
BY PUBLIC AUCTION  
OF SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE  
CAMELS.**

A Sale of the undermentioned Camels, together with Equipment,  
will be held at

**WITDRAAI POLICE STATION**  
on  
**6th JULY, 1951.**

7 Bulls [Untrained]  
25 Cows [17 Untrained]  
58 Heifers [23 Trained]  
32 Geldings [17 Trained]

Equipment includes CAMEL SADDLES, RIDING and STABLE EQUIPMENT,  
WATER CARRIERS, Etc

Further particulars may be had from  
Messrs MALAN AND MALAN, PO BOX 27, UPINGTON

**OPENBARE VERKOPING  
VAN  
KAMELE  
VAN DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE POLISIE.**

In Verkening van ondervermelde kamel, saan met witresling,  
sal plaswind op

**6 JULIE 1951**  
op

**WITDRAAI-POLISIESTASIE**

7 Bulle [Ongalcord]  
25 Kaeia [17 Ongalcord]  
58 Verse [23 Galcord]  
32 Ruine [17 Galcord]

Die uitrusting slot in KAMELSAALS, RY en STALUITRUSTING,  
WATERRIHADRAAGBANDE, em

Verdere besonderhede kan verkry word van  
Die Firma MALAN EN MALAN, POSTBUS 27, UPINGTON.

**Fig 1.** Public notice informing of the sale of the last of the South African Police camels.

was exceptionally suited to the breeding of camels or perhaps its staff knew just how to handle their grumpy charges or perhaps it was a combination of these 2 factors, but the Police Station at Witdraai was so successful, that already in 1922, there is a document in the archives "South African Police: 1) Exchange of camels 2) Free gifts of camels 3) Sale of camels. And again in 1929 "Disposal of surplus camels by Police".

On police patrols, camels were expected to be out for 14-16 days with only one visit to a water hole in that period. The total weight carried was in the region of 400 lb (182 kg) being made up of the policeman (150 lb, 68 kg), saddle (40 lb, 18 kg), blankets (11 lb, 5 kg), water (60 lb, 27 kg), food for the rider (12 lb, 5 kg) and rifle and ammunition (20 lb, 9 kg) (Speight, 1929). Camel patrols normally



DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE POLISIE VEREER MET HIERDLE STANDBEELD DIE  
KAMEEL EN SY RUITER. IN DIE HANDAWING VAN WET EN ORDE HET DIE  
BEREDE AFDELING VAN DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE POLISIE 'N BELANGRIKE EN  
GEWAARDEERDE ROL GESPEEL.

DIE ONVERGEEILIKEROL WAT DIE KAMEEL VERAL IN DIE WORDINGSJARE  
VAN DIE MAG VERVUL HET, WORD HIERMEE IN DANKBARE HERRINNERING  
GEROER.

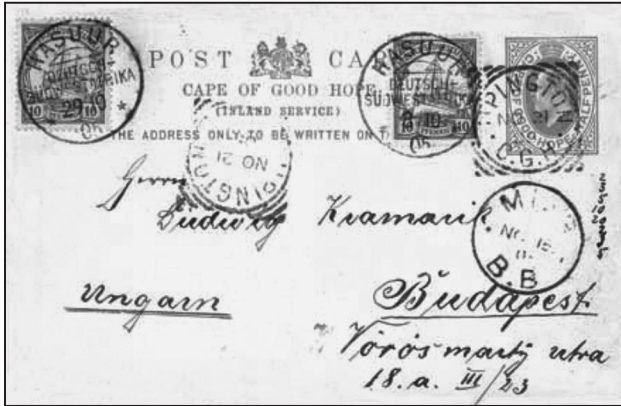
ONIHUL DEUR MENEER A J VLOK, MINISTER VAN WET EN ORDE  
OP 29 APRIL 1988.

WITH THIS STATUE THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE PAY TRIBUTE TO THE  
MOUNTED POLICEMAN AND HIS TRUSTY CAMEL. THE MOUNTED DIVISION  
OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE MADE AN IMPORTANT AND MUCH  
VALUED CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND  
ORDER. THE UNFORGETTABLE ROLE OF THE CAMEL, ESPECIALLY IN THE  
FORMATIVE YEARS OF THE FORCE IS RECALLED HEREBY IN GRATEFUL  
COMMEMORATION.

UNVEILED BY MR A J VLOK MINISTER OF LAW AND ORDER  
ON 29 APRIL 1988.

**Fig 2.** Memorial statue and inscription to the camel police at Upington.

covered 40 miles (64 km) in a day but could do twice that in an emergency situation. The camels subsisted mainly on 'tsama' melon (as did the bushmen) in the driest and remotest parts of the Kalahari: there is a story of one camel that wandered off and lived for 6 months entirely on the 'tsama' before being recovered (Speight, 1929). In the 1920s the camel police force comprised about 165 camels of which 120 were at the stud station at Witdraai with others in the Gordonia Game Reserve, at Tsenin on the Kuruman River, at



**Fig 3.** Postal item for Budapest: Cape of Good Hope ½d stationery card with two 10pf Yacht type SWA stamps from Hasuur Deutsch SüdWest Afrika cancelled 8 October and 29 October 1905 via Mier (Rietfontein) British Bechuanaland on 15 November and by camel for Upington Cape of Good Hope on 21 November.

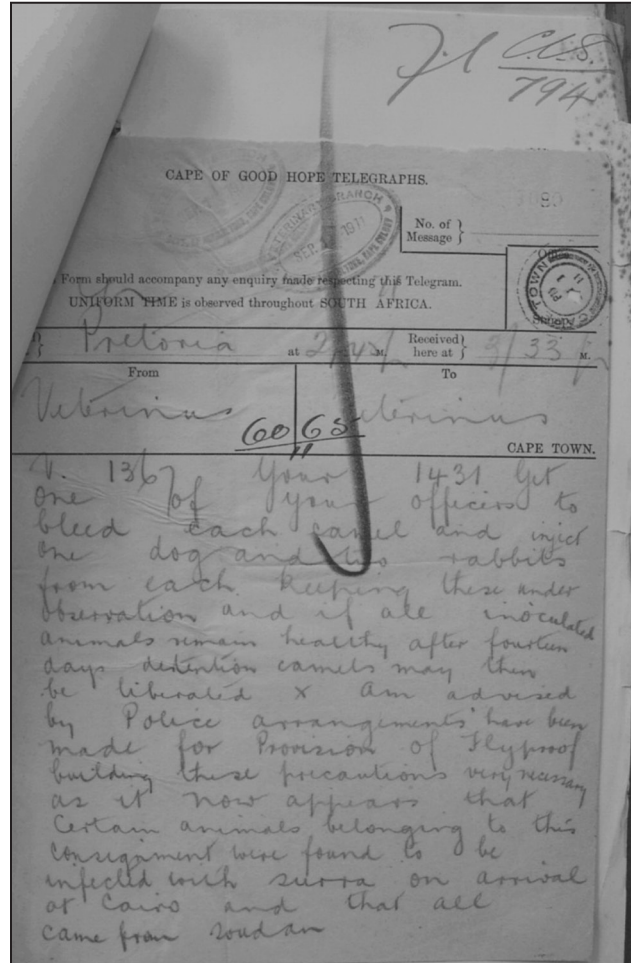
Rietfontein on the SWA border, at Didebing in the Koranna Mountains and at the “very distant station” at Morokwen (Speight, 1929).

The transfer of camels from Hofmeyer to Witdraai was perhaps an early indication of the end of the use of camels by the South African Police. With the arrival of the ubiquitous Ford pick up in the late 1940s the era of police patrols by camel in South Africa drew to a close. There was a final sale of camels at a public auction on 6 July 1951 (Fig 1) although it appears that not all the camels were actually sold. The large camel pens or “kraals” that had been constructed of camel thorn (*Acacia erioloba*) trunks of up to 400 mm in diameter and about 3 metres in length were removed by the farmers, a few at a time, together with the camels they had bought.

The real end to the camel police was to be delayed, however, for almost 40 more years. On 29 April 1988 the South African Minister of Law and Order unveiled a statue at Upington that puts the role of camels and of their handlers and riders in its proper context in the development of the nation (Fig 2).

### Postal services

The Cape Post Office obtained 4 camels from the government forest station at Uitvlucht near Cape Town in June 1899 (Cape Postal History, 2005). These camels and their handlers were subsequently stationed near Zwartmodder. The “Mier Camel Post” was inaugurated in July 1899. It replaced an ox-wagon service which itself had succeeded a weekly service provided on horseback for the 95 km stretch from Upington (post office opened in 1882) to Zwartmodder and a fortnightly runner



**Fig 4.** Telegram from Union veterinary surgeon to Cape veterinary surgeon with instructions for testing imported camels for presence of trypanosomiasis

who carried the mail to Rietfontein (about 3 km from the South West Africa border and whose post office opened in 1895) covering the 160 km in about 5 days (Rosenthal and Blum, 1969). Rietfontein was also known as Mier but the actual village of Mier was about 30 km away and Mier District is now in Botswana. Two camels were used on each trip for safety reasons with one being ridden and the other carrying the mail in special saddle pouches. The camel post became a great success in part because the camels completed the journey in a much shorter time than the ox-cart contract (letter Postmaster General to Under Secretary of Agriculture 9 March 1900, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052). The total annual cost of the service was reported to be £ 408. The camel service was suspended from 9 March to 18 May 1900 during the Anglo-Boer War to prevent the animals being captured by raiding Boer Commandos who were very active at the time in the Northern Cape

and the animals were taken across the border to German South West Africa<sup>7</sup>. During the Bondelzwart campaign and related military activities in German South West Africa in the Herero War of 1904 (the Nama Rebellion) there was a considerable increase in the mail conveyed between Mier and Zwartmodder. The extra journeys coupled to a prolonged drought meant that the camels lost condition (weight). This led to the Commissioner of Police assisting the post office by allowing mail to be carried by the camels used for police patrols. In 1906 the camel post was temporarily suspended to allow the animals to regain their strength but normal service was resumed in May 1907. The camel service was supplemented by the ox-cart from October 1907 as 2 of the camels were incapacitated. A full camel service resumed on 1 February 1909 and continued uninterrupted until 31 March 1914 when it was permanently abandoned due to an inability to replace the camels. The remaining camels were sold to the Department of Defence and the ox-cart was again brought into service. The service used exclusively Cape of Good Hope stamps and postal stationery but one of the cancellers had the words MIER at the top and B.B (British Bechuanaland) at the bottom. The Cape of Good Hope, South West Africa and British Bechuanaland were touched by the Mier Camel Post and some individual letters actually traversed all 3 territories (Fig 3).

The use of camels by the postal services caused some difficulties of an unexpected – at least for the Post Office – nature. In spite of the work to which they were subjected the female camels were getting fat, coming into season, and were inclined to run away. A request was made to the Agriculture Department for the services of a bull (telegram Civil Commissioner Upinton to Under Secretary of Agriculture 14 July 1899, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The reply was that no bulls were then available although steps were being taken to procure some and, further on the advice of the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon, that if they were getting fat a “little judicious restriction in the diet scale would have a beneficial effect on their behaviour” (Under Secretary of

Agriculture to Post Master General 26 July 1899). Eventually, a bull did become available, being the only camel then remaining at Uitvlugt, and was offered for Post Office use at a cost of £53.13.1 (USA to Assistant Treasurer Cape Town 24 September 1902, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). The same letter also asked for payment of £168 for camels already loaned to the Post Office since 1899, this being paid together with the price of the bull some time later (letter Postmaster General to USA 27 October 1902; letter Assistant Treasurer to USA 13 November 1902, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053).

### *Public interest, Education and Tourism*

A first interest in the educational value of camels was expressed within a few days of their arrival in the Cape when Dr Turner sent a telegram to Agricola to the effect that “in event of either or both camels dying, [the camels inoculated with rinderpest] the Museum would be glad of their skins and skeletons” (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2052).

The Golden Jubilee celebrations of Her Majesty Queen Victoria were seen by the Corporation of the City of Cape Town as an occasion to introduce camels to the general public and their presence in the procession to take place on 22 June 1897 “would greatly increase the general interest”. If the Department of Agriculture could “see its way to meet the wishes of the Committee” the Corporation would endeavour to “provide Arab riders in the proper costume to follow the Malay hadges [sic]” (letter dated 14 June 1897 of Chas J Byworth, Town Clerk to the Hon P H Faure, MLA, Minister for Agriculture – who wrote by hand on the letter that he had not the least objection – Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3052). The Under Secretary for Agriculture replied in the affirmative on 16 June, advising the Town Clerk that the camels were stabled at present at Fillis’ Circus and that the Town Clerk should contact Mr Fillis’ Representative in Cape Town with regard

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7. The Boer General Christiaan De Wet was a constant thorn in the side of the Cape government at this time and was apparently greatly feared by them. A suggestion that the 6 camels plus the calf that arrived at Cape town on 13 May 1901 (Conservator of Forests to Under Secretary of Agriculture 5 July 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053) be sent to the Government Reserve at Wodehouse Kraal in Bechuanaland, Botswana as they were causing damage to trees at the Uigvluyt Forest Reserve was turned down as being “out of the question just now unless we want to make a present of remounts to De Wet or his friends” (internal memo Under Secretary of Agriculture 10 July 1901, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 2053). For an account of the guerrilla war at this time see Christiaan De Wet, *Three Years’ War*. Charles Scribner’s Sons N.Y., 1902 Translated from Dutch, original title “Der Kampf zwischen Bur und Brite - Der dreijährige Krieg”.

to details and arrange for saddles and riders. On 19 June the USA authorised Fillis to hand over the camels to the Town Clerk so they could take part in the procession. There is no indication in the archives of how the public responded to the presence of the camels in the procession but on 23 June the Town Clerk wrote a formal little note to the USA expressing the appreciation of the Committee to the Department of Agriculture for the loan of the camels. The celebrations for the Coronation of King Edward VII were another occasion for the camels to be used in an educational role. W A Batchelor, Municipal Clerk of Rondebosch asked the Secretary of the Agricultural Department in Cape Town on 17 April 1902, if some of the camels could be loaned to the Council to entertain the children on the Agricultural Society's grounds at Rosebank on Coronation Day. This request was also granted with the provision that the camels must not be ridden and that the Council accept full responsibility for the safe return of the animals (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3052).

Another step in introducing the camel to the South African public was taken towards the end of 1901 and at the beginning of 1902. On 29 December 1901 the Director of the Pretoria Museum and Zoological Gardens wrote to the Honourable Sir Pieter Faure, Minister for Agriculture, Cape Town about the possibility of getting a camel for exhibition in the Zoo and emphasising that "the addition of such an animal will be an enormous attraction for the Zoo, and will very materially assist us in making the institution popular" (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053). The Director further went on to propose that the Zoo was "quite willing to breed for you, on the half, if you would perhaps feel inclined to part with more specimens, as we have a very large piece of ground". Unfortunately, matters did not proceed as the Director wished as the Secretary for Agriculture would only transfer a camel to the zoo at cost (£42 for a French West African camel and £54 for an Egyptian camel) and the Secretary for Agriculture thanked the (Zoo) "Committee for their offer to breed camels on the half-share principle [but] regrets that such an arrangement is not acceptable to him" (letter of 9/10 January 1902, Charles Curry Under Secretary of Agriculture to Director Pretoria Museum and Zoological Gardens, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053). In fact, the Director of the Zoo had been under a misapprehension as he "understood that the price of a camel was much less

than the price quoted in your letter and I very much regret to say that our funds do not at present, allow us to make such big purchases" (letter Director to USA, 20 January 1902, Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053).

Since their demise as "working" animals, camels have assumed an increasing importance in the tourist industry and, especially, in the domain of the so-called ecotourism. Descendants of many of the original Rietfontein, Hoffmeyer and Witdraai camels are now found all over South Africa as tourist attractions and curiosities. Several web sites in South Africa attest to the attraction and continuing economic importance of camels in this area of human activity although in the Republic itself at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are probably less than 10 owners (Nolte, 2003) who have a serious interest in the animal.

### Diseases

Captain Hunter of Egypt asked what diseases camels already purchased had suffered from as he might be able to help prevention in future. Post Office said one pneumonia and others of old age. Police said snake bite, lung disease (?pneumonia) and bowel complaint due to overfeeding of oats when famished plus lameness of unknown cause (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 591, Reference R66). No cases of sore backs, specifically requested by Hunter, since new saddles were purchased.

The Veterinary Branch of the Department of Agriculture was also greatly exercised by the possibility of 'surra' (camel trypanosomosis) being brought into South Africa with camels from Egypt. Early in July 1911, it despatched a telegram to its counterpart in Egypt (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source CVS, Volume 1.83, Reference 79: Source AGR, Volume 445, Reference 3053). A cabled reply was received on 5 August to the effect that, as far as, was known 'surra; did not exist in Egypt proper but was believed to exist in Sudan in the vicinity of Khartoum. In the same telegram Egypt advised South Africa to endeavour to ascertain the precise origins of the camels and it could then be decided whether any experimental inoculations were necessary. The Acting Assistant Principal Veterinary Surgeon (Cape) then wrote to the Acting Principal Veterinary Surgeon (Union) on 10<sup>th</sup> August that in view of the discovery of trypanosomosis in one camel and of filariasis in another of the camels to be imported from Egypt - he here mentioned the letter of 21 July from the High Commission in London to

the Acting Under Secretary for Agriculture (Cape Town Archives Repository, Source AGR, Volume 591, Reference R66, and referred to earlier in this paper) – it was recommended that the camels be sent to Pretoria to be kept under the supervision of the Acting Director of Veterinary Research until this latter was satisfied as to their condition and health<sup>8</sup>. Pretoria then replied by cable of 14 August that on arrival in Cape Town the camels should be quarantined in a fly proof accommodation which the Cape Police and the Post Office should provide until the necessary inoculations could be ready to prove them free of disease. The Cape Veterinary Surgeon then wrote to this effect to the Commissioner of (the Cape Mounted) Police. He received an urgent and somewhat brusque reply from the police written on 15 August stating that no fly proof accommodation could be found in Cape Town and that the camels had been bought for the police and the postal services by the Department of Agriculture and that it had not been anticipated that there would be any difficulty about their introduction into South Africa from Egypt. There were further somewhat ill-tempered exchanges amongst the parties until the Department of Agriculture did find a suitable building that could be rendered fly-proof. The Cape Veterinary Surgeon then requested of Pretoria what was to be done about the experimental inoculations to which he received a detailed telegraphic response (Fig 4). Both the police and the post office were informed by the Cape veterinary surgeon on 21 September 1911 that they could remove their camels from the quarantine at their convenience.

### Epilogue

From a maximum of somewhere of the order of 3000 camels in South Africa (but not including its neighbouring states) in the 1950s, there were probably fewer than 450 camels left in the country in the year 2000 (Ramsay *et al*, 2001). According to one source, the reasons for the reduction in numbers included neglect of these animals, the castration of bulls to lower their level of aggression during the rutting season, indiscriminate slaughter and high juvenile mortality (Burger, camel owner, personal communication, 2002).

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century camels came to be considered as a landrace (native or indigenous) breed, having been admitted to this category in 1999 (Ramsay *et al*, 2001). The average mature weight

of South African camels is given as 400-1000 kg for males and 360-800 kg for females with an average daily weight gain of 1.1 kg, an interbirth period of 18-20 months and a first birth at 5-8 years (Ramsay *et al*, 2001).

Camels continue to play a role, if now only a minor one, in the economy of South Africa. Their function is mainly to provide pleasure for a few. They may also have a future function in the arid and semi-arid regions in the rational use of the natural rangeland resources and in bush control (Van Biljon, 1995). In view of their very small numbers, however, this can have only a limited effect.

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8. In the South Africa of this period there seems to have been hardly any substantive occupiers of senior posts as almost all were performing their functions in an "acting" capacity.

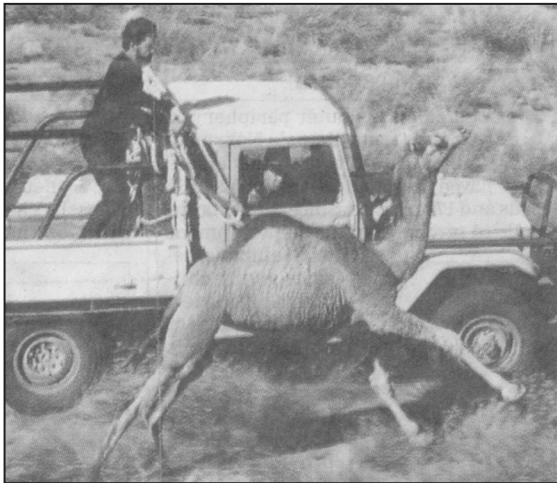


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## News

### AUSTRALIA TO CULL 650,000 CAMELS

Sharpshooters will gun down the camels in the remote outback area of the country from helicopters and officials are planning to turn many of the creatures into camel burgers and other treats, according to various sources. The Australian government's decision came in the wake of reports that the thirsty dromedaries are barging into people's homes, ripping up their bathrooms looking for water. Camels were first introduced to Australia in the 1840s to help explorers travel through the Australian desert. There are now about one million camels roaming the country. They compete with sheep and cattle for food, trample vegetation and invade remote settlements in search of water.



On a number of occasions they have scared residents-tearing apart bathrooms and ripping up water pipes. According to Glenn Edwards, who is working on drafting the camel reduction programme the camel population needs to be slashed by two thirds to reduce the catastrophic damage.

On a number of occasions they have scared residents-tearing apart bathrooms and ripping up water pipes. According to Glenn Edwards, who is working on drafting the camel reduction programme the camel population needs to be slashed by two thirds to reduce the catastrophic damage.

### PAKISTAN CAMEL ASSOCIATION

Pakistan Camel Association is a platform for camel scientists, herders and other stake holders who are crucial to work on the issues related to camel and its husbandry. Therefore, on Monday, August 24, 2009, a meeting of camel herders and scientists was held in Quetta. Issues and problems related to camel were discussed in detail. It was decided to lay the foundation of an organisation, which will work for the interest of camel and its herders. The participants agreed on the name of the organisation as Pakistan Camel Association and Dr Abdul Raziq was chosen as an organiser. All the beneficiaries of camel can be members of the association. An executive committee was also formed comprising 8 members.

It was also decided to contact the camel scientists\herders in the country and to participate in the camel fair of Mangrota in the month of October. Dr Abdul Raziq will be responsible for the communication with the scientists and herders. A meeting of the association will be held in the month of December 2009 and a broader representation will be ensured.

(Source: Dr. Abdul Raziq, email- raziq2007@gmail.com , Organiser of Pakistan Camel Association)