

No
Journals

OUR LARGEST BLACK CITY:

A SKETCH OF HOW
IT CAME ABOUT

by Jack Ross Spencer

If you enquire from the Johannesburg Publicity Association about what a visitor should see and do, they will tell you that the guided tour through Soweto is a "must". The word Soweto, which is an acronym made up of the first two letters of the words South West Townships, is the name of South Africa's largest black city. They will also tell you to book early because the trip is a popular one.

The bus leaves from near the City Hall and travels westwards. When you have gone ten miles, and have left the heavy traffic behind, you approach Soweto. In front, you see many thousands of brick cottages, each on its separate plot, stretching in neat rows for as far as you can see. As you glide over the wide asphalt road, the cottages close in behind you. You pass some churches close to the road, then a large sports stadium and cycle track, then a swimming bath. You continue until you come to a shopping centre, where the bus stops. You get out fascinated by all these businesses owned and run by Bantu. There is a hardware store, greengrocer, dry cleaner, butcher, coal merchant, grocer, and a large petrol filling station. You venture into the grocery and are a little surprised when you are approached by a polite but confident shop assistant who offers you an ice-cold drink from a refrigerated counter. As you enjoy this refreshment, you glance around and admire the neatly packed shelves and the spotless floor and counters. This little shop could be in Eloff Street. The word "Progress" intrudes and dominates your thoughts. Feeling refreshed, you step out of the shop to return to the bus. You look around at the view, and find that in every direction there are myriads of cottages, each with its garden, and some with trees beginning to peep over the roof tops. You feel as if you are in a separate world.

This is natural, as Soweto and its satellites cover thirty square miles and have more than half a million inhabitants - one and a half times the entire population of the City of Port Elizabeth. Soweto has grown out of what I believe is the largest poor relief project of the western world.

The full story ^{of Soweto} is a long one ^{at} and has been told in the booklet, "A City within a City" by Councillor P. R. B. Lewis, but here are some of the facts which show briefly what has happened and what in my opinion influenced those who built it.

A map/...

A map of Johannesburg dated 1897 shows "Kattir Location" about one mile west of the present City Hall. A vivid description of the conditions in this area is given by the report of the Johannesburg Insanitary Area Improvement Scheme Commission in 1903. Here, the report says, lived 5,000 people of all races in filth and squalor. The streets were narrow and twisted, water was drawn from polluted wells, and lavatories were just holes in the ground. As a result of the Commission's recommendation, the area was expropriated so that it could be replanned. But there was no place to which the wretched inhabitants could move. Then, as now, whenever a new site was proposed, the whites in the neighbourhood raised such strong opposition, that the proposal had to be dropped and the plans shelved.

In 1904 there occurred something far stronger than the opposition of the whites - an outbreak of bubonic plague. The officials of the Town Council acted that very night. All inhabitants were cleared and the whole slum was burnt to the ground. Accommodation now had to be found for the refugees, even if only temporary. This was provided on municipal land adjoining the sewerage disposal works twelve miles from town. Corrugated iron huts were erected as temporary shelters. These so called temporary huts were used for some sixty years.

One commission after another strongly criticized the wretched conditions under which the City's non-Europeans lived, and urged the provision of proper building sites; but apart from housing its own employees, the Council did nothing to help until 1917, when it hired a disused mine compound. There was as yet no separate municipal department for Bantu affairs and as late as 1920 the annual estimates of expenditure on Bantu and on the Zoo were roughly equal.

It took the influenza epidemic of 1918 to rouse the Council and the Government from their inertia. The sufferings of this dreadful scourge revealed that in the urban centres throughout the country, Bantu lived in conditions of such squalor that they were a standing menace to the health of the whole population.

Following the epidemic, the Council between 1918 and 1921 built two hundred and twenty seven houses on a new site - Western Native Township, only five miles from the City Hall, and in 1923 the Government passed the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, which placed
the responsibility/

the responsibility fairly and squarely on local authorities to provide housing for the Bantu employed in their areas. This was a turning point. By 1927 the Council had provided accommodation for 15,000 Bantu out of a population estimated at 96,000 (excluding those housed by the mines). In the same year the Council established its Native Affairs Department as a separate department and appointed its first Manager. In the following year the new Manager persuaded the Council to appoint a committee on Native Affairs.

The new Committee soon showed its worth, for by 1930, 2,600 houses had been built. New powers were conferred on local authorities by the amendment of the Natives Urban Areas Act in 1930 and thereafter the Council acquired 1,300 morgen of land on the farm Klipspruit No. 8 some ten miles west of the City. A competition was held to submit plans to accommodate 80,000 Bantu. Provision was to be made for administrative offices, a public hall, a cottage hospital with dispensary and clinic, a central police station, a central post office and three district offices, a fire station, ten sites for schools, ten sites for religious purposes, a shopping centre, a market and a community store. The township was called Orlando. This was the beginning of Soweto.

Unfortunately, because of the great depression, there was an acute shortage of funds when this fine project was planned, so progress was inevitably slow.

However, at the outbreak of war in 1939, 8,700 houses had been built but there were still many thousands of Bantu living under dreadful slum conditions in various parts of the City.

The war years completely changed the situation. To supply the war-time needs of the country, new industries grew like mushrooms, each factory requiring its own share of unskilled labour. By 1946 the Bantu population had leapt to 400,000 and the resources of the Council were quite inadequate to deal with such numbers. The limited accommodation available was hopelessly overcrowded, and no fewer than eleven illegal squatter camps sprang up. These were made up of thousands of the most wretched hovels made of packing cases, sacking, bits of iron, etc., abutting each other with narrow passages for streets and the most primitive sanitary arrangements. Racketeer ^{Bantu} landlords took illegal possession of land belonging to the Council and set up their own illegal courts which imposed savage punishments on the wretched inhabitants. The situation was completely out of hand, and when the Council tried to regain control, it was obstructed by the racketeers who realised that the/ . . .

that the end of their illegal revenue was in sight. ~~In August 1947~~ three European policemen who were trying to maintain order were murdered in a riot provoked by racketeers.

In 1948 it was estimated that there were still 50,000 families living in the most appalling squalor in and around the City. The task of housing so many seemed impossible. It was not only a matter of providing the houses, but of building them cheaply enough so that the tenants could afford the rents. There was also the problem of providing each house with the essential services such as water, sewer reticulation, roads, etc., which often cost as much as the house. However, about 1,000 houses a year were being built so that some slow progress was ^{being} made.

In 1951 the Bantu Building Workers Act was passed, making it possible to employ Bantu workers in building trades in proclaimed Bantu Townships. The Council immediately took advantage of this development and soon formed a separate Housing Division, using Bantu carpenters, plumbers and bricklayers, working in teams on piece work, under white supervision. The achievements of this department were phenomenal - ^{in 11 years,} ~~between 1951 and 1965~~ it built 45,000 houses, 76 schools, 3 hostels, accommodating 14,000 men, 7 administrative blocks, 5 communal halls, a public library, 5 clinics, 3 beer halls, a bank and many other minor works. At the height of its activity, the Housing Division was completing no fewer than forty houses a day and the cost per square foot was brought down to 61 cents as compared with R1.22½ per square foot in 1946 - less than half.

The inability of local authorities to provide the essential services drove them to petition the Government for financial help, and after desperate appeals the Bantu Services Levy Fund was established by Act of Parliament in 1953. Under this Act all employers of Bantu labour within the municipality who do not house their employees are obliged to make monthly contributions to the Fund. This Fund has collected to date R21 million in Johannesburg and it has financed among others the following projects:-

The building of some 600 miles of roads within the township of which 40% are now tarred.

478 Miles of sewer reticulation bringing water-borne sewerage to every house and a large sewerage disposal works

The provision of street lighting for - to date - 75% of the streets.

Mechanised/ .

Mechanised units have also been purchased which remove the garbage from 70,500 sites.

Medical services have been established which operate from seven general clinics with home visiting by doctors and nurses and they are part of an integrated system under radio control with the large Baragwanath Hospital as base. Routine immunisation against diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, poliomyelitis, measles and tuberculosis are carried out at the rate of over half a million procedures a year. Every Bantu is medically examined and x-rayed before he is employed, or when he changes his employment. As a result of these measures, the infant mortality rate has dropped from 311 per 1,000 in 1946 to 40 per 1,000.

The Recreation and Community Services Department has a European and Bantu staff of over 500 to care for the 76 sports fields, 58 basket ball courts and 34 tennis courts, 35 children's playgrounds, etc., and no cottage is situated further than half a mile from at least one children's playground or sports field. These amenities provide for more than 1,150 soccer teams, 300 basketball teams and thousands of athletes.

The capital cost of Soweto to date is R57,000,000, but apart from this sum deficits of the Bantu Revenue Account borne by the white ratepayers over the years amount to R11,000,000.

The story of Soweto as I have sketched it is far from complete. I have had to shorten it because of limited time. It is a story of progress and achievement, but the most difficult problem remains unsolved, and this is how to increase the wages and purchasing power of the people who are still so poor. This is a matter of economics and productivity beyond the scope of this paper.

What has moved the whites of today to concern themselves with the welfare of poverty-stricken Bantu, in contrast to the complete indifference of sixty years ago? Has it been the beseechings of moralists and ~~clergymen~~^{preachers} appealing to the public conscience to alleviate human suffering? I am afraid not, although these good people have played their part. The facts show that the main forces were self-interest and self-preservation. In 1904 when the first action was taken, it was fear of the plague. In the 1920's it was the shocking memory of the Spanish Influenza epidemic, which had killed more people than the millions who died in the world war, and had recognised no colour bar. In the 1940's it was the huge/.

the huge squatter camps which were so hideous that they were frightening to behold. They were located in conspicuous positions near main roads and railway lines, so that the public constantly saw them, and could not put them conveniently out of mind. There was also the fear of more riots.

Although it has needed the fear of epidemics to drive us to these benevolent deeds and higher standards, it does seem that once we have reached a standard it becomes the norm from which we do not turn back. Let us pray that we never do.

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