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# 'OLD' JOHANNESBURG

by Denis Godfrey

Of all the great cities of the world, Johannesburg probably is unique in one respect. It is that some of the commercial establishments which opened their doors on what virtually was barren veld in the cradle days of the mining town, still are in business to this day.

After the passing of almost a century since the first keen traders hung notices outside their tents and shanties proclaiming their wares, at least some of the pioneer firms still are in business, thriving and growing and changing with the fabulous city that they and the gold mines helped to create out of a treeless waste.

Names that come to my mind include Thorne Stuttafords, Jutas, Markhams, Hilson and Taylor, T. W. Beckett and Company, Herbert Evans, and, of course, Shimwell Brothers, the firm that set out with such success to put the people of Johannesburg on wheels.

Shimwell Brothers was founded by Albert Shimwell in 1887, and had among its customers such giants of South African finance and mining as Julius Wernher, Alfred Beit, Hermann Eckstein, J. B. Taylor and Lionel Phillips.

Of all these distinguished customers, Lionel Phillips was a patron with a terrific sales resistance to anything

except what he had in mind in the first place.

Many people have the impression that for years Johannesburg was a "mining camp". It was nothing of the sort. It certainly began with a cluster of wagons and tents in various camps dotted strategically among the gold workings. But it did not stay that way for long.

The proclamation of the Witwatersrand as a public goldfield was made in the "Staats Courant" of September 15, 1886. This, the "birth certificate" of Johannesburg, followed the discovery in February that year of the amazing and rich Main Reef series by George Harrison and his friend George Walker. They found it while collecting building stone to make an outhouse for one of the owners of the farm Langlaagte.

The first auction of 986 stands in the township of Johannesburg took place on December 8, 1886 and the auctioneer, Jooste Heystek, sold the first stand, No. 469, for £10 17s 6d. A total of 936 stands were disposed of in three days, some for as little as 10s, and the sale realized about £13,000.

The "Father of Johannesburg," Capt. Carl von Brandis, Mining Commissioner and Special Landdrost of the new goldfield of the Witwatersrand,

moved into the first buildings to be erected, the Government offices and jail, built at a cost of R414. He moved in from his tent and began his colourful career, resolving quarrels, performing marriages, maintaining law and order, and generally presiding, with Solomon-like wisdom, over the turbulent affairs of the growing army of prospectors, speculators, traders and hangers-on and *hoi polloi* that went to make up the human material of the beginnings of Johannesburg.

The roistering, dusty first dozen years of Johannesburg—which grew with amazing rapidity, and which in less than 100 years has mushroomed into one of the great cities of the world—make a dramatic and fascinating story.

The village of stands was marked out on a piece of triangular-shaped Government ground, five miles long and only 780 yards to half a mile wide called Ranjeslaagte. It was, however, given the biggest Market Square of any town in South Africa—1,300 feet long and 300 feet wide.

At the first sale of stands the highest prices were paid for stands adjoining the Market Square and also the principal streets nearby. So the first business houses of Johannesburg were ranged along and near the four sides of the

Johannesburg, 1887



Market Square. It was, of course, a matter of good business and prestige to be as near the Market Square as possible. Practically all South Africa's cities, towns and villages have grown up around their market squares.

The central area of Johannesburg has undergone many changes in the passing years. It was the scene of business before a single building had been erected in the newly-proclaimed township.

Farmers were the first people to use the Market Square, bringing much needed produce, fodder and fuel to the mining village. They filled it with their wagons and teams of oxen, and they themselves camped there with their families and servants. However, conditions became too crowded and unhygienic eventually, and the Sanitary Board, the local authority then, banned camping on the Market Square.

Pritchard Street was the first to have shop windows lit at night, and this was a great attraction, too.

Many of the little pubs that abounded in early Johannesburg were clustered around the Market Square and its environs—the Guildhall (still in existence), the Baldwin Bar, the Arcade Bar, the National Bar, the Gaiety Cafe, to name but a few. It was said in the early days that if one stood blindfolded anywhere near the centre of Johannesburg and walked straight ahead, you were sure to end up in a pub!

Also, of course, discreetly around the corner from the main thoroughfares and pubs, were the brothels and other places at which gathered the ladies of easy virtue, who arrived in such droves after Johannesburg was established that they were indirectly the subject of an official investigation from Pretoria.

little place. Most of the buildings in Johannesburg in 1887 were of wood and corrugated iron—transported in sections by wagon to Johannesburg from Kimberley, Durban or Barberton. But Shimwells made their premises of “green brick”, which is the polite way of saying that it was built of sun-dried mud. But it boasted a calico ceiling under an iron roof.

One of the first employees, Sammy Smith, who retired to Natal, recalled when in his nineties that “on windy days I as bookkeeper had to keep my hat on as protection against descending sand and insects.”

Dust—great thick red clouds of it—was the principal scourge of early Johannesburg. It was suffocating, and made the town a gritty and horrid place, and a cartoon I once found in an early Rand newspaper, “The Johannes-

The Gold Rush is on! Speculators, prospectors and their wagons on the Witwatersrand, early 1887.



So the farmers and their families coming to market had to camp at Von Brandis Square (on which the Supreme Court now stands) from the middle of which there gushed a little spring of clear water.

But the Market Square and the streets around it remained the hub of commercial and social life of the rapidly growing gold town. The new arrangement led to Pritchard Street becoming the town's main shopping thoroughfare, together with President Street. This was because the campers at Von Brandis Square walked down Pritchard and President Streets to Market Square where, also, on high days and holidays, the populace tended to congregate.

Loveday Street was one of the favourite haunts.

When Henwoods from Durban erected their large building in Pritchard Street, the population immediately dubbed it “Henwood's Folly”, because no one in his right senses would build so firmly and so high in a transient locality like a gold-mining town, whose gold would surely peter out soon, as it had done in the gold towns of the Eastern Transvaal. But the pessimists were wrong. Johannesburg lived on and on and on . . .

Among the first bicycle shops was that established by the Shimwell brothers, at the corner of Eloff and Pritchard Streets. It was a tiny, cramped, shabby

burg Pink 'Un”, was of a young Victorian lady riding a bicycle down Pritchard Street in a dust storm, displaying a daring amount of leg—almost up to the knee!

She probably bought the bicycle from Shimwells, before they moved to larger premises at the corner of Kerk and Eloff Streets in 1898, for the town was growing rapidly. The streets were better, though still full of potholes and dust—which turned to sticky red mud when it rained.

Not everyone could afford a carriage, but most people could own and ride bicycles, and Shimwells did a great deal to popularise the famous B.S.A. British

vehicle. The firm consisted initially of two African stalwarts, Jim and Sam, and W. Burnley, A. E. Tandy, Sammy Smith, T. Hinks, and the three Shimwell brothers, Arthur, Harry and Albert.

Like other famous business and mining personalities of early Johannesburg they took a lively part in all the affairs of the young town. In 1895-6 during the Jameson Raid crisis the Shimwells belonged to and supplied the cycles for the Goldfields Despatch Riders.

Within a few years of Shimwell Brothers opening their bicycle shop, cycling became something of a craze in Johannesburg. Bicycles were part of every carnival in Republican Johannesburg. They were in the procession and games which heralded in 1897 the biggest gala to date in Johannesburg's short history. It was a ten-day binge to celebrate, in Republican Transvaal, mind you, the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign, and lasted from June 21 to June 30.

It was a festival on a grand scale, with feasting, sport, dancing, processions, spectacle, and all the other trappings of community celebration in which everyone joined with alacrity.

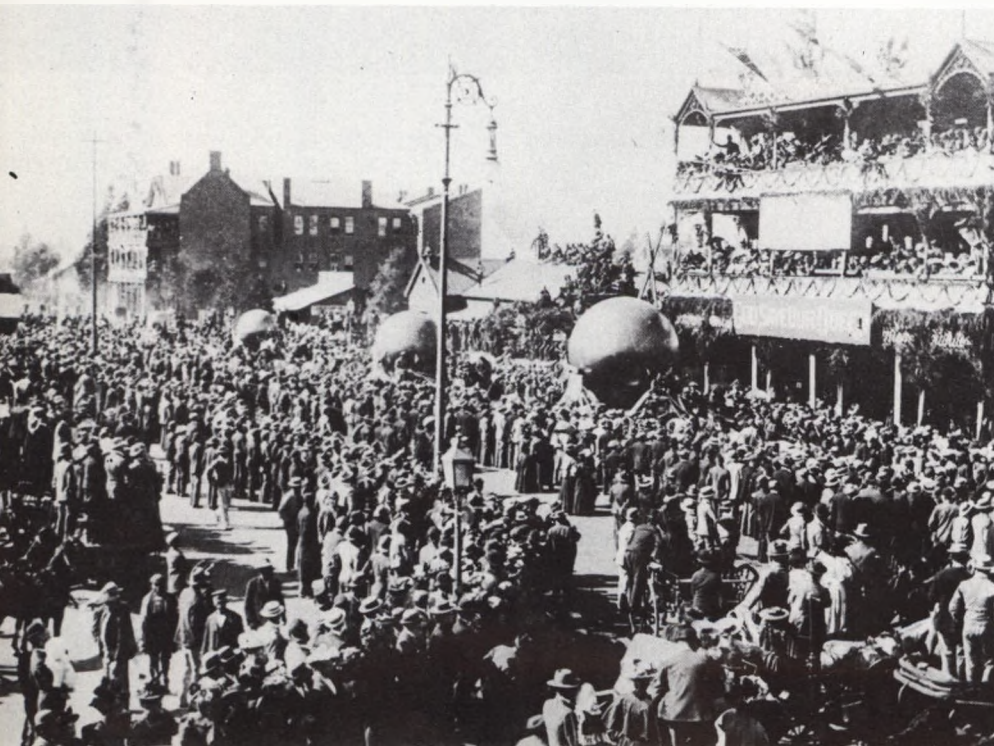
There were bicycle races, horse races, potato sack races, tug-of-war, grand balls, juvenile fancy dress affairs, concerts — and bands played, cadets marched, and the citizens had fun and games and ate and drank too much and ran around . . .

The Wanderers, focal scene of it all, was thronged every day and night.



Ferreira Gold Mining Company, Johannesburg, 1887.

Pritchard Street, 1889.



But already the shadow of the South African War was over the country and over Johannesburg. The world changed for the city and for its people at the turn of the century, but always the city grew bigger.

The dusty little mining camp with first its wagons and tents, then its iron-roofed shanties, has developed into a vast city today, with comfortable, tree-lined suburbs stretching many miles into the surrounding country. The little boarding houses, the tiny shops and saloon bars are replaced by great towering blocks of massive and spectacular buildings.

Today Johannesburg marches with the world.

Celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Crowds gather in Von Brandis Square.



Pritchard Street, 1895.

From humble beginnings. The "Principal Street" — Ferreira's Mining Camp — 1887.



But what happened to the man who started it all—George Harrison, the odd-job builder and part-time prospector who, with his friend George Walker, found the fabulous Main Reef series on the Oosthuizen farm Langlaagte?

As discoverer of the payable gold field he was entitled to and obtained a Discoverer's Claim, which he worked only until November 16, 1866. But he found that it was not good as a surface working, and sold it to a man named Marsden for R20.

Then he quietly vanished from the scene. Nobody knows what happened to him at length. His co-discoverer Walker, died in Johannesburg in 1924.

Shimwell Bros. 1896. On the corner of Eloff and Pritchard Streets—today one of the busiest shipping centres in Johannesburg.



But no one seems to know for certain what became of Harrison. Some say he died of malaria in the Barberton region, or was eaten by a lion.

All that was left for his memorial was a fenced hole in the ground marked "Claim No. 19" . . . All, that is to say, except the great Witwatersrand goldfield and the seething modern city of Johannesburg.

Shimwell's today are very much to the fore in the bicycle business, not only selling B.S.A., Hercules and Achilles pedal cycles, but specialising also in the popular range of Honda motorcycles, both for domestic and commercial use. In the latter instance there is a unique leasing scheme. Other Honda products include petrol operated lighting plants, stationary engines and water pumps.

Shimwell's have also earned for themselves a reputation in the field of outdoor living, marketing a full range of tents and camping equipment, boats, outboard motors, fishing rods and tackle, etc.

For many years they have been one of the leading dealers in arms and ammunition.

From the first shop in 1887 on the corner of Eloff and Pritchard Streets there are presently two outlets in Johannesburg and branches in Pretoria, Germiston, Springs, Krugersdorp, Klerksdorp and Pietermaritzburg.

Shimwell's was recently acquired by the Wit Industrials Group of which Edward Hotels is a member. Plans are already under way to give Shimwell's a new look; a swinging, dynamic organisation, an image that is common to all the Wit Industrial Group companies.

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