

HISTORY OF ROBERTSON

In 1728 a large tract of land known as Over Het Roode Zand, which fell within the very large boundaries of Swellendam district, was let to a Mr. P Joubert. The area soon attracted other migrant farmers who required grazing for their sheep and by 1800 many of them settled permanently on these pieces of land, which they now purchased outright from the Government. The names of the original farms are still much in evidence as districts, eg. Roodezant, Le Chasseur, Retreat, Noree, Goree, Vink Rivier, Willem Nels River, Klaasvoogds, Goudmyn, Vlolikheid and De Hoop.

Between 1728 and 1790, the particular farm Roodezand changed hands several times and in the 1840's belonged to Johannes W van Zijl. Church services were held in his home when every three months Dr. William Robertson, the Dutch Reformed Church Minister at Swellendam, visited the area.

In 1852 the community approached the Church with the request that a town be established and Dr Robertson and the local schoolteacher, Mr. Mauritz Polack, acting on behalf of the Church, purchased Mr. Van Zijl's farm for the then enormous sum of 4 200 Pounds. Surveyors Van Rheenen and Hopley were instructed to lay out the town, and since Dr. Robertson was responsible no doubt, in obtaining the services of the auctioneers, Mr. John Barry of Swellendam, the town was named Robertson in recognition and appreciation of his many services to the community.

The sale of plots at about 40 Pounds each and the laying of the cornerstone in 1853 of the Dutch Reformed Church on its imposing and well-situated block in the centre of town was considered the birth date of the town. The Church was completed in 1856 and served the community well, until 1905 when it was pulled down and a larger, more imposing Church was erected above the old foundations. The erection of Churches of other denominations soon followed, with the Wesleyan Church in Paul Kruger Street being completed in 1859 and St Mary's Anglican Church, designed by Sophie Grey, Bishop Grey's wife, commenced in 1862.

Joseph Barry and his family, of Swellendam, were already an integral part of the community since they had traded with the farmers from the 1840's. They were quick to purchase a prime block of ground behind the Dutch Reformed Church, where a general dealers store of repute, and wine cellars were soon erected.

It was not much later that another well-known Cape Town firm, Lieberman and Buirski, opened up a branch here, and other traders on a smaller scale opened up general dealer stores.

Several private schools were opened, and the ubiquitous Mr. Polack, not only continued to teach for a few years, but acted as preacher in the D R Church in addition to being the Secretary of the town management board.

The year 1860 proved to be disastrous for the small town, when a measles epidemic broke out followed by an enteric fever epidemic of alarming proportions, which swept through the entire village. Aid in the way of food and nursing was enlisted from as far a field as Montagu and Worcester. In all, eighty-nine people died, an enormous percentage of the still growing population.

Young Dominee Carel de Smidt, the newly appointed predikant, was one of the last to succumb in January 1861, when he contracted the disease while selflessly seeing to the needs of his congregation. He took ill while attending to Church matters in Montagu, and died there some days later. His is one of the few graves within the Church grounds. He was only twenty-six years old.

Visiting medical officials, and the local Dr. Hanf, put the epidemic down to lack of isolation of the sick and to the water, which while it left its source in the mountains at De Hoop in a pure state, became more and more polluted as it traversed the town in open furrows. It was from these that the town folk drew all their drinking and household water, unless they were fortunate enough to have a water tank which collected water from the roof during the rainy season. Since in a good year the total rainfall might be only 30 cm, there must have been times when the whole population had to make use of water drawn from the furrows, and another enteric epidemic broke out between September 1896 and February 1897. It was only after the Robertson Water Supply Act of 1898 when drinking water was diverted to houses in pipes, that the spectre of "maagkoors" was finally laid.

To return to the 1860's when in spite of the vicissitudes of the immediate past and those of the unknown future, the town began to progress. The town-folk once again appealed to Dr. Robertson to obtain for them the services of a dominee, which he did, with the arrival in Robertson from Scotland, of the Rev. Andrew McGregor, who was not

only to faithfully serve his congregation and indeed the whole town for 40 years, but was within a few years to become Dr. Robertson's son-in-law when he married Elizabeth Augusta, the eldest daughter.

By 1872 Robertson boasted a well stocked Public Library. Eleven years later a cultural body known as the Mutual Improvement Society, was established, mainly due to the offices of WHD English, Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate in the town, and a few like minded men such as Rev. McGregor, the Rev. Morris, the Anglican Minister, Mr. Stakesby Lewis and his brother John Lewis.

By 1880 a branch of the Standard Bank of South Africa was opened here by EB Gardiner, the manager at Worcester who came over several times a week to conduct business. Shortly thereafter, premises and a suitable house, the former DRC pastorie, were hired for a full time manager and staff of one.

During this period few farmers were wealthy but the district was already gaining a reputation for its fruit, wine and brandy, and with ostrich feathers becoming high fashion overseas, ostrich farming too developed.

The main industry of the town itself was that of wagon building, and church records abound with the mention of its allied occupations of wheelwrights, blacksmiths, carpenters, upholsterers and professional transport riders. Whipstocks, also a necessity of this thriving industry, were obtained from nearby Lady Grey, later to be re-named McGregor.

The Breede River Irrigation Scheme, which brought water by means of canals to the farms, was the brainchild of Dr. Frederick Hanf, who though a medical doctor, was a man of diverse talents, and farms with improved irrigation become more productive. In 1891 the Stander Bank Manager's report could state that the income for the area was between 30 000 Pounds and 40 000 Pounds a year, making it extremely prosperous.

The town had been declared a municipality some years before, and there were always concerned Councilors and members of the public who saw to the planting of trees, and the beautification of the town. Small wonder that Robertson was gaining the reputation of being the prettiest town in the Western Province. With the building of the First Class Public School in 1893 under Dr. Cluver, the town was developing a reputation for educational excellence throughout South Africa. "Rob Roy", the home of the Rev. and Mrs. A McGregor became a hostel for youths from far a field, and remained so even after their retirement in 1902.

Where before post had arrived in the town bi-weekly it was now delivered daily, because of the newly built Cape Central Railway, a privately owned line that ran between Worcester and Mossel Bay with Robertson its Head Office.

The Anglo Boer War of 1898 – 1902 saw the stationing in the town, of a British Garrison under the command of Lieutenant Cooper, and even before hostilities ceased, the wagon making industry was grinding to a halt, and the railways had taken over the transport of all goods.

The beginning of the First World War in 1914 saw many, for the size of the town, young men leaving their tranquil surroundings for the horrors of war at the Front Line in France, one at least never to return again.

The total collapse of the ostrich feather industry in 1915 ruined many farmers, some of whom never recovered and while Robertson had never depended entirely on ostriches as had Oudtshoorn and Ladismith, there is no denying that many were materially affected, and it is perhaps at this stage that wine farming started developing into the multi million rand industry it is today. These, together with the racehorse breeding farms, which have proliferated in the last thirty years, certainly have added to the prosperity of the town and the district.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, Robertson is a clean, tree-lined town, well known for its roses and gardens, with all the amenities of a much larger town, and the additional attraction of a beautifully laid out and well tended holiday resort, Silverstrand.

According to the 1998 census the town has 16 984 residents. This figure includes Nkqubela but not the outlying area.