

CHAPTER THREE : 'DORP VAN DROME' BY JOHANNES MEINTJES

GEORGE VICE - FATHER OF MOLTENO

The early history of the town Molteno is also the history of George Vice, an inhabitant of the Eastern Cape with wide interests. His parents were 1820 Settlers who made their home in Bathurst. A few years later they moved to Grahamstown where George Vice was born in 1830. He was the youngest of six children, two daughters and four sons.

During the Frontier War of 1846 George Vice went to King Williamstown and had to flee on foot with other citizens to Fort Peddie. The women were taken on wagons.

After his service during this war George Vice accepted a position with Cawood Brothers in Cradock. In time he would become a representative for them in Koonap and would, in the 1850's open a branch in Schoombie. He stayed there for seven years.

In 1859 he decided to accept an invitation from a Stormberg farmer, John Grove, to open a shop on his farm Cyphergat. George Vice had probably visited the region before on both trade and hunting excursions and he was keen on a change and better prospects. The presence of coal in the Stormberg had already become known in 1856.

George Vice arrived at Cyphergat at the age of twenty nine. From childhood he was aware of the coming and goings (and doings) of the Eastern Cape citizens and his family was well known as hardworking, God fearing, strict but also charitable. Prospecting must have peaked his interest at an early age, something which was fairly common amongst English speaking people. To begin with, though, he would be a general dealer in the employ of John Grove and he lived in a hut while a house and the shop were being built. On completion of the shop he acquired stock from his friend Bentley of the firm Trollip & Bentley in Queenstown.

While going about his normal duties George Vice investigated the farm Cyphergat thoroughly and found coal. He probably knew about the discovery a few years earlier by A Wyley and also about a second investigation in 1859. In 1859 most coal was still being imported and the deposits in the Transvaal and Natal has not been found. The search for coal in the Cape has already begun in 1852 and a reward of £100 was offered for a worthwhile discovery. The first noteworthy discovery was that of Wyley and then that of Vice. This was later followed by similar discoveries in Indwe as mentioned in the reports of EJ Dunn in 1873 and 1878.

Grove's reaction to George Vice's discovery was unexpected. Under no circumstances was Vice to spread the news and he was summarily forbidden from touching the deposits. The reason for this was that, like most of the Afrikaans speaking farmers, he had little interest in mineral deposits and was afraid that there would be a deluge of opportunists who would threaten his farm or that the government would confiscate his land. The shop which George Vice managed was enough.

The young man was not happy with this and begged and pleaded until at last he obtained permission to remove one wagon load of coal on condition that the area was immediately covered over. George

Vice was now in his thirties and in the three years that he had been at Cyphergat he had not been allowed to remove more than two wagon loads of coal. It was a frustrating situation and he decided to relocate because, as far as he could ascertain, the deposits were not limited to Cyphergat only.

Vice moved a few miles to the farm Paardekraal which had belonged to Willem Lategaan from 28 November 1850. The neighbouring farm was Onverwacht and George Vice also found large coal deposits there. He bought this farm from JJ Pienaar, son of the lion hunter DP Pienaar, on 18 August 1868 and added it to Paardekraal which he had already bought from Lategaan on 18 January 1865. In 1864 he started a mine called Penschaw and had immediate success although the coal, as previously reported, was of a poor quality and difficult to ignite.

Wagons loaded with coal were sent to the neighbouring towns and eventually even as far as Cradock and Kimberley. Wood was very scarce in the whole district which accounted for the initial success of Penschaw. It would lead to the founding of various companies such as the Great Stormberg Coal Company and Cape Collieries Ltd. The Cyphergat coal was mined from 1864. Rail links would bring great changes although not to the transport costs which remained high. The Great Stormberg Company collapsed after three years but other mines remained active until 1905 (Cape Collieries) and 1913 (Cyphergat and Penschaw). There were also Wallsend, Contat and Silkstone Collieries. Penschaw was in the part of Vice land which was called Wynnedale.

With the upheaval which occurred among the Bantu people with every frontier war and especially after the National Suicide of the amaXhosa, there were few labour problems as large numbers of people arrived in the Stormberg looking for employment. Experienced coalminers were brought in from Britain mainly from Scotland and Wales, and they were encouraged to bring their families with them. And so the Richardsons, Gardners, Straws and Gemmels arrived at Penschaw. After the later and more important discoveries of gold and coal they moved north. While Penschaw flourished, the name of George Vice became known from Algoa Bay to Kimberley.

But he was not just a businessman with an interest in coal. As with many of his era he was also a farmer and he built and planted. Vice established a wool-washery and planned to build a wool factory⁹ but had to abandon the latter. He built a mill, dams, installed irrigation systems and planted a plantation against the mountain and was also one of the first farmers in South Africa who fought soil erosion on a large scale. His methods in the area of soil conservation, such as the planting of various grasses, would surprise the future generations. On his farm he built a hostel for white employees, a blacksmith's shop and a grocery store which eventually sold just about everything under the sun. And amidst all these activities he also founded a town.

'A pioneer in the real sense of the word', declared Rev Allen Lea in a special church service on Sunday 13 May 1917, 'who passed away at his home on 26 April and with his passing this 'Father of Molteno' has gone to his eternal rest. Having passed away at the age of more than 86 years we can say with great conviction that his was a fruitful life. He had the privilege of completing a career of nearly 87 years and, for us younger people, I would like to repeat the message which I gave at his funeral : take everything from life that you can. His limitations in training, education and opportunities did not discourage him. We see him full of enthusiasm, managing successfully to grab every opportunity and use it to his benefit'.

'With his demise another connection with England and Waterloo was lost. His father and mother were part of the historic settlers who found it necessary to leave England as a result of the dire circumstances which followed the Battle of Waterloo.' Rev Lea then expounded on the British settlers and all that had had to endure. 'The full story of the Settlers has yet to be written', he said and since then it has indeed be written about on a grand scale. George Vice would remain proud of his British heritage but as a native South African he was equally proud patriot of the Eastern Cape and the country as a whole.

Throughout his life his motto was : moderation in all things - something which he implemented. As a young man he suffered greatly, especially in times of military service and he had to sacrifice much to realize his ideals. But he was always courageous and pious, a piety which in his youth was encouraged by the Rev John Brownlee. Brownlee was a missionary amongst the amaXhosa, a huge man, intelligent and with many and varied interests and had specialist knowledge of the history, traditions and habits of several tribes. During the war of 1834-35 the Brownlees and the Vice family fled together and again in 1846-47 when George Vice as a young boy of 17 entered into military service for the first time.

He also had become friends with Charles, son of John Brownlee. Charles was to play an important role in the Eastern Cape. By the time that George Vice had moved to Stormberg, Charles was magistrate for Headman Sandile and concerned with the many problems and changes in the Eastern Cape. Brownlee and his generous wife, Frances had an important influence on George Vice and set an example for him to follow. He was very proud of his friendship with the Brownlees and was eternally grateful for their advice and support when he, at an early age, had to make his own way in the world.

The influence of the Brownlees can be seen in many of George Vice's activities. They were practical people who still cherished ideals, culture conscious people and patriotic South Africans. Vice showed this in the choice of the name of the town which he would found and in his donations of ecclesiastical and educational institutions. Rev Lea called him 'a businessman, a soldier and a patriot' and that he indeed was, also a good friend, firm and generous. He was not a man who strove for luxury or self-aggrandisement , but he was the undeniable 'Father of Molteno' and constantly strove to be worthy of this role. His campaigns were manifold, his military blood was true, against apathy, negligence and especially alcohol abuse.

An anonymous visitor to Molteno told of how he arrived there one Sunday morning early in 1897. He had, he told in a now lost manuscript, heard of the many warnings not to comment on local issues, because the 'Royal Family' - as the Vice family was known - were hostile towards anything that was generally acceptable, that they were staunchly religious and anyone who did not agree with them would be seen as lost. On the whole, he understood that they were a stingy, miserable bunch who were so revered in Molteno that it would be better to hold your tongue, even if you were a genial diplomat - 'a town of many VICES and only one VIRTUE' - the latter being a spinster in charge of the library. Only teetotallers were welcome and the two hotels were 'dead'.

The visitor eventually met the 'Royal Family'. 'I attended a mass gathering where a decision was to be made on how to celebrate the 60th Jubilee of Queen Victoria in an appropriate way. It made me blush to watch how a stage full of VERY IMPORTANT PEOPLE were busy fighting for the attention of a silver bearded old gentleman, GEORGE VICE, who after he had donated a park to the town and had promised to plant it, was now being forced to fence it! After I discovered that it was the usual way to treat the Vice family my sympathy switched to them. They were the only sincere people in Molteno, narrow yes, but hospitable, friendly and helpful. 'Old George' remarried and created a second family of little boys who, quaintly, addressed their older half-brothers as 'uncle'...'

His first wife Sarah passed away in 1883 at the age of 54. Some of their children died young. George Vice's second wife was Charlotte Miller Wynne, 22 years younger than him but she only outlived him by 3 years. She was the daughter of James Needham and Mary Wynne and was born in Fort Beaufort on 1 June 1851.

Strong personalities always create legends and so it was with George Vice. His 'verkramptheid' was exaggerated, especially in mining towns such as Molteno, as was his campaign against sport on Sundays. The story goes that when he was fifty four, he decided that he was old and he sat down and barely stood again. This description cannot be reconciled with all his activities as he was also the first Mayor of Molteno.

Very little of his plantation remains as a plague infested the trees and caused him much concern. Toward the east of Molteno on the right bank of the Stormberg Spruit he planted 500 morgen of trees, mainly pine trees and the mountain slopes became a rich oasis in a treeless district. Also noteworthy were the beautiful Cyprus trees. In a tender issued by the government in 1902, George Vice won the first price of £500. When he died there were still at least 160 000 trees apart from the many fruit trees, and a beautiful avenue with a view of the town. The place is now known as The Plantation (briefly known as The Pines) and members of the Vice family still live there.

In all his enterprises George Vice was very precise. When his son Percival George Vice took over the running of the mill, a contract was drawn up wherein every possible point was touched on. The same applied to the leasing of a section of his farm Paardekraal to his son Albert Charles Vice. In the many other contracts with people within and outside of his family concerned with the hiring and letting of property, prospecting and the delivery of coal one can see the practical and discerning businessman - but also a businessman with a big heart as his rules and regulations for the foundation of Molteno would show.

Molteno's coal production amounted to 16 483 ton per year by 1885. By 1938 coal production in the whole of the Cape had dropped to 3108 ton. George Vice fortunately did not survive to see all the mines in Molteno simply become curiosities. He spent his last days in his imposing house and many photographs of him and his wife on the stoep remain. A worthy couple with their relatively young children. The old gentleman with his luxuriant snow-white beard and bushy white eyebrows never smiles but stares tightly out in front of him. By 1917 there was probably not much to smile about as his promising town began to die.

With great sorrow George Vice was laid to rest right in the middle of the original cemetery and his memorial looks down upon the town which he founded with so many joyous expectations.

Ref: 'Dorp van Drome', Die geskiedenis van Molteno 1874-1974 Hoofstuk 3 - George Vice. Meintjes, Johannes Petrus. 1974, Die Rustica Pers (Pty) Ltd

Translated by Mrs Bev Fourie 2019