

The Dorsland Trekkers: Endurance, Faith, and Folly:

In 2024, I bought Paul van Zeyl's Dorsland Trekker (Afr. 'Thirstland trekker') display from Kenny Napier Auctions. The purpose of his display was to record the exodus of the Boers / Afrikaners from the ZAR (Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek / Transvaal) who crossed the arid Kalahari Desert of Bechuanaland in order to find land, first in Ovamboland before it became a part of German SWA and eventually in Portugal's southern Angola. Paul had scored 73 points with this 80-sheet Open Class exhibit at both Australia 2013 and at Marpex (Hilton, Natal) in 2024 where he was awarded a Large Silver.

I imagined I could build on Paul's work by adding more postal history to it but I underestimated how scarce Dorsland Trekker material is. As a respected specialist dealer of long-standing Paul had accumulated much of what little postal and documentary material existed on a migration that began in 1874, ten years before the rudiments of a postal service were introduced into the vast and remote areas which they crossed. To date, (January 2026), I have only been able to add two items to this display. One, Fig. 1 below, is a modern Airmail cover showing the 1974 4c 'Centenary of the Thirstland Trek' commemorative stamp.



The original Dorsland Trekkers were some 700 Boers and 200+ 'makvolk' (Afr. 'tame people', servants) who left the western Transvaal between 1874 - 1877 in three major trek parties. (Smaller parties followed, some at the end of the SAW (South African War) in 1902). There was no proper planning and they departed without a destination in mind. They aimed to cross Bechuanaland and to find land in SWA. They would know their destination when they arrived. Some 230 Trekkers died, mainly from malaria, while a similar number turned back. About 130 babies were born en route. They

founded a Republic of Upingtonia at Grootfontein that lasted four years but in 1883, some 325 Trekkers and 43 servants departed Ovamboland for Humpata in south western Portuguese West Africa. Fig. 1, an easily found 15c Airmail cover from Oranjemund dated '30 XII 74' to GB bears 3 x SWA 1974 4c 'Centenary of the Thirstland Trek' commemorative stamps. Their design shows the north-westerly route the Trekkers took across the arid scrubland of Bechuanaland to SWA and Angola.

Like the Great Trek of 1835 the Dorsland Trekkers were driven by a need for farmland. Most were poorly educated 'bywoners' (landless tenant farmers). Paul's display includes several sheets of an historic letter written by the Cape Coloured adventurer and trader Will Jordan who encountered the Trekkers in dire straits in 1874. His letter to a Cape newspaper is a valuable first-hand account, possibly the only contemporary interview with the surviving Trekkers in which they explain what happened to them. Jordan describes the Trekkers as "ignorant", "uneducated" and "unfortunate, narrow-minded people". Despite his low mixed race social status, the destitute Trekkers accepted Jordan's medical aid and political advice. He negotiated with the Ovambo on their behalf and suggested that they ingratiate themselves with the Cape's fourth Prime Minister, Thomas Upington, by naming their republic after him. Jordan's support for the Trekkers would eventually contribute to his murder by the Ovambo in 1886.

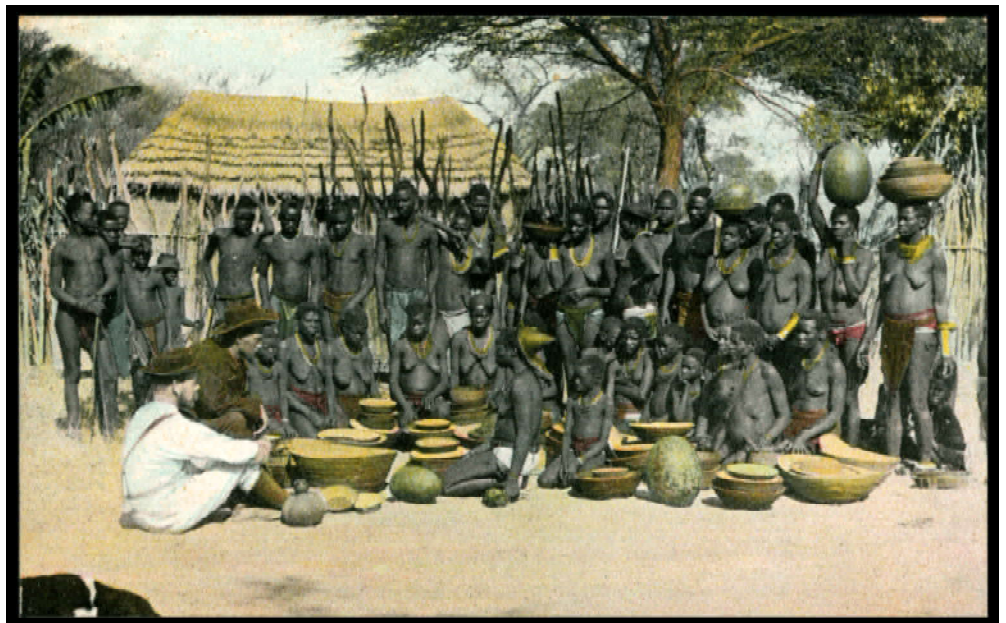
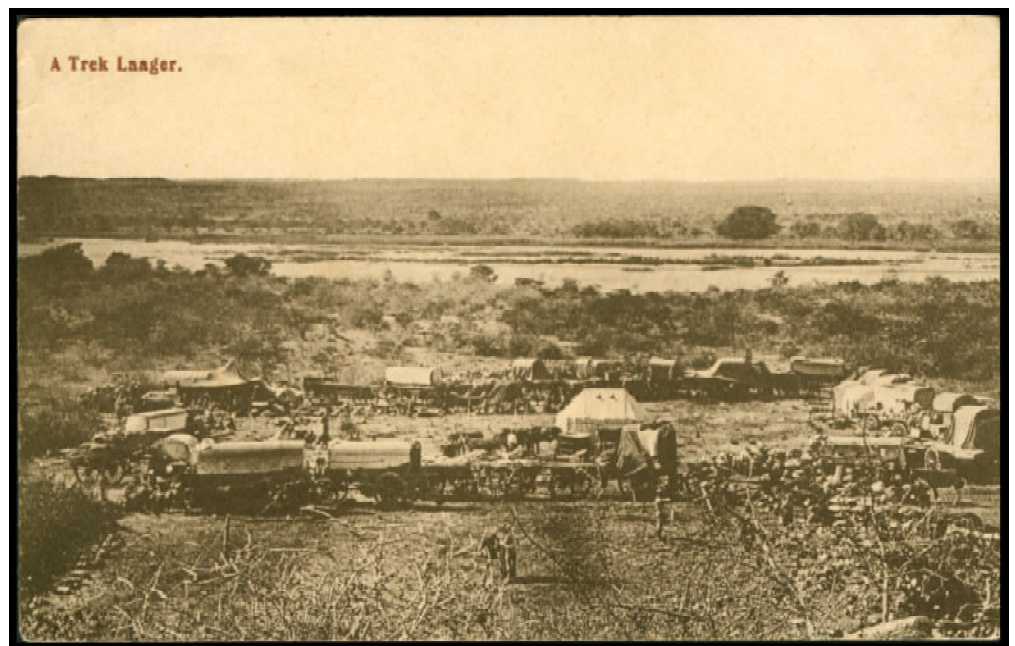


Fig. 2, postcard right, shows a European, possibly the trader John Gunning, and a Coloured man, possibly Will Jordan, trading with the Ovambo.

*at various, Some left because Burger was
 President, Others again say they knew that the
 English Government was going to take the Transvaal
 Others again because in the Transvaal they had
 no ground, so they wanted to look for a place
 where they might call a piece of ground their
 own. One saw Mr. Merwe told me to be better because
 the Transvaal was too thickly populated. But
 Alberts again said that his father prophesied
 that the Transvaal was but a resting place for
 them for a time, and that they like the
 Children of Israel will have to cross the river.*

Fig. 3 above shows a reduced part of Jordan's contemporary letter in which he says the Trekkers believed that "the Transvaal was but a resting place for them for a time and that they, like the Children of Israel, will have to cross the river." Some believed they could literally trek across Africa to the Promised Land and rejected advice that an overland route to Jerusalem was much farther and more perilous than they realised.

The Trekker's rejection of well-meant advice contributed to the tragedies that befell them. The first Thirstland trek, 'the Van der Merwe' trek, comprised 50 people in ten families who left the Pretoria district in May 1874. Indicative of their lack of leadership and a clear plan, they camped for a year along the Limpopo, apparently waiting for the rains before crossing the Kalahari. Fig. 4 above shows a typical trek laager. They were lucky, moving through Bechuanaland to Ghanzi and Lake Ngami, then to Rietfontein inside SWA without real mishap. They remained at Rietfontein until early 1878, six years before Germany's occupation of the territory. The second and third treks fared worse. Fearing a trap, the second trek of 1875 ignored Bechuana Chief Khama's advice to travel in small groups so as to preserve the route's few wells and sparse grazing. They lost most of their cattle and wagons. The third and deadliest trek followed in 1877 after Britain annexed the ZAR. Malaria claimed many lives but the group persisted in trekking on.



In 1877 the Cape Government was concerned about Germany's plans for SWA. It sent William Coates Palgrave to discuss its annexation with Nama and Herero leaders. (Britain would later only permit the Cape to annex the port of Walvis Bay in 1878.) Palgrave warned the native leaders that Boers intended to settle their territory, effectively turning them against the Dorsland Trekkers whose subsequent attempts to buy land in pre-German SWA failed. When the three Dorsland Trek parties eventually merged, they pushed north from Rietfontein. In desperation one group entered the Okavango swamps where all the men died of malaria, leaving only three women and 19 children alive.

The survivors moved to Kaoka Otavi where they built homes and gardens but disease still took its toll. At this time hunting was a major source of Trekker livelihood. (Later they would hunt Angolan elephant to make a living from ivory.) When a hunting party clashed with the Ovambo tribe in southern Angola the Boers came to the attention of the Portuguese authorities. As the Portuguese colonial presence was weak, they welcomed the Boers as farmers, traders and military allies against the local tribes, as well as a buffer against British expansion. In 1880 a delegation of Trekkers reached an agreement with the Governor of Moçamedes that allowed them to settle at Humpata in south-western Angola.



Humpata was a small garrison town in south-western Angola that was issued with one of eight recorded Angolan military internal crown oval cancellers in about 1879. Perhaps the arrival of the Dorsland Trekkers and the needs of the Portuguese military influenced the issue of a Humpata Double Circle datestamp in 1883.

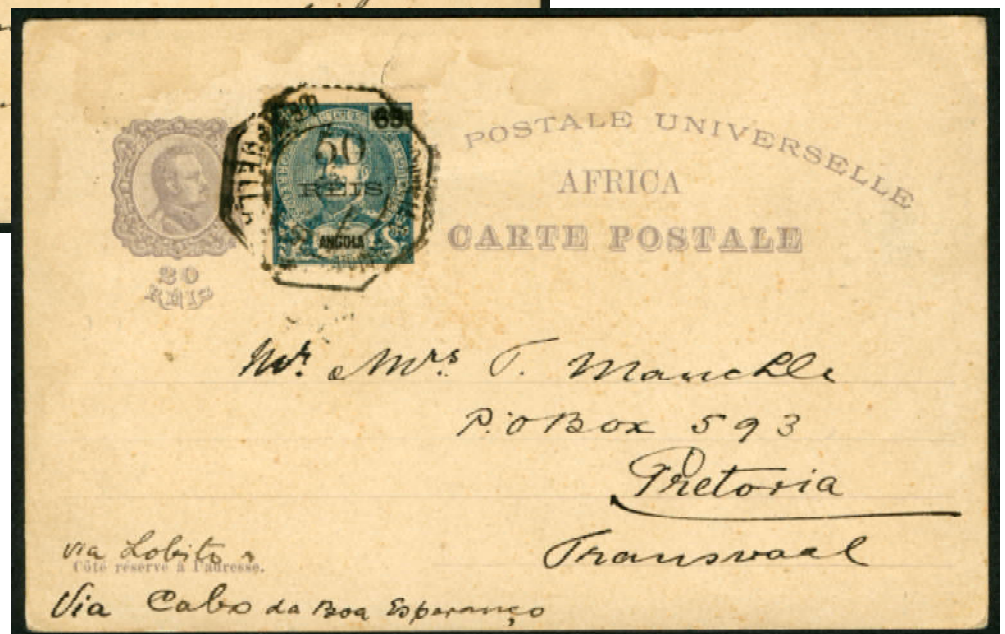
Its upper circle states 'ESTACAO POSTAL' while the lower part shows the post office name. The cancel is rare. In 1892 a long-serving Unbroken Double Circle datestamp was introduced as the main canceller of Angola. Its has 'PORTUGAL PROV-DE-ANGOLA' above the post office in the bottom of the circle which is

introduced by CORRO DE (town). In about 1900 the Octagonal datestamp was issued to Humpata. It was still in postal use when many of the Dorsland Trekkers and their descendants departed Angola in 1928.



Figs. 7 and 8 and 9 (over) are Angolan postcards posted to Pretoria, Transvaal, between 1909 - 1911, showing that the Trekkers kept in contact with family in SA. Much of this postal history may have been lost when the British Army burned Boer farms during the ZAR. The card left is from a German in the Trekker community who is writing to Pretoria from "der wilderness".

The last trek from the now Transvaal Colony to Angola was in 1906. It was triggered by the harsh conditions of the Pax Britannica that followed the end of the SAW in 1902. A few Europeans joined the Dorsland Trekkers and married into the community, providing fresh intellectual and cultural stimulus. The most influential newcomer was the Hollander Pieter van der Smit, a former teacher in the ZAR and a South African War veteran. He campaigned for overseas support, both spiritual and financial, from Holland where he also agitated on behalf of the ZAR Boers during the SAW and the Trekkers after it. He founded schools and businesses and as the owner of the first camera in the Trekker community he documented their lives in southern Angola. He died in 1921 aged 42 leaving a wife and 12 children. Fig. 5 bottom page 12 shows Pieter van der Smit's photo of a young Trekker couple in Humpata in 1905. (Photographer: Pieter van der Smit.)



The Trekker ox-wagon, Fig 6, was a revelation to the Portuguese who used indigenous people as *carregedares* (Port. pack carriers) and or ox-sleds to haul heavy goods inland. The Trekker's four-wheeled '*carro Boers* (Port. ox-wagons) transporting between 1½ - 2 tons over poor terrain revolutionised southern Angolan transport. While the same job could be done more cheaply by 80 *carregedares* they were less reliable and seldom available in wars against local tribes.

Granted a monopoly on transport provided that they developed and maintained roads, some Boers



thrived during the building of railways. Paul's display has five postcards showing the '*carro Boer*'. Fig. 9 below shows prosperous wagoners.

The Boers also served the Portuguese as mercenaries and participated in no less than 22 wars against indigenous people in the 40 years that they were in Angola. Attacks on Portuguese garrison towns like Moçâmedes by indigenous anti-colonial resistance fighters ended soon after the Boers arrival in Angola. At a basic rate of £1 per day the Boers were well-paid for their



services. Fig. 10, photo top page 5, shows the Trekker's 'Wen Commando' (Afr. Victory Commando) after their defeat of the Okuamati tribe in 1907.

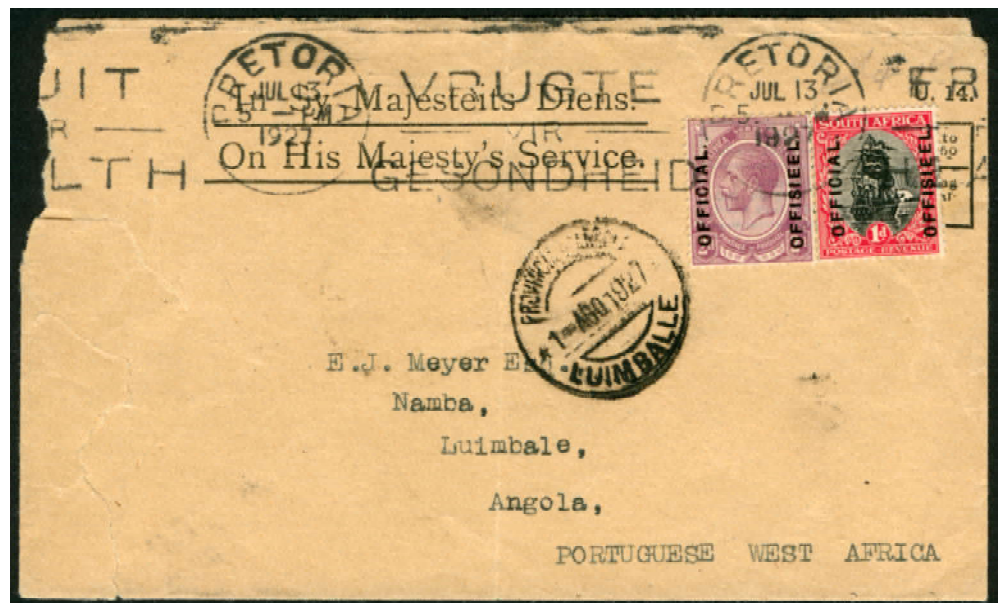
Despite the Boer's valuable service tension developed with the Portuguese authorities who decided as early as 1894 not to make more land available to Boers. Gun Licences were withheld from the more unruly Boers. The autonomy to regulate their affairs in Humpata was ended despite the agreement of 1880 guaranteeing it. Angolan colonial policy was to encourage a *mestiço* (mixed-race) elite. The Boers were not melting pot material. The *mestiços*, though only about 2% of the population, formed an administrative class loyal to Lisbon, one contemptuous of the isolated Boers who refused to integrate.



The Catholic Church resented the growth of Protestantism in southern Angola. Mass Protestant baptism of Africans by missionaries were not uncommon and contributed to Catholic and official unease and antagonism toward Boers. When Portugal refused to grant Boers citizenship and denied their children from being taught in Afrikaans, the surviving Dorsland Trekkers and their descendants gave thought once more to moving on again or back to the now Union of SA.

In 1924 J.B.M. Hertzog, a conservative Afrikaner nationalist, became the third Prime Minister of the Union of SA. Hertzog appointed Ernest Meyer, a post-SAW trekker farming in Luimballe, as SA's first consul to Angola. See Fig. 11 Official OHMS cover right to Meyer who negotiated with the Portuguese for the repatriation to SA / SWA of all Angola-Boers. The two countries finalised the details at Swarbooisdrift in June 1928.

With the help of Portuguese authorities, Trek Certificates were issued to 420 families of whom 373 accepted immediately. By February 1929, 1,922 Boers were resettled in SWA mainly around Gibeon, Gobabis, Grootfontein, and Otjiwarongo, as well as in the Union. Fig. 12 photo shows a "Dutch family arriving at Fort Namutoni" with their dog and donkeys. A second smaller group returned to SWA/ SA in 1931.



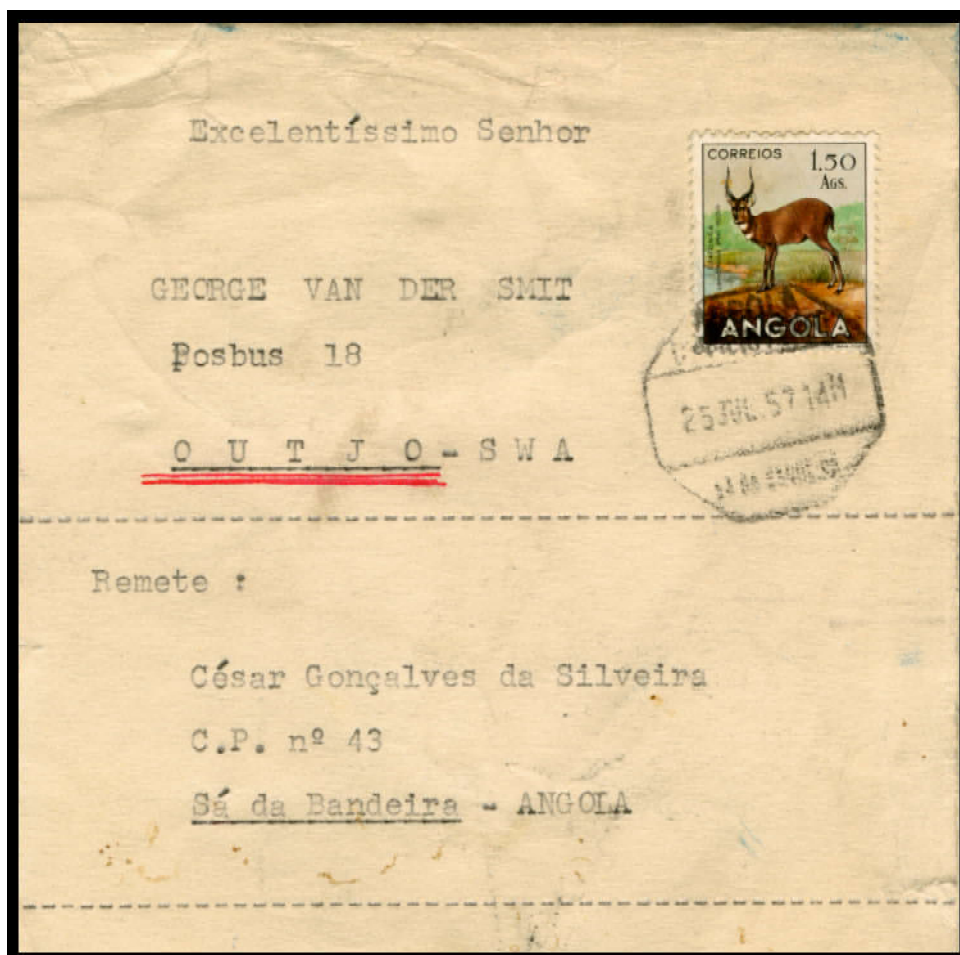
About 85 Dorsland Trekker families remained in Angola. Their refusal to assimilate led to more Portuguese hostility. The last official Angola-Boer repatriation was in 1958 when Apartheid was government policy in SA. As a result, the Union only accepted Europeans back. The loyal 'makvolk' were left behind, as were all Whites with mixed race offspring.

Over time monuments were erected to the Dorsland Trekkers. One of the foremost organisers of the various festivals and commemorations that were held was George van der Smit, son of the photographer. Fig. 13 above is a questionable 'First Day Cover' signed by him as the organiser of the 1957 re-visit to Humpata and other Trekker settlements in the southern highlands, also the 1969 Festival whose commemorative datestamp

was used in Ohopoho 23 - 27 June 1969. It shows the Dorsland Trekker Monument erected at Swartbooisdrif.

This article omits the community's divisive religious discord, slavery and the introduction of railways whose development was hastened by the "carto Boers". Surprisingly, some Boers went back to Angola once its economic prospects improved. These topics are covered in Paul's display which can be viewed in full on the South African Philately Club website.

Email questions to: steve@softcover.com.



The Dorsland Trekker Festival of 23 - 27 June 1969 was celebrated with the issue of 4,323 FDCs (below) cancelled with the OHOPHO postmark above.



The 4c Dorsland Trekker stamp, page 1, was issued in SWA on 13th November 1974. Its official postmark above celebrates the Republic of Upingtonia in Grootfontein.

A Memorial Visit to Angola was organised in 1957 by the "Rusplaas-Dorslandtrek Feeskomitee" under the leadership of George Diederick van der Smit. The journey into southern Angola was undertaken in a convoy of 90 vehicles, (some 400 people). At Humpata they erected a monument in honour of the Dorslandtrekkers and restored three graves. The ceremony was attended by the Portuguese authorities who took the monument into safekeeping. The cover above, Fig 13, from SA DA BANDEIRA '25JUL 57' to OUTJO, SWA, is according to Paul van Zeyl "evidencing the follow-up work relating to the ceremony". The cover below, Fig 14, signed by George D van der Smit, "Member of the Festival Committee", is from the three day Remembrance Festival at Swartbooisdrif in northern SWA (Namibia) '23 - 27 6 69'.

