

Port Shepstone, Time Travel 1905 at the Harbour

Facts, Natal and Port Shepstone in the beginning of the 20th century

The beginning of the 20th century was a critical time in the history of the colony of Natal and a turning point in South Africa. It was a time of imperialism and colonialism, an increasing racial hostility that brought insecurity, tensions and fear, a fear for a major African uprising.

Hunter-gatherers and later farmers, San and Khoi, had been living in the Natal area for thousands of years. We know very little of their movements, settlement pattern and organization. In the early 19th century the more loose organisations of kingdoms was formed into a centralised, militaristic state led by Shaka, King of the Zulu clan. This was subsequently referred to by Colonial settlers as the kingdom of the Zulu. From the 1840s white settlers from Europe, and especially England, moved into the area and the situation gradually changed.

Natal was proclaimed a British Colony in 1843. In the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 the British defeated the Zulu army, and Zululand was annexed to the Colony of Natal in 1897. 1899-1902 the Anglo-Boer war ravaged in the colonies in southern Africa including Natal.

Around the turn of the century 1900 the Africans were a large majority, the settlers less than 10 % of the population in Natal. The white settlers perceived themselves as superior. The colonial government introduced a policy for separate administration (“reserves”) of the “Natives”. Natal was a deeply racist society. And there was an increasing aggression towards the African population.

Many Africans became more and more dissatisfied with colonial rule in Natal. They had lost their land to white farmers and sugar cane fields through the English policy of relocation. Many forests were cut down. The traditional way of living in the villages, producing most essentials, was changed into working for wages in the emerging industries, on white farms or the mines at Witwatersrand. Rents, taxes (hut tax, marriage tax, dog tax etc) and prices increased, and the restrictive pass laws were despised. The changes broke up the family, the traditions and the homesteads. There was an erosion of African traditions and values, a racial discrimination and often a violent exercise of authority.

African quotations: *“We cut away the wild forests for sugar plantations and towns, we dig your roads. We are made to live on farms and pay rent”. “We have to go out leaving no one in charge of our homes and children behind.”* Many Zulus and Mpondos wanted to reclaim their heritage.

The settler’s solution to African poverty and complaints was obedience and labour, *“carry out our instructions without complaint and go and work on white farms, industries or on the mines, to earn the money you need”*

Many settlers were afraid that the African dissatisfaction would turn into a rebellion on a massive scale. They thought it was only a matter of time. It was almost like a sign when heavy storms, hails and even snow affected Natal badly in May 1905.

In the 1860s sugar cane was introduced in Natal. The same year the first indentured labourers from India came to the region to work in the sugar industry. By 1900 more than 100 000 Indians, men, women and children, had arrived in Natal, most of them working on the fields along the north and south coast, in the sugar industry or in the mines. Some of the women also

had domestic work. The Indians often had a five-year contract that could be extended for another five years before they qualified for a return passage to India. Mohandas K. Gandhi came to Natal in 1893. When he saw the racism and the ill treatment of the workers he started his Satyagraha (truth and firmness) movement, a non-violent resistance against white oppression.

Sugar was introduced to the Port Shepstone region in 1868 and the first sugar mill started. The Aiken brothers built another mill in 1884. From 1896 the Umzimkulu Sugar Mill Company took over the operations and a new mill came into function. The sugar was shipped to Durban. The sugar industry had compounds for the workers, one for Black labourers and one for Indians. Both men and women worked on the cane fields and in the sugar mill. Often a woman stayed behind in the compound to take care of the children. The salary for the workers was c. 6 pounds a year plus rations of sugar, mealie meal, rice, beans and oil. Many Indians had a small garden where they grew vegetables for their own use but also to sell.

In 1880 the harbour at Port Shepstone was opened. William Bazley was in charge of the work at the harbour from 1879 to 1894. He was followed by William Barnes Kinsey. 1882 the town of Port Shepstone was laid out. Officially the area south of the river had the name South Shepstone until 1928 but popularly the town was called Port Shepstone already from the early times. Many white settlers moved into the area, 1880 and onwards. 1882 saw the arrival of 246 Norwegian settlers. The colonisation forced the Zulus and Mpondos to find new ways of living. In the 1880s and onwards indentured labourers were sourced from India and settled along the south bank of the Umzimkulu river. The changes made the tensions in the area grow.

There were at times problems at the Port Shepstone harbour because of the drifting of sand and flooding. Kinsey led the work of building a new cement wall and a second breakwater. He used many African and some Indian labourers, one year 168 Black workers and also 12 convicts. Sometimes there were complaints by workers of mistreatment. In 1904 some Black workers accused the foreman HB Andreason, W Sayers and F Bakeberg of bad treatment and complained to the Magistrate. The same year an African drowned in the harbour and was swept away. The workers could also be called out on emergency and were threatened with severe punishment if they did not attend.

The Umzimkulu river was used for many purposes, it was the river of life, a gathering place. For most of the period, 1880-1906, there was work at the harbour. Many ships came to Port Shepstone, was loaded or unloaded. Every fortnight a steamer came from Durban with cargo and passengers, a 12-hour trip. The main imports were flour, biscuits, rice, groceries, building materials etc. Exports included sugar, lime, marble, hides, fish, tea, cotton, fresh fruit etc. Lighters and barges were used to transfer the cargo, for transport within the harbour, and bringing the goods upstream and downstream. Dredgers tried to keep the river mouth open.

A wharf started in 1898 and a Custom's House the year after. The custom's house was utilised for collection and customs duties on imports and exports..

In 1901 the railway extended to the northern side of the Umzimkulu river. The work at the harbour continued and the new harbour was completed in 1904. The dredger Snipe came into use. Kinsey wanted to increase the size of the harbour. But there were often problems and the harbour closed for shorter periods because of weather conditions or the silting of sand.

The new lighthouse, opened in 1905, was made of cast iron and transported in modules from Britain.

In 1905 the decision was taken to build a bridge for the railway over the Umzimkulu river, a bridge that was finished in 1906. That meant the final closing of the harbour 1906/1907.

At the turn of the century and white employers in the Colony of Natal had difficulty recruiting black farm workers. One reason was the harsh conditions but also because of increased competition from the gold mines of the Witwaterstrand. The colonial authorities decided to introduce a new tax on every unmarried male, the so-called poll tax, in the Zulu language it was called the head tax, "Khandampondo". The government needed to repair economic setbacks after the war. They wanted to force black men to enter the labour market, to work on the fields and in the industries in order to earn more money and pay the tax. In 1904 the government made a census of the population to use as the basis for taxation. The Poll Tax Act was passed in the Natal government in August 1905 and announced in September and October the same year. The Government sent officers from the Magistrates to proclaim the new law to the people. The taxation of unmarried men also challenged the patriarchal authority in the family because previously only the fathers paid the taxes.

The reaction towards the new tax was fierce. Most Africans resisted paying when the first tax collectors came to the villages in January 1906. It turned into a violent uprising in 1906. The Zulus took to arms with pockets of resistance throughout Natal, opposing the Poll Tax. Inkosi Bambatha kaMancinsa was one of the chiefs, homestead north of Greyton, who resisted and started guerrilla attacks. The uprising is often called the Bambatha rebellion. Many people chose rather to die than be forced into economic and political slavery. The mighty and organised British Armies were victorious, adding more suffering to the Zulus, quelling the Rebellion. Rebellion Leaders were arrested, tried and sentenced. In the Port Shepstone region 37 Zulu leaders were put to court and sentenced to life, to prison with hard labor and floggings. The Family fibre and social fabric of the Zulus, directly and indirectly, were destroyed and defragmented.

This was also the time when the passive Resistance Movement for Indians started, led by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi set up a small ambulance corps within the British army, to help the wounded in the war.

The sugar farm owners by the river had a strategy to suppress people from partaking in the rebellion and they tried to breakdown the Blacks economy.

There were much talk about the new tax, resistance and rebellion in the spring of 1905 by all affected.

Scenario. At the Umzimkulu River at the Port Shepstone Harbour, October 1905

There are always people by the river at the river mouth. This day people are waiting for the Umzimvubu steamer to arrive from Durban. Every time the steamer comes in people are gathering at the harbour. Some need to buy groceries and flour. Labourers will offload and onload and the custom's officer check the wares.

The new wall of the harbour, finished in 1904, has cost a lot of effort and hard work to finish. Still the person in charge of the work, Harbour Engineer William Kinsey, is not satisfied. He calls for labourers to make improvements on the wall and the breakwater. Another heavy job is to store all the goods from the Sugar Mill and the quarries. The goods will stay in the harbour waiting for a boat to take it to Durban.

Some people are sceptical to work at the harbour for William Kinsey and the difficult foremen Andreason, Sayers and Bakenberg. It's hard work, tough treatment and a low salary. But maybe the work in the harbour is soon going to be finished, if a railroad bridge will be built over the river.

When people gather some of the Indians have brought vegetables and other goods to sell, which they have grown in their gardens. The Zulu women have brought baskets and beads and hope to trade some of it. As usual the women are busy all the time, while waiting, talking, and bargaining.

At the harbour there are often employers from the Sugar Mill, looking for new labourers.

Today you can feel the tension in the air. The rumour says that the colonial government will decide on a new law. Each unmarried male should pay a tax, a poll tax they call it. This is in addition to already existing taxes which are a burden to many people. And why the unmarried men? Isn't it the father who is the head of the family and control the economy?

Are the rumours about the new tax true? The reason to make a census last year must have been to introduce this new tax. Maybe the law is already passed in the Government? We need information from the Magistrate! The women are worried to be left alone in the villages even more than before, if their husband, brothers and sons go away working for days, weeks and months.

Many say there is already too much of oppression. It is enough! Others are more hesitant on what to do if any tax collectors will come to their village. Will they pay or not? The frustration is growing. Is it time for an uprising? Or is non-violence the way? Or to be obedient?

Key questions

- How do we respond to the new tax? An uprising? Non-violence? Or be obedient and pay?
- What do we think of the changes in the area over the past few decades?
Loosing land and our traditional way of life (Zulus). How do we reclaim the heritage?
What is it like to live in another country (Indians)? Was it better back home in India?

Roles

Learners:

2/3 of the learners will be Zulus, 1/3 will be Indians. Everybody keep their age and sex.

Adults: Zulus, Indians, Mpondos, Coloured, White settlers, Foremen, Kinsey, Employers from the Sugar Mill. Everybody keep their age and sex

Others (convicts, custom's officer?).

Activities

Unload a barge

- Store sugar, lime, marble
- Stone work
- Cooking
- Basket weaving, beadwork
- Fishing, making sinkers
- Stick fighting, games, singing, dancing

Time plan

07.00 Set up the place

09.00 Learners arrive. Welcome, dress up
Presentation of characters, rules

09.40 Initiation (boat arrives?)

09.50 Activities start

10.50 Tea, rumours of the new tax

11.20 Activities continue

12.20 Meal, proclaiming of the new tax, decision
Sing and dance

13.30 Ending ceremony

Evaluation

14.00 End

Clean up

2009-10-05

Ebbe Westergren, Kalmar County Museum, Sweden

Twinning and Time Travel Committee in Port Shepstone

Kwa Zulu Natal Museum Service