

The following information is intended to enhance your enjoyment of the area by adding an historical perspective to the features that the casual visitor can see in Wakkerstroom and the surrounding areas. It was gleaned from many sources (see list **of suggested reading**) by John McAllister and particular thanks are due to Elna Kotze and Chris Smit for their assistance and advice. Much of the information on Zulu/Swazi history and legend was related to him by Mandla Sithole, Norman Ncube, Themba Thusi, Siphso Dladla and Jafta Ngwenya.

The Khoisan

The earliest known people that lived in the Wakkerstroom area were the *Khoisan*. Many examples of **rock art** usually attributed to them can be found in the area. These people were undoubtedly attracted to the vast herds of game that were found on the grassland plains of the area. The herds were mainly migratory and were attracted to the rich bounty offered by the regenerating grasslands after the first spring rains. As the summer progressed these grasses would become less and less palatable until, by the time the first frosts of autumn arrived they would have withdrawn most, if not all, of their nutrients into their root systems. The herds would move on to other pastures and the *Khoisan* would probably follow them and not remain in the Wakkerstroom area during the winter months.

Settlement by Nguni and Sotho peoples

It seems likely that the first Nguni or Sotho people may have arrived in the Wakkerstroom area in the 15th Century or earlier. Whether they settled in the area, visited it occasionally or merely passed through it on their way to somewhere else is not clear.

Gradually the area was settled by Nguni and Sotho people. In the mid 18th Century the death of Ngwane, the chief of a small group of Nguni people of the same name, resulted in a struggle for succession between two of his sons, Ludonga and Dlamini. The Ngwane were the nucleus of the people later to be known as the Swazi nation. Ludonga and a band of his supporters eventually fled and hid in a cave on **Mhlongamvula**, part of the **KwaMandlangampisi** mountain complex overlooking the present day hamlets of Dirkiesdorp to the north and Lüneburg to the south. The Khoisan people who occupied the cave at the time were evicted and the Swazi occupation of the area to the east of Wakkerstroom began. Around the same time the Hlubi, a Sotho tribe, were ensconced in the catchment of the **upper umZinyathi (Buffalo) River** in the area of the present-day towns of Wakkerstroom, Volksrust, Utrecht and Vryheid.

Further to the south-east Dingiswayo, after unsuccessfully trying to oust his father, Jobe, as ruler of the Mthethwa fled into exile. For at least part of his time in exile he gained refuge among the Hlubi. After Jobe's death Dingiswayo returned to Mthethwa territory and ousted his brother who had

succeeded Jobe. Dingiswayo is credited with developing and implementing the age-regiment system among the Mthethwa - a system that was soon used to great effect by his General and protégé - Shaka.

Dingiswayo and Zwide welded together a number of smaller tribes into two major opposing tribal confederations in eastern South Africa - the Mthethwa and the Ndwandwe. Their bitter enmity resulted in Dingiswayo being killed by Zwide in 1818. To honour his name Dingiswayo's name Langalibalele, the Hlubi chief born in this year, was given the second name of Mthethwa. The **Balelesberge** south of Wakkerstroom were named after the Hlubi chief.

Zwide and the Ndwandwe was defeated by Shaka near Ulundi and the tribe scattered. Although Zwide died elsewhere in 1825 it is rumoured that he was buried on a farm between Wakkerstroom and Volksrust.

The *Mfecane* and its effects on the Wakkerstroom area

These events sparked off the *Mfecane* - a period of terrible wars which affected developments throughout southern Africa as far north as southern Tanzania for almost the entire 19th century. They also had a profound effect on the Wakkerstroom area.

A group of Ngwane, living under their chief Matiwane in the area east of the present Vryheid were attacked, first by Dingiswayo and then by Zwide. They fled westwards and fell upon the Hlubi in the upper umZinyathi in the Wakkerstroom area. The Hlubi were defeated and their people either fled, survived in scattered remnants (e.g. a group of Sotho speaking Hlubi still survive in the Vryheid district and still cling to traditions long since abandoned in Lesotho). The Ngwane were in turn dislodged from the old Hlubi lands when they were attacked by Shaka.

At least in part the *Mfecane* can be said to have been one of the stimulants of the Great Trek. Populations of large parts of the southern Highveld, the present-day KwaZulu-Natal had been devastated and dislocated. While these areas had never been cleared of people the tendency of their inhabitants to hide in sheltered places gave the impression of empty lands to the Boer reconnaissance expeditions in 1834 and 1835.

After the Battle of Blood River in 1838 and the subsequent death of Dingane in 1840, Mpande became ruler of Zululand with the help of the Boer settlers. In acknowledgement for this help he granted them the right to settle, among other places, along the umZinyati (Buffalo River) in the area of the present-day town of Utrecht - part of the former territory of the Hlubi and the Ngwane and a seemingly empty landscape in the wake of the *Mfecane*.

The Boers, under Andries Pretorius formed the short-lived republic of Natalia. After four years of independence the British defeated Boer forces at Congella near Durban and annexed the republic as the district of Natal under the jurisdiction of the Cape Colony. This annexation led to the large scale exodus of Boers from the area. Among them was "Swart Dirk" (named after his black

beard and hair) Uys. He initially settled in the area between the present-day towns of Wakkerstroom and Utrecht.

Mandlangampisi

Meanwhile back in Swazi (Ngwane) territory near the present day Dirkiesdorp the descendants of Ludonga had managed to hold their own during the Mfecane. The local chief by the mid 19th Century was a man named Shabalala, also known as Mandla-angawempisi ("he who is as strong as the hyenas" and shortened to Mandlangampisi), the great grandson of Ludonga. His descendants still live in Dirkiesdorp area below the heights of the mountain known as KwaMandlangampisi.

Among Mandlangampisi's many claims to fame was that he twice defeated the Zulu might in battle. The first "battle" took place in the cave on **Mhlongamvula**. When Mandlangampisi and his people saw a Zulu impi approaching they retreated to the cave. Apparently the Zulus were merely on an exploratory trip to the area and had no intentions of fighting. Some of them entered the cave where Mandlangampisi and his group had taken refuge. The hapless Zulus could only enter the cave in single file and were killed off one by one in the darkness without the knowledge of those at the back.

Not all the warriors went to explore the cave and eventually they tired of waiting for their comrades and returned to Mpande without them. It is not clear why they did not search out their comrades, but it is worth noting that Mhlongamvula features strongly in both Zulu and Swazi mythology. Until today stories persist that there are caves on the mountain inhabited by spirits and that it is not wise to risk incurring the wrath of these beings. Possibly this incident gave rise to the myth.

After a few years had passed Mpande, the Zulu king at the time, sent a large contingent of warriors to search for those that had not returned and so the second "battle" between the Zulus and the Swazis under Mandlangampisi took place in the mid 1850s. This new force camped out near the place where the missing warriors had last been seen and engaged in a traditional ceremony of some sort (perhaps to appease the spirits of the mountain that had already killed their comrades). They hoped that the smell of cooking meat and the sound of the ceremony would entice any surviving comrades to come and investigate.

As the ceremony progressed the Zulus became more and more relaxed and left the weapons unguarded. The Swazis attacked and are said to have used their own weapons to kill the partying Zulus. It is interesting that the Dirkiesdorp area and the river running through it is called **Mabola** - rotten - in isiZulu. Perhaps it was so named from the rotting corpses of those slain in this battle.

Mthonga

It was around this time that Mthonga, the first born son of Mpande arrived in the area with his entourage. Mthonga had fled Zululand (with some of his father's cattle) in fear of his life. Mpande's second wife was plotting to have him killed to ensure the succession to the throne of her own son, Cetshwayo. They settled at a place then known as KwaYende.

An interesting story has it that there was a scribe named Ngema among Mthonga's entourage. Yende asked Ngema to write to the President of the then Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek and to register the title to the land. Ngema did this, but omitted to mention that he was writing on behalf of Yende and the area was duly registered as **KwaNgema** not KwaYende.

In 1854 Mpande ceded the right to the Boers at Utrecht to settle the area in the **upper umZinyathi** - more of the former Hlubi territory vacated during the Mfecane - in return for their help in locating and returning Mthonga to him for punishment. The cession granted by Mpande resulted in the settlement of a wide area around the present-day towns of Utrecht, Wakkerstroom and Volksrust by white stock farmers.

Mthonga had to flee once more and he moved westwards to the Wakkerstroom area and was given refuge on the farm **Saxony**, just west of the present-day town. He also spent a lot of time at the place known as Ophondweni or **eSikhaleni** between Wakkerstroom and Volksrust. In March 1861 the Boers surrendered Mthonga to Cetshwayo in exchange for a land agreement

Early days in the town of Wakkerstroom

The Volksraad of the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek in Potchefstroom decided that there was a need to establish a town between Potchefstroom and Utrecht. Swart Dirk Uys, who lived in the vicinity, was instructed by the Executive Council to find a site for a town that met the criteria of having good grazing and plenty of water to cater for the cattle and other livestock of both the residents and passing travellers.

His brief was simply to find a suitable site for the new town, but Swart Dirk decided to measure out the town anyway, before any approval was given by the Volksraad. He accomplished this by cutting a 50 yard long thong from an eland bull that he had shot when he arrived at his chosen site to measure out stands in the future town.

Using his layout he submitted plans Volksraad for the layout of the town he called Uys en Burg. The plans were submitted to the Volksraad by President M.W. Pretorius and were unanimously accepted by them on 21st September, 1859. Swart Dirk's name for the planned town was not accepted, however and the town was officially named Marthinus Wesselstroom - the name which is still used on official documents today - in the District of Wakkerstroom. With a typical Boer disregard for central authority the district name of Wakkerstroom was adopted as the "unofficial" name for the newly proclaimed town.

The Wakkerstroom of those days was a wild place. Not only did the nightly roars of lions compete with the calls of the frogs in the wetland, but there were many pretty lawless human inhabitants as well. The first Police Officer, Richard Donague, was only appointed in 1864 and there was quite a contingent of people who managed to avoid settling in Australia by getting out of their leg irons and jumping ship in Durban. These folk settled in Wakkerstrom outside the jurisdiction of the Natal Colonial Police and would retreat into the Colony whenever the ZAR Police decided to look for them

By the late 1860s the town was described as 'little more than a shanty town on the edge of a swamp.' Young Tom Vinnicombe and his family settled on the farm "**Mooi Plaats**" and describes the place thus (from **Vinnicombe's Trek**):

High in the Drakensberg were reedy bogs

Where lions' roars were answered by bullfrogs.

From mountain kranzes spruits ran sparkling down

Through Mooi Plaats to the place called Wakker's Town.

In time the boggy basin was surveyed,

Rondavels, mud huts and sod houses made;

Mud floors, reed doors, rawhide hung from door pole;

A pillow served to close each window hole

British Annexation of the Transvaal

On 12th April 1877 Sir Theophilus Shepstone, using the pretext that the President Burgers' government was bankrupt and ineffective, annexed the Transvaal as a British colony ostensibly to preserve the security of Natal. All the ZAR towns, including Wakkerstroom, were occupied by British forces. Shepstone was succeeded as Administrator of the new colony by Sir William Owen Lanyon in January 1879.

After much indecision by both Boers and Brits it was the attempted collection of arrear taxes that led to the final decision by the Boers to start the War of Independence. The burghers (citizens) of the Wakkerstroom district played a leading role in this. On 16th November 1880 they placed the following advertisement, with 113 signatories, in *De Volkstem*, a Pretoria newspaper:

'The undersigned burghers of Wakkerstroom district, having learnt that some of the inhabitants of the district have been called upon and others are being summoned to pay quit-rent and railway tax, seeing that the country is being robbed illegally and we, burghers of the country, owe no quit-rent except to the lawfully constituted Government of the S.A. Republic, we fully expect from

those persons who arrogate to themselves to demand quit-rent in this manner and to molest us, the burghers, that they will now leave us in peace, as we will pay no quit-rent unless an Estimates Law shall have been promulgated by our Volksraad in accordance with the Grondwet; and we bring this to the notice of you gentleman, who send written demands to us an molest us.

And we hereby forbid all Englishmen or English partisans, of those who call themselves officials in this country, from coming on our ground or to our homes for whatever reason, as we will have nothing to do with low betrayers of the country.'

This advertisement helped bring matters to a head. A Republican meeting held at Paardekraal on 8th December 1880, near the present-day Krugersdorp. It was resolved to fight, to the death if necessary, for the restoration of the republic. The War of Independence officially started at Potchefstroom on 16th December 1880.

The War of Independence (1880-81)

The British garrison in Wakkerstroom (C Company of the 94th Regiment) were relieved by a larger component of 120 men of the 58th Regiment under Captain H.M. Saunders on 17th December 1880 together with about 45 volunteers from among the townspeople. Most of the troops were housed in a **typical mud-walled "fort"** built around 1.5 km north of the town. The rest were stationed in the **courthouse** and the **Dutch Reformed Church**, which had been modified to make loopholes for firing out of and had been surrounded by a deep ditch. One story has it that a service was actually taking place in the church when the first alterations commenced! An old naval howitzer was placed in front of the church on the body of a water cart. This was left here after the war when it was transferred to the Pretoria Zoo by the victors.

While the Boers under Commandant van Staden threw a cordon around the town Wakkerstroom was never under any sort of serious siege. There were however many exchanges of fire and the occasional sorties by the British to 'recover' cattle and horses that had been 'captured, by the Boers. During one such sortie, on 22nd February, 1881, Private James Osborne rode out under heavy fire to pick up a comrade, Private Mayes, who had been wounded. Osborne was awarded the Victoria Cross for his valour.

After the Battle of Bronkhorstspruit the British forces gathered under General Sir George Colley at **Mount Prospect Farm** prior to marching to Pretoria to relieve the besieged forces there. The Boers were determined to prevent this and their forces gathered at **Coldstream** just above the farm owned by one Henry Laing.

The war was soon over. After heavy losses at the battles of Bronkhorstspruit (near Pretoria), **Laingsnek** and **Schuinshoogte (Ingogo Heights)** the British were defeated by the Boers at the Battle of **Majuba** on 27th February 1881. Sir George Colley was killed at **Majuba** and was buried at **Mount Prospect**.

This proved to be the end of this very unpopular war on all sides and an armistice agreement was reached on 6th March 1881 and a full peace treaty was signed at **O'Neill's cottage** on the southern slopes of Majuba Mountain

The railway line from Durban to the Witwatersrand

Not long after the War of Independence the railway line from Durban to the Witwatersrand was under construction. It was planned to go through Wakkerstroom, but a petition protesting against this was drawn up by the inhabitants of the town.

The ostensible reason for the protest was that the noise from the steam engines would frighten their cattle and hens and cause them to stop giving milk and eggs. The soot from the engines, it was maintained, would also blemish the skins of their wives and daughters. The real reason which no-one cared to admit to was more likely that the town's economy depended heavily on the transport riders and the wagon trains passing through town. Rail transport was seen as an unwelcome competitor to this.

The outcome of this was that the line was diverted and the present-day town of Volksrust was established as a border town in 1887. When the town fathers realised the magnitude of their mistake they tried to get the line re-routed, but it was too late. As a consolation prize a branch line was constructed from Volksrust via Wakkerstroom and Amersfoort to Bethal. Even here the townsfolk would not allow the line to be built closer than two miles to the town. Today the line has fallen into virtual disuse and the station, downgraded to a siding in the early 1990s, is now a restaurant and caravan park.

This was the first of a series of events that contributed to the downturn in the economic fortunes of Wakkerstroom that were to deteriorate continually for the next 100 years

The Anglo-Boer South African War (1899-1902)

The Boer forces under Commandant-General Piet Joubert gathered on the banks of the Sand River at **Dassieklip** - the farm where the young Tom Vinnicombe had stayed some 40 years earlier - before invading Natal.

After the initial Boer victories General Sir Redvers Buller led a British force into the Transvaal and defeated a Boer force at the Battle of **Allemansnek**. After this battle the Boers, fearing that they would be surrounded, retreated from Laingsnek. Buller occupied both **Volksrust** and **Charlestown**. Wakkerstroom itself was not occupied at this stage of the war, although **Ossewakop**, known at the time as Voortrekkerkop, was occupied by General N. G. Lyttleton and the South Staffordshire Regiment. This may have been because Buller had a soft spot for the Wakkerstroom people who had raised a Commando to help the British in the Anglo-Zulu war.

In an effort to restrict the movements and contain the Boers forces during the guerrilla phase of the war the British established several strategically situated lines of blockhouses. These blockhouses were of three basic types :

stone structures which were single-, double- or multi-storeyed;

structures with stone bases with corrugated iron upper parts - the so-called Sangar type; and

wholly corrugated iron structures known as Rice type blockhouses.

More than 9 000 blockhouses connected with over 8 000 km of barbed wire or entanglements were constructed throughout South Africa. More than 130 of these were located between Volksrust and the Swaziland border near Piet Retief. These **blockhouses** were of the Sangar and Rice types.

Chronological course of events in the conventional phase of the war as they affected Wakkerstroom and nearby towns

(extracted from a *Guide to the Anglo Boer War in the Eastern Transvaal*)

- Sept 1899 - Approximately 8 000 Boers gather at the **Sand River** near Volksrust
- 12/10/1899 - Boers invade Natal
- 14/10/1899 - Boers occupy Newcastle for seven months, renaming it Viljoensdorp
- 16/05/1900 - Retreating Boers occupy **Laingsnek** and damage the Laingsnek railway tunnel to cut the rail link from Natal to Pretoria
- 28/05/1900 - Long Tom cannon placed on top of **Mollskop (Pokweni)** to deter Buller's advance
- 02/06/1900 - Generals Sir Redvers Buller and Chris Botha meet at **O'Neill's cottage** to negotiate an armistice and possible peace treaty
- 05/06/1900 - Armistice ends and peace talks fail
- 08/06/1900 - Buller defeats Boer forces at the battle of Botha's Pass and the British enter the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek
- 11/06/1900 - Buller defeats the Boers at the Battle of **Allemansnek**
- 12/06/1900 - The British occupy **Volksrust** and **Charlestown**
- 13/06/1900 - British forces under General N G Lyttleton occupy **Ossewakop** overlooking Wakkerstroom
- 21/06/1900 - Buller's force occupies Perdekop
- 23/06/1900 - Buller occupies Standerton
- 07/08/1900 - Buller's force enters **Amersfoort**
- 10/08/1900 - Buller reaches Begin-der-lijn bridge on the Vaal River
- 11/08/1900 - British forces under the Earl of Dundonald enter Ermelo

Driefontein

In 1912 Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a founder member and the first Treasurer of the South African Native National Congress (later to become the African National Congress), founded the Native Farmers' Association of Africa Limited. He was President of the ANC from 1930 to 1937 and is commemorated in the name of the Seme Municipality which includes the towns of Wakkerstroom, Volksrust, Daggakraal, Amersfoort and Perdekop.

He purchased land on behalf of the Association at **Daggakraal, KwaNgema** and **Driefontein**. At the time these properties were home to some 5 000 Swazi-, Zulu- and Sotho-speaking inhabitants. It is probably fair to say that these purchases gave great impetus to the enactment of the Native Land Act of 1913. This Act forbade the purchase of land by Blacks in South Africa.

The total population of these townships grew to between 30 and 50 000 in the 1960s. In spite of having among the largest concentration of people in the area Driefontein did not appear on any road maps of the south-eastern Transvaal. It still did not exist as late as 1995 according to the New Southern African Book of the Road published by AA of South Africa. Daggakraal was shown as a farm siding on the railway line between Wakkerstroom and Amersfoort. KwaNgema was still insultingly shown as being on the farm Kaffir Lokatie (Kaffir Location) 024 HT on the 1994 update of the 3rd edition of the 1:250000 topocadastral map VRYHEID 2730.

These townships became a great thorn in the side of the apartheid government. In 1965 it was decided to remove this black spot, and to relocate the people to their respective Homelands according to their home languages. A dam was to be built covering part of their land at Driefontein and KwaNgema.

In 1981 the pressure brought to bare on these townships was increased dramatically. At this point Saul Mkhize, a well-respected community leader in Driefontein, was elected as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the three communities. The authorities chose not to recognise the board.

Relations between the community and the authorities deteriorated during 1982 and 1983, as a series of petty incidents showed. Eventually, on 2nd April 1983 Mkhize called a meeting at the Cabanangi school, supposedly to discuss the move. Two policeman arrived beforehand to ban the meeting. There were altercations and the judge who later heard the case, accepted police evidence that stones had been thrown. Mkhize was shot and killed by a policeman. Constable Nienaber was subsequently charged with murder and acquitted.

The construction of **Heyshope Dam**, which was to flood much of Driefontein and KwaNgema was begun in late 1983-early 1984. The residents were eventually granted permission to remain on their land in 1985. The dam, Heyshope Dam, was nevertheless completed in 1986. Water from the dam was pumped up over the escarpment into the Vaal Catchment to provide water to the Eskom Power Stations in the Vaal Catchment. Power lines from the nearby Majuba Power Station ran through the centre of Daggakraal. The

residents of Driefontein, KwaNgema and Daggakraal had to make do with water from simple and often unreliable wells and small, polluted streams. They received no water at all from Heyshope Dam. They also did not have access to Eskom electricity.

Towards a brighter future

Wakkerstroom remained in the economic doldrums until late 1989, more than a century after refusing to let the Durban-Johannesburg railway line through the town. The solitary hotel was in reality a derelict bar utilised by a few of the local inhabitants. Guests were virtually unheard of and those that did come could only sleep over. No meals were served. It was then that At and Elna Kotze decided to opt out of city life in Johannesburg and realised the potential of eco-tourism in the area. They purchased an old house a few kilometres outside the town and launched **Weavers' Nest**, Wakkerstroom's first Guest House. At this stage, with the exception of a group of hardened birders, Wakkerstroom was virtually unknown to out of towners.

While things started slowly at first Elna ensured that the area was recognised as the premier birding site for rare South African endemics like Rudd's and Botha's Larks and Yellow-breasted Pipit. It was soon realised that while these species were and always would be the backbone of the town's burgeoning tourist industry there were plenty of other things to satisfy would be tourist's requirements including another 360 bird species, a myriad of wildflowers, a rich history, 4x4 routes and simply a blissfully tranquil escape in beautiful almost unspoilt countryside.

Today there are no fewer than five hotels and guest houses, two guest farms and a number of Bed and Breakfast and self-catering establishments within a 10 km radius of the town providing well over 200 tourist beds each night. There are also five different guides in the town to show visiting birders the birding treats of the area. **Mpumalanga Parks Board** is responsible for the conservation of the wetland and the twin peaks of **Ossewakop** and **Skotseberg** to the south of the town. The town is the centre of a very ambitious project to establish an internationally recognised Grassland Biosphere Reserve.