

# The Cattle Dip that became a National Monument

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*It is the year 1924: a very difficult year for the Voorendyks of Elandsputte.*

*John Voorendyk, postmaster of Lichtenburg, has been dejected for a long time. He can't get a buyer for his farm, not even for the low-low price of 7/6 a morgen. And his cattle are dying of an unknown illness.*



*On advice of his son Koosie, they start digging a cattle dip. The dip hole is already finished and they are now busy digging the last hole for the kraal poles. Then suddenly the worker's eye catches a glitter in the gravel. He picks up a small stone and shows it to Koosie.*

*"Dad! Look! A diamond!!" Not quite sure what to believe, but remembering the diamonds which were sporadically found in recent years in the district,*

*they took the diamond to the local science teacher, Mr Bosman, to put the stone through a test of acid. It was December 1924... a Beautiful stone of 3 carats! Not flawless or blue-white, but nevertheless a real diamond!*

**It is here where the story begins of some of the most unbelievable stories in world history of alluvial diggings, and the cattle dip was the starting point.**

## **"Bird dropping"**

Immediately the Voorendyks contacted Dr Harger, state geologist and prospector, but Dr Harger was not impressed. On a visit to the farm in 1925 he did look around, but his reaction was: "My boy, there are no diamonds on this farm - a bird must have dropped it here!" Was their excitement premature...?

Shortly after this Dr Harger heard about another find at Manana, a farm next to Lichtenburg town, and went prospecting there. It was here that first proclamation of a digging took place. Honingklip, a farm north of Elandsputte, was visited next. He got lost and starts prospecting unknowingly on Elandsputte. Before Dr Harger could make up a "wash", he already had a beautiful diamond of 6 carats in hand!

## The Beginning

Dr Harger immediately moved his camp to Elandsputte. He started prospecting at the "donkiegat", where a donkey had been buried and later became a famous beacon on the diggings. The first wash delivered 21 diamonds, the next 36! The farm was proclaimed in February 1926, the first big rush with thousands of diggers taking part.

This started off one of the most exciting times of the 20th century South Africa. The magical word: "Diamonds!" had diggers and fortune seekers streaming to the diggings in their thousands.

More and more prospecting was done, and from May 1926 to the end of 1927 there had been 45 more proclamations on 8 farms. The vastness of the diggings became evident: 36 km long, 1.6 km wide. At 1945, when the production on the diggings was on the same scale as in 1925, 104 diggings on 13 farms were proclaimed.

The highlight of the diggings was between the years 1926 and 1929 when the luck was in with the "blinkossies" (diamonds) and the sieves were turned over "blinkpens" (shiny stomach). There were those who went broke and were "on the bottom", but it was just a case of open up, get on porrel and put the washes through, because the gravel carries well; it is not dead or lazy soil. Yes, the thumb heads and shiny eyes (big diamonds) will deliver a big score. And if your

Potential Diggers inspecting their claims, 1927



'With shiny cars and old crocks, by bicycle and on foot, by donkey carts and ox wagon they came...'



luck holds, you may strike a pothole and then it is only heavy stuff all the way!

After Elandsputte it was Treasure Trove, then Ruigtelaagte in August 1926, with Witklip and Klipkuil by the end of that year. With shiny cars and old crocks, by bicycle and on foot, by donkey cart and ox wagon they came; professional diggers, fortune seekers, the poor and the adventurers. Even from neighbouring countries, and from Australia and Europe they came. There was only one destination: Lichtenburg... Diggings... diamonds...!

It was the richest public diggings in the world, with the biggest gathering of diggers in history. "At Lichtenburg you do not need a shovel and sieve to dig. No man, you just pull a shrub from the soil, and the diamonds will hang from its roots!" was the type of stories that gave impetuosity.

## City of Shack and Tin

A "City of Shacks" rose within a year or two, and which housed in the region of 150 000 people, about 5 times as big as Lichtenburg today. It was a "temporary city", the only one of its kind in the world. Even street names such as Eloff, President and Prichardt were found, borrowed from Johannesburg in remembrance of the days of the gold rushes.

Bakers, called after the owner Albert Baker, and later known as **Bakerville**, was the "maintown". Here the houses and shacks stood close cheek by jowl for several kilometres. In the business centre were there as many as 250 diamond buyers' offices (each with their own flag), as well as dining places, bioscopes, even a merry-go-round, and about 60 cafes, shops, barbers, butcheries and other businesses. The school, one of 17 on the diggings, had 15 classrooms.

It was the unbelievably vast amounts of diamonds found just beneath the top soil that made the diggings so extraordinary. In one specific week £75 000 worth of diamonds were found on Treasure Trove. In today's terms (at a moderate 15% inflation per year since 1961-1993) it would be worth more than R10 million!

## Grasfontein

At Grasfontein, where the biggest diamond rush in world history took place on March 4, 1927, more than 2 million carats were found. More than 1.5 million carats were found on each of the farms of Uitgevonden (where Bakerville is situated) and Welverdiend.

Between the years 1926 and 1945 more than 7 million carats were found, with a value of £14,6 million, an astronomical R2 000 million in today's terms. In 1927 the diggings delivered 79% of Transvaal's alluvial production, where Transvaal on its turn delivered 94.41% of the Union's production.

Of course the diamond market had been influenced - so much so that, in the absence of protecting laws, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer had to intervene and the Oppenheimer-Syndicate was born. This syndicate bought up huge quantities of diamonds and then let it trickle slowly back onto the world market. Thus they prevented the total collapse of the world diamond market.

## Water too brought riches

It was not only the diggers that found fortune, but also the landowners who sold their claims and water, the farmers who found a market for their crops, and of course the entrepreneurs who ran the butcheries and barbers, the tailors and shoemakers. The Voorendyks, for example, had sold water for £40 000 (more than R4,6 million today) in only the first 6

Grasfontein diggings 1927



months! In 1927 more fuel was sold than in Johannesburg, and 2000 new vehicles were registered in Lichtenburg in the first five months of that same year.

Where the local Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church had only one ward north of Lichtenburg with 8 families, the same ward, at the end of 1927, had a total of 15 000 members, with an additional 18 500 in the parish! In the past there were no schools, but in 1930 there were 16, with 103 teachers on the diggings.

The nearest hospital was the *Cottage Hospital* in Lichtenburg, with six beds for whites and none for non-white in the district, so the Elandsputte hospital came into being.

From 1928 onwards the economical position of the diggers weakened dramatically because of worked out surface gravels, the fall of diamond prices, the depression that was increasingly felt, credit sources that dried up and labour that was becoming prohibitively expensive.

### Today

Today there are but remnants of this once cosmopolitan "diamond city" and its corrugated iron houses and shacks, thousands of vehicles and donkeys, diggers and entrepreneurs. Only a handful of diehards are still digging amongst the millions of tons of gravel heaps. A chapter in South Africa's history is closed.

P.J.Niemand said: "A thousand people can each write a book about the diggings, and all will still not be told". This is the background to the great tales such as the Grasfontein rush in which 25 000 runners took part; the famous Red Diamond weighting 33 carats sold as a boart for £66, and was later valued at \$150 000 (and probably worth more than \$6 million today). That is the purest red diamond in the world. Numerous tales about potholes and their unbelievable fortunes are still told today.

And then there were men like Jimmy Boucher (he died on November 30, 1992) who lived for more than sixty years in his shack of stones, and Seer van Rensburg, the Boer prophet, and his vision of the diamond as big as a sheep's head. There are the tales about school that had to move in pursuit of their pupils, and all the weal and woe of a substantial part of the people of South Africa that led to the declaring of the *cattle dip* at Elandsputte as a National Monument in 1980.

