

SELECTED ACCOUNTS OF THE HISTORY OF THE FRONTIER ACCLIMATISATION SOCIETY (ESTABLISHED IN 1894)

BY

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Deftly, admiral cast your fly into the slow deep hover,
Till the wise old trout mistake and die,
Salt are the deeps that cover the glittering fleets you led
White is your head.... W H Auden Song

The Eastern Province, though formally part of the Cape Province, has gained from its geographical position and history a separate identity, lying inland of the coastal towns of Port Elizabeth and East London, it has always been frontier country.

Ancestral home to the amaXhosa, with whom the Settlers fought for the last of nine wars a century ago, but within these borders lie the most diverse and incredible of landscapes, vegetation, streams, and rivers. Within these boundaries are waters of every kind from icy mountain streams in gentle forest glades, to reservoirs and lakes.

The F.A.S. (the oldest fishing club in Africa) established itself in the beauty of its surrounding at the Maden Dam (Pirie), lying on the upper Buffalo River between King Williams Town and Stutterheim. Maden Dam was commissioned in 1910 to be the main water supply for King Williams Town, a purpose it still serves. It is a place steeped in history.

Attempts to introduce trout from the Northern Hemisphere were first made over a hundred years ago and were eventually successful in the late 1890's.

In June 1890 J D Ellis, a King Williams Town auctioneer, presented a paper to the local Naturalists Society in which he observed, "..... surely the achievement of a more difficult task of transporting an animal from one hemisphere to the other, and peopling barren rivers with a noble species of fish, is worthy of support and encouragement both from the people and the Government of a country."

"That such rivers as the Buffalo, Keiskamma, Katousie, Toise, Klipplaats and others suitable for the 'Salmonidae', there is not the shadow of doubt, and it only requires a small outlay with care and attention to stock these rivers."

Unfortunately, his own attempts to stock the rivers had been unsuccessful and had cost him dearly in both time and expense. In 1882, his first shipment of 20 000 trout ova, supplied by Mr Capel of Foots Cray, had been “lost through misadventure” in East London.

A second shipment arrived in February 1884. Ellis carted the boxes, packed in 300 weight of ice to King Williams Town, where he had prepared an incubating house for their reception and specially imported slate troughs.

He recorded: “On opening the boxes in KWT, I had the satisfaction of seeing that thousands had hatched out in the sphagnum moss. No time was lost in having them transferred to the troughs, a plentiful supply of ice being used to lower the temperate.

Here the young trout in the alevin stage sported about in their new home... I can hardly convey to you my sore disappointment on visiting the troughs early the next morning to find that the temperate of the water had risen to 72 degrees, the ice supply having become exhausted, and every fish had perished, and the undeveloped ova parboiled.”

A series of articles published in the 1950's in the quarterly journal of the Cape Piscatorial Society, *Piscator*, tells the remarkable tale of how trout were first introduced to the Eastern Province. Carefully researched and beautifully written by A C Harrison, the articles record the patient efforts of the men who, despite everything, made reality of their dreams.

They were frustrated by not only the great distance that separated them from the hatcheries, and expertise of England and Scotland, but often by the sheer bureaucratic ineptitude of those who held the purse strings.

In researching his articles, Harrison explored the faded records of a body called by the resonant title of the FRONTIER ACCLIMATISATION SOCIETY, which had been formed in 1894, with the express purpose suggested by its name:

To establish Salmonidae in the new world of Africa. Harrison found the old documents bursting with minutes and notation, proposals, agreements and decisions. The actions often leading to failure and frustration of one sort or another.

Ellis wrote a letter to Ernest Latour, who had originally been brought from Britain to oversee the hatching of brown trout ova in the Western Cape, he moved to the Eastern Province to work for the Acclimatisation Society at a salary of 150 pounds a year, and an advance against his sea passage, of which he repaid 4 pounds a month. A brief account of what took place with Latour and the committee was published in a South African fly-fishing magazine. The article was written by Fred Croney, a journalist and avid fly-fisherman. He revealed the following, “in 1890, Ellis approached the Cape Government for assistance and made partial arrangements for

a shipment of brown trout ova to be sent from England. Owing to a very severe winter in England, the ova were not dispatched until 6 March 1891.

It was decided that Mr Ellis would proceed to Cape Town to meet the steamer vessel, "Mexican," carrying the ova, and make arrangements for obtaining 2 tons of ice, packed and divided in such a way that arriving near the end destination, it could ultimately be carried by bearers from the end of the Rabula Road, which approached the Evelyn Valley Forest Station from the Keiskammahoek side of the Amatola mountain range.

The boxes of ova eventually arrived in KWT at 12.35pm on April 2nd 1891, together with the 2 tons of ice, having been conveyed by a special steam trolley from East London, free of charge.

The ova and as much ice as possible was then transported by a wagon and six horses to the foot of Rabula Hill, arriving at 4.45pm. From there, the ascent was made with ten oxen. They reached the top at 6.45pm. Twenty-four bearers carried the ova and ice, on foot, the remainder of the journey, reaching the hatchery at 8pm. The remainder of the ice had been despatched on a light covered wagon pulled by a span of a dozen oxen, at speed, halfway up Rabula Hill. The wagon was met by the second span at 7pm.

Darkness prevented them from ascending to the top of the hill. At daybreak they reached the top of the hill with the assistance of an additional eight oxen.

From there, twenty-four bearers conveyed the ice, wrapped in blankets to the hatchery, which they reached at 10am on Friday, April 3rd 1891.

On April 8th, the first eggs hatched and others were on the point of doing so. Some of the trout began to die soon after hatching, it was believed to have been caused by a fungus brought about by the dead eggs which were amongst the good ones. On the 15th April the hatching had finished, the total number hatched were 773 out of 11 000 eggs, after that large numbers died daily reducing the number to 160.

No better results were obtained from a shipment in 1892 and in spite of these initial failures, the trout pioneers of the Frontier were still not dismayed.

In June 1894, the FRONTIER ACCLIMATISATION SOCIETY was formed, and Mr Latour was engaged to handle the first shipment of trout ova at Pirie. In February 1895 it was reported that between 45 000 and 50 000 fry were brought from the hatching troughs on the mountain and placed in rearing ponds situated at a lower altitude.

Mr Latour recommended that the hatching troughs be brought down to the bottom of the hill near the rearing ponds, and assured the Society that the higher water temperate there would not prove injurious to the incubation of the ova (and probably not such a long climb for him too). About half of the government grant was spent on

erecting a new hatching house at the lower level, constructing the rearing ponds, and increasing the volume of water furrow from the Tyusha stream.

It was to take until 1898 before success rewarded the years of patience, perseverance, extraction from reluctant public coffers to pursue the ideal, the wrangling between the committee and not only Mr. Latour, but those who came after him. In 1898 between 7 000 and 8 000 healthy young fry were liberated into the streams and rivers of the Eastern Province.

Two rearing troughs are still to be found near Pages Corner at the inflow to the beautiful Maden Dam. Now obscured by vegetation and moss, these troughs are all that remain of that venture—a tangible link with the past and the gentlemen who worked so hard at bringing trout to this corner of South Africa. Standing at these troughs, one can look down the length of Maden, a stretch of magnificent, sweet water. The placid flow of the river emerges from the dense forest, pauses and becomes wide. In the distance the dam wall is surmounted by a round tower of dressed stone.

There can be few stretches of water of such absolute charm, and where the light is often dappled through a canopy of trees, surrounded by birdsong.

The FAS took over the “propagation and acclimatisation of trout” from the King Williams Town Naturalists Society, a forerunner of the Kaffrarian Museum, and ran the hatchery until it was taken over by the Cape Provincial Administration in 1946, and by the Ciskei Government in 1981.

In 1994, the borough council of King Williams Town spent R450 000 to rid the Maden Dam of a large section of reed marshes, to get rid of silt and increase the capacity of the dam. If the reed had been left to its own devices there would have grown a huge swamp. It seemed primarily to improve trout fishing conditions, a move criticised by leading wetlands experts. Trout fishermen of the FAS, who by then had re-built the club under the leadership of John van der Merwe, to 61 paid up members, welcomed the idea, but the main concern was that it was done in such a way to create little or no damage to the environment. It was important to ensure enough reed beds remained to sustain sufficient trout food supply. The reed bed at Page’s Corner was left untouched. Dredging was handled in three phases and completed by December 1994. The FAS re-stocked trout into Maden Dam purchased from Rhodes University.

The names Geddes Page, Ellis, Holland, Latour, Chaplin, Clement, Pautz, and van der Merwe, are a few who were instrumental in steering this club to its centenary year in 1994. The FAS Trout Club celebrated its centenary and expo with top trout fishermen visiting King Williams Town from Thursday 12 to Sunday 15 May.

Editor of the Piscator, the Cape Piscatorial Society editor, Ed Herbst and fly fisherman, Jack Blackman, attended. Mr Fred Crony, President of FOSAF (Federation of South African Fly-fishermen), opened the celebrations, which were

held at the War Memorial hall. The celebrations, organised by the club president, John van der Merwe, included fishing in four dams and rivers, a cocktail party, a R1000 tagged-fish prize, a fly-casting clinic at the Pirie Trout Hatchery, Harry Stewart demonstrating the art of fly tying, and a seafood banquet and a prize giving.

The FAS TROUT CLUB would never have stood the test of time in a turbulent South Africa without the dedication and passion of many avid “frontiersmen” and fly-fishermen who have been absolutely passionate about the love of trout fishing, nature, the waters, conservation, the thrill of the tail-walk and the sheer beauty of God’s creation. They are the passionate men (and some ladies) who have carried this club and dedicate much time and effort for the sake of preserving a heritage so rich and true, to tell tales of their forest walks, their stream sojourns, late afternoons teeming with aquatic life, and the trout, with their silver backs curving above the surface in sudden swirls.

Names that readily come to mind that served on the committee during the past 30 years and who have been passionate about this club, its history and its future are:

Mike Pautz, Ingo Muller, Fred Croney , Dean Rhind, Shane Ashby, Mark Richter, Keith Rose-Innes, Briant Nonceba (Pirie trout hatchery) Terry McEnery, Brian (Eastern Cape FOSAF Chairman) and Sofie von Holt, Andre DuPlessis, Stan Bauer, Antony Pautz, Rodney Webb, Rod Allen, Elwin Love, Clive Webb, Dave Reynders, Keith Edwards, Mark Rose-Innes, Bruce Rose-Innes, Dave van der Merwe, Martin Davies, Ed Herbst, Mike Coleman, Peter Hein, and Rod Randall.

Martin Davies, a research scientist at the JLB Smith Institute in Grahamstown is in many ways a present day Mr. Latour. His breeding and distribution of trout for stocking the dam has been in the heart and passion of his love for trout fishing.

Pirie Sawmills donated a cabin to the FAS which was assembled on a high piece of ground just back from the waters of the Maden Dam by a team of anglers under the leadership of Mike Pautz.

One of my fondest memories is catching an unusually large, 3 kg rainbow in Pages Corner, I am told it is a record. I used a “Red Setter” fly. The FAS remains active today though it has been amalgamated with the nearby Stutterheim Trout Angling Club under the umbrella name of the Amatola Fly Fishing Club.

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References: Fly-fishing in Southern Africa - Robert Brandon-Kirby