

Coopering will be one of the many attractions at the De Poort Industrial Heritage Centre

De Poort

Heritage Village –

where the artisan crafts of the wagonmakers will re-live again

by Hennie Basson



The De Poort Industrial Heritage Centre in Paarl South will be an interactive, authentic “village”. It will recreate the artisan crafts and lifestyles of Drakenstein’s cart and wagon making industry in its boom period. It will kick off soon with the construction of a replica wagon factory and museum precinct.

In 1870 the rush of people from the Cape northward increased in volume day by day. The question on everyone’s lips was: “How do I get there soonest?” Such was the effect of the discovery of diamonds and later gold in Southern Africa.

The demand for transport of any kind precipitated a transport revolution in South Africa. As thousands came from all over Southern Africa and overseas, entrepreneurs seized their opportunity.

The Drakenstein Valley, especially Paarl, became the epicentre of the largest transport industry in the country. More than 87 businesses were involved. Skilled artisans came from all communities. Some enterprises amalgamated and grew into major firms such as Retief & De Ville. Jan Phillips began as an apprentice and ended up owner of a large wagon and carriage works. By contrast, some were smaller establishments such as Domingo, Solomon, Thom, Waal and Verster.

Blacksmiths, wheelwrights and carpenters turned their hands to the manufacture of hundreds of different vehicles – from transport wagons to the Cape’s own unique “spring-wagon”, which could carry up to 12 people. The world famous Cape Cart was the lighter model for fast travel. It could achieve 40-60 km in a day!

Upholsterers, decorators (who painted motifs on the vehicles), leatherworkers and harness-makers clustered together around the precincts of the booming “wa-enkar” factories producing thousands of vehicles over the next several decades. Drivers and farriers were in great demand.

Even after the railhead from the Cape reached Kimberley, the need for horse-drawn vehicles continued. Wagons were loaded up for dispatch further North and East.

Prior to the Anglo Boer War, both the ZAR and the OFS ordered transport vehicles from Paarl. Later, so did the British. During World War I, Paarl provided wagons for the SA campaign in German South West Africa and for use against the 1914 Rebellion.

The products of these Paarl manufacturers won many international prizes, so it is not surprising that Mussolini in the 1930’s placed an order for wagons for his ignoble



campaign in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). Even in World War II, Paarl played its part in producing wheels for the Howitzer guns.

Today, visitors to this Boland municipality would find it difficult, apart from some street names and a square or two, to find any trace of this once vibrant source of its transformation as a boom town in the last quarter of the 19th century.

All that is about to change! A community based and led organisation formed a Section 21 Company in 2001. Soon to be sited at the Gateway to Paarl and just off the N1, will be the De Poort Industrial Village. The name “De Poort” captures the historical role played by this Valley as the “Gateway”, linking Southern and Northern transport routes.

The centre piece of this village will be a recreation of a carriage and wagon factory. Around it will be craft shops, a schoolroom, market and conference center, stalls, a picnic area, restaurants and many other aspects depicting life at the time.

With the goal of involving visitors in an interactive way, activities include a ride in vintage style horse-drawn vehicles; enjoying old style foods in one of several eateries; watching crafters as they work and buying these unique items; savouring sweets the way great-grandma made it; playing period games; having a photograph of yourself taken in period dress; watching or playing games of yesteryear; listening to bands; watching the Mounted Rifles drill; enjoying a picnic under the stone pines and so much more.

While awaiting rezoning approval and actual construction, the Section 21 Company, from time to time organised a Heritage Festival where the public could sample something of life during the age of the cart and wagon makers.

At the company’s recent annual general meeting the architect’s master plan was launched. With funds from both local and district municipality, as well as a funding of R2,3 million from the National Lotto Trust, De Poort will erect its first building – a replica of the wagon factory – soon. Sketch designs have been completed, professionals appointed and the last rezoning logjams are being removed.

Craft development is a priority. This involved identifying those who are already involved in crafts and those who wish to be trained. De Poort is to provide a means of marketing and promoting specialist crafts and foods. A craft development consultant has arranged workshops to advance quality crafting. The “village” is a major job creation opportunity and has broad community support.

Calvyn Gilfillan, recently appointed to Cape Routes Unlimited, described De Poort as “emotionally important and reconciliatory” in reclaiming a lost heritage. The project’s integration with the rest of the tourism environment as a unique experience is paramount.

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The mayor of Drakenstein Municipality, Herman Bailey, arrives at the De Poort terrain in an old-fashioned coach