

Rorke's Drift. After the War

By Katie Stossel.

After the Zulu war, peace returned to the community. Otto Witt returned to rebuild the two burnt out and gutted ruins of his mission and Rorke's Drift thereafter slipped off the map of public awareness, the area was too far off the basic road network and was of no use for any commercial enterprise. When the Boer war broke out, the nearest the combatants came was to Dundee with a small outpost at Helpmakaar. The community remained small and eked out a living off the harsh countryside on either side of the river, the only event of any significance to the people was when a trader crossed the river to trade in Zululand. Later, the occasional motor vehicle would arrive to make the crossing for which the local community would assemble to watch. The two world wars had no effect on the community and so their lives at the river crossing remained uneventful.

Diamond fever once reached the Rorke's Drift area but only as a result of a simple human error. In 1920 Mr Ekron, the farmer who owned Petroskar Farm near the fugitives' graves, found two rough diamonds in a small pool next to the river. He took them for verification to a Mr Meyer at Dundee who, without telling Ekron, swiftly purchased the land surrounding the pool. Local folklore remembers him paying twelve times the current value for the land. Stone sifting equipment was transported to the site and washing began. For months work progressed but nothing was found. Ekron occasionally passed by and one day came across Meyer watching the sluicing operation. Ekron, by accident or design, mentioned that this was the very place where his ostriches once gathered to drink. Meyer knew Ekron had once owned a flock that had been reared for their feathers but the venture failed and he asked Ekron where the ostriches had come from, to which Ekron replied 'from the diamond fields at Kimberley where they had been used as 'guard dogs' to prevent thieves scavenging loose diamonds'. On realising the diamonds found by Ekron had originally been swallowed by one of his ostriches, the Meyer diamond venture then closed down.

This amusing account was one of a number given to me by David Rattray at Fugitives' Drift Lodge in 2009 while conducting my research into Sister Janet Wells time spent at Rorke's Drift towards the end of the Zulu War.

Sister Janet; Nurse and Heroine of the Zulu War Best and Stossel, Pen and Sword, 2006.