

Orange River Artery Keeps South Western Free State Heart Beating

Jacobsdal is situated in the heart of the dry South Western Free State where farmers battle ongoing drought. However, a complex system of canals leading water from the Orange River to the Riet River, administered by the Orange-Riet Water Users' Association, has ensured this community's survival.

Ria and Daan Wilke were desperate. It was 1981, six years since they packed up their full-time jobs in Kuruman to farm on the banks of the Riet River near Jacobsdal, and the weather wasn't playing along. All the dams were dry making it impossible to keep their lucerne, wheat and onion crops alive. All around them farmers were trying to make ends meet, pay their workers, feed livestock and support their families.

The close-knit community of Jacobsdal in the South Western Free State was on the brink of collapse as the economy suffered in the worst drought in living memory.

"There was nothing we could do," says Mrs Wilke, "there was just no water."

Relief came from an unexpected quarter. Dr Henegan van Graan, principal of the Panorama School in Saundershoogte, went on a massive recruiting drive for young pupils and, with government support, he was able to offer desperate farmers and business people temporary jobs as teachers. The local chemist and lawyer taught alongside farmers and their wives working for government salaries that would ensure the survival of their community and their farms until the rains came.

Eventually van Graan had 1 300 young pupils and 50 staff – most of them drawn from the farming community. Despite their plight the farmers and townsfolk were no motley crew and the education department named Panorama's staff the most qualified teachers in the country.

"It was an unbelievable time of hopelessness softened by wonderful comradeship," remembers Mrs Wilke, herself a qualified teacher. Daan, her husband was a geologist and taught accounting, science and religious studies to the older children while she was inspanned to teach sub A.

When the rivers started flowing again the men went back to the land but many of their wives stayed on, some for years, continuing to teach the children who Dr van Graan had insisted come to school.

GUARANTEED SUPPLY

For the farmers their sojourn as teachers was temporary relief. They knew that if they were to secure their future and their farming investments they needed a guaranteed supply of water to avoid another agricultural catastrophe.

With the determined support of farmer Kobus Nel (current chairman of the Orange-Riet Water Users Association) the Riet River Farmers' Union succeeded in winning a subsidy for the farmers who couldn't irrigate. They also managed to have the Orange-Riet Canal approved – which would, at last, guarantee a steady supply river water to the Riet River Settlement.

Nic Knoetze, Chief Executive Officer of the Orange-Riet Water Users' Association, picks up the story. "From 1987 the Orange-Riet canal began supplying Orange River water (out of the Van der Kloof Dam) to the Riet." (After the Gariep Dam the Van Der Kloof is the second largest storage reservoir in South Africa with a capacity of 3 200 million m³).

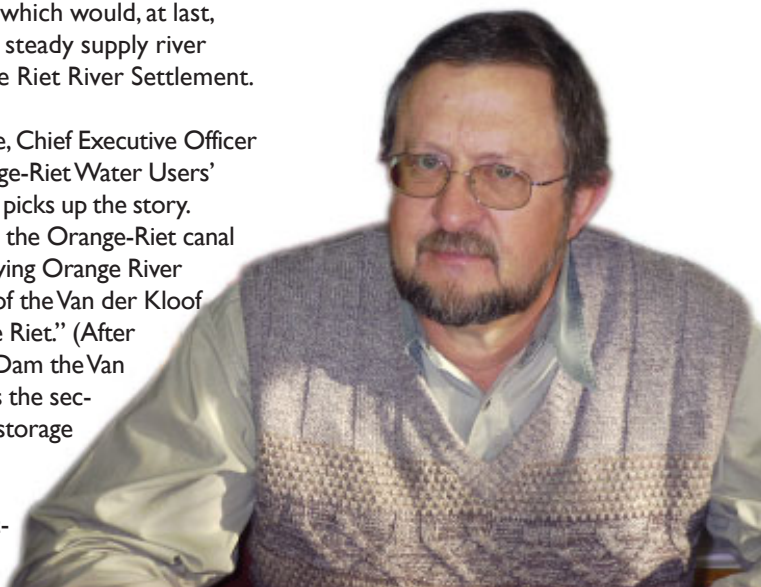
"The Modder River farms continued to take water released from the Krugersdrif Dam 67 km north of Bloemfontein. This relieved pressure on the Modder River guaranteeing a more steady supply to those farmers."

Since 1945 farmers in the five sub-regions of the Riet River Scheme had taken water from the Kalkfontein Dam (upstream on the Riet) but there just wasn't enough to go round.

"The river was under strain serving the needs of farmers upstream while the Riet River Scheme farmers were coming off second best."

VAN DER KLOOF DAM

Today this is the system that the farmers rely on for water. Water is released from the Van der Kloof Dam on the Orange, travels through



Nic Knoetze, Chief Executive Officer of the Orange-Riet Water Users' Association



a 13,6 km and 18 m wide "Main" canal to the Scheiding Pumping Station where it is pumped 47 m up before being released into the 112 km long Orange-Riet Canal. Once in the canal the water travels by gravity towards the Riet. In the Riet River Canal System the water is transported to farmers via 185 km of smaller canals, 54 km of drainage canal, and 103,4 km of river. It is stored in two weirs and five balancing dams with a capacity of 2 300 000 m³.

The Van der Kloof Dam remains the major supplier of water to the extended Riet River Settlement (8 045 ha) as well as to farmers irrigating 3 970 ha along the Orange-Riet Canal.



The Orange-Riet Canal and the upgrading of the Riet River canals were finally completed in 1992 at a cost of R138 and R96 million respectively.

For the farmers still recoiling from the harsh dryness of the 1980s the new canal system brought hope and optimism but disaster was far from over.

FLOODS

In 1988, just a year after water began flowing through the canal, the rivers turned on the community again. This time heavy rains brought floods and farmers watched helplessly as years of labour on the lands washed away.

Martie and Chris Steenkamp had been farming on the banks of the Riet for 17 years – and this was the second time they had watched the river turn from a bubbling brook into a raging torrent.

"The first flood was in 1977 and we were caught totally off guard," says Martie, "the army warned us the river was coming down but we never expected the devastation that followed."

The farmers hoped the Kalkfontein Dam would hold back the floodwaters but eventually, when the risk that the dam wall would break became too great, the river was sent into flood.

Then the Steenkamps raced against the clock to get workers and livestock to higher ground. "There was no time to worry about material belongings," she says, "When the water came it was with a roar."

She remembers a man of 93 who wouldn't evacuate his home in Ritchie because he refused to believe the river would cause that much damage.

"He had lived there all his life and never knew the river to flood that dramatically," Soldiers eventually carried him out of his home.

With his family safe farmer Chris Steenkamp returned home to help a farm worker, Frans, rescue the



last of the livestock. The two of them (and the family dog) escaped with their lives by driving the tractor through the rising flood waters.

When Martie returned to the farm cupboards were lying upturned in the bedrooms, mud covered everything and the floorboards of her farmhouse were ripped out.

In 1988 when the army once again told Martie the river was coming down again she was better organised. This time the family got most of our things out before the water rose. Nevertheless the flood was devastating and, yet again, the farmers had no choice but to start again.

“Both times we suffered terribly,” says Martie.

Flood and drought are always at the back of farmers’ minds yet the Orange-Riet Canal has, at least, guaranteed a steady supply of water without which many would not have survived. In the 17 years the

canal has been in operation water restrictions have been introduced only once when water allocation was reduced to 50%. For this to happen the Van der Kloof Dam level has to drop below 35%.

At full capacity the Orange-Riet Canal can transfer 370 million m³/a. The annual water requirement of irrigators supplied by the canal is 186,8 million m³. Altogether the canal serves 371 farmers (including Ritchie) irrigating a total of 17 000ha of cropland. (In Ritchie 75 farmers work just 98 ha).

COMPLEX SYSTEM

The Orange-Riet Water Users’ Association, under Knoetze’s guidance, administers and maintains this complex system of water transfer. The three Irrigation Boards (Scholtzburg, Ritchie and Lower Riet) with the two Government Water schemes (Riet River settlement and Orange Riet canal) amal-

gamated to form the Orange Riet Water User Association (ORWUA) that took over the operation and maintenance of the water system in 2001.

“The Orange-Riet Canal changed the way we farmed in this part of South Africa. “Water is the life blood of any community and it is the sophisticated system of canals that make up the Orange-Riet scheme that has ensured Jacobsdal remains a thriving agricultural centre at the heart of our country,” says Knoetze.

For the two women, Ria Wilke and Martie Steenkamp, the rivers have shaped their lives. Both their families continue to work the land alongside the Riet enjoying the beauty of a remote part of South Africa.

“All we can pray is that the stream remains steady and that neither flood nor drought return to devastate our lives.” 