

Roodekrantz Recollections (retyped exactly from an original transcript)

Angela Rowles (Circa 1980's)

In July 1939 Roodekrantz, 3827 morgen in extent, stretching from the Tsiri River to the Nhlalumi River was purchased by Mr Toby Rochat from South African Townships., Mining and Finance Company. The sum payable was £1913.17 to be repaid in the following manner – £287 in cash and the balance of £1626.17 in nice equal instalments of £180.15.3d each.

Toby and Vi Rochat had not seen the farm they had purchased but had chosen the area off an old map with the two rivers being the boundaries.

There were no roads into the area, so with bandages and chopper marks on the trees a rough route was cut through the virgin bush. When the bandages ran out Vi cut up her young son's cot sheets. The bakkies got stuck in the deep sand in the drifts and palm fronds and branches were put under the wheels for traction. It took three days to cut the road 20 miles in the direction of the Olifants River, using a squad of natives and a compass lent to them. Roan #, Buffalo, Impala and Zebra were to be seen.

The first ever home on Roodekrantz were tents on the banks of the Tsiri River. Later on Toby and Vi had mud and Mopani huts built. The site chosen was at the end of the old landing strip, through the stream, on the right, where until recently the Jacarandas were to be found flowering.

The huts were built of Mopani poles plastered with mud, with a thatch roof. The floor was sand and women collected Zebra and Buffalo dung and mixed it with goat's milk for the finish. The stench was too dreadful (sic.) and was soon replaced with cement.

There was no running water, so holes were dug in the Tsiri River bed and lined with canvas through which the water could seep. This in turn was 'skipped' out with a tin mug.

The water hold was visited regularly by lion and one night they were woken by a dreadful commotion and on investigation using a lamp, found a lion with his head stuck in a 4-gallon tin which had been lying at the edge of the hole.

Things improved and a small Briggs and Stratton water pump was purchased which pumped water into 44 gallon drums. Water was used sparingly – not too difficult without a bathroom – baths were taken in a wheelbarrow which was pushed into the bushes, girls bathing first.

In 1944 cattle were introduced to Roodekrantz, a decision later regretted by Toby and Vi when all odds were against them. The Bushveld was to suffer severe droughts, one of the worst was from 1969-1973 when thousands of head of game and the cattle died.

In 1950 Toby went for an evening walk and climbed the small hill overlooking his Mopani home, watched the sun setting over the mountains and decided this was where they would build their permanent home.

It took Vi and the natives a year to make the cement blocks on the banks of the Tsiri River. Sand from the river was used and cement was brought in by any farmer who wished to exchange it for kraal manure – a 5-ton load of manure for carting in 100 bags of cement. The blocks were transported to the house site in a two wheeled donkey cart and sand and stones were brought up the hill using a wood sleight drawn by a donkey. African women carried pebbles in bowls on their heads to mix with the concrete.

Meanwhile, Toby who was still working on the mines, with Vi running the farm, heard of a hospital that was being demolished and purchased the entire roof. It was his reluctance to cut the timbers that led to the house being built the size it is today!

The house was finally completed in 1958, built almost entirely by Vi and her labourers.

Having a home, kraals for cattle, sheep and goats soon followed. The Impala got so used to grazing alongside cattle that it was not long before 20-30 head of Impala used to come into the kraals for the night with the cattle.

A baboon struck up a friendship with the goats and sheep and slept in their kraal at night. With time he grew bold and could be seen entering the kraal sitting on the back of a goat – and eventually was found herding the goats and sheep into the kraal in the evenings.

Toby was constantly rescuing animals and bringing them home for Vi to rear. A young Zebra foal became extremely tame and would follow Vi around but was sadly bitten by a mamba and died. A Grey Lourie chick that had been reared with the aid of two toothpicks was to be found perched on the head of the old cookboy as he went about his chores.

Ducks, geese and chickens too were brought onto the farm and penned into the enclosure near the old garages. Vi, who was alone at the time, was aroused from her sleep by a great noise and on rounding the corner of the verandah saw a pride of lions eating her geese – with no more ado (sic.) she shot three lion from the back verandah door, much to the amazement of her servants who were confronted by the three dead lion when they reported for work the following morning.

Vi and Toby were crackshots and with lion being the biggest threat to their farming operations set out to trap and shoot them. On 'lion trap road' a mesh enclosure is still to be seen in which a donkey was enclosed for bait. Vi and Toby would wait for the lions to investigate the braying. Gin traps were set at all the entrances to the kraals to trap the lion, and Vi's brother stepping into one of these traps and was lucky not to lose (sic.) his leg as the mechanism jammed on some twigs.

It is no wonder that stories in the district reported salted lion skins being stretched out around the entire verandah.

A young leopard cub named Duke was to join the family. Toby's son Leon and their trusted tracker Cigarette were out looking for a site to build a dam. Out of the bushes walked a young cub which Leon picked up, only to put it down hastily when the mother appeared. Stepping over the cub she charged Leon, who had no option but to shoot her.

Duke was reared on goats milk and became very tame. He wandered around the house quite freely and was taken for walks in the veld by Toby wearing a collar and chain. An enclosure next to the geese pen was built for Duke when he got bigger. Sadly, he never learnt to hunt and at 18 months old was donated to the Johannesburg Zoo.

Toby with rifle, accompanied by Cigarette used to freely walk in the bush. In 1974 whilst he was out on a walk a buffalo charged him from a distance of 10-15 yards. Cigarette ran off. Toby stepped back to shoot the buffalo and stumbled, falling into a thorn bush. This was to save his life as the buffalo viciously attacking him again and again got his horns entangled in the thorns. Toby was gored in the groin. When the buffalo finally left him for dead, Cigarette crept back and carried Toby to the house. He was taken to Elim mission hospital and then transferred to Pretoria General Hospital. Toby, who never really recovered from his wounds was discharged and returned to Roodekrantz. His health deteriorated rapidly and six to nine months later he passed away.

Vi continued to live on her own on Roodekrantz, running the farm. Cigarette bought a treadle sewing machine and was found on the verandah of the native store busy with his tailoring. I was at his sewing machine that Cigarette died.

Lonliness (sic.) and the pressure from her family, finally forced Vi to sell the farm and she now lives at Scottburgh. Vi, who is in her 87th year has been back to Roodekrantz twice and it is with her help and that of a neighbour that I have been able to piece these recollections of Roodekrantz together.