

Roadside Memories: the Reminiscences of A.E. Smith of Thornville

EDITORIAL NOTE

Alfred Edwin Smith (born 1866) was the eldest child of John Smith (c.1826—1893), formerly of Normanby, Yorkshire, and his wife Eliza Ford (c.1840—1921), the daughter of Edward Ford, a blacksmith of Pietermaritzburg, formerly of Warblington, near Emsworth, Hampshire. John Smith was a cousin of Mrs Mary Boast, widow of Henry Boast, the originator of the scheme which in 1850 brought to Natal those Yorkshire immigrants who settled in the area now known as York.

Alfred states that his father came to Natal in the early 1860s with ample capital, supplied by himself and a syndicate, 'plus a complete outfit' of the most modern farming implements. In his early days in Natal he acted as agent for 'a machine and implement-making establishment' in England. A cousin of Alfred's on his mother's side, Myrtle Foss, wrote that John Smith had been a wealthy man when he emigrated to Natal to farm, but through inexperience, lost nearly all his capital.

Thornville Park was the name of his farm. It was formed of a consolidation of emigrant allotments on the farm *Vaalkop and Dadelfontein*, outside Pietermaritzburg. As a settler location the area had proved a failure, being in low rainfall thorn country, with most allotments far removed from any source of water. Thornville, the village laid out for the settlers, had been sited on an outcrop of shale, and apart from a canteen and a house or two, existed more on paper than in reality.

The area took its name from the village, and early in his manuscript Alfred discusses the relation between the original Thornville, and Thornville Junction some six or seven miles away. Thornville Junction came into being when the branch line to Richmond was constructed. Smith points out that there is hardly a thorn tree anywhere at the Junction. The only excuse he can think of for the inappropriate name was that the canteen at Thornville, 'being the nearest point at which liquor could be obtained, was the regular Saturday afternoon rendezvous of the Mauritian navvies who were employed on railway construction work' at the time.

John Smith and his family remained at *Thornville Park* until at least the early 1880s. They afterwards went to Pretoria, where he and his wife both died. Alfred trekked to Barberton in the early 1880s, but by 1888 was back at Thornville, farming at *Normanby*. He later lived in the Transvaal once more, and at the time of writing this manuscript (which is undated), was resident in Bloemfontein.

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. . . Let us get back to the main artery of the colony's economic existence, — the road that ran through the heart of Natal from Durban to the regions known as "up-country", bifurcating at Ladysmith to serve the Free State over Van Reenen's Pass on the one side and over Laing's Nek to reach the Transvaal on the other. To those of us youngsters who attended school, when such an institution happened to be located at the roadside, or who lived in its immediate vicinity, the traffic that passed to and fro was a

constant source of interest, and where lessons were concerned, of distraction. The procession of wagons and their spans of sixteen was a never ending one. In twos and threes, a sign of single ownership, up to a train of a dozen or more where the drivers had moved off together or caught up to each other on the road, these wagons would pass with their loads of miscellaneous merchandise weighing from 60 to 70 cwts — sometimes a good deal more if the load happened to be a heavy piece of machinery. They headed for destinations very often hundreds of miles away and taking a month or more to reach, the time depending on the state of the weather, the roads and the rivers, or perhaps the vicinity of the nearest blacksmith's shop where repairs could be effected, and where a broken axle or disselboom could be replaced. The state of the rivers was perhaps the greatest cause of anxiety; hence the cardinal rule in the transport driver's code: Always outspan on the other side when coming to a drift. The drift might be perfectly safe when the wagons arrived at the banks of a river or spruit but there was no telling but what a spate of water or a flood might come down in the rainy season from a source far removed from the outspan and if the rain persisted the wagons might be held up a week or more until such time as gauging the water with a stick indicated that a crossing was feasible. More often the loads for up-country were of a very miscellaneous nature, in keeping with the varied nature of the stocks to be found in the general stores that served the inland areas and where anything from a needle to an anchor could be obtained. These goods were packed in an assortment of containers as varied in shape and nature as the contents, so the loading of the wagon called for much skill and delicate adjustment and a plentiful supply of ropes and riems to keep the components of the load from falling off or getting damaged. Then of course a bucksail was a very essential part of the wagon's equipment for keeping the load dry during the frequent rain storms that had to be faced; hence greasing the sail to make it waterproof and to see that it was kept in good condition was one of the most important tasks that the transport rider had to attend to. It was not very often that a load suffered damage from rain but a sail was no protection if the waters of a swollen river reached the bedplank and soaked the lower layers of the load. In such cases there would most likely be a bill for damages to pay and that would take all the profits out of the trip, especially should the load have consisted partly of such commodities as flour and sugar. Should a load have been damaged either during the crossing of a swollen river or because of the use of a defective sail that had failed to be proof against a heavy storm of wind and rain, evidence of the fact would often be afforded by the sight of a whole load of goods spread out on the roadside to dry. If it was a case of a saturated consignment of sugar the best that could be hoped for was that the consignee would not notice the diminished state of contents in the bags. If it was flour other measures could be resorted to to make the bags look as if nothing had happened. Water, as long as there is not too much of it, will not penetrate very far into a bag of flour. That in contact with the inside of the bag cakes, forming a thin waterproof layer that protects the rest of the contents. However, damages would have to be paid if bags of flour with a plank-like covering were presented for delivery, so the task was to restore the external appearance of those bags to their original pristine softness. So if the passer-by on the road side was confronted with a scene in which all

hands belonging to the outfit were busily engaged in pounding the surfaces of white objects spread on the ground with the flat side of yokes or if he happened to be a transport rider himself he would know what was happening. If the wet layer of flour was allowed to become thoroughly dry first the pounding it received restored it to its velvety softness and if there was anything wrong with the contents of those bags it was for the grocer or baker to find out. Having signed his consignment notes undertaking delivery in good order and condition, the transport rider or kurveyer, as he was often called, was held strictly responsible for all losses and damage however slight, there was no "Act of God" about it.

Tales of mishaps and adventures on the road, of dodges and shifts, that had to be resorted to, of difficulties and dangers overcome by the fraternity of transport riders were legion; one had only to listen to the yarns and experiences when these were swapped at any time, when these men of the road met each other at the outspans, or more probably at the roadside canteen, to realise that transport riding, however slow and leisurely its movement, could nevertheless be crammed with incident and excitement and why its urge was so strong among all classes of men. While the majority came from the farms other ranks and professions furnished their quota, including men from abroad who had come to try their fortunes in this land who, attracted by the open life and freedom of the road, took up transport riding. They were well educated and refined men, some of them — one could always tell these overseas entrants to the game by the way they handled a double handed whip. One has to start early in life to give that artistic touch to a twenty foot lash that denotes the expert able to give the lightest touches or the heaviest of swipes just where wanted and who make the echoes ring with the resounding cracks of the "voorslag". Among the most noted of these experts was a well known Maritzburg citizen, familiarly known as Bill Leathern, whose fame as a handler of the whip was as wide as the subcontinent itself. He was credited with being able to flick the neck off a bottle or send a shilling flying off the ground with the point of the lash. There were lions to be encountered in the days when Mr Leathern was on the road and to the end of his days he bore the marks of a mauling received in an encounter with one of these kings of the veld.

In the days when the up-country conveyance of goods was the main feature of the traffic, wagons for the most part had to return empty to the nearest loading point, the distance shortening as the point moved with the railway constructions from Durban to Maritzburg, from Maritzburg to Ladysmith and so on. What down-country traffic there was consisted chiefly of wool and hides, largely game hides. In the earlier days the multitudinous and unique four-footed fauna of the country was being decimated just for the sake of their coverings and to a certain extent for making "biltong". There being no export market for the latter it was used chiefly for local consumption, only a limited quantity finding its way towards the coast where the chief buyers were the transport riders themselves who looked upon it as a standby should provisions run short on the road. Rates on down country traffic were very low compared with those paid in respect of merchandise consigned in the opposite direction; so were the value of wool and hides, the former being of a very inferior quality with very little attempt at sorting and classification. When it was realised that some system of classification

resulted in higher prices, many tricks were resorted to for the purposes of making inferior wool and sometimes rubbish that was not wool of any kind, masquerade as the superior article. Ask any woolbroker who was in business in those days and he could a tale unfold, in fact he could tell of a practice that persisted long after wool ceased to come down to the coast by wagon, of "stovepipe" methods by which inferior wool was neatly packed in the centre of a bale, and even of geological specimens being used for purposes of *avoirdupois*.

The chief drawback to these loads was their bulkiness. To make a worthwhile load, bales and skins had to be piled high on the wagon, and a topheavy load was very liable to capsize on an uneven bit of road and reloading was an awkward business.

Wagon transport was by no means confined to the conveyance of trade goods. The ox-wagon, slow as it was, played a vital part in military movements and history, whether these had to do with simple change of garrisons or actual hostilities. Whether the body of troops was small or large, there was the inevitable convoy of wagons required for the purpose of conveying kit and commissariat supplies, each wagon with its guard of two privates marching behind. The wagon convoy usually trekked ahead of the column and if it was a large one it was a sign that a full regiment or several companies were on the march, and that there was a band at the head of it. The sight of the convoy or the sound of martial music, which on a clear and calm day could be heard for miles, was the signal for all and sundry, especially the native section of the community, to assemble at the village outspan, which was generally the spot where the troops bivouacked for the night or rested during the hotter hours of the day. On resuming their march the band would strike up to the delight of an appreciative audience of the youths of the village and a heterogeneous crowd of natives of all ages and both sexes who would keep the marching column company for a mile or more.

When the convoy of wagons was on the move, each with its guard, was also the occasion when farmers, whose lands abutted on the road, found it necessary to do a little guarding for Tommy's curiosity as to the nature of some of these crops, which he had never seen before, was insatiable. Slipping into a field he would loot a few mealie cobs or a pumpkin or perhaps get a sample of each and Johnny the driver — all natives were "Johnny" — would be asked "What . . . these . . . things were for"? It was in wartime that the military element was most in evidence and the road became the scene of greatest attraction for the inhabitants living anywhere in the vicinity. These were the times when the convoys would stretch for a mile or more along the highway and the tramp of infantry could be heard as well as the clop of cavalry and the rumble of artillery, especially on their way to the scene of action in the North. Many a famous regiment took part in this cavalcade. Some had been hastily summoned from service in other parts of the Empire, others from the parade grounds in Great Britain.

My most vivid recollection is of the 24th Regiment of Infantry. Bronzed and bearded they were, men fresh from active service in quelling one of those interminable conflicts between whites and natives in the Transkeian territories. How full of confidence these men were as to the outcome of the coming conflict with Cetywayo's impis. The reason for this confidence was

the demonstration they had had of the superiority of the Martini-Henry rifle, which had only been recently issued, over the falling block Snider, and which they had used for the first time in the Transkei. One man was pointed out who had bowled over a native warrior at a distance of 1 100 yards, which was considered a marvel of long distance shooting and accuracy. What "chance" they asked had any native warrior, however bold and numerous, against a weapon that would start mowing them down long before they got within assegai range? Yet the irony of fate decreed that this crack regiment of the British army should be all but annihilated on that fateful day, January 22nd, 1879, at Isandhlwana. Although, because someone had blundered, the new rifle was unable to accomplish at Isandhlwana what was so confidently expected of it, there is little doubt that the small company of men belonging to the same regiment who so heroically held Rorke's Drift against the Zulu hordes had largely to thank the new weapon for the execution it caused and its effect on the enemy.

It was the cavalry regiments that excited the most attention and interest, especially among the natives. The beautiful mounts, the like of which in such numbers had never been seen before, made the local nags look sorry specimens in comparison. Yet it generally happened that it was these same nags that had to be resorted to in order to finish a war. However, it was appearance that appealed in this case and no more picturesque sight was afforded on these occasions than a regiment of cavalry on the march, the magnificent horses, and the striking uniforms of the men in orderly procession, half a mile long, being most impressive as well as picturesque. I still call to mind the sight of the 17th Lancers (Death or Glory Boys) defiling through the drift at the M'Pushini as the sun shone on the gleaming steel of the spearheads of their lances and the pennants at the spearheads fluttering in the breeze. Needless to say the sight of the Lancers made a great impression on the native mind, the lances being regarded no doubt as nothing less than a modification of their own favourite weapon, the assegai, greatly improved because of its greater length, but above all appealing to them on account of the gaily coloured piece of bunting that fluttered at the end. One saw the result when the Native Contingents were formed to take part in the hostilities against the Zulus. I was in Maritzburg one day as a mounted contingent rode down Church Street on its way to the front. They were armed with the traditional weapons, the throwing and stabbing assegai. The use and management of a lance being unfamiliar to them a large number had compromised by tying a piece of coloured rag to the corresponding position on the regular lance, the decorated weapon being carried in approved lancer fashion. This form of flattery was no doubt quite sincere but a compliment which the Lancers could hardly appreciate because of the burlesque appearance these decorated assegais presented. The more so when side by side with the lancer members of the contingent, other of the mounted warriors carried gaily coloured umbrellas to safeguard their complexions. Dressed in that motley garb characteristic of the native, the whole *tout ensemble* was anything but a martial one.

One form of traffic was the daily and perennial interest provided by the coming and going of the passenger buses and postcarts carrying Her Majesty's mails. Thornville was the first and the last of the stopping places or stages on the Maritzburg to Durban route, where the teams of horses

were changed and passengers were given a chance of stretching their cramped legs and trying to get a little refreshment. There was little opportunity of doing either where postcart passengers were concerned. The postal service was scheduled to be done in six hours from the starting points, which were left at noon, and so there was no time to waste. The fresh team of four and sometimes six horses stood ready harnessed at the stopping place in front of the hotel where the changes were made, to be hitched on as soon as the old team of horses with sweating bodies and heaving flanks were unhitched. The customary shout "All aboard" was given by the driver; the passengers climbed up into the two wheeled conveyance with its limited seating for five persons. If the mails were heavy, as on the occasions when the English mail came into port, passengers often had to seat themselves precariously on top of the mail matter. Then with a swish of the whip the postcart went off on its next eight or ten mile gallop to the next stage. Unless the roads were very bad during spells of very wet weather, the whole distance was done at a gallop, the only pause for more than a few minutes being at "Half Way House" for more solid refreshment than there was time for at the other stops. The passenger buses followed the same procedure more or less but having ten hours or so in which to do the trip leaving town much earlier in the day, their progress was a little more leisurely. Passengers generally, the full complement of ten or twelve which the buses could seat, had a little more time in which to stretch their limbs and have a little refreshment, both being needed badly by the time the journey was finished. There were at one time two firms engaged in the bus and postcart business, J.W. Welch and Thomas Murray. The postcart would alternate between the two firms, according to which put in the lowest tender. At one time a rate war developed in respect of the bus service. One firm announced a reduction in the customary fare of 21/- to 17/6d. I think it was the rival firm countered with 15/- the response to which was the offer to carry passengers at 10/- till at last, when it came to a threat to convey passengers for nothing at all and a free lunch thrown in, wiser counsels prevailed. The firms reached an agreement which stabilised fares at the original rate and as the "War" only lasted about a week the travelling public did not get much benefit from it.

It is remarkable that during all the period from the time when the bus services were inaugurated and the postcart took the place of the native runners who carried the mails between Durban and Maritzburg, until the day when both services were relegated to the limbo of the past by the railway, so few accidents occurred to either buses or carts. This is all the more remarkable in view of the heavy wagon and other traffic which was constantly on the move. This was due to the skilful handling of the reins by the drivers, some of whom were Cape Coloureds who seem to have a flair for handling the ribbons. Their skill was all the more manifest in that they had not only to manage the reins to a team of hard-mouthed horses, but to double handle the whip as well with a sjambok in reserve for the benefit of the "wheelers". White men were equally good at the game. It was all a matter of training and long practice. Johnny and Jim Welch, sons of the founder of the firm, were outstandingly good drivers. Another man with a Scottish name but of mixed descent, whose special job was to drive the post cart was regarded with fear and dislike by all the wagon drivers on the road.

If some dilatory individual had not responded quickly enough to the warning call of the bugle to make room for the cart to pass, he would be reminded of his remissness by a flick of the whip as the cart sailed by.

An indispensable adjunct to the safety of the buses and postcarts was the bugle which every driver was an expert at blowing. The bugle call, which could be heard half a mile away, not only gave the signal to the change boys to have the new team ready at the stopping places, but was used as a warning to all and sundry travelling on the road to get out of the way — a very necessary precaution where wagons were concerned.

When in their stride on the road, ox teams generally went leaderless as they tramped leisurely in the middle of the road with both driver and “voorlooper” seated comfortably at the front of the wagon. But there was a quick change over the scene when the sound of a bugle was heard in the distance, more especially when it was known that it was the postcart that was coming along. The “voorlooper” would make a rush for the “touw”; the driver would leap down with his whip in order to get the team to the side of the road to enable the bus or cart to pass. Awkward occasions were when a wagon had stuck fast in the middle of the road with the team stretched diagonally across and perhaps another team standing by waiting to be hooked on to the one in difficulties. This immunity from accidents was not only attributable to skilful driving and close attention in seeing that the vehicles and harness were kept in good repair, but to the fact that dangerous drifts were few and far between. This was because the road for the most part traversed the ridge that divided the catchment areas which fed the rivers on either side, the road chosen by the Voortrekkers with their unerring instinct for choosing the most practicable route for their wagons. The most dangerous of the drifts was that on the M’Pushini in the seasons of floods. Being at the confluence of two streams, it was simply impassable after a heavy storm. But except on those rare occasions when heavy rains persisted for a week or a fortnight, the floods soon subsided and it was rarely that bus or postcart with their high wheels was held up for more than an hour or two.

