

## THE ESCAPE OF THE LATE MR. L.H. WHITFIELD FROM THE ZEERUST JAIL DURING THE BOER WAR

Related by Mr. Jack Whitfield and Mrs. Joyce Puren (nee Whitfield)

After the outbreak of the war, Mr. Whitfield and his elderly partner Mr. Coker who were farming at Willow Park in the Transvaal, went to the Landdrost in Zeerust as they did not wish to fight against the Boers nor against their own people. They obtained permission to move to Maritsani with their cattle provided they took no part in the war. Mr. Coker however stayed on at Willow Park to manage the farm.

While camping with the cattle, Mr. L.H. Whitfield was taken Prisoner along with an elderly man Mr. Wright, Mr. Muggerridge, Mr. Reid and two others. Some Boers had spread the rumor that they were aiding the British and the Boers sent a commando to arrest them.

After appearing before the Landdrost they were given the choice of fighting for the Boers or being shot. They all decided however rather to be shot than fight for the Boers and were taken to the Zeerust Jail. Here they were held for six months before managing to escape.

In the Jail there was a Xhosa native serving a long term sentence and who was allowed certain privileges. His two duties everyday were to take fresh water round the jail to the European prisoners and was also escorted to the Magistrates Court to sweep and clean up. Mr. Whitfield was able to speak the Xhosa language and while apparently scolding the boy for not bringing fresh water, he was also able to ask the boy in Xhosa about the latest news of the war. By promising to release him if they escaped, he was able to bribe the native into smuggling weapons into the jail. The native managed to obtain a child's old cricket bat and got it into the jail by throwing it over the wall.

The prisoners complained about the bad food they received and were eventually allowed to have food sent up from the boarding house run by a Mrs. Trusscot who was English. A paper which was printed in Zeerust and which was heavily censored was the only reading matter allowed other than the Bible.

Miss Gertrude Ackhurst used to send these prisoners copies of this paper and one day a paper was thrown into Mr. Whitfield's cell by one of the Warders but which turned out to be weeks old. The paper was nevertheless circulated around the cells and while reading the paper one of them discovered that the bottom of a page had been folded up and lightly gummed. It contained the message "Mafeking relieved, the British are advancing. The Boers are retreating from Zeerust". The prisoners then realised that they would be taken along as well or maybe even shot. They made final plans to escape.

Each day after recreation in the jail courtyard, the prisoners were led into the jail and a roll-call was taken. Mr. Muggerridge's name was last on the roll and it was decided that as his name was called, it would be the signal to attack. As the prisoners names were called they usually immediately were made to return to their cells. However, Mr. Whitfield walked up to the warder after his name had been called and started questioning him about the war and when they were going to defeat the British. This irked the Warder and soon all were gathered around listening and secretly marking their men. As the last name was called, which was the signal to attack, they caught the guards by surprise and over powered them with the help of the cricket bat.

Mr. Whitfield took the jail keys off the Warder as well as his revolver and locked all the warders up in the cells. The Party was leaving when Mr. Whitfield remembered his promise to the native and not knowing which cell he was in, let the whole lot out. They then fled up the mountain

range which almost encircles Zeerust. Old Mr. Wright who was getting frail sat down halfway up the mountain too exhausted to continue and begged the others to continue without him. They refused and instead took turns in carrying him.

The Party moved down the opposite side of the mountain and followed the dry course of the Doring River in a detour around to the hills near Willow Park where they lay low until nightfall. Under cover of darkness Mr. Whitfield and a couple of the others slipped down to the house where they managed to get food and other supplies. Mr. Coker warned him not to stay as that would be the first place the Boers would search.

Following the Karee Spruit, Mr. Whitfield managed to slip into Zeerust to hear the latest news about the positions of the Boers. He also managed to borrow a wagon from Dr. Blake and the party decided to make for Mafeking which had been relieved from the siege by the Boers. They left in the very early morning and in the grey dawn saw a company of horsemen approaching whom they took to be Pieter Swart's Commando retreating to Zeerust. Someone suggested that they make for the hills but Mr. Wright said they would never make it and that it would only create suspicion. He suggested they rather try and bluff their way through it. It was only when the company of horsemen got close by that someone noticed that they were British.

The party was held overnight by the company and in the morning were set free to continue to Mafeking. Mr. Whitfield was able to retain the Prison Warder's Revolver and Keys and these are still in the possession of the family.