Chapter Six

How the Mines got their Labour

The Land is Divided Unequally

The last chapter showed that many black subsistence farmers became workers because they had to get money to pay taxes.

Many others were forced to leave home and become workers because they had lost so much land. This chapter describes what happened.

A successful black sugar farmer in Groutville, Natal. As the Rand developed, a number of black farmers prospered, selling food to the growing towns. The Land Act, however, effectively put a stop to much of the black commercial farming.

By the end of the last century most of the land in South Africa had been taken over by white farmers, by mining companies or by the government.

In the Cape and Natal, land in the Transkei and in Zululand still belonged to black farmers but there was much less than there used to be. The Xhosa and the Zulu lost much of their land after they were defeated on the battlefield. The land in these places was owned by the whole tribe. The chief decided who should use the land.

The Cape government and its Prime Minister, Rhodes, wanted blacks to buy land for themselves (as individuals) and not to share it with other families. They knew that those who failed to buy land would have to go out and work for wages.

Individual land-owners also had to pay extra tax to the government, as well as paying the costs of fencing their land. The result was that very few of them remained full-time subsistence farmers.

Either they lost their land or they began to grow crops to sell to the growing number of people in the mines and the towns. They became peasant farmers, like many Boers.

There were also black commercial farmers in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Very little land was still owned by black tribes in these provinces. The black farmers here did not farm their own land. Most of them lived on land that belonged to white farmers or they farmed unused land that belonged to mine-owners or the government. These farmers were called *squatters.*

SQUATTERS

There were thousands of squatters in the OFS and the Transvaal. Some were whites, but most were black.

Squatters grew their own crops and gave half to the landowner for part of the year or they paid rent in cash to the landowner. Many of these squatters made money from selling their crops to the towns.

TWO POWERFUL GROUPS

Meanwhile, as the Witwatersrand began to grow, two powerful groups began asking the Transvaal government to make new laws about the land. Both these groups were important to the government.

* One group was the white commercial farmers, the Boers. They were important to the government because they had voted for it and for President Kruger.

* The other important group was the mine-owners. The Transvaal government wanted to look after them because the mines brought great riches to the Transvaal.

COMMERCIAL FARMERS

The Boers had very large farms — they had taken for themselves most of the land in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State during the Great Trek. But for a long time they were not able to use all this land. Instead, they allowed squatters to use the land in

A commercial farmer with his labourers. As the gold mines and the towns developed, commercial farmers began to require more and more labour.

return for crops and labour.

When many of the Boers became commercial farmers, after the discovery of minerals, they needed more labour. They needed more workers to grow crops and rear cattle to sell to the growing mining towns.

In 1895, the same year that the hut tax and the poll tax came into force in the Transvaal, the government passed a *'squatters' law'*. The law aimed to help the Boers to overcome the labour shortage. According to the law, only five black families were allowed to 'squat' on any white man's farm. All other squatters had to leave the land and find work as labourers on other farms, or else on the mines or in the towns.

But the law did not work very well. There were whole tribes living on land that was supposed to belong to white farmers. These people had been living there for many years, since before the Boers trekked to the Transvaal. All over the Transvaal, many families stayed where they were and continued to work part of the time for their Boer landlords.

As the years went by, white commercial farmers continued to call on the government for more labour. The towns were growing rapidly and needed more food. To produce more food, the commercial farmers needed more land as well as more labour. They wanted to exploit all their land.

Their eyes turned to the black squatter farmers, who were using 'white' land to grow and sell crops. The white farmers did not approve of this, because they wanted the land that the squatters were using. They also wanted the squatters for labour. But as long as the squatters could use land for themselves, they were unwilling to leave home and work for wages.

THE MINE-OWNERS

The mine-owners also needed cheap labour. They already had many blacks coming to the mines to earn money for taxes. But there was still not enough labour to satisfy the needs of deep-level mining.

The mine-owners knew that most blacks were farmers. They also realised that as long as there was land to support black farmers they would not go to the mines.

Black squatters no longer owned the land, but they were still able to live off it.

'The native has been left, in effect, in undisturbed ownership of the land, and is rapidly becoming the small farmer of the community — able to live, prosper and preserve his independence by the sale of products obtained from the soil,' wrote the editor of the *SA Mining Journal* in 1895.

'The native . . . cares nothing if industries pine for want of labour when his crops and home-brewed drink are plentiful,' complained the President of the Chamber of Mines in 1912.[1]

The mine-owners saw that the only way to get more black farmers to leave the land was to take it away from them.

So when white farmers began to call for laws against squatters the Chamber of Mines supported them. White commercial farmers and the Chamber of Mines agreed on one thing: **black squatters must get off the land.**

THE LAND ACT

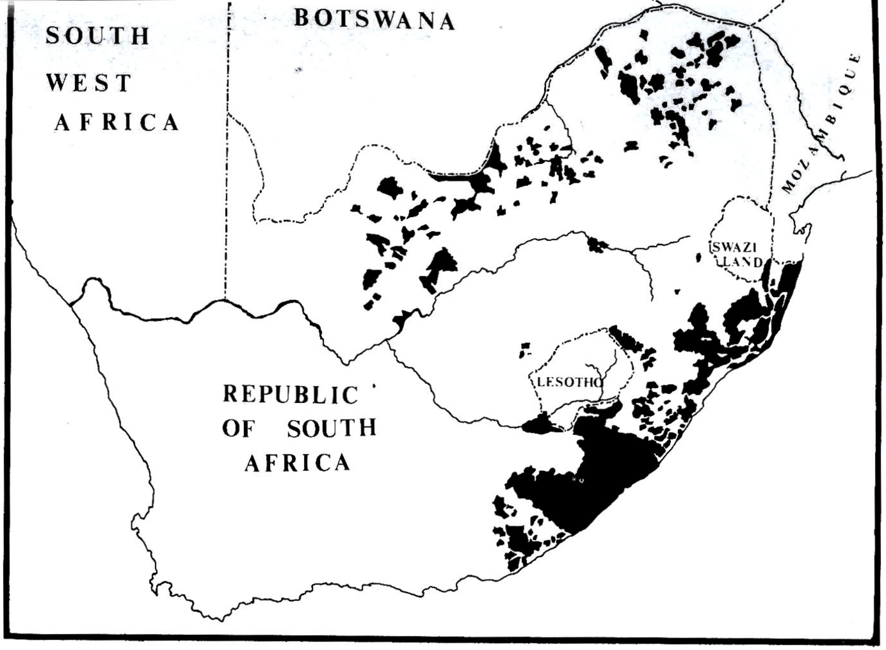
In 1913, the South African government made a law which divided the land between blacks and whites.

The law said that no whites could own land in African areas, and no African could own land in white areas, except in the Cape. If Africans lived on white-owned land, they must work for the landowner. Otherwise, they must live as farmers in the tribal lands, the 'Reserves'.

The map on page 26 shows how the land was divided in 1913. The 'Reserves' formed less than a tenth of the land in South Africa.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS OF THIS LAW?

1. After the 1913 Land Act, the only land Africans could farm for themselves was the tribal land in the Reserves. But the Reserves were already crowded — there was no room for extra people, so few squatters were able to settle in the Reserves.
2. White commercial farmers got more land to use and more labour. Everybody who lived on their land had to work for them. People who were not needed as workers had to go.
3. The Land Act stopped black farmers from renting land from white farmers.
4. The mines got more labour because the Land Act forced many squatters into the towns to look for work. The easiest way to get a job was in the mines, because the mines were always short of labour.



The 1913 Land Act reserved less than 10% of the land for black ownership.

So the Land Act pushed thousands of squatter farmers into becoming wage workers. The government helped the mines to get labour in two ways: through making laws on taxes and through the Land Act, which deprived black farmers of most of their means of production by dividing the land unequally between Africans and whites.

Sol Plaatje — black novelist, poet, journalist and leading political figure — described the sufferings of squatters after the Land Act:

A month after the Land Act was made law, Plaatje and some friends rode on their bicycles around the farms of the Transvaal and the OFS. They wanted to see for themselves what was happening to the squatters. Plaatje wrote many stories about what he saw. He put all these stories into a book called *Native Life in South Africa.* This book was published in 1916 three years after the Land Act.[2]

Here is one of the stories told to Plaatje by a squatter family after the Land Act.

A Black Writer looks at the 1913 Land Act

A squatter called Kgobadi got a message from his father-in-law in the Transvaal. His father-in-law asked Kgobadi to try to find a place for him to rent in the Orange 'Free' State.

But Kgobadi got this message only when he and his family were on their way to the Transvaal. Kgobadi was going to ask his father-in-law for a home for the family. Kgobadi had also been forced off the land by the Land Act.

The 'Baas' said that Kgobadi, his wife and his oxen had to work for R36 a year. Before the Land Act, Kgobadi had been making R200 a year selling crops. He told the 'Baas' he did not want to work for such low wages. The 'Baas' told Kgobadi to go.

So both Kgobadi and his father-in-law had nowhere to go. They were wandering around on the roads in the cold winter with everything they owned. Kgobadi's goats gave birth. One by one they died in the cold and were left by the roadside for the jackals and vultures to eat.

Mrs Kgobadi's child was sick. She had to put her child in the ox-wagon which bumped along the road. Two days later, the child died.

Where could they bury the child? They had no rights to bury it on any land. Late that night, the poor young mother and father had to dig a grave when no one could see them. They had to bury their child in a stolen grave.

Plaatje ended the story with the bitter words that even criminals who are hanged have the right to a proper grave. But under the cruel workings of the Land Act, little children, 'whose only crime is that God did not make them white', sometimes have no right to be buried in the country of their ancestors.