

Chapter Two

The Gold Rush

'Gold — an industry which feared neither locusts nor cattle diseases, neither drought nor summer floods.'¹

One summer's day in 1886, two prospectors discovered gold on a Transvaal farm called Langlaagte. Gold was not new to the Transvaal. Africans had mined gold hundreds of years earlier. More recently, gold had been found in the Eastern Transvaal, but this gold ran out and the small mining towns closed down. The gold find at Langlaagte was different. The gold discovered there ran for miles and miles underground, 'an endless treasure of gold.'²

Gold changed the face of the Transvaal. Before 1886, it had been a poor, struggling Boer republic but ten years later, it was the richest gold mining area in the world. As news of the gold find spread throughout South Africa and the rest of the world, men made their way to the Transvaal.

They walked, they rode on horseback, or they came by slow ox-wagon. Ships no longer passed South Africa on their way to Australia or New Zealand. Instead, boat-loads of men arrived at the ports and hurried to catch the next coach to the Transvaal, hoping to find the riches of their dreams.

Wherever people found gold, another little mining camp grew. Langlaagte became part of a big new mining town called Johannesburg, where many other mining camps were set up. Soon Johannesburg became the biggest town in the Transvaal, bigger even than Pretoria, the capital.

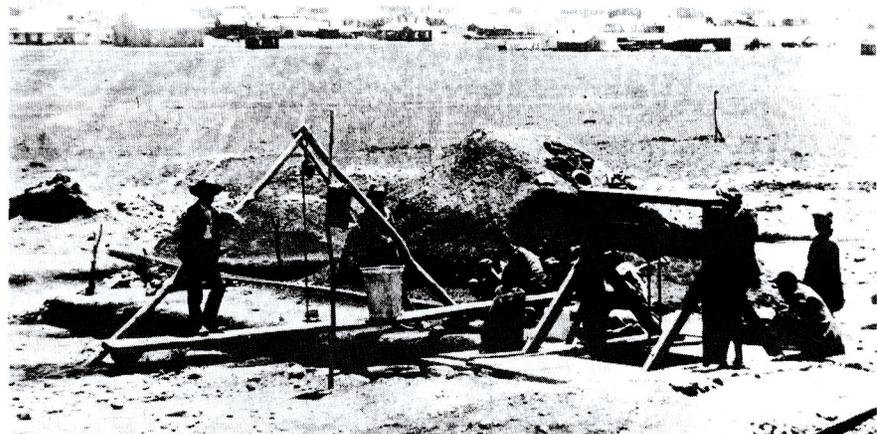
Other mining towns sprang up as well. If you look at the map on page 10 you will see that these mining towns form a line along a ridge. This is called the *Witwatersrand* — the *Rand* for short.

As time passed, the tents disappeared and people began to build houses, offices and shops. Builders were very busy. Ox-carts and horses filled the streets with traffic, dust and noise; yet the sound of the stamps crushing rocks in the mines around the town could be heard day and night.

Every week, hundreds of people poured into the 'golden' Rand — all had come to seek their fortune.



Gold mining was not new to the Transvaal — men and women had mined precious and semi-precious metal many centuries before the coming of the white man to southern Africa.

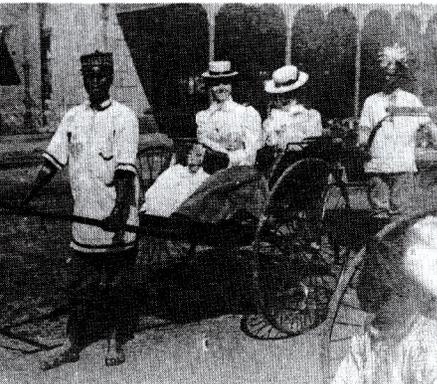


Above: Early prospectors in 1886, near Ferreira's town, which became part of central Johannesburg.

Below: Market Square, twenty years later.



People of the Mining Towns



There were three main groups of people who hoped to make money from the mines:

* The first to come to the mines were the *prospectors*. These were the men who came to look for gold in the soil. They came with great hopes of 'striking it rich'.

* A growing group of people were *labourers*. Many of them were black farmers needing money. They hoped to find jobs so that they could pay their taxes, or buy guns or tools like hoes and ploughs for their land.

So at first, most labourers did not come to stay. They went home as soon as they had earned enough.

* Other people did not get their money directly from the mines — they made money from the needs of the people who mined the gold. The sellers of land, lawyers, traders, shop-keepers, ox-wagon drivers and many more made their money in this way.

Many traders did well in those early years on the mines. Goods were in short supply; they could

charge high prices.

Ox-wagon drivers were also busy. They brought food and water from the farms for the new townspeople. They carried supplies like building materials and machinery from the faraway ports on the coast.

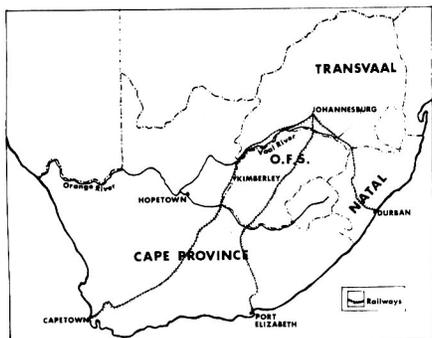
For the first time in South Africa, towns grew so fast that they could not supply people with all their needs. Water was so scarce that people had to buy it by the bottle. Cabbages cost R2 each.

Improved Transport

More and more people were coming to live on the Witwatersrand. As the Rand grew, the seaports became much busier. More and more factory-made goods and machines were being shipped from England to meet the demand.

Goods had to be transported all the way from the coast to the Rand by ox-wagon – and ox-wagons were very slow. Goods were in short supply: the demand was great. Traders saw their chance to make money. No wonder prices were high! But most important, the equipment needed for the mines was taking too long to arrive.

Something had to be done to improve the system of transport. First, the governments of the Transvaal, the Cape and Natal improved the roads so that wagons could travel faster. Then railways were built.



A map of South Africa, showing the first railway lines to Johannesburg.

You will notice on the map that the first railway lines joined the ports to the mining towns. Most of the main lines went to the Witwatersrand, to the gold mines. (There was also a main line to the diamond mines of Kimberley, in the Cape.)

The coming of the trains to South Africa made a great difference to people all over the country. People living in the countryside used the railways that were built between the towns.

* Men who wanted to work in the gold mines went by train. This made it easier for the mines to get workers.

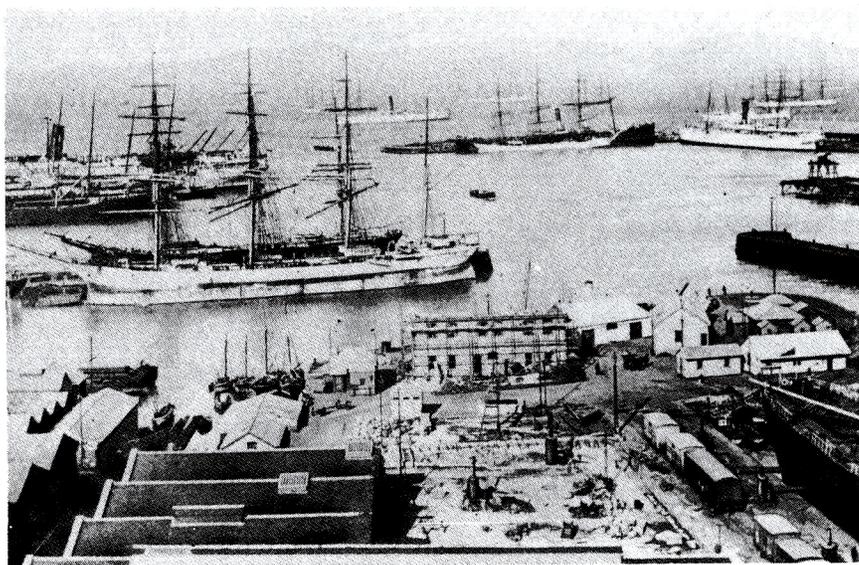


An ox-wagon crossing a drift. Transport was slow and difficult before the coming of the railways.



(Above) Park Station, Johannesburg – 1903.

(Below) Cape Town harbour in the early days. The dockyards developed as trade from the Rand increased.



* Farmers who wanted to sell their crops could send them by train to the larger towns. This meant the towns could get fresh food more easily and cheaply. New stations were built near the bigger white farms to transport the farm produce.

* New towns grew up around the stations. These farming

towns gave more work to builders and railway workers, railway officials and traders.

So with the help of the railway lines, more and more towns were built in the interior, providing an increasing number of jobs for the people of South Africa.

A New Way of Life

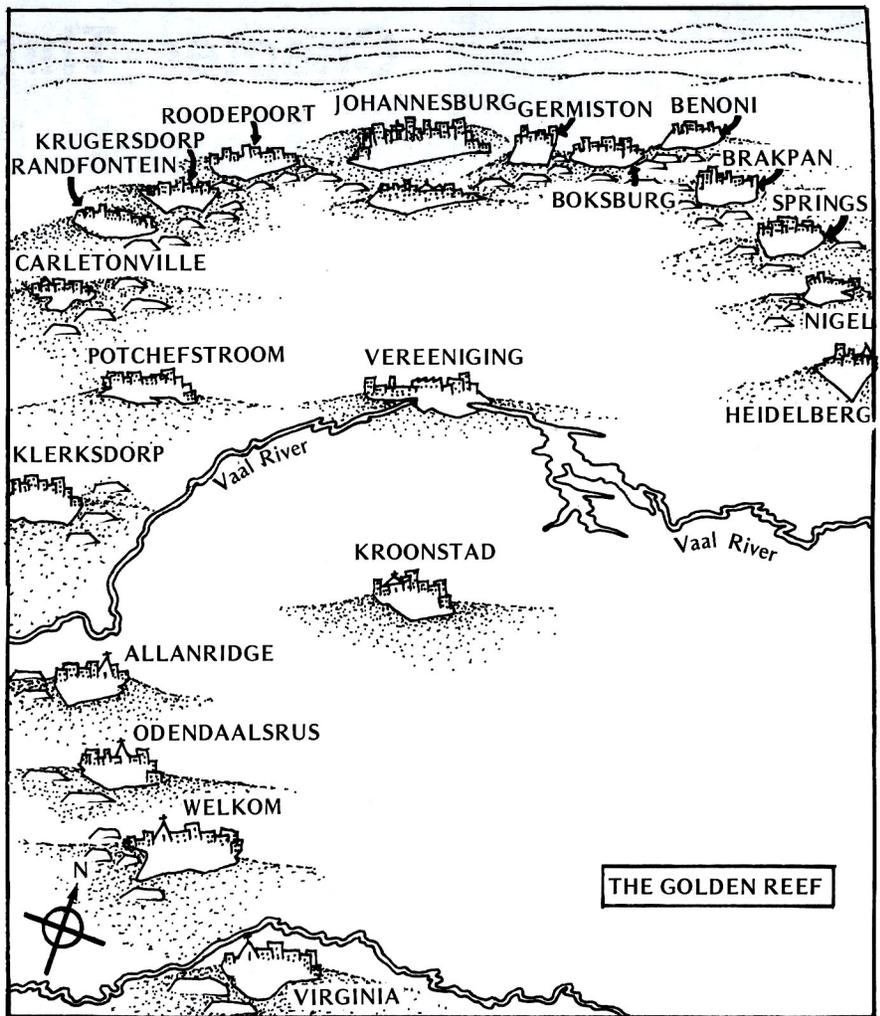
Industrialisation was spreading from the Witwatersrand to the rest of South Africa. As the Witwatersrand grew, so did the need for goods, machinery, food and – most important of all – people to service and develop these mining towns.

Some people became rich. Others lost everything they had. But for all the people who went to live in the towns, whether they were rich mine-owners, or traders, or poor labourers, money became very important.

Townspople could not live without money. Even farmers, black as well as white, started to grow crops to sell.

For most people, the old way of life was gone forever. From now on, more and more people would:

- work for a wage;
- buy their food and clothes from a shop;
- live in a compound, a township or a suburb.



The gold mining towns formed a curve, starting from the east Rand in Heidelberg, extending westwards across to Krugersdorp and Randfontein. Later, gold was discovered further south.

