

# Making the best of a home-made home

Anna Zieminski, Afrapix

Nothing beats the satisfaction of owning your own home, argues Orange Farm resident **ZOLILE MTSHELWANE** (pictured right, in his recently-erected home) in this article on the phenomenal growth of South Africa's newest squatter settlement.

In the sprawling shackland of Orange Farm, a squatter settlement about 65 km south of Johannesburg, 30 families share a tap, and have no sewage service at all.

Today, in terms of Section 6 (a) of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act of 1951, Orange Farm is an area designated for controlled squatting. The Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) Community Development Services has made available approximately 4 300 sites for families who have been squatting on white-owned land in and around Walkerville.

Two thousand of these sites have been set aside for families from Weiler's Farm and the surrounding areas - Sweetwaters, Vlakfontein and Doornkuil. People from Mshenguville in Soweto and some squatters from Alexandra township have also settled here.

Most families from the Weiler's Farm area were moved, together with their dismantled shacks, on free TPA transport. The first move was in October 1988 and by the end of September 1989, there were approximately 600 families settled at Orange Farm.

There is no sewage system in the area and every household has to dig and build its own toilet. For the most part residents have dug holes in their yards according to specifications issued by the authorities - but these are seen as temporary measures for residents who cling to the hope generated by rumours that a sewage system is to



*Home sweet home: Zolile Mtshelwane in his new home, built on the property he bought for R500*

be installed.

Families originally from Weiler's Farm who have moved further out now face increased transport costs. The major means of transport for people at Orange Farm is the train. Most people walk to and from the station, which is about 2 km away from the squatter area but there are also taxis and a bus feeder system between the settlement and the station.

There have been rumours and public pronouncements that the TPA will provide various services for the Orange Farm community. There have also been promises that the dusty roads will be graded from time to time, but so far only the main road leading into the area has been graded about once a week. No work has been done on the 'streets' inside the settlement so that when it rains they are full of puddles,

and dusty when it is dry.

The one clinic which serves the whole area is open five days a week, offering different health services on a daily rotational basis. Most schoolchildren still attend schools in the areas they came from. This is mainly due to the fact that the school at Orange Farm only goes up to Standard Four. The 'school' is representative of the whole area - it is like a gigantic shack built out of corrugated iron. At this stage it is not clear whether any more schools will be built.

The community has been promised that if they buy the sites they are living on they can legally own them. The price for a 20 square metre site is R500. Those who can't afford to buy must pay a monthly rental of R47. Everyone has to pay service charges of R37 a month, but people who rent have





**From one farm to another: the Mkhize family move from Weller's Farm (top) to their new home at Orange Farm**

to pay an additional R10 monthly levy.

One interesting aspect about people who have moved to Orange Farm from places like Soweto, Sebokeng and Pretoria, is that these people were not forcibly removed from their former places of residence, but willingly chose to settle at Orange Farm. The overwhelming majority of this group were tenants in the backrooms of other people's houses, and have been on housing lists for as long as they can remember. There are also a few from Soweto who moved out of houses they were paying off in bank or building society instalments. One in every three of these people expressed similar opinions: there is nothing that beats a place of your own.

When asked why she left her three-bedroomed house in Soweto's Selection Park, Sarah Ndlovu said: 'The unending burden of a bond repayment was too tough for me and my husband. Initially we were paying R260 per month, but when the bond repayment increased to R400 it became apparent that we were going to die of hunger.

'We decided to look for someone who could take over the house and the repayment of the bond. At the same time we heard of Orange Farm and started making enquiries about a site there. We were lucky to find a younger couple who were prepared to take over the house, which had become like a yoke on our necks.

'Then we managed to acquire a site at Orange Farm. As it is now, we no longer have to worry about what we are going to eat, or drink or about clothes, because the burden we were carrying has now been removed from our shoulders'.

John Nkambule, an Orange farm resident, summed up the feeling of former backroom tenants when he said: 'It is so uncomfortable to be at someone's mercy all the time. When you live in a backroom, it is the landlord's prerogative to raise your rent if and when he so wishes.

'Should you not agree to pay the

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**Making a fire: Orange Farm children carry sticks home to make a fire**

increased rent, the only option is to move on. The effect of this continuous moving is detrimental to family life and the happiness of children who never come to know exactly which or where is their home'.

Most residents agree on one thing: what you have at Orange Farm belongs, or can belong to you.

Orange Farm may not be a great place to be because of the lack of proper infrastructure and the erratic transport system, but being an owner of your own shack seems to be the overriding advantage for the people there.

What this means is that once you are settled there, it is up to you what you do about your piece of land, whether you build a palace or a shack - one person even built a double-storey shack - or whether you construct a proper structure at your own financial pace.

The biggest challenge now for the people of Orange Farm and the TPA is whether the government will upgrade the area, and when that upgrading will start. As it is, the government's lack of commitment to providing black people with affordable and adequate housing in urban areas has been the cause of the mushrooming of squatter settlements

anyway.

For residents, the challenge is whether they will be prepared to wait for the government to effect its upgrading, or whether they will pressure the government to act quickly and in consultation with the residents.

The toughest of the challenges is the power relationship between the government and the residents. The question is who will seize the initiative first in laying the ground rules.

It also remains to be seen whether residents will wait for the government to set up its own collaborationist structures or whether residents will come up with their own organisational formations.

At the moment there is an eight-man committee which meets regularly with TPA officials to 'discuss' the development of the area. The majority of the committee members are formerly from the Weiler's Farm area.

It is well-known that structures of this nature receive no mandates from the communities they profess to be representing. And since the establishment of Orange Farm, there is no record of this committee having called any meetings with residents.

Since the area is still 'new', only time will tell which way the power relations will go.

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