

## LOWER ALBANY, 1919-1939: PROSPECTS FOR INDUSTRY

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### Suid-Albanie, 1919-1939: Nywerheidsvooruitsigte

Sedert die vroegste jare van die Oos-Kaapse Britse nedersetting van 1820 het die vooruitsigte vir die ekonomiese ontwikkeling van die kusgebied en die aangrensende Albaniegebied eerder om die sukses van die beoogde landbou-ondernemings, en veral om visvang by die mond van die Kowierivier, gedraai as om die ontwikkeling van 'n hawe wat tegelykertyd 'n sentrum vir plaaslike nywerheid sou wees. Daardie vooruitsig het deur die tussenoorlogse tydperk van 1919 tot 1939 bly voortleef. Hierdie artikel is 'n beskouing van die wisselvallighede wat die projek tydens hierdie periode beleef het asook van die algemene ekonomiese tendense vir hierdie streek, veral in die konteks van die wêreldwye depressie wat ingelui is deur die ineenstorting van die Wallstraatse aandeleemark in 1929. Daar is dus ook 'n fokus op alternatiewe nywerheids- en verwante vooruitsigte, met insluiting van mynboubedrywighede asook 'n kort hedendaagse siening van die moontlikhede wat daar was om die plaaslike ekonomie te bevorder. Teen die einde van hierdie tydperk egter is die stewige basis van Suid-Albanie se ekonomie soos dit vandag daar uitsien, reeds gevorm deur die lank gevestigde vrugte- en melkboerdery in die binneland en uitgebreide toerisme aan die kus, asook die vooruitsig van Port Alfred as 'n bloeiende sentrum vir permanente intrekkers (alhoewel dit soms gekniehalter is deur die dwarstrekkery en kortsigtigheid van Port Alfred se eie inwoners).

From the very beginnings of the 1820 Eastern Cape British settlement the prospects for the economic development of the coastal and adjacent area of the district of Albany, known as Lower Albany, centred not as much on the success of the intended farming enterprise as on the development of a harbour *cum* centre for local industry, especially fishing at the mouth of the Kowie river. That prospect remained alive right through the inter-war period from 1919 to 1939. This paper examines the vicissitudes of that project during this period as well as some of the general economic trends for this region, not least in the context of the global depression ushered in by the Wall Street crash of 1929. There is, therefore, also a focus on alternative industrial and related prospects, including mining as well as some little contemporary awareness of how the informal sector of the local economy might have been encouraged. But by the end of this period, it was the long established fruit and dairy farming inland, and expanded tourism at the coast and the prospect of Port Alfred as a growing centre for permanent residents (though sometimes thwarted by the infighting and shortsightedness of Port Alfred's own citizenry) which formed the solid basis of the Lower Albany economy as it exists today.

Lower Albany is the coastal and closely adjacent region of the nuclear area of the 1820 British settlement in the Eastern Cape. Its economic foundation rested on the well represented vision of metropolitan and local colonial officials as well as local observers, including the great naturalist William Burchell to turn this apparently fertile region into a closely settled, therefore labour sufficient, high intensive arable farming enterprise.<sup>1</sup> The infrastructure provided included the establishment of Bathurst, 14,5 km inland from the coast, to serve as the whole of the Albany region's administrative centre and military headquarters. But because of the slow progress of building operations, and following the recall to Britain of the "Settlers'

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G. Butler (ed.), *The 1820 Settlers an illustrated Commentary* (Cape Town, 1974), pp. 65-79, 135. See also H.E. Hockly, *The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1973), pp. 20-32.

friend”, the acting governor Sir Rufane Donkin on the return from leave of Lord Charles Somerset, Bathurst, by proclamation of the latter, issued in February 1822, gave way to Grahamstown as the “Settler capital”.<sup>2</sup> Donkin, before he left the Cape Colony, had also actively encouraged the efforts of some of the Settlers to give the area regular access to the sea by the establishment of a harbour at the mouth of its most strategic river, the Kowie. These efforts culminated in the appointment in 1821 of ex-naval officer Joseph Dyason as harbour master and pilot at Port Kowie (re-christened Port Frances in 1825, and Port Alfred in 1860).<sup>3</sup>

Once established, it was the latter centre that was generally looked to as determining the economic future of the Lower Albany region. Such expectations for its future marked, in fact, its very genesis. Firstly, in the sense that Donkin’s active sponsorship of the Kowie harbour project was prompted not least by his very early realisation that Albany would never prosper as exclusively an agricultural settlement. Simultaneously, practical men of affairs like Benjamin Moodie, leader of a Scottish settler party three years prior to the arrival of the sponsored settlers of 1820, pointed the way of diversification by obtaining a grant of land on the west bank of the infant port settlement where together with a Cape Town merchant, Henry Nourse, he intended establishing a meat-curing factory.<sup>4</sup>

So from the very outset the Settler community of Lower Albany centred its hopes for a more diversified economy, including industry on the prospects of the Kowie developing as a safe and economically viable port. That was always the first priority of private developers up to 1877, at which juncture the Cape government took over what remained of a succession of privately financed and always ultimately abortive Kowie harbour schemes<sup>5</sup> (including eventually the government’s own intermittent efforts stretching over a period of seventeen years to develop the port until they were abandoned in 1891).<sup>6</sup> But secondly, the failure of the founding agricultural close settlement scheme notwithstanding, the Lower Albany region developed a farming economy particularly noted for its great variety of produce, including a wide range of animal products and fruit, notably apples, pineapples and oranges,<sup>7</sup> and for such produce the Port Alfred produce market was by 1919 the most important local outlet, even necessitating the construction of a new market hall ten years later in 1929.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly – spread over many years – was, if slow, the most spontaneous “growth point” of the local economy (namely) Port Alfred’s development as a tourist attraction. So even as late as the early 1880s the visitors that came to the Kowie were still largely very local people, especially from Grahamstown. The chief reason was the bad state of the roads and the slow mode of coach-and-wagon travel,<sup>9</sup> until the advent of the railway in 1884.<sup>10</sup> But even after that communications break through, it was only just before the outbreak of the First World War that

2. Hockly, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62, 68, 73, 74, 77-78.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

4. *Ibid.*

5. See report of the Union government’s fishing and harbours committee, 1926-7, *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 16 February 1928.

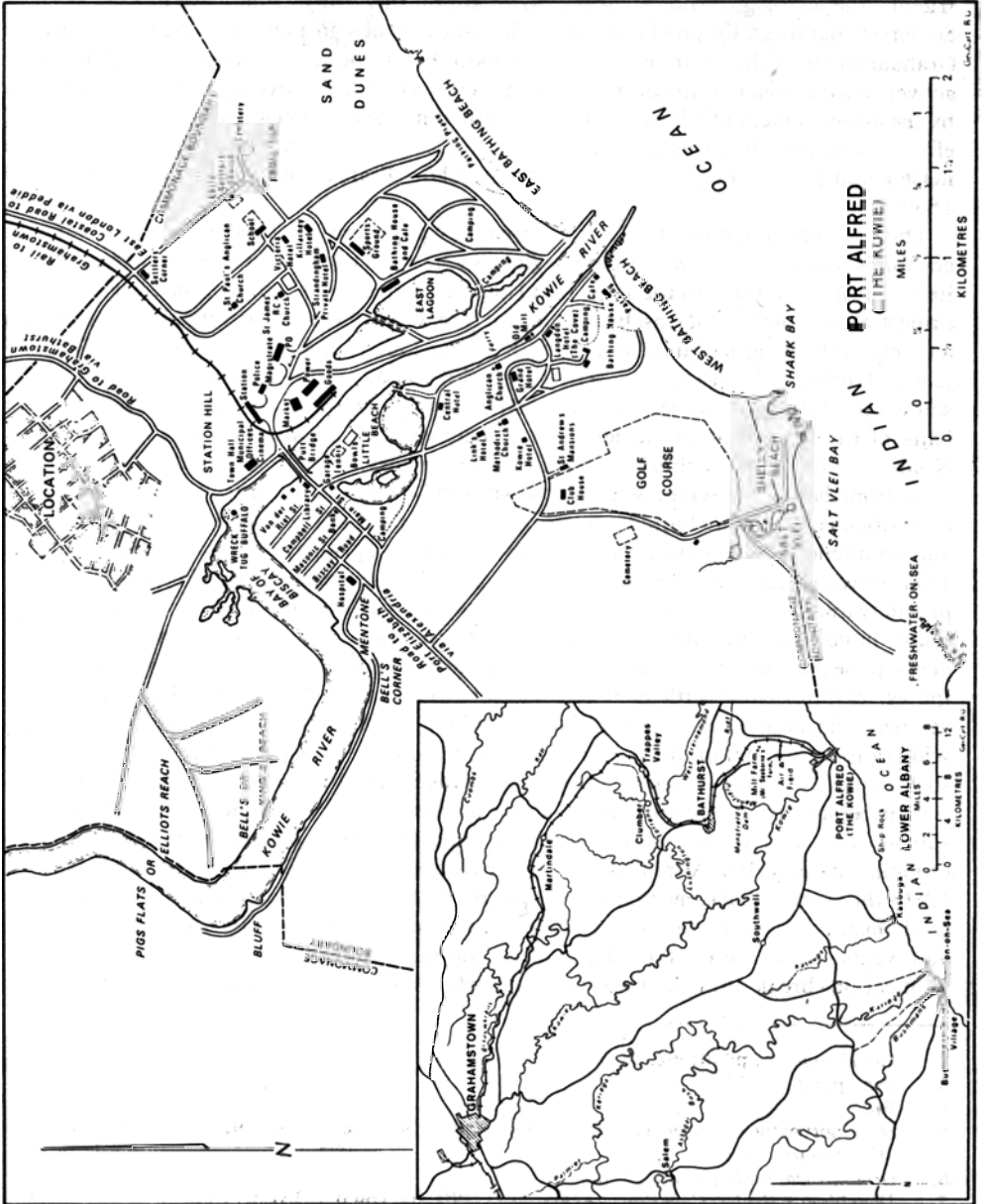
*Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 5 May 1936.

*Donaldson & Braby’s Cape Province Directory 1919* (Cape Town, 1918), p. 716. See also *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 25 January 1930, “Port Alfred Notes”, reporting the anticipated export of 10,000 cases of oranges from the Blaauwkrantz farm belonging to the Palmer brothers.

8. *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 4 December 1929, Port Alfred supplement.

9. *The Grahamstown Journal*, 5 January, 6 April and 27 August 1880.

10. See H.C. Hummel, “The opening of the Kowie railway: an historical molehill?”, Proceedings of the 10th Biennial National Conference of the South African Historical Society, Cape Town, 15-18 January 1985. See also Hummel, “Morse Jones Memorial Lecture 1983: The Kowie Railway”, *Toposcope*, xv, pp. 18-34.



visitors from farther afield, and more particularly the Rand, began to see out Port Alfred as their holiday destination in preference to a “pricey” and “glitzy” stay in Durban.<sup>11</sup>

Therewith the background to a community which by 1919 had a population of roughly 3000, including 2000 blacks, but excluding the over twelve and a half thousand people (two thousand of whom were classified as white, and ten thousand others) who lived in the surrounding farming district.<sup>12</sup> Highlighted by four days of local celebration in the first week of August to mark the return to peace after four years of war,<sup>13</sup> 1919 saw the beginning of the 20 years long inter-war period which is the focus of this paper.

There were still the echoes and the false optimism of the past. These were often reflected in correspondence to the local press, including a four paged supplement on Port Alfred contained in the issue of 4 December 1929 of *Grocott's Daily Mail*, the operative passage of which reads as follows: “The question is often asked: ‘Will the Kowie ever again be a seaport?’ Personally [a ‘strictly laymen’s opinion’, the author of the supplement added], I don’t think there is the slightest doubt about its progress in future. Delay and time ... have been and are entirely in its favour. Science and engineering, too, have made big strides in the meantime. The Kowie is a well sheltered spot and lends itself to all kinds of up-to-date improvements”. That was wishful thinking; it was but the latest version of a pipe dream frequently reiterated.

But there were also more practical and realistic appraisals of past failures. Of them the most consistent was an admission that, though Port Alfred would never become a great carrier port to rival either of its coastal neighbours, Port Elizabeth or East London, it should never give up striving to become a sizeable and reliable enough fishing port and so also establish itself as a centre for a fishing and fish processing (and therefrom derived also fertiliser) industry.<sup>14</sup> One variation of this refrain was the opinion ventured by one local correspondent writing to his newspaper that Port Alfred could follow in the footsteps of many an English seaside resort which has started as a fishing village and become both fashionable resort and important centre of a flourishing fishing industry. He quoted as examples Scarborough, Bridlington, Lowestoft, Yarmouth, and Grimsby.<sup>15</sup> Eventually such appeals resulted in a committee drawn from public figures from both chief local centres, Bathurst and Port Alfred, being set up in March 1926 and petitioning the Minister of Railways and Harbours to institute an “impartial inquiry” into the feasibility of establishing Port Alfred as a fishing and ancillary industrial centre, and service port for the farming produce of its immediate hinterland as enumerated above.<sup>16</sup> What brought matters further to a head was a highly publicised local catastrophe, the destruction by shipwreck in early 1926 of what appears to have been the most important ocean going fishing vessel operating out of the river mouth, owned and managed by a Mr de la Harpe.<sup>17</sup>

These were the circumstances which ensured that Grahamstown and Port Alfred were included in the itinerary of a committee of 4 members, served by a secretary, appointed by the Union Government towards the close of 1925 to investigate the country’s fishing harbour pro-

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*The Graham's Town Journal*, 12 August and 4 September 1913. See also Hummel, “The Month of August – an *Annales* Approach to the History of the Kowie: August 1881 to August 1914”, *Contree*, 18 July 1985, p. 25.

*Official Year Book of the Union*, etc., no. 4-1921 (Pretoria, 1921), p. 870. *Donaldson & Braby's Cape Directory*, *op. cit.*, p. 1446.

13. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 8 August 1919.

14. *Ibid.*, 24 October 1919; *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 9 March and 17 November 1925.

15. *Ibid.*, 24 April 1925, letter J.W. Bayes to editor.

16. *Ibid.*, 17 March and 8 December 1926.

17. *Ibid.*, 23 May 1926.

spects.<sup>18</sup> The team spent a day in each centre.<sup>19</sup> What they saw locally they were impressed by, and so when they issued three of their four reports early in 1928, parts IV and V, devoted to covering Lower Albany,<sup>20</sup> those dealt very fully, sympathetically, but also very realistically with the problems and prospects of establishing a local fishing industry. They took careful note of two previous Kowie harbour feasibility studies, the Coode and Methven reports of 1888<sup>21</sup> and 1901<sup>22</sup> respectively, and those cautioned them against any sense of over optimism. Largely on the basis of those earlier findings they ruled out the feasibility of Port Alfred as either a general port or even a local port, and even while commending the prospects of it becoming the centre of a fishing industry and perhaps a local small crafts harbour, they urged that without a proper survey of the river mouth allied to the establishment of a permanent dredger, the problems of shifting sands and shallow sand bar at the river mouth were incapable of containment sufficient to allow Port Alfred to function as even the very modest small local fishing port envisaged.<sup>23</sup>

One thing was clear to local leaders the moment the report was issued; the preliminary investigations alone would require state assistance. Hence a local deputation hastened down to Cape Town and was received by F.W. Beyers, Minister of Mines and Industries, on behalf of his colleague, C.W. Malan, the Minister of Harbours and Railways. Though he gave the men a very favourable hearing,<sup>24</sup> this was not a propitious time to ask for money. The “bubble” of post-war prosperity only burst in October 1929, but a drastic retrenchment programme of staff salaries ordered by the Bathurst Divisional Council in June 1928,<sup>25</sup> pointed the local finger in the direction of where the rest of the country and the world would follow fifteen months hence. Hardly surprisingly, therefore, in view of the rapid decline of financial stability that followed the Wall Street crash, nothing of the substance of any of the recommendations for the Kowie locality contained in the fisheries report materialized, though it took the government almost two years after the publication of the report, and then only in response to further local representations to Cape Town,<sup>26</sup> to commit to writing its “regret” at being unable to “see [its] way to authorise improvements at this port”.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps to soften the blow of disappointment, but chiefly, it appears, thanks to the untiring effort of a very determined mayor of Port Alfred, Wallace Stephen Colegate, first elected in 1928,<sup>28</sup> the government was induced to

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18. The committee consisted of Col G.T. Nicholson, M.Inst. C.E., Dr J.D.F. Gilchrist, who died during the progress of the investigation; Mr C.L.W. Mansergh, CBE, I.S.O., and Captain R.A. Leigh, with Mr R.W. Fair as secretary (succeeded on his retirement by Mr A.B. Skottowe). See *Official Year Book of the Union*, etc. Nos 9-1926-27 and 10-1927-1928 (Government Printing and Stationery Office, 1928/1929), pp. 490, 484 respectively.
  19. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 8 December 1926. They were in Port Alfred on 6 December; in Grahamstown on the 7th.
  20. Parts VI and VII and VIII of the report were printed and published as *U.G. 46, 1928* and *U.G. 3, 1929* *Union of South Africa Department of Mines and Industries Fisheries Survey Fishing Harbours Report* (Government Printing and Stationery Office, 1928), 1929 respectively. Parts I and II and IV and V were printed (but not published) as annexures. Parts IV and V are listed as *Annexures 285, 1927-'28*.
  21. J.C. Coode, *Cape of Good Hope Report on the East London and Port Alfred Harbour Works, February 1888, G.18-'88*; W.A. Richards & Sons (Cape Town, 1888), 15 pp.; C.W. Methven, *Report on the existing and proposed Harbours Improvements, Port Alfred (with eleven annexures)*.
  22. *G.46-1901*: W.A. Richards & Sons (Cape Town, 1901).
  23. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 18 and 20 February 1928.
  24. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1928.
  25. *Ibid.*, 22 June 1928.
  26. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1930, joint chambers of commerce resolution.
  27. *Ibid.*, 24 May 1930.
  28. *Ibid.*, 22 September 1928.

give a little. Colegate took his chance when members of the Railway Board, visiting the locality in June/July 1930, wasted no time in rejecting a long mooted idea of a spur to link the farming community of Southwell to the railway. Instead of allowing the visitors to idle away the rest of the day, he whisked them off to inspect the crumbling condition of the Kowie piers and river walls and made them promise that they would promote the case for their repair on their return to Cape Town.<sup>29</sup> By such smart opportunism, Colegate was given the chief credit for persuading the government to make at least the gesture of spending £1000 over the next two months on effecting those repairs.<sup>30</sup> In relation to what might have been had the fisheries report recommendations been fully implemented, Colegate's was a very modest achievement but it was enough to make local opinion reaffirm the prospect that one day – however distant – Port Alfred would become a fishing harbour. As the local columnist in Grahamstown's *Grocott's Daily Mail* informed his readers: "A very well drawn plan of the proposed harbour according to Mr Methven's scheme has been drawn by a prominent local resident. It is contended that even if the scheme costs half a million, and takes fifty years to come to fruition, a move should be made to get £5,000 put on the estimates every year".<sup>31</sup>

Some months later he enlisted the support of the Cape provincial harbour engineer in favour of promoting a "small modified" harbour development scheme for Port Alfred.<sup>32</sup> About the same time, local enthusiasm once again spilled over when after a particularly rich harvest of fish out at sea, one local resident, quoted by the same columnist, suggested the establishment of a cod liver oil extracting and manufacturing plant at the Kowie.<sup>33</sup>

Not that opinion was unanimous on the point. There were always those in the local community who were identified in the same column as people whose "apathy and want of interest" was so pronounced that "if you asked [them their] opinion on the subject, [they] would hardly know anything about it, or even know anything at all". Others were hostile to the prospect for reasons which were a mixture of social snobbery, cultural superiority, aesthetic and hygienic considerations, economic and financial scepticism, and indifference. *Grocott's Daily Mail* stated: "There are those who think a fishing industry will attract Malays and Asiatics and other undesirable classes of people to the town, and there are others who declare the town does not want to be saddled with the unsavoury odours associated with fish offal, etc. There are a few people who, directly you broach the subject, ask 'Where are you going to get the capital from? A scheme like a fishing harbour will cost a fortune.'"<sup>34</sup>

Or else there were those who were genuinely concerned that a fishing industry sited too close to the centre of town could seriously damage the further resort prospects of the Kowie.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the sense of perseverance of those like the local columnist, which never flagged,<sup>36</sup> was not misplaced, for even in the next nine years and almost to the date of the outbreak of World War II<sup>37</sup> (and beyond)<sup>38</sup> the prospects of a fishing harbour and ancillary industries being established at Port Alfred remained alive.

29. *Ibid.*, 5 July 1930.

30. *Ibid.*, 29 September 1930.

31. *Ibid.* See also *Ibid.*, 17 February 1931.

32. *Ibid.*, 17 February and 9 March 1931.

33. *Ibid.*, 2 March 1931.

34. *Ibid.*, 17 February 1931.

35. *Ibid.*, 9 May 1934.

36. *Ibid.* See his "Port Alfred News" column of 17 February, 9 March, 8 June, 21 July and 19 October 1931.

37. *Ibid.*, 21 July 1939, report back meeting of local M.P., T.B. Bowker.

38. *Ibid.*, 19 October 1939.

The first tangible sign of yet another attempt made to bring it about was the visit to the Lower Albany locality in September 1932 of a Board of Industries and Trade delegation, headed by its chairman and including the Director of Fisheries Survey.<sup>39</sup> Its findings, though only published after much delay to the frustration of local opinion,<sup>40</sup> reiterated the viewpoint of previous commissions that Port Alfred had the basic facilities for a local fishing industry providing the harbour mouth could be made safer at a reasonable cost.<sup>41</sup> One of the causes of the delay was the inability of the government harbour engineer to visit the locality and take his "soundings" sooner than April 1934, which was nineteen months after the delegation had been and held up their report pending his investigations.<sup>42</sup> But in the wake of his visit local optimism soared,<sup>43</sup> it being thought imminent that the government would make up its mind to sponsor one of two schemes: the first, a major one; the second and the one obviously regarded as more likely to be recommended, a more minor one, on the lines of rendering the river mouth safe for local fishermen.<sup>44</sup> And yet again, it needed further local representation before anything happened. This took the form of the chamber of commerce in conjunction with the town council sending its secretary, G.R. Stocks, to interview the Minister of Industries in Pretoria.<sup>45</sup> That helped to expedite the report which was issued early in the new year, almost exactly three years after it had been commissioned on 3 February 1932.<sup>46</sup> But when the report showed that Port Alfred was not one of the ports earmarked for immediate development, Stocks was sent to Cape Town to enlist the help of the local member of parliament.<sup>47</sup> That seemed effective, because soon after his intervention, the scheme of work as it eventuated, became known to the press. The essence of it was to build out the western breakwater by another 300 feet (92,3 metres) so as to afford shipping vessels safe entrance into the river mouth (including across the bar).<sup>48</sup> But in keeping with the long history of harbour development at the Kowie, even this latest instalment became subject to delay.

There was renewed anxiety, this time as to whether October, the projected date for tenders to be issued for the work, would be adhered to.<sup>49</sup> In the event, the calling for tenders was postponed to 17 January 1936.<sup>50</sup> The long time it took to award the job caused the next frustration<sup>51</sup> until the news came through on 7 April that a Cape Town construction firm, Messrs Schuddin, Hawkes and Sons, had been awarded the contract.<sup>52</sup> They set about their task with a will, and for the next nine months good progress was made,<sup>53</sup> until all of a sudden work "bulletins" came to an end. They revived fitfully for a time,<sup>54</sup> but then in an atmosphere of worsening international relations and particularly in the wake of a rather sudden visit by Oswald Pirow, the Minister of Railways and Harbours who was also Minister of Defence, on

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39. *Ibid.*, 13 and 23 September 1932.

40. *Ibid.*, 11 July, 12 September, 21 November, 1 December 1933; 6 February and 24 April 1934.

41. *Ibid.*, 11 March 1935.

42. *Ibid.*, 24 April 1934.

43. *Ibid.*, 9 May, 6 June, 3 July and 27 August 1934; 8 January 1935.

44. *Ibid.*, 9 May 1934.

45. *Ibid.*, 20 October and 19 December 1934.

46. *Ibid.*, 11 March 1935. The report was printed as *Annexure 180* of 1935.

47. *Ibid.*, 6 April 1935.

48. *Ibid.*, 24 April 1935.

49. *Ibid.*, 24 June and 19 November 1935.

50. *Ibid.*, 15 January 1936.

51. *Ibid.*, 27 March and 8 April 1936.

52. *Ibid.*, 27 April and 5 May 1936.

53. *Ibid.*, 5, 15 and 30 May, 16 June, 7 July, 25 August, 22 September, 18 December 1936; 1 February 1937.

54. *Ibid.*, 13 April, 16 July, 15 September 1937; 21 and 27 April 1938.

10 February 1938 in the course of which he admitted to the growing naval threat posed by Japan to Western interests in the eastern Pacific,<sup>55</sup> the project became the focus of “all kinds of “rumours” and speculation, the chief one being that “the Government had abandoned the original project” and was planning to incorporate Port Alfred into a general defence scheme<sup>56</sup> as a subsidiary naval base<sup>57</sup> or else turn it into a graving dock.<sup>58</sup>

But at other times when the modified harbour project was not the “burning issue”, local opinion turned to even smaller concerns, though these often related to the main one. Precisely one such concern was a trend that had long been in evidence but featured only on a very minor key when prospects for an expanded deep sea fishing industry held the centre of attraction. That trend was the marked decline of the fishing resources of the river itself, and it became almost a local pastime in the 1920s to guess at the causes of it. This was reflected by the same often quoted local newspaper columnist who recorded fifteen different explanations sent to him<sup>59</sup> with the prospect of more in the offing, which duly materialised two days later.<sup>60</sup> Every party involved, including the government, entered into the spirit of this “little side show” when one of the more tangibly projected causes of the absence of table fish from the river, namely the apparent tendency for sharks to congregate at the piers and prey on shoals of smaller fish<sup>61</sup> was put to the test by stretching a gill net across the river mouth.<sup>62</sup> It was the Provincial Director of Fisheries Survey, Dr C. von Bonde, who was the author of the scheme, and it took nearly five months and the help of both government and town council before the “trap” was finally in place.<sup>63</sup>

And yet, ironically, even as the world’s economy was heading for its fabled crash in 1929 and the local harbour saga, dating back to the first harbour works started as Port Frances in 1825, seemed destined to end in a “fished out” stretch of local river denied safe access to the sea by even the smallest of sailing crafts, the prospects for industry in Port Alfred picked up in a variety of other ways.

Firstly, via tourism: The “Kowie season”, which peaked during the Christmas and New Year holiday period, attracting two to three thousand visitors,<sup>64</sup> was unfailingly well patronised. And, certainly, this was the case of the 1929/30 season when the local press reported that visitors were arriving by car and train in their hundreds, causing all the beach facilities to be “taxed” to their “uppermost”.<sup>65</sup> But also ironically, so exceptionally busy a holiday season coincided with a fall off in patrons at one of the town’s best known facilities, the local golf course, which had started as a 9-holer in 1906, was upgraded to a full sized 18-holer eight years later<sup>66</sup> and given the title of ‘Royal’ in 1924.<sup>67</sup> In keeping with its reputation for excellent management, the club’s committee took immediate corrective action. By the start of the next season it had effected considerable improvements, including a lengthening of the fairways,<sup>68</sup>

55. *Ibid.*, 3 and 11 February 1938.

56. *Ibid.*, 1 February 1937. See also 11 February 1938 and 16 May 1939.

57. *Ibid.*, 3 February 1938.

58. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1938.

59. *Ibid.*, 1 October 1929.

60. *Ibid.*, 3 October 1929.

61. *Ibid.*, 1 October 1929.

62. *Ibid.*, 22 November 1929.

63. *Ibid.*, 14 April 1930; 7 and 13 February, 14 April 1930.

64. *Ibid.*, 3 December 1930.

65. *Ibid.*, 17 December 1929; 3 and 7 January 1930.

66. Hummel, “Links, Litigation and Location: Port Alfred 1914-18”, *Toposcope*, 18, 1987, p. 74.

67. *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 12 February 1924.

68. *Ibid.*, 31 March 1930.



and these resulted in “a big increase in revenue in 1931 as compared to 1930”<sup>69</sup>. 1933/34 was another “bumper” season as gauged by the very large number of people who swam in the lagoon (5200 ticket holders alone in the first two weeks of January) as well as apparently “the record number of cars that were to be seen in Port Alfred and the variety of identification plates on them”.<sup>70</sup>

This welcome economic upswing, seen in another context and related to contemporaneous economic indicators such as clear signs that the South African and overseas market for pineapples was picking up strongly and that regular packings were leaving from a new packing shed at Clumber (starting with the resumption of overseas exports on 3 February 1934),<sup>71</sup> suggests that the 1930s depression had bottomed out locally. There were no more reports like the ones that had filtered through to the press in the wake of the collapse of the demand for pineapples in 1932,<sup>72</sup> giving news of white labour gangs doing maintenance work on the roads,<sup>73</sup> or the formation of local vigilance committees to help police those farms in the district left abandoned by their owners in search of paid employment to make ends meet<sup>74</sup> or of large numbers of blacks defaulting on their poll tax payments (and being brought to court in consequence).<sup>75</sup> Other signs of upswing included the inauguration of a regular rail car service between Grahamstown and Port Alfred,<sup>76</sup> including Sundays at a later date<sup>77</sup> and the opening of a new bridge across the Kowie at Port Alfred on 9 September 1933.<sup>78</sup>

These later developments are important for three reasons. Firstly, they are examples of how public money, spent on public works, as elsewhere in the Western world, notably the United States, helped to overcome depression. But secondly, they are also an indication of how uneven locally as also in other parts of the world, and more particularly Britain,<sup>79</sup> was the economic impact of the depression years. Like that other “marvel” of the depression years, the advent of the “talkies” which – as elsewhere – came to Port Alfred at this time<sup>80</sup> to help at least some of the enforced idle while away their blues. Thirdly, and particularly pertinent to the context of this paper, such “mid-depression” revivals of the local economy regenerated local optimism and some previously discernible economic trends. They even helped to spark some new development, though much of that was more apparent than real.

One such development was a discernible trend towards a category of tourists other than the “seasonal tripper”. These were the out of season or “all seasons” visitors. The most notable breakthrough in this regard was the visit of an eleven-strong party of Americans cruising in the Atlantic on the maiden voyage of *The City of New York*.<sup>81</sup> Coming as they did from the “southern bible belt”, they were fascinated by the beautiful singing to which they were treated by a school choir in Port Alfred’s black location<sup>82</sup> and thereby unearthed a talent hitherto

69. *Ibid.*, 25 February 1931, AGM of chamber of commerce.

70. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1934.

71. *Ibid.*, 23 January, 1 May 1934. See also Albany Museum Ms 2994(e), minutes of Bathurst East Farmers and Fruit Growers Association, July 1929 to October 1951, 1931 annual report.

72. *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 20 February 1932.

73. *Ibid.*, 12 March 1931.

74. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1931.

75. *Ibid.*, 26 September 1931; 14 December 1932.

76. *Ibid.*, 3 December 1930; 30 March 1931.

77. *Ibid.*, 17 November 1936.

78. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1933.

79. See S. Glyn and J. Oxborrow, *Interwar Britain A social and economic History* (London, 1976) or S. Constantine, *Unemployment in Britain between the Wars* (Hong Kong, 1980).

80. *Grocott’s Daily Mail*, 20 April 1931.

81. *Ibid.*, 7 March 1930.

82. *Ibid.*, 12 March 1930.

unappreciated locally. In the aftermath of the impromptu performance for the overseas visitors a concert was arranged for the town hall with the choir singing under the baton of the principal of the United Missions School, E S Mvambo. Much of the benefit of this occasion for closer communal relations was lost, unfortunately, because there was “only a small attendance of white people, possibly”, it was speculated, “through the rumour having got abroad that the concert was for coloured people”.<sup>83</sup> Yet within the next six years, such an event was drawing a white audience of five hundred.<sup>84</sup> It was a case of a new form of tourism producing the unexpected local spin-off of improved intercommunal relations.

Predating even 1919<sup>85</sup> but subsequently greatly stimulated by an ever increasing number of amenities<sup>86</sup> and sometimes fishing harbour prospects (yet the “quiet” unchanging character of the place all withstanding<sup>87</sup>) was Port Alfred’s growing character as a place of settlement and “permanent” abode. This phase of its inter-war economy became perhaps its most solid “industrial” growth point as evidenced not least by several peak periods of residential construction work usually coinciding with the expansion to existing hotel facilities as occurred in both 1923<sup>88</sup> and 1936<sup>89</sup>. Other signs of it included the growing pressure of vehicular traffic in the town (even out of season)<sup>90</sup> and the “new blood” infusion in town council affairs of the first woman councillor elected in 1935<sup>91</sup> and in place of previously just businessmen, of men who were still young enough as retired persons to be sufficiently vigorous, public spirited and broad visioned to want to serve the town.<sup>92</sup> But the most significant advance and by far the most spectacular and most expensive new amenity having cost £8,500<sup>93</sup> to instal a plant that served as the model for other towns in the vicinity<sup>94</sup> was the advent of electricity to Port Alfred. This new source of energy and light came on stream in literally a blaze of glory and self-congratulation at an impressive “switch on” banquet held on 20 November 1931. It was, as the mayor supposed, a case of history recording “that in 1931, Great Britain came off the gold standard” and Port Alfred being “put on the electric light standard”.<sup>95</sup>

Notwithstanding these signs of progress, it was also natural that a whole district that had its fulfilment in a viable Kowie harbour project so often frustrated should be constantly on the look-out for a rather more spectacular economic breakthrough than a reliance always on the “constants” of farming, tourism and latterly land development for more permanent settlement. So for a number of years, until an expert dispelled the hopes, much store was laid by the revival of prospects last nurtured in the 1870s<sup>96</sup> for the mining of coal and quicksilver in the

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83. *Ibid.*, 28 April 1930.

84. *Ibid.*, 15 January 1936.

85. Hummel, “The Month of August - an *Annales* Approach to the History of the Kowie: August 1881 to August 1914”, *Contree*, 18, July 1985, p. 25.

86. These included the establishment of a flourishing bowling club (*Grocott's Daily Mail*, 27 April 1920), a new library (*Ibid.*, 17 July 1924), a new abattoir (*Ibid.*, 23 October 1924), orchestra (*Ibid.*, 10 November 1924), and the establishment of telephonic links with Johannesburg (*Ibid.*, 1 July 1932).

87. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 7 July 1921, editorial; 12 January 1928.

88. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1923. See also *Ibid.*, 1 August 1933.

89. *Ibid.*, 5 May 1936.

90. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1920, town council report.

91. *Ibid.*, 3 September 1935.

92. *Ibid.*, 18 October 1924, leader, “Port Alfred Progress”.

93. *Ibid.*, 21 November 1931.

94. *Ibid.*, 8 May 1931; 21 July 1932; 1 November 1933.

95. *Ibid.*, 21 November 1931.

96. *Ibid.*, 4 December 1929. See also *Ibid.*, 20 January 1930; 11 February and 27 December 1932; 17 January and 22 April 1933; 10 July 1934.

Lower Albany area. This revived prospect lasted from 1929 until March 1933 when the professor of geology at Rhodes University, Edgar Mountain, in an address to the Port Alfred debating society dashed such hopes in no uncertain terms.<sup>97</sup> What had kept them alive so long was the simultaneous discovery, located on the Port Alfred commonage, of what was seen as a deposit of a recent German discovered exploitable mineral resource, useful to industry in filtration and other processes. This was hydrated silica of a type called *Kieselguhr* after the name of the scientist Dr Kiesel who discovered its use.<sup>98</sup> An overseas syndicate was quick on the scene to exploit the deposit and formed itself into a local proprietary company to be known as the Albany (S.A.) Products Proprietary Ltd.<sup>99</sup> But the “bubble” burst when the learned Rhodes professor pronounced the “find” to be no more than a large, open cache of weathered shaly sandstone which, to sweeten the bitter pill of disappointment, he hastened to add, “appears to be perfectly satisfactory as a kieselguhr substitute from the report available and might still prove a boon to Port Alfred”.<sup>100</sup> But it was not to be. Harder to accept, because longer anticipated, was local acknowledgement that the local “coal” on a Mr Seaborne’s farm was like the local kieselguhr merely a very low grade, and therefore an uneconomic, substitute; in this instance, it was a deposit of carbonaceous shale.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, the closest Lower Albany came to an affinity with the mining industry was the Rand Mines Ltd holiday bungalow Knoll Top,<sup>102</sup> a famous local landmark because it occupied the highest promontory of the seaside resort and was made doubly famous when Prince George, the Duke of Kent, stayed there for three days (19 to 21 February) during his Southern African tour of 1934.<sup>103</sup> This holiday facility, so prominently displayed, gave Port Alfred at least the benefit of regular visits from high powered mining executives<sup>104</sup> and sometimes their advice, given *gratis*.<sup>105</sup>

When South Africa went to war on 4 September 1939 there was nothing really left of the prospects for port, fishing and mining. Already sixteen months earlier, even the visit of so eminently well suited a body as the Rural Industries Commission to inquire into the industrial needs of an essentially rural environment like Lower Albany, raised no stir any more. The president of the local chamber of commerce in his representation made a half-hearted plea for the establishment of canning and cheese factories in Port Alfred, though even this recommendation as well as the representation by the town council for better excursion facilities on the railways,<sup>106</sup> were tacit acknowledgement of the fact that “seasonal” tourism to Port Alfred and fruit and dairy farming further inland remained what they had been at the beginning of the period namely, still the most reliable pillars of the Lower Albany economy. The prospect for economic expansion lay in the direction that the district realised its full potential only in the 1970s and 1980s. This was in land development for permanent residen-

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97. *Ibid.*, 7 March 1933.

98. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1930. See also *Ibid.*, 25 June 1930; 6 February and 27 December 1931.

99. *Ibid.*, 30 January 1930. See also *Ibid.*, 13 and 24 February 1930.

100. *Ibid.*, 7 March 1933.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*, 4 December 1929, Supplement on Port Alfred.

103. *Ibid.*, 19, 20 and 22 February 1934.

104. *Ibid.*, 4 December 1929; 11 January 1937; 12 April 1938.

105. *Ibid.*, 4 December 1929.

106. *Ibid.*, 13 and 14 April 1938. The commission’s findings were published in 1940 as *U.G. No. 27, 1940 Union of South Africa Department of Commerce and Industries Report of the Rural Industries Commission* (Pretoria, 1940). Lower Albany features only marginally in the Fishing Industry chapter, chapter VII, pp. 50–58. The list of local representatives who were interviewed by the Commission in Grahamstown on 12 April 1938 is shown in Appendix E, p. 84.

tial sites. It was projects like a Rhodesian exploratory settlement scheme for the area beyond Port Alfred's west pier to be known as Freshwater-on-Sea (on which negotiations and planning started in early 1937<sup>107</sup> until they became bogged down by a dispute as to where to site the access roads leading to it<sup>108</sup>) which foreshadowed Port Alfred becoming what it is today. This is a stable residential community all year round and a business centre for its hinterland to rival the historical position of Grahamstown in this regard.

One other potential for "industrial" growth, almost entirely, if not completely, overlooked at the time was the development of the informal sector. The tentative beginning in this direction was the founding of a local arts and crafts school in 1930,<sup>109</sup> but it was a poignant item in the local press column which probably serves as a better guide for the type of activity that could have been developed in this sector. The *Grocott's Daily Mail* reported: "An old Port Alfred native by the name of Jennings died yesterday. He was known by visitors all over South Africa, to whom he was a familiar figure in the selling of nautilus shells and mother of pearl shells. He also used to hawk shells. He habitually wore a black bowler hat, very much worse for its length of wear."<sup>110</sup>

In the final analysis, Port Alfred was its own worst enemy. No issue of any importance was ever clear cut. The community was invariably deeply divided within itself to the extent as one informed local, when invited to explain the phenomenon, characterised it as Port Alfred's "infernal 'personality complex'". "Whatever the issue", he continued, "the merits of the case don't matter, and whoever has the power will push through his ideas regardless of obvious defect". And he concluded, "This 'complex' is becoming deeprooted, as it is to be feared that things will be much worse before they are better."<sup>111</sup>

On the very eve of war Port Alfred acted precisely in this way. The issue involved was the most vital after electricity, the obtaining of a secure and adequate public water supply. But instead of presenting a united front to the Provincial Council, the Port Alfred community fought itself to a complete standstill in rival support over two schemes on the same Mansfield river. It was a case of those who had advocated the more ambitious and costly scheme refusing to accept defeat and thereby prejudicing the chances of the provincial authorities sanctioning even the more modest alternative plan for a smaller reservoir and pumping arrangement.<sup>112</sup> The net result was that Port Alfred entered the period of the Second World War still essentially dependent for water on the rain water run off and storage capacity of individual property holders in the town. In this way alone, by their own latest exhibition of local in-fighting, local citizens seriously retarded the advancement of the very industry which held out the best potential future growth of Port Alfred and the wider Lower Albany community.

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107. *Ibid.*, 18 March 1937. See also 11 June 1937; 4 February 1938.

108. *Ibid.*, 20 October 1938.

109. *Ibid.*, 6 May 1930.

110. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1932.

111. *Ibid.*, 17 May 1938, letter, RATEPAYER to editor, 16 May.

112. *Ibid.*, 12 August 1935; 12 June, 13 and 21 August 1936; 29 April, 28 June, 1 July, 25 August, 18 September, 28 October, 13 and 25, 26, 27 November 1937; 3 February, 31 May, 27 and 28 June, 12 and 13 August, 20, 21 and 25 October, 5, 15 and 25 November 1938; 3 February, 1, 16 and 22 March, 12 June, 29 July, 9; 24 and 31 August 1939.