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4 West Wheelock Street  
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TCY-5 1997  
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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## One Year in Pietersburg

PIETERSBERG, South Africa

January 1997

By Teresa C. Yates

"The city center of Pietersburg is reserved for whites. We blacks are expected to stay in Seshego or Westenburg or in Nirvana. I've tried to go out to the bars or the one dance club in Pietersburg but I've been beaten up several times. So finally, I'm just staying away." This view was expressed by a friend who is in his early twenties and lives in Westenburg, the "coloured" township about five miles from the Pietersburg city center.

People outside the Northern Province expect such stories from Pietersburg. After one year in Pietersburg I still pause somewhat and wait for the response that I inevitably get from outside people when I tell them where I am living. Why!? is the usual, initial retort, then bewildered sighs. After one year in Pietersburg I am also pondering my reasons for coming here, and my reasons for staying.

I came to the Northern Province to observe and write about the South African Government's attempts to implement new systems of land tenure. The Northern Province, however, is lagging behind in all of the three components of the land-reform program. Indeed, there has not been a single restitution, redistribution or

tenure-reform case completed in the Province to date.

"The Northern Province, however, is lagging behind in all of the three components of the land-reform program."

The Province offered what I thought would be a unique opportunity to observe

the government's attempts to reconcile customary practices of communal holding of land that are prevalent in rural communities with modern concerns with rights of women in rural communities.

"I grew up in the North. It's very poor and backward!" exclaimed a friend in Pretoria when he heard that I was moving to Pietersburg. Every time I see him he asks the same question, "How are the Boers (white Afrikaners) treating you in the North?" Then he laughs.

Another friend was serving as a legal consultant to the Premier of the Province, commuting from Pretoria to Pietersburg every Monday and Friday. "Why don't you just move with your family to Pietersburg?" I asked.

"For what? he said. There's nothing to do on the weekends in Pietersburg but sit and listen to the insects." He has recently taken a job in Pretoria.

The first time I came to South Africa in 1990, another law student who had lived his entire life in New York City and gone to law school in Washington, DC observed that the social structure in South Africa was the geographic opposite of the United States. The population became considerably more conservative and racist as you moved south in the U.S., north in South Africa.

I lived in South Carolina until I was 13 years old. I know that many of the

perceptions that people have of the southern United States are based on ignorance. The Northern Province represents to some people here what the American South represents, I think, to people living in the northeastern United States. That is, a place where old ideologies about race die hard. Of course there are other Provinces in South Africa that are conservative and that have more than their fair share of racists. But the North, like the southern United States, symbolizes that part of South African culture that cuts to the core of white hatred of blacks and black animosity towards whites in the country as whole.

In many ways the Northern Province conjures the same types of images in South Africans who live elsewhere as the American South conjures in Americans who have never lived in the region. Of course, many stereotypes are born out of a little truth and a lot of prejudice. They have a tendency to become so exaggerated that we believe the caricatures of people that stereotypes create are real. I was led to believe that the stereotypical white Northern Province resident, for example, is a white male farmer with a fat belly and thick beard who employs docile blacks who can neither read nor write.

The black population in the Province is perceived as backward and rural. With an estimated 60 percent illiteracy rate among blacks, with more than 80 percent of the black population living in rural villages, and with the majority of murders in the Province committed against accused witches, those living outside the Province believe that they have more than enough evidence to support their prejudices.

The Province does have its share of stereotypical white farmers and illiterate black farm workers. But they are not found in large numbers in Pietersburg. As the capital of the Northern Province, Pietersburg is working hard to shake its image of being little more than an agricultural bush town. The signs of this attempted transformation are numerous. The city now has illuminated billboards advertising everything from the Church of Christ to expert electricians and plumbers, Ground has been broken on a large new shopping center that will bring a much-needed movie theater to the city.

Old stereotypes die hard though, and it will probably take more than illuminated billboards and a shopping complex to change the outside world's views of Pietersburg. Some of my experiences during the past year are good illustrations of the distance Pietersburg has to travel if it wants to be seen as a cosmopolitan provincial capital.

## BEWITCHED

The first day I walked through the Pietersburg city center, a black man rushed past me and rubbed dirt on my arm. I didn't know what to make of the encounter until a young man approached me and greeted me in the Northern Sotho language. When it became clear to him

that I did not understand, he said to me in English, "That man has just put a *muti* on you. You must spit on your arm to clean it off." *Muti* is a term used to describe witchcraft. The young man was suggested that I had in some way been bewitched.

I looked at him in disbelief. He thought I was from Venda. He then said that another young man approaching us in street clothes was a policeman and that I must report the incident to him. This was, of course, a sham. So I declined the advice to spit on my arm and to "report" the incident to the "policeman."

This young man knew that if I had been from a Sotho or Venda-speaking village I would be petrified at the thought that a *muti* had been put on my arm, and that I would hand over money to ward off the evil spell. But I hail from New York City, and know a hustle when I see one. I simply walked away.

When I was looking for a place to live I answered ads in the newspaper and called real estate agents, but to no avail. Finally, during a visit to the law school at the University of the North, located about 10 miles from Pietersburg, I met the Associate Dean, who told me that there was a professor at the law school who was on leave and whose house was empty. He was sure that he could arrange with the professor's father for me to stay in the house until I found more permanent accommodation.

The Associate Dean, who I knew only as Tony, arranged for the key of the house. When I went to look at the house, its most distinguishing feature was the smell of cat urine. I walked through the house and decided that the smell of urine was better than the Holiday Inn. I walked in and locked the front gate behind me.

When I walked out the kitchen door in back, it closed behind me and the lock snapped. I looked around and instantly knew that I was trapped. The back gate was locked. There was no way to climb over it. I desperately searched for a key, thinking that certainly, if it was so easy to get locked out of this house there must be a key hidden somewhere! No key was to be found.

I heard someone in the next house. I found a box, stood on it, and looked over the gate. I could see a black cleaning woman busy with her work. "Excuse me," I said timidly. She looked up in shock. "Is there anyone who can make a telephone call for me? I'm locked out of this house." She responded in Pedi.

"Sorry," I said, "but I don't speak Pedi. Isn't there someone there who can call a locksmith?"

Silence and confusion. Finally the woman responded in clear frustration, "Where is your master?"

It was my turn to be confused. Should I explain that in

America blacks were freed in 1865? No. "I'm the only one here. I need someone to make a telephone call. Is anyone else there with you?"

Finally a white man dressed in the Afrkaner uniform of khaki shirt and shorts came out of the house with cellular telephone in hand. A locksmith arrived about twenty minutes later and freed me. I spent the rest of the day cleaning the urine-smelling house and moved in the next day.

I stayed for just over three months. While I lived there it became clear that the next-door cleaning woman was not the only person who believed in the master/servant relationship. On a quiet Saturday afternoon I sat in the living room reading the newspaper when an elderly white woman and a younger white man who seemed to be her son knocked on the door.

"May I help you?" I asked.

"Where is Mr. Pretorius?" the woman snapped at me.

"There is no Mr. Pretorius here." I responded, very calmly.

"Well then, who *lives* here?" she shouted.

"I live here," I answered, still trying to remain calm.

"But this is where Mr. Pretorius lives! Where is Mr. Pretorius?" she shouted again.

Finally, I replied, "I don't know any Mr. Pretorius." I closed the door.

### ANOTHER SATURDAY NIGHT. . .

One Saturday night I was sitting in the house (it never completely lost the odor of cat urine) and a very loud bang on the door shattered the silence. I stood up and without opening the door, asked, "Who is it?"

A loud angry male voice shouted back, "Just open the door!"

I thought that it must be the police or that something must be terribly wrong outside so I answered back "Why don't you tell me who you are and what it is that you want?"

The man shouted back, "Is that your white Toyota parked in the back? You are blocking our garage!"

I slowly opened the door and there stood a white man



and woman, both smoking cigarettes and shouting at me.

“That car is blocking my garage!” the woman barked.

In as calm a voice as I could muster, I said, “ Sorry, but I didn’t think that the car was blocking anyone’s garage. I will get the keys and move the car.”

When I went outside the woman began shouting at me again, “Don’t you have a copy of the rules? You are not supposed to park here!”

Then the man shouted “You are supposed to park in a garage or in the parking spaces on the other side!”

Finally, I couldn’t take it any more. I shouted back at

them. “Stop shouting at me! I have the keys! I am moving the car!”

#### CITY WITH A FUTURE

Pietersburg celebrated the 110th anniversary of its founding last year. The current slogan is “City With A Future.” I think the future of Pietersburg will depend on whether its’ people will be able to find a way to live up to the national slogan, “Rainbow Nation.” There is at least one guest house in town that seemed to have the Rainbow image in mind when the sign outside was painted, boasting that “all races” were presumably welcome for bed & breakfast accommodation. As for my own future in Pietersburg, I have a lease that expires in May. After that I just may have to spend my future in South Africa in another town. □



*Welcome to Pietersburg*