

# A PLACE IN HISTORY

Vereeniging has tempered the steel of its existence in the fiery furnace of a turbulent past. Epidemics, wars and natural disasters have all had some influence on the development of the city.

**T**he pioneers of Vereeniging were men of vision who made invaluable

contributions to the city. These men recognised the potential in an area that was not, at that time, particularly attractive.

Dr T N Leslie in his diary 'Casual Memories of an Octogenarian', writes: 'A trip from Pretoria to the Vaal River on horseback took you 12 hours. We travelled in a spider drawn by six mules — it took us fourteen and a half hours. Coming from Pretoria where gardens, hills and trees abounded, the country here looked very desolate and forbidding. No trees, except a few near the river and near a place called Houtkop. There was a strange absence of birds, animals and plant life. Over the dry bare veld, only the harsh grating scream of the kiewiet could be heard. I saw a few hamerkoppe and quite a lot of meercats and the repulsive bare-headed vultures were common.' Later in his life, Dr Leslie wrote: 'When we look around

Vereeniging today and see trees and gardens everywhere and the river flowing full and free and its banks lined with a wealth of weeping willows — we have difficulty in recalling the conditions when the town and countryside was bare of vegetation and the river, when not in flood, was a trench that could be walked across almost anywhere and nowhere a tree in sight, no weeping willows,

nothing, except an odd acacia, horrida here and there.' Dr. Leslie eventually became the first mayor of Vereeniging.

## A Tradition of Determination

George W Stow, 21 years of age and unemployed, arrived in South Africa from Great Britain and went in search of coal for the then independent colony of Griqualand West and the Cape Colony. He discovered a 12 foot seam at Maccauvlei in the late 1870's. The government of the Orange Free State who employed Stow at that time, decided that the seam was too far north. Stow approached Mr Samuel Marks, the Russian born diamond magnate and millionaire developer. Marks, brilliant businessman, promptly employed Stow with the instruction — and the money — to buy as many farms as he believed had coal. Stow purchased 126 000 acres and the first mine was built on the Transvaal side of the Vaal River.

The meeting between Marks and Stow resulted in the founding of 'DE ZUID AFRIKAANSCH EN ORANJE VRY STAATSCH KOLEN EN MINERALEN MIJN VEREENIGING'.

If Stow, who died tragically in 1922, discovered the coal that was to lay the foundations of Vereeniging, Sammy Marks is to be credited with the development of the city. Marks was a man of remarkable vision

and industry, even more so perhaps when one considers that in 1891, as a Jew, he had no voting or citizen's rights.

## An intriguing historical background



## Difficult Days

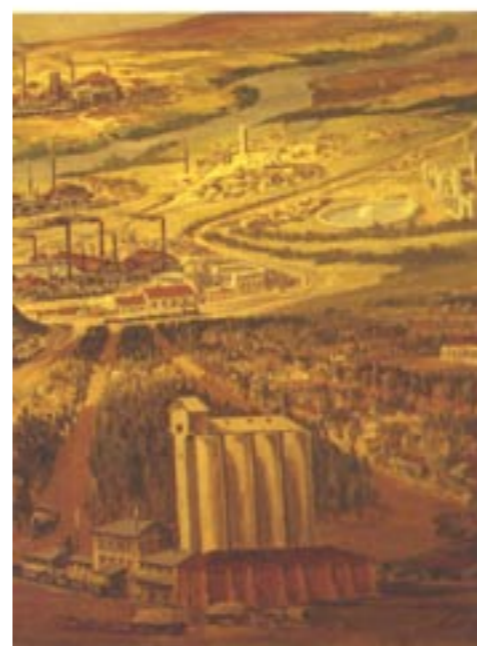
Although many of the role players in the early days of Vereeniging were English, there were few English speaking newcomers as 'the English public was not interested because they could not conceive that there were any possibilities in a town with a totally unpronounceable name.' The government of the day was noticeably unsympathetic, as illustrated by President Kruger's speech at the occasion of the opening of the first railway bridge that was to link the Republic of the Orange Free State with the South African Republic. The President remarked that since he had allowed the bridge to be built in the first place, he could close it down if the Uitlanders (or foreigners) did not behave themselves.

Vereeniging grew and prospered in spite of setbacks. In 1882, Samuel Marks' company applied for the laying out of the foundations of a town on the farms Leeuwkuil and Klipplaatdrift. The plans were approved and the name Vereeniging was decided upon — taken from the last word in the name of the company. The

plan for the town was drawn by Johan Rissik.

## Momentum Gathers

In 1890 a telegraph office was established. The first post office



was opened on 29 January 1892 and the first sports club was started. Sammy Marks began Vereeniging's plantation at Maccauvlei. When his mine foreman informed Sammy that trees would not grow in the area, Sammy answered 'Well then, by God, I'll make them grow' and planted four million trees. The first municipality began as a health committee, and a school followed shortly afterwards.

Vereeniging continued to develop in the years that followed. The coal mines became even more important with the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand and the town developed into an important trade centre. The first industry, apart from the coal mines, was the VEREENIGING BRICK AND TILE COMPANY LTD. NOW KNOWN AS THE VEREENIGING REFRACTORIES LIMITED, it is the largest manufacturer of fireproof material on the African continent.

At that time there was no form of local government in Vereeniging. Authority resided in the local Justice of the Peace, who was installed in office in 1892 when the population of the town was barely 100 people. Senator Marks realised that the

town would, in time, develop into a great industrial centre and with this in mind he registered the Vereeniging Estates Ltd in 1897 to further develop Vereeniging.

## Shadow of War

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899, affected Vereeniging in more ways than one. Tradition has it that enormous stockpiles of gold, were to be exported to the Cape Colony for safe keeping, by the various mine interests and banks. The gold was confiscated at Vereeniging Station and evidently used by the Boers to partly finance the war against the British. Seven months and seven days after war broke out, Vereeniging was occupied by the British. Lord Roberts took Johannesburg and a few days after that, Pretoria was occupied. For the following two years, the Boer forces continued the struggle. During that time, a number of Boer prisoners, women and children were kept in the concentration camp in Vereeniging.

Senator Marks played an important role as mediator between the opposing camps and The Peace Treaty of Vereeniging was signed on 31 May 1902 in Pretoria. There is a general acceptance of the fact that with the signing of the Treaty, the new South African nation came into being.

On 15 November 1911, the UNION STEEL CORPORATION OF SOUTH AFRICA was founded. The Corporation was to attract many companies to Vereeniging resulting in its establishment as one of South Africa's greatest centres in the steel and engineering industries.

In 1912, Vereeniging was declared a large municipality and the VICTORIA FALLS AND TRANSVAAL POWER COMPANY built a power station on the banks of the Vaal River in the same year.

## The World at War

With the outbreak of the First World War, the coal mines and the steel factory in Vereeniging went into armament production. As Vereeniging possessed water, coal and

electric power, the town's importance as an area of great industrial potential accelerated.

In 1929 the new parliamentary electoral district of Vereeniging was proclaimed. Later developments included the creation of the Vaal Dam and the largest thermal power station in the southern hemisphere and the establishment of firms such as AMCOR, AFRICAN CABLES, SAFIM and MCKINNON CHAIN.

The first hospital was completed in 1934 and a new power station was built bordering the Springfield mine which was to supply the coal. The first fire station was built in 1939.

## Hostilities Renewed

Vereeniging realised before the outbreak of World War II that foreign raw material sources could be endangered by the hostilities. MCKINNON CHAIN and AFRICAN CABLES erected factories in Vereeniging and a number of companies were able to find their feet in the difficult war years. A few months after the outbreak of war, all primary industries were switched to armament production. Thousands of munitions workers flooded into Vereeniging, many of whom were women. The war years disturbed the status quo of the town and there was much suburban development.

A wave of industrial development during the decades after the war brought scores of technicians, tradesmen, operators engineers and administrative personnel to Vereeniging. Suburban development and the creation of shopping centres and leisure areas increased.

With the establishment of the Lethabo power centre to the east of Vereeniging, one of the largest power stations in South Africa came into being.

Vereeniging has fulfilled the role of Mother City in the Vaal Triangle for many years and yet has not even reached its full potential. The search for further industrial areas and living areas continues and further growth of the city is envisioned.

**“ Vereeniging possesses one remarkable resource in abundance — the incorruptible, unquenchable spirit of the people that is fuelled by the pride and love that they have for the city ”**

**“ Vereeniging is a fortunate spot, unique in South Africa, where coal and water are found in abundance ” —**

Founding father, name unknown.