

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

By Denese Jordan

This is the story of Alwyn Bisschoff who drove the first Land Rover up Sani Pass.

For many of you 1952 happened before you were born, but for some of us it doesn't seem so long ago. For Alwyn Bisschoff the events of his historic drive up a track that was sign posted "Bridle Path only" live in his memory.

Alwyn served as an aircraft technician with the South African Air force during the World War II. After being demobbed, Servicemen were offered skills training to facilitate their return to civvy street and Alwyn elected to study agriculture at Potchefstroom University. Once qualified, he remembers clearly sitting on the steps of the Department of Labour in Pretoria and responding to a call from a British Government official for a volunteer to serve as an Agricultural Officer in Basutoland as Lesotho was called in those days. (At that stage Basutoland was still a British Protectorate.)

Alwyn was first posted to Maseru and it was there that he was presented with the opportunity to test a Land Rover. After a 2 year posting in Maseru he was to be transferred to Mokhotlong towards the end of 1952.

Land Rover had given two vehicles to the Colonial Administration for testing at altitude. In return for an invitation to "see if he could break it", Alwyn was required to send quarterly reports on the vehicle's performance. But first he had to get the vehicle to Mokhotlong. The trouble was there was no vehicular access between Maseru and the latter. So it was that the historic drive up Sani Pass was undertaken. It has to be recorded that a Willys Jeep had conquered the bridle path in 1948. Alwyn had no doubts that if a Jeep could do it, so could a Land Rover.

Sani Pass at that point had not changed since 1948. Still the preserve of mule trains and their minders, corners and inclines were hewn from the forbidding rock with four footed animals in mind, not engine driven vehicles.

The journey round from Maseru through the Orange Free State as it was then, to Underberg went smoothly. Even pack mules had sometimes missed their footing on Sani Pass and fallen to their death, so Alwyn knew that the journey to the escarpment would be no picnic. "But I really had no choice", he said.

"I drove very slowly, mostly in first and second gear. The corners were very tight (12 – 18 inches either side of the wheels and often I had to do five, seven and nine point turns to manoeuvre the vehicle around the corners, always being aware of the sheer drop off if I miscalculated". The gradient of 1 : 6 means that over a 6.5 km stretch the road rises 1300 metres – or in imperial terms, the road climbs 1 000 feet a mile over four miles. The first journey took 6 hours – and then he still had to get to Mokhotlong some 60 k's away over the Black Mountains.

Advancing years have impaired Alwyn's memory of the conditions but he does remember taking his wife and young son up the pass in the Landy too. It is not clear whether his family was exposed to Sani on this first historic occasion, or whether it was later.

However, Dr Jeff Wilkinson newly graduated from UCT and appointed as Medical Officer in Mokhotlong in 1953, recalls what living there at that time was like. "There were 6 white families in Mokhotlong then", he says. "Four Government Officials, including Alwyn with their wives and children, one Trader and one Native Recruiting Agent". The standard form of transport was horseback and to get to just one of his clinics necessitated a 4 ½ ride by horseback there and the same back. Children were taught by their mothers using a Southern Rhodesian Correspondence School Course. The Colonial Administration provided its officials with 12 bags of coal per year, which were bought up by mules from Himeville. If you needed more "fuel" for burning you used a locally grown plant called Sehalahala (otherwise known as 'die bitter bessie bos') and/or lisu - dried cow dung. All bulk provisions such as sugar, flour, mealie meal, paraffin, petrol etc., was brought up by mule/donkey from South Africa. All cooking was done on primus stoves. There was no electricity.

Often snowed in for eight months of the year, the community was totally dependent on Peter Strong's Ladysmith-based Drakensberg Air Services. Flying Dragon Repeats (bi-planes), this company would transport mine labour in and out, other passengers and freight at a cost of threepence per lb. Passengers were weighed on the same scales as the freight. Jeff Wilkinson recalls that they would give the pilot their grocery order and he in turn would pass it on to Illings Bros. in Ladysmith.

They in turn would buy out whatever they did not stock and the order would then be sent to the air transport company for delivery the following week. As an aside Jeff recalled that in those days mutton cost two shillings a lb. and it was possible to buy a whole sheep for 4 Pounds.

"Security was never a concern then", he said. "The elements presented the only threat". He recalls a time when the District Commissioner summonsed them to go for a ride one winter day and there were six burly men and their horses riding quite safely across the frozen Mokhotlong River. On another occasion they were snowed in for 10 days – this at an altitude of over 3 000 metres.

Dr Wilkinson seems to remember that when he arrived in Mokhotlong, Alwyn's Landy was parked in the stables attached to his house, and the gearbox was spread out in pieces in one of his bedrooms. Something had gone wrong with the transfer mechanism. With no tools, nor technical manual, it was beyond Alwyn's ability to fix. However by that time the District Commissioner, Brian Gray, had his own Landy, which was not used a lot. Petrol availability remains an iffish problem in Lesotho today, but in those days it had to be transported by mule, so 'joyriding' didn't happen. However the D.C. did use his Landy to travel to Buthe Buthe and back which took him three weeks at that time, but would only take a couple of hours on the new tar road that exists today.

One of the main news stories in The Basutoland News of Tuesday April 21 1953 was the report of a rescue of an ill mountain climber by Alwyn Bisschoff and his party. Leaving at 8 pm they traveled through the night on horseback crossing some 15 rivers in the process. They finally found the climber at 3.30 pm after a 19 and a half hour's ride. The climber unfortunately subsequently died of pneumonia. The rest of the rescue party including all the animals, showed no after effects despite the difficult weather conditions and cold that was so intense that the riders had to get off their horses at times and walk to restore circulation in their feet.

Notwithstanding physical hardship and the lack of amenities taken for granted in less remote places, both Alwyn Bisschoff and Jeff Wilkinson remember their days in Basutoland with great fondness. We who find it so adventurous to off road (but not in the winter) in Lesotho with our coil sprung vehicles, diff lockers, our camping fridges, roof top tents, gas cylinders and all other mod cons can't really begin to grasp what it was like to travel in that country not even 50 odd years ago, can we?