

DURBAN IN MOTION

Virtual photographic exhibit

The history of transport in Durban is the history of Durban. Transport is an indelible part of the social history of the city and all its inhabitants. In fact, there would be no Durban without the realisation that this was a perfect site for a city where means of transport would meet, on a ship-worthy bay that could accommodate a fleet just inside the Indian Ocean shore that held the possibility of becoming terminus for an inland route through the Mist Belt and the thornveld, up the escarpment to the top of the Drakensberg ridge and the Highveld. The discovery of minerals made this Overberg route an important commercial way. Durban men joined others to make their way in the world as transport riders:

‘Then there were other transport riders from the neighbouring villages of Pinetown and Hill Crest, and inquiries would be made from them. “Oh, yes, we passed each other at Barberton and he should be back in about three weeks’ time”¹

From 1860, the *Perseverance* provided systematic horse-drawn coach travel from Durban town to Pietermaritzburg. Leaving at around 6AM, it would reach the provincial capital towards 8 PM. The coach would generally stop at Welch’s half-way house on Botha’s Hill for a meal. Even earlier, post was brought to Pietermaritzburg on foot by African runners. These forerunners of the Comrades race were allowed eighteen hours’ travel time and were active until the 1870s. On the ascent from Durban, the landmark Toll Gate collected a fee from 1866, the date when the Berea Road was formally laid out; it only was abolished in 1900 when the gate and house were demolished. In the first year it earned more than £446. The gatekeeper for long was Mrs. Bird, a widow whose husband had purportedly died from falling out of a building on Mercury Lane. Pedestrians too were obliged to pay their sixpence. There was another such toll to pay leaving Durban at Overport.

The discovery of Witwatersrand gold made it imperative to move beyond the horse and wagon stage of transport to expand the slowly developing railroad system. The line between the Bluff, outside which the big ships had to stand, and Congella, ran the very first trains on the continent of Africa from 1860, extended to the Umgeni river by 1867. A decade later the colonial government took over rail management and plans were laid to extend service to Pietermaritzburg. The train reached Pinetown in 1878. Subsequently, lines of rail reached out north and south of the city, finally improving the situation in the province which was often considered to suffer from the worst roads in South Africa. The imposing railroad station at Pine and Commercial Streets, completed in 1904, still stands.

At the same time shipping was an immediate and important presence in the life of the city. Gradually sailing boats gave way to steamships. Some boats plied African waters and ports while others connected Durban with the wider world. Cruise liners docked at the city

¹ *Tribune*, 11 September, 1938.

and, during the world wars, shipping took men and women far afield to experience adventures and hardships.

The harbour itself became a very busy place. The winning of the so-called battle of the sand from 1904, ensured that the deep-water cut finally allowed large ships reliably to come into the bay and anchor. Maydon Wharf handled its first working vessels in 1910.² The bay became the site for a formidable array of equipment to lift and move goods and as the home for ferries that crossed the bay and other working craft which assisted in transport. Some of these ships were used for decades and were known and loved by Durbanites. The first steamer or steam tug was manufactured from parts made in Britain in 1894. By 1910, the harbour contained four tugs, thirty-one lighters, seven suction draggers, a floating dock and a floating crane. The names of many of the familiar vessels were household words.³

.Dockworkers came to Durban as migrants from deep in Zululand where they laboured in teams under the leadership of *izinduna*; their strength led them to be called *onyathi*, men like the buffalo. This distinctive worker community, so much a part of the world of Point Road, organised strikes in 1942, 1959, 1969 and 1972 in phases of discontent, the latter of which had national reverberations.⁴

The harbour generated numerous jobs directly and indirectly and, before the Act of Union, some of the leading city merchants sat on the administrative board which oversaw harbour developments for the Province and in the interests of the growth of business for the city. For a considerable time, the biggest ships in the world could enter the Bay but this has long ceased to be true as vessels became enormous and containerisation dominated the shipping lanes. Today the biggest boats can no longer enter the harbour and bulk cargo such as coal export has left Durban for Richards Bay while Durban specialises in container loads that can be broken up for further transport elsewhere.

By the turn of the century, adventurous men rode through the streets of Durban on bicycles and even enthused, formerly indentured Indians ran bicycle races as sport. Bicycles were then being constructed in Durban and licensed for use by the city. Oliver Veal, an enthusiastic but hapless cyclist from Pietermaritzburg, enroute to Durban on a weekend pleasure trip riding a borrowed Haymarket Special, ran into the Bambatha rebellion in the Maphumulo district on July 1, 1906 and fell victim to an assegai thrust.⁵ ; new technology jostled with old forms of culture and resistance in Natal. Carriages also plied the roads and were in sufficient demand that by 1895, the city gave work to two carriage building firms.

² Trevor Jones, 'The Port of Durban; Lynchpin of the Local Economy?' in Bill Freund & Vishnu Padayachee, eds., *(D)urban Vortex; South African City in Transition* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).

³ David Reynolds, *A Century of Steam Tugs*, Downstairs Graphics, Pretoria, 1981.

⁴ David Hemson, 'In the Eye of the Storm; Dockworkers in Durban' in Maylam & Edwards.

⁵ Jeff Guy, *The Maphumulo Uprising; War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion*, UKZN Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2005.

Probably the most remarkable innovation in transport was the ricksha which the sugar magnate Sir Marshall Campbell brought from London but copied from Japan in 1893. Ladies and gentlemen would rely on the ricksha to go to and from town back to the Berea in an age when only the first handful of automobiles began to serve the wealthy. Rickshas also made themselves available for Durban's seaside tourists and by the 1920s they were the most familiar symbol of the city in the eyes of South Africans. At the peak in 1902, more than 24.000 men registered as pullers at some point in the year for no less than 1.700 rickshaws. Drivers would come to Durban for very short periods, often only a couple of months and return to the country with their earnings.⁶

However, transport was also needed as the city grew for commuting and other mundane purposes. Here Durban was very much on a par with 'progressive' cities elsewhere in the world. Horse-drawn trams were introduced on the widest thoroughfares. Before 1880, an omnibus was operating in the CBD for 6d fares. In 1881 the horse-drawn tram was introduced by the city as public transport and within a decade trams ran up to the old Tollgate and on the Berea to the newly laid out Mitchell Park. With a typical speed of four miles per hour, they were available to pleasure-seekers for late evening hire. In 1895, they appeared on Umbilo Road.

These were gradually replaced in time by horseless trams, the first of which ran down West Street to the Criterion Hotel where the Point Road began in 1902, then electric trolley buses from 1936 which did without street tracking and finally, by buses. The last trolley bus ran the Berea route in 1949 to a morning tea at Mitchell Park. Trams had become considered noisy, dowdy and old-fashioned.

At the same time, the trains were increasingly used by commuters from the nearest stops which were becoming suburban. Public transport was taken up by municipal administration and the trains and trams were the place of work of unionised white men who proved capable at times, for instance after World War I when the red flag very briefly was hoisted at City Hall, of considerable militancy. At the same time, their presence excluded blacks as workers. This created increasing problems for the city where Indian and African labour was becoming more and more widespread and people of colour were largely resident on the urban periphery while Durban spread out. Africans were no longer merely short-term visitors to Durban while Indians deserted the canefields for the periphery of the city.

By 1930 there were more than 9.000 cars licensed in Durban and a slightly larger number of horse-drawn vehicles. While automobiles began to diffuse amongst the Durban white middle class, rickshas were increasingly pushed off the main thoroughfares and began to be the transport of the poor. Many were used now to transport people to the market at the crack of dawn. This was the first proto-taxi black people could use for short distances and they had some of the features of contemporary taxis. If the rickshas were privately owned

⁶ Ros Posel, 'Amahashi; Durban's Ricksha Pullers' in Paul Maylam & Iain Edwards, eds., The People's City; African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban, (Portsmouth, NH & Durban; Heinemann & University of Natal Press, 1996.

and stored each night, the ricksha drivers, who rented their vehicle by the day, were typically Zulu migrants who had, unlike almost all their fellows, a kind of autonomy in their often heavy labours each day. By the time of World War II, it was Pondoland men who dominated this trade which remained significant into the 1960s. However, more recent beach rickshas have been associated with, for instance, the Mandlakazi kin of Nongoma district.

By 1930, however, transport was needed for longer distances on the eve of the expansion of the city beyond the old precinct. Here the big innovation consisted of Indian-owned buses which began to service distant parts, acquired the right to run buses on given routes and represented an area where small scale entrepreneurs could have a chance to develop businesses. There were 21 such buses registered in 1930 when the Bus Owners Association was formed, 105 in 1939 and 169 by 1945.⁷ Through doing their own driving, repairing the vehicles themselves, employing family members and parking the buses in front of the house rather than in a garage, these enterprising individuals could undercut public transport and became more and more essential to the economic life of the city. The municipal system required storage facilities, cleaning and maintenance operations and considerable capital expenditure. Late in the 1940s, the bus fare on an Indian owned bus might be 2d a journey. Service was not always at a premium; often buses simply did not run off profitable peak hours despite licensing arrangements, aggravating the temper of customers. Even the 2d fare, moreover, was a burden for the poor; according to Torr, 35% of Lamontville residents in stable family circumstances got to work on pushbikes in 1935.

However, the minimum fare on a municipal bus was three times that amount. As early as 1930 trams were losing money and in the 1940s and 1950s, city transport as a whole ran at a deficit. This despite such innovations as the mobile post office, introduced with special 'European sections' in 1940. The Deputy Town Clerk reported in 1947 that there had been 'a battle in progress or many years between the Council and the Indian bus drivers.' Moreover the rising apartheid mentality favoured the view that each 'race group' should be served separately in transport as in other matters, impractical an idea as it was sometimes inhumane.

The situation created problems both for the municipality which feared undercutting and for ambitious Africans who began to emerge in Durban during the 1930s and 1940s and were often resentful of dependence on Indian bus owners and anxious to enter this field of endeavour. Regardless of practical difficulties, Torr reports that the Lamontville Native Advisory Board tried in 1939 to block Indian buses from entering that pioneering neighbourhood for African families; later attempts by African entrepreneurs, members of the LNAB, were declared illegal because Indian operators already held the sole right to drive specific routes.

In the terrible so-called Cato Manor race riots of 1949, Indian buses, by now mainly driven by employees, were attacked and destroyed. Africans boycotted their use and the city at first laid on many municipal buses as an immediate remedy. This action was

⁷ Louise Torr, 'A Ticket to Ride; The Struggle over African Bus Services in Durban 1930-60', unpublished, Conference on the History of Natal and Zululand, July 1985, University of Natal, Durban.

however declared illegal by the courts; a few Africans in this period ran buses to Clermont and Lamontville but most attempts here were not successful and such lines disappeared from the scene soon. Gradually therefore in the 1950s the city moved to buy out Indian buses and bus routes and regain control of more of the essential transport services of Durban. In 1957 the Bantu Transport Services Act created a system of national subsidisation of commuter buses to get around this contradictory situation. On this basis, the municipality could run buses exclusively for Africans at a profit and was able to introduce non-unionised and cheaper African drivers and conductors. The disturbances around the time of the banning of the PAC and ANC were marked with major destruction and boycotts affecting buses. Thus Durban Transport ran at a £30000 in 1959 and a £26000 loss in 1960. Nine busses were entirely destroyed in 1960. Yet the service recovered. The new township Kwa Mashu, meant to re-house Africans from Cato Manor, was served by white owned PUTCO buses from 1960 and a special rail line from 1962.

This apparent apartheid success did not last long. White car ownership became very widely generalised in the generation after World War I. Justin McCarthy, a former bank clerk and early Harley Davidson rider, turned towards automobile sales in Durban as a young World War I veteran. His family name gradually became synonymous with the car business and, in World War II, he served as Director of War Supplies for Natal. Thereafter he began to assemble first Chrysler cars and then British Nuffield products put together from overseas components on land which he purchased in Jacobs. He in turn established an important business friendship with Albert Wessels, an ambitious Afrikaner businessman resident in Johannesburg with a successful clothing factory and a knowledge of state industrial policy.⁸ Wessels was exploring the potential in South Africa for automobile assembly based on increasing South African content, which the state wished to encourage. He was deeply impressed with the Toyota Company and the trucks they produced on a visit to Japan in 1960. He realised that Toyota was making reliable bakkies that could undersell the dominant US competition. It was on McCarthy's former premises that Wessels sited the South African Toyota plant, thus on flat land facing the Indian Ocean and the East. It would become one of the most important industrial operations in Durban. Wessels bought out the Motor Assemblies property for Toyota manufacture in 1964 and his facility was opened in 1966. It first focussed on commercial vehicles but after some years, success with passenger cars became more and more pronounced. The implications of the car revolution in terms of road construction and maintenance, the sale of used cars and parts, the workshops involved in repair and maintenance, were and are massive. Toyota eventually became South Africa's number one selling motor car, moreover. McCarthy meanwhile developed further into a Durban-originated firm that by the 1980s was selling one in eight passenger cars on the market.

By 1985 public transport played a very small role in moving white Durbanites around; the services were overwhelmingly serving the needs of a black clientele. This reflected as well the situation on trains. In 1949/50 first and second class service served slightly over 7.000 passengers on average per day and twice that number travelled third class. By 1986/87 the first and second class service clientele had fallen by approximately half. Third class traffic at first grew astronomically and peaked at 120.000 passengers in 1979/80, partially

⁸ Albert Wessels, *Plaasseun en Nyweraar*, (Pretoria : Perskor, 1987).

reflecting the one important commuter rail link completed linking the new township of Kwa Mashu to the CBD but it had fallen to below 100.000 by 1986/87. These figures emerge from a transport plan at the end of the apartheid era contemplating the future of public transport in Durban.⁹

In 1966, Durbanites owned 80.000 automobiles. By 1976, the number was estimated at 182.000, some 30% owned by Indians, Coloureds and African. Car ownership reached 270.000 in 1985, more than 1/10 owned by Africans. This amounted to 459 cars for every 1000 whites, 136 for every 1000 Coloured and Indian and 24 for every 1000 African. according to city estimates, as apartheid neared its end. In the 1970s as well, Durban was crisscrossed with limited access highways that made the conquest of long distances easy and greatly extended the potential for suburban and peri-urban growth.

Eventually bus services had to be integrated to survive. This was due initially to the determination of the PFP dominated Council after 1975 but only achieved success from 1986. Mynah buses, introduced at the end of the 1980s, made an attractive addition to certain popular routes. However, they have never ousted the passenger car and bus usage declined over time.

The real story with regard to African transporters and transport however had to be not so much the growing number of automobile owners per se but the taxi. Only once did the state authorise the extension of the railway system to benefit African movement, in the case of Kwa Mashu, built for people removed from Cato Manor. However, at first the apartheid system isolated blacks through imposing segregation patterns that inhibited many aspects of participation in urban life. Starting at the end of the 1970s, however, African-driven collective taxis began to ferry working class Durbanites throughout the metropolitan area and knit the population together through their exertions. While buses and trains survive and bicycles have made a gallant sporting comeback, it is the taxis and the private passenger cars that have won the day in our era. But the cycles of transport economics and preferences change constantly and the world of urban transport undoubtedly will see more changes in our new century.

BILL FREUND
DURBAN
JULY 2007

⁹ Durban Metro. Transport Advisory Board. *Interim Transport Plan 1989-94*, 1990.