

Weenen and farm labour removals

By Cheryl Walker

THE village of Weenen lies some 30 km north-east of Estcourt. The magisterial district, of which it is the centre, covers an area of roughly 1 200 square kilometres between the district of Kliprivier, Estcourt, Umvoti, Mooi River and, on its north-eastern edge, the Msinga district of KwaZulu.

Most of the area is dry thornveld country, suitable for stock farming rather than intensive cultivation, but the Tugela River and several tributaries flow through the district, providing scope for some irrigation farming along the banks. Years of neglect have created a serious soil erosion problem and some areas are amongst the worst, most eroded parts of the country.

Although there are a large number of white-owned farms in the district, many belong to absentee landlords who use these farms chiefly as labour reserves for other, commercial farms in the Natal Midlands. One can drive for miles through these lands without seeing any signs of white habitation.

AFRICAN MAJORITY

The vast majority of the population is African. The exact number is not easy to assess. The 1970 census figure of 2 000 is clearly inadequate — judging by the number of homesteads on many farms, the population is likely to be nearer 15 000 and may well be higher.

About 900 Africans are living in a temporary 'Emergency Camp' on the outskirts of the village. The remainder are to be found living on the farms and on a strip of Tribal Trust land on the north bank of the Tugela.

There are two major tribes in the district, the Mtembu and the Mchunu. Boundary disputes, ex-

acerbated by mounting population pressure and landlessness, have long been a source of friction and conflict between the two groups. Even now, when all the land is, technically, owned by whites, this is still a cause of tension.

LABOUR TENANCY

The overwhelming majority of the African population knows no home other than this district. Zulu-speaking people have been settled in the area for generations. During the course of the 19th century, title to the land passed to the incoming white settlers, the African occupants of the land becoming farm labourers and 'squatters' on what had once been tribal land.

Before 1969, the labour tenant system of farm labour, long established in the district, offered these people a degree of residential security. Under this system, a family paid for its right to live on the land by working for their white landlord for six months of the year, at a nominal wage.

MASS REMOVALS, 1969

In 1969, as part of a concerted drive by the government to modernise white agriculture and eliminate old feudal practices, the labour tenant system was outlawed in the Weenen district.

Henceforth a farmer was entitled to have a maximum of five families only living on his farm, all of whom had to be in fulltime employment with him. If he wanted more than this, he had to apply to a Labour Control Board for permission.

All unauthorised families living on his land had to leave, to be resettled in KwaZulu. These were the 'surplus appendages', the marginalised workers of the rural areas.

The drive against labour tenancy got under way in the early 1950s. In 1961, a Departmental Commission of Enquiry called for the complete abolition of the system within seven years.

Then in 1964, in terms of an amendment to the Bantu Trust and Land Act (Bantu Laws Amendment Act, No. 42, 1964), the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development was empowered to abolish entirely or limit labour tenancy in any district in the country.

The extent to which labour tenancy was entrenched in South African agriculture was indicated by figures put out by the Natal Agricultural Union in 1967. It estimated that if labour tenancy was to be abolished overnight, about one million Africans would have to be moved off white farms and settled elsewhere (Rand Daily Mail, 27/2/68).

Yet despite the enormity of the undertaking and despite strenuous opposition from many farmers, concerned at the effects on their labour supply, by the late 1960s labour tenancy had been outlawed in most of the Transvaal and all of the Orange Free State and a start made on Natal where the practice was most widespread.

20 000 REMOVED

Weenen was the third district in Natal to be affected by the ban, but the first where a large population was involved. It has been estimated that between ten and twenty thousand people were removed from their land, at times forcibly, and settled elsewhere.

The large-scale removals, the destruction of established communities, and the crowding together of desperate people on

hastily erected 'Closer Settlement' villages on Trust land have left scars that are still clearly visible in the district today.

For most of 1969, 1970 and 1971 the district was in turmoil. 'Concern over farm labour policy' (Natal Mercury, 16/7/69), 'Africans' homes and families are forced out' (The Star, 9/10/69), 'Shortage of farm labour in Weenen' (Natal Mercury, 31/1/70), 'Tractors demolish kraals — 2 000 homeless' (Rand Daily Mail, 9/11/71) — newspaper headlines tell the story succinctly.

Mass evictions began to get under way in the second half of 1969. Frequently they were accompanied by hutburnings and bulldozers to force out recalcitrant tenants. Many tenants who resisted moving were prosecuted. A Press statement issued by the Bantu Affairs Commission in October 1969 listed convictions for '291 kraalheads (2 246 souls)'.

DEPRIVED OF CATTLE

Because of a blanket ban on any stock entering KwaZulu from outside (a conservative measure that takes no account of the thousands of people resettled in the Homeland), tenants destined for KwaZulu had to get rid of all their stock.

White farmers flocked to the forced sales from miles around and hundreds of head of cattle and goats were sold, often for a third or quarter of their actual value.

Originally the Government intended to resettle the bulk of the redundant tenants at Mdadeni, a resettlement camp near Newcastle. These plans were thwarted, however, by the resistance of the tenants, many of whom returned to Weenen as soon as the Government trucks (the notorious GG lorries) had offloaded them at the camp.

Many hundreds crowded into the adjoining KwaZulu districts at Keates Drift, Tugela Ferry, Mhlumba, Mashunka, etc. Thousands more were finally accommodated in a 'temporary' resettlement camp acquired by the Bantu Trust on land adjoining Tugela Estates (now a BIC enterprise). Here, several 'Closer Settlement' camps

were pegged out and each family allocated a half acre plot on which to build their huts.

STATEMENTS

'A BAD man gave me a stand which had four poles at the corners and said that was where I could build my house. I was given a tent to erect on the stand. As soon as we had put a roof on the first hut, the tents were taken away for someone else. A water tanker was parked nearby so that we could get water to make the mud walls of our huts. The moment the tents were taken away, the tanker was also taken elsewhere.

'There were no latrines... We came from homes where the nearest neighbour was half a mile away and there were thick bushes to give one privacy. Now we were all living right on top of each other.

'When we were moved we were told that we could not take our cattle and goats with us and that there was no land for us to cultivate because there were already too many in the location. They told us not to worry about this because we would soon be moving to a place of our own. Our buildings must be temporary because this was a transit camp.'

FACTION FIGHTS

That was ten years ago. Today the people are still there. Since the mid-1970s this area has been repeatedly devastated by a series of deadly 'faction fights' between rival clans, jostling for space, competing for inadequate resources, resentful, frustrated, and, increasingly, hungry.

In 1969/1970 most of the ex-labour tenants could become full-time migrant labourers in Johannesburg, Kimberley, Durban to support themselves and their families. During the 1970s, mounting unemployment in the cities has closed this safety valve for many.

LABOUR TENANCY TODAY

In this way labour tenancy was formally ended in Weenen in 1969. Yet the system has not been eradicated. Both farmers and tenants have clung to it tenaciously and, despite its prohibition, it continues to operate under different guises throughout the district.

In the ten years that have elapsed since the first removals, many of the former tenants have drifted back to their previous homes or to farms nearby. The number of homesteads on many farms has crept up from the limits imposed in 1969/1970. Some tenants are working fulltime for their landlords, but many are working some variation of the old 'six month' system.

Sometimes the whole family is under an obligation to work for the farmer, sometimes only one member is required to do so. In some cases only the children of the tenant are taken on as labourers. There are also instances where a family hires a substitute to work for the farmer to pay for their rent, while they work elsewhere or stay at home.

There are perhaps some seven or eight thousand people living on white farms in Weenen today. Many are under threat of eviction and removal to Government resettlement camps.

These people are currently struggling to bring permanence and stability into their lives. Under present conditions they have no security of residence at all. They are completely dependent on the good intentions of the farmer. If he chooses to evict them, they have no means of contesting him, no matter how arbitrary or unfair the notice may be. Their presence on the farms is illegal, their 'contracts' outside the law.

Many tenants have alleged that they have been able to stave off threatened evictions in the past only by paying their farmer a 'fine' in the form of a cow or a goat. Others recite a story of constant removals. Evicted from one farm they approach the neighbouring farmer for permission to settle on his land, only to be forced to move on again at some later date.

The details vary but the general predicament remains the same.

And so does the response of tenants when asked what they want — the right to live on the land and in the communities that they know, the right to keep their cattle and their fields and build for themselves a future where they are now.