

## Tough Times – Second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

I am writing this story in November 2008, a time when share markets around the world have plummeted and everyone is gloomy about economic recessions. It is perhaps topical to tell about tough times in our family. I was born in the depression of the 1930s and careful husbanding of cash was part of normal life but we lived comparatively well compared to others. Although very little was talked about it, the depression best remembered was that of the 1890s. But there were tough times even before that and the farm was saved by ouma Bremsie, 1822 – 1902, who sold her jewels and exercised careful frugality. The image I gained from family stories was of ouma Bremsie walking around with her bag of coins doling out only in extreme need. She lost her husband, Daniel Johannes in 1879, some ten years before the depression and my grandfather Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel 1854 – 1926, would have been running the farm at that time.

Part of the farm close to The Strand was sold off, probably at that time. It was bought back later for my father as the younger son. Understandably not much was told in the family about these times. Apparently my great grandfather Daniel Johannes Morkel, was not an astute farmer or businessman. My uncle, oom John cautioned not to speak poorly of him because he did not lose the farm – somewhat faint praise.

When I read up about these times, it became clear that economic problems started much earlier than the 1890s depression and it was indeed an achievement to hold on to the farm. For more than 130 years, the family had been doing well with the means for sons to have farms of their own and daughters well married.

In 1813 England introduced preferential tariffs on Cape wines while maintaining tariffs on French wines imposed during the Napoleonic wars. This boom period brought wealth to the wine farmers but also over-optimism. Wine plantings were expanded vigorously, often with heavy loans. Quality suffered and many farmers became dependent on wine as their sole source of income (2). In 1825 the British government reduced import duties on European wines and the relative advantage the Cape had, disappeared. The Cape wine industry went into a slump with overproduction and prices below the cost of production (2). The Morkel family on *Onverwacht* seemed to survive these setbacks, possibly because they already had established vines and did not borrow so heavily, and they also kept producing other crops. However, the rot had started.



**Ouma Bremsie (1822 – 1902)  
Emmerentia Elizabeth Morkel  
(née Malan)**

Slavery was abolished in 1834 with a transitional phase up to 1838. While slavery was indefensible, its abolition had a severe economic impact. The farmers lost a capital asset (compensation was assessed at less than half the value, and payable only in London), a shortage of

labour developed as former slaves migrated *en masse* to Cape Town. Wages rose and drunkenness and theft increased. Gradually the labour returned and production continued during the 1840s (2).

In 1849 the family helped supply food to the convict ship *Neptune* which was anchored at the Simons Town naval base (3). This is a fascinating story told separately under 'Breaking the Pledge'. The people of the Colony was extremely upset about the British Government's intentions to place convicts at the Cape and pledged to completely boycott the ship. The Governor, Sir Harry Smith desperately needed food for the people on board the *Neptune* and persuaded Robert Stanford of the farm *Gustrouw* near present day Gordons Bay, and his neighbours Hendrik Johannes Morkel and son Daniel Johannes (at the time aged 52 and 27 years respectively) to break the pledge and provide food supplies. Community retaliation was severe. Robert Stanford was bankrupted and went back to England as a broken man. Our family stuck it out but was pilloried and ostracised.



**Hendrik Johannes Morkel**  
1798 – 1859



**Daniel Johannes Morkel**  
1822 - 1879

After several months at anchor, the British Government relented and the *Neptune* with its cargo of convicts was sent on its way to Tasmania. However, the whole affair was a severe financial setback for the family.

Worse was to come. This time the Cape Colony as a whole was affected. Wine was a major export for the Colony, and an important part of the family's income. A succession of disasters hit that industry during the second half of the century.

In 1859 the powdery mildew fungus (*Oidium tuckeri*) created havoc in the Cape vineyards (1,2,4). The Hottentots Holland area including *Die Bos* was particularly hard hit because of its proximity to the coast. Treatment with powdered sulphur helped but in 1860 the industry was dealt another blow when the British Government entered into an agreement with France to drastically reduce import tariffs on French wines. The Cape wines, of poorer quality and with long transport distance could not compete. In 1861 the British went further to abolish preferential tariffs for Cape wines and the industry went into serious decline and exports ceased almost entirely.

There would have been years of prosperity as well. For example, the discovery of diamonds in 1866 in Kimberley created a substantial influx of immigrants and thirsty men in the dry interior, stimulating the economy, the demand for farm produce and the sales of liquor, including wines and particularly brandy. However, in 1886 the dreaded phylloxera beetle was discovered in the Cape vineyards. This pest (*Phylloxera Vastatrix*) came from North America and had already caused havoc in the European vineyards (in the 1860s). (1,2) The only remedy was to dig up and burn the vines and replant new stock grafted on resistant wild vine roots. For three to four years while waiting for the new crop to mature, there were almost no grape harvests and wine production.

Then came the depression of the 1890s. It started with a stockmarket bubble and subsequent collapse based on the Witwatersrand gold mines (5). By 1890 Johannesburg was flourishing as the world's largest gold producer with associated euphoria and speculation. Fraudulent floats of new mining companies were common and regulatory controls by Government were almost non-existent. "Every speculator could float a dunghill and call it a mining company". Banks lent money with abandon and greed took over. People borrowed heavily to buy shares on the expectation of making a killing, and the banks obliged. By 1890, six years after the first discovery of gold in the area, there were already hundreds of gold mining companies established in Johannesburg.

Reality came when even those mines which were actually producing gold, suddenly hit a major problem. As they dug deeper the ore became refractory pyritic. The gold was there but it could not be extracted. (A few years later the problem was solved using the cyanide extraction process). The news spread fast and with mass hysteria raging, everyone tried to sell their shares, but no one was buying. People lost their life's savings and many carried large debts they could not repay. Banks throughout the country, including in the far away Cape Colony, were in serious trouble. The Bank of Cape of Good Hope, Paarl Bank and Union Bank were liquidated in one year. Whether our family lost money during this time I do not know, but these were very difficult times, and gives weight to the stories of how ouma Bremsie's frugality (*suinigheid*) saved the farm.

The depression of the 1890s was not confined to South Africa. A quick Google search reveals that the US, Britain, Europe and Australia all suffered severe economic depressions at this time.

The family thus survived difficult times that lasted almost fifty years from the 1850s to the late 1890s. Hendrik Johannes Morkel died in 1859, leaving behind his second wife Esther Elizabeth and six children from the first and six from the second marriage. The oldest son, Daniel Johannes, 37 years old and married, ran the farm. The other children from the first marriage were adults and would have left the home by then. The children of the second marriage included a daughter of 22 and five children ranging from 18 to 6 years. Daniel Johannes' wife, (ouma Bremsie) contributed money (reputedly from selling jewels) and the farm became theirs. There was not much for the others to inherit, a first for the family since Philip Morkel and his wife acquired the farm in 1713.

By the end of the 1890s, the worst was over for the family and my grandfather, Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel (1854 – 1926) was able to build up the farm again. During 1896 they were able to do a major renovation of the house. By the 1920s he bought back the portion near the Strand (then called *The Lodge*), which had been sold off. It was farmed by my father as the younger son and this is where my brothers and I grew up. The name was changed to *Altena* (Lit: All to near) and by the early 1940s it became unencumbered when my father finally repaid the mortgage. Wars (Anglo Boer War 1899 to 1902 and the two World Wars) were remote from the Cape and stimulated demand for farm products.

## Notes and Sources

1. Phillida Brooke Simmons. 2003. "*Meerlust*" Fernwood Press, pp 88 to 89.
2. D.J. van Zyl, 1979. In *Stellenbosch Three Centuries*. Stellenbosch Town Council. pp 191 - 194
3. Ted Hoefsloot and Cor Pama, 1980. *Cape Wine Homesteads*. A.D. Donker, Johannesburg.
4. Peggy Heap. 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. Balkema Cape Town. pp54 -55
5. From a communication by Herman Labuschagne on *Genforum*, a genealogy chatroom no longer active.