

Vanities, Fables and Foibles

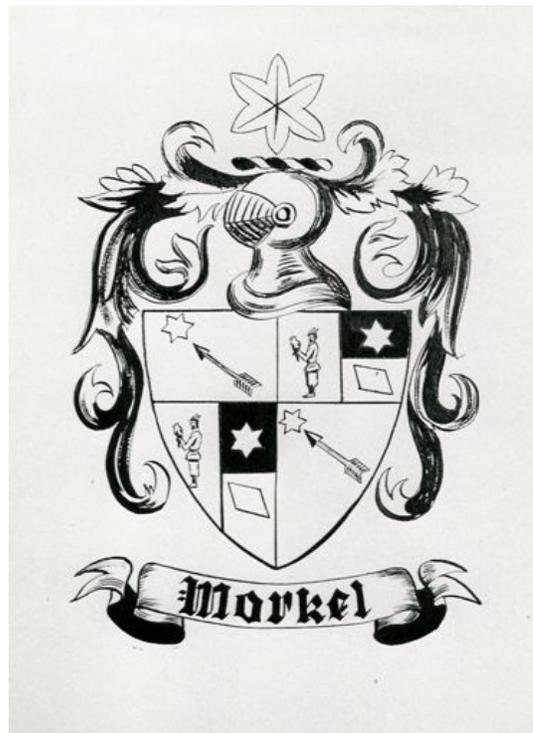
Part 1

We tend to remember and record the good things about the dead in obituaries and family histories. As a member of GenForum once remarked, *mens wonder hoe hul die vlerkies in die kis kon vou* (one wonders how they managed to fold the wings into the coffins). I hope the following stories about the family will bring an indulgent smile that they were also human. This is Part 1 of a two part series.

The Family Crest

I remember in the entrance hall of *Die Bos* there were some fascinating items from the old times. (I describe them more fully in other stories). They included for example a poem of thanks to *stamouer* Philip, printed in 1725, a beautiful chest that we believe comes from Philip's wife, Catharina Pasman, and other old furniture, including a large grandfather clock from the mid 1700s. On the wall was also the family crest or coat of arms, clearly from long ago.

The crest had the classical knight's helmet and shield, with the Morkel name in a ribbon (or whatever it is called) below. My knowledge of heraldry is weak but I am aware that the four quadrants of the shield often denote family connections and history. The top left and bottom right quadrants had an arrow pointing to a star. The top right and bottom left quadrants were a bit more complex. They contained a falconer on the left and a star above a parallelogram on the right.



Morkel Family Crest at Onverwacht.

Source: P.W. Morkel (2)

Where did this crest come from? Did Philip bring it along from Germany or was it a recent acquisition? While we cannot be certain of its provenance, the windows of the 2nd church of Stellenbosch give some clues. The first church was burned down in the big fire of 18 December 1710 when at the height of the dry mediterranean climate summer, and driven by a gale force South Easterly, a fire swept through the thatched roofed buildings of the town. Rebuilding the church went through many delays and it was complete only in 1723 (1).

There were 17 painted oval windows of the family crests of prominent members of the church (they would have paid for the privilege) fixed in the leadlight windows of the church. When the church was rebuilt for the 3rd time in 1862, the windows were thrown on the builders' rubble. Daniel Johannes O'Flinn Morkel (1836 – 1903) happened to walk by and saved two of them. They have been preserved and I understand are in the Stellenbosch Museum.

One of the windows is a simple inscription surrounded by baroque angels: *Philip Morkel, Heemraad, Anno 1723*. (A *Heemraad* was the equivalent of a town/district councillor.) The other window contained an elaborately embellished family crest with the inscription *Sibella Pasman, Weduwe van (widow of) Jan Lobsten. A 1723*. Sibella Pasman was the sister of Catharina, Philip's wife and married to Jan Loubser (2)

Sibella's crest is interesting – it is almost identical to the top left and bottom left quadrants in the Morkel crest, showing the falconer, star and parallelogram. The falconer part comes from the Cloete family (a prominent family at the Cape). Catharina and Sibella's maternal grandfather was a Cloete. The parrallelogram as a measuring device was for the Pasman name – (*pas* is a Dutch word to fit or measure).



Window panes from Stellenbosch Church 1723 – 1862

Source: *Hugo & van der Bijl, 1963. p 64a. (1)*

Philip did not have a crest at the time the windows were commissioned, and he had to endure his sister-in-law's crest every Sunday during the long sermons. It was a time to have a crest prepared, with a Morkel emblem on the top left and bottom right combined with the Pasman emblems as in Sibella's crest.

I found a compendium of Dutch bourgeois ('burgerlike') family crests in a library years ago. It was printed during the 1800s. The closest name to ours was 'Merkel' and there it was - an arrow pointing to a star, just like in the family crest. Years later my brother Daniel had some wine made from grapes of his farm to commemorate his 70th birthday. On the label he had a family crest showing the arrow/star by itself.

Thus it seems that Philip had it prepared sometime after 1723. It is unlikely that his son Willem, (or later descendants) would have commissioned it, because then the Malan emblem of his wife would have formed part of the crest.

A family crests is a harmless family vanity. It is hard to escape its allure, particularly when it comes down from the mists of long ago. One can always hope it was awarded centuries ago, perhaps by royalty or at least that there are connotations of status, if not nobility. There has always been a small industry catering for this need. Families can inquire whether they had a crest, and if so, supplied with a nice coloured version to hang on the wall. I suspect families are seldom, if ever, told they did not have one, and it must be a good business.

A crest or coat of armour is attached to an individual. Only the original holder and his sons, direct male descendants can lay claim to it. One cannot simply appropriate a crest from a published source, even if it is for a family name identical to yours.

The bulk of South African family crests, which hang in family homes or are published, have been created without authorisation. Because of public interest, a Bureau of Heraldry was established in South Africa to assist in the design of crests and to form a registry for such designs, under authority of the Heraldry Act.

Pecking Order in the Graveyard?

The History of the Stellenbosch Church (1) is a fascinating account of the peculiarities of the time. While sympathetically written, it also documents squabbles, petty jealousies and vanities of the people involved. They were status conscious and at a time that the church became too small for the growing population there were acrimonious demands for seating privileges. P. A Myburgh of *Meerlust* – of a family with close connections to our own, wrote a forthright letter threatening to come with his own chair to church (1, p116). One day in the future, someone will no doubt be amused (sympathetically I hope) about vanities revealed in my own style of telling stories.

It is tempting to deduce that status extended to grave allocations. Grave 1 was bought by Philip's mother-in-law, Sophia Pasman, who later married the acting-landdrost* Pieter Robberts. Sophia and her daughters, Catharina (Philip's wife) and Sibella (she with the crest on the church window) were buried in this grave. Philip and his son Willem are lower

down the scale in grave 96 (1, p224). (* The *Landdrost* was appointed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to run the district, assisted by the *Heemraden*, and was essentially the magistrate of the District). Read more about Sophia, her daughters and Pieter Robberts in our story on the *Formidable Paskan Ladies*.

However, a careful reading of the book seems to indicate that the grave sequence was more a matter of timing – i.e. when people bought the lots than social status. A nice story spoiled by facts.

Angry Letters to the Elder

The history of the Church of Somerset West (Hopkins, 5, p45 – 46) relates that demands about seating arrangements for wives were not confined to the Stellenbosch church. Men had seats along the walls, while the center area was reserved for the ladies. They arrived, each with a slave carrying a chair and *gesangboek* (hymnal) and were seated according to rank. It caused conflict and argument about who outranked whom. The annual meeting to decide seating arrangements (*Verzetting der Stoelen*) was exhausting and challenging. The Church Council listened patiently to the claims and grievances but could not satisfy everyone. Appeals were lodged to the *Landdrost*, but when that office was abolished in 1828, the problems were back with the Council. Philip Hendrik Morkel (1760 – 1831) as the senior and oldest Elder had this responsibility, and copped most of the complaints.

Field Cornet H.R. De Vos, while “reluctant to complain” (*waarsch voor klachten*) appealed to *Landdrost* van Ryneveld. He could not allow that his wife be insulted (*in haar eer gekrenk*) when her chair was arbitrarily (*eygendunkelyk*) moved several times by Morkel. He could not agree to an informal arrangement (*minlike schikking*), and the issue had to be settled publicly. By placing the chair of his wife among people of lesser reputation, his whole family was insulted. The Church Council was unhappy over the tone of the letter (*ongepaste en beledigende uitdrukkingen*) and they went to Stellenbosch to put their side of the argument. M.W. Theunissen of Vergelegen wrote to “oom Morkel” urging him to take the case to the Chief Justice, Sir John Truter, to tell him about the lies spread by de Vos. The *Landdrost* eventually decided that the Church Council acted properly according to regulations and thus concluded the case.

In 1822 it was Koos Theunissen of *Vergelegen* (M.W.'s son) who complained that his wife's chair was placed lower than Hercules Morkel's wife. (The first wedding in the new church was between Hercules Morkel and Helena Munnik, and they lived at *Welgelegen*, later renamed *Erinvale*, next to *Vergelegen*). Morkel explained that Hercules told him that he had been promoted to *wachtmeester* and his wife was entitled to her place.

In the same year Wouter de Vos of *Paardevallei* wrote to *Geachte Neef Morkel* to express his unhappiness that his daughter Geertruy's chair was set down below that of miss Teunis (sic – most likely Theunissen). Geertruy was married to Hercules Morkel, the son of Hercules and Helena Munnik.

At this time Hercules Morkel borrowed the penknife of Jacobus Pentz and scratched out Pentz's name on his (Pentz) bench and from then on he (Hercules) occupied that bench. The Church Council had to discipline him.

Sisters Inheriting Farms – With a Twist

An enduring story within the family was that once two sisters stood to inherit a farm each. When the time came, they were surprised that the allocation was the reverse of what they had anticipated. The one sister named her farm *Onverwacht* or “Unexpected” and the other farm became *Nooitgedacht* i.e. “Never Imagined”. The husband of the owner of *Nooitgedacht*, a Morkel, was keen on fishing and the two families agreed to swap farms because *Onverwacht* stretched to the beach at present day Strand. By swapping farms everyone was happy.

Another lovely story not supported by facts. There were indeed two sisters, Catharina and Sibella Pasman – whom we already met in the story above about the family crests (2). Catharina was married to Philip Morkel and they farmed *Onverwacht*. Sibella was married to Jan Loubser and farmed on *Nooitgedacht*, outside Stellenbosch. However, the story about the mixed inheritance would have been concocted afterwards to fit the names of the farms. The name *Onverwacht* predates ownership by the Pasman and Morkel families. It had that name when it was bought by Claas Elbertsz who was married to Margaretha Pasman. When Claas and Margaretha died in the small pox epidemic of 1713, the farm passed to her mother, Sophia Pasman (2). Sophia allowed Philip and Catharina to farm at *Onverwacht* and eventually in 1718 it was transferred to them. Sophia bought the farm *Nooitgedacht* with that name and gave it to Sibella. Thus there was no swapping of farms, whether for fishing or other reasons.

An Unamusing and Slenderly Informed Host

In September 1835 the Astronomer Royal at the Cape, Sir John Herschel (son of the famous William Herschel, the discoverer of the planet Uranus) stayed for two nights at *Die Bos* because the inn in Somerset West was full (3). He describes a bit of the farm and his stay in his diary. Of interest to our current theme is his less than complimentary observations and views of his host, Hendrik Johannes (1799 - 1859) and his second wife, Ester Elizabeth.

The diary entry about his second night’s stay after a rainy day visiting the surrounding countryside:

Descended & got home to Morchel’s where arrived around 6 & passed a dull & rainy evening in company with our very unamusing and & his rather fineish & would be ladylike young 2nd wife who after scolding the slave girls duly seems to think life has no other occupation left. (3)



Hendrik Johannes Morkel 1799 – 1859

Family photo at Die Bos

These views were for his private diary. He also expressed appreciation for being given

hospitality for the two nights, and for the straight-forward way in which his host indicated an appropriate payment – for Herschel did not want to feel obligated.

For me it is a fascinating reality glimpse into the life of the family in the 1830's. Growing up in the isolation of then far away Africa, he was placed in the role of host to one of the top astronomers of the time, one who was described as a prodigy in science and a prize winner at St John's College, Cambridge – no wonder ancestor Hendrik Johannes was 'slenderly informed' by comparison. It also reflects the contempt of the British of that time for anyone not an English gentleman.

Sir Hendrik? (or would it have been Sir Daniel?)

At the dinner table my father told that one of our ancestors was offered a knighthood but he refused it. Had it been hereditary, my uncle as oldest son would have been Sir John Morkel.

There is some substance to this and I tell the full story of the Neptune elsewhere (*Breaking the Pledge*) In 1849 the ship Neptune III arrived with almost 280 convicts for the Cape. The local population was in uproar and formed a pledge to boycott the ship and everything connected with it, including providing food. The Attorney General and Collector of Customs begged Colonel Robert Stanford to supply cattle and sheep from his farm *Gustrouw* near present day Gordon's Bay. Stanford and neighbour Hendrik Johannes Morkel (the one who hosted Sir John Herschel) broke the pledge and supplied the ship with food, thus narrowly avoiding the need to declare martial law. Col. Stanford and the Morkel family were ostracised in the community and subjected to insults and abuse. It was a tough time for the family, socially and financially.

Robert Stanford became Sir Robert when Queen Victoria knighted him in 1855. It is said that a knighthood was also offered to Morkel. Peggy Heap (4) claims that it was Hendrik's son Daniel Johannes that was involved. Daniel Johannes was 27 years at the time and would probably have been the one actually running the blockade. However, the decision to co-operate would have been made by his father Hendrik Johannes, then 50 years old, as owner of *Onverwacht*. If the knighthood were indeed offered, it would likely have been to the father.

The Tall Ones or The Horrible Morkels

Tall and strong runs in the family. Protea cricket player Morné Morkel is 2.01 metres tall. His grandfather, Daniel Johannes Morkel was a champion shot put and discus thrower with the nickname "Vat", or "barrrel" for his powerful build. My brother Charles played first class rugby for Western Province and was 1.93 metres (6ft 4inches) tall. (None of us others were small). There are several tall ones among the sons of the four brothers.

The trait seems to go back in the past.

Sir John Herschel (see the story above) visited the old the farm in 1835 and described Hendrik Johannes Morkel (1799 – 1859) as “*slenderly informed (tho’ by no means slenderly personed)*”. Hendrik's younger brother, Daniel Johannes Morkel (1801 – 1843) was known as *Dik Daniel* (lit: thick Daniel). He was not fat, but tall and large, weighing 300 pounds (136 kg) and excelled in a demanding sport where the contestant had to jump on to a wagon moving on the hard sand of the beach at low tide, take a whip and lightly touch a designated part (usually the ear) of one of the horses drawing the carriage. (See our story about Morkel Wine)

Being tall, strong and athletic was part of the success of the rugby Morkels. The American best selling author, James Michener in *The Covenant*, p956 remarks on the Morkel rugby prowess. While his characters are fictional, the information about the Morkels and rugby are based on fact.

These were the years when the game was dominated by one sensational family, the Morkels. Twenty-two Morkels were playing in this decade, brothers, cousins and unrelated solitaires, all of them stout lads. Once, the four biggest men facing him in the tight confrontations were Morkels, and as he left that game, he told his coach 'as if I had slipped by accident into a threshing machine'. ... It was the day after a game in which five horrible Morkels had run up and down his spine

From our story about the *Rugby Morkels*, two items are worth mentioning:

When Harry Morkel was still at school he struggled to gain a place in the under 14 team. He looked so ungainly that the general opinion was that he would be good only as a forward. He asked to play at wing and built a reputation in that position. He was big, strong and fast and became a feared player. When an opponent tried to tackle him, he simply pushed him out of the way and carried on running spectacularly – with his knees almost to his chin as he ran. Often 4 to 5 opponents would lie in the dust before he was brought to a stand still. Of Harry, a prominent sporting journalist (E.J. Platnauer) wrote in 1908: "Harry Morkel- Athlete, Rugby footballer and cricketer. The best hurdler who ever ran over sticks in South Africa. He went to England in 1898, but failed to reproduce his South African form. As Rugby footballer he was a brilliant wing three-quarter".

The largest Morkel physically was Royal (Johannes Albertus) born in 1896. He was known for his steamroller tactics. In 1919 ships with Australian Armed Forces stopped over at Cape Town returning from the battlefields of Europe. A rugby team was formed and a match arranged against Somerset West who at that time was the strongest club team around. During the match Royal Morkel burst through and pushed the Australian full back out of the way to score behind the goal posts. Shortly thereafter it happened again. Royal had thrust his way through the forwards and was storming on to the Australian full-back. When the full-back saw him coming, he turned and ran to his own goal posts and sheltered behind one of them. Royal scored the try between the posts and stood amused with his hands on his hips looking at his unfortunate opponent. By this time the Australian captain caught up and berated his team mate. "What made you run away" he asked. The full-back answered: "I can stop a German tank, but I can't stop this damn Dutchman!" Royal was 6ft 2inches (1.89 metres) tall and weighed 230 lbs. (104 kg). He was a good swimmer and boxer and ran 100 yard sprints and even participated in high jump. (8)

My parents told the story of *oom* Bertie (Johannes Gijsbertus Freislich Morkel, 1887 – 1953) who also played first class rugby for the strong Somerset West team. Oom Bertie was a gentle person who drove a small British car. One day on his way back from Cape Town, he did something wrong which infuriated the driver behind him. Both cars stopped and a small angry man emerged from the other car and strode forcefully towards him to give him an earful. As *oom* Bertie got out of his car to apologise, he towered above the fellow, who turned around without a word, got back in his car and drove off, clearly intimidated by Bertie's size.



An historic photograph taken at the Strand rugby grounds a few years ago. Here you have thirteen of the Morkel family together. (From l. to r.): Albert, Pieter (P.K.), Nicolas (first club captain, 1904), Bertie, Johnnie (first senior capt., 1905), Alby, Henry and Gerhard. Then the younger generation, in front: Tinie, Hannes (Gerhard's son), Herman and Hubert and Philip, (Bertie's sons).

A collection of retired Morkel Rugby players. Bertie and Harry are standing 4th and 6th from the left, respectively. Oom Johnnie Bos, 5th from left, of normal height, looks small in the photo. Among those in front are Gerrit and Bertie's sons, all tall ones. (8)

A Moppie about Rich Mr Morkel

*Ryk mister Morkel
Ons kommandant
Hy regeer sy vollek met goed en verstand
Laat wy drinken de Kaapse koele wyn
Laat wy drinken de Kaapse koele wyn
Jan Burgers kom te staan met sy wapen in sy hand
Stryk met syn land en syn verstand. (9)*

My attempt to translate a ditty where sense is not the first priority:

*Rich mister Morkel
Our commandant
He rules his folk with goods and mind
Let us drink cool Cape Wine (2)
Jan Burgers comes to stand with his weapon in his hand
Stroke with his land and mind.*

Composed in the eighteenth century, this Moppie was written by freed slaves to thank their former master Mr. Morkel, who had freed them. The song was rediscovered in 1960 and collected by Willem van Warmelo, after reading an interview with Mrs. Brinkhuys who was interviewed in a Cape Town newspaper about her memories of slave times and her former master Mr. Morkel from Somerset (West) (9).

The second of January (*tweede nuwejaar*) has long been the traditional day of celebration of the coloured community of Cape Town and the Western Cape. With colourful parades with marching choirs and floats it has become one of the tourist attractions of Cape Town. The choirs sing both traditional “moppies” or ditties as well as new ones.

‘The best time of the year is New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day’, the words of a popular song, written and performed in Cape Town to salute the New Year. New Year’s Eve is, as the song claims, seen as the most important event in Cape Town for the Cape Coloured Community (the descendants of the slave population brought to the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth century), because the celebrations are considered to be a ‘crossing ritual’. It is a time of remembering the past, a time for closure but also for hope and ideas for the new year. The satiric/comic songs, also known as ‘Kaapse Moppies’ have been an important part of this ‘ritual’. The ‘Moppies’ sung by the Coons Troupes and the Cape Malay Choirs, both musical clubs of the Coloured Community operating in Cape Town and the surrounding area, reflect on the year gone by and comment on the events and characters who have put their mark on the past year. In a way this repertoire of songs are musical annals, presenting in a comical way which issues or events have made an impact on the community in that particular year. The songs give us a unique look into the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the Cape Malay and Coloured Community during past events. It could therefore even be argued that these songs are historical sources.

This ‘tradition’ of singing comical songs is as old as the city of Cape Town itself. ‘Ghoemaliedjies’ were sung by slaves on their picnics, these being an important

aspect of a slave culture. In fact, part of the slave owner's obligation to his slaves was the provision of an annual picnic. The Ghoemaliedjie is thus known as a 'Malay picnic song', but also as a 'straatlied', a 'skemliedjie', a 'moppie' or a comic song'. Moppies are still sung by choirs today at the annual Cape Malay Choir Competition. For centuries, these songs have brightened up picnics, weddings, parties. (10)

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