

My time as one of 'The Volunteers'

by Penny Elliot



Penny Elliot after her presentation to LAHS on 19 October 2023. Left: the heavy 1820 dress she wore in the six months as a Volunteer, and below, displaying illustrations about The Volunteers in Sheila Ridden's book (2019) on Salem.

(Photos: Sue Gordon)



On the 31st May 1983 around 4.30 in the morning and 4 days before my 23rd birthday, I put on my Settler clothes and walked out the door.

When I first saw the advert for The Volunteers in the Grahamstown Grocotts Mail, I was determined to be selected. I had no idea what it was about, but I wanted to do something to change my life and this seemed to be a good opportunity. Much like the original Settlers.

My knowledge of 1820 settler history was based on three or four days of school history, probably in grade 3 or 4. Research in those days was not as easy as clicking on a Google

Search. I read what I could, but not so much on settler history and more on how to survive in the harsh Eastern Cape bush. I tried to find out about edible plants and what survival skills I would need, but the truth is, I embarked on this adventure with very little knowledge or experience.

My first interview was with Sheila Mullins, and I was delighted when she phoned a few days later to tell me Tommy McLelland would be interviewing me next. Tommy seemed amused at almost everything I said. I was working as a credit controller at the time and probably did not look like a likely candidate for roughing it in the bush for six months. He told me afterwards that I was selected as the most conservative Volunteer. I understood that the purpose of the project was to establish a clear picture of how the 1820 Settlers lived, rather than to paint a picture of who they were. Tommy told me that there were a number of TV dramas at the time about the 1820 British Settlers. He said that SATV received complaints from settler descendants claiming that the settlers were being shown in a romanticised version of how their lives had been, and that they were a lot tougher than that. Tommy hoped that by placing a group of Volunteers¹ in an isolated area of the Eastern Cape, with the clothing and equipment of a lower to middle-class settler family, he would be able to produce a documentary showing how the British Settlers lived when they arrived in South Africa in 1820. **[The TV documentary *The Volunteers* was to become the forerunner of today's reality programmes]**

He was assisted in the selection of the final 14 Volunteers by psychologist Hennie Minnaar. Historian Dee Nash made sure every detail of his plan was checked against credible historical documents and that all conditions for 1983 "Settlers" were as close to being what they had been in 1820 as possible. Dee put together a settler shopping list based on records of what was available in the Cape at that time. Where there were no prices on goods, Tommy worked on the Chicken Exchange Rate based on the price of a chicken in 1820 and in 1983.

We were transported down to the Valley on Pat Bradfield's Tractor and trailer after all our goods had been checked for contraband and loaded. There was great excitement as we slowly made our way down the rocky road Pat had prepared, not having the faintest idea what trials and tribulations lay ahead. The road was so bad that some Volunteers elected to walk rather than take the tractor ride.

I had already been to the Valley a few days before, but it was only after we had carried our first load of goods down the winding path and through the reeds and rushes of the river bed, that I remember looking around me and facing the reality of my new home. It was a pivotal moment. I was standing next to a thorn tree, the wind was blowing and there was dust everywhere. I looked around me and thought, "this is it, I can do it".

1 The 14 Volunteers comprised a married couple with three children, and nine single persons. Altogether 11 stayed until the end of the six months.

SABC Wardrobe Department had designed and made our clothing, four dresses, a petticoat, a night dress, bonnets, two shawls, thick woollen stockings and boots for the women. There were long winter shirts, a smock, cotton underpants, breeches, leg warmers, a hat, socks and boots for the men. We could do what we liked with the dresses, we didn't have to wear them in the same way as the Settlers did.

Within the first week I had taken the sleeves out of two dresses and cut them off to knee length. In summer I wore my petticoat as a dress and in winter I wore one of the men's shirts with woollen stockings. The dresses were very elaborate and heavy. We could not wash them so we hardly used them. 1820 settler women would have worn sweat pads under their arms so that they would not have had to wash the whole dress.



After the first night, which was cold and uncomfortable, we stuffed out mattress covers with excess clothing. The family stayed in their tent. Kim, Terry and Ashley shared a tent with our food supplies and Isa, Mike, Toni, James and I shared the other tent with my dog Prince and on windy nights a chicken or two. We pushed our mattresses really close together, shared blankets and then piled extra clothing on top just to keep warm. We also wore the men's leg warmers on our heads like beanies.

Left: Penny dishing up in the settler kitchen.

(Photo: Gordon Hiles)

The evenings were long and without light there was not much to do. Sometimes we wrote letters by the light of our little oil lamp and at full moon we could sometimes write by the light of the moon. James shaped the ends of feathers into quill pens for us but in general, writing letters was quite a messy business. Towards the end we started playing card games and the winner would have control of the oil lamp for a week. When we ran out of wicks, we cut the ties off the sides of the tent and used those.

Within a few days we had developed a routine of cooking in pairs. There was quite a steep bank down to the river and the wooden buckets were too heavy for one woman to carry up once it had been filled with water.

We would start the day with a breakfast of barley or rice, no milk, and just a dash of sugar. It was cheaper to buy a sheep than a kilo of sugar and we had to be very aware of our budget. At first we cooked over a circle of rocks then James and Mike built a lovely stove with an oven in the side. The oven door was made of 2 logs fastened together and covered with a piece of sheepskin.

James and Toni usually baked the bread. We had to make our own yeast, which was really difficult as we had no idea where to begin. We tried a few recipes from Yvette's book before we settled on one which was based on using the water that potatoes had been boiled in. Sometimes the dough was good and would swell and rise, other times we'd end up with a solid chunk of hard and heavy bread. Whatever the case, we ate it and enjoyed it as if it was a fine brioche from a Parisienne Patisserie. Our first oven was a hole in the ground which James had dug to the exact specifications given to him by Joss Nell.

Bread baking could take an entire morning. Step one was to build a fire in the hole and leave it to burn for 1 hour. After that, all the coals would be taken out, and James would place three little stones in the bottom of the hole for our large cast iron pot to stand on. The pot, oiled and filled with our risen dough would be carefully balanced on the stones and then James would place a few small coals on the lid before closing it all up with a section of an antheap which he had cut to size as a lid for the earth oven. Around an hour later the mouth-watering aroma of freshly baked bread would rise up from the earth and we would know the bread was ready.

We usually only baked bread on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning.

We developed our own method of time keeping in the Valley. Everything took time. Often our time management was dictated by the animals or chores that were part of our everyday living. If the cows were cranky, milking took longer, breakfast ended later and deadlines for work on the house were extended. We had been given two watches, one for the family group and one for the singles. They didn't really work so we abandoned them in favour of our own new time zone. It took a while for Tommy and the crew to figure out that there was no point in asking us "what time" we would be milking the cows. In Valley Time, we didn't serve lunch at 1 o'clock; instead, it was 1 o'clock when we served lunch. We happily called out the time based on anything that felt right at the time. Perhaps the sun looked like it might be 4 pm or we were tired of work so it could be 5 pm.



Left: Cottage for family group

(Photo: Gordon Hiles)

In the last few months when Toni, James, Mike, Isa and I were busy on our own houses and garden and the family rarely came near us, we would sometimes decide the day was a Sunday. Nice weather for a walk or swim in the river was enough to declare a Sunday and catch up on the building work later.

Sundays were always special days when we could take a break from working on the houses or fields.



Right: Penny, Mike and James crossing the Bushman's River on a homemade raft (no oars) – helped by a ball of rough twine.

(Photo: Gordon Hiles)

In the early days when we were always dirty and our skin turned grey after a cooking day, we would spend Sunday mornings scrubbing each other with our hair brushes, to get clean again. After a few weeks of living in the valley the protective oils in our skins took over and we stopped turning grey and our weekly bath was replaced with a quick swim in the river. On most evenings we would wipe away the dust of the day with a quick wash in a bucket in the tent.

We used pieces of the rushes that grew along the river to brush our teeth and Isa used wood ash as a kind of toothpaste. Toni and I would pull threads out of our towels to use as dental floss.

I remember many lovely Sunday walks, sometimes Mike and I would team up with Toni and James and sometimes we would wander down the Valley on our own. In spring the wild flowers were beautiful and when we started building our houses, we were always on the lookout for a good rock for the gable end walls. Isa chose rocks that were uneven and had pieces jutting out. She used to feed a little robin, and it had become tame enough to find her in camp when it was hungry. She wanted her wall to have inviting places for other birds to land and perch. I chose rocks with different colours for my wall and James looked for nicely squared rocks for the solid and straight wall he wanted to build. We often had a church service on a Sunday morning. Kim was always the peacemaker in the Valley, and I think he tried to use Sunday mornings as a time to redirect emotions and tensions that built up between the two groups during the week. Most of us attended the services dressed in our Sunday best. Kim always prepared a message to inspire us and a hymn which we always destroyed. One Sunday Tommy brought The Rev Howard to the Valley so we could have a proper church service and Communion. We prepared cakes and eats and pulled our best dresses out of our mattress covers for the occasion. By then I was baking bread with Toni and our yeast making was mostly successful. We went the extra mile for this special occasion and baked two large loaves in the biggest black pot we had. There was a moment during the service when even the birds stopped singing and we all held our breaths until our crusty loaf finally cracked in Howard's hands as he struggled to break the bread for the Communion.

James spent many hours walking through our Valley forest in search of the straight sneezewood poles to use in the building of our houses. We never cut wood for our fires and rather foraged for fallen branches. Sneezewood was our fire starter, and we treasured wild olive for the long-lasting coals it made for bread baking. We were very aware of our pristine surroundings and wanted to leave our Valley as beautiful as it was to us when we first arrived. Whenever we went for walks we would collect the lichen that grew in the trees in the Valley. Some called it "Old Man's Beard". In the early mornings when it was still damp with dew, it made a perfect replacement for 2-ply toilet paper. The family built a toilet behind their house, but flies were such a problem in the Valley we decided to rather stick to digging a hole which could be immediately covered up. We selected a section of the ridge to be the toilet area and left a hoe for digging, close to the path.

James also marked the spots where the large *kowa* mushrooms grew and after every storm he would come back from a walk with a giant mushroom for breakfast. Dermot regularly collected mushrooms on his morning walks, but I don't recall ever tasting any.

The most important day in any month was supply day. We could order off our 1820 shopping list, and the film crew would arrive in the valley on the appointed day with an SABC Combi filled with our supplies. It was always a big day. Some of us would swim across the river to decant all the goods into 1820 containers and then there would be a big trek to the rope pulley which we had set to bring supplies and thatch across the river. Even the chickens and pigs came over in a hessian sack hooked onto the pulley. It was more difficult to get the sheep across as the river had filled up and the path we had originally used was too deep for a sheep to walk through. We once tried swimming a sheep across, but the poor thing became too waterlogged to stay afloat, and we had to just pull him over as fast as we could. He survived the ordeal only to be slaughtered for his meat the next day. I hated sheep day. Skinning and cutting the meat up could take all day and it was always hard to get rid of the smell.

The soap we had made with Mrs Tooley ran out after about three months and when we asked for ingredients to make a new batch we were told that we would not be allowed to use caustic soda. We made up a recipe using wood ash and lard, but it smelt so bad we threw it away and washed without soap.

I'm not sure why we got chickens and cows so early after our arrival in the Valley. We were really not prepared and the result was disastrous. Dermot had built a chicken *hok* which was fine for keeping the chickens in, but ineffective at keeping genets out. Within a few days at least half our chickens had been killed. We decided it would be better to let them find their own safe places to sleep, which was usually the tree outside our tent. One morning after the rooster had fallen out of his perch in the middle of the night, we were woken by loud crowing in our tent. Silly rooster had spent the night with just his head through the door flap of our tent.

Ashley and Kim were always up first to start carrying cattle fodder down the valley to the milking kraal. Toni and I would follow them to do the milking and usually Kirsty, the youngest of the Gordon Graham girls, would come with us to learn to milk as well. Our cows were wild and hungry, so milking was never easy.

It seemed that we had reverted to a male dominant society and as women, Toni and I were often left out of important decision making such as bringing the cows in. The Valley was dry and barren so it would have made much more sense to bring one or two cows down rather than six. Ashley and Kim spent hours carrying food every day, but it was never enough. There was one cow who avoided being milked and another who regularly kicked out at us as we tried to milk her. At best, we'd be lucky to get a litre of milk after an hour of milking and dodging grumpy cows. After a few weeks we had to send five of the cows out the valley because they were too thin and hungry, and we knew they would not survive. Later, after the rains, we brought two cows back to the Valley. There was more food then but even so, they would often escape and head for the hills in search of greener pastures. One of the cows was named

Venus. She could not resist answering Ashley when he called her name, so we were always able to find them and bring them home again.



My dog Prince walked most of the way to milking with us, but he always stopped and waited a little way before the family house, or if Toni wasn't milking with me he would go back to Camp to watch her feed the pig. He loved that. Prince loved Valley life. He carefully guarded our cooking area, making sure that the chickens were never allowed near our supplies. He kept the monkeys out of camp and loved hunting moles. The film crew told me that no matter which direction they came from, Prince would always find them on the path before they reached our camp and then he would escort them in.

Left: Penny and Prince.

(Photo: Gordon Hiles)

After a while the surviving chickens started to lay but it would take about two weeks before we had enough eggs to use for a meal.

Theresa was always careful to be beautifully dressed in her settler best because she was the teacher and felt it was important to look the part and always be on her best behaviour. We were very surprised one day when she confessed that she had hidden an egg, a lemon and some sugar in her laundry and she was going to make lemon curd while down at the river doing her laundry. There would only be a small amount to share so we were sworn to secrecy and like naughty children, we played along and sneaked into the tent for our teaspoon of lemon curd without telling the men about it. They probably knew something was up because our sense of smell was so sharp in the Valley one could smell an egg cooking from miles away!

Part of our contract stated that SABC would own everything we said, wrote or did. This meant that the film crew could access our diaries and letters at any time. We each had a diary of our own and there was also a diary for each group. I kept a daily journal which I would send out to my mom in the form of letters home. We could write as often as we wanted to but only received letters from home once, after three months when it was assumed the next ship would have arrived from England. We always knew when they had been in our camp to read our diaries because Dale's perfumes would linger on for hours after she had turned the pages.

There was great excitement the day our letters arrived. We had no idea what was happening in the world outside the Valley and one of the difficulties of settler life was the lack of news and thought provoking conversation. We had a few books to read and a lovely old bible, but we longed for news on current affairs and particularly South African politics. We'd asked for a special vote in the 1983 Constitutional Reform Referendum but that had been denied. After I had read all my letters twice, Toni and I swapped and read each other's letters.

There was another important event on Letter Day. Dermot had possession of an 1890 Shotgun. We understood it had been lent to The Volunteers, but Dermot had taken control and would not allow anyone else to use it. He went out hunting every morning but rarely returned with more than a few mushrooms. There was so much wildlife in the Valley we were sure that it would be easy to supplement our diet with a bushbuck or two. Some Volunteers did not want any shooting to take place in the Valley and had asked that the gun be removed.

So we also voted that day on whether to keep the gun or not and also on whether it should remain under Dermot's control. There was whispering around camp that Theresa was an expert hunter, but she never admitted it, nor did she show any interest in who had the gun. Sometimes Dermot would bring a duck home, but he insisted on hanging it so long before cooking that we all refused to eat it. I think the result of the voting that day was that the status quo of the gun ownership would remain unchanged.

In the last two weeks of our stay in the Valley we decided not to use any of the supplies we could buy in. By that time our gardens were producing some vegetables that we could enjoy, and we had enough milk to make a little basic cottage cheese. Our commune group had bought more chickens and they were laying regularly. Zoe always laid her eggs behind our kitchen and announced her achievement with loud flapping of wings and squawking. After a while we knew where each chicken laid and it was easy to find the eggs each morning. If we didn't check every day, the leguaans would find them and steal them from us.

During this time Dermot offered James the use of the gun. He came home one day with a dassie, which tasted good, but I hated skinning it and specially when it came to cutting off the little paws. The worst meal in the Valley was when we tried to eat a cormorant. As hungry as we were, we chose to rather dig a hole and bury it.

We were supposed to prove that we could survive in our new home and that we would have been able to continue living there. I think we achieved that. Our homes were comfortable and we had everything we needed. Our vegetable garden was flourishing, our cows produced milk and our hens were laying well. We had borrowed Pat Bradfield's oxen to plough a field, and on a joint venture with the family group, we had planted a crop of mealies and Grahamstown marrows. We knew that we would have left the Valley by the time our crops were ready for reaping, but we were proud of the fact that they were doing well, and it was likely the crop would be good.

There was a time when Kim became very ill. Ashley had to run up to the closest farm house late one evening and call for help. The doctor was brought in and rules were relaxed to enable

Kim to get the antibiotics he so badly needed. For days he stayed in bed in his tent while Genie nursed him and we all did what we could to encourage a speedy recovery. He knew it would be a while before he got his full strength back and felt he needed to find another way to ensure his contribution to our little Valley Society.

After the family had moved to their house, we moved to our house site and Kim and Terry moved their tent to a spot between the 2 camps. Terry was still teaching the children and Kim wanted to establish a neutral territory between the two groups, who did not share the same plans and goals. It was during this time that Dermot had started a little cottage industry making walking sticks, which he hoped to be able to sell via the film crew to supplement the family income. Kim earned a living by writing in real life and he hoped he would be able to fall back on those skills in the Valley as well. He asked Tommy if he could write articles on life in the Valley which he could sell as a daily newspaper. The idea was that Tommy would buy the articles, Kim would earn a living, and the film crew would have added insight into our lives in the Bushman's River Valley. The idea had hardly been presented when the Gordon Grahams called for a meeting challenging Kim's plan as they believed it was not authentic.

This is what caused the meeting between all parties which will always be remembered as The Big Fight.

Kim had always treasured his role as peacemaker and was supported in this role by Ashley, Terry and Mike. Toni, James and I had wanted to split from the family within the first week of living in the Valley. We had gone down as two financially independent groups and were only living together as one group because Genie had convinced us it would be better for everyone. When Dermot and Genie opposed Kim's only plan for survival, he lost the last thread of calm and reason that he had worked so hard to hang onto and the fury inside erupted. A meeting was called and for the first time the singles united to take a stand against the family.

The main Agenda of the meeting was to address the reason the family had opposed Kim's plan. We also wanted the third tent which the family were no longer using, as their house was built and they had moved into it. They wanted to keep the tent to house their chickens, but we needed it to live in while we built our cottages. There were also other issues to be resolved. When the family moved to their house site, they took all the chickens with them. We didn't really mind as we were busy building our houses and establishing a productive vegetable garden. There was not much time to also take care of chickens. They had offered to pay us out for our share of the chickens but had made no move to do so. They did, however, feel entitled to sell eggs to Kim and Terry.

It didn't take much before all the feelings of resentment and anger boiled over into an unmanageable volcano of accusations and unbridled emotions.

I am often asked about the petty bickering over tents and chickens. It saddens me that so many people who watched and loved the TV documentary never understood the reality of life in the Valley. The tents were our homes, they were our safe place where we could shelter from the wind and the rain. The eggs we collected from the chickens were a primary source of

protein. There was a time when we ate only potatoes for three days. Plain potatoes without any form of flavouring, as that was all we had. By the third day we were cooking them in the coals for the added flavour of charred skins. The tents and chickens were the cornerstones of our survival in the Valley, and we fought for them as any citizen outside the Valley would fight to retain ownership of their homes and ensure a sustainable meal each day.

Tommy referred to Dee Nash² for guidance whenever there was discord or dissent in the Valley. In every instance I know of, she was able to confirm that our behaviour was no different to documented interactions within settler parties. They also suffered after moving to a different and difficult environment, as Dee Nash would quote to us.

The meeting collapsed under the pressure of Genie's wails and admonishments and our accusations against the family. We all dispersed into our little corners in the Valley and tried to figure out what to do next.

Late that afternoon, Terry came to find us. She was crying and distraught. Kim had left the Valley. She felt that there was no place in the Valley for her without Kim and as the sun set, Ashley and Isa walked her up to Pat Bradfield's Farm where Tommy later collected her and took her back to Grahamstown to join Kim. Mike also tried to leave the Valley but couldn't find Kim, so he came back to camp. We were all devastated and depressed.

The next morning, Ashley called another meeting to establish the way forward. It was a very weary and downcast group that gathered at the family house. Ashley was still trying to be peacemaker, and he took the lead in chairing the meeting. He started calmly, explaining to Genie and Dermot how their actions had affected everyone in the Valley. When Genie responded (despite Dermot desperately trying to stop her), Ashley exploded and stormed out. We knew we had reached a breaking point in Valley life and finding a way forward seemed almost impossible.

James, Toni, Mike, Isa and I were back in camp later that afternoon when Dermot arrived with Helen and Kirsty. He apologised and asked if we could agree on working together, starting again and this time with more understanding. We had to agree, there was no other way, even though we had some misgivings and certainly did not believe that would ever change.

Just before the first meeting, Kim and Terry had shared with the family in slaughtering a young bull. They had not had time to finish working the meat when they left the valley. The clean-up took ages, burying the meat, scrubbing the tent and trying to get rid of the flies. Ashley moved out of the family house to take his place between the family and the commune, as Kim had done. We invited him to dinner, and he found a bottle of sherry in Kim's tent which he brought over for us to share. We ate and drank and laughed until all the anger and emotions of the previous two days had dissipated.

2 Dee Nash, at the time head of the Cultural History Division at the Albany History Museum, and author of *The Settler Handbook: a new list of the 1820 settlers*. (1987)

The Valley changed after that meeting. We settled into a good routine of building our houses, caring for our animals and enjoying the beauty of our surroundings after the rains and with the blossoming of Spring.

We had learnt a lot while building the family house and knew we had to come up with a better plan for our houses as time was running out. Mike took the lead and suggested two small cottages, each divided into two rooms with a small courtyard between and a cooking area set back (see photo on next page) where it would be protected by the ridge behind and the houses on either side. The walls would be low and the roof pitch high. This served two purposes: less labour in building the small walls and the steeper pitch meant we could use less thatch to obtain the same level of protection from rain. We each designed and planned our own rooms. James repurposed his trunk into a cupboard for Toni and we all shrieked with laughter when Toni pointed out she had no possessions to put into the cupboard. Toni painted her wall with her story of the Valley, and I did the same with mine - the same story but told quite differently. We found a place a little way up the hill where we could dig good red earth to plaster our walls and spent many hours carrying sacks of dirt down to the building site.



‘...two small cottages of two rooms each’, with cooking area behind. (Photo: Gordon Hiles)

We had ordered a raw hide to cut into strips which we would use to bind the roof trusses on our houses. Mike and I spent an unforgettable day cutting the strips. The hide had been in the sun for a day and had attracted thousands of flies from miles around. We swam across the

river with a small pocket knife each and on the way picked up a good stone for sharpening the blades. We crawled around that cow hide all day, balanced on our haunches, slicing through the thick skin, sharpening our knives and dodging the flies. Joss Nel and Tommy Hoole had explained the process to us. We had to cut the skin into strips then bury it for a few day and keep it watered and moist until we were ready to use it. Mike pegged out a frame for building the trusses and we drilled holes and made pegs to fasten them together. When it came to tying everything together, we were very excited to find a length of strong wire on one of our bush walks. We used it for one of the trusses and the cowhide for the rest. After a day or two, we realised that the cowhide did a much better job, so we took the wire off replaced it with cowhide strips. As it dried out it contracted and set, naturally tightening up way more than we could have managed with the wire. We used a different method with the thatching and in no time our roofs were up and we could move into our little homes for our last month in the Valley.

There was no doubt that we had taken root in the Valley. Our crops were growing, we could feed ourselves from our garden, our chickens were laying and life was good. We walked to the family site every morning to milk the cows, but other than that we had little contact with them. We concentrated on finishing our houses and garden and making sure that when our six months were up we would be able to show the final team of judges that we could indeed survive and that as hard as settler life was, we had done it and not only survived but had flourished.

In the last few days of our time there, Tommy brought in his panel of judges: Hennie Minnaar to check on our emotional wellbeing, Harry Ekron to judge our farming efforts and Joss Nel to comment on our survival skills.

Leaving the Valley was hard. We had faced many challenges and learned many life lessons. The bonds between us were strong. People ask me how difficult it was to adapt to settler life. The answer is that it was easy. We had to survive, so we did. In doing that we were forced to reassess what life is really all about. Things that were important in 20th Century life didn't really count when it came to basic survival. We walked back to Grahamstown on 26 November 1983, dirty and scruffy and dressed in our settler best. As Mike and I walked down the hill from the Monument and into town, an old lady leaned over her garden gate and said "Been for a long walk then?" I smiled and said "Yes".

My sincere thanks to Tommy McLelland whose brilliance and zest for life continues to inspire me. To the rest of the crew for recording our journey and to my fellow Volunteers for the fun, love and support as we searched for, and found, our Settler souls.

