

185th Great Trek Celebrations: The Freedom Seekers of the Eastern Cape Colony

by Basil Mills



Theo van der Walt, LAHS Treasurer, with Basil Mills after his talk on 15 Feb 2024 (Photo: Sue Gordon)

Basil Mills, one of the Eastern Cape's most colourful and interesting characters, gave a presentation on 15 February 2024 to LAHS members. Basil has made learning, history, storytelling, art and literature come alive in the Frontier Country landscape. He is a hands-on nature conservationist, storyteller, artist, blacksmith, wagon restorer, horse wrangler, trick rider stuntsman, military historian and battle re-enactment specialist.

A twin son of Daphne and "Cowboy" Hugh Mills of Wide Horison Wildlife sanctuary in the 1960s, Basil has the Wild West and early settler pioneer spirit in his blood, and his heart belongs to the African bush and wildlife.

For the past 39 years he has fascinated children with fun-filled outreach wilderness camps and historical trails, where topics are woven into historical environments involving South African literary figures. Orphaned at the age of 11, he and his twin brother went to boarding school and lived on Karoo farms training horses, locating fossils and Bushman painting sites. During his school years he researched and learnt about the Voortrekkers and the Boer War. While in the Air Force and working as a game ranger in the Hoedspruit area, he became fascinated by gold diggers, gold panning, transport riders, highwaymen and interesting locations of Jock of the Bushveld.

After teaching animal traction¹ at Taung Agricultural College he returned to the Eastern Cape to become the Outreach Education Officer at the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. He created outdoor wilderness camps for schools centred around important literary figures such as Thomas Pringle², Olive Schreiner, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, Sol Plaatjie, Credo Mutwa, Athol Fugard, Stuart Cloete and many others.

His re-enactment activities over the years grew into time travel, experiencing living history with tales of the past. In both looking forward and backwards he aims to stimulate an interest in reading and educating the youth to use their initiative, to be creative, appreciate family values, culture and heritage.



Above: youngsters on a Thomas Pringle Camp being transported on an ox wagon to a site where the 1820 Scottish settlers were placed, near Eildon in the Baviaans Valley, Bedford district. (Photo: Basil Mills)

1 a sustainable, affordable way of empowering rural people to use animal pulling/carrying strength, and incorporating traditional knowledge in training and working with animals that pull/carry objects. This includes how to make harnesses that are humane (avoiding overloading animals) and how to treat animals that are injured or sick.

2 The Thomas Pringle camp at Eildon was started in 2003 on the actual location, also known as Camps Rest, where the Scottish Settlers were left in the Baviaans Valley.

Basil came to share with LAHS an experience he'd had at the 185th Great Trek celebrations held at the Karel Landman monument on the 16 December 2023. He had been invited to assist F.A.K with some of the practical aspects of this event, which was a wonderful family gathering where children were able to sing, ride horses and play games. The Bathurst Agricultural Museum and Basil's SABRE (South African Battle Re-enactment Society) members demonstrated bygone skills, games, cooking, and the firing of a 200 -year-old cannon. Different parts of the wagon were explained, how the Voortrekkers drew up into defence laagers, the resilience of the women in loading of the muskets and treating the wounded in times of battle, and caring for the children in isolated and difficult times.

It had been a restless period in South African history, and the 185th celebrations reminded the folks participating that the Groot Trek had been one of the most dramatic and important events - a trek into the unknown vastness of Africa and danger.



Bathurst Agricultural Museum and SABRE members at their laager outspan site, Dec 2023 (Photo: Basil Mills)

Stuart Cloete said the Dutch Voortrekkers had "tempered the iron of their nature into steel." For them the plough shear and the sword were interchangeable. The trek was like Noah's Ark and, as in Biblical times, a people in search of a promised land. These Afrikaans freedom seekers left the Cape Colony to escape British rule, driving their canvas covered wagons and

vast stock of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, poultry, and also transporting plant seeds, fruit trees, farm equipment and ploughs. The wagons were their homes, hospitals, church and forts on wheels. They travelled across the vast waterless wilderness in places leaving graves and the bleached bones of those families massacred by fierce tribes in the open veld: a hard testament to a sacrifice for peace and freedom. The Great Trek was much the same as the way the early colonists opened up America's untamed West.

References:

Bulpin, T V *The Great trek* Printpak Cape Town 1976

Cloete, Stuart. *The Fiercest heart* Collins Glasgow 1960

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Cartoon by Basil Mills, whom we thank for creating it especially for this issue of Toposcope Journal