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Labour conditions on the Natal Collieries: the case of the Dundee Coal Company, 1908-1955.

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The establishment of the coal industry in Natal generated unprecedented concentrations of population as numerous collieries were developed in the thinly populated, largely pastoral areas of Northern Natal. From the outset the coal industry was based heavily on the employment of large numbers of black labourers who performed the heavy manual work, while a relatively small number of whites were responsible for blasting and general supervision. The average black/white ratio on the collieries before 1955 was 19 to 1. [1] The whites, at least until the Second World War, were mainly recruited from various parts of England, Scotland and Wales. While the sources of black labour were various, at the core of the labour complement of most collieries, was voluntary labour living in the vicinity of each colliery. While there were no black reserves or officially designated 'locations' in Northern Natal, the region was the scene of the greatest concentration of black land ownership in Natal, and black-owned farms in the vicinity of collieries readily offered accommodation to colliery workers and their families. [2] This was also the case with mission farms or reserves such as 'Ebenezer' and 'Boschhoek' in the vicinity of the Dundee Coal Company's Burnside and Merthyr mines. Many of the collieries themselves owned farms or parts of farms, where they conducted mining operations, and where they would allow labourers and their families to settle and build their own houses. Such areas were called 'schoonplaats'. As the Chief Native Commissioner for Natal pointed out in 1926, such land was

> 'formerly occupied by the kraals of those natives who resided on the locations under ordinary tribal conditions. It is in the main those ordinary residents who have now concentrated to meet the new conditions and although the supply of mine labour has to a certain extent been augmented from outside, the large majority of the labourers and their families is composed of householders who have dwelt in the vicinity all along.' [3]

This feature of permanent black families on the collieries survived the proclamation of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, the provisions of which were 'briefly that natives should not take up domicile in Urban and Industrial centres' [4], and the Director of Native Labour's belief

> 'that the production of families of detribalised natives in areas where natives have no permanent rights of residence must create a problem for the future as the wage earners die out or become decrepit or the Mines are worked out.' [5]

This core of labour, however, had to be supplemented by recruiting men further afield who had to be housed in compounds on the colliery property. As this labour was uncertain and subject to the seasonal demands of planting and harvesting crops, attempts were made, before 1911, to recruit indentured Indian immigrants who, likewise, had to be housed on company property.

The establishment of colliery operations, particularly those of the larger collieries such as the Dundee Coal Company, which remained one of the leading shipment collieries of Natal until the demise of its mining sector in March 1955, had the effect of bringing semi-urban areas rapidly into existence in predominantly rural environments. During the first decade of the coal industry in Natal there was no legislative framework to govern living conditions on the collieries, with the exception of the activities of the Protector of Indian Immigrants and the provisions of the Indian Health Regulations which meant that Indian mortality rates on the mines were scrutinised and some attention paid to the provision of adequate accommodation, clothing and rations to sustain Indians in the harsh climate of Northern Natal. Regulations framed under the Natal Mines Act of 1899 did seek to set minimum standards of accommodation, the effective implementation of which, however, was restricted by an

already overworked mining inspectorate. The Public Health Act of 1901 provided additional means whereby living conditions could be improved, but without an effective inspectorate, the owners of isolated and scattered collieries were left largely to their own devices in the provision of facilities. Their perspective, in turn, was shaped by the nature of the coal trade as it developed in Natal. The industry was built up on the fluctuating bunker and export trades and was characterised by alternating periods of depression and prosperity, a situation exacerbated by the distance of the coal fields from the port of Durban and an almost chronic shortage of railway trucks which could leave the collieries standing idle for days at a time. This tended to make coal owners extremely conservative in matters involving capital expenditure and increased working costs. The uneven distribution of demand for coal also made it difficult to compute how much labour would be required at any particular point. This tended to inhibit the development of effective recruiting structures. The coal owners' conservatism on labour matters was reinforced by the 'somewhat artificially secure position' they enjoyed in the pre-Union period because of the availability of indentured Indian labour and the Natal government's policy of retarding the outflow of black labour to other parts of South Africa. [6] Coal owners had little incentive 'to appreciate the necessity for catering for their native employees as real competitors in the labour market.' [7]

That these circumstances were productive of appalling conditions and severe exploitation of black labourers on the coal mines in the Dundee district is suggested in a letter written on 29 June 1911 by a labour agent in Dundee, E.H. Richardson, to the Secretary for Native Affairs in Natal, in which he reported repeated complaints of poor and inadequate food, overcrowding and unhygienic accommodation, exposure to disease and the excessive lengthening of contract periods through not being given work every day, among other serious allegations. [8]

The year 1911 in some respects marked a turning point for coal owners. In July indentured Indian Immigration was brought to an end, and the passage of the Native Labour Regulation Act was the harbinger, if not the immediate instrument, of greater government control of black living conditions on the collieries. In the opinion of the Chief Native Commissioner for Natal, the passage of the Act, which made possible the declaration of labour districts and the enforcement of regulations, was the only means whereby 'a proper control can be exercised by the Government and a general levelling up of conditions obtained.' [9] The declaration of the coal fields as labour districts came only in Janaury 1924, because of the delay attendant on amending the General Pass Law of Natal, a necessary pre-condition for such a move. [10] In the interim the Inspector of Native Labour, without teeth, sought valiantly to effect improvements, but as the Mines Medical Inspector commented in 1916

> 'he has still practically no power. He cannot insist on any improvements being made, having no Regulations to support him.' [11]

In 1915 a set of regulations was promulgated to govern mine housing, and was enforced by the Inspector of Native Labour working directly under the Assistant Health Officer for Natal. While this brought about some improvement in compound accommodation, these regulations did not get to grips with the problem of general sanitation, hospital accommodation and the control of 'schoonplaats' areas. [12]

It was in this context that the living conditions of the mining communities spawned by the operations of the Dundee Coal Company were shaped. It was a contest between government officials, who were not always unsympathetic to coal owners' interests, on the one hand, and coal owners, who became adept temporisers, on the other.

As the original Dundee mine ('Malahleni'), on the outskirts of the town Dundee, drew near to the end of its economic life, the Dundee Coal Company commenced in 1908 to exploit a new property in a precipitous valley gouged out by the Waschbank river between the plateau rising from Dundee and the Biggarsberg spur of the Drakensberg mountains. As the coal seams lay some 600-700 feet below the plateau, the shaft of the new Burnside ('Hlatikulu') mine was sunk in the bottom of the Waschbank valley where the bottom seam could be reached at 140 feet below the surface. This meant that the surface layout of the mine had to be planned in difficult, restricted, undulating terrain on either side of the Waschbank river. In a region where droughts were a frequent occurrence and the rains usually came in the form of heavy thunderstorms with attendant flooding, the problem of an adequate water supply remained a constant source of anxiety throughout the history of Burnside, and had important implications for the sanitary conditions at the mine, and indeed actual mining operations. This point was underlined when the Waschbank river dried up in December 1913 as the result of a prolonged drought and, when the mine water gave out, the colliery was forced to close down on 9 December. Only heavy rains on the evening of that day enabled the mine to reopen on 10 December. [13]

In 1911 the Chairman of the Dundee Coal Company, Walter Greenacre, described Burnside as

> 'quite a little village at the head of the valley - a rough valley that had developed into a smiling village with every sign of prosperity.'

He assured the annual general meeting of shareholders that employees were all living 'under the most healthy conditions' and were housed 'in the most comfortable manner possible.' [14] Yet within a few years the quarters for black and Indian labourers had become a slum.

Between 1911 and 1942, as the productive capacity of the Burnside collieries increased, the complement of black labourers had increased from 245 to 1 600; and the Indians had declined from 530 to 150. [15] The large proportion of Indians in 1911 was a legacy of the Dundee Coal Company's concerted effort, initiated at the old Dundee mine in 1892, to rely as much as possible on indentured Indians as a solution to labour difficulties. [16] The decline in numbers was the consequence of the ending of indentured Indian immigration in 1911, the final expiry of indentures in 1915, the decision of very few Indians to re-indenture, and the general drift of free Indians away from the collieries into more upwardly mobile occupations. [17]

By 1918 compound accommodation for blacks and Indians had clearly become inadequate. Chronic shortage of accommodation was not merely a feature of the compounds but also of the white township on the plateau overlooking the valley, and later of the 'schoonplaats' area. Some of the small rooms in the compound blocks were seriously overcrowded, very dirty and had not been whitewashed for years. Indian inmates, most of whom were married and lived with their families in single compound rooms, had no bathing facilities, while blacks made do with a plunge bath in the centre of a dirty, concrete-floored bathroom. There were no facilities for washing clothes. Slop water was thrown out of the doors together with ash and other rubbish that was supposedly cleared up daily. An inspection report noted that the

> 'compounds [are] at present littered with rubbish and in many places the ground is fouled and stinking with slop water. In several places deposits of human excreta [lie] in gutters and on the ground.' [18]

Some of the latrines located behind the compounds on steeply sloping ground had earthen floors and were fouled with excrement.

As such a state of affairs constituted ripe breeding ground for the spread of disease and epidemics and could only be exacerbated with an expanding labour force, the Dundee Company heeded the recommendations of the Assistant Health Officer and by 1919 had installed water-borne sewerage with septic tanks for the compounds at a cost of £4 000. [19] Dr. Park Ross described the new compound sanitation as 'the best yet installed at any of the Natal Mines ...' [20]

By 1923, 843 men, together with 55 women and 44 children, were housed in the No. 1 compound as well as 127 Indians with 76 wives and 88 children. The Burnside No. 2 compound further down the valley housed 494 single men and 127 Indians with 53 wives. On the surrounding farms resided 177 men with 76 women and 88 children and 12 Indian men. In mid-October of that year an enteric epidemic broke out accounting for 93 cases amongst blacks and 10 deaths by 12 November 1924. [21] The epidemic lingered on and by April 1926 an additional 8 deaths had been recorded among black labourers. [22] This outbreak caused a major reappraisal of sanitary conditions and water supplies at the mine. The Company decided to get expert opinion on water and sewerage schemes [23], while Dr. Park Ross, the Assistant Health Officer, recommended the renewal of all fly screens, the cleaning of areas where flies bred, and the disinfection and lime-washing of the compound. [24] In November 1924 E.L. Jackson was engaged as a temporary sanitary inspector for a month. His services were subsequently to be retained for an additional six months, although he soon left to take up a permanent appointment elsewhere. There followed a succession of appointments all leaving for better jobs elsewhere. Park Ross argued that the 'proper thing' to do was to appoint another sanitary inspector until the mine had a clean bill of health for 4-5 months or until some little time after the first rains in October. When his suggestions hardened into the notion of a permanent sanitary inspector [25], Sokehill, the General Manager, urged the Board of Directors to consider carefully 'and referred to the continually

increasing Mine costs brought about by the new Native Affairs Regulations.' [26] Park Ross won the day. Among subsequent sanitary inspectors was a particularly energetic appointee, W.C.E. Lewis, who, within a month of his appointment in July 1927 submitted a 'somewhat lengthy' report on matters pertaining to health. [27] In September 1927 he drew attention to the serious insanitary conditions of the abbattoir and brew house belonging to the Mine Stores, who met his application for improvement 'with polite but complete indifference'. The intervention of the Managing Director, Owen Walter, however, secured 'a very marked improvement' by November. [28] Inevitably, Lewis left for a better paid appointment in Johannesburg and by 1932 the assistant compound manager was doubling up as sanitary inspector, even though he had had no training for the job. [29]

On 10 August 1928 the Natal mines were informed that beds or bunks had to be provided in all compounds, a provision which would reduce the capacity of the Burnside compounds to about 60% of the numbers housed there. [30] The Manager of Burnside, Hugh Williamson, calculated that the additional beds and buildings would involve expenditure of £3 000. The Secretary of the Company interviewed the Inspector of Native Labour who agreed to postpone the question for two or three years if the Company sent him a letter explaining the undesirability of increasing capital expenditure at that point. [31]

By December 1929 over-crowding existed to the extent of 285 men at No. 1 compound and 96 at No. 2. The Director of Native Labour in Johannesburg ordered the Company to submit plans for additional accommodation for the excess number. Williamson discussed the matter with the Inspector of Native Labour and gained the impression that if the Company were to erect new compounds at the rate of 4 or 5 a year at a monthly expenditure of £50, it would be let off the installation of bunks in the old compounds. [32] After constructing one 'very satisfactory' block with accommodation for twenty men and equipped with bunks in

single tiers separated from each other by concrete partitions, and racks for storing possessions [33], Williamson stopped further construction. With the closure of Burnside No. 2 mine in 1932, all married employees in future were to be housed in the No. 2 compound, leaving No. 1 compound entirely for single men. [34] By 1936 the question of bunks had not yet been resolved. Secretary Gilbert bluntly explained the Company's position in his request for exemption:

> 'The existing compounds will not admit of the installation of bunks unless excessive alterations are made thereto, almost amounting to rebuilding. Frankly we have not the required capital as our present loans and bank overdraft amount to £26,045 which is practically our limit.' [35]

In his Inspection Report for 1936 the Inspector of Native Labour explained that the compound was originally built as an Indian barracks in 40 single story blocks containing a total of 252 rooms, each ten feet square and ten feet high. In 1931 the Company had tried to improve a number of these rooms by removing every alternate interior partition wall to create rooms of the dimensions of 20 feet by 10 feet,

> 'but even then the rooms are badly designed and old and ... could not be made to contain more than eight bunks each.'

He concluded that the existing compound was scattered, difficult to keep clean and would be difficult to control in the event of riot or disturbance. [35]

Finally after yet another adverse report on compound accommodation at Burnside, submitted in 1942 by the Senior Assistant Health Officer [37], the Board of Directors gave up the idea of alterations and additions to the existing buildings.

Instead, the expenditure of £15 000 over two years was authorised for the erection of an up-to-date enclosed compound. [38] By June 1945, the main compound was rebuilt but latrine accommodation was not yet connected up with the water-borne sewerage system of the old, because the Controller of Manpower had not approved the diverting of a skilled plumber to do the job. With the approach of spring and very hot summer conditions it was feared that the stop-gap arrangements 'must become a menace to the health of the 3,000 employees of all races on the mine.' [39] The problem was speedily rectified. The bold step taken by the Board of Directors in providing a new compound stemmed partly from the prosperity brought about by wartime demand for coal, and partly from the determination to get the ban on Burnside recruiting in Basutoland lifted, a ban which had been imposed because of the poor living conditions at the mine.

A similar kind of evolutionary struggle for better conditions is evident in the provision of married quarters. Prior to 1925, apart from the accommodation of some married black labourers in the compounds, there were no married quarters belonging to the Company at Burnside. Arising out of the enteric epidemic and the ensuing decision to construct a resevoir to improve the water supply, homesteads in the catchment area were moved to a farm colony on the Company's property where blacks erected 'grass huts after the native fashion.' [40] This was 'rather a hurried move' and the ultimate intention was to replace them with with 'a better type of hut.' [40] The Chief native Commissioner justified the creation of an area referred to by the blacks as 'Emusi' [42] in these terms:

> 'Outbreaks of epidemic diseases have in some cases led to the necessity for concentration for health reasons in order to prevent their spread, as for example in the case of the Burnside mine where a serious outbreak of enteric was the reason for this course being adopted.' 43

Ironically, seven years later the temporary grass huts were still standing, and they were seen as a potential source for the outbreak of epidemic diseases. Dr. Park Ross described the 140 huts as

> 'old and primitive and very liable to become verminous. These conditions are entirely unsatisfactory for the use of industrialised Natives.'

Sanitary facilities consisted of bucket latrines placed at various points. Park Ross argued that if the present large number of married men were to be retained, a properly built location should be provided. [44] By 1938 the total population of the 'schoonplaats' was 784, and the mine management had appointed four black workers for cleaning and white-washing purposes. [45]

On 12 July 1940 a new regulation No. 119 was proclaimed by the Native Affairs Department which required all mines to submit full details of 'schoonplaats' areas. In November 1940 the Inspector of Native Labour recommended that the Burnside 'schoonplaats' should be condemned as none of the structures conformed to the new regulations. The old huts should be demolished and replaced by properly built rondavels, and proper latrine and washing facilities provided. A portion of the existing site should also be abandoned as the huts were too near the dump with its fumes. [46] Williamson estimated an expenditure of £20 per hut to comply with the regulations. [47] Because of the heavy expenditure involved, the Inspector of Native Labour suggested that the Mine Manager be allowed to effect improvements gradually. [48] The Board of Directors voted a sum of £10 000 for the erection of 350 rondavels, to be erected at the rate of 15-20 per month. [49] By 1944, 206 rondavels had been completed at a sum in excess of the original estimates because of the wartime escalation of labour costs and materials. [50] At this

point further construction was abandoned. In November 1948 C.E. Kruger of the Native Affairs Department complained that only 206 of the promised 350 rondavels had been built. [51] In 1949 the Inspector of Native Labour condemned a number of the shacks housing families, and pointed out that provisions would have to be made to accommodate an additional 200 families. [52] The Company obtained a quotation of £20 000 from Messrs. Creteweld for 100 blocks to accommodate 200 families. As this would do no more than accommodate the existing 200 families living on the 'schoonplaats' condemned by the Inspector of Native Labour, the Company would not be able to house more married blacks than they did at present. As Creteweld's scheme was the cheapest method of providing suitable married quarters, yet the sum of 20 000 was high, the Board of Directors felt 'that it might be an advantage to delay action a little longer.' [53] While the Native Affairs Department pressed for action, the Company temporised a little longer by investigating a potentially cheaper method of construction in the form of an improved type of concrete block patented by William Barboure. [54] Williamson's successor as manager, Arthur Caister, in turn experimented with soil cement bricks manufactured with an Austral Brick and Block making machine. He estimated that a substantial 4-room cottage to house two families could be built for £103. [55] In practice the cost was £125, requiring expenditure of £15 000 to house the existing married population. The Company employed further delaying actions because of the desire to keep capital expenditure as low as possible in view of the short life of No. 1 mine. As an alternative to replacing the condemned shacks the Board decided to explore the question of reducing married accommodation and increasing the single quarters at the No. 1 compound. [56] The new 'schoonplaats' was never built.

The story of hospital accommodation at Burnside followed the same lines as that of the 'schoonplaats'. As in the case of the compounds, hospital accommodation was originally designed for Indians, with one ward set aside for the use of blacks. In 1918

the hospital provided 12 beds and a small operating room used as a furniture repair shop. An inspection report for that year revealed that the hospital wards were dirty as was the verandah which was littered with rubbish. Three Indians and seven blacks were in hospital lying on wooden stretchers with sacking as the only form of bedding. One of the Indian patients had been in hospital for five months suffering from hip joint disease with sinus, discharging large quantities of pus. The Inspectors reported that:

> 'This patient was in an exceedingly dirty condition; had evidently not been washed on admission or since, so that [with] decomposed urine, pus and faeces his person and clothing and the old blanket which was his only covering, were in a filthy and stinking condition.'

The only washing facilities at the hospital consisted of a small bathroom with cold water only. In 1917, 22 black adult male deaths were recorded at the hospital. No records were kept of women and children. The corresponding figures for Indian men, women and children were 10, 3 and 5. In the first four months of 1918, 4 black males, 1 female and 4 children died, and 2 Indian women and 2 children. The Inspectors reported that:

> 'The general dirty and insanitary condition of this mine is reflected in the death returns. There is clearly an undue prevalence of, and mortality from, filth diseases - such as Diarrhoea and Dysentery.'

They noted that TB was also prevalent. [57]

In 1920 the hospital was described as clean and well kept. The Mine's Medical Officer reported on the death rate and sickness among coloured labourers in 1922 and urged the implementation of

extensions to the hospital and the provision of facilities for sterilising hospital clothing. [58] In the following year the failure to treat minor ailments, particularly injuries, until they had become serious, 'brought the total laying off on account of sickness to over 10% of the labour population' and resulted in serious over-crowding of the hospital, and numerous out-patients languishing in the compound 'under conditions which retard their recovery.' Dr. Park Ross and the Chief Native Commissioner, Wheelwright, persuaded the management to insist that all cases of illness or injury, however trivial, should be dealt with in the hospital or the Dressing Station ward which was to be erected, to improve conditions in the hospital and to provide hospital clothing, blankets and pillow cases. Patients in particular should be bathed before being admitted,

> 'it being realised that it is impossible to consider that the best possible has been done for patients who have been placed in bed in their out-door clothes impregnated with coal dust and filth, and in many cases in a dirty condition.'

The sick rate should be brought down to the 'more reasonable' level of 4-6%, at most, of the population. [59]

The death of a black patient of typhus in 1923 led to immediate steps being taken to erect an isolation ward for patients suffering from infectious diseases. From 1924 onwards the Native Affairs Department insisted that Hospital Superintendents on the mines should hold the recognised nursing certificate in order to raise the standards of hospital treatment. [60]

From July 1923 to September 1925, 29 major operations were performed at the mine hospital although it was not equipped with full surgical facilities. [61] By 1932 the hospital wards were provided with iron beds, asbestos bed boards and felt mattresses,

while the isolation block was being used exclusively for the treatemnt of patients suffering from venereal disease. [62] The dressing station, promised in 1925, was only constructed in 1942. [63]

The unfavourable singling out of the hospital in the Inspection Reports for 1942 finally goaded the Company into taking active steps to improve conditions. [64] The high estimated cost of £7 000 for a new hospital to be erected on a site requiring extensive excavations, prompted the Company to explore the possibility of renovating the existing hospital at a cost of £2 000. Williamson argued that

> 'the proximity of the hospital to the dump was not an inconvenience, as the wind seldom blew in that direction. The question of dust from the road was one that could be easily overcome.' [65]

When the Director of Native Labour rejected the idea of renovation on the grounds of adverse reports on the existing hospital, A.H. Fletcher, the Managing Director, went personally to Johannesburg to plead the Company's case. The Director of Native Labour was sympathetic and promised to discuss the matter with the medical authorities. The new hospital was never built. [66]

Given the generally appalling conditions at Burnside it is surprising that major epidemics did not occur more frequently. The great flu epidemic of 1918 carried off a total of 23 blacks and 65 Indians, and caused some 160 labourers to desert from the mine. [67] The enteric epidemic of 1923-1926 has already been discussed. In addition, isolated cases occurred both before and after this period. [68] It is interesting to note that in 1918 the Company's medical officer at Burnside had recommended that all the employees, white and coloured alike, should be

innoculated against enteric and typhus fever. While the Board of Directors agreed with this proposal, it was decided to wait until this matter had been brought before the Natal Mine Managers' Association to secure unanimity of action. [69] During the height of the enteric epidemic at Burnside, the one absolute cure suggested of innoculating all existing black labourers at the mine, and any newcomers, was rejected on the grounds that it would drive away labour. [70]

An outbreak of smallpox in the district in 1943 prompted the District Surgeon, who also served as medical officer at Burnside, to decide that all coloured employees at Burnside and the Company's By-Product Works near Waschbank should be vaccinated. In the following year 17 cases (including non-employees) occurred at Burnside and one at By-Products. Of these cases, 6 were fatal. [71]

Venereal disease was chronic. For instance, in the first three months of 1928 some 6 cases of syphilis were recorded at Burnside. [72] The medical officer at the mine extimated in 1938 that 70% of the mine labour was infected with VD. [73] Dr. Park Ross saw the major cause of the problem in squatters on adjoining farms in the immediate vicintiy of the mine property who depended for their livelihood on beer brewing and 'immorality'. In an effort to control the disease the mine employed a woman to round up females suspected of having venereal disease. She was paid 2/6 for every case brought in. The cases delivered averaged 4 or 5 per month. [74]

In order to counteract the high invalid rate of 10% of the labour population noted in 1923, Dr. Park Ross recommended additions to the rations issued at Burnside. In 1911 workers were issued with a daily quota of 3 lbs of mealie meal and 1,5 lbs of meat, and 2 quarts of beer on alternate Saturdays. [75] Four years later the Inspector of Native Labour asked for this rather inadequate diet to be supplemented by a weekly ration of fresh

vegetables, a request the Board of Directors asked the Manager to comply with as far as possible. [76] The General Manager was authorised in 1923 to include in the rations peanuts, peas and beans or oil as a preventative against scurvy. [77] By 1938 the rations issued to black labourers for the month of May, at a cost of 3.4 d per head, showed greater variety and balance, consisting of meal, mealies, cow peas, peanuts, salt, flour, rice, vegetables (pumpkins, potatoes and turnips), meat, beer and sugar. The rations for Indians, consisting of rice, meal, dholl, oil, salt and mutton were slightly more expensive at 5.3 d per head for the month. [78] The only recommendation the Mines Medical Inspector had to make was that the dry beans, occasionally issued, should be germinated. He noted that scurvy was rare on the mine. [79]

The wider cultural and leisure needs of the labouring population did not receive much serious attention from the Company before 1937. Missionaries were encouraged to provide church and school facilities. For instance, in 1917 the Wesleyan Native Mission was granted a piece of land, some second hand material, and a 25 donation for the erection of a church and school. [80] A squatter lease was granted to the Catholic Maria Ratschitz Mission in 1926 for similar purposes. [81] It is interesting to note that by 1948 the Burnside Native School was receiving assistance from the Education Department [82], and the Principal's request to the Company to build a Std. V classroom to keep the older children occupied, was readily acceded to because about 60% of the black children educated at Burnside eventually entered the Company's service. [83]

Beyond attempting to stamp out beer-drinking and the other activities on the neighbouring farms [84], the Company did not seriously consider the leisure time activities of the black labourers until 1937 when it was unusually difficult to recruit labour, and the Manager was asked to devise ways of making the mine more popular. In 1939 the old entertainment hall was

reconstructed and provisions made for a bioscope with weekly film shows. The compound was equipped with two loudspeakers and a gramophone and provision was made for a dancing floor and football grounds. [85]

One of the central features of life at Burnside was Mine Stores which not only supplied meat and mealies for the Company's rations on a contract basis, but also ran a general store, butcher shop, eating house, brewery, hotel and pub. The trading rights at Burnside were originally held by Messrs. Lazarus Brothers, who formed a limited liability company called Mine Stores (Natal) Ltd. in 1911. [86] With the active support of the Company, Mine Stores set about creating a monopoly at Burnside. For instance, when Farouz Khan wanted to transfer his retail licence from the old Dundee mine to 'Volker', a neighbouring farm to Burnside, Mine Stores opposed the transfer. While the Company did not lodge an official objection, the Company's secretary, Livingston, undertook to explain the position privately to the licensing officer. [87] When local farmers came to the compound to sell goats and sheep to the Indians for slaughter purposes, Mine Stores asked the Company to put a stop to the practice on the grounds that it interfered with their trading rights. The Company's solicitors argued that while there was no legal obligation to do so, there was a moral obligation, and so the farmers were asked to desist. [88] The attempt of an Indian to open a butchery adjacent to No. 2 mine was foiled in 1916. [89] When the Company ommitted to register trading rights granted by the Marais family over the whole of Burnside, members of the family disposed of the surface rights without indicating that the trading rights were excluded. Mine Stores was faced with the task of getting the trading rights from the owners of the various sub-divisions of the farm. Sokehill, the General Manager, was instructed to oppose the granting of any trading licence in these areas, and to place all the obstacles he possibly could in the way of those endeavouring to trade. [90] When one sub-division only remained to be secured, Lazarus

commented that if it could not be obtained, it would be 'inconvenient but not fatal'. [91]

As in the case of many other mines, the Eating House and Beer Hall were strategically situated between the compound and the mine shaft. 'When natives return from work', wrote the Director of Native Labour,

> 'there is a sense of impaired vitality which would be dissipated by rest and food. The position of most of the beer halls is at the gate of the Compound and natives coming off shift not unnaturally drift into the beer halls to restore their depleted energy regardless of their financial resources, which can be mortgaged under the credit system.' [92]

The infamous credit or 'token' system, which gave another twist to the monopolistic practices of Mine Stores, involved the issuing of coupons or tokens purporting to represent money, and then recovering the debts incurred on pay day at the mine office. Illustrative of an aspect of the credit system was Mine Store's request to the Company to be paid, out of the balance of unpaid wages unclaimed by a deserter, the amount owing on goods supplied to them. [93] In 1934 the government issued a notice in the Government Gazette effectively banning the credit system. Mine Stores appealed and the government lost the test case when the court ruled that the notice was ultra vires. [94] Although a visit to Burnside by the Director of Native Labour satisfied him that the credit system had not been abused there, he emphasised his determination to get rid of the system. [95] In 1935 the government threatened to introduce legislation to end the 'token' system unless the various mine stores undertook to limit such issues to 45% of the employee's wages. The storekeepers strongly opposed this restriction. [96] In 1938 a government commission was appointed. The 'token' system was subsequently banned from 1 March, and Williamson informed the Mine Stores that

the collection of debts in the Company's office would cease after 31 March. [97]

The Chief Native Commissioner for Natal wrote in 1912:

> 'Improve the lot and condition of the natives and their numbers will greatly increase.' [98]

The Dundee Coal Company was very slow to take this advice, although the question of maintaining an adequate supply of labour was an almost constant source of anxiety , particularly given the declining Indian complement to the mine. There was also increasingly stiff competition from mines in the Transvaal, whose labour requirements were expanding in 1929 from 183 000 to 195 000 workers at a time when the Portuguese government was reducing the maximum number of Mozambiquan blacks allowed into the Transvaal from 99 000 to 75 000. [99] The Chamber of Mines took selected Natal magistrates round the compounds of the Rand mines in order to show how much better blacks were treated there. [100] The General Manager of Tendega colliery reported that the Chamber of Mines was not only paying the rail fares of recruits to Johannesburg, but was also allowing them an expenses-paid week to go round the mines and select the one where they wished to work. Such treatment had enabled the Chamber to increase the number obtained in Zululand from 75 to 300 men a month. [101] Yet the Dundee Coal Company, in common with other Natal collieries, failed to develop a clearly defined, systematic recruiting policy. The Company made use of a variety of Labour Agents and Agencies operating in various districts of Natal and Zululand, Basutoland, Pondoland, East Griqualand and the Transkei. Among them were J.A. Vink (Basutoland), H. Hargreaves (Johannesburg), Messrs. Nicoll and Co. (Durban), W.A. McLuckie (Transkei) and Alec Robertson (Kimberley). [102] Such agents were usually advanced money on the 'impress system', whereby recruits would in turn be given money for the payment of fares and other expenses incurred in reaching the mine - a system which

always involved the risk of loss in the event of the death or default of the labour tout. [103] The director of Native Labour pointed out sardonically that although labour was predominantly 'voluntary' as distinct from recruited, the Natal coal industry had 227 labour agents licensed to maintain the small quota of recruited labour. [104]

The Dundee Coal Company appointed W.N. Shum in 1919 as its own Labour Manager for recruiting purposes with headquarters at Vryheid. Within a few months Shum's headquarters were moved to Dundee and then back to Vryheid again by 1928, partly because of the ambiguous position arising out of the prohibition on recruiting in declared labour districts. [105] In 1924 Shum was granted a motor car and petrol allowance and toured such areas as Basutoland, Pondoland, East Griqualand and Zululand, trying to gather in labour. [106]

In 1923 the Company opened up its own agency in the Transkei, appointing I.V. Seymour, the Compound Manager of Burnside No. 2 colliery, in charge. It was hoped that this would effect a better and more permanent supply at a lesser cost than the existing method of operating through separate agencies. In less than a year the Company withdrew and left Seymour to carry on an agency on his own account. Within a few months the recruiting office was closed down and the Company again made arrangements to recruit labour through responsible agents. [107]

In 1937 labour proved practically unobtainable. On a recruiting trip to Zululand Shum was informed of the reasons for Burnside's unpopularity amongst blacks [108], and so began the tardy process of making Burnside more attractive to potential workers.

The results of all these activities are reflected in a rare territorial analysis of the Burnside labour force, provided by the Mines Medical Inspector in 1938. The core of 557 came from Natal. This was followed by 362 from the Cape, 293 from

Basutoland and 103 from the Transvaal. Portuguese East Africa accounted for 65 (clandestine drifters into Natal over the Portuguese border), the Orange Free State 30, Swaziland and Bechuanaland 12 and 11 each, 7 from Nyasaland and one from Southern Rhodesia, making a total of 1441. [110]

During the Second World War when demand for coal was exceptionally high and the South African government wished to give Natal every opportunity to meet this demand for strategic reasons, certain concessions were made. In 1940 the recruitment of Mozambiquan blacks by the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association for the Natal collieries was permitted as a temporary measure. [111] This was discontinued in 1942 [112], but compensated by the Chamber of Mines sending labour to the Natal collieries through the Native Recruiting Corporation. [113] The Dundee Company acquired 127 workers for Burnside and 21 for Merthyr colliery in terms of this concession. [114] In 1943 the High Commissioner banned recruiting for the Natal collieries in Basutoland because of the poor living conditions provided. [115] This ban, and the desire to lift it, was a major factor in the Dundee Company's decision to construct a modern compound at Burnside. The ban was eventually lifted in 1944. [116] The continuing demand for coal, and acute labour shortages in the immediate post-war years, prompted the government to legalise the recruitment of Mozambiquan blacks who infiltrated into Natal, provided that the number recruited did not exceed 3 000. The concession was to last for 6 months. [117]

Given the labour supply difficulties confronting the Natal coal mines and the competition of the well organised N.R.C., it is surprising that a central recruiting organisation was not formed in Natal until 1943. The idea was first seriously mooted in 1914. [118] In 1918 the Natal Mine Managers Association found the scheme 'far too large' for a definite opinion to be expressed one way or the other. [119] Sokehill, the General Manager of the Dundee Company, had originally been in favour of a recruiting

organisation, but had changed his mind when he discovered that one of the proposed conditions was that the companies would have to pay for local blacks living adjacent to the mines, as well as those who came in voluntarily. [120] In 1921 the idea of the N.R.C. recruiting labour for the collieries was seriously considered, but the Dundee Company refused to join. [121] The final decision of the Dundee Coal Company, as one of the leading Natal collieries, not to join any recruiting organisation was a serious blow to any such endeavour. [122] When recruiting costs rose from 1.1.9 per head in 1922 , to 1.17.9 per head during the first seven months of 1923, Sokehill expressed renewed interest in a central recruiting agency. [123] Although much thought and discussion was given to the question over the years a major obstacle was the unwillingness of individual collieries to disclose the actual sources from which they obtained their labour. [124] As late as 1942 the idea of joining either W.N.L.A., or N.R.C., or both, was still being seriously considered. In the end Natal decided to go it alone. In 1943 the Natal Coal Owners's Society set up a limited liability company known as the Natal Coal Owners' Native Labour Association. The Dundee Coal Company subscribed 3 512 shares. [125] By 1945 the Company was actually experiencing a surplus of labour because the N.C.O.N.L.A. was sending more workers than ordered, and they could not be turned away because they were recruited labour. The Board of Directors believed that:

> 'The difficulty was that N.C.O.N.L.A. was now benefitting from all the spade work put in by the Labour Association and if all the Collieries were to temporarily suspend recruiting it would prove very detrimental to the future of N.C.O.N.L.A. and probably result in an all round shortage of labour.' [126]

The surface layout of Burnside mine set the white inhabitants apart from the often noisome valley in that the township or village for married miners was located on the plateau above, and the single quarters half way up the hill. Although it was a pleasant, attractive and relatively healthy setting, it confronted men after a long and arduous shift, often in temperatures of 90 to 98 degrees Fahrenheit, with a difficult hill climb of 300 feet 'vertical in the distance of three quarters of a mile.' [127] This daunting prospect was sweetened by the strategic location of the Mine Stores pub between the shaft and the hillside roads. Sanitary conditions in the village were reasonably good but the topography and insufficient water rendered waterborne sewerage impractical and too expensive. [128] The weak spot in the pail system was the transportation of the night soil from the top of the hill for incineration on the mine dump in the valley below. This disadvantage was remedied in 1928 with the construction of an incinerator on top of the hill. [129]

Unlike their coloured counterparts, whites were rapidly equipped with recreational facilities such as a hall, reading room, billiard table and film shows, making the transition from silent films to 'talkies' at a much earlier date. [130] But the white community did not escape the neglect that tended to characterise the Company's handling of social matters. Already in 1926 accommodation was insufficient, a chronic condition which at times inhibited the ability of the mine to attract suitable staff. [131] In the general probing of health conditions attendant on the enteric epidemic, five houses were condemned by the Sanitary Inspector as unfit for human habitation, a condition the Company had recognised by not charging rent.

> 'The tenants of these house had permitted the premises to get into a very filthy state, some of them keeping fowls, pigeons, goats etc which were kept in or under their houses.'

It was perhaps ironic that the Board of Directors should send a circular to all the tenants of the houses at the mine reminding them of the provisions of the Public Health Act. [132]

While set apart in living conditions, blacks and whites were united in the common dangers and discomforts of their working places in 'a difficult coal field to win'. [133] Although the No. 1 shaft was 140 feet deep and the No.2 mine access was an adit in the hillside, the extension of the workings under the plateau meant that the coal was being won at a depth of 712 feet [134], which, in conjunction with the overhead whinstone sheet and numerous dykes, rendered Burnside a gassy mine with the ever-present danger of explosions. A turbulent geological past had subjected the coal measures to considerable horizontal and vertical movement of the earth's crust, causing fractures in the coal and overlying strata, and exposing the workmen to the hazards of falls of roof and coal to an unusual degree in the process of extraction. [135] The situation of all the mine entrances in the valley at the southerly limit of the coalfield made access to and from the working faces very arduous. In 1926 Sokehill calculated that it took employees on an average 1.25 hours to go to and from their working places in a mine where the average height of the coal seam was 3 feet 6 inches, which did not make for comfortable walking conditions. [136] The coal seams at Burnside were not horizontal but undulating and it often took 2-3 trammers to push one hutch of coal from the working face to the haulage rope. [137]

The safety of men working under these conditions was shaped by the effectiveness of the regulations framed under the Mines and Works Act of 1911, which were constantly being added to and revised in the light of experience and accidents that had occurred, the extent to which these were observed by the white miners who were responsible for blasting operations and ensuring

that working places were in a safe condition for work, and the quality and rigour of supervision exercised by officals and management. An examination of two of the five recorded instances of ignitions of firedamp and explosions at Burnside, all of which occurred before 1931, suggests that the lack of care shown in the general condition of the surface of the mine was also evident underground. Although Burnside No. 2 was less fiery than No. 1, it was the scene of the two worst explosions recorded in the annals of Burnside. 'A semi-fiery mine', observed the Inspector of Mines,

> 'is usually the most dangerous, because men look upon the fiery mine regulations as unnecessary there, and will evade them unless the strictest supervision is exercised by the officials.' [138]

At 10 a.m. on 14 August 1922, 14 black miners were killed and 6 fatally injured in an explosion at Burnside No. 2 colliery. Three of those who died were on their first shift. Prior to the explosion, the ventilating fan had broken down and the men had been withdrawn from their working places. While the fan was being repaired, firedamp (methane gas) built up at the working faces, and extinguished most of the flame safety lamps when the men returned to work. A man whose lamp had remained alight, opened it to relight the lamps of his colleagues, thereby causing the explosion. In doing so he was fatally contravening the regulations, yet his action was understandable. Management had not provided a relighting station underground. To get a new light involved a 3 000 yard round trip out of the mine and back again in a narrow four-foot seam. The ensuing inquiry into the accident also revealed that the lamps, lamp room and records at the mine were kept in a shocking state, and the lamps were not properly exmamined before going underground. A defective lamp could as easily have caused an explosion, as the miner opening

the lamp. The report on the accident highlighted the problem of poor supervision at the mine. [139]

In 1930, Burnside No. 2 was the scene of the worst disaster ever experienced at the Burnside mine. On 20 May W.H. Jenkins, a white miner, fired an insufficiently tamped shot in a hard dolerite dyke without first testing for gas. The ensuing blow out ignited firedamp which exploded, killing him and 37 black colleagues. [140] It took more than a month to recover all the bodies because of the roof falls and the copious emissions of gas at the scene of the accident. [141] The accident enquiry exposed yet again the slack supervision at the mine.

Neglect of their duties on the part of white miners and slack supervision by management, which was such a strong feature of the accident pattern at Burnside, was not unrelated to the policy of the Board of Directors of the Dundee Coal Company in seeming consistently to take decisions with short-term economic considerations in view, whether they involved questions of mining policy, development and equipment, or the provision of accommodation, health and recreational facilities for the workers. The inordinately long roadways which made miners tired even before they began their work, was the result of developing the mine for quick returns in the initial phase, and the failure to take subsequent remedial action because of the expense entailed. The decision to develop the mine fully before resorting to pillar extraction, brought better economic yields in the short term, but in the long term produced escalating working costs and poor roof and pillar conditions. There was also a tendency to be tardy in replacing or renewing mining equipment, or introducing better equipment, because of immediate cost considerations.

This latter point is well illustrated by the example of lighting in the mine. In 1922 Sokehill had pointed out that:

'The west side of the mine is exceedingly dangerous. The present lamps do not give enough light. A boy was recently killed in this part of the mine through a fall of roof. Better light would give the miner a better chance of examining the roof carefully which would tend to diminish accidents. Better light would give better results in every way. ...'142

His recommendation that electric lamps be bought went unheeded. The need for such lamps was underlined by the tragic explosion later in that year. Only in May 1924 was a decision finally made to import some electric lamps. 143

Injuries arising out of accidents were often exacerbated by the poor quality of treatment and hospital services on the surface. For instance, in 1923 N. Lubezi, a haulage attendant, was injured when a hutch ran over his foot. The wound turned septic and he died a month later. 144 In 1927, F. Tokwana, a loader, was admitted to hospital after being struck by a fall of shale. The Hospital Superintendent thought his injuries were trivial and merely treated him for shock instead of reporting the case to the Medical Officer of the mine. When he died suddenly the post mortem showed that he was suffering from a fractured pelvis and internal bleeding. 145

Before 1911, compensation for those injured or killed in accidents was entirely at the discretion of the coal owners. The Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911 introduced compulsory insurance for black workers for the first time. Whites and Indians were covered by the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Act. For blacks compensation payments were small and were only paid if the accident were not the result of any act or omission on the part of the victim. The Director of Native Labour was responsible for assessing the amount of compensation. In cases of permanent or partial incapacity, a sum of between 1 and 20 was awarded, according to the degree of incapacity. In

cases of total permanent incapacity, or death, a sum of between 30 and 50 was awarded.[146] In cases where the victim was the author of his own misfortune and therefore not entitled to compensation, the Director of Native Labour would on occasion appeal to the Company to make a 'compassionate grant'. For instance, B. Ngwenya was totally paralysed through being crushed between tub and roof, while illegally hitching a ride in the long haulage way at Burnside. The Director of Native Labour asked that a compassionate grant of 50 be made to him. The Dundee Board of Directors refused, but agreed to provide him with daily and weekly rations.[147] In contrast with this case, the dependents of W.H. Jenkins, whose illegal acts had caused the 1930 explosion, were given an ex gratia payment of 500 by the insurance company even though the evidence given at the official enquiry revealed that no payment was due for compensation.[148] The compensation assessed for the dependents of the innocent black victims of this disaster was 30.[149] In 1934 blacks were brought under the provisions of the new Workmen's Compensation Act with an improved scale of compensation.[150]

A contributing factor to accidents was t long hours worked. Periodically a minimum basis of hours worked per week was established with additional hours worked being paid at overtime rates. In 1912 the basic minimum for the Natal coal fields was 60 hours; in 1939, 51 hours. During periods of high demand, or when the truck supply was plentiful, the length of a shift worked could extend to 13 hours and more.[151] Rates of pay were also determined by trade fluctuations. The maximum rates of pay for white miners ranged from 15 to 28 shillings per shift, depending on the state of prosperity of the coal trade, while that of blacks ranged between 1/5d and 2/3d per shift.[152]

A survey of labour conditions under the aegis of the Dundee Coal Company reveals an almost unrelieved pattern of harsh and exploitative conditions, which was by no means an untypical feature of the Natal coal fields. The key to the situation lay

in the nature of the coal trade as it developed in Natal. An industry that was based on the bunker and export trades was exposed to wild fluctuations of depression and prosperity, and was always characterised by uncertainty, which inhibited wise long-term planning, and inculcated a pathological cost consciousness. In this kind of environment each colliery tended to look to its own interests, rather than seek to develop structures that would place the industry on a more rational commercial basis with greater prosperity for the industry as a whole. The long gestation of the N.C.O.N.L.A. is an example of this. Although ruinous competition characterised the inland market for the Natal collieries during the early years of the industry, it was only in 1931 that the Natal Associated Collieries was formed to regulate prices and conditions of sale. Rationalistion of the bunker trade came relatively early with the formation of the Natal Coal Owners' Association in 1913, but the subsequent history of this Association was a precarious one. One highly successful combination of coal owners, which came quickly into being without a long gestation period, was the Natal Coal Owners' Society formed in 1909. The aims of the Society were not commercial but rather purely to protect the interests of coal owners and generally oversee the working and welfare of the collieries in Natal. A massive tightening up of mining regulations in the aftermath of the Glencoe explosion of 1908 was the immediate spur to the creation of the N.C.O.S., for coal owners feared the implications of these regulations for working costs. The N.C.O.S. subsequently acted as a successful pressure group retarding the attempts of government to improve living and working conditions on the collieries. The Native Labour, Health and Mining inspectorates stood Janus-faced between coal owners on the one hand, and workers on the other. An effective workers' response was inhibited by the racial stratification of the work force and the scattered and isolated nature of the collieries in Natal. Attempts at organising labour were made on racial lines.

In 1927 the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union attempted to

organise black miners in Natal. The Dundee Company blamed the shortage of labour experienced in that year on these activities, and Shum, the Labour Manager, had no doubt that

> 'when they are properly organised the coloured employees will formulate their demands.' 153

Advertisments for an I.C.U. meeting drew a crowd of 4 000 to Vryheid, but the meeting ended in disorder when the spokesmen did not appear. 154 The Company acted ruthlessly against anyone suspected of having I.C.U. leanings. A senior black clerk was dismissed for this reason. 155 Members of the sugar and coal industries met in Durban to formulate methods to counteract I.C.U. activities and wean the 'better class natives' away from their influence. 156 Prominent among their allies was John Dube who was well rewarded with grants to his educational institution. 157

In 1945 Indians formed the Natal Non-European Mine Workers' Union and questioned the Dundee Company on matters of housing, working hours, wages and leave. The Company's response was a decision not to engage any new Indians and replace existing Indian employees with blacks wherever possible. 158

White miners in Natal made an unsuccessful attempt to form a Miners' Union in 1910. In 1913 a branch of the Transvaal Miners' Association was formed and in September 1916, a Mine Workers' Association confined to Natal, which eventually linked up with the Transvaal Mine Workers' Union in May 1935. White union activities concentrated primarily on questions of pay, leave and hours of work, and in negotiations on these matters through a Conciliation Board set up in 1916, always played second fiddle to the coal owners.

Strikes were a rare phenomenon in the Natal coal fields and invariably ended in victory for the coal owners.

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