

https://dspace.org/

Agriculture in Lydenburg, 1900-1960

Schirmer, Stefan

1994-05-16
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9693

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW 7003 SEMINAR ROOM
AT 4.00pm 16th May 1994

Title: **Agriculture in Lydenburg, 1900-1960.**

by: **Stefan Schirmer**

No **357**

AGRICULTURE IN LYDENBURG, 1900-1960

Historians opposed to structural analysis and working with models that place a greater emphasis on human agency have argued that white farmers were always highly stratified. For the period before 1930, a number of studies demonstrated that this was indeed the case, but very little detailed analysis emerged to show that stratification continued after 1930, into the 1990s.[1] Instead, despite some statistical analyses showing that 20 per cent of white farmers produced 70 per cent of output throughout the 1950s, the literature is still dominated by assertions that 'white farming' became 'capitalist' or 'experienced an agricultural revolution' sometime between 1930 and 1960.[2] These approaches are unsatisfactory, because they ignore the majority of white farmers who made only small contributions to agriculture's GDP. Although many of these farmers experienced structural transformations, they did not become 'capitalist farmers', nor did they fully participate in an 'agricultural revolution'. These farmers remained dependent on state aid and cheap labour, and their inability to become independent profit maximisers has had important consequences for South Africa's current transformation. It has provided the economic context for many farmers' right-wing allegiances.

This paper attempts to make a contribution towards a more stratified picture of white farming. It focuses on the district of Lydenburg, where most whites today appear to support the notion of a 'boere-staat'. The paper argues that districts like Lydenburg must be differentiated from more productive districts elsewhere in the Transvaal. Further, farmers within Lydenburg were also stratified, which meant that changes in the district always had an uneven impact. From this perspective rural transformations were not homogenous phenomena imposed from above. Every change was contested at a number of levels: by white farmers threatened by the growing dominance of the market, and by Africans seeking to maintain access to land.

The paper focuses on how economic processes transformed Lydenburg. From 1902 the district was gradually integrated more fully into the wider South African economy, and experienced spurts of growth that raised most farmers' standard of living. However, the paper shows that farmers did not benefit equally from this growth. Some farmers were always more ready to take risks, and thus benefited the most, while others remained cautious, failed to expand their enterprises, and

---

1 For the pre-1930 period see especially T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The southern highveld to 1914* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1986); H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in rural South Africa 1924-1930* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1987).

2 For the statistics and an argument about 'agricultural revolution' see Jones and Müller, *The South African Economy, 1910-90* (London, Macmillan, 1992), p. 239. For a summary of the transition to capitalism literature see, H. Bradford, 'Highways, Byways, and Culs-de-sac: The transition to agrarian Capitalism in revisionist South African history', in J. Brown *et al*, *History From South Africa: Alternative visions and practices* (Philadelphia, Temple Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 46-47.

struggled to retain their land. A growing number of these farmers eventually gave up this struggle and moved to the urban areas. The paper also demonstrates that both economic accumulation and attempts to retain land in the face of hostile market forces were dependent on various forms of state aid.

Before examining the processes of economic growth and stratification in Lydenburg, we must first place the district in a wider context. During the nineteenth century, Lydenburg was described as an 'economic backwater'. In the course of the following century the district became more dynamic, but, in relation to other regions, it remained backward. Little comparative analysis has been done on Transvaal districts, but available statistics describing the value produced by different categories of farmers in each agricultural district allow us to make some comparative assessments for 1962; at the end of the period of discussion. At that time Lydenburg's average output per farmer placed the district in forty fifth place out of a total of fifty five agricultural districts. Lydenburg's average was less than a quarter of the average achieved in lowveld districts like Barberton and Nelspruit, and western Transvaal districts like Lichtenburg and Schweizer Reineke.[3]

Lydenburg's first disadvantage was its distance away from any significant urban centre. The distance between Lydenburg and Johannesburg is, for example, 334 kilometres. Secondly, the soils in Lydenburg are not as fertile as those in the western Transvaal maize belt and the eastern Transvaal lowveld. The latter, neighbouring, area has the additional advantage of a tropical climate that favours fruit and citrus production. Some oranges were grown in the lower lying valleys of Lydenburg, where quasi-lowveld conditions prevailed, but frost often destroyed these crops.[4]

Although the district was backward, it was not unimportant. It was a major wheat producing area in the Transvaal, and one of its leading farmers, A. Op t' Hof, played an central role in the establishment of a wheat board in the 1930s.[5] Further, the sheep raised in the district were of a high quality, although their number was relatively small. Most importantly the farmers of the district can be regarded as representative of poorer, less-capitalised Transvaal farmers, who depended on labour tenants until the 1970s, and who played a crucial political role in the 1948 election. These farmers constantly pressurised the state for further protection from market forces, and thus had an important influence on the economy.

1900-1930

Agriculture in the district was in bad shape at the turn of the century. The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war had disrupted trade routes - which affected both farmers and transport riders - and had eliminated the payment of mineral options.

---

3 Union of South Africa, *Agricultural Census No. 37, 1962* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1967).

4 *Lydenburg News*, 4 February 1938.

5 *The South African Farmer*, 3 October 1930.

The latter was a crucial source of revenue for the landowners of Lydenburg, especially as many sold 'keep alive options' that required the buyers to pay an annual fee to keep the option alive.[6] Thus the outbreak of the war cut Lydenburg off from markets and cash. As the war dragged on, invested capital was destroyed when the fighting, including attacks on farms by Africans, led to the destruction of homesteads and agricultural equipment.[7]

In 1902 the Standard Bank only had two 'noteworthy debtors': Abel Erasmus Snr. and Jnr. The former made his fortune before the war, by extorting 'taxes' from Africans, and investing some capital in agriculture.[8] The rest of the white farmers, who only had their land, and whose capital savings had not been large enough to survive the war, basically had to start over. They were assisted in this endeavour by state funded 'Repatriation Boards' that compensated larger farmers for their losses and 'alleviated some of the distress among the poorer class of farmer'.[9]

State assistance reduced some of the hardship, but the regional economy in the early 1910s remained depressed as Lydenburg waited for a viable transport link to the urban markets of Johannesburg and Pretoria.[10] Because of the remoteness of markets there was a consistent tendency towards overproduction (except during those periods when locusts destroyed the crops) and the most profitable activities were transport riding and trading.[11] The former activity was threatened by the outbreak of 'rhodesian redwater' amongst cattle in 1904; which limited transporting to those who owned donkeys. The latter activity was made difficult by the large number of traders, which meant that only those who had been in the district for a long time, and had access to kin and friendship networks, could be assured of a steady supply of produce. Debt also tied farmers to traders and gave the individual trader the ability to force farmers to trade with him.[12]

In 1909 the railway reached Lydenburg from the Pretoria-Belfast line, but,

---

6 Standard Bank Archives (SBA), General Managers Correspondence (GMC), Letters to London, p. 244, 12 July 1899.

7 P. Marwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1981), p. 101; SBA, Inspection Reports (INSP), 1/1/242, Report on the Lydenburg Branch, 2 September 1902.

8 P. Delius, 'Abel Erasmus: Power and Profit in the Eastern Transvaal', in W. Beinart *et al*, eds., *Putting a Plough to the Ground* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1986); *Bantoe*, February 1955, p. 15.

9 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on the Lydenburg Branch, 2 September 1902; T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A modern history* (London, Macmillan, 1991), p. 205: 'The actual sum spent on relief and repatriation amounted to over £16 million, in grants and loans administered by a Repatriation Department in the case of whites'.

10 TAD, CT, No. FM4, Vol. 315, Chief Engineers Report and Estimates for the Lydenburg Railway, 17 February 1918: It was estimated that the railway would cause a significant increase in the districts productivity.

11 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 12 August 1904; For conditions in neighbouring Belfast see Transvaal Archive Depot (TAD), G, No. 828/06, Vol. 517, Agricultural Report, 30 October 1906.

12 Central Archives Depot (CAD), Department of Agriculture (LDB), No. R2542, Vol. 1572, J.A. Theron to Department of Agriculture, c1928; Long established traders included the Dutch immigrant Schurink, and the British immigrants McGee and Morgan. The more recent Indian traders used lower prices and barter to establish themselves in Lydenburg. See *House of Assembly Debates*, 17 March 1927.

according to the Standard Bank inspector, this had little effect on production in the district.[13] In that year the inspector filed the following report:

> 'From a farming point of view the Lydenburg district cannot be generally classed as good. The products consist chiefly of wool, maize and wheat, but the quantities turned out are not heavy. Sheep only do well in certain parts, and the area of arable land is not large.'[14]

Despite this pessimistic view, the levels of agricultural activity did increase in the ten years after the railway came.[15] The district had the slight advantage of being less prone to droughts because it was largely a middle-veld area, which received rain even when the lowveld and highveld received none.[16] Consequently the district was hardly affected by the drought of 1914, which allowed the farmers to benefit fully from the expanding markets and higher prices produced by the First World War.[17] Many farmers, having escaped the ravages of drought, were able to use the extra cash generated by the bigger profits of 1915 and 1916 to pay off their debts with the Land Bank, and local traders like R.J. Schurink.[18] These tendencies continued into 1919, although an outbreak of rust in the wheat crop of 1917, and the influenza epidemic of 1919 - which prevented the effective harvesting of the 1918 wheat crop and the sowing of the 1919 maize crop - hampered agriculture somewhat.[19]

The depression that began in 1920 put an end to the expansion of production and the availability of capital. The evidence indicates a number of foreclosures, although there is no specificity on the precise numbers.[20] There was a leniency on the part of the Standard Bank, who felt that they would recoup their debts after conditions returned to normal.[21] Nevertheless, the population statistics show that a number of people left Lydenburg during this time, and other evidence indicates a high level of indigence in the district.[22] Prices improved in 1924, but

---

13 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 29 August 1910; TAD, G, No. 828, Vol. 517, Magistrate Lydenburg, Report for 1909, 20 June 1909.

14 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 20 January 1909.

15 Available figures indicate a consistent upward trend in wheat and wool production, with Maize fluctuating. See *Agricultural Census 1918* (Cape Town, Gov. Printer, UG 53-1919); *Agricultural Census 1919* (Cape Town, Gov. Printer, UG 20-1920).

16 Interview with J. Mason, Isando, 1990.

17 Despite the instability caused by the 1914 Rebellion. See CAD, South African Police (SAP), No. 6/245/14/286, Vol. 24, District Commandant to Deputy Commissioner SAP, 10 April 1915.

18 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 5 September 1917.

19 CAD, LDB, No. R1074/5/14, Vol. 951, M. Jackson to Secretary of Agriculture, 6 January 1918; CAD, LDB, No. R1074/5/14, Vol. 951, S Pelbalan to Under-Secretary, Agriculture, 19 March 1917: Indicates that Sekhukhuneland was struck by a severe drought and heat-wave, which apparently did not affect Lydenburg; *Minutes of Evidence of the Eastern Transvaal Natives Land* (Stubbs)*Committee* (U.G. 32-18) (Cape Town, Government Printer, 1918), Lydenburg, 22 October 1917, Evidence of G.C. Schoeman.

20 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 12 March 1928, shows four insolvencies in 1926 and three in 1927.

21 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Managers Reply to Inspection Report on Lydenburg, 1 December 1921.

22 Union of South Africa, *Fourth Census of the Population of the Union of South Africa, 4 May 1926* (Pretoria, Gov. Printer, UG 4-'31) shows that the population in Lydenburg (adjusted for change in size of district) only increased by 82 in the period 1921-1926; CAD, Department of Justice (JUS) Public Service Inspector's Report Lydenburg, 13 April 1929: Shows that the average annual

in 1925, soon after an outbreak of east coast fever amongst cattle, the district's luck *vis à vis* droughts ran out.[23] This time they were hit with a serious drought that lasted until 1928. After eight years of unfavourable circumstances it is not surprising that in 1928 there were farmers like C.J. Smit and J.P. Nel, who were creditors that the Standard Bank regarded as extremely undesirable. Smit had lost all his capital, and was permitted to occupy, on a share-cropping basis, the farm he once owned. Nel was on the verge of bankruptcy.[24]

A visiting agricultural officer's report reveals that in some parts of the district the farming community had been thrown onto the defensive. Many farmers had given up all hope of 'improving their farms', and concentrated instead on survival. The report on farmers in the Krugerspost area states:

> 'I visited ... Mr Van Der Merwe who is chairman of the [agricultural] society. His is a tale of woe: the society is dead or nearly so and he is in despair, for he says he can not get the members to wake up. They are, he affirms, retrogressing fast, and he has asked for a special visit from me, to see if we can not get them to wake up and take a new interest in their farming - owing to drought - bad markets etc. etc. - the farmers have become low-spirited. Their farming is going the same way as at Ohrigstad and something must be done to instill new life and methods.'[25]

The Ohrigstad Settlement Scheme, established in 1912, bordered on the Krugerspost area, and here poverty was even more endemic. The scheme contained 68 settlers whose plots differed in size from six to twenty morgen.[26] Some of the settlers were able to place all twenty morgen under irrigation, planting wheat in winter and maize in summer, but this practice quickly exhausted the soil. All the settlers struggled to keep their heads above water, and half of them faced losing of their plots in 1927.[27]

In other parts of Lydenburg conditions were slightly better. In the southern part of the district farmers were producing a high grade of wool, which fetched up to 27d per pound on the market. The average price for wool in 1928 was 16 to 18d.[28] Those farmers who irrigated their fields and grew wheat in winter produced 32000 bags in 1927, and some enterprising farmers diversified into barley, producing 12000 bags, which they sold to the breweries.[29]

---

population growth rate amongst whites in Lydenburg during 1927 and 1928 was 122; CAD, JUS, No. 21/56/1, Vol. 1076, Agreement between Department of Labour and Dutch Reformed Church, undated, c1927; CAD, Department of Lands (LDE), No. 5069, Vol. 488, T.H. Byrne to Government Attorney, 19 November 1922.

23 CAD, JUS, No. 3/234/21, Vol. 310, Inspection Report on Magistrates Office Lydenburg, 25 September 1925; *Agricultural Census No. 9, 1925* (U.G. 24-28) (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1928): 1045 farms reported losses due to weather and other conditions.

24 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 12 March 1928.

25 CAD, R, No. 2543, Vol. 1572, G.H. Cock to The Principal, School of Agriculture, Potchefstroom, 9 July 1928.

26 CAD, LDB, No. R2542, Vol. 1572, Report: Ohrigstad Settlement, 19 July 1927.

27 CAD, R, No. 2542, Vol. 1572, J.A. Theron to Department of Agriculture, c1928; CAD, LDE, No. 22108, Vol. 1158, Inspection Report on Lot 21, 11 April 1919; 13 May 1925; 14 November 1928.

28 Department of Agriculture, *Crops and Markets*, October 1928, Vol. VII, No. 2.

29 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 12 March 1928.

Many farmers continued to generate cash with their land, a policy that had its roots in such nineteenth century practices as selling mineral rights. During good years farmers often invested in land rather than in 'improvements' like dams and fences. They then leased this land out, or acquired mortgages from the Land Bank and other Banks. Some farmers were actually highly skilled at this practice:

> 'they go around to all the banks to "raise the wind", and the balance sheets they furnish cannot be relied upon. Liabilities to other banks and merchants are not disclosed, the value of farms inflated, and, in several known cases, farmers have fraudulently misrepresented that farms, being purchased by instalments through the Land Board, were actually their freehold property'.[30]

This risky practice suggests that farmers were prepared to gamble with land ownership, but it does not necessarily mean that they were unconcerned about maintaining a rural lifestyle. Grosskopf's study, based on interviews conducted with Transvaal farmers during 1930, showed that land ownership was often regarded as unimportant and optional while the possibilities of tenant and share-cropping arrangements were abundant.[31] As Grosskopf noted farmers were becoming less inclined to rent their land to *bywoners*, but in Lydenburg the practice was still widespread in 1938. *Bywoners* in the district were sometimes given as little as six morgen irrigated land and twelve morgen dry land - for which they had to pay with one third of their produce - while others received as much as 80 morgen irrigated land, and 100 morgen dry land. During the period 1935-1939, 149 bywoners in Lydenburg registered for the state's Tenant Assistance Scheme.[32] Many were poor, but determined to make a living on the land. As one tenant put it: 'I opened my eyes in agriculture, and I will shut them in agriculture'.[33]

Land was still abundant in the Lydenburg district as a whole. For example, in 1929, 651 farmers reported to the Department of Agriculture; they occupied farms that in total consisted of 403536 morgen. Only 21398 morgen of this land was 'under agricultural crops'.[34] Lydenburg was a mountainous district, which restricted the amount of arable land, and the best land was limited to the soil riparian to the rivers that ran through the valleys. The figures cited above nevertheless suggest that large amounts of arable land remained unused, and this land was therefore still available for *bywoners*.

Evidence about Lydenburg's relatively remote Steelpoort Valley indicates that by 1929 more land than before was occupied by white farmers. Nevertheless, land was not yet scarce, and large tracts were either unoccupied or occupied by Africans. In 1917, the Steelpoort Valley was beginning to be occupied by whites,

---

30 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 12 March 1928.

31 J.F.W. Grosskopf, 'Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus', in *Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa*, (Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesia, 1932), pp. 37-38.

32 CAD, VWR, No. B645/192/1, Vols. 104-106.

33 CAD, VWR, No. B645/192/1, Vol. 106, Application of G.S. Mare, 1936.

34 *Agricultural Census No. 12, 1929* (U.G. 35-30) (Gov. Printer, Pretoria, 1930).

who had previously used it as winter grazing land for their cattle and sheep.[35] In 1922, The Minister of Lands, Deneys Reitz, travelled through the Steelpoort Valley, and submitted the following report:

> 'The farms lying riparian to the Steelpoort River are, with one exception, privately owned [by whites], and they are all under beneficial occupation at the present moment. In travelling down along the river I was greatly struck by the tremendous development that has gone on there during recent years, and by the large tracts that have been placed under irrigation.'[36]

We can, however, assume that Reitz, whose department was sensitive to white land claims, exaggerated the extent of white occupation and cultivation in the area.[37] A report submitted by the Standard Bank inspector in 1929 presents a very different picture of the valley. The inspector claimed that, 'the potentialities of the Steelpoort Valley are well spoken of, but this area remains practically uncultivated.'[38] It appears that the extent of white control had been extended during the 1920s, but it is highly unlikely that all 2800 morgen of estimated irrigable land was being put under the plough by white farmers.[39]

By 1929, when stock markets were crashing in other parts of the world, Lydenburg's economy had progressed very slowly and with great difficulty. In fact, farming in the district was finally finding its feet in 1930, when the effects of the depression began to manifest themselves on the produce markets. In August of that year the following detailed report was submitted on the various farming activities in Lydenburg:

> 'Sheep: On the highveld wooled sheep do very well, and the wool is of good quality. There are approximately 72000 wooled sheep and 17000 non-wooled sheep in the district, the latter mostly belong to Natives.
> Cattle: This industry is sadly neglected, the cattle in the area being mostly "scrub"; and with the local type of farmer little improvement of the breed can be expected. The average farmer does not appear to consider it necessary to grow winter feed for his cattle. Consequently, at this time of year they are in miserably poor condition. There are 88965 head in the district, of which 63864 belong to Natives.
> Wheat: This is the principal grain crop in the district, and is all grown under irrigation. Last season's crop was poor, owing to rust and hail. About 25000 bags were reaped as compared with 32000 for the previous season. This season's crop looks good, and it is estimated that approximately 40000 bags will be reaped.
> Maize: This crop is not grown to any extent in the district. Last season's crop was approximately 40000 bags, and the crop just reaped is slightly in excess of that figure.
> Barley: The demand by the breweries for this crop has fallen off, consequently the

---

[35] See Chapter One of thesis.

[36] CAD, Native Affairs Department (NTS), No. 298/308 Vol. 3504, Colonel Reitz to Minister of Native Affairs, 25 September 1922; CAD, LDB, No. R1074/5/14, Vol. 951, Nieuwenhuize to Under-Secretary of Agriculture, 12 August 1917: Indicates that there were only ten white farmers in the Steelpoort valley at that time.

[37] See Chapter One for the Department of Land's conflicts with the NAD over who should be allowed to occupy the area.

[38] SBA, INSP, 1/1/294, Lydenburg Inspection Report, 30 May 1929.

[39] Stubbs Commission, Lydenburg, 22 October 1917, Evidence of Mr. Yates.

farmers have sown less this year. It is estimated that the total production will approximate 4000 bags, which is just half of the previous crop.[40]

Almost on the same day that this report was filed, the Native Economic Commission (NEC) visited the Lydenburg district and heard the evidence of some local farmers. Read in isolation, the evidence given by these farmers seems to indicate that major economic advances had taken place in the district.[41] This contradiction of the description presented above arises because the NEC spoke to Lydenburg's leading farmers: Elias De Souza was the chairman of the oldest and strongest farmers union, Hendrik Neethling was the chairman of the farmers organisation in the Steelpoort Valley, and Marthinus Van Rensburg had recently achieved a record yield of over 60 bags per morgen.[42] The descriptions offered by these farmers suggests that they always sought to expand their production, no matter how adverse the conditions.[43] It will be shown below, however, that this attitude was the exception rather than the rule in Lydenburg.

1930-1939

The assertions about the expansion of agriculture in Lydenburg made by farmers to the NEC at the beginning of 1930 were also based on the forthcoming crop, which represented a significant jump in productivity. Farmers thus first responded to the lower prices of the depression by increasing their output. But during the following two years their spirits were clearly broken, as production dropped once again to near the 1929 levels.[44]

The farmers of Lydenburg did not, however, suffer equally during the depression. Their fortunes varied according to their resources, and according to the kinds of crops they produced.[45] For example, 1931 and 32 were bad years for the district as a whole, but wool farmers fared particularly badly because their's was primarily an export crop. Wool prices firstly fell because of the depression, and were then reduced further by the 'gold standard crisis'.[46] Maize and Wheat prices, on the other hand, were already protected and prices therefore did not hit the same lows as wool.[47]

The overall situation in Lydenburg during 1931 was said to be 'somewhat

---

[40] SBA, INSP, 1/1/304, Lydenburg Inspection Report, 25 August 1930.

[41] Wits Historical Papers Library (WHPL), AD1438, Native Economic Commission (NEC), Lydenburg, 21 August 1930.

[42] Wits Historical Papers Library (WHPL), AD1438, Native Economic Commission (NEC), Lydenburg, 21 August 1930.

[43] CAD, LDB, No. R1074/5/14, Vol. 951, Department of Agriculture to P.E. Swart, 13 September 1929: That there were others in the district who were similarly 'progressive' is confirmed by the activities of P.E. Swart, who doubled the area he planted with wheat in 1929, and expanded the overall area under cultivation on his farm from 274 morgen to 420 morgen.

[44] SBA, INSP, 1/1/331, Lydenburg Report, 15 March 1933; In 1931 the price was 22/6 per bag, SBA, INSP, 1/1/331, Lydenburg Report, 14 November 1931.

[45] D.H. Houghton, *The South African Economy* (Cape Town, Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 64.

[46] Houghton, *South African Economy*, p. 55.

[47] F. Wilson, 'Farming 1866-1966', in L. Thompson & M. Wilson, eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1969), p. 137; Houghton, *South African Economy*, p. 51.

depressed', and a survey by the Department of Inland Revenue indicated that conditions were getting worse rather than better in 1932:

> 'The district has been badly hit by the closing down of several mines in the district, while the one large asbestos mine has reduced its establishment considerably. The wheat crop at present is very promising, but on the whole the prospects in the district are not too bright. A shortfall in revenue [must be expected].'[48]

Despite the railway, many wheat and maize farmers had continued to produce for local mines and the closures thus represented an additional headache for residents already affected by lower prices.[49] During this time many wool farmers slaughtered their sheep rather than trying to sell the wool. Only 2000 bales of wool were produced during 1930 and the number of sheep was declining rapidly in 1932 as farmers were 'living on their sheep'.[50]

In 1933 maize and wheat production once again increased, but prices were still dropping in early 1933 when they went from 20/ to 18/.[51] Nevertheless this expansion at a time when crops in other districts were wiped out by drought shows that Lydenburg managed to escape the worst effects of the devastating 1932/33 drought.[52] Consequently, the district was once again able to benefit fully from the generally improved conditions that began in 1934.

The factor behind the subsequent expansion of agriculture in Lydenburg appears to be an improvement in price controls. The foundations of this process were laid in 1932 with the establishment of the Wheat Board. Wilson points out that 'the introduction of a quantitative wheat import control combined with the power to fix the price of imported wheat well above the international level forced up the price of the local product and led to a massive extension of wheat farming and a progressive reduction of wheat imports'. In the Transvaal the area under wheat increased by 8.7 per cent before 1935.[53] Wilson also claims that Maize subsidies in the 1930s led to an expansion of production.[54] Jones and Müller show, however, that these increases were not sustained after 1935. They argue that 'in volume terms there was little increase in wheat and maize production between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s, though there were considerable annual fluctuations'.[55] The new price controls therefore only provided an initial boost, which was probably helped along by 1933's devaluation and the subsequent

---

48 CAD, JUS, No. 552/29, Vol. 462, Inspection Report of Magistrate Lydenburg, 31 July 1931; CAD, JUS, No. 552/29, Vol. 462, Survey of Lydenburg conducted by Inland Revenue, 9 September 1932; The difficulties of the district are reflected in the huge number of applications for the consolidation of Land Bank loans. See CAD, TUS, No. 552/29, Vol. 462, Report of Public Service Inspector, 2 July 1931.

49 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 8 February 1915.

50 SBA, INSP, 1/1/331, Lydenburg Report, 15 March 1933.

51 SBA, INSP, 1/1/331, Lydenburg Report, 15 March 1933; In 1931 the price was 22/6 per bag, SBA, INSP, 1/1/331, Lydenburg Report, 14 November 1931.

52 SBA, INSP, 1/1/294, Lydenburg Inspection Reports, 30/May/1934: The rainfall for the last four years has been as follows- 1931-20.95", 1932-19.14", 1933-23.94", 1934 up to March-11.85".

53 Wilson, 'Farming', p. 137.

54 Wilson, 'Farming', p. 137.

55 S. Jones & A. Müller, *The South African Economy, 1910-90* (London, Macmillan, 1992), p. 143.

'natural' rise in agricultural prices. After 1935 the controls, which were solidified by the Marketing Act of 1937, had only a limited effect, and mainly served as a guarantee against the collapse of any agricultural markets. On the other hand, the stabilised prices made investment in agriculture a much safer option. One would expect 'progressive farmers' to take greater advantage of this situation, and economic differentiation in a district like Lydenburg should therefore increase during the 1930s.

Census figures for Lydenburg generally agree with the composite national picture outlined above.[56] The figures reflect a significant jump in wheat production during the period 1934 to 1936, and a healthy stabilisation after that period. The price of wheat went up fairly dramatically up to 1936, but then steadied somewhat after the wheat surplus of that year.[57] Maize production, after the significant jump in 1933, fluctuated fairly widely, because it was grown on dry-land plots, and was thus more susceptible to variable rainfall. During the 1930s Lydenburg was primarily a wheat growing area, and Maize was, on the whole, a secondary crop, which contributed further to the fluctuations in Maize production. The price of maize during this period increased as a result of the 1931 Mealie Control Act, but did not spiral to the same extent as the wheat price.[58]

The fortunes of Lydenburg's wool farmers also improved as wool prices made a dramatic recovery after the depression. The 1935/36 season opened in September 1935 with prices 15 per cent higher than the closing prices of the previous season. The price increase came about because of greater demand in some European countries and the renewal of the Union-German agreement.[59] Furthermore, the establishment of the Wool Marketing Committee stabilised wool prices and thus gave wool farmers security and an incentive to increase production. In 1935/36 48786 sheep in Lydenburg produced 275134 pounds of wool, which was still of a very good quality and again sold at some of the highest prices on the market.[60] The number of sheep in the district increased steadily as a result of these factors.[61]

Cattle were kept only to maintain the oxen used for ploughing, and, to a lesser extent, for milk consumed on the farm.[62] Very little time or capital was spent on 'improving cattle' for meat or dairy production, mainly because the lower lying

---

56 Average figures for 1934-36 from, SBA, INSP, 1/1/362, Lydenburg Report, 25 April 1936; Figures for 1937-39, *Agricultural Census Nos. 17-19, 1937-39* (U.G. 18-39 - 27-41).

57 Department of Agriculture, *Farming in South Africa*, December 1936, p. 523.

58 Department of Agriculture, *Farming in South Africa*, December 1936, p. 522.

59 Department of Agriculture, *Farming in South Africa*, December/1936, p. 514: This agreement 'extended certain exchange facilities to German buyers for the purchase of South African products to the value of £30000000, of which the majority proportion is allocated to agricultural products, primarily wool'.

60 SBA, INSP, 1/1/362, Lydenburg Report, 25 April 1936.

61 From 48786 in 1936 to 51800 in 1938, see *Agricultural Census No. 16, 1936* (U.G. 59-37); *No. 18, 1938* (U.G. 31-40).

62 Interview with Mrs. Kloppers, Lydenburg, 1990

areas of Lydenburg were very prone to cattle diseases.[63] In 1938 it was reported that some farmers were improving their herds, but they were mainly from the higher, southern portions of Lydenburg.[64]

The 1930s were clearly a period of significant agricultural development in the district of Lydenburg, which is borne out further by the increase in the land placed under cultivation from 21398 morgen, of which 11450 was irrigated in 1930, to 25576 morgen of which 13928 was irrigated in 1937.[65] But, as predicted earlier, not everybody participated in the expansion and growing prosperity. W.J Fouche, for example, reduced the area under cultivation on his farm from 41 to 34 morgen in 1937.[66] White settlers on the Ohrigstad Settlement, who had been reduced to 42 settlers by 1933, were still mostly concerned with survival and were not involved in any substantial expansion of production.[67] Settlers on the Spekboom Irrigation Scheme also struggled for survival. Their position in 1938 was described in the following terms: 'As a result of crop-failure the position of the settlers at the Spekboom Scheme is awful. Very little has changed during this year.'[68]

Numerous *bywoners* also complained of poverty, and of their inability to make a living on the small plots and shares that they were allocated. A large percentage of those who registered with the State's Assistance Scheme had worked on the roads and the railways; temporarily, as a means to get by while they searched for farm land that they could rent.[69] Although the evidence on their future plans is thin, it nevertheless suggests that, while many *bywoners* desperately clung to a rural lifestyle, others were desperate to leave the land. For example, W.C. Meyer lived in the house of farm-owner Johan Steyn, and helped with the farm work. He had tried to leave Lydenburg to get a job elsewhere, but the train that he was on failed to stop at the place of his new work. In desperation he jumped from the moving train, and was badly injured. Back in Lydenburg Johan Steyn described him as having no belongings, disheartened and depressed. Steyn was helping him 'to get away from this place'.[70]

This picture of poverty and lack of progress amongst significant portions of Lydenburg's white farming population is given further weight by the reports of the Standard Bank inspector, who pointed to the existence of a large number of farmers who made very little headway in the 1930s.[71] He also described Lydenburg's farmers as 'of the backward type', 'satisfied with conditions that

---

63 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg, 1990; Magistrates Reports, Lydenburg (LLY), Circular from Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa, 24 October 1934; CAD, NTS, No. 3/371, Vol. 9257, TAU Annual Congress, 1938.

64 *Farmers Weekly*, 26 February 1936; *Lydenburg New*, 15 April 1954; Highveld sheep farmers like H.F. Hannan, see SBA, INSP, 1/1/400, Lydenburg Report, 26 October 1943.

65 *Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930* (U.G. 12-32); *No. 17, 1937*.

66 CAD, LDB, No. R1074/5/14, Vol. 952, Crop Report W.J. Fouche, 26 January 1937.

67 CAD, LDE, No. 22108, Vol. 1158, Inspection Report of Lot 21, 2 April 1932 & 11 May 1936; CAD, LDE, No. 22108, Vol. 1158, Secretary for Lands to The Receiver of Revenue, 24 March 1936.

68 CAD, LON, No. 157/3, Vol. 268, Annual Report on Spekboom Irrigation Scheme, 1938.

69 CAD, VWR, No. B645/192/1, Vols. 104-106.

70 CAD, VWR, No. B645/192/1, Vol. 105, Application of W.C. Meyer.

71 SBA, INSP, 1/1/373, Lydenburg Report, 16 June 1938.

suited their forefathers', working on farm properties that were 'small and heavily bonded'.[72]

However, a look at Lydenburg's leading farmers completely contradicts the Bank Inspector's assessment, confirming the highly differentiated character of the farming community in the 1930s. These farmers were dynamic, risk taking entrepreneurs, who poured capital into their farms in order to build dams, bridges, sheds, and even a privately owned electric light plant.[73] What these progressive farmers had in common was access to capital outside of agriculture. The four leading farmers in Lydenburg during the 1930s were a Member of Parliament,[74] a teacher,[75] a trader,[76] and a miller.[77] These jobs allowed the farmers to vent their forward-looking ideals without risking their survival on the land.

The majority of farmers, on the other hand, were not prepared to raise their production costs and risk the possibility of experiencing a bad year during which they would be unable to meet these costs.[78] Land Bank loans were a source of capital - for those who owned enough land for security - but usually only for long term loans.[79] The interest rates on these loans were lower than at other banks, but there was probably a stronger obligation on farmers to pay the instalments on these loans in the 1930s, than, say, in the 1960s.[80] Land Bank loans also further discouraged a steady investment in agriculture as the instalments often encompassed a large proportion of a farmer's disposable income.[81] Tampering with secure profit margins therefore meant entering the risk of losing one's land, as failure to pay an instalment might lead to foreclosure on mortgages. Credit societies that issued short term loans were first noted in 1930, but appear to have had little effect on the fact that most farmers were 'badly off financially' in 1936.[82] Short terms loans became more readily available after 1938, when the Land Bank became directly involved, but it was the increase in loans to Cooperatives that substantially affected farmers' access to working capital, and

---

72 SBA, INSP, 1/1/373, Lydenburg Report, 25 April 1936.

73 *Lydenburg News*, 14 August 1942.

74 Municipality of Lydenburg, *Lydenburgse Eeufeesgedenkboek*, 1950, p. 82; Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg, 1990; SBA, INSP, 1/1/294, Lydenburg Report, 30 May 1929.

75 CAD, NTS, No. 30/280, Vol. 2027, Under-Secretary of Native Affairs to Lydenburg North Farmers Union, 2 June 1921.

76 SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Report on Lydenburg, 5 September 1917.

77 *Lydenburg News*, 17 November 1939.

78 SBA, INSP, 1/1/373, Lydenburg Report, 25 April 1936. See also Grosskopf, 'Rural Impoverishment', p. I-116.

79 Even in 1959 some farmers were unable to acquire mortgages. See *Report into Agricultural Credit* (De Swart), (U.G. 16, '61, Pretoria, Government Printer, 1961), p. 66.

80 P.L. Wickins, 'Agriculture', in F.L. Coleman, ed., *Economic History of South Africa* (Pretoria, HAUM, 1983), p. 82; This argument is based on the fact that Land Bank Loans were harder to come by in the 1930s and the Bank was more vulnerable because it had less capital reserves. However, only 521 foreclosures were undertaken by the Land Bank itself during the period 1912-1959. See De Swart, p. 66.

81 SBA, INSP, 1/1/294, Lydenburg Report, 30 May 1929: 'The district is heavily bonded, and many farmers are finding it difficulty in meeting interest charges. The majority of loans are obtained from the Land Bank.' This situation deteriorated during depression, but the Bank was more lenient during that time. One can assume that these difficulties continued throughout the 1930s.

82 SBA, INSP, 1/1/304, Lydenburg Report, 25 August 1930; 25 April 1936.

this only became significant in the 1940s.[83]

Even when small farmers got access to capital they were loath to tamper with secure profit margins, because raising of production costs made farmers more vulnerable to losing their land.[84] The attachment to land as a way of avoiding 'the city' - noted as important during the nineteenth century - remained an important factor in the 1930s.[85] In 1934, the choice for most Lydenburgers was between being an 'independent farmer' or an unskilled labourer.[86] There were processes already under-way - based to a large extent on the kind of thinking outlined by De Souza above - that tried to expand the urban opportunities available to white South Africans. But, during the 1930s, when the 'problems of rural education' still loomed large, access to land remained a secure alternative compared to the risks of finding employment in an urban centre like Johannesburg.[87]

The emergence of over-production in both maize and wheat production during the 1930s suggests that many farmers were determined to stay on the land in-spite of hostile market forces. It is true that the new agricultural control boards blunted these market forces, but only to a limited extent as many farmers at the time felt that the prices set by the boards were not high enough to guarantee a satisfactory profit.[88] High railway rates were, for example, a source of complaint, and played an important role in a district as far away from the markets as Lydenburg.[89] A. Op t' Hof, furthermore, disputed that the Marketing Boards operated exclusively in favour of the farmer and disregarded the consumer.[90] He explained:

> 'The farmer never has made much out of the production of wheat. The production cost of good wheat is round about £1 per bag of 200lb; so I fail to see that the farmer who grows even 500 to 1000 bags of wheat can grow fat; he barely ekes out

---

83 See De Swart, p. 50; Union of South Africa, *Report of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa* (U.G. 12 '31, Pretoria, 1931), The figure for 1930 was £24931.

84 Grosskopf, 'Rural Impoverishment', p. I-116: 'In many cases it is only natural that a farmer should prefer spending the profits of a prosperous year on his pleasures, because he runs the risk of getting no returns if he invests in farming. ... It is true that unexpected disasters often ruined the richer farmer also, but as a rule the power of resistance of the small farmer was much weaker.' ALSO STRUGGLE ON THE VELD.

85 *Farmers Weekly*, 10 August 1932, J.M. Johnstone, Amersfoort, Transvaal; *Farmers Weekly*, 27 June 1934, 'Poor White', Transvaal: 'Why can't a law be passed that every farm must be occupied by a white man.'; *Farmers Weekly*, 12 February 1936, 'Fed Up', O.F.S.

86 *House of Assembly Debates*, 9 March 1934.

87 *Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa, Vol. 1* (Stellenbosch, Pro ecclesia, 1932), p. xxv; *Farmers Weekly*, 23 December 1936; For the unattractive conditions in the towns, see Grosskopf, 'Rural Impoverishment', pp. I-183-225: Conditions in town, Grosskopf argues, were often better, but still difficult.

88 CAD, NTS, No. 3/371, Vol. 9257, TAU Annual Congress, 1938: Calls for higher prices to 'stop the drift to the towns'.

89 *Farmers Weekly*, 25 January 1939.

90 Wheat price went up to 28/- in 1938. See, CAD, NTS, No. 3/371, Vol. 9257, TAU Annual Congress, 1938.

a living when he can sell all his wheat at 22s.'[91]

Op t' Hof had an interest in justifying the board's prices, but his argument fits with the complaints made against the Maize board. Farmers often maintained that the 'small but progressive farmer' could not survive on the fixed prices, and the only farmers to prosper were the large Orange Free State producers, 'rich in land and capital', who had 'the main say in the Association'.[92] These complaints must be read in conjunction with O'Meara's assessment of the Marketing Act. He argues that the Board's stabilised prices and profits mainly led to larger farms and an expansion of land under cultivation.[93] Taken together, the evidence indicates that large farmers with available land could make profits by substantially expanding their production, but small farmers continued to struggle. Those farmers in Lydenburg who, like R.J. Schurink above, already had the capital and land to invest in the construction of new canals, could expand their wheat fields under irrigation. But the poor farmers, settlers and *bywoners* of Lydenburg, who were often restricted to less than ten morgen of irrigated land and reportedly produced an annual profit of only £50, did not benefit greatly from the boards established in the 1930s. In the words of Op t' Hof these farmers 'barely eked out a living'.[94]

A comparison between the farms Skaapkraal and Rietfontein shows the extent of the differences in Lydenburg farm sizes during 1938. The former was 1227 morgen in total, of which 140 was irrigated. The farm was also 'fully fenced and divided into camps'.[95] The latter contained 29 morgen of irrigated land and 40 morgen of arable land in total. The farm was 'mostly fenced in'.[96] In 1930 the average size of farms in Lydenburg was 620 morgen.[97] By 1937 the average size declined to 606 morgen, but one must assume that not all the farms in Lydenburg became smaller.[98] Unfortunately more detailed figures for Lydenburg are not available, but the figures for the Transvaal as a whole clearly indicate that both the number of very large farms and the number of very small farms increased significantly during the 1930s. The farms between 2000 and 5000 morgen increased from 1506 in 1930 to 1577 in 1939, while the farms between 1 and 100 morgen increased from 6711 in 1930 to 7758.[99] These figures point to growing economic divisions amongst white farmers, and these processes were still evident in Lydenburg during the 1950s, when regional figures are available.

The expansion of production amongst the leading farmers in Lydenburg caused the demand for labour to become more intense during the 1930s. In conjunction with

---

91 *Farmers Weekly*, 1 February 1939; 15 February 1939; CAD, NTS, No. 3/371, Vol. 9257, TAU Annual Congress, 25 August 1939: Protest against depression of prices and increase in cost of milling.

92 *Farmers Weekly*, 12 August 1936.

93 D. O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism 1934-1948* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983), p. 184.

94 Grosskopf, 'Rural Impoverishment', p. I-119.

95 *Lydenburg News*, 28 January 1938.

96 *Lydenburg News*, 16 September 1938.

97 *Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930.*

98 *Agricultural Census No. 17, 1937.*

99 *Agricultural Census No. 13, 1930*; *Agricultural Census No. 19, 1939.*

many other farmers throughout South Africa, the farmers of Lydenburg called on the state to intervene to overcome agriculture's 'crippling labour shortage'.[100]

1940-1948

Two important trends - agricultural diversification and mechanisation - became prominent during the 1940s. These developments had been apparent earlier, but it was only in the 1940s that they became widespread. As early as 1928 some farmers had gone in for tobacco, but they remained a small minority, increasing slightly in 1939.[101] The substantial expansion in production occurred during and after World War Two; the area planted with tobacco in 1946 was more than two and a half times the size of the area planted in 1939.[102] Further, because the war led to shortages in many basic foodstuffs, a number of Lydenburg farmers began to produce vegetables in 1943.[103] In that year farmers in the district reaped one of the largest wheat crops in its history.[104] But the drought during the following two years caused a decline in output, and after that the farmers in Lydenburg produced less and less wheat as more farmers diversified into tobacco, vegetables and citrus fruit.[105] It was reported that the latter product was gradually becoming established in some areas in 1949, although a number of problems remained:

> 'According to E.F. Malan, of the Research Station, Nelspruit, the standard of citrus [at Marone and Waterval Valley] was outstanding. The Valley offered unlimited possibilities for citrus farming, if sufficient water could be supplied. Because frost does occur in the Valley, farmers should limit themselves, as far as the commercial market is concerned, to citrus culture only, and should not endeavour to produce all the different specie of tropical fruit.'[106]

Concentration on wheat production was also undermined by the emergence of the Orange Free State as an important dry-land wheat producing area.[107] The wheat produced in this area was cheaper because it did not involve irrigation. This had a negative effect on the trend in wheat prices, and Lydenburg's expensive production methods thus became uneconomical.[108] The production of wheat in Lydenburg's valleys was condemned anyway by agricultural officers who favoured a mixed farming system. To strengthen their case these officers referred to the Spekboom River, where - like in many of Lydenburg's other valleys - farmers double-cropped with wheat and maize:

> 'It must be realised that the present system of farming in which wheat plays the

---

100 M. Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910-1986* (Aldershot, Wildwood House, 1986), p. 91.

101 *Agricultural Census No. 19, 1939.*

102 *Agricultural Census No. 20, 1946* (U.G. 77-48); SBA, INSP, 1/1/400, Lydenburg Report, 10 February 1942.

103 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg, 1990; SBA, INSP, 1/1/400, Lydenburg Report, 26 October 1943.

104 SBA, INSP, 1/1/400, Lydenburg Report, 26 September 1944.

105 SBA, INSP, 1/1/400, Lydenburg Report, 26 September 1944; 10 November 1945.

106 *Farmers Weekly*, 22 June 1949.

107 Interview with Mr Mason, Isando, 1990; *Farmers Weekly*, 8 December 1948.

108 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg 1990.

> major role is completely wrong. A mixed farming system involving summer crops, cattle, pigs and chickens seem to be a better alternative. ... It is apparent that during the past few years the farmers have not once achieved a decent crop. Last summer the maize crop failed as a result of too much rain and the winter weather brought an untimely cold-spell that caused great damage to the very promising wheat crop.'[109]

A few Spekboom farmers recognised the problem and made the transition to diversification in 1939 by planting soya-beans and by taking up pig farming. Thus wheat farming was becoming less important during the 1940s, even though Op t' Hof claimed in 1946 that Lydenburg was still essentially a wheat farming district, and the majority of Spekboom farmers still farmed with wheat and maize in the 1950s.[110] Wool, on the other hand, remained an important product, especially as wool prices climbed steadily during the 1940s.[111]

As a result of these processes the district's agricultural character changed during the 1940s, and began to fit with the description offered by Johan Steyn, the manager of the Lydenburg Cooperative from 1937 to 1952:

> 'This district is unique because it lies in three climatic regions. The [Waterval Valley] is in the bushveld. [South-east of Lydenburg town] going through to Machadadorp is more middle-veld. Going south you have highveld again. Now that influences the type of product that people produce. In the bushveld and the lowveld, that is fairly sub-tropical, and all production there takes place under irrigation. Water comes from the highveld in rivers and they take it out in canals and dams. Their production will be sub-tropical fruits, citrus, paw-paws, avocados, and then they produce wheat and tobacco. In the middle-veld you find more maize farming, beans, sugar beans, soya beans, and cattle farming. Out to the highveld, Dullstroom, Belfast that way, that is very good sheep farming, wool sheep, and mixed farming: Sheep and cattle.'[112]

Lydenburg reported a serious labour shortage in 1943, and then again in 1945 when the situation was reportedly worse.[113] This was part of an ongoing national situation, and farmers from all over the country filled the pages of the *Farmers Weekly* with complaints about such a shortage. Some farmers, and a few liberal observers like Margaret Ballinger and Leo Marquard, believed that the solution lay in offering better treatment and conditions.[114] But the majority were of the opinion that African workers could not appreciate better conditions, and that

---

109 CAD, LON, No. 157/3, Vol. 268, Report on the Spekboom Irrigation Scheme, 1939.

110 *Farmers Weekly*, 6 March 1946: Maize production still fluctuated drastically during the period 1940-1946; CAD, MLW, No. 312/60, Vol. 142, Spekboom Boerevereneging to Minister of Lands, 7 April 1952.

111 Houghton, *South African Economy*, p. 53.

112 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg, 1990.

113 CAD, NTS, No. 97/362, Vol. 8834, Native Commissioner Lydenburg to Secretary of Native Affairs, 23 April 1945; Native Commissioner Middelburg to Secretary of Native Affairs, 5 March 1945; Native Commissioner Belfast to Secretary of Native Affairs, 12 April 1945; Native Commissioner Ermelo to Secretary of Native Affairs, 19 March 1945.

114 *Farmers Weekly*, 22 April 1936: 'The Native for Replacing Failing Export Markets'; 10 January 1945: 'Better Treatment Means Smaller Profits but a Contented Staff'; WHPL, A410, B1.1.57, 'Margaret Ballinger on Farm Labour', c1951.

higher pay would only cause Africans to work less.[115] Most of these farmers called on the state to force Africans into farm labour, but a number of others also saw mechanisation as a solution.[116] Included amongst the latter group were agricultural officers, one of whom argued in 1944:

> 'Labour is today, in some respects, a problem. But it is rapidly disappearing. The wheat crop today does not offer any difficulty at the time of harvesting since the introduction of the combine. ... Essential labour can be retained with the ample use of machinery. With machinery one can reduce labour by 25 to 30 per cent.'[117]

The reasons given by farmers for mechanisation often centred around the notion that it enabled them to do the work themselves.[118] Mrs Baragwanath, the wife of a Lydenburg farmer, explained that they mechanised so that they did not have to depend on unreliable African labour:

> 'Unless you are with them all the time, they don't reap the mealies and they steal the mealies. At the farmer up the road, they would sit down and have beer the minute he left. And people felt it was just becoming uneconomical to employ [Africans]. So really they worked themselves out of jobs. They just have no motivation.'[119]

Mrs Kloppers, the wife of a Lydenburg farmer and the grand-daughter of Dirk Winterbach, who was one of the original white settlers in Lydenburg, explained that her husband preferred to drive the tractor himself:

> 'My husband and my son have always driven the tractor. My husband now and then used a black to help with the driving, but we have never had a permanent tractor driver. We have got three big tractors, but we have no blacks to drive the tractors.'[120]

Tractors are not necessarily labour replacing, and in South Africa as a whole machines only replaced farm labour in the 1970s when combine harvesters were used on maize farms.[121] However, if the use of tractors is to cause an increase in labour, it must be accompanied by an extension of the area under cultivation. In Lydenburg the size of the irrigated fields was limited by the amount of water available, and even where an extension was possible it would require an additional investment in a canal or dam. The statistics show that during the period 1939 to 1950 the number of tractors increased from 46 to 233, while the land under

---

115 *Farmers Weekly*, 1 December 1943: 'Delinquent Natives'; 12 January 1944: 'Facing Up to the Farm Labour Problem'; 2 February 1944: 'Native Policy'; 26 September 1945: 'Ticket System to Deal with Wont-works'.

116 *Farmers Weekly*, 21 July 1948; 16 June 1946.

117 CAD, NTS, No. 10/280, Vol. 2010, The Director of Native Agriculture, undated, c1944.

118 M. De Klerk, 'Seasons That Will Never Return: The impact of farm mechanisation on employment, incomes and population distribution in the western Transvaal', in *JSAS*, ????: Shows that this was the prime motivation for farmers in a different district during a later period. For similar motivations in America, see D. Grigg, *The Transformation of Agriculture in the West* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 49.

119 Interview with Mr & Mrs Baragwanath, Lydenburg, 1990.

120 Interview with Mrs Kloppers, Lydenburg, 1990; For a history of the Winterbach family see, *Lydenburg News*, 9 August 1938.

121 De Klerk, 'Seasons That Will Never Return'.

agricultural crops increased from 25576 in 1937 to 27945 in 1947.[122] This is a fairly significant increase, and probably also reflects the growing use of fertilisers, which, according to Mr. Baragwanath, made the ploughing of dry land a much more viable option.[123] But if the expansion in land-use is divided by the number of tractors, the increase comes to a fairly modest 12.6 morgen per tractor. It is therefore highly likely that some farmers used their tractors to expand their production, while others used them to replace labour. This assumption is borne out further by the discrepancy in farm sizes at the time. During the period 1946 to 1952, of the Lydenburg farms put up for sale, most were fairly small (there were hardly any bigger than 1000 morgen). Most contained an average of 20 to 30 morgen of irrigated land, but there were also many differences. Some farms were only 10 or 49 morgen in total size, while others extended to 780 or 1500 morgen. More importantly some farms contained no dry-land at all, and only 14 or 17 morgen of irrigated land, with no possibility of extending this area. Others had great potential for the extension of irrigated and dry-land, including one farm that contained as much as 250 morgen of arable land.[124] Clearly this kind of farm would allow the use of tractors to create a greater demand for labour, while on the smaller farms the adoption of tractors would generally be labour replacing, which fits with the experiences of labour tenants, most of whom remember tractors as a machine that lessened their work-load.[125]

The question that remains is why smaller farmers, who had been opposed to improving their farms in the 1930s, were now ready to invest in tractors. The answer lies in the extension of credit to the Cooperative. The Cooperative, as explained above, was formed in 1910, but it was dissolved during the depression. Prior to its collapse it had been relatively successful.[126] During 1915 and 1916 it handled between 70 and 75 per cent of the produce in Lydenburg, which was high for the time.[127] But after it was revived as the Voorspoed Cooperative Ltd in 1936 it attracted many more members, which was in keeping with the growing tendency towards organised agriculture in South Africa as a whole. A Transvaal Agricultural Union report for 1939 gave the following synopsis of the situation:

> 'Much progress has been made lately in Lydenburg regarding the cooperation of various organisations and affiliations with the district union. I ascribe this to the application of the Marketing Act and schemes thereunder. Fortunately the antipathy towards the TAU has disappeared and we hope for wholehearted cooperation.'[128]

The Marketing Act, by making controlled marketing attractive, made it almost impossible to avoid cooperation. The other factor in this process was that 'all

---

[122] *Agricultural Census No. 19, 1939; No. 20, 1946; No. 24, 1950* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1952).
[123] Interview with Mr & Mrs Baragwanath, Lydenburg, 1990.
[124] *Lydenburg News*, 26 January 1945; 22 February 1946; 29 November 1946; 30 July 1948; 7 January 1949; 20 January 1950; 9 June 1950; 2 Feb 1951; 24 August 1951; 23 November 1951.
[125] See Chapter Five of thesis.
[126] *House of Assembly Debates*, 2 July 1925.
[127] SBA, INSP, 1/1/242, Lydenburg Report, 8 February 1915; 10 April 1916.
[128] CAD, NTS, No. 3/371, Vol. 9257, TAU Annual Congress, 23 August 1939.

requirements - implements, tractors, fuel, fertiliser, packaging, fodder, veterinary medicines and so forth' were now supplied by the cooperative to its members.[129] This was facilitated by the massive extension of credit to cooperatives during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1929 the Lydenburg Cooperative received a loan of £14500. In 1930 the size of this loan increased significantly, and, although figures for individual cooperatives are no longer available for the following period, it is reasonable to assume that this trend continued as Land Bank loans to cooperatives increased from £1820901 in 1929 to £3011624 in 1939 to £7123352 in 1945.[130] Thus it became possible for the Cooperative to supply farmers with equipment at very reasonable and drawn out instalment rates. As Johan Steyn explained:

> 'They [Lydenburg's farmers] have over-capitalised because it is made attractive to them. They get easy credit, they are induced to buy by the Cooperative salesman. The salesman is given a free trip over-seas if he sells the most tractors and he does not care if the farmer can pay or not.'[131]

Apart from the increasing availability of Land Bank loans, direct state aid also expanded in the 1940s. Aid to white farmers began, in the twentieth century, with the Repatriation Boards after the Boer War, and then took the form of cattle loan schemes, assistance with stock diseases and locusts, and poor white settlements in Ohrigstad, Spekboom and Steelpoort. During the period 1928 to 1931, for example, a total of 61250 anthrax vaccines were issued to farmers in Lydenburg.[132] During the period 1947 to 1949, 349 applications under the 1935 Farmers Assistance Act were received.[133] In 1939, when Lydenburg suffered a 'disastrous flood', it was, according to the *Lydenburg News*, 'only natural to expect the farmers in our district to turn to the one and only source whence aid might be expected, namely the Government'.[134] These expectations were duly fulfilled as 'the Government' provided farmers with both funds to reconstruct their washed away water-canals, and with free maize to feed themselves and their labourers.[135]

With the passing of the Soil Conservation Act in 1946 state aid entered a new era. Under this act, districts would, with the approval of resident farmers, be declared as 'soil conservation regions' and would then be eligible for assistance and subsidies in the interest of conserving the soil.[136] The regions of Lydenburg were

---

129 Eeufeesgedenkboek, p. 86.

130 De Swardt, p. 50; *Report of the Land and Agricultural Bank of South Africa* (U.G. 12 '31, Pretoria, 1931), The figure for 1930 was £24931.

131 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg 1990.

132 CAD, JUS, No. 552/29, Vol. 462, Annual Report, Lydenburg, 1929; 12 February 1932.

133 CAD, JUS, No. 21/167, Vol. 921, Annual Report, District of Lydenburg, 1949.

134 *Lydenburg News*, 17 February 1939; *Assembly Debates*, 23 February 1939.

135 CAD, HKN, No. 28/36/1, Vol. 65, 'The Relief of Flood Distress: Lydenburg', 10 November 1939; CAD, NTS, No. 136/308, Vol. 3464, Magistrate, Lydenburg to Secretary for Agriculture, 6 October 1940.

136 Wickins, 'Agriculture', p. 63; See also, Department of Agriculture, *Farming in South Africa*, December 1947; December 1950; CAD, MLD, No. 14/20, Vol. 19, 'Opposisie Hoofsprekers in Landboudebatte', 1948-1956.

declared in terms of this Act in 1948,[137] and many farmers began to reap the benefits in the 1950s. But, as is shown below, conflict emerged over this state aid as some farmers wanted to use it to extend their farming activities while others hoped to guarantee their survival on the land without increasing their risks.

The increases in state aid and credit allowed more farmers than before to benefit from agriculture, although, in keeping with national trends, it was undoubtedly the larger 'progressive' farmers that made the biggest contributions to expansions in output.[138]

1949-1960

The 1940s were marked by the food shortages of World War Two, the continuing expansion of agricultural markets and the growing prominence of tractors on white farms. But agriculture was to be promoted even further in the 1950s. In 1948 a political shift occurred that significantly affected this development. The election of the National Party during that year marked the beginning of a new era that manifested itself in the 1950s. O'Meara argued that farmers felt that the United Party did not provide them with high enough agricultural prices, and they therefore voted for the National Party.[139]

The National Party subsequently delivered on its promise to increase state support of white agriculture, and significantly advanced capital accumulation in the white rural areas. This argument was supported by Lazar who claimed that from 1949 the government raised prices in order to 'encourage production'. He pointed out that during the next three years the average price per bag [of maize] was 'raised from 21s.3d to 30s. For many farmers this meant almost the doubling of net profits and they responded almost immediately to the incentive. Production increased rapidly and, after that time, there were surpluses every year.'[140] The 1950s were therefore a period during which more farmers could make a profitable living from agriculture, although many still found it difficult to make ends meet and, as shown below, either left the rural areas or struggled hard to keep their land.

A further indication of the state's new, unambiguous support for white agriculture can be found in the massive increase in the loans given to cooperatives, from £7123352 in 1945 to £27869488 in 1950, to £65132878 in 1955.[141] Consequently machines and implements from the cooperative were even more readily available in the 1950s than they had been in the 1940s, which fits with the assessment of a Lydenburg resident who said: 'after the National Party came to power you could drive your old tractor into the cooperative and drive out with a brand new one

---

137 *Lydenburg News*, 12 November 1948.

138 The number of listed farmers reached a high of 915 in 1950. See *Agricultural Census No. 24, 1950*; For national trends see Jones & Müller, *The South African Economy*, p. 239.

139 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, pp. 187-188. For an index showing the increases of wool, wheat and maize and other prices, see p. 186; *Farmers Weekly*, 19 February 1947, 'Produce Market Solution'; 2 June 1948, 'Marketing Act Indictment'; *Cape Times*, 'Serious Bread Shortage on Rand', 30 March 1946; *Sunday Times*, 'New Maize Price Will Add £132000 to Mine Costs', 31 April 1946.

140 Wilson, 'Farming', p. 142.

141 De Swardt, p. 50.

without a cent changing hands.'[142] During the period 1950 to 1959 the number of tractors in Lydenburg increased from 233 to 599. An even more telling figure is the number of ploughs pulled by tractors. In 1955 there were 1214 animal drawn ploughs in the district and only 273 that were pulled by tractors. In 1960 there were still 801 of the former, but also 729 of the latter.[143] Threshing machines, which had been the earliest form of mechanisation in the district, gradually diminished during this period. Wheat farmers began to replace them with combine harvesters. There were 20 combines in the district in 1956, and although the number declined to 13 in 1960, these harvesters were mainly owned by syndicates, and hired out during the harvesting season.[144]

These inputs produced significant changes in the agricultural economy of Lydenburg during the 1950s. In 1953 the Magistrate explained that 'this district in the process of developing. During the past few years many large properties have been sub-divided, and more intensive farming methods are being practised.[145] Further, a more detailed assessment drawn up in 1958 makes it apparent that agricultural diversification had increased, and that many farmers had prospered during the relatively good years since World War Two. On the other hand there were many farmers that had not prospered and struggled to cling to their land. Successful farmers had benefitted from the construction of dams by the state, the introduction of winter-feed for sheep, and the good prices for wool, wheat and tobacco.[146] Those farmers who struggled occupied farms that were too small to allow for the extension of acreage under crops. They continued to double with wheat and maize on exhausted soil, and many could only retain their land by undertaking migrant labour contracts on the railways, road-works and mines.[147]

Despite frequent references to labour shortages, the available labour supply had increased dramatically in the 1950s, and the evidence suggests that the problem had become less acute by 1958.[148] There were, however, regional variations in the supply of labour, which suggests that the kind of conditions that different farmers offered continued to play a crucial role. Furthermore, there is additional evidence to support the picture of massive stratification and changing farm sizes that emerges from the above description.

In 1950 the average farm size in Lydenburg was 605 morgen. In 1955 it was 667. This shows that subdivision had been a strong trend during the 1940s, and that the process was beginning to reverse in the 1950s as some, mainly small, farmers

---

142 Interview with Bryna Davis, Lydenburg, 1990.

143 *Agricultural Census No. 24, 1950*; *No. 29, 1955* (U.G. 49-58); *No. 34, 1960* (R.P. 18/1963).

144 Interview with Johan Steyn, Lydenburg, 1990.

145 CAD, NTS, 367/313S, Vol. 6504, Magistrate Lydenburg to Chief Native Commissioner (Northern Areas), 27 April 1953.

146 CAD, K, P15/6, 'Commission of Enquiry into the Depopulation of the Rural Areas', Lydenburg: Mnre. Swart, 2 Swanepoels, Bredell, Veldman, Schurink, Erlank, Davel, Joubert, Preller, 19 February 1958.

147 For an overview of wool prices from 1910 to 1959 see, Houghton, *South African Economy*, p. 50.

148 CAD, NTS, Vol. 2167, No. 289/280 (3) (7), SWVK to Chief Native Commissioner (Northern Areas), 26 September 1955.

struggled with the expense of mechanisation and decided rather to look for employment in the booming industrial sector.[149] The diminishing number of small farmers, and the growth in the average farm size also suggests that more farmers could now take full advantage of the opportunities offered by mechanisation, which helps to explain why a minor labour shortage continued to exist despite massive increases in the number of farm workers.

The other important change that had gradually occurred was the decline in the number of absentee farmers. In 1937 69 per cent of the farmers owned the farm on which they lived. By 1950 this had increased to 77 per cent. In 1937 14 per cent of the farms were occupied on a shares basis or managed for the owner. In 1950 this declined to 9 per cent, and in 1955 to 8 per cent. By 1960 the farmers of Lydenburg were putting 19352 morgen under irrigation. In addition 1809 morgen were under 'permanent crops' and 1063 morgen consisted of artificial pasture. In total 45325 morgen were under agricultural crops. This represents a massive increase of the 27945 morgen under agricultural crops in 1947, and once again explains why some farmers still complained of a labour shortage in the 1950s.

However, as was evident from the detailed picture of Lydenburg presented above, many small farmers continued to cling to the land. In Lydenburg during 1950, 175 farms were smaller than 100 morgen; in 1954 there were 194; and in 1957 there were 151. A statistic that is even more telling is that in 1958, 362 farms yielded a profit of less than £300 per annum, while only 389 yielded more than £300. In 1959 417 farms yielded more than £300, and a still significant 270 yielded less. In 1958 Lydenburg's farmers owed £628530 to the Cooperative, the Land Bank and other commercial banks.[150]

Thus many farmers marginalised by this economic progress refused to give up their farms; rather becoming migrant workers in order to keep land that did not provide them with their basic requirements. These farmers viewed state aid in a particular way: as an aid in their struggle to remain on the land. They were therefore weary of any aid that could make their profit margins even more risky, and as a result they often clashed with farmers who hoped to expand their production with the state's assistance. These processes emerge from an application for a dam in terms of the Soil Conservation Act, by 44 farmers in the Spekboom Valley. The farmers who applied for the dam wanted to expand their farming enterprises by placing more land under irrigation. But the farmers who countered the petition, and appealed to the state to refrain from building the dam, explained that this development would necessitate an increase in levies. Thus, although farming in the area as a whole would probably benefit from the dam, the increased costs would make it difficult for those particular farmers to continue farming.[151]

---

[149] CAD, K, No. 103, Vol. 1, Middelburg Farmers to the Commission on Ontvolking van die Platteland, 19 February 1958.

[150] *Agricultural Census*, 1958.

[151] CAD, MLW, No. 312/60, Vol. 142, 'Besproiingskema in die Boloop van die Klein Spekboomrivier', 7 April 1958; Attached Petitions.

The same conflict occurred in the Steelpoort Valley in 1952, and again in 1954, when it was about fencing.[152] Numerous other examples also emerge from farming districts all over the country.[153] A few are cited here in order to present a fuller picture of the values that motivated many white farmers. In 1954 in the Western Transvaal, for example, farmers were facing the loss of their entire crop as a result of commando-worms. They claimed that they could not invest in the equipment and chemicals necessary to avoid this disaster, because they were 'already very deeply in debt'. They asked the government to save them.[154] Farmers all over the country, in fact, expected the state to protect them from the economic and ecological forces that threatened to separate them from their land.[155] Probably the clearest and most extreme expression of the line of thinking that expected the state to sustain white farmers on the land irrespective of their efficiency came from a farmer who called himself 'a friend' of the National Party. He argued:

> 'There is only one solution. The production of maize must be controlled. To do that, every farmer must only be allowed to produce a certain number of mealies at a certain price. ... Where would you find a better plan. The problem with you rich Ministers is that you only look after the rich man, and don't care a damn about us less fortunate people.'[156]

This evidence proves that while state aid enabled more and more farmers - like those in the Steelpoort and Spekboom Valleys who supported the construction of dams - to invest in agriculture and attempt to maximise their profits, there was a significant group who saw the state as a resource in their survival on the land. They used funds earmarked for fighting locusts to send their children to school, and to transport products to the market; they were sometimes squeezed off the land by more efficient producers, but they also continued to struggle against these processes.[157] A look forward at the farm sizes in Lydenburg during 1963 indicates the trends, as well as the persistence of small farms. The number of farmers declined to 638 and the average farm size grew to 798 morgen. There were still 114 farms that were smaller than 100 morgen, but farms between 100 and 1000 morgen constituted a significant majority. Only one farm remained 'undivided', while 14 farms were larger than 2000 morgen. Thus, although many inefficient farmers had been pushed out of the district, farm sizes still varied enormously.

---

152 CAD, MLD, No. 14/20, Vol. 19, Minister of Agriculture to J.L.V. Liebenberg, 4 June 1954; CAD, MLW, No. 312/76, Vol. 143, 'Voorgestelde Besproeingsdistrik: Steelpoort: Distrik Lydenburg', 8 January 1952.

153 CAD, MLD, No. 14/20, Vol. 19, Minister of Agriculture to J.L.V. Liebenberg, 4 June 1954.

154 CAD, MLD, No. 14/14, Vol. 17, NHG Kerk, Ottosdale to the Minister of Agriculture, 22 February 1954.

155 J. Lazar, 'Conformity and Conflict: Afrikaner Politics 1948 - 1961', (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1987), p. 98; CAD, MLD, No. 14/13, Vol. 17, P.F. Jordaan to Minister of Agriculture, 6 July 1956.

156 CAD, MLD, No. 14/13, Vol. 17, 'n vriend' to Minister of Agriculture, c1950s.

157 CAD, MLD, No. 14/13, Vol. 17, A. Hertzog to The Minister of Agriculture, 28 February 1951; No. 14/20, Vol. 19, M.M. Beukes to Minister of Agriculture, 19 May 1955.

CONCLUSION

Houghton argued that 'few meaningful generalisations' can be made about South Africa agriculture, because of the huge variety in farm size and efficiency; an observation that is largely true for the district of Lydenburg.[158] One broad generalisation about the district can, however, be made. All the farmers relied on state assistance in order to either survive on the land, or to expand their productive capacity. As mentioned in the beginning of the Chapter, Lydenburg remained a backward district within the Transvaal. The farmers of Lydenburg were therefore at a competitive disadvantage, which pushed them into seeking state assistance, and into relying on cheap labour forms. Within this broad consensus, the farmers of Lydenburg were affected by economic progress in three different ways: Some used the new economic opportunities to expand their production, others struggled to remain on the land and refused to take risks with their profit margins, and a third group, which became more numerous in the 1950s, decided that the city offered a better standard of living and left the land.[159]

---

[158] D.H. Houghton, *The South African Economy* (Cape Town, Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 64.

[159] CAD, MLD, No. 14/20, Vol. 19, 'Memorandum in connection with the depopulation of the rural areas', c1957.