

First Forester in Woodbush

The [Woodbush Forest](#) is my prime forest birding spot here in Magoebaskloof. The book BETWEEN WOODBUSH AND WOLKBERG Googoo Thompson's Story by B Wongtschowski, is the story of Googoo Thompson's life. Her father was the first forester assigned to the Woodbush Forest. I have extracted, verbatim, those aspects of Mr Arthur K. Eastwood's life relating to his days as a forester in the Woodbush area of Magoebaskloof. for this post. The book is out of print.

Arrival at Haenertsburg and Early Life in the Woodbush

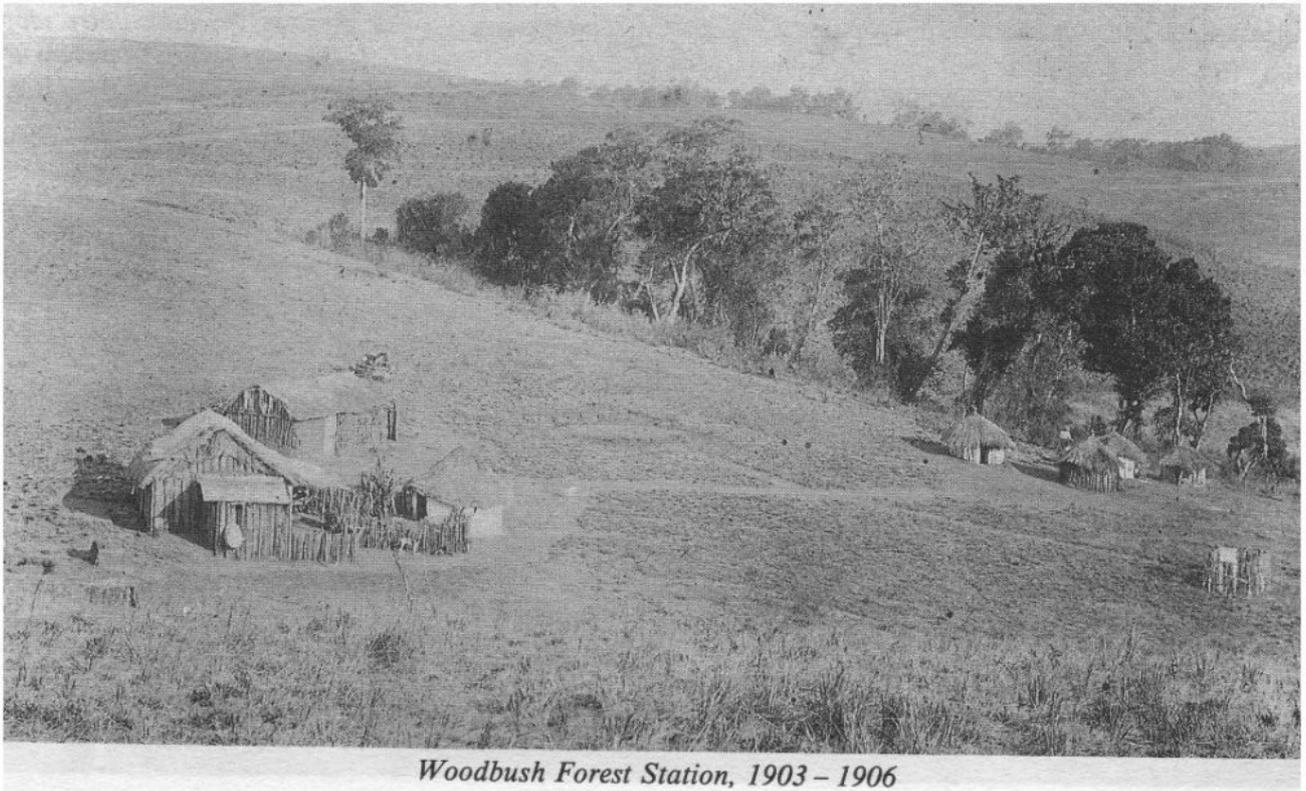
Woodbush Forest Home

“Upon our arrival in the afternoon at the Haenertsburg Hotel, we transferred from the coach to our donkey-cart which was waiting for us. We spent the night in Stanford's Bush near the Fauconniers' farm, Waterval. The cart, covered with tarpaulin, had an inside framework with riempies drawn across, which served as an excellent bed for Mother and Father. This was known by the Boers as a katel. I slept under the bucksail in the front part of the cart on a small stretcher that was folded up during the day. However, I often preferred simply to sleep under the wagon, as did Father.”

“Father's main duty as Government Forestry Officer was to survey the rain forests of the Woodbush that were not owned by farmers, for transfer to the Department of Forestry. The South African Republic had granted so-called “Burgher Right” – and

“Occupation-farms” in an attempt to control the movement of Blacks and settle the land. Those farms had already been surveyed. He had no jurisdiction over the indiscriminate felling of trees on such occupied land. However, there were patches of forest that were not owned by anyone and thus an area of about thirty five square miles was surveyed by him in about three years.”

“If you have a close look at the old photograph of our whole set-up you can also see a little wooden box on four white legs. This was a simple meteorological outfit, and next to this was a rain-gauge. Each day, at 8 a.m., minimum and maximum temperatures for the day were recorded, together with remarks describing the kind of clouds in the sky and whether or not it was misty. In Father’s absence, Mother had to do this little job. Coming from the top of Magoebaskloof, all these buildings were situated just before the turn-off to the Forest Drive that leads to the Debegeni Falls on the left-hand side, in a square which today boasts high cypress trees. These were originally planted by Mother and kept trimmed like a hedge.”



Woodbush Forest Station, 1903 – 1906

The First Woodcutters

“On several occasions we were told by Mr Brits about the Sekhukhune campaign and its connection with the first settlers in the Woodbush. On the 2nd of December 1879 the British Army under Sir Garnet Wolseley routed and captured the Pedi Paramount Chief. Sir Garnet used a big contingent of Swazi soldiers, together with the 94th regiment and the 13th Light Infantry from Perth. When the campaign was over, five soldiers from the 13th Light Infantry deserted and found shelter in the Woodbush. The names of these original five woodcutters were Woodward, Smith, Schnell, Ruthven and Taylor. They earned a living by felling timber which was badly required for railway sleepers, building houses and wagons. There was a great demand from the fast-growing town of Pretoria. The timber was also sold in Pietersburg and to a lesser extent on market days at Houtboschdorp.”

A few verses in Totius's poem "Trekkersweé" seem to refer to our Woodbush.

"Die hout was geelhout wat gesaag

is in die Houtbosbergse kuil,

vandaar met moeite uitgedraag

en oral in die land verruil."

"The word of untold timber resources soon spread as far afield as Knysna, and not long afterwards the village was teeming with oxwagons, sellers and buyers. These arrivals swelled the number of white settlers, who had to buy sugar and material for clothing, but otherwise managed to live entirely off the land. They shot bushpig, duiker, bush-buck, gathered wild spinach and grew mealies from which they cooked their porridge. They even made their own coffee from the husks of mealies." "The first five woodcutters were soon followed by others who had heard about the beautiful yellowwood planks which had been offered on the market square in Pretoria and a sort of "Timber Rush" set in. A ruthless decimation of the forests took place between the years 1880 and 1890.

Sawing up the logs

"Apart from the giant Yellowwoods, Vaalbos, Bitter Almond (Waggon Wood), Black and White Iron Wood, Water Wood – used mainly for furniture – Stinkwood, Boekenhout, many other trees

fell to the woodcutters' axes. As soon as a tree was felled, it was marked and became the property of the woodcutter. It was reduced to boards by means of pitsaws. Two men operated these saws, one above the pit to draw the saw up and the other within the pit to draw the blade down. To ensure that the sawing was straight, a length of twine plucked like a violin string and when released it left an imprint of charcoal. The entire log was marked in this way and reduced to planks of 3 inches or $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in thickness. Trees that were too hard for the sawblades to cut into boards were left to rot on the ground. This applied particularly to Iron Wood"

Iron Wood fence posts

"Father helped to enforce the law that made the felling of young Iron Wood trees in the forest strictly forbidden. However, in 1910 Lionel Phillips wished to have his recently acquired farm, named "Broederstroom Stud Farm", fenced into paddocks. It was specified in the contract that the straining posts of the fences were to be of Iron Wood with a minimum diameter of 9 inches at the base, tapering in diameter of 7 inches at the top. Father at this time was farming Clear Waters, after abandoning his work with the Forestry Department; in 1907, but being anxious to earn some extra money undertook the fencing job. He consulted old Mr Brits, who confirmed that there were indeed hundreds of unused felled Iron Wood the forest. Father thereupon sought and gained permission from Pretoria to split poles from felled trees in the Longbos near Broedstroom. Old Brits was promised sixpence for every pole that Father split. The trees had to be dug out literally from twenty years of mould and compost. After scraping away the cambium layer, Father was able to obtain no less than 36 poles from the heart core of a single tree The mind boggles at the size of the trees which were doomed to rot

by the greedy woodcutters. Some of the fencing poles Father erected still stand to this day. “

“At the end of 1906 Father took three months’ leave, which we spent on our newly acquired farm Broedersdrift. Before he left the Forestry Department, they sent up a man called Berry, who was a trained surveyor, to check on the work that Daddy had done. To our pride, he found that his work has been extremely accurate. Father was succeeded by the first qualified forester in the Woodbush, Charles Edward Lane-Poole,* who had trained at the French Forestry School at Nancy and had spent 1906 at the South African Forestry School at Tokai Mr Legat instructed Lane-Poole to plant gum trees in the open space between the indigenous Kiaat (*Pterocarpus angolenses*) in a forest on Middelkop, where the tea plantations are now. As an alternative Lane-Poole suggested young *Pterocarpus* or other indigenous trees like Bitter Almond, Yellowwood, Vaalbos or Essenhoutbos. It was a practice he had observed in Burma on a private visit before coming to South Africa; between the existing large Teaks young teak trees were planted, and in time the old ones were felled. In this way the young trees eventually took over and the forests were re-established. However, he had to do as he was told. His annual reports of 1907/08 and 1908/9 make fascinating reading. In 1910 a disagreement over [introducing exotics](#) brought Lane-Poole’s work with the Transvaal Forestry Department to an end. “