

Interview with Mr Sam Chetty

This interview was conducted at the offices of the Natal Society, Pietermaritzburg, on Tuesday 16 July 1985. Comments which did not bear directly on the main themes of the discussion have been excised from the transcript, as have such minor hesitations and repetitions typical of colloquial usage that do not affect the sense of Mr Chetty's remarks, but in all other respects this is a verbatim transcription.

We had a laundry situated at West Street, 191 West Street, which was opened by my grandfather. This must be some time just before the first World War — that would be 1910, 12: I couldn't remember dates. This was managed by him and helped by my father. I was born in '24, so I only remember things say from '30 onwards.

I can remember faintly we used to do washing for the Wykeham School. And we used to do all the washing for the mounted police out at Alexandra Road, for the warders at the prison, and all the people at the top end of town. At that stage there were a lot of lawyers and judges and all living in Pine Street and West Street. This was our territory, we used to do all the washing and ironing.

I mean those days, you know, one had to do starching, and we had all these four or five ironing rooms. Nothing electrical, it was all coal stoves, these flat-irons, and washing soda; none of these things you get these days, modern equipment.

There were another two laundries, I think. One of them was even before us. I think it was before the start of the century, 1890-something, which was known as Verasammy's laundry in Pietermaritz Street. I think that was the oldest laundry in town. And then there was Samuel's laundry. That was just below the station. These were the three laundries at the top end of town that did all the washing and all.

You know, in a laundry those days, things used to be dried out in the sun, and we had all these lines surrounding the yard. This is what I can remember. And our place used to be a meeting place for most of the Indians, because we had a big yard, and people used to come shopping in town from the outlying districts and would . . . Animals, horses and things would be fed there, hay and other things. When they did their shopping there was a very big trader known as Amod Bayat. That's just below the station in Church Street, one of the oldest traders in Maritzburg, and that used to be the main shop for Indian groceries and Indian condiments. People living far out, like Ashburton and Sweetwaters, towards Edendale, used to come into town. If they came by train it wasn't far from the station, and they would come and rest at our place, or leave things there, and put up for the night and the next day go back home.

So you lived on the premises?

We lived on the premises.

Are the buildings still surviving?

No. It was demolished in about . . . We had stopped this laundry operation in '34. There was a new building that was put up there. We had leased these premises.

There was quite a good Indian community at the top end of town — we just called it the top end of town — towards the Pine Street area. There were quite a few shopkeepers, and there were tobacconists. A very old resident of Maritzburg had his tobacconist's there, Mr S.R. Naidoo. And the other Chettys, Dr Chetty's family, used to live at the top end, and —. That's about all I could . . .

Now you mentioned that there were a lot of lawyers and other professional people living in much the same area . . .

Much the same, yes.

It was a "good" area to live?

I think it was an elite area.

An elite area?

An elite area, because I think the Government House was where the present teachers' training college is, and then Macrorie House and all these places. I think that was the elite area.

And an obvious question: was there any friction between people of colour?

No. Nothing at *all*. Opposite us used to be Mr Salter that used to own racehorses, and we were great friends, and his children. You know, we used to go across there, and we used to pinch some of the carrots that he used to feed his horses with. As children, you see. And all our neighbours were Europeans. We used to go . . . my sisters and others used to go and help at the Sanatorium that was just in Loop Street, and . . . all very friendly. In fact our next door neighbour (I've forgotten the name now) was a European that my sister used to always go and help, and do a bit of baby-watching.

As I said, most of our friends, even, that go down to the Umsindusi, which was just down the road, were all Europeans, children that used to play together. We used to go down to the river there, and spend . . . Well, you know, pinch plums and other things that used to grow around the river banks, and come up . . .

Where did you go to school then?

Well, there was a school not far from us that used to be called the . . . Islam . . . It used to be a school that was opened by the Muslim madressa that was known as the Mohammedan school. That was not far from us.

Of course, we had the bakery opposite us, and we had Dr Ovendale opposite us. From that time he was a doctor, right 'til about the 'fifties, almost the 'sixties. Even close to the 'seventies he was still . . . and I think he retired after that.

And, you know, those days, not far from our place used to . . . Well, we were very well situated. We had all the facilities. We used to go down to the Cream—. We used to go down to the milk shop. You know, you didn't get milk in tea rooms as you get these days. You go up with your jug, and they pour a pint out of the big container, and you buy your butter and things like that. And we had a city meat market that is still there, still in that position,

and we had this fish shop, that used to be next door to Arnold's chemist, but that's since . . . not there any more.

And you said that the business was started by your grandfather. Had he come from India himself?

He had come from India as an immigrant, and I think he worked for some time in Durban. We're a bit vague about that. Then he . . . I think he was contracted to the railways.

Before you go on: was he a free immigrant or indentured?

An indentured immigrant. He came as a labourer. He had to do his time, and then, I think, he was given a job on the railways. He tells us that he helped on the railways up to Mooi River. And finally I think . . . I am not too sure what he was doing on the railways, but then he became a gatewatcher at Mooi River, a sort of a foreman of the gates. My father was born in Mooi River, then from there he settled in Maritzburg.

He bought himself a farm out at Edendale, which is still in our possession, but of course now it's going to be expropriated by the Department of Co-operation and Development. This is the . . . the latest thing happening.

While my grandfather had this laundry, my father used to operate a taxi business and started a small bus service. He was one of the first taxi operators, and he had this transport knowledge with him. And in the 'fifties, or '58, we started, with the help of my father, a bus service which grew to a very large company. And, ah . . . Unfortunately there was another expropriation there. We seem to have had [chuckle] a string of expropriations. And this bus service was finally taken over by the city council and the KwaZulu transport. This matter had to go to arbitration, and we were not very happy about it: you know, the sort of a settlement, the legal costs, and all these things involved in it.

The whole family ran this business, from this laundry business into this bus business. We are seven brothers and six sisters, so a very large family, yet my grandfather had just one son.

Sorry, to go back to him again: did he marry out here, or did he bring a wife?

He brought a wife, from India. He had one son and the one son had thirteen children. A large family.

Why was your bus service expropriated? You say by KwaZulu and the council together. Was there a clash of interests?

Well. Well. We used to co-operate quite well with the city council. We knew most of the city operators. Our service grew to a very big service.

When you say 'very big'.

We had about fifty-odd buses, fifty or sixty. You know, for a private enterprise that was quite a large fleet. I was a sort of a mechanic. We had my sister that used to be a cashier, and my brother that used to do the finance in town, the board work. In fact, I think, six of the brothers were involved in this bus thing.

What happened is that we had a sort of clash of interest with KwaZulu that . . . What they call B.I.C. came in and they operated a bus service, not in direct competition but sort of around about to . . . we used to meet there. They used to be always wanting to say this is an African area and they are

preparing this for Africans. It used to come to the local board. Of course one used to argue the matter, and we were successful every time.

And then came Group Areas and we thought, you know, sooner or later we'd have to leave this, and we applied for a bus service in the Indian area, thinking that . . . Not that we wanted . . . This was not our doing that we wanted to be in the area there; we were quite happy with the African service.

In fact all our neighbours . . . From European neighbours here we had African neighbours, and we had a very good relationship with the African community out at Edendale. We lived on the premises, and all the drivers, predominantly African drivers and mechanics, were trained there and we had a very good relationship. We brothers started the business in '58 and we went up to '78: twenty years in this business.

And then there was a new law passed in parliament in 1978, which we weren't aware of, which had given the minister the right to have an enquiry when he deemed fit. And like a bolt from the blue came this commission of enquiry into transport in the Maritzburg area.

We had our legal representatives. We wanted to know what is wrong with the present transport, what is wrong with *our* transport? Before that, if anything was wrong, they had given you allegations. You know, you were overloading, or you didn't keep to your timetable, or your service was not up, the commuters were complaining. We wanted to know what's wrong. And they just said, 'Look, we've just got a directive from the minister that we must look into transport. The *status quo* might remain, and . . .'.

So we said, 'Well, we've got nothing to go by'. At the hearing the chairman just said, 'Look, this is something the minister asked us to look into; we might just leave this matter as it is. You say your piece. Each one must say their piece'. But we said, you know, 'Wh- . . .'.

Then they went around on inspection *in loco*. They came and had a look at our depot, and looked at all the workshops and whatever we had. At the same time we even mentioned that trying to compare the city council's workshop and our workshop, which was a private enterprise, wouldn't be fair, so the judgement wouldn't be fair. One thing that we impressed upon them and said, 'Look, come and look at our routes, the area that we are running'. This was not of our own choosing. We had bought off African operators, single operators, that had gone out to the spare routes and then found themselves in great financial difficulties. They couldn't pay for these buses, and their things were being repossessed. We would, if we could, take them over so they don't lose everything, they don't lose the bus and their certificate. So in most cases — must have been five or six operators — we had taken them over and made some financial arrangement so they don't lose the lot. So we almost had the monopoly.

I must just come back to before we got this monopoly. There were another two Indian operators. Then the city council *themselves* weren't keen on running the service. I think they were looking for a buyer, and I think they had a buyer, an overseas company that was known as United Transport. They came down to Maritzburg, and they visited us also, and they said they were interested in this matter, but they weren't keen on buying the city council's bus service if we were still in competition with them. Their one condition was that they would take over the city council if Mr Chetty and the other operators are willing to sell.

We had words with Mr Schumann, I think he was the transport manager, and other officials, and we said, 'Look, we're quite willing. We think our days are numbered in the sense that it's becoming an African area where they talk about KwaZulu. It means that a new company is to take over, and we'd be quite willing to talk price'. So then there was this question that they would talk to the city council first, being the biggest operator, then come back to us. They made the necessary arrangements with the city council, and asked if we would, with the other operators, meet them in Johannesburg, which we did.

We went to a boardroom in Johannesburg and had a chat and spoke about price, and . . . during that . . . That was in '76, and I just have this feeling that they dropped this whole matter because of the '76 riots. There were the Soweto riots that took place *while* we were still discussing this. There was this burning of buses. Of course, we still couldn't get the proper reason for their dropping this, but we just have a slight suspicion that it would have been these riots.

Then after this came this commission of enquiry. But the irony of the whole thing is that the city council now wants to be rid of its bus business. They're running at a loss.

But I was telling you about the routes that we ran, but the commission didn't want to go — they said they knew about it. We said we'd like to drive along some of the routes where we are operating, and we've made quite a few complaints to KwaZulu roads department about fixing these roads and nothing has been done. For years we used to have to mend the . . . We used to have a pick and a shovel and a barrel to fill up these potholes and ruts and things like that.

But in any case, we had a very *good* relationship with the people. We were in the route. If there were any complaints, people used to come to the yard. Immediately we'd take hold of the matter. We didn't have an incident of stone-throwing, or burning of buses in our time. It was easy to get hold of us. People did come and complain to us. We usually just checked on this. If it was the driver that was at fault, we just said, 'Look, please, we want none of these things to happen'. Or we would go into the matter and sort it out.

Of course, at the same time, we weren't the best of operators, in the sense that we also had financial difficulties. Each time we bought an operator off it meant outlaying money, and we had bought new buses. One sad part was that this was a sudden thing that was just snatched away.

We had senior counsel in Durban, and the city council had. KwaZulu weren't prepared to nego-. Well, I wouldn't say not prepared to negotiate, but there was great difficulty. This matter took three years, and finally we had to settle out of arbitration. Our creditors were only prepared to accept forty cents in the rand; more or less forty cents in the rand. We paid about forty cents. But the people we had dealt with like Western Bank and Combined Motor Finance understood the position, that this wasn't of our own making. That this was something that just came about, and . . .

And it seems that they could provide no specific reasons why you should not run the service?

No specific reasons. If they had given a reason one could bring evidence to try to fight this allegation or whatever it was. The old Transportation Act —

I don't know if it was in 1952 or something — used to give the chairman of the board . . . He could give you notice and give you thirty days or sixty days in which to show cause why your certificate should not be cancelled. Here there was no question of cancelling certificates. There's just that the minister feels that they should look into transport in the Maritzburg area. And we wanted to know what's wrong or who complained so we could get into the matter. We'd know what was happening. Before that, one would give an operator a warning that your certificate will be cancelled, and these are your offences, or these are the allegations. There might be a good reason why you didn't run a service. You know, there could be a bridge washed away. I mean we, once or twice, didn't run certain services. The bridge had washed away, so we couldn't do anything. You either had to go through the river with great danger or just had to terminate your services.

But now, since we've lost our bus business, my brother has got a sort of a restaurant at the lower end of town, a sort of a take-away, and I've . . . It's just fortunate for me that I could, at this age, I could fit in there.

Most of the people that used to travel by our buses still come and support us, and this great relationship still exists with us. Some of them, we still call by their first names. People still come to the shop that used to be our bus commuters, and each time they want to know when are we coming back into the bus business, why did we sell? Lots of them don't understand that it wasn't a willing seller. It was just something that was just . . . taken away.

Going back then. The transition from the laundry to the bus service was just a development by the children, and you didn't close the laundry business for any reason?

No. The laundry business, I think . . . Here I'm a bit . . . I wouldn't know the reasons, but I think the lease had expired or the people wanted to . . . It used to belong to some Froomberts that had a bottle store round the corner. They owned the premises, and I think this laundry was a very old building, and I think they wanted to demolish it and put up a block of flats. That is what is there now.

And Group Areas. Did that affect you residentially?

At West Street? No.

Or at any stage. Not at West Street because you had moved from there.

We had moved before Group Areas came in. It didn't affect us. Except at Edendale it didn't affect us. But what happened at Edendale is the schools were moved out. You know, they had a different way of getting people to move. And then there was the threat that it was going to go KwaZulu, and lots of people, I think the whole community at . . . There was a very large community at Edendale, Indian community. We had a soccer club, we had a cricket club, and we used to have annual five-a-sides quite a large number of Indians that used to be farmers predominantly. A few storekeepers, mostly farmers.

Well, we even did farming while we were doing this bus operation. We had about, say, thirteen acres of land, and we used to grow nearly any vegetable that one could think about or come across. We had an orchard of

about an acre, and we used to grow almost any fruit. We had a very nice soil, nice climate out at Edendale, and most of the farmers used to bring things to the local market.

Now when we got to Edendale we had built a home, and we were living at this, built for my grandfather. This was in about 1935, and there was a new national road that was being planned for Edendale. This went right through our home. We lost all the orchard, and we had to move again from there and build another house lower down the road. So we had quite a few movements in our [chuckle] time. This wasn't very helpful.

I must mention there were a few European people at Edendale too. There were storekeepers and a few farmers and the relationship was very good. We used to visit them and they used to visit us and, you know, exchange ideas.

And then, during the war years we were the first people in the Maritzburg area to grow rice, and we grew rice for a very long time. The war started in '39 and you couldn't get rice at all here, but we had an ample supply. Very hard work. We used to have paddy fields just like they do in China or India, proper paddy fields. We had an ample supply of water; we had very good irrigation. When there was this shortage of rice, we used to support Carter's and we were their customers, and we used to barter rice seeds for other seeds. They used to sell our seed to other people that wanted to put in rice seed just to experiment. I remember one specific occasion, some gentleman in town, I don't know his name, he came and wanted some rice seed, and he wanted to send it to the Egyptian Sudan he says. He said they grow rice a lot there but he just thought he's going to try some Natal rice.

We used to grow about five, six acres of rice. Of course the dehusking was the problem. We didn't have any machines or something, we had the old mortar method that you just stamp, stamp and clean that. That was a very difficult job. Of all the things that we grew, rice was the very difficult operation. But the land seemed very fertile and we used to have very good rice crops. We must have grown rice 'til about the 'fifties, and then South Africa started importing American rice and things like that so we stopped growing rice.

There wasn't Group Areas as such but . . . Mount Partridge, Plessislaer, Esinadeni, all these areas had farmers. But what happened is that these Indian schools were moved, so children had to go by bus, which was a long distance. The schools were taken away, and then, just lately, the hospital came away to Northdale. Of course, today there is a slight difference, but if there was an injury or something you had to come across town. So virtually there is hardly anybody living at Edendale. No Indian community as such living there. There might be one or two, possibly five at the most, business people that are still, not living out there, but still doing their business out there but living in town.

Within KwaZulu, does Group Areas operate?

We're not too certain. We've never had any inkling towards that. You know, nobody even came and . . . Except right now the property is going to be expropriated. We get a letter from Bantu Trust or something, and then it's got a minister of co-operation and development sort of a pamphlet saying that they looked into the matter and there was a . . . They made us an offer, and if we didn't accept this offer it would be expropriated, then we

could go to arbitration. This is in the last month now. But before that we had no inkling whatsoever, no notice from people, no buyers that said, 'Look, you chaps are in the wrong area'. And Edendale was a free area. We used to go out to the grounds and walk in the streets and down the roads. Of course, running a bus service there you were at nearly every corner of the area. We ran quite an involved sort of intensive area in town, and then we had these country routes, right into the rural areas. But out at Edendale we had *no problem at all*. We could be repairing buses right out in the countryside, but we had *no trouble at all*.

And do you have any idea what they're going to use this land of yours for?

We just hear . . . We've just heard from . . . They hadn't said anything on the letter, but we hear that part of it's going to be used . . . Because part of the land is low-lying, they said that they might open up a school or something. But this is something that we just hear a whisper. We've got no definite . . .

You have no specific reason why?

No specific reason why. Yes.

Recorded by MORAY COMRIE

