

The outbreak of the Great War

How Pietermaritzburg reacted

by Paul Thompson

THIS article briefly describes how people in Pietermaritzburg received the news of the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. It is based on a reading of the two Pietermaritzburg newspapers The Natal Witness and The Times of Natal, and also on local correspondents' reports in Durban's The Natal Mercury. The material, and therefore this selection of it, reflects very much the attitudes and interests of the English-speaking middle class of the city.

The Long Weekend

There had been no rain for some time. The trees in the park were showing it. The Borough Engineer warned of possible water restrictions, which meant that people would have to curtail watering their gardens – but this was not unusual at this season. Friday 31st July 1914 was typical of a dry Natal mid-winter day. Temperatures during the week rose to 88, 87, and 90° F, [30–32 °C] but the nights were still cool. There was a long weekend ahead – Monday August 3rd was a bank holi-

day – and, as might be expected, the weather took a turn against sport. On Friday the 31st strong berg winds drove dust into shops, offices and houses, even carried off the roof of an Indian's house and deposited the debris in the telegraph wires nearby, and the sky was overcast. The temperature fell from 82 to 75 on Saturday and 70 on Sunday, there were heavy frosts in town and snow fell on the Drakensberg. Expect rain, the *Natal Mercury* correspondent said, but there was no rain, although it stayed in the mid-seventies [*about*

23°C] for the next few days. So the sports went on. On Saturday afternoon there was a Currie Cup match between South-Western Districts and Rhodesia played at the Show Ground. The other matches were played elsewhere, and more of them over the long weekend, but, of course, they received full coverage in the daily papers for a good fortnight. Also for those who could afford to travel to Durban, there were two Races on Thursday and the Stewards Cup on Saturday, the 1st of August.

The weather had to be right on Monday the 3rd for the Bank Holiday competitions at the Maritzburg Golf and Country Club. There were about the same number of motor car and cycle shops in Maritzburg as there were wagon- and carriage-makers now, and motor vehicles presented a new challenge to the corporation's maintenance of roads. More compelling for aficionados of the modern, the Motor Cycle Club had arranged an all-day endurance test for Monday. It started at 8.30, with legs from Maritzburg to Weston, Weston to Greytown (lunch), and Greytown to Maritzburg, all carefully planned and timed by members in advance. Solo machines were not to exceed twenty miles per hour, those with sidecars eighteen. The organisers were disappointed that out of 120 club members, there were only eighteen entries (sixteen solo and two side-car). The *Natal Witness* gave the event front-page cover, with a detailed map of the course. "The route is certainly one which presents many difficulties." At Weston there was not enough petrol and contestants had to go in to Mooi River for it. The race should have lasted about eight hours, but one entrant got back to Maritzburg at 9.30 that night.

There was also the fortnightly dance at the Oddfellows hall on Saturday evening, and the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra, on a countrywide tour, would give two concerts in the Town Hall on Monday and Tuesday evenings.

One old timer, a keen shottist who deplored the decline of interest in shooting, blamed the young men about town for apathy and self-indulgence. "The latest turn at the Rinko, or perhaps the newest socks, ties or motor bicycles are more in their line." Indeed, modern technology brought not only motor vehicles but the bioscope. There were two of these in town, the Rinko in Longmarket Street and the Excelsior ("The Cosy Little Bio-Theatre in Chapel Street"). They were very central, like the majority of businesses and offices in town, situated within a ten-minute walk of the Town Hall. The Rinko had film and vaudeville shows, the Excelsior films. Both had evening performances at eight, and Saturday matinees at three o'clock, and both changed the programmes on Mondays and Thursday.

The Rinko was finishing a programme including the The Cyclery Buffoons and the Hersleb Brothers, "two of the greatest comedy acts yet to visit this City", plus a dramatic "photo play" entitled "An Officer and a Gentleman" and a variety of six short films. The Excelsior was concluding "Another Grand Programme" which included a twenty-minute Keystone Company comedy entitled "Mabel's Strange Predicament" and the "Star Drama" entitled "The Luck of Life". (Both theatre houses included Gaumont's Graphic, evidently a newsreel of contemporary events and scenes.)

Monday brought new programmes to both. At the Rinko there were Jarvise and Martine (novel comedy jugglers); Maudie Ford, singing and dancing; and the female duettists the Minnesingers. There was also the usual Pathé Gazette, and several comic short films. The *Times of Natal* reviewer noted that the gazette included Joseph Chamberlain's funeral. Maudie Ford was good, if one liked "the ragtime craze in sound and dance", and she was well received. The Minnesingers were almost too good: "There is nothing 'music-hally' about them." At the Excelsior there was a "Sensational Feature", "When The Lights Went Out":

The Film is in 3 Parts, and rarely has there been such a combination of thrilling incidents with a powerful plot on the screen. The story of this film is exceptionally dramatic, and so skilfully presented that one's attention is held spellbound from start to finish.

The audience was told there would be scenes of a shipwreck and the blowing up of a lighthouse. Pathé's Latest Gazette, another newsreel, and three comic shorts would also be shown. The *Times* reviewer had little to say about all this, except that the shipwreck was a "fine photographic picture" and the blowing up of the lighthouse was "very realistic".

There was also a municipal election campaign in progress. The city was divided into eight wards – the main line of division was Church Street, and the wards were separated by Chapel, Commercial and Boshoff cross streets. Almost everyone lived in town, but the wards extended outward to take in the few suburbs. The Town Council comprised the bourgeois elite of a class-conscious British community. Elections were fairly humdrum, if they oc-

curred at all, and a popular incumbent could feel safe about his seat. There were two councillors for each ward, and one was elected every other year. In 1914 candidates contested only Wards 2, 4 and 5, but the contender for ward 4 dropped out before nominations were filed. "Tom" Reid, formerly of Ford Brothers' ironmongers, stood forward in Ward 5 to replace Hugh Parker, who was retiring because of ill health. Councillor G.B. Laffan, an architect and civil engineer, stood for re-election in Ward 2. They were opposed by men associated with the Labour Party, M.E. Piesold, a watchmaker, and W. Clowes, respectively. One might have expected a lively campaign, especially because women could vote in local elections for the first time; but instead the fortnight's campaign was "quite the usual tame affair". Public meetings were few; Labour candidates proved less articulate than their opponents; and both sides played safe and talked about saving ratepayers' money.

Yet there was more than this to stimulate the public's interest. The news of the preceding week was increasingly about war in Europe. At first it jostled for position on the front and feature pages of the papers with news of the Currie Cup, local parliamentary elections, and the like, and, of course, the Irish trouble seemed closer to home and quite as bad. On Monday July 27th the *Witness* heralded "Austria declares war on Servia.[The names Servia and Serbia were both used at the time.] Ambassador withdrawn. Troops moved to the border. Russia intervenes. Five army corps mobilized. Great sensation in Europe. Fall in Consols." Three out of the five columns of the front page carried war news. That evening the *Times*, which was usually

more restrained than the *Witness*, was still talking about Ireland, but there was a headline box: “A CONTINENT IN ARMS? Clash of Armageddon. Britain Watching at her post.” The editor commented:

War has been tentatively declared between Austria and Servia, and both countries are hastily mobilising. Russia is also mobilising on behalf of the Serbs, and it is feared that Germany may take sides with Austria, and France with Russia. Italy has already expressed her intention of adhering to the Triple Alliance. England is watching the course of events with the utmost anxiety. Readers are referred to p. 6 for the week-end news of the crisis.

From that point on it only got worse. No one really thought much of Serbia, perhaps rather more about Austria, with some sympathy after the killing of the Archduke Ferdinand by a Serb nationalist the previous month. Then things had been fairly quiet. People had grown used to crises among the great powers during the previous few years. When things got hot someone stepped in to cool them off. But not now. It really looked like war. Not only Austria, but Russia, and Germany, and France, too. And what would Britain do? Every day there was more about the war looming in Europe. It was Friday and the long weekend was coming up. Yet the fearsome headlines continued: “The clash of arms. Gathering war clouds burst. Belgrade in flames. British fleet sails. Sealed orders. Hosts of Russia and Germany. On the march.”

Newspaper sales jumped. Between Saturday July 25th and Saturday August 1st the *Witness* circulation increased by 2 272 copies. Street sales soared. Country orders poured in by

telephone, telegram, and letter – hundreds a day. News agents were told to put in orders before 5p.m. for the next day, and regular supplies would be increased “in proportion to standing orders”. On Thursday the *Times* announced that it would run daily specials in red, white and blue, but, of course, they would “deal only with news of such gravity that immediate publication becomes necessary”. The *Witness*’ “Topics of the Town”, on Saturday, August 1st, spoke of “wars and rumours of war”. The press promoted them, and now no one really believed that the last-minute negotiations would achieve anything.

Saturday’s *Witness* front page carried photographs of Archduke Charles of Austria and Prince Alexander of Serbia, with the headline: “Young Heirs to Thrones Now Shaken by War: Where the Armies of the World will be Let Loose.” The latter referred to a large map of the putative theatre of operations. Other columns had detailed news. The *Times* was just as bleak: “Black Shadow of War. Creeping Over Europe. A General Call to Arms. Mr. Asquith’s Statement.”

By Monday there could no longer be any doubt about the Great War. On the *Witness* front page the headlines were: “Germany draws the sword. Declares war against Russia. Triple Alliance shattered. Italy remains neutral. France prepares to face its old enemy. Tremendous Parisian enthusiasm. Europe in battle array. Smaller states anxious.” (At least there was the local motorcycle endurance test for distraction.) The *Times* said: “Germany and Austria versus Russia and France. Britain Vigilant.” Also: “British Cabinet meets. Ominous Signs. ‘Stand by France.’” “Stop Press News” carried

final and half-time Currie Cup scores, mentioned a (false) rumour of a militia call-up, and last, ominously: “There are indications in London that all parties are now agreed, and that an important announcement is imminent.”

Tuesday, 4th August 1914

The *Witness*’ headlines ran: “The tide of war. Russian advances into Germany. German forces pour into France. Kaiser loses two officers. Britain calm but practical. Dominions rally to the flag. Important British statement awaited.” The front page was all war news, except for a four-column photograph at the top, captioned: “The Currie Cup tournament: the Western Province team”, and there were two photographs of play. That evening the *Times* was hardly as informative: “The Empire in Suspense! No War News. Cables Interrupted. Messages Held Up. Censors Appointed.” Readers had to be content with some speculative reports and local news, and perhaps some useful advice: “Cablegrams for Germany. Stopped Until further Notice.” (The second pages of both papers carried advertisements for German steamship companies as usual.)

Of course, no one could know about the British ultimatum to Germany, demanding withdrawal from Belgium, and it would be the middle of the night when it expired. The weekday passed as it usually did. That evening there were the same features at the Rinko and Excelsior. The Cape Town orchestra’s second and last performance in the Town Hall featured Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, some pieces by Grieg and Grainger and, ironically, preludes from Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan and Isolde* and *The*

Flying Dutchman. The four candidates for the Town Council made their last election speeches at different venues. None had anything new to say, and the one incumbent probably attracted the smallest audience.

Wednesday, 5th August 1914

The news that Britain (and therefore the Empire and South Africa) was at war came later in the day. The *Witness*’ front page declared: “Naval battle between Germany and Russia. Russian fleet driven into Gulf of Finland. British Fleet Cleared for Action. South Africa and the War.” There was even a framed communiqué in column 2: “A reassuring statement. Britain still aloof. Official announcement: ‘Be calm and confident.’” But it was dated Pretoria, 6.15p.m. Tuesday.

Shortly after eleven the news was received. Both newspapers issued specials and the news spread like wildfire, as may be imagined. Small groups of men who were in the streets talking about the war received it first, and cheered. Most people did not. The majority were shocked; some leading citizens seemed quite nonplussed. Evidently some hope had lingered with government’s last bit of reassurance. And the news came piecemeal. The complete speech by Sir Edward Grey justifying Britain’s declaration was not received in full until late in the afternoon. With it, the *Times* dispelled any lingering hope and doubt: “Britain Intervenes At Last. The Declaration of War. Message at Midnight. England, France, Russia v. Germany and Austria. Official Announcement.”

It was a day of disruption, as the *Times* observed: “Suffice to say, the news has caused a great feeling of restlessness everywhere, and there

seems to be an inclination for everyone to temporarily suspend everything pertaining to the ordinary routine of life.” Evidently early in the day the organising committee of the West Country Dinner, scheduled for the 10th at the Creamery Hotel in Longmarket Street, decided to postpone the event: “It is felt that rejoicings and jubilations would be entirely out of place at the present juncture when Britain may be involved in war.” Purchasers were nevertheless advised to keep their tickets, as a long postponement was not expected. The Women’s Enfranchise-ment League was more realistic. Its committee met later and suspended public meetings for the duration of the war: it would henceforth “undertake any other kind of work that may be helpful to the country in the meantime”. It is not clear if the Oddfellows postponed their annual ball and the Overseas Club postponed their bridge drive that evening, but apparently the entertainment houses were open as usual. The disruption of the day was temporary, as the *Times* explained: “Business men, lawyers, tinkers, tailors, in fact every one, accepted the inevitable with the calm, so characteristic of the average Britisher at a time of great national tension.”

The municipal election turned out to be a damp squib. Not many electors turned out, and there was no last-minute rush to the polls. At the Town Hall, Tom Reid had a fleet of motor cars to fetch voters, and they gave a bit of bustle and brightened up Church Street with their colourful decorations. Reid defeated Piesold 176 – 34. At the Oddfellows there was apparently more action. The candidates’ tables flanked the entrance, and lady greeters hugged voters and pinned colours on them (red

for Clowes, blue for Laffan) as they arrived. Clowes was trying hard, and there were probably more real “workers” in Ward 2. Nonetheless he was defeated by Laffan 296 – 159. Polls closed at six, and forty-five minutes later the results were announced. The candidates thanked their loyal supporters; they all gave three cheers for the Returning Officer (the Town Clerk), and went home. The *Witness* observed: “Had it not been for the fact that the tragedy of war hangs over everyone, the contest would possibly have assumed a more important place in the public eye.”

Anticlimax

The programme at the Rinko was not changed on Thursday – Jarvise and Martine, Maudie Ford, and the Minnesingers remained on stage, perhaps because they really were drawcards – but the photoplay was changed, with a drama entitled “Child of My Heart” and three comedy and two educational shorts, including “Russian Mountains and Tour of the Caucasus”. At the Excelsior there was something new: “Too Many Brides”, another Keystone comedy starring Ford Sterling; a Crystal comedy “His Vacation: The Adventures of a Seaside Tripper with the Eyes of Love”; and a two-reel drama “Throne or Wife?” Plus the newest Gaumont Graphic.

The Currie Cup tournament finished at the end of the week – on Saturday over 3 000 spectators at Lord’s Grounds in Durban watched Western Province defeat Transvaal. The August Handicap and eight other races were run the same day.

The one topic that did not come and go was the war. On Thursday the Maritzburg correspondent of the *Natal*

Mercury commented: "The greatest patriotism is in evidence on all sides, but the news has been received with characteristic British calmness." On Friday he elaborated:

Naturally enough, scarcely anything finds a place in local thought or conversation except the war, and numerous dinners and functions have been postponed in view of the situation. All news is enthusiastically and greedily received, and except, perhaps, among a few Socialists in the place, a thoroughly patriotic spirit pervades the public.

The next few days were anti-climactic in respect of news. The morning *Witness* caught up with the evening *Times* on the full news of the declaration of war, and both newspapers carried Lord Grey's speech and full commentaries. There certainly was no falling off of interest on the part of local readers. During the week August 1st – 8th the *Witness* printed 11 863 more copies than in the previous one. The problem – if it can be called that – for the newspapers was that the war itself did not move fast enough and supply front-page drama. Petty combats were magnified. Of course, there was much on the Royal Navy moving into the North Sea – but to do what?

Official censorship now applied – even locally, and for the first time sentences and paragraphs here and there in the press were blacked out, presumably because they told of intended troop movements. The South Staffordshires – the Imperial garrison at Fort Napier – returned from annual manoeuvres. Nothing was said, but naturally orders for their departure were expected. There were many rumours in the air, not least the one about militia being called up for service in Brit-

ish or German East Africa – depending on which rumour one heard. They were, however, promptly scotched by the authorities. Durban Active Citizen Force units were mobilised, but not Maritzburg ones, and one wonders why. Reservists of the Union Defence Force received orders to report for duty at Roberts Heights. No one knew how many of them there were in Maritzburg, but it was thought many of them must be railwaymen. All leave was cancelled for the local unit of the South African Mounted Riflemen.

The run-up to war in the press had many references to disruption of international and national markets, loss of investments, and attacks on shipping which might affect exports and imports – such as Australian wheat for South Africa. There was an early official assurance that South Africa had enough maize to feed itself. Yet when the war came there was a rush on food stocks – not only in Pietermaritzburg, but all over South Africa, as well as in England itself. It was about a week before the panic subsided and shopping and prices returned to normal.

On Tuesday the 4th there had been a rumour in town that Durban merchants, in view of a shortage of supplies in consequence of the crisis, had met and decided to raise the prices of foodstuffs. The *Times* interviewed the secretary of the Maritzburg Chamber of Commerce, Robert Dunlop, about this, and he dismissed the rumour. A change in the prices of foodstuffs was unlikely, barring some extraordinary event, he said; but he conceded there was a shortage of rice, which had risen in price by about 2s.6d. [*two shillings and sixpence*] a bag. The chamber was going to meet on Friday and discuss the situation.

Of course, war is an extraordinary event, and so there was indeed a change in the prices of foodstuffs. There was a rush on local stores on Wednesday, and grocers checked their stocks. The rush continued on Thursday, and some items ran out. Flour and paraffin became almost unobtainable, and consignments were booked a week in advance. One householder, who normally bought two bags of flour at a time, suddenly ordered twelve. Some others laid in a six months' supply. Africans and Indians joined Europeans in the rush. Local Indians appealed to the chamber to see that the price of rice, their staple diet, would not rise beyond the means of the poor. The price of rice went from 25s. to £2 a bag in two days. Indians apparently were laying in as much of it as they could afford. Muslim shopkeepers told the *Witness* that they could not prevent the increase in price because Durban merchants imposed it on them.

The price of petrol rose to £1 a case [*It is not known how many gallons this represented.*], and supplies quickly gave out, because a by-law limited the quantity that could be stored on premises. Some wholesalers tried to lay in more coal and wood, but when one offered coal at 27s.6d. a ton, few storekeepers responded. It should be noted that whatever processed foods were selling for in the shops, food prices on the local produce market remained fairly steady, e.g. maize sold for 4s.3d. – 4s.7d. per 100 lbs on Tuesday, 4s.6d. – 4s.9d. on Wednesday, and Tuesday a week later at 5s.; while sorghum sold for 4s – 4s.6d., 3s.3d. – 5s., and 3s.6d. – 5s. During the same period the price of fresh beef remained steady at 3d. – 6d. per lb.

A number of shopkeepers reserved

stock for their regular customers, and refused to supply others, except limited amounts for cash. This produced an outcry, and by the end of the week there were reports of consumers blaming greedy shopkeepers for profiteering, and shopkeepers blaming panicry consumers for hoarding, and the result was a great inflation of prices. The merchants said that if only public demand would return to normal, so would prices. Indeed, they expected a slump soon. The press urged the merchants, wholesalers and retailers, to get together and tell this to the public. They also called on the government to intervene to regulate prices.

There is no record of the Chamber of Commerce's meeting on Friday, but it would be surprising if the members did not follow the suggestion, for there quickly appeared various notices in the papers promising to keep down prices, especially for valued customers. One leading citizen, G.F. Macfarlane, did ask officials to intervene to regulate prices, but got no response. Then he wired General Smuts, the Minister of Defence, saying that Durban and Maritzburg merchants had held back supplies and raised prices by 25% and upward: the government must investigate and regulate! Again there was no response.

A Patriotic Demonstration

The election of the new Town Council, even though it involved only two council seats, pre-empted official municipal activity on Wednesday, when the declaration of war was announced. The "new" council had to meet, and then elect a new mayor and deputy mayor, and this had to proceed in a measured, lawful manner. Thus there was no immediate or spontaneous re-

sponse on the part of the council or its officials to the crisis. After some reflection “A Citizen” wrote to the *Witness* that it was ungracious, if perhaps understandable, that when the mayors of Durban and several other cities in South Africa had wired expressions of support to the government almost at once, the mayor of Pietermaritzburg had not done so. The letter appeared in Saturday’s paper, when a patriotic demonstration was scheduled that evening. Even so, on Monday, the editor churlishly asked “Why is Maritzburg so backward?” Many expressed surprise in public or private that no action had been taken earlier.

One reason that the mayor did not act at once was because there was uncertainty whether the incumbent or his successor should take the initiative. The new council had its factions: one wanted Percy Taylor to continue as mayor, and the other wanted his predecessor, the current deputy mayor Daniel Sanders, to be mayor again. Apparently Thursday was taken up with politicking between them. On Friday morning the council met in caucus and decided there would be no change. Taylor would be mayor and Sanders deputy. The formal election, however, would only take place at noon the following day.

The editor of the *Times* could not wait. On Friday he telephoned Taylor to ask what he, Maritzburg’s leading citizen, was going to do in the crisis. Taylor said that after Saturday’s election he intended to make an appeal to his fellow citizens to attend a public meeting, presumably the following week, so that they could present a united front in support of the Empire: he would ask them to contribute to a Widows’ and Orphans’ Fund for

the sufferers of the war. Of course, between now and then other leading citizens might come up with other suggestions of merit. He mentioned that he also was in favour of levying a special “war tax”, but since that was a national and not a local question, it would be pointless to bring it up just now.

This the *Times* imparted to the readers on Saturday morning, when fresh news of the war was embarrassingly scarce. The man in the street waited for specials. A rumour spread that there had been tremendous battles, great French and Belgian victories, bloody German defeats, and some German spies had been captured in Durban – but there was no confirmation in print. The paper’s phone rang with calls from people wanting to know the latest. By afternoon callers to the *Witness* were practically accusing it of not conducting the war properly!

Towards four o’clock some wires did come in: there had been German reverses in Belgium, a desperate attack had been made on Liège, the cavalry had been wiped out and a whole battalion had been blown up by a mine. The green special was snapped up eagerly. Then came more: a great naval battle had been fought, twenty-six German ships had been sunk, and only six British cruisers had been lost. The pink special sold well. Then another special reported that there had actually been no battle at all. Sales of Specials dropped off.

In any case it was late in the day, time for supper, and then came the great public gathering in the Town Gardens. The morning papers had a front-page notice urging all of Maritzburg to assemble that night, when an opportunity would be afforded of “exhibiting the patriotic feelings of the community

in regard to the war.” The band of the Natal Carbineers would perform. The programme would begin with the national anthems of Britain, France and Russia. These would be followed in sequence by Elgar’s “Land of Hope and Glory”, a march (“Old Comrades”), and three medleys of the airs of England (G. Godfrey), Ireland (H. Basquit) and Scotland (F. Godfrey). Appropriately, the musical programme would end with the regimental march and “God save the King”.

The evening was cool and dry, the moon was full. Long before eight o’clock crowds were moving through the streets towards the Town Gardens. They assembled around the bandstand; by the time the band began to play there were about 4 000 people. A large Union Jack was produced and paraded about, to the accompaniment of loud cheers.

The programme began with the national anthems, each followed by three cheers. The march (perhaps considered too German?) was omitted. There were the medleys of regional airs. Then Deputy Mayor Sanders climbed on to the bandstand and announced that schoolboy soprano Eddie Palmer would sing “God save the King”. The band and audience joined in the second verse, and cheered. By this time

Bandmaster Keilly no longer tried to keep to the printed programme. “What the people wanted and what they had was ‘God Save the King’ and ‘Rule Britannia’ – and plenty of it.”

The baritone Mr Glasspoole mounted the stand and sang “Land of Hope and Glory”. All joined in, and cheered. A procession went around the bandstand, led by the flag. A past president of the Sons of England, Mr Kingston, sang “Soldiers of the King”, and the crowd joined in the second verse. There were more cheers, and shouts for the army and the navy. The band played the French and Russian anthems again. Mr. Sanders shouted “Vive la France”, and everyone cheered. Someone else called “Cheers for Russia”, which were duly given.

The programme came to an end when the crowd massed close round the band stand, and cheered the Royal Family, Canada, the Overseas Dominions, and (loudest of all) “plucky little Belgium”. They sang “God save the King” and (a fourth time) “Rule, Britannia”, gave three cheers, and went home.

So began in Pietermaritzburg the four-year period that would see patriotic fervour and excitement give way to unimagined suffering and loss.