

Part II:

# The great hunting era of the 19th century.

By PH Willem Frost

*After the Nine Days' War of October 1837, when the Voortrekkers drove the Matabeles of Mzilikazi out of the Transvaal to the Matobo Hills in what is now Zimbabwe, the first whites started to settle in the Marico district.*

Among them were **Jan Viljoen** and **Piet Jacobs** – two close friends and two of the most successful hunters of the 19th century. Viljoen settled on the farm Vergenoeg and Jacobs on Jacobsdal, but they spent most of their time in the hunting fields to the north and the west.

Hunting was free and game was plentiful. All the farmers hunted – some just hunted more than others. By the second half of the 19th century, hunting had become a major industry in the Transvaal.

It is believed that Jan Viljoen and Ockert Oosthuizen first visited the Matabele king, Mzilikazi, in his *kraal* (village) near Bulawayo in 1840 to obtain permission to hunt in Matabeleland. The next year they were back, and Jan Viljoen, Ockert Oosthuizen, Piet Jacobs and Hans Engelbrecht probably became the first white people to set eyes upon the Victoria Falls – the world's largest waterfall.

Years later, Viljoen met with a young Frederick Courtney Selous in Matabeleland during the latter's first African trip. Viljoen apparently took a liking to the young Englishman and invited him to stay for a while in the Viljoen camp, during which time the hardened old veteran taught Selous a lot about hunting elephant and the handling of firearms.

In 1853, the brothers Pieter, Jan, and Frans Joubert also undertook a very successful and profitable hunting expedition to Matabeleland and probably also saw the falls. Years later, Dr. David Livingstone claimed to have "discovered" the falls in November 1855, and he named them in honour of his Queen Victoria – a name that has stuck to this day.

Many Boer hunters followed Viljoen and Jacobs to hunt in Matabeleland. In 1849, **Jan Nel** and **Kallie Swart**, with their families, hunted up north to the Victoria Falls (then only known by its Matabele name *Mosi-oa-tunya*), and from there they apparently followed the Zambezi River to its mouth in the Indian Ocean. On the return trip, Jan Nel was captured by some naked tribesmen somewhere along the Zambezi. Fortunately, he was released after a couple of days. Sadly, there is no record of this most fascinating expedition. The Swart family from the Marico (Marthinus and his sons Jurgens and Pieter, and his brother Jan) were renowned hunters and also hunted regularly in Matabeleland.

Piet Jacobs and Jan Viljoen were the renowned and celebrated hunters of the time. They knew the land from the Marico Bushveld to Lake Ngami and the Okavango, and eastward to Matabeleland and Mashonaland, and south to the Soutpansberg, like the back of their hands. They knew all the tribal chiefs in this vast stretch of land and made it their business to maintain friendly relationships with them.

Consequently they obtained hunting concessions where few other white people could hunt. They even befriended the fearsome Mzilikazi, King of the Matabele and murderer of many – especially the Shona. It is not known how many elephant Viljoen and Jacobs killed. When asked about it in the 1870s, Jacobs mentioned that he must have taken at least 500 bulls himself. Viljoen took about the same number. Including the females, they must have killed close to, or perhaps more than, 1,000 elephants each.



*Two Transvaal Boers with what seems to be a .303 falling-block Martini-Henry rifle. After the Second War of Independence (1899 – 1902) .303 ammunition was freely available and widely used throughout Southern Africa.*

Viljoen retired from hunting in 1880 and spent his last years on his farm Vergenoeg, where he passed away in 1893 at the age of 81. He also had an active public life, and in 1881 he still commanded a Boer force in the First War of Independence.

Very little is known about Piet Jacobs. He was born in the Eastern Cape, but it is unclear how he ended up in the Marico – most probably with one of the Voortrekker parties. He was a modest man, a remarkable shot, and an exceptional horseman. In 1872, he was badly mauled by a lion in Mashonaland and he never really fully recovered. He retired to his farm in the Waterberg where passed away in about 1882.

## Hunting Stories of Yesteryear: The Early Boer Hunters of Southern Africa

The Boer hunters of those days did not go hunting as individuals, but always in small groups. Their families would go with them and sometimes also their livestock. The oxwagon was home, and they would take at least two wagons: one for the parents and daughters to sleep in, and the other to load the ivory, biltong, skins and horns.

They preferred to go out hunting on horseback, and when a shot was to be taken, the hunter would dismount and shoot over the back of the horse using the saddle as a rest for the heavy old rifles. The horses were specifically trained for this.

Hunting expeditions usually lasted all winter. During the rainy summer months, the tsetse fly forced the hunters to return to more healthy climes. There would, however, always be a few hunters that continued to hunt a while longer, on foot, in the “*fly country*.” Most of them spent up to eight months of the year hunting.

Some of the largest hunting operators got other hunters to hunt for them. Perhaps they can be regarded as Africa’s first hunting outfitters. Typically they would provide horses, rifles and ammunition, and in return

receive 50% of everything that was hunted. In many instances the hunters were also required to sell their 50% to the “outfitter.” The proceeds of this 50% were often shared equally amongst the employee hunters.

Up until the latter half of the 19th century, game was abundant almost everywhere. The gregarious animals formed herds so vast that trekkers often had to wait for the mass of wildlife to pass. Predators were equally plentiful. In those days it was not unusual to see prides of 40 or more lions.

In 1844, **Jan Nel** and **Kallie Swart** saw a pride of at least 100 lions along the Crocodile River. In 1855, Jan Viljoen had an encounter with a pride of about 100 lions at Victoria Falls. The pride attacked his oxen and killed seven before they could be driven off.

In 1860, **Willem Gronum** was hunting along the Matlabas River with a friend when they were surprised by a pride that they estimated at 90 to 100. They got back to their camp late one afternoon, just in time to see the lions attack their oxen. Three oxen were killed and some of the

lions started to feed immediately while others were pursuing the rest of the oxen. Fortunately, it was full moon and the hunters set off after the lions with their rifles and their horsewhips.

When they heard the oxen, they fired into the air, called the oxen by their names and cracked their whips. This calmed the frightened oxen, and they started running back to the camp. How many of today’s hunters would pursue a large pride of hungry lions at night with a muzzleloader and a whip? Lion skins were sought-after and fetched good prices. As a result, lions were hunted at every opportunity. For example, Jan Viljoen’s grandson, also Jan, killed 108 lions during his career towards the end of the 19th century.

**Bêrend Bouwer** was most probably the first white man to visit the elephant paradise that became known as the *Tebraveld* – the stretch of land between the Okavango Delta and Damaraland. It was in the 1860s. The country was crawling with large herds of elephant everywhere.

Initially Bouwer hunted the *Tebraveld* alone, but was later joined by **Hendrik van**

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*Jan Viljoen, pioneer and elephant hunter extraordinaire, was also a natural leader of men. He retired from hunting in 1880 and passed away on his farm in 1893 at the age of 81.*

Zyl, a wealthy trader and hunter from the Cape Colony. Their base was to the south at Ghanzis in what is currently Botswana. Bouwer got married in 1870 and two years later had to return to the Transvaal for his wife to give birth. But he soon returned to his elephant paradise. In 1872, Van Zyl settled permanently near Ghanzis where he built a beautiful, large double-storey home for the family. He hunted elephant in the *Tebra* from 1865 to 1880. It is not known how many elephants fell to his rifles, but he had many others hunting for him, and collectively they must have killed far more than 1,000 elephant.

Hendrik van Zyl is, amongst other things, remembered for shooting 103 elephants on a Sunday afternoon in 1877. They had shot nine elephant bulls the previous day, and Sunday lunch included baked elephant foot, rice, vegetables, and raisin pudding for dessert. They had just finished lunch when one of the Bushman trackers came running to tell them about a herd of elephant not too far away. Hendrik van Zyl and five others (his three sons,

plus Pieter Botha and Bêrend Bouwer) immediately set off on horseback.

Soon they found the herd which had fled into a swampy pan where they got stuck in the mud. All 103 elephants were shot on the spot, and the place became known as *Olifantspan*. During that particular 14-day period, the six hunters killed no less than 178 elephants.

During a hunting trip in 1880, Hendrik van Zyl was murdered by one of his servants near Ukuambi in Ovamboland. Here he was buried by one Flip Scheepers and a few Bushmen in a lonely grave in a faraway hunting field. A few years later, his son Andrew was also murdered by a Hottentot employee and a Bushman gunbearer.

About four decades after the Great Trek, there was another emigration of Boers – this time from the Transvaal, across the Kalahari to the Okavango, then westward to Damaraland and the Kaokoveld, and eventually northwards into Angola. This was the famous *Dorsland* Trek of the 1870s (“Dorsland” meaning *Thirstland*).

The reasons for this trek are not quite clear. According to some sources, these farmers were unhappy with the liberal ideas of their then president, Thomas Burgers. The annexation of Transvaal by Britain in 1877 was the final straw that broke the camel’s back. Some of the Boers stated openly that they were not prepared to live among the English. So, they decided to sell their farms, pack their wagons, and trek once again in search of a land where they could live in peace without any English nearby.

The trekkers were mostly from the Marico and Rustenburg districts and were quite a stubborn lot. Their assembly point was at the confluence of the Marico and Crocodile Rivers. While they waited for friends and family to sell their farms and finalise all their affairs, they hunted

extensively in the area as far north as the Matlabas and Mogol Rivers.

By then, Jan Viljoen knew the Kalahari very well and he gave them some sound advice (such as travelling in small groups from one waterhole to the next, and buying more horses), but this was largely ignored. The result was that many succumbed from thirst and exhaustion in the endless sands of the arid Kalahari. When they eventually reached the Okavango, malaria took a further serious toll. The story of the Dorsland Trekkers is, however, not only a story of hardship and suffering, it is also a story of fascinating hunting by remarkable hunters in a wild, untamed land.

**Pieter Botha** first hunted elephant for Hendrik van Zyl (who was not a member of the *Dorsland Trek*, but who settled near Ghanzis before the trek took place), and he participated in the hunt at Olifantspan when 103 elephant were killed. Botha also hunted for the Swede, Axel Ericksson, for a short time. A year or two later, Botha joined the trek and married one of the young ladies who was on trek with her family.

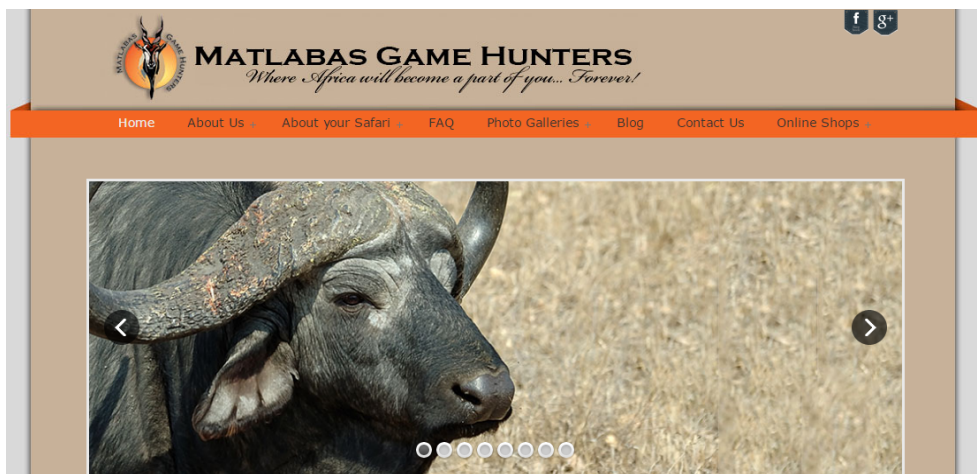
Botha hunted the Tebraveld, Damaraland, the Kaokoveld, and southern Angola, and soon became, together with his friend Bêrend Bouwer, one of the most competent hunters of the time. He also played a major role in establishing the trekker town of Humpata in Angola.

Botha and Bouwer took an unknown, but certainly large, number of elephant, rhino, hippo, lion, and other game. This was quite an adventurous life, and they had many narrow escapes from wild beasts as well as hostile tribesmen.

During the Second War of Independence (1899 to 1902), Pieter Botha and Bêrend Bouwer were back on commando in the Transvaal and served the Republic with honour and distinction.

Of all the hunters during the *Dorsland Trek*, none was as successful in the hunting business as **Jan Robbertse**. He had by far the largest hunting operation in Southern Africa at the time and became a very wealthy man. He had a large number of hunters working for him, and he hunted for 28 years (1880 to 1908) – mainly for elephant but also other big game. It is not known how many elephant fell to his guns, but it must have been several thousand.

Although his father was an experienced elephant hunter, Jan Robbertse’s hunting career only started on the *Dorsland Trek*. He hunted in what are now Botswana, Namibia and Angola. Probably most of his elephant were hunted in the Kaokoveld in



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German West Africa (Namibia).

He started out hunting on his own, but by the time the Trek got to Angola, he was in a position to hire other hunters to work for him.

His hunting expeditions from Angola into German West Africa were quite something. He provided his hunters with everything they needed. The hunter usually had his own rifle, but was provided with ammunition, a salted horse, and provisions. Often the families would accompany the hunters and would camp near the Kunene River while the men would hunt to the south across the river.

They would also take a couple of wagonloads of maize to feed the horses, a few milking cows, some slaughter-stock, and a few extra horses. Robbertse would also hire 100 to 200 porters to carry the elephant tusks back to camp and to carry provisions between the camp and the hunting patrol deep in the Kaokoveld.

Jan Robbertse and his hunters shared the ivory on a 50/50 basis. The hunters were, however, required to sell their half to Robbertse at a predetermined price. The hunters usually pooled their ivory and shared the money equally. Other hunting proceeds, like ostrich feathers, whips,

hides, and skins were dealt with in the same way.

There were many elephant hunters amongst the Dorsland Trekkers, but none had the resources to operate at the scale of Jan Robbertse. Over the years, many of the Robbertse hunters started to hunt on their own.

Although Jan Robbertse was a very good hunter himself, he did not personally shoot as many elephant as Bèrend Bouwer or Stephanus Oosthuizen, who were already hunting the area years before.

Jan Robbertse was a born hunter and an astute businessman. He not only hunted, but was also a trader and farmer. Elephant hunting, however, was almost an obsession with him, and during his hunting career this enabled him to buy nine farms in the Transvaal, to where he returned in 1908.

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