

MATABELELAND VIA THE TRANSVAAL

PIETERSBURG TO BULAWAYO

We saw in the final part of "Mashonaland via the Transvaal" that after the conquest of Matabeleland, Salisbury lost its direct connection with the Rand. Bulawayo was now to become the terminus for the southern mail routes - the heavy plant on the Wirsings' Bechuanaland line was diverted from Macloutsie to Bulawayo and a new contract was concluded with Hollins and Zeederberg for a Pietersburg - Bulawayo service to replace their main line service from Pietersburg to ^{Victoria +} Salisbury via Tuli. However, as a sop to Victoria residents, Hollins and Zeederberg agreed to continue a Tuli - Victoria service for the 1894 dry season only. We also learnt in the earlier chapter that limited Mashonaland mails were routed via the Transvaal and that the carriage of these south of Tuli was undertaken without apparent subsidy.

The new contract with Hollins and Zeederberg was made at Salisbury on 9 June, 1894 and provided for a "through mail service between Pietersburg in the South African Republic and Bulawayo in the Company's Territory once a week each way and to connect with any mail or passenger service that may be run from Pretoria to Pietersburg or its vicinity so long as there is a Government service between the two towns. Any subsidy allowed or granted by the Government of the South African Republic for that purpose to belong exclusively to the Contractors."⁽¹⁾ Although the contract was to commence on 1 August Duncan was able to telegraph Cape Town on 8 June, 1894 -

"Have arranged everything with Zeederberg to run the Tuli Bulawayo mail in forty-eight hours for £1600 he also puts in a weekly service each way with oxen from Tuli to Victoria eighty-four hours to last during this dry season please pay him subsidy which has been temporarily detained and Zeederberg will give up the main line on July 31st Zeederberg agrees to carry the mails at once from Tuli to Bulawayo so that you can tell French."⁽²⁾

French was somewhat piqued by the news in this telegram. He was the titular Postmaster-General for the new territory and this was the first intimation of a new contract with Hollins and Zeederberg. He failed to see the reason for it - everything had been arranged for the Wirsings'

mails to transfer at Bulawayo to Bezuidenhout's Salisbury service and for Victoria to be served by a branch line from Iron Mine Hill. He was now informed of a quite unexpected Tuli-Bulawayo service and of a continuation, even if for a short period, of a Tuli-Victoria service.⁽³⁾ I suspect that the Chartered Company were loathe to drop an efficient contractor like Zeederberg and the direct connection that he could provide between the two boom towns of the period - Johannesburg and Bulawayo. French was apparently kept in the dark until the negotiations were concluded and then presented with a fait accompli.

The next three or four months through to October, 1894 saw a major effort by the Mashonaland and Matabeleland settlers to have some of their mails to and from the Cape and overseas, in addition to the normal Transvaal and Orange Free State mails, routed via Pretoria. Wirsing was running in excess of his contract weight of 1500 lbs. in Bechuanaland while Zeederberg seemed to have adequate spare capacity. The biggest problem was Zeederberg's contract with the Transvaal government for the carriage of mails between Pretoria and Pietersburg. These internal mails were regularly overweight and as the Transvaal government was paying Zeederberg 6d per lb. excess on this section it sought reimbursement for any such excess caused by the carriage of Chartered Company mails. However, as the Chartered Company was liable for a greater excess charge on the Bechuanaland route (a half share of 1/6d per lb.) there would be an obvious saving in both time and money if some of the Bechuanaland excess was diverted to the Pretoria route. The eventual compromise was for Zeederberg to carry only those mails which would cause Wirsing to be in excess of his contract limit of 1500 lbs. and this was finally agreed to by the British High Commissioner in Cape Town. On 2 July, 1894 the Imperial Secretary wrote to the Postmaster-General, Cape Town in very clear terms -

"Sir,

I am desired by the High Commissioner to acknowledge (your letter) respecting the diversion of a certain portion of the Mashonaland and Matabeleland Mails from the Protectorate to the Pretoria route.

It is understood that the mails so diverted will consist only of mail matter, in excess of the contract limit of 1500 lbs., or as nearly so, as can be calculated at the time of despatch of mail.....

His Excellency while approving this proposal, wishes it to be distinctly understood that it involves no change in the policy agreed upon between the High Commissioner and Mr Rhodes that the Protectorate route is to be the main Postal route to the Chartered Company's Territories.

His Excellency understands that you fully recognise this to be the case, and it is hoped that this feeling is shared by the British South Africa Company. It must be remembered that it is only on this understanding that the Mail Service through the Protectorate has been so largely subsidised by Her Majesty's Government."⁽⁴⁾

The editor of the Salisbury newspaper was right on the mark when he wrote -

".....Current gossip attributes to (Rhodes) a very strong prejudice in favour of the Bechuanaland as opposed to both the Beira and Transvaal routes into this territory Still, as regards the Transvaal, which, together with the interests of the Mashonaland public, has been sacrificed for the midland route, the facts very strongly point to the rumour being true."

From the same newspaper we learn of the time-table for the new service -

"ZEEDERBERG

Leave	Cape Town	Sunday	9 p.m.
Leave	Pretoria	Thursday	5 a.m.
Leave	Pietersburg	Saturday	3 a.m.
Arrive	Tuli	Sunday	8 p.m.
Leave	Tuli	Monday	10 a.m.
Arrive	Bulawayo	Wednesday	10 a.m.

Leave	Bulawayo	Thursday	6 p.m.
Arrive	Tuli	Saturday	6 p.m.
Leave	Tuli	Sunday	4 a.m.
Leave	Pietersburg	Monday	9 p.m.
Leave	Pretoria	Wednesday	8.30 p.m.
Arrive	Cape Town	Saturday	6.40 a.m." ⁽⁵⁾

Sometime in September or October of 1894 Hollins and Zeederberg lost the Transvaal contract for the movement of mails between Pretoria and

Pietersburg to George Heys and Co. of Pretoria⁽⁶⁾ but this caused no interruption in their service. On 26 October, 1894 they were able to advertise that their - "Coaches (although not carrying the Transvaal Mails) will still continue the service between Pretoria and Buluwayo, via Pietersburg, with the celerity and comfort for which they have been famous."⁽⁷⁾ Presumably the Chartered Company mails were now being trans-shipped at Pietersburg.

Business picked up and on 1 April, 1895 a bi-weekly service was introduced on the route.⁽⁸⁾ The Salisbury Postmaster-General's office summarised the position as follows -

"..... The S.A. Republic, Orange Free State and Natal correspondence arrives and is despatched via Tuli and Pietersburg. Correspondence from abroad and the Cape Colony for Tuli is circulated via Pretoria. A second coach is run by the Contractors without subsidy for the convenience of passengers only."⁽⁹⁾

In the meantime the Zeederberg brothers (now without Hollins) had been expanding their business and on 1 May, 1895 took over the Bechuanaland run from the Wirsings. On 4 July, 1895 the Postmaster-General, Cape Town wrote to the Secretary, Cape Town -

"BULAWAYO-PIETERSBURG MAIL SERVICE - PROPOSED DISCONTINUANCE
OF SUBSIDY

Sir,

During the negotiations which took place in June 1894 between Mr C.H. Zeederberg, the Company and this department, on the subject of the Mafeking-Bulawayo Mail Service, it was stipulated by the former that the subsidy paid by the Company in respect of the Pietersburg-Tuli-Bulawayo service should not be discontinued until the Mafeking line was in working order. It is now over two months since Messrs Zeederberg took up the Mafeking-Bulawayo Mail Service, and although liberal concessions have been made in regard to an extension of the Contract time, it would appear that they are not yet in a position to perform the journey in 144 hours.....

Consequently, a large proportion of the mails from Mashonaland have necessarily been diverted from the Bechuanaland route and sent via the Transvaal. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs, and I would now submit for the consideration of the

Managing Director whether the interests of the Company would not best be served by a concentration of the Contractors' energies and plant upon the Bechuanaland line. If the Transvaal route were not subsidised as a competing route, a saving to the Company of £2000 per annum (could be) effected."

This letter was seen by Rhodes and is endorsed in pencil - "Mr Rhodes would be glad if Mr French would deal energetically in this matter." However some other official was aware that Jameson had expressed special interest in the service and the letter was endorsed with a further note -

"Dr Jameson conferred with Mr Rhodes and directed me to write to the effect that the existing arrangement should not be disturbed for the present. Dr Jameson had made some promise to Zeederberg in the subject."

Duncan, in Salisbury, was informed of the position by telegram and he entered the arena with a reply dated 11 July -

"Dr Jameson asked me to let the Pietersburg mail subsidised service remain for the present for certain reasons which he would be able to explain to Mr Rhodes but I assume Dr Jameson's reasons to be now no longer operative. I concur in thinking that notice should be given Zeederberg at once of the termination of the contract. If Zeederberg continues to run without subsidy we could pay him a nominal amount for carrying mails between Tuli and Bulawayo and if he ceases we could serve Tuli by a horse post from Bulawayo or Macloutsie as you suggest."

As a result the matter was put to Jameson again with an outline of the recent correspondence and he was asked to confirm that it was still his - "wish that this contract should not yet be cancelled?" The reply was - "for the present we do not think it advisable to discontinue the subsidy for the above line."⁽¹⁰⁾

This was the period of the build up to the Jameson Raid and readers should bear in mind that the service provided the only direct link between the Rand and the Chartered Territory. There were, then, good reasons why Jameson wanted the service retained.

Ironically it was the Raid that caused the eventual demise of the service. Without adequate police in the country the Matabele rose in rebellion and the service ceased in March, 1896 - not to be reintroduced

until 1902. Gwanda was the only postal agency on the route in Matabeleland and the early history of this office is described below.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. NA: CT1/17/2/3. The contract was between the Company and Richard Roger Hollins, Christian Hendrick and Hans Jacobus Zeederberg carrying on business under the style of Hollins and Zeederberg. It was to commence on 1 August, 1894 and endure for two years, using coaches and covered wagonettes on springs drawn by horses or mules. The trip between Tuli and Bulawayo was timed to forty-eight hours and a subsidy of £1600 per annum was payable monthly in Pietersburg for a contract weight of 800 lbs. "It is further agreed and understood that the Company is not bound to provide or maintain a pont on the Limpopo River nor shall any delay ... of mails caused by the want or failure of a pont be deemed to excuse the Contractors from the fines...." Clause 48 provided that "The Contractors hereby undertake to run a weekly passenger service between Tuli and Victoria and vice versa in eighty-four hours during this dry season for which no subsidy shall be claimed or paid. This service shall continue until the Company has received one month's notice in writing from the Contractors of their intention to discontinue it; no fines on this section."
2. NA: CT1/17/2/2. Telegram to Harris.
3. ibid. Letter to Secretary, Cape Town dated 9 June, 1894.
4. NA: CT1/17/2/6. For the full story of the mails via the Transvaal see CT1/17/2/7.
5. Rhodesia Herald 10 August, 1894
6. NA: CT1/17/2/7
7. Rhodesia Herald 26 October, 1894
8. Rhodesia Herald 29 March, 1895
9. NA: PL/1/2
10. NA: CT1/17/2/7 - covers this complete exchange of correspondence and notes.