

Stories and Traveltips: A Springbok Migration in the 19th Century, Karoo and Kalahari, Northern Cape, South Africa.

Springbok migrations which devastated Karoo districts during the last century must have formed one of the most dramatic scenes in the world. I am sorry these cavalcades of fur and flesh occurred before my time. There was once a trekboer with a gift for storytelling whose tale gave me the human side of it; one of those tales which carried the ring of personal experience in every vivid detail.

Gert van der Merwe left the Transvaal with his family in the eighteen-seventies as a boy of ten. They were members of the first "Thirstland (Dorsland) Trek", a group impelled by real or imaginary grievances and a restless spirit to seek a new country. Some reached Angola, but the Van der Merwe's in question broke away from the ill-fated wagons and headed south.

They spent their lives trekking in search of grass for their sheep and cattle. When the old people died, Gert went on living the only life he knew in Bechuanaland (Botswana), the Kalahari and the North West Cape. By the time he was twenty-one he had a wife and three children, two coloured shepherds and a Bushman touleier to lead the oxen from one water-hole or vlei to the next.

One morning Gert's wagon was plodding along the dry bed of the Molopo river where it forms the southern border of Botswana. He noticed that the Bushman seemed worried. Suddenly, in mid-morning, the Bushman left the oxen and ran off. At noon Gert stopped for the usual outspan and meal. His wife had just settled down to cooking when the Bushman raced into camp and urged the party to "... inspan and follow him immediately". "The trekbokke are coming," the Bushman declared. "It will be death to stay in the river-bed."

Gert packed up, wondering whether the alarm was justified as the Bushman led the wagon out of the riverbed and up a hill on the north bank. He drove up the hill as far as the oxen would pull it and then climbed to the summit where the Bushman pointed. At first Gert saw nothing unusual. Later he observed a faint cloud of dust on the horizon. It was miles away and did not pose any danger. However, the Bushman persuaded him to cut and pile thorn bushes around the wagon and cattle because, if the springbok came over rather than around the hill, they would trample everything in their path. He hoped the thorn bush and wagon would make them swerve.

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Later, Gert again climbed the hill. By now the dust was only a few miles away, rising high into the air and spread over a wide front. Gert's hill appeared to be in the centre of the oncoming game. Realizing what might happen if the stampede passed through the camp, he felt a little nervous. So he ordered his wife and children into the wagon and tied the dogs under the wagon tent. With the aid of the coloured men and the Bushman he gathered heaps of dry wood and placed it in front of the wagon. By throwing green foliage on top of each pile he intended sending up smoke to startle the buck, causing them to swing aside.

Gert waited on the summit. The buck were hidden by the dust screen but hares, jackals and other small animals raced past taking no notice of the humans. Snakes were out in the open, too, seeking cover under nearby rocks. Gert and his men threw stones at those that came too close but they seemed to be dominated by fear. Meerkat families and field mice also appeared in large numbers.

At last he heard a faint drumming. No doubt the Bushman had sensed this drumming hours before but now Gert heard it as well. The dust cloud was so dense only the front rank of springbok, running faster than galloping horses, could be seen. The front line of buck was at least three miles wide. Ahead of the main body were swift voorlopers, moving as though leading an army.

When the stampede came within a mile, the Bushman, taking no chances, climbed into the wagon despite the growling dogs. Gert and the coloured men then moved back, pausing only to light the fires. They remained with the cattle, which had sensed the danger and were milling around lowing nervously. Gert's wife wanted him inside the wagon but he was gripped by the spectacle and climbed onto the canopy for a better view.

At first the buck swept past on either side of the hill. Thereafter the stream was continuous, making for the river and the country beyond. Later the buck became so crowded it was no longer possible for them to swerve aside when they reached the fires and the wagon. Some became jammed in the wheels and the wagon became the centre of a mass of dead and dying buck. Then the thorn barrier broke and the buck were among the cattle. Before long the bellowing cattle stampeded and vanished in the direction of the river. Gert had to let them go -- it was suicidal for anyone to venture among the horns and hooves.

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At the height of the rush, Gert said, the noise was deafening. Countless hooves powdered the surface to fine dust, and everyone found it hard to breathe. Gert's wife, who had been watching with frightened interest, drew the blankets over herself and the children -- the dust almost smothered them. Everything in the wagon was an inch deep in pale yellow dust. Within an hour the main body of springbok had passed but that was not the end of the spectacle. Long after sunset, stragglers followed exhausted, crippled and bleeding. Gert wondered what had happened to the hares, jackals and snakes which had been unable to take cover.

All night lone buck passed the wagon. The air cleared but, when there was any movement in the camp, the dust rose again. At daybreak Gert climbed the hill to see whether he could find his cattle. He had food and there was a waterhole not far away in the dry riverbed. However, without oxen he was stranded. The morning air was so clear and bright that the events of the previous day had a nightmarish quality. Then he saw that the landscape, which had been covered with trees, green with food for his cattle, consisted of gaunt stumps and bare branches. In their passing the buck had brushed off all herbage and splintered many young trees, never to grow again.

Gert thought he could see a few of his oxen in the distance and set off to recover them after breakfast. Every donga and gully leading into the river was filled with buck. The first buck had paused on the brink, considering the prospects of leaping across. However, before they could decide, the ruthless mass was upon them. Buck after buck was pushed into the donga until the hollow was filled and the irresistible horde swept over their bodies. Small animals were lying dead everywhere - tortoises crushed almost to pulp, fragments of fur that had been hares. A tree, pointing in the direction of the advancing buck, became a deadly spike on which two springbok were impaled.

Camped beside the Molopo, Gert searched for his cattle for a fortnight. He only found half of them -- the fate of the rest remained a mystery. They might have been borne along by the impetus of the stampede and trampled to death; or they might have escaped from the living trap far away from the wagon. Thankfully, Gert inspanned the survivors and the wagon rolled away from the scene of destruction. When he told the tale, it was clear that he regarded it to be the most memorable episode in a life he regarded as the finest on earth. "Ons lewe lekker. Dit is vir ons heeltemal goed genoeg," declared Gert at the end of his story. "We live well. It is absolutely good enough for us."
NFSpringbok

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A tale from Lawrence Green's "Karoo"

PS: If one assumes that the stampede in question was 3000-m wide, travelled at 45-km per hour and lasted for 1 hour then the stampede covered an area of 135,000,000 m². If one assumes still further that each springbok occupied 1m² then this stampede consisted of 135 million animals. In other words, such stampedes consisted of tens of millions rather than thousands of animals -- an awesome spectacle.

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Author: Alan Mclver

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