THE HISTORY OF STEENBERG

"Steenberg" was there even before Simon van der Stel built his great house in the heart of a valley, giving it the name "Constantia". Steenberg, Mountain of Stone, has a romantic ring, but the original name was more beautiful still, for it was called "Swaaneweide", The Feeding Place of Swans. Whether swans did indeed fly down to drink and swim in the cool clear waters of the farm, or whether the first owner looked back with nostalgic longing to her former home in Lübeck, on the Baltic coast of Germany, is hard to tell. Her name was Catharina Ustings and she was one of the most daring and controversial figures ever to settle at the Cape. Life was not easy when she arrived, only ten years after Jan van Riebeeck landed, for 1662 was far from being the age of rights for women, and yet this indomitable woman had boarded a sailing ship and made the perilous journey to the furthest tip of Africa.

What she found was certainly no land of milk and honey, it was a fierce wild place and fierce wild laws were made to match it. Keel haulings and hangings, lashing and branding were normal occurrences. This was no place for a lone widow of twenty-two, and immediately she found herself a second husband. Hans Ras was not a particularly eligible catch, he was a soldier and free burger with a penchant for the female slaves, but he had a house on the Liesbeek River which he had bought from Jakob Kluten, founder of the famous Cloete family, whose name would dominate Constantia for two hundred years or more.

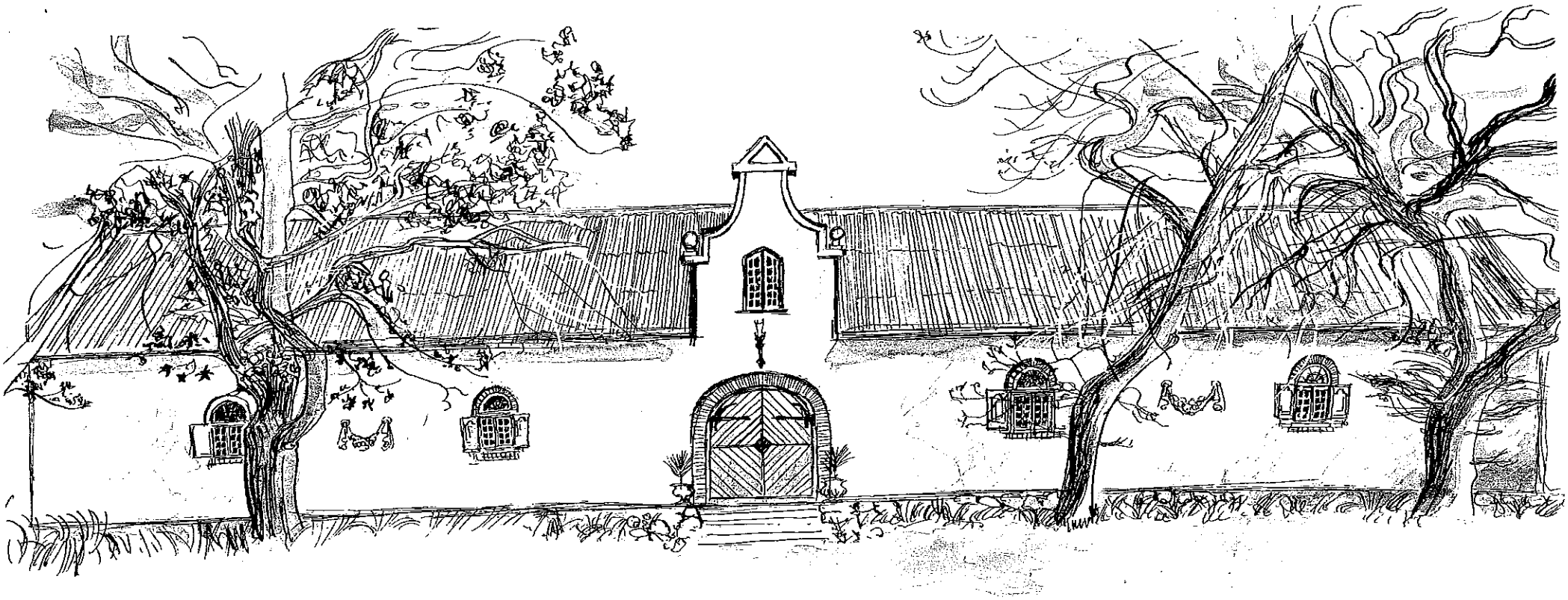
Once the wedding knot was tied, Catharina's life seemed to take on the dramatic overtones which marked its course from that day forward. Two wagons left the ceremony, with the groom and bride in one and the guests in another. Lit from within by good Cape wine and overcome, no doubt, by the spirit of the occasion, the drivers decided to race one another back to Rondebosch. While the guests clung fearfully to their seats, praying to heaven with truly Protestant fervour, the wagons vied for position, and as the road was rough and narrow, a collision soon occurred. Enraged at this conduct on his wedding day, the bridegroom jumped down from his seat and soon became entangled in a fight, receiving a knife thrust which almost proved fatal, for the weapon broke in two between his ribs. Though he survived and lived to father several children, he came to an unfortunate end, being eaten by a lion some years later. Legend has it that, like Annie Oakley, Catharina courageously fetched a gun, leaped on her horse and gave chase, finally shooting the lion herself, but this may well be a case of historical embroidery!

Fate had a good deal more in store for the girl from Lübeck, however, for her next husband was murdered by a Hottentot, and his successor was trampled underfoot by an elephant. Seemingly no less endowed with energy than Henry VIII, who surprised all Europe with his impressive total of six wives, Catharina then took unto herself a fifth husband, a hardy German, named Matthys Michelse.

By this time it was obvious that marriage could not be looked upon as a source of security, and so Catharina set her sights on owning land. Though women had no rights before the law, she took matters into her own hands and approached Simon van der Stel, asking for twenty-five morgen at the foot of the Steenberg mountains. It is hinted that the Governor was her lover; others say he liked her style, but perhaps he was merely delighted that she had picked a spot in the very valley which he himself desired to cultivate. Whatever the reason, her unusual request was granted and together she and Michelse began to build the first Constantia homestead.

It was 1682, the year Versailles was chosen as the Royal Residence of France, but the house at the foot of the Steenberg was far from being palatial. Today we are not sure how it looked, but we do have an eye-witness account of its owner, a description which, far from diminishing the stories about Catharina from Germany, actually underlines them! Baron Van Rheede tot Drakenstein, who arrived at the Cape in a tightly curled wig and silken hose as a Commissioner of the Dutch East India Company, rode through the valley one day and stopped at "Swaaneweide", probably in time for lunch. Hospitality was readily offered and he and his party partook of an extremely healthy meal, with "radishes and freshly baked bread and beautiful cabbages." But the

Opposite: "Steenberg" was the first farm in the Constantia Valley, for it was granted to Catharina Ras in 1682. Seen outside the house are Nicolaas Louw and his wife Leonora Colyn, a descendant of the widow Colyn of "de Hoop op Constantia".



lady of the house caused the baron some alarm: "She rides bare-back like an Indian," he exclaimed in fine distaste, "and her children resemble Brazilian cannibals!".

Being of a fiercely independent turn of mind, however, Catharina blithely ignored such criticism and continued to farm her land and raise her children exactly as she pleased. But once Simon van der Stel had occupied the vast tract of land which lay next to her own, she recognised that he might well decide to regard "Swaaneweide" as his own, for it had been a gift, unratified by law. She approached him once again, therefore, asking for a legal Title Deed, and in 1688 a mandate was granted to the Widow Ras, for twenty-five morgen, adjacent to the land of his Worship the Governor . . . "to cultivate, to plough and to sow, and also to possess." The farm under the Steenbergen was now her own.

Eight years passed. In 1695 Catharina and her family moved away from the Constantia valley to farm on the Berg River and Michelse came before the Court of Justice to transfer "Swaaneweide" to Frederik Russouw. Henning Huising, the influential friend and later the implacable enemy of the Van der Stel family, was there to witness the Deed, and with him was Hugo de Goyës, who signed with such a swirl and flourish that his name seems like a decoration at the bottom of the page. Once the sealing wax had been heated, and stamped with the insignia of the Dutch East India Company, a certain piece of farm land "*met sy bepotinge en sy beplantinge*" became the property of Frederik Russouw, for the sum of eight hundred guldens.

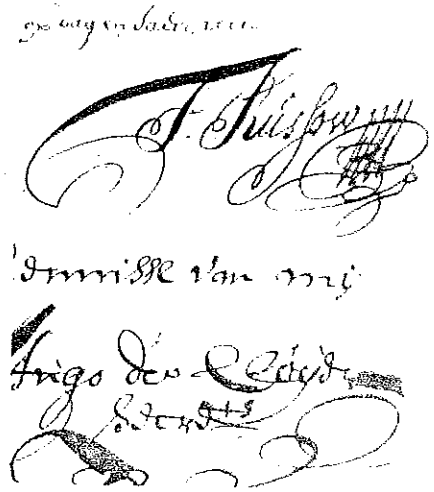
Russouw was powerful and wealthy, and a member of the Burgher Council. His firm, determined signature underlines the fact that this was not a man to be content with cabbages and radishes, and he set out to develop "Swaaneweide" to its full potential. It was not long therefore before the name "Russouw" appeared as a landmark on maps of the peninsula, drawn by cartographers and travellers from Europe.

Above: At the end of the avenue are the stables, with the main house on their right.

Opposite: "Steenberg" was first known as "Swaaneweide" – The Feeding Place of Swans.

Above: Baron Van Imhoff, Governor General of the Netherlands East Indies – an impressive figure in his velvet topcoat and buckled shoes – granted land beyond the Steenberg to Christina Diemer, the widow Russouw. (Cape Archives)

Below: The firm, determined signature of Frederik Russouw, who set out to develop the farm to its full potential.



Whilst these developments took place at the Cape, civilisation in Europe was entering a fascinating phase: the English, in their inimitable way, had brought about a Bloodless Revolution, with William and Mary happily settled on the throne; Isaac Newton and John Locke were developing theories which would revolutionize the thinking world, and, having completed his design of Greenwich Hospital, that remarkable Englishman, Christopher Wren, embarked upon his drawings for St. Paul's; the Bank of England had been founded, and in Moscow, a tax on beards had been introduced, which had the gentlemen of Russia either rushing for their razors or parting with their roubles!

In the quiet Constantia valley, Frederik Russouw was unaware of these events, for Christina Diemer had come into his life. Her grandfather, Elbert Diemer, arrived at the Cape in the time of Jan van Riebeeck. He was not a wealthy man, indeed, he was a waiter at table, a tailor and a farmer, but these practical skills were indispensable and he soon rose to prominence, choosing as a wife the young Christina Does, described by the Commander himself as "that virtuous young woman". Now their descendant, also named Christina, was about to marry the owner of "Swaaneweide". At first there was little opportunity to develop the shrewd and practical talents which lay within her, handed down in the genes of the Diemers. She ran her household and, like a dutiful wife, produced twelve children, six boys and six girls, whilst their father grew wheat, made wine and added more land to the farm.

During these years little is known of the history of "Swaaneweide", except that the Public Notary, Nicolaas Oortmans, purchased a section of the ground. Kolbe, a well-known German traveller, tells of a breakfast he attended with Oortmans at the farm, after which, hearing of an unusually high tide, they all set out, post haste, for the coast. When they got to what is now called Muizenberg, they stopped, unpacked their chairs and, somewhat in the manner of King Canute and his court, sat regally down, "In such a manner as to have full view of the sea." Unfortunately nothing further is said of the event, but it was certainly an enterprising way to end a Constantia breakfast party!

It is not certain how Oortmans came to be at "Swaaneweide", but the grant made out to him is of considerable interest because it confirms the strategic link between the farm and the Old Cape Road, *Die Ou Kaapse Weg*. Oortmans was permitted to ride and to plant corn (providing one tenth of his harvest was delivered to the Castle) and he was to replace all chopped wood with oaks or other trees. Above all, it was his duty to keep the road winding over the Steenberg in good repair, wide enough for a wagon to make its way up the steep slopes. Today that self-same road is there, following the path that travellers took more than two hundred and fifty years ago.

In 1741 the Dutch East India Company took a step which changed the fate of "Swaaneweide". Winter after winter, their ships had been wrecked in Table Bay by north west winds which swept into the harbour, causing untold damage and loss of life. (In 1737 two hundred people died, when eight ships sank in the course of a single storm!) Simon's Bay was the obvious alternative, and a decree was issued stating that, from May to August every year, this would be the official winter port. Despite the wisdom of this choice, the reaction was probably one of consternation, as innkeepers, merchants and ladies of the town saw a highly profitable business being whisked away from beneath their very noses.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good, however, and there, delighted with the change of venue, was Christina Diemer, now the Widow Russouw. No doubt Christina went down on her knees to thank the good Lord for the strong north westers – at last the opportunity had come! Her property was one of the farms closest to Simon's Bay and she would be only too happy to sell provisions to the fleet. After long months at sea nourished on little else but mouldy ships' bread and salted meat, travellers arrived at the Cape longing for fresh vegetables, real meat and a bottle of wine, all of which were readily available at "Swaaneweide". As an added piece of good fortune, the farm was situated exactly one day's journey from Table Valley and people would be obliged to outspan their wagons under the oak trees and to spend the night there, before making the perilous journey over the mountains to False Bay.

Most women, indeed most men, would have been content to count their blessings and to do nothing more, but this was no ordinary woman. The blood of the Diemers flowed in her veins, and when she saw the way open, she pounced. Fertile pastures lay between the Steenberg and Simon's Bay which no one had claimed and so when Baron Van Imhoff visited the Cape as Governor General of the Netherlands East Indies, she went to the Castle to ask for this land. Van Imhoff was a prudent man, not given to the lavish granting of favours, but the Widow Russouw was charmingly persuasive and he gave her sixty four morgen at Slangkop, now known as Kommetjie.

It was no coincidence that on the same day, another farm was granted, right next door to hers, and that Carel Georg Wieser, who owned "Groot Constantia", was to be her neighbour. He was wealthy and a good farmer, qualities which the widow admired, and they built two charming country houses side by side. Hers was called "Slangkop", (later "Imhoff's Gift") and his was given the delightful name of "Poespaskraal" which, roughly translated, means "Hotch Potch House".

This idyllic Atlantic retreat may have provided a love nest in the wilderness, but it was also a highly profitable scheme, for they now owned land all the way to Simon's Bay. Leaving nothing to chance, Christina then chose one of the loveliest plots above the bay and built yet another house called "Goede Gift". She grew vegetables here and sent her cattle to graze near Cape Point at Buffels Bay.

This was a remarkable achievement, for it was the eighteenth century, an age where women were excluded, both by convention and the law, from invading the territories reserved for men.

Addison, the famous essayist, is eloquent upon the subject: "Women are not formed for great cares themselves, but to soothe and soften ours," he states with great conviction, and concludes that "she who leaves the duties of her own sex to invade the privileges of ours is worthy of nothing but contempt." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose writing played a major rôle in the precipitation of the French Revolution, expresses himself in similarly masculine tones: "The woman is expressly formed to please and to be subjected to man . . . to please, to be useful to us, to educate us when young and to take care of us when grown up, to console us, to make our lives easy and agreeable: these are the duties of women at all times."

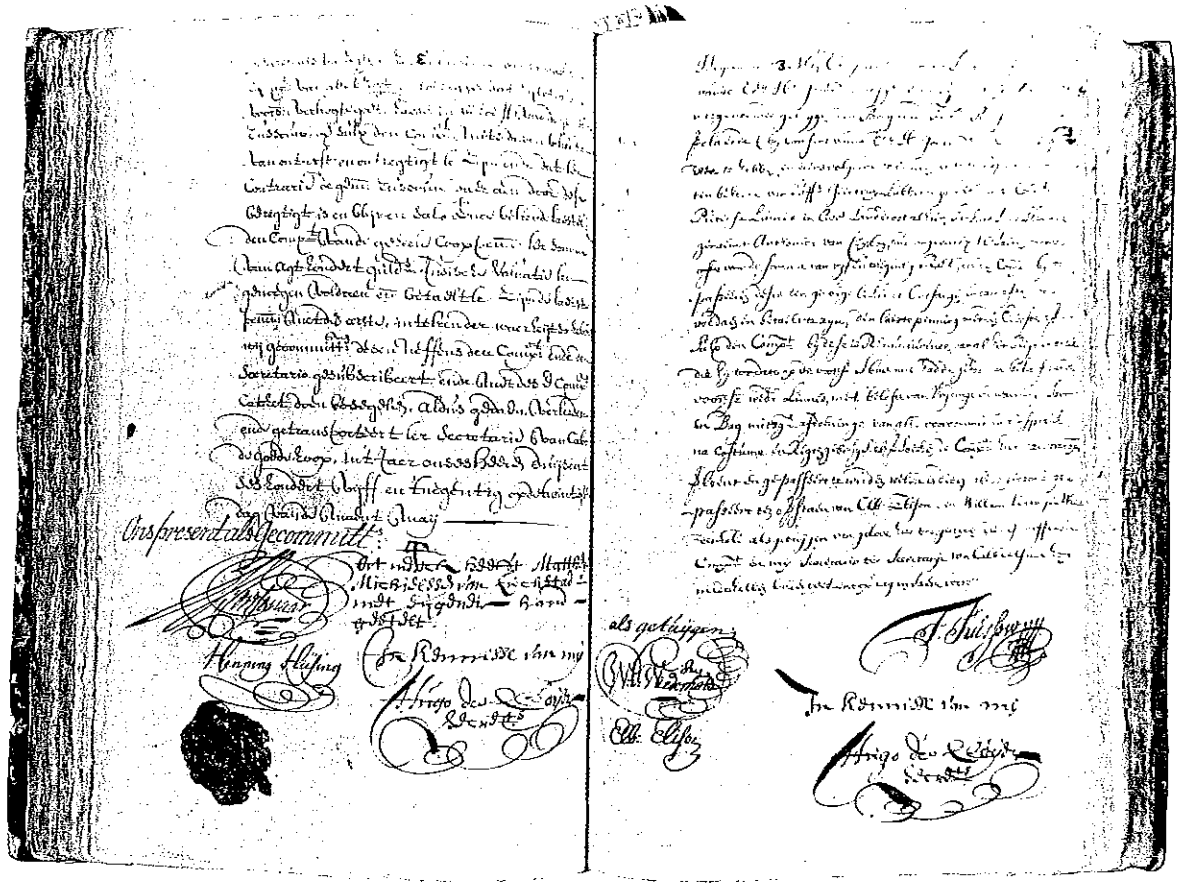
Despite the pronouncements of the literary gentlemen of her time, Christina Diemer was both happy and successful. She fulfilled her maternal duties admirably by producing twelve children, and wealth, prestige and influence were hers. Eventually Death – with great bravado – approached the invincible Christina and led her on to pastures new. The Constantia valley was all the poorer for her passing, for, like her predecessor at "Swaaneweide", she had shown that neither legislation nor legal rights are needed to set a woman free, her own courage and determination are all that she needs.

It took some time to settle the vast estate which Christina left behind her, and only in December 1765 did her executors, Lucas Sigismundus Faber and Johan Nicolaas Schott, come before the Court of Justice to dispose of "Swaanswyk", as the farm was now known.

An elder son, Abraham Russouw, who once accompanied Hendrik Hop on his remarkable expedition to Namaqualand, had received his share of the inheritance at an earlier date, and he relinquished all claim to the estate, naming his youngest brother as sole heir. So it was that Nicolaas Russouw and his wife Anna Maria Rousselet reigned at the farm for thirty-six years, from 1765 until 1801.

This was a time of turbulence and challenge, which saw the slow and painful decline of the Dutch East India Company and the sudden arrival of the British. The latter stimulated trade and agriculture, however, which soon brought changes to the valley. Only a few houses had been built there over a period of one hundred years but the last decade of the eighteenth century saw the rapid appearance of "Tokai Manor House", "Nova Constantia" and "Buitenverwachting", at all of which, vineyards were planted and cellars established.

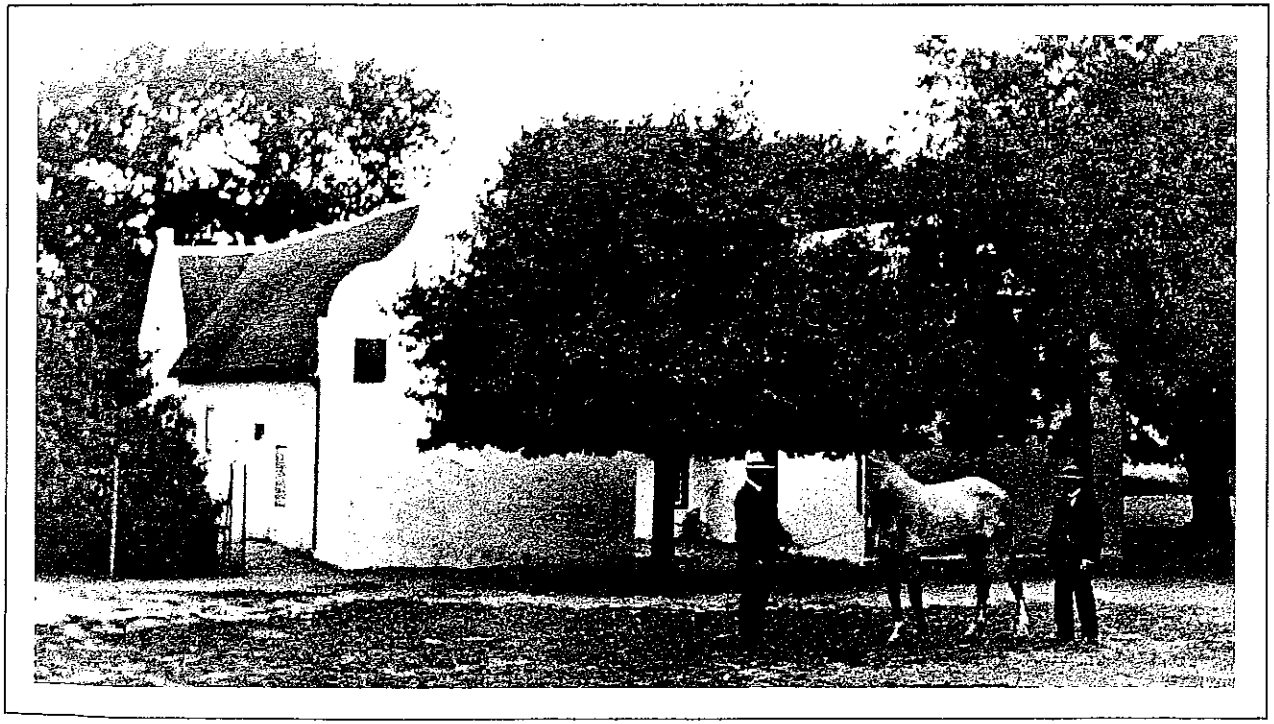
"Swaanswyk" continued to prosper and a fine new gable was built in front of the house, a *"holbol"*, which Nicolaas chose for its unusual lines. He felt secure, confident that the name of Russouw would remain in the valley for centuries, passing, by tradition, from father to son. Mercifully, man is protected by his inability to see into the future. He may plumb the depths of the ocean, and rise like a bird in the sky, but he cannot tell what the morrow will bring. Nicolaas died in peace, therefore, never knowing that after the next generation, the name of Russouw



The sale of "Swaaneweide" took place in 1695, the age of Christopher Wren and Isaac Newton. This document in the Deeds Office records the event with swirling signatures and a sealing-wax stamp.

Right: The children of many generations have climbed up to see the "Steenberg" sundial. It is dated 1756 – the year Mozart was born. (Cape Archives)

Below: The grey mare shows her paces. (Cape Archives)



would be severed from "Swaanswyk" forever.

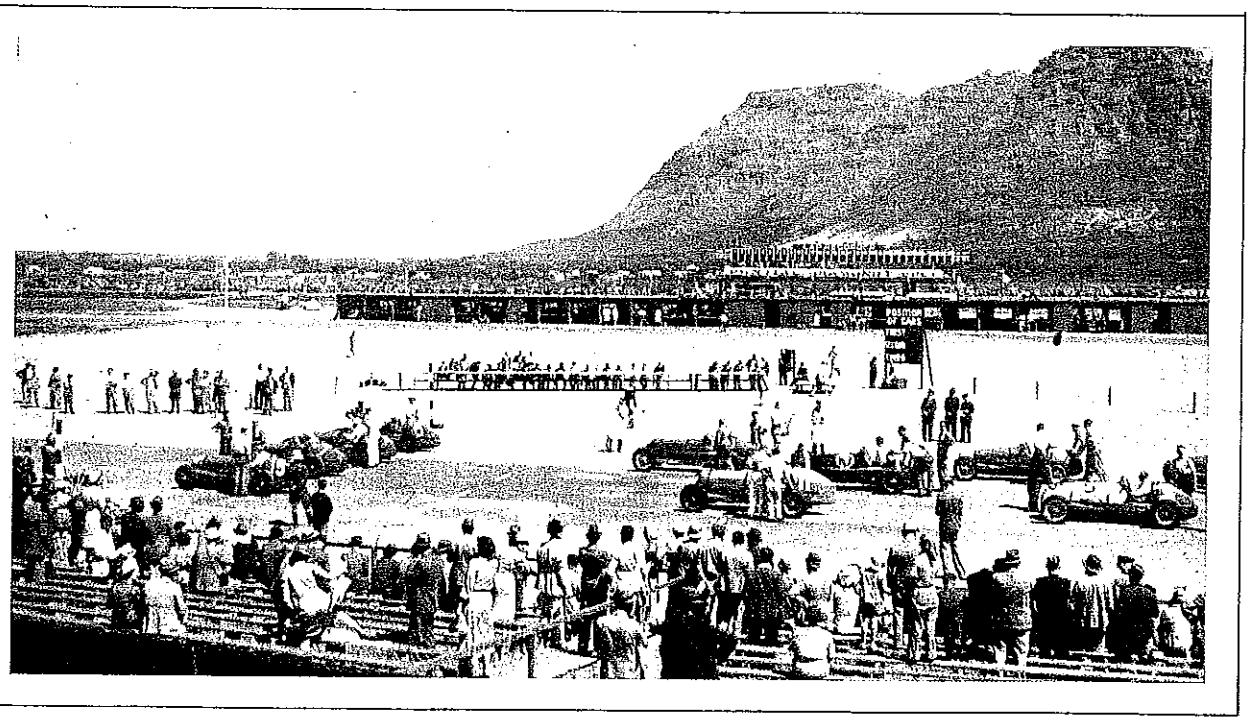
When Daniel Russouw bought the farm from his mother in 1802, it seemed as if the gods were against him. The summer had been harsh the year before and the wheat had failed. One Proclamation after another was issued from the Castle, signed by the Governor, Sir George Yonge: "I hereby order and direct that from the 15th day of the present Month of February one kind only of Bread should be made of the whole flour as it comes from the mill . . . and I hereby further order that after the 15th day of this present Month no Cakes or other Articles of Confectionery or Pastry made from flour shall be made for sale."

"I hereby forbid all Bakers or other persons . . . from making white Bread. Given under my Hand and Seal at the Castle of Good Hope this 11th day of February 1801."

Yonge was hated by everybody. He was a difficult, extravagant, wilful man and it was a relief when he was removed from office and Francis Dundas was installed in his place. The latter had a better understanding of the farmer's mind and he tried a different tack . . . "I have thought fit and expedient for farmers and others dwelling in the Country Districts of this Settlement to kill Game at all Seasons of the Year without licences, or any prohibition or restriction, which would enable them to bring into the stores of Cape Town a very considerable quantity of grain." Nevertheless, the crops still failed and when the Marquis of Wellesley demanded bread for his troops on their way to India, there was none to be had in the Cape, neither wheat nor flour. These were difficult years. Daniel had many children to provide for, and the question which troubled him most was one of inheritance. To whom should "Swaanswyk" go?

In August 1842 a letter appeared before the Master of the Supreme Court stating firmly that the late Daniel Russouw had truly and legally sold his farm, "Swaanswyk", to his two sons-in-law, Jan Adriaan Louw of Fisantekraal, and Fredrik Anthon Olthoff. All other members of the family, the sons of the line included, were paid 646 rijksdaalders for their share of the property and each one signed to say that he or she had received the money. Was pressure brought to bear on the unfortunate Daniel? Did the sons feel denied of their birth-right? Or did Jan Adriaan Louw, who then became owner, appear from over the mountains as a knight in shining armour, to save the farm from bankruptcy? Time keeps its secrets, and the Deed of Sale is legally phrased and cut and dried, giving no inkling of the family drama which lies behind it.

The name of Russouw was gone from the gates of "Swaanswyk", but the blood of the family still flowed strongly onwards in the children of Johannes Adriaan Louw. His descendants farm there to this day, for



architect Andrew Louw and his sisters, Jean and Nicolette, inherited the property jointly when their father Nicolaas died in 1976. Nicolaas was a man of boundless energy and infinite charm, of towering rages and great generosity. "Steenberg" was his life, his passion, and though he married three times, his attachment to the farm remained an unchanging constant at the core of his existence. Three years before his death he refused an offer of three million rands for the property, a decision supported by his son Andrew, who shares his love of "Steenberg".

From the moment he left school to run the farm, Nicolaas was up at five each morning to supervise the dairy and this ritual was never broken, even if, once or twice, he arrived there straight from a party, complete with white tie and tails! His life was not confined to farming only, for he had many interests, amongst them, big game hunting and, for a time, motor racing. Before the war, Pollsmoor was not a grim, forbidding prison, with watchtowers and high walls; it was a race-track, four and a half miles in length. "It was part of a scheme to put Cape Town on the National Racing Circuit," says Andrew Louw, "and it soon attracted a large number of overseas drivers. They used to come and stay at "Steenberg", which was right next door to the track. My father was good with machines, he'd worked on tractors since he was a boy, and he acted as mechanic to the Swiss driver, Hans Reusch, who had an Alfa Romeo. There were only two major races," he adds, regretfully, "in 1937 and 1938, then the war intervened and Pollsmoor was taken over as a military base, but we all had tremendous fun whilst it lasted."

Nicolaas had the glamorous good looks of a film-star, and indeed, film-stars did come to "Steenberg". Names like Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier, Tyrone Power and Moira Lister were added to the visitors' book, and Ivor Novello and the Princes of Greece and Yugoslavia wrote enthusiastically of the happy times they'd spent there. When he married the beautiful Daphne Venter, Nicolaas settled down to a life of hard work and relaxation with his children and grandchildren round him. "He grew very tired of the social scene," she says, "he would come in off the land in his denims and his boots and if he found the house full of people, he'd simply say, 'It's time you all went home.' And they did, what's more – they knew he meant it! Nowadays," she adds, thoughtfully, "no one minds if you feel anti-social, in fact it's quite the thing, but then it was different, you simply had to conform. They thought he was outrageous to send them all packing." Here was a man who wanted to be himself, even if it meant crossing swords with convention. Like Catharina Ras and Christina Diemer before him, Nicolaas Louw was an individualist to the hilt, and he added yet another fascinating page to the history of "Steenberg".

STEENBERG – THE HOUSE

As soon as you drive through the tall, white gates of "Steenberg" you are drawn into the life of the farm. A long avenue of pine trees stretches ahead and there are vineyards on either side; dogs run out to meet you; a chestnut horse with two white feet is being saddled up, waiting for its rider, and a cowherd walks past, bringing a herd of Frieslands in for milking. He whistles and calls to them, flicking a long poplar sapling over their heads as they hurry along, bunching up, snorting and swinging their tails. A tractor rumbles by, pulling a trailer piled high with rich, dark soil, and the oak trees are full of starlings. They twitter restlessly and rise up suddenly in the air, in a great cloud of wings, feeling the chill of approaching autumn.

"Swaaneweide" . . . "Swaanswyk" . . . "Steenberg" – the name has altered through the years, but here beneath the mountains, under the crenellated turrets of the Prins Casteel, the scene has hardly changed. This continuity is the joy of the place, it is the spirit of "Steenberg", flowing like a strong, dark river.

At the end of the avenue is the stable, with the farmhouse on its right, surrounded by oak trees. This is an unusual arrangement, for an outbuilding seems to have pride of place, whilst the main house stands to one side. It leads people to believe that when Frederik Russouw bought "Swaaneweide" in 1695, he found it too small and simple for his needs, and so he built this spacious U-shaped homestead which you find here today, turning the old one into stables.

When you realise that the original house has gone, you feel a surge of disappointment and regret. But a house is like a language, it is a living thing, changing and moving with the generations, which leave their mark and then move on. Like the mountains which surround it, like the earth from which it came, "Swaaneweide" has endured an endless process of age and renewal. The people who have lived here – Catharina Ras and Matthys Michelse, Christina and Frederik Russouw, and all those who came after them – belong to that slow evolution. They are still part of this house which reaches out to greet you now.

Once inside, you will find that the heart of this homestead is its diningroom, a room filled with some of the finest treasures that the Cape has to offer. It gleams with silver and glass, with porcelain and crystal. Against the wall are half-moon tables and silver-escutcheoned armoires, while Tulbagh chairs stand by in all their simple elegance. Each piece is worthy of a museum, yet there is no formality within this room, no sense of overcrowding. Here you feel at ease, perfectly at home.

In the centre is a large slave table and somehow you are drawn towards it, as if the architect himself had meant you to sit down, glance up, and be delighted by the ingenuity of his design. There before you is the famous "Steenberg" screen, of stinkwood, ebony and yellowwood, intricately carved and louvered, yet understated in its subtle interplay of geometric shapes. It is the purpose of this screen to divide the *agterkamer* from the hallway, but, by a stroke of genius, it forms a perfect framework for the door which lies beyond it. Here is visual proof that when a craftsman is inspired, function and art go hand in hand.

This doorway is the entrance to the house and up above it, a fanlight repeats the design of straight lines and curves which is featured in the screen. Like all the homesteads in the valley, the front door is a stable-door, and when the upper half is opened, a sash window slides down in its place, keeping out the draught, but letting in the light.

Shutters of yellowwood and teak surround the upper casement and these can be closed at night, held firmly in place by a strong wooden bar, which makes the place secure against the outside world. This antique form of burglar-proofing shows, once more, the fusion of art and practicality in these houses at the Cape, a characteristic which well reflects the spirit of the men who built them.

The hallway is bordered with dark grey slate and paved with square red tiles, set on the diagonal. Thus a diamond pattern is added to the earlier motif of square and round, a pattern which the eye records with pleasure, even before the brain has noted it. Hanging here in pride of place is the original Title Deed, signed by Simon van der Stel in 1688, its Old Dutch script recording, in almost Gothic style, that this is the first

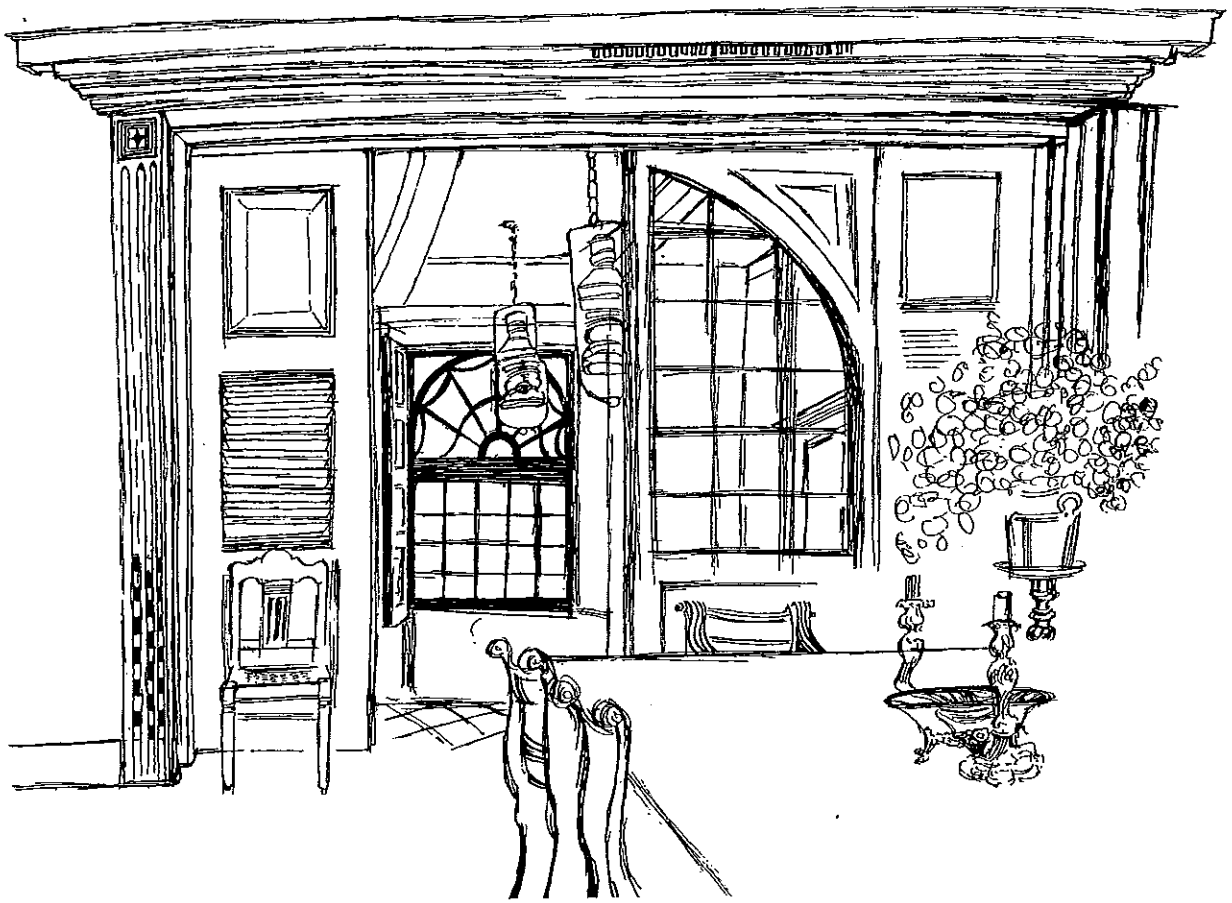
Above: The gates of "Steenberg" stand for continuity – the Louws descend directly from the Russouws, making this the only farm in the Valley which has remained in the care of one family for nearly three hundred years.

Opposite page

Top right: Nicolaas Louw – "Steenberg" was his life, his passion.

Top left: Three generations of the Louw family, Nicolaas Marthinus, Lambert Abraham and Nicolaas as a babe-in-arms.

Bottom: Pollsmoor was not always a grim, forbidding prison, it was once a race-track, and Swiss driver Hans Reusch stayed at "Steenberg" when he raced there.



The heart of the homestead is its diningroom, with the screen of stinkwood, ebony and yellowwood.

house in the Constantia valley. Overhead are two of the enormous copper lanterns, trimmed with brass, which were salvaged from a shipwreck long ago, and which hang throughout the house as a reminder of the nearness of the sea.

From one of the bedrooms which lie on each side of the house, a small girl appears. She is a slender figure, with the dark hair and high cheekbones of her grandfather, Nicolaas Louw, and is the eighth of his generation to live in this house. You feel as if her ancestors have left her here, to be the guardian of the past, so eager is she to tell of all it holds. She shows you a hidden drawer in the yellowwood Bible Desk, with its brass-ringed slot for money; a slender telescope, marked "day and night" and an antique bell-pull, which answers to her touch with a soft, tinkling chime.

"Let me show you this door," she says. The heavy livingroom door swings open, with its stinkwood frame and yellowwood panel, and there, completely hidden from sight, is a wooden hinge, made by hand two centuries ago. "They ran out of brass," she says, smiling, "and so they made it out of wood."

Unlike the large, imposing rooms of certain other country houses, the livingroom is comfortable and well proportioned, with the frequent use of wood lending a warmth and texture to it. The dark window-seats have bevelled edges and shutters guard the casement windows, which, on this side, are of a later date than many other sections of the house. Two of the greatest treasures at "Steenberg" are in an armoire here – a pair of glass decanters, with the initials of the Dutch East India Company – those legendary letters, "V.O.C.", and, beneath them, the date, 1741.

1741 . . . that was the year Handel wrote "The Messiah" (a work which took him only eighteen days to complete), Maria Theresa accepted the crown of Hungary, Frederick the Great had only just come to the throne of Prussia and George II was King of England. It was also a memorable year for "Steenberg" or "Swaaneweide" as it was then known, for Simon's Bay had been chosen as a winter anchorage. These decanters may well have been a gift from some sea captain who passed this way, leaving them as a memento of his stay.

The small girl opens the cupboard carefully, and they gleam in the light. It is not only the surface of the glass which shines, for an inner radiance from the past streams out, making its presence felt within the room.

"These are our very best," she says, "and when the earthquake came, the one that struck Tulbagh, my Auntie Daphne rushed straight here. She took the decanters out and wrapped them in a blanket, and, with them under one arm and her poodle under the other, she just ran and ran!" There is a trace of wistfulness in the telling of this tale, as if she wishes silently that she had been there to share the action of that moment, but it is soon forgotten as she leads the way across the hall.

In the bedroom the walls are almost turquoise, the colour of the sea. They may, at first, seem out of keeping in a farmhouse such as this, till you recall that at "Boschendal", that excellent example of careful restoration, a deeper tone of the self-same colour was found beneath the layers of paint, and faithfully retained. At "Alphen", too, the outer window-frames are a dark blue-green, and so this colour seems to be regarded as an authentic part of Cape tradition.

The room is dominated by a large armoire, its plain lines heightened by a single brass escutcheon, and up above are hand-hewn beams in heavy teak, stamped with the letters, "V.O.C." On the soft carpet

covering the floor stands a copper milking-pan, one of the many relics of farm life which bring an air of homeliness to "Steenberg", filled here with flowers and ferns and dark green leaves.

In another bedroom, further down, you find one of those rare delights of history, a seemingly spontaneous gesture from the past, recorded in all its simplicity. A captain of the ship *Duynenburg* which was anchored in Simon's Bay, came to "Steenberg" with one of his crew, and here, in this room, he took a ring from his finger, and engraved their names on the windowpane. "*H. J. Leappé,*" it reads, "*Capitain van de Artillerie en ingenieur met het schip Duynenburg de 8de december, 1763, en J. van Asbeek, luytenant van d'Artillerie.*" The year that engraving was made saw the end of the Seven Years' War, the most successful war the English ever fought. They had swept the French out of North America, and had defeated them in a dozen places around the world, but the Cape was safe for yet another forty years. Boswell met Johnson that year, and the six-year old Mozart was stunning Europe with his virtuosity.

Leaving the house by the front door (the small girl staying reluctantly behind to do her homework), you cross the stoep and glance upwards at the *holbol* gable, the only one of its kind in the Cape Peninsula, with its concave and convex lines. Turn to the left and you will see an avenue of ancient oaks which came from "Groot Constantia" long ago. Rising steeply upwards, over the mountain, is the beginning of The Old Cape Road – *Die Ou Kaapse Weg* – which curved its way across the Steenberg, as it does to this day. If you stand still, it seems as if you hear the wagonwheels come splashing through the drift, and the shouts of men, as they slow down for their oxen to drink. Their voices re-echo as they urge them up the other side, to the cool shade of the outspan place.

You are brought back to the present by someone who emerges from a shed nearby. He is puckish, almost Pan-like, short and stocky, deeply tanned, with iron-grey hair appearing from under a peaked corduroy cap. He has worked at "Steenberg" for years. "These people are good to me," he says, "I ask for nothing, but it comes . . . it comes," and he stretches out his hands, as if a world of endless plenty lay enfolded in his arms. Then he points to a gangling, bare-foot boy, who peers into the bowels of a tractor. "See that chap there? He's fifteen – my son. In three years' time he'll take my job and I'll be finished."

"Will you stay here?"

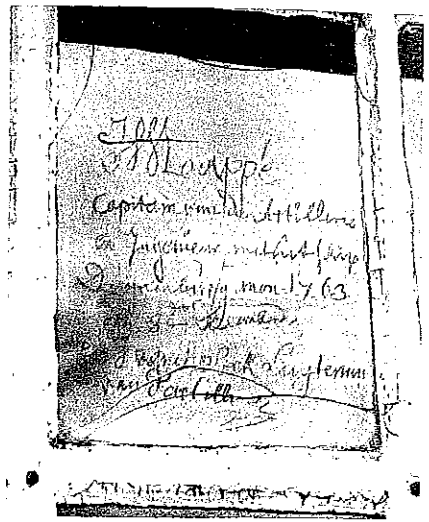
He stops short, amazed. "Of course, for my life, for my life." This statement of unquestioning belief in permanence is almost Biblical in its simplicity, and he smiles in parting. "I wish you the best," he says, and disappears into the dusk.

The cows are in for milking, row upon row of them, straight backs, heads down, munching. A gentle warmth rises from their bodies, and a clean, sweet smell. There is sawdust on the floor, raked smooth, and above each stall hangs a slate with a number and a date. This cowshed is the heart of the farm. Here Nicolaas Louw developed his Frieslands into one of the finest herds in the Cape, pouring out his energy, his money and his time. You feel his presence still, in this vibrant, exciting place.

If the house is steeped in the old ways, the dairy is quite the reverse, for it is clinically modern, neon-lit and mechanized, a far cry indeed from the days when cow-herds sat on three-legged stools, laboriously milking, for today a pulsator is attached to the udder of each cow. The milk flows, rich and frothing, into glass tubes which run overhead, leading to a big glass jar, and from this point it is pumped into enormous cooling tanks. It is a long day at Steenberg dairy, for the first milking is done at three o'clock in the morning, the second just after eleven and the third at five o'clock. Each session lasts for two hours and the cows yield a total of three and a half thousand litres of milk a day. The man in charge is busy in one of those small, crowded corners which men seem to be able to create for themselves. It is a private world-within-a-world, which, though only one long shelf, serves as both office and dispensary. His arms are covered with tattoos, with hearts and flowers and mermaids, and as he looks up, the Alsation standing quietly at his side looks up too, ears forward, alert.

"Mr. Louw? I had a lot of time for him. He loved his farm and he loved his cows – if anyone chased a cow of his, God help them! Every morning he was here at five o'clock, winter and summer, rain or shine." The dog is listening as he talks. "And that's a one-man dog," he continues, "it belonged to Nicolaas Louw, and now it stays with me." Nicolaas Louw lies in the graveyard up on the hill, but here, in the dairy, the pattern of life that he planned goes on, and he, it seems, continues with it, as his son and daughters run the farm.

The graveyard is up on the hill, close to the house, yet apart. Mountains surround it on every side and the late evening sun shafts down through a ridge. Guinea fowl scurry and chatter in the vines, and a girl in a bright red jersey rides by on a horse. It is peaceful and still here, the sense of death is not oppressive, not even final. It is simply familiar, companionable. Row upon row they lie, and you read their names, "Elisabetha . . . Catherina . . . Emarentia Jacoba . . . our dearly beloved mother . . . my beloved husband." Whatever fate wrought in their lives, whatever relationships were between them, here they lie in peace together, gathered into the comforting lap of the earth, beneath the shelter of the Steenberg.



Above: A spontaneous gesture from the past, captured in all its simplicity. The captain and lieutenant of the ship *Duynenburg* engraved their names on the window pane at "Steenberg" in 1763.

Below: "A slender figure waits to greet you." (Cape Archives)