

HTA - 100 years young

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The early nineteen hundreds saw the establishment of two organisations that would play a singular role in the annals of South African fly fishing. In September 1902 in the Western Cape, the Western Districts Game and Trout Protection Association was established. Twenty nine years later, in November 1931 it was reconstituted as the Cape Piscatorial Society.

In 1906, in Haenertsburg, a little village nestling in the northern foothills of the Drakensburg Mountains sixty kilometres east of Polokwane (Pietersburg), an offshoot of the Transvaal Trout Acclimatisation Society was established after local streams in the Magoebaskloof had been stocked with trout.

The Johannesburg contingent suspended activities and informed the Haenertsburg branch that they would have to go it alone if they wanted to keep fishing. A meeting was called on 9 December 1911 at the Haenertsburg Hotel and the foundations of the present HTA were laid. Mr Lionel Phillips (Snr) was elected president, and a local farmer, Mr Harley Stanford, the chairman. On 9 January 1912, another meeting was held at which the name Haenertsburg Acclimatisation Society was adopted and the rules were drafted. Sometime during the next 15 years, the name was changed to the 'Haenertsburg Trout Association'.

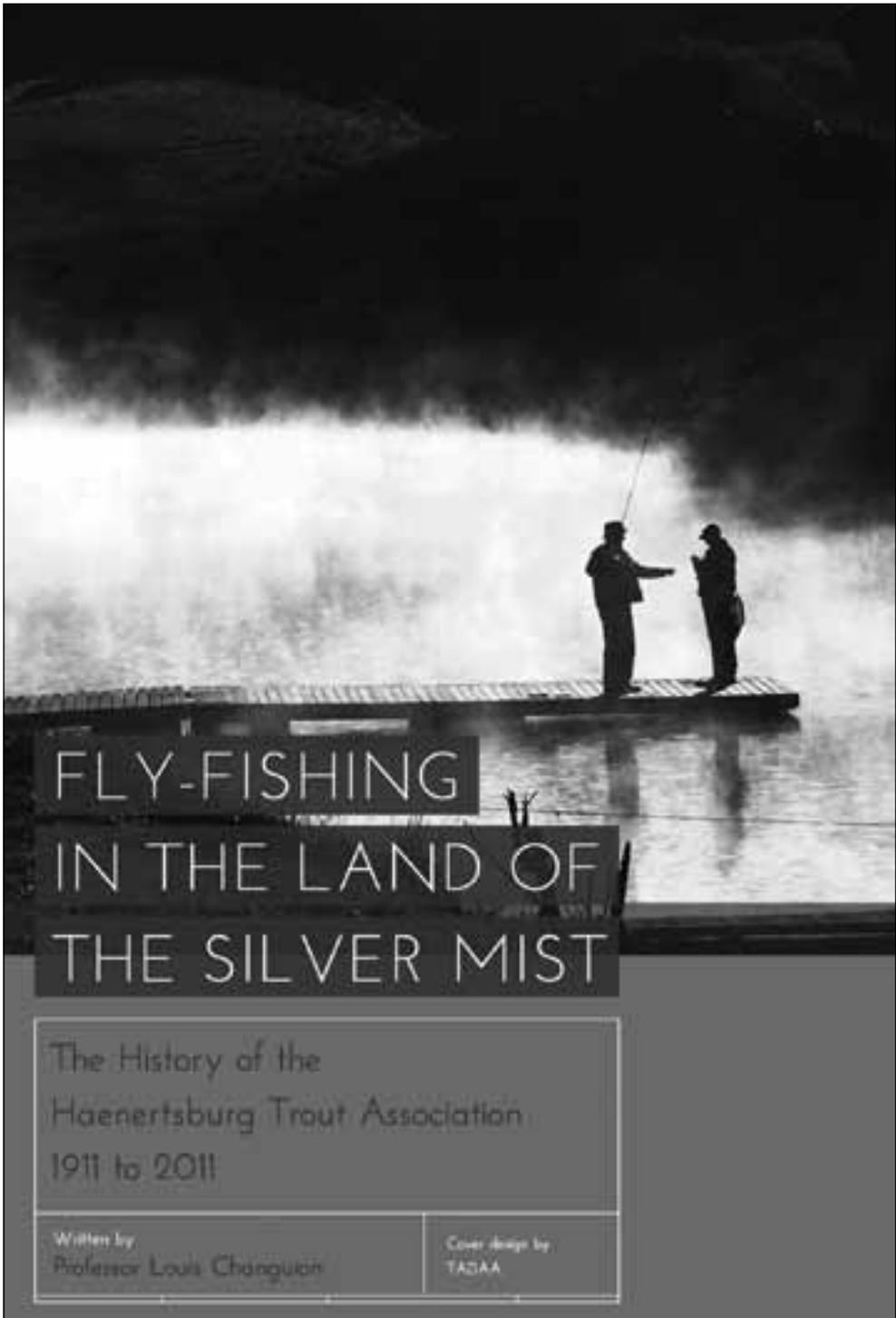
Early history

The area was named after the chief of the local Ba Tlou tribe, Makgoba. According to tribal legend, Makgoba refused to pay the taxes levied by the Transvaal government and resisted the intrusion of white farmers. An army consisting of 600 commandos and 800 Swazi mercenaries drove him into a kloof where a Swazi chief challenged him to a duel. Makgoba lost and his severed head was taken back to Pretoria so that a bounty could be claimed.

'The Land of the Silver Mist' - was how Lord John Buchan (1875 – 1940), future Governor General of Canada and acclaimed author of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, described the Magoebaskloof area. A prolific author, he is credited as being the first writer of suspense thrillers. After the Boer War, he was seconded to Pietersburg (now Polokwane) to take charge of reconstruction. It was during this time that he fished the streams of Magoebaskloof and he often expressed a desire to retire in the area.

In the first two decades of the last century, much of the indigenous forest had been cleared but, in 1913, a Conservator for Forests was appointed. Today, although SAFCOL (the South African Forestry Company – now known as Komatiland Forests - KLF) has many hectares under pine plantations, much of the natural bush has been re-established, <http://www.safcol.co.za/>.

There is some confusion as to when trout were first stocked in the Magoebaskloof streams. Various records indicate that between 1905 and 1907 two hundred and fifty fish, from a short-lived hatchery in Potchefstroom, were released by Mr C Harvey on the aptly named Clear Waters farm and on Sir Lionel Phillips' estate - Broederstroom Stud Farm. Another



The cover of the new book celebrating the centenary of the Haenertsburg Trout Association.

five hundred fingerlings were placed in the Broederstroom near Haenertsburg village just above its present confluence with the Ebenezer Dam. The fertilised ova were originally obtained from the famed Jonkershoek hatchery in Stellenbosch and the fingerlings were then transported first to Pietersburg by train in large milk pails and then to Haenertsburg by the Zeederberg Coach Company, an uncomfortable full day's ride. The Zeederberg Coach Company was the first and probably the only one to use zebras, unsuccessfully as it proved, as draught animals. Ingeniously the fish were kept alive by oxygenating the water with a bicycle pump, an idea that Arthur Eastwood, one of the founder members came up with. This simple innovation also made it possible for the HTA members to stock the most remote streams with fingerlings by carrying the fish on their backs through the forests and up the steep slopes of the Drakensberg, in specially modified milk cans.

Two of these streams are the Mathlapetsi and the Thabina. The former was stocked with browns and rainbows in 1906. The Mathlapetsi was stocked with browns in 1949. (See *Rainbows and Leopards -The Transvaal Mathlapetsi*, by Garret Evans in *Piscator* 106, December 1980 and *Browns from the Rain Forest* by Aldo Rech, *Piscator* 119, August 1987).

The HTA, my home club, has access to two streams, the Broederstroom and the Helpmekaar in the Magoebaskloof. The Broederstroom, while still within our club boundaries, becomes the well known Letaba River and the Helpmekaar is dammed to form the picturesque Lakeside and Stanford Lakes.

The Helpmekaar

The Helpmekaar is a small stream. It nevertheless offers an opportunity to catch truly wild rainbows and the occasional brown trout of sometimes surprising size. I have seen fish of up to a pound hovering in the currents, but fully grown fish of six to nine inches are the norm as is the case elsewhere in the world with freestone streams of this size. The Helpmekaar is important in that it offers shelter and a breeding ground to the fish that migrate to it from the dams in warm weather and during the spawning season. The HTA has access to three dams that are fed by the Helpmekaar - Stanford, Lakeside, and Pavetta. The latter, acquired in 2007, is beautiful water and with its abundant food supply, minimal poaching and an apparent lack of bass has the potential to become a trophy fish venue. Stanford dam cascades into the Ebenezer Dam forming a large pool, teeming with trout. During winter, Ebenezer provides fantastic fishing for large trout and a five kg monster was caught recently on a lure by a bass angler - I have seen photos of a metre-long trout taken in front of the present boat club, by an absolute rookie fishing with a Lazy Ike bass lure. Being extremely deep Ebenezer requires local knowledge to be fished effectively. This can easily be acquired by anyone prepared to ply the club veterans with copious quantities of an amber, medicinal beverage.

The Broederstroom

The Broederstroom is chameleon-like in its many character changes. In its upper reaches the Broederstroom feeds the Dap Naude Dam, in my opinion, the jewel of the club's stillwaters.

The 50 hectare dam was built in 1956 and named after a local lawyer and seven times mayor of Pietersburg who had lobbied for it to be built



The Ebenezer Dam, headquarters of the Haenertsburg Trout Association. Photo by Mike Biccard.



Rondawels used by HTA members at the Ebenezer Dam.

It is renowned for its wild, Scandinavian-strain rainbow trout that breed in the upper reaches of the Broederstroom, making this is one of the few dams in the country where stocking is not necessary. Subtly patterned and displaying the most delicate colours, these wild fish seldom exceed 35 centimetres.

Fishing the Broederstroom, below Dap Naude, as it winds its way amongst the gnarled European Oak trees and through the cathedral-like atmosphere created by the 60 year-old Pin Oaks, is a memorable experience. Don't expect to catch a large number of fish however - two fish per day is a good return and then only if you are a skilled fly fisher.

Doddington Weir, a few kilometres downstream however produces fish in excess of 45 centimetres with the odd 3kg fish not uncommon.

The Goedvertrouen section of the stream is the last section managed by the HTA before it flows into the Ebenezer Dam. This section is similar in character to the famous English streams. It has long glides protected by overhanging trees and reed beds that make fishing a challenge, but for the angler who can present a fly with a gentle touch this stretch can be very rewarding. Some sections of the Goedvertrouen beat are however easier to fish and one can have great fun in the narrow, fast runs where the fish are less choosy and partial to a well-presented dry fly.

Below the Ebenezer Dam, the stream changes dramatically as it cascades through a number of rapids and waterfalls in what is known as the Bergplaas section. This section offers exciting fishing for decently sized rainbows.

Ebenezer Dam

The often mist-shrouded Ebenezer Dam, only a few kilometres from Haenertsburg, has played an important role in the angling enjoyed by the Association's 300 members since its sluices were first opened in 1957

They benefit from a hatchery, chalets, camping sites and a large communal clubhouse on the banks of the dam. The club's headquarters is situated in what was once the old sailing club's premises and has five basic chalets - each sleeping four, camping sites and a modern and clean ablution block. In accordance with a decision taken by the majority of members, there is no electricity but there is hot water, once provided by a donkey boiler but now generated by gas geysers - a recent concession to the reduction of global warming.

Today the Magoebaskloof area is approximately 27km from Tzaneen and 60 km from Polokwane on the R71.

Three years ago, fellow committee member Mike Biccard and I decided that every effort should be made to find as many relevant documents as possible that record our history. This did not prove to be an easy task.

Thankfully the early years of our club's history had been recorded in two leather-bound minute books that, luckily, are still in our possession (I have them stored in a fire proof safe at present). For the rest, we managed to locate a number of files and other items in long-forgotten boxes that had been stored by previous members.



Arno Laubscher with a brown trout caught on the Broederstroom below the Dap Naude Dam.



Ed Herbst fishing the Helpmekeer stream several kilometres downstream of Haenertsburg.



Doddington Weir on the Broederstroom has produced trout of up to three kilograms.



The HTA hatchery at the Ebenzer Dam which provides both brown and rainbow trout for stocking the Association's dams.



The lovely Dap Naude Dam which provides fishing for wild, Scandinavian-strain rainbow trout.

Unfortunately some files are missing and my appeals, via the media, for any memorabilia and for anything of interest regarding the HTA to be sent to us for copying, did not prove very successful.

Having managed to collect as many documents as possible we persuaded the committee to make available R10 000 for the physical and electronic recording of the available data. Mike took on this thankless job and the project was completed two years ago.

However, I still believed that it was necessary to have a record of our club's history for our members and the general public to access easily. This could only be done in a book that would encapsulate the wonderful history of the oldest fishing club in South Africa.

As part of the celebration of the club's centenary, a book, *Fly Fishing in the Land of the Silver Mist* by Louis Changuion, a former professor of history at the University of Limpopo, has been published.

Although access to the club waters is limited to members only, other than for Stanford and Lakeside Dams, any keen fly fisher will always be accommodated.

All relevant information can be obtained on the club's website, www.htatrout.co.za.