



## MY INTRODUCTION TO TROUT CULTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA

By F. G. CHAPLIN

Photographs by courtesy of  
Mr. F. G. Chaplin.

Richardson and Chaplin netting a  
pond at the Pirie Trout Hatchery,  
period 1903-07.

A FEW notes on how I came to hear of the Pirie Hatchery in 1903.

I was for some months staying with a relation, Meyrick Bowker, on his farm "Dunskye" in the Cathcart district, where two of his neighbours, John and Frank King, very fine tennis players, were to play in a match in King William's Town.

Bowker suggested that I should ride down to King William's Town taking a pack-horse—a distance of about 60 miles. When having tea on the courts, I got into conversation with a man sitting next to me. He happened to be R. J. Dick, one of the Committee of the Frontier Acclimatisation Society, and for something to say, I said that I understood that there was a trout hatchery in the district. I told him I was interested in trout culture and would like to see the place. It turned out that he was going to drive there the next day, a Sunday, and that he would be pleased to take me.

On our way out to the Pirie, Dick told me that they were afraid they would have to close down the hatchery as they could not get a man to manage it. I was very charmed with the drive, in a Cape Cart and four horses. The country was to me very like my old home in Sussex—the South Downs. Of course added to this was that we drove through Native locations—which was rather different to Sussex. In those days they were all "Red Kaffirs" in blankets—transformed now by European dress and customs.

When we arrived at the hatchery, the forest views, trees, birds etc. so charmed me that I fell for the place at once. Of course the ponds, huts and place generally were in a very bad state, which showed me how much there was to be done to put things in order. We had a very nice lunch, but not too much for me to know what I was saying! So on the drive back to King William's Town I offered to go out and

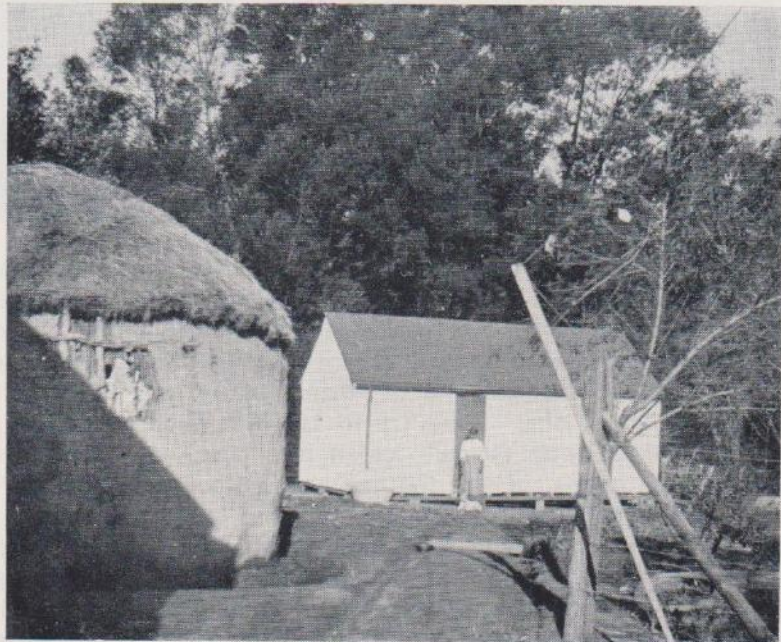
live there for a time, until they could find a man to take charge. The outcome was that a Committee meeting was called and I was appointed to take over.

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When the time came, I found things dreadful. It was so bad that the roof of my bedroom hut leaked like a sieve—the rains continued late into May that year and I think that they had 110 inches at Evelyn Valley, the forest station just above the hatchery.

So bad indeed that I had lent to me one of the big beach umbrellas to cover part of my bed, and put waterproof sheets over the rest of it. Before getting out of bed I had to put on rubber boots, to find an inch or more of water all over the floor of the hut. All the other huts were in a worse state. Young Stenning, who was there with me for a month or so, slept in a corner of the small room used as a kitchen.

Chaplin's sleeping hut of 1903, on left, and newly-built workshop.

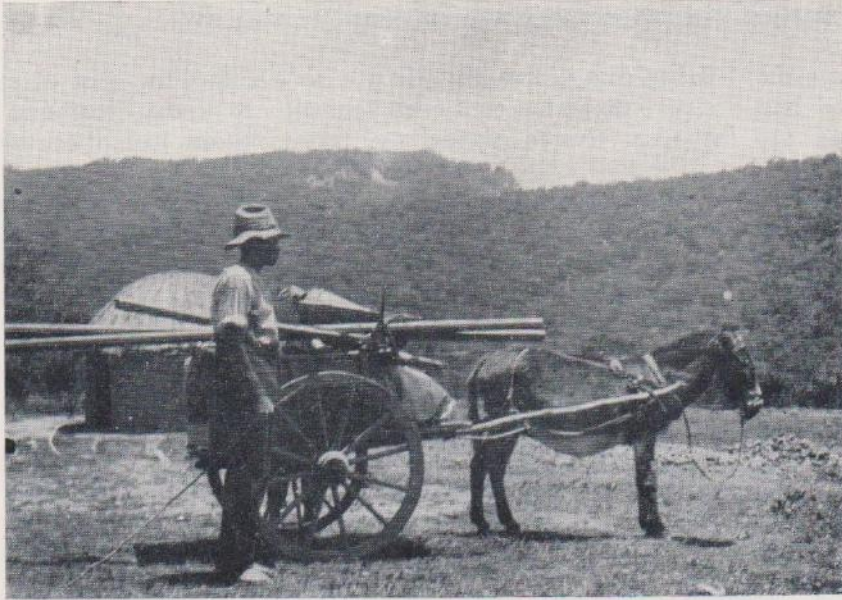


The Committee were most kind and did all in their power to help matters, but there were no funds and little Government help. However, by degrees I got things going, with the great help of Richardson and Fuhr. These two would come out every week-end and stay with me. They were wonderful in what they did. When the new cement pipe-line was laid, we had to cut down the bush, no joke I can tell you. Those native hardwoods are indeed hard. It is not easy to remember dates so long ago, but the spawning season was coming on when I took over. The old hatching house was about to fall down. But in a way it was all great fun, especially as I had no white men helping me and I knew no native language.

All this was rather strange, as before I left England, a month or so before, I was told at a party one evening that my entire life would soon be changed. (I was then living in a very charming village, Lindfield in Sussex.) This was told to me by two ladies I had never met before, who played about with palmistry.

Well, here I was brought from that lovely English village to live among many thousands of South African Natives. Indeed a great change. One of the old ladies wrote all this down at the time and I have her notes with me now. They told me other things which have come true, but I can't believe in palmistry even now!

As the Pirie Hatchery was 14 miles from King William's Town, it was very difficult to get supplies, and the only means of transport was with an old donkey and cart and



Pirie Hatchery transport unit, 1903. "Willie" and the dangerous donkey. Background of indigenous forest.

a Native driver "Willie" (see picture). It took more than 12 hours to do the 14 miles there and back, and this journey was done once or twice a week (rain permitting). What a donkey that was! He was so clever that I really think he could have picked any lock. He would open up gates, open the door of the "dwelling" hut and upset the supper pot of hot mealies—and eat them boiling hot! How often I had wished for the death of that moke. I did try to kill him once by driving him into one of the narrow fry ponds, with the help of an iron rake, but he just stood on his front legs and kicked out at me. I was the one near unto death!

Another experience I remember only too well, when there was a "near death", was when the new hatching house was being built and all my pals were out for the week-end—H. Fuhr, Col. Knapp and Richardson. We were trying to fix the new filter, which was a tank made of wood about 4 ft. by 3 ft. by 4 ft. deep. The outlet pipe in a corner at the bottom of the tank had to have a flange screwed on firmly on the inside of the tank. The tank was near the roof of the building, and Richardson had to climb up a ladder and get into the tank head first, which meant practically standing on his head. Richardson was a big man, weighing, say, 170 lb. He started to swear before he even got into the filter, but when he got his head and hands in the corner, the language was unspeakable—I have never heard anything like it before or since!

Richardson was screwing or trying to screw on the flange, and Fuhr had to hold the pipe in place outside. Nothing happened but words, and when after some minutes Richardson came to earth, I really thought he would have brained Fuhr with a hammer, but Knapp took it away just in time. I may say Richardson was a hot-headed bloke. All ended well, after a drink.

During my stay at the Pirie, my transport was an American gig with two wheels and a seat, and my pony "Trout" I broke in while with Bowker. He was a nice pony and I taught him to jump quite well. Richardson drove him for many years after I left.

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I shall never forget when we first found that brown trout were breeding naturally in the Buffalo River. We had decided not to turn out any brown trout fry for a year or more. One Sunday morning Richardson, Fuhr and I took a walk over to the river, when just by chance I was looking into some water about a foot deep and very clear, and there I saw about two dozen brown trout fry, about 1½ inches long, feeding nicely in mid-water. I shouted to the others to come and see them. We were all very excited

Chaplin's transport, his pony "Trout"  
and the American gig.



and I remember throwing my hat in the air—which fell in the river, and I had a job to retrieve it.

You may think that my childish spirits were somewhat out of place, but one must remember that this was the first time of proof that trout had bred naturally in the Eastern Province.

To commemorate the finding of these fish, Richardson asked Perks, the jeweller of King William's Town, to make and engrave some small gold tie-pins of a trout about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches long. He gave one to each of us—Fuhr, Col. Knapp and myself. I am wearing mine as I write this, and have done so every day for the past 50 years.

It would seem that my tie-pin fish has a charmed existence, having been lost and recovered four times. Once on the sands at Gordons Bay, while I was playing with my two children. I offered a reward of £1 to the children of Gordons Bay; and they got all the kids they could find, sifted the sand—and found the fish. Another time I found it on a four-inch wide cement edge of a pond; once caught in my sock and once in the turn-up of my trousers.

During my stay at the Pirie, the Cape Mounted Riflemen, through the kindness of Colonel Lukin (afterwards Major-Gen. Sir Henry Timson Lukin, K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.) let me have the use of a room as a bedroom in the C.M.R. barracks. This was nice for me, because I could drive into town and spend the night and see friends at the club.

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I think that it was while I was at the Pirie that I sent the first trout ova to the Maclear district, to Mr. Tarr of Ugie. It was interesting because only 2,000 rainbow ova were sent to him, and they arrived without any knowledge of what to do with them—except that they had to be hatched in running water. All he could do was to put the ova in an ordinary garden sieve with a wooden cover and stones on top to prevent it from floating. I was told that all the eggs hatched, with the result that nearly all the rivers in that district became stocked from such a simple start. It was from this result that I experimented and produced the "Chaplin Hatching Box", for which there was a large demand for a time. When I went to Jonkershoek (at the end of 1907), a local carpenter took orders and supplied them to farmers all over South Africa.

Some of these floating hatching boxes were used to stock the Amalinda Reservoir near East London. Mr. Harold Brooking of that town undertook the work, and helped trout culture by writing articles in the *East London Despatch*.

I should also mention that a great help to me and the Frontier Acclimatisation Society was my friend Dr. McArthur, District Surgeon at Keiskammahoe, where he took in charge the stocking of the rivers and streams on his side of the Hogsback—the Keiskamma, Gxulu, Wolf and Tyumie.

It happened that I stocked the Klipplaat River with trout, on Bowker's farm, Dunskey, before I went to the Pirie Hatchery. When I was staying with him, I said I should like to try and hatch a few ova. He was a great sportsman and was only too pleased. I set to work to make a hatching trough, and we had a clear mountain stream running through the garden. I am not sure if the 1,000 eggs he got came from the Pirie or Jonkershoek. They arrived in good order and hatched fairly well. As Bowker owned about 20,000 sheep, livers were always to be had for fry food. (I think that wool was then at 6d. to 9d. per lb.: but, oh, what lamb! the like I have only tasted off the Sussex South Downs—oh, for those days, when one could eat and enjoy one's meat!) Some of the fry I turned direct into the garden stream that flowed to the Klipplaat River, and a few I fenced in a small pool I had made off the stream. These did well for a time, but all were killed, I fear, when a dipping tank overflowed into the pond, which was only a few yards from the river.

We used to have great fun on Dunskey. There were numbers of otters in the river and I shot quite a few from the house with a rifle, but I soon stopped doing this, as when shot they always sank and we only found them days after when they floated to the surface. Perhaps I should not call this fun. Bowker did not, as he was, as I said, a great sportsman, as are all the Bowkers, and he always said that everybody should do all in their power to save the wild life of South Africa—and how true are his words today. The otter is a beautiful animal when you can sit and watch them as we could from the garden.

Another thing we used to do when the Klipplaat River was in full flood. (The river on this part of the farm took a horseshoe bend.) We would put the boat, a rather fragile one, on the waggon and take it to the upper water. We would get in and away we went over the rapids. This was only possible when the river was very full as the rapids were all rock and quite dangerous unless well covered with water. When we got to the end of this sporting reach we would come ashore. The waggon would come back for us and we would do the trip over again. We would do this sometimes for three goes, but if the river was in flood on Sunday morning, so much the better. The church was many miles away.

Sometimes we would take a crowbar up on the top of Gaikaskop and shift boulders to see them bound down. There was no danger in this, as it was grass country, so that one could see that all was safe and clear of sheep before we started this so-called "sport".



I forgot to mention before that in the Pirie forest there is found (I am told the only place in South Africa) a fine black mole, a very big fellow and with a lovely skin. I should have some of the skins now, if I could only find them. Stenning used to get them to send to Europe and America, where they fetched a high price.

The wild life in the Pirie bush was most interesting. Lots of bushbuck, monkeys and bush babies, and the latter kick up a weird row at night, quite enough to frighten one unless one knew about them.

The Natives around the Pirie used to go into the bush hunting buck or anything that they could get, from bushbuck to blue buck—which is the smallest South African buck, about 1 foot high. It was a fine sight to see say 200 Natives, armed with any kind of stick or assegai. (I have even seen them use sparklet bulbs in their guns.) It was expected of the Forest Ranger to catch these chaps. Personally, I would rather have gone with them—but then I was always a funk.

Being a funk reminds me of what happened on my return journey from King William's Town to Dunskey. I had left the town rather late one evening, and was about six miles from Debe Nek, riding and leading the pack-horse.

It was raining, as only it can in the Eastern Province. I was wearing, I remember, a hunting apron, but I was wet through; when a man with a cart and two horses overtook me. This I thought very strange on such a night. Through my usual funk,

I at once thought of "murder on the highway", etc., and all the dreadful things that could happen in Darkest Africa (English ideas). As he stopped and asked who I was and where I was going, that made it worse, so I promptly asked "what the devil it had to do with him?" I saw he had a gun in the cart beside him. I also had a revolver in my pocket, not that I could have got at it, wrapped up as I was.

To my rude remark, he burst into a loud laugh, saying, "Oh, I can see you are an Englishman—a Rooinek!" (At that time I did not know the meaning of "rooinek".) However, after a bit of a chat, he said, "You had better come on my cart—we can tie your two horses to the back and drive on to Debe Nek where my waggon is outspanned."

We got to Debe Nek, had a good supper, and early next morning started for Middledrift. On his waggon he had a new double harness he had bought in King William's Town, so I suggested that we put my two horses in the harness and drive four-in-hand to Middledrift. My horses had never been in harness before, as I had helped to break them at Dunsbye. However, after a bit of trouble, we drove in fine style to Middledrift, outspanned, had lunch and afterwards went up the Tyumie valley to Yellowwoods, where my friend (please note, friend) lived and kept a store. I left him there and commenced a lonely but slippery ride to Dunsbye, the road being very bad with mud after the heavy rains.

I took over the Pirie Hatchery a short time after this.

Stellenbosch, August 1955.



Some of the Committee of the Frontier Acclimatisation Society, about 1905. Standing : Col. Knapp, W. T. Trollip, Col. Style, T. W. Heywood and F. G. Chaplin. Sitting : R. J. Dick, Col. "Tim" Lukin, H. A. Fuhr and Tommy Fletcher.