

Letters from my grandmother in South Africa 1904-07

By Bente Grue, Denmark

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Cape Point 1

Cape Town 15/4 1905

Dear everyone at home

I had decided not to leave Cape Town before I had been at the Cape of Good Hope – or Cape Point, as it is known here. That was easier said than done, as the country is so desolate and has no roads, tracks or paths. I persuaded Miss. Lauridsen to join me, and on a lovely Sunday morning we started from Cape Town and took the train to Simons Town, England's naval harbour at False Bay. From there we had 35 English miles to Cape Point, using the Apostle's mode of conveyance (walking). We had a good map and walked towards the South, steadily upward.

Small groups of donkeys and mules were the only living things we saw. Here and there a Hottentot hut appeared, but apart from that, nothing.

At noon we discovered a farm in a small valley. There was a long white building with a flat roof, where melons had been taken to ripen. We were both hungry and thirsty, and went in to ask if we could buy a melon, and also ask after directions. The farm was owned by a Boer family – a widow with son and daughter. We were as warmly welcomed as one might expect if one was in West Jutland in Denmark. We were asked all sorts of questions: where we were from, where we were going, and why. We were seen as a pair of oddballs, thinking to go to Cape Point just to say that we'd been there. The woman said that it was the first time in her lifetime and may be first time ever that ladies had been to the Cape, which we somewhat doubted. She asked us earnestly to visit on the way back, so she could see that we made it back safely and got away with the experience.

She gave us melons and pears and told us of a farm that we could stay the night at if we didn't make it to the lighthouse before nightfall. We had to find the road out ourselves. We saw wheel tracks in the places where there was sand on the ground, but otherwise nothing. The countryside gradually became more desolate. Grass is now a thing of the past at this time of the year. Just a few cacti were the only signs of life. During and after the rainy season it is apparently relatively green. We named it St. Paul's Desert after a mountain range along False Bay.

The isthmus gradually became narrower – we saw the ocean on either side. The lighthouse could also be clearly seen in the clear, light air. We were many hundred feet above sea level. When we arrived at the farm the sun was still high in the sky and we decided to reach the lighthouse and stay the night there, if there was space, which we thought there should be. As long as we got a roof over our heads we'd be satisfied. Finally we reached the hill just as the sun was going down. We had to clamber up in the moonlight as best we could. There was a small track, probably intended only for donkeys. We didn't have the benefit of them though, but we made it up anyway, went in to the lighthouse keeper's house, and asked about a place to stay the night. Yes, we could stay the night, as long as we had permits from the tourist association in Cape Town. They had built two stone houses up there, of course suited for men, as women never came here. We didn't have permits. We couldn't sleep outside as the nights are so frightfully cold, and it would be impossible to find the farm. We promised by



My grandmother Maren Olsen

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

I would like to do the journey the same way as she did.

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

The old lighthouse history. Does a club or group of lighthouse fans exist?

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Cape Point 2

our honour not to tell anyone that we had been allowed to stay there without permission.

We were shown the two houses, one of which was a common room, with an open fireplace where we could cook food. There were pots, plates, and other utensils, but these were something we didn't have any need for as we didn't take any food with us except for a little bread and butter.

The other was a large room with 5 stretchers and up on a little mezzanine there were some dirty blankets and straw pillows. Yes, everything was very primitive, down to the earthen floor and granite walls. I thought of the mountain huts in Norway and Sweden which offer shelter for travellers. Everything was just so interesting. Here and there, granite walls had been built outside so that one didn't inadvertently fall down into the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean.

We bought some food from the lighthouse keeper, were allowed to go up into the lighthouse. I spoke more English that evening that I had done in the entire 6 months prior. People who are so isolated have to make the most of the opportunity to converse.

We didn't get much sleep as the beds were not so inviting. They were intended for tourists and also used as stretchers for sailors who had been washed ashore. And the surf breaking against the cliffs wasn't much of a lullaby either. All the time we had the feeling that everything would fall apart around us. I wouldn't say it was exactly pleasant, but it is with pride that we can say that we spent the night at the Cape of Good Hope.

The next morning we were up in the tower again, saw Cape Hangklip and Cape Agulhas. After that we went out to look for monkeys. I would have loved to have been able to take a small one back with us, but couldn't catch any. The lighthouse keeper told us that they are not afraid of women, but he did confess that they hadn't seen any women with the exception of his wife!

On the way back we went in to Mr. Smidt's farm, mostly out of curiosity.

We asked after some water as an excuse though. This Mr. Smidt was a bachelor Boer, or Dutch.

His family had lived on the same farm for two hundred years. His parents lived in Cape Town, but he ran the farm with some male farm hands, coloured and white, as it happened, but no women were there. He invited us to dinner, to which we gladly accepted. We had a look around, and asked how big the farm was. He didn't know, but he had 2 cows and almost 900 horses. He wasn't certain about the exact numbers as they grazed wherever they pleased during Winter and Summer. Of the cultivated land he had some small fields with grain, corn, and wheat for the household and the hens.

We asked if it wasn't a dull existence, but he seemed to be quite satisfied.

The hunting was good during two months of the Winter. At that time he also had a number of friends staying. We were very interested to know exactly what kind of hunting they did, as we hadn't seen any other living things around.

Deer, wild ostrich, and partridge were most common (we also saw ostrich later

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

Does a club or group of Cape Point fans exist?

Places I would like to find and/or know about:

Does the farm still exist?

Is it possible to get in contact with descendants of that Smidt family?

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Cape Point 3

in the afternoon). Every day he had to ride to check on his herds of horses, and then there were the neighbours.

He had only one hours quick ride to the nearest, and that was pleasant, because then we don't disturb each other. He had upper-secondary school leaving certificate, was up to date with current events, and had a good library, so in the end we were a little jealous of the man.

When we had eaten dinner and had learnt of everything regarding the man and his farm, we were ready to go walking again, but it had become too late. In the best case scenario we would be able to make it to the farm from the previous day, but it wouldn't be before late, and we weren't certain that we would be able to stay there the night.

We had to then instead accept Mr. Smidt's invitation to stay there the night.

The next day we reached the farm at 4 o'clock, and went in to tell the woman about our journey. We stayed there that night and for the first time in our lives slept in a real four-poster bed. It was a farm like Mr. Smidt's, and had been property of the family for many years. They were members of the reformed church, and had evening and morning prayers, and were surprised that this wasn't the norm amongst the Lutherans.

We were treated just like old friends. We asked her (the woman) if she took in all travellers. No, she doesn't, but there is Danish blood in her family - her great-grandmother. She adored this fair people so we were made to promise to visit the farm again if we ever came back to Cape Town. We now want to send them a Danish flag, as thanks for their hospitality.

Later we heard that they and Mr. Smidt are the richest farmers in the southern part of the Cape.

On Wednesday morning we arrived at Simons Town.

We took the train a few stations to the north and from there walked up over Constantia's vineyards, Tokay and Grote Constantia, containing several hundred acres of land with grapes and oranges. The grape season was over, so we were allowed to eat as many of the remaining grapes we liked. The oranges had a rest period now before the rainy season. Otherwise, the trees have flowers, unripe and ripe fruit year round. Constantia's nature and location is some of the most beautiful and perfect imaginable. The only thing that was missing was that it wasn't called Denmark, otherwise it could be called home.

The whole journey to the Cape was such a success from beginning to end, so it will be one of the best memories that I will take with me from here. It's just such a shame to have written about it, as it can sound so dry when written down.



Bente Grue

**Is it possible to find out
which family it could be?**