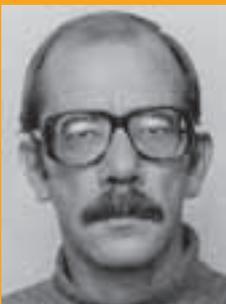


# Chapter 5

## Windhoek's small Dutch "Colony" of the 1950's

The Dutch building contractor L. A. Steens, was instrumental in building the modern city of Windhoek. His contracted Dutch masons, carpenters, other artisans and their families were accommodated in the Steenskamp. Cor Leijenaar describes his experiences – and provides poignant reminiscences of the lifestyles of the residents of Windhoek's Steenskamp in the 1950s as seen through the eyes of a child.



Cor Leijenaar

Cor Leijenaar was born in The Hague in 1941. His family immigrated to South West Africa in 1949, where his father worked in the construction industry. Mr Leijenaar started his career as a journalist, mainly sportswriter, with *Die Suidwes-Afrikaner*, *Die Suidwester* and *Beeld*. He moved to Pretoria in 1978 and continued his journalistic career in South Africa. In 1984 he became public relations consultant. He retired in 2003 but remains active as mentor and consultant for young journalists.



Wood workshop and joinery at the Steenskamp

*L.Steens was a Dutch contractor who established himself in Windhoek towards the end of the 1940's. He engaged a good number of artisans from the Netherlands, who moved to Windhoek with their families. Photo courtesy of Cor Leijenaar.*

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Residents of the Steenskamp in traditional Dutch costumes

*The people in this photo are Dutch employees of L.A. Steens, although a few may be Afrikaners from South Africa, who lived with them in the same compound. The photo is taken in the 1950's. It is interesting to see that the traditional costumes of several Dutch towns and regions are represented in this picture. Photo courtesy of Cor Leijenaar.*

According to any city map of Windhoek there is open terrain a stone's throw southwest from where the Gammams River in Windhoek flows under the railroad bridge en route to Gobabis. Today there are no traces of the vibrant community that thrived there fifty years ago – a group of people that would play a decisive role in the establishment of Windhoek as a modern city.

The *Steenskamp* has not existed for many years and there are virtually no indications that it ever did. But since the late 1940s many of Windhoek's well-known landmarks are linked to this fenced-in "camp" with its prefabricated houses and massive joinery and wood stores.

The *Steenskamp* is named after building contractor L. A. Steens who contracted most of his skilled craftsmen from the Netherlands. The Second World War had dampened employment prospects in Europe and many artisans eagerly faced the unknown in the hope of a new life. The *Steenskamp* did indeed serve as springboard for a new and prosperous life for many of the Dutch families who, after a few years of having moved to the camp with their meager belongings, were able to afford better accommodation. Many started their own successful enterprises in the building industry, some settled elsewhere in Namibia, whilst others returned to the Netherlands after a number of years.

In addition to the large joinery that manufactured all wood products required for numerous buildings in the city, the *Steenskamp* also featured four large prefabricated asbestos apartment buildings that stood head to head. Each building housed four families in four spacious rooms each. The ablution facilities were, however, outside and separate to the apartments. A fifth apartment building was added later.

Fifty years ago, one would have said that the *Steenskamp* was virtually on the southern point of Windhoek. Besides a few buildings, residences and Eros airport, there was little else further south. Looking at a map of Windhoek today, the *Steenskamp* was probably closer to the center of the city than the suburbs that lie further to the south. Getting there today is also vastly different than in those early days, when it also depended on whether you were one of the few who could afford a car.

Most travelled by foot; the shortest route from town was to walk along the bumpy, narrow tarred road bordered by gravel on either side today known as Mandume Ndemufayo Road, to just before the three railway tracks that lead to Gobabis (in those days there was no bridge over the tracks). There we would turn right (west) and walk next to the railway tracks for a good kilometer on a well-worn and dusty footpath to just before the Gammams River where we'd cross the tracks and walk through the dry river bed to the camp. The footpath was later widened as times improved and more people could afford the occasional taxi ride home. Windhoek's only taxi driver, Sampie Nel, could however only take his fares to the point where his path was blocked by the railway tracks.

The route was a good kilometer longer for those who could travel to the camp by car; about a kilometer further after the railway tracks in Republic Road before turning right and arching on a gravel road through the bush for another kilometer.

Where pedestrians reached the camp from the east, motorists visiting the factory did so from the south. This road was later extended so that it curled around the western part of the camp and provided residents access to the north between the second- and last apartment buildings. Thus, to the north was the railway track, to the east the Gammams River, to the south bush and to the west, more bush.

A current map of Windhoek will, directly west of where the train track crosses the Gammams River where the *Steenskamp* used to be, indicate nothing. The closest roads indicated are Diesel Street, virtually south, and Joules Street, slightly southwest, of where the *Steenskamp* used to be.

Although most undoubtedly saw it as a challenge, life in the camp itself was probably a trial for the adults. For us children it was certainly the best time of our youth. Where adults certainly would have missed pre-war luxuries, the children were untouched by what they did not know.

The Dutch held celebrations at the camp that attested to their roots, like the annual *Sinterklaasfeest* in early



**Celebration of Sinterklaas at the Steenskamp**

*Between 30 and 40 children of primary school age lived at the Steenskamp in the 1950's. Most were Dutch, while the others were South African. Afrikaans was their common language, although the Dutch traditions, such as Sinterklaas on 5th December, were celebrated by all. Photo courtesy of Cor Leijenaar.*

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**New immigrants are welcomed at Windhoek railway station**

*New arrivals at the Steenskamp were welcomed by everybody. Normally husbands travelled ahead of their families from the Netherlands to start work and to prepare the arrival of their families. The normal journey was by ship from Rotterdam to Walvis Bay or Cape Town and then onwards by train to Windhoek. Photo courtesy of Cor Leijenaar.*

December, which was celebrated by on a grander scale than Christmas a few weeks later. Other events were similarly tackled with enthusiasm and even a birthday was cause for celebration. There were between 30 and 40 children at a time with 80% very close in age to each other. There were many playmates and play areas – the sand, the river (which virtually never had water), the wood stores (if we weren't caught out), the bush, the train bridge and much more.

Although most Dutch children initially attended the English/German medium convent, we quickly assimilated Afrikaans due to the Afrikaans families in the camp. In turn, many Afrikaans children assimilated Dutch culture, something that a chance encounter will attest to even years later.

I was seven years old in May 1949 when I strode ashore from the *Athlone Castle* in Cape Town with my mother, brother and sister, and boarded a train for the three-day journey to Windhoek where we were heartily welcomed by the Dutch upon arrival. The welcoming reception continued at the *Steenskamp*. My father had arrived six months earlier in order to prepare for our arrival.

We lived at the *Steenskamp* for about five years before moving to better accommodations – four single rooms of the old airport hotel less than 200m from Eros Airport's northern point of the runway.

Our days at the *Steenskamp* and the people we met

there, however, are indelibly etched in my memory. My parents remained in contact with most of them; the same of which cannot be said of the children. Most of the adults have passed away and their children are certainly spread throughout the country. But I recall most of who lived there – the Afrikaans families Esterhuizen, van Schalkwyk, Hall, Grobbelaar, Schrader and Schonken and the Dutch families Tuit, R Van der Salm, Segboer, C Leijenaar, J van der Salm, Ebenau, van der Klei, van Langerak, Kerkstra, Nederlof, Mollier, K de Groot, A Leijenaar, Heerschap, van Asperen, P de Groot, Van Es.

I tried in vain to track the old accommodations several times in later years. Perhaps I shouldn't have tried by car as I invariably encountered fences and other obstructions. Perhaps I should rather have attempted to walk the old footpath next to the railway tracks that I and numerous other Dutch had walked hundreds of times. But times have changed in fifty years. Why walk when you can drive?

The *Steenskamp* may be nonexistent on a city map of Windhoek, but the buildings for which the residents in the service of L.A. Steens - and later as own enterprises or for other companies - were responsible, grace the city and are their testament. Two of the most well-known buildings in Windhoek for which L.A. Steens' people were responsible are the main post office and the church of the Nederduits Gereformeerde community.

