

TEBA THE MAN

HENRY MELVILLE TABERER

He was called Henry by his family and Teba by Africans throughout South Africa. They called his company Kwa Teba in the Ciskei and Transkei 65 years ago and today TEBA is the logo of The Employment Bureau of Africa. He was Henry Melville Taberer, born at Keiskammahoek in the Ciskei in 1870.

Henry was the son of Canon C Taberer, a missionary among the Xhosa people for 53 years and he grew up at St Matthews Mission. He was sent to school at St Andrews College, Grahamstown and in 1889 went to Keble College, Oxford, where he took a BA Honours degree. He gained his 'blue' for athletics and rugby, was captain of the Oxford University rugby team and played at half-back against Cambridge in 1892. He was in the first eleven cricket team and also played cricket for Essex County.

When Henry returned to South Africa he was appointed Secretary for Zululand at Pietermaritzburg and was magistrate at Eshowe in 1895. At the invitation of Cecil Rhodes, he then went to Rhodesia and was Chief Native Commissioner for Rhodesia from 1896 to 1901. He took part in the Matabela Rebellion and was twice mentioned in dispatches.

During 1902 he joined the service of the Transvaal Government in Pretoria and was appointed Chief Native Commissioner. In the same year he played cricket for South Africa against Australia. He was later to be a member of the Cricket Board of Control.

During 1903 he was appointed secretary to the International Colonial Native Affairs Commission. He became Assistant Secretary for the Transvaal in 1905 and Director of the Labour Bureau of the Louis Botha Government in 1906.

Two years later he gave up the public service for private enterprise – engaging mine labour, especially in the Ciskei and Transkei, which he knew and which knew him well. His company was soon known as 'kwa Teba' (the house of Teba) and was so well known as kwa Teba that the name was transferred with him when the company was incorporated in the Native Recruiting Corporation in 1912.

Teba was appointed General Superintendent and was later Native Labour Adviser of the two labour organisations, the NRC and WNLA of the Chamber of Mines. That appointment he held until his death – at Colesberg in 1932.

It was said then that no White man had ever been closer to the heart of the Black people of Southern Africa, none had possessed his intimate understanding of their character and way of thinking.

Growing up in the Ciskei, he naturally spoke Xhosa and with a remarkable talent for languages he became familiar with all the other Bantu languages and dialects.

Today he is remembered as a friendly and vigorous man of the world who put as much energy into his social life as he did into his work. He was impatient of red tape, somewhat scornful of authority.

He liked to get things done as quickly and efficiently as possible even if it meant breaking the rules. His relations with his Board of Management were at times abrasive but men who worked under him speak of his exceptional kindness to his juniors.

His son, Travers Taberer, who also worked for the NRC for some time, was the youngest soldier in the British forces to be awarded the DSO during the First World War.

Two thousand mourners attended Teba's funeral service in St Mary's Cathedral, Johannesburg.

Researched and Written by

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