

THE ORIGINS OF WENELA AND TEBA

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When gold was discovered during 1886 the Witwatersrand was an inhospitable place – cold, treeless and windswept. During the first half of the century scattered Sotho-speaking clans had lived there, but the armies of Mzilikazi had so reduced their numbers that by the time when the first gold mines started there was no local labour available to work on the mines.

The newly discovered gold deposits were to become the most extensive in the world, but much of the gold content was of low grade and if large scale mining was to be conducted it was essential to have unskilled labour in large numbers to do the manual work.

The nearest supply of labour was Mozambique where men of the Shangane and Thonga tribes had some previous experience of mine work in the Barberton area in the eastern Transvaal and were attracted by the money that could be earned to take back to their homes. They were the first labour force of the new industry.

As early as 1896 there was a loose association of labour employers known as the Native Labour Supply Association formed to engage labourers from Mozambique. During the Anglo-Boer War, when mining operations were suspended, representatives of the industry conducted preliminary meetings in Cape Town with the object of forming a joint company to engage labour and during 1901, when the war had ended, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) was incorporated.

WNLA was mainly concerned with the engagement of labour from Mozambique, but also sought elsewhere, far and wide, for the much needed labour and the minutes of the early meetings refer to inquiries being made in such distant places as Liberia, Egypt, Uganda, German South West Africa and Mauritius.

A few men came from the areas north of the Tropic of Capricorn, but the mortality among people unaccustomed to the harsh climate of the Witwatersrand was so high that their engagement was stopped by law and was not resumed until much later when new anti-pneumonia vaccines gave them the protection they needed.

So critical was the need for labour that the new industry went to the most distant place of all to get it and the strange episode in the history of South Africa occurred when for a few years Chinese indentured labour was brought to the Transvaal. WNLA acquired an engagement depot at Wei-hai-wei on the eastern shore of the Chinese mainland and as it has never been sold, WNLA presumably still owns this property, although it would be difficult to lay claim to it now. The Chinese experiment was not a success and the last Chinese labourer was repatriated in 1906.

The well-known engagement centre in Eloff Street Extension, Johannesburg was established by WNLA early in the century and to this day it is known as “Mzilikazi”, after the ruler who held dominion over the Witwatersrand area before the white man came.

For the first twenty years of its existence the gold mining industry depended entirely on foreign labour as the people who lived in the provinces of what was to become the Union of South Africa appeared to be intractably opposed to mine work. However, individual mining groups persistently tried, through a number of independent recruiting organisations, to break down their opposition.

During 1912 most of these recruiting organisations were amalgamated under the name of the Native Recruiting Corporation Limited (NRC).

So closely associated was the NRC with WNLA that one of the provisions of its Articles of Association was that no mine could be a member of the NRC without also being a member of WNLA. The two companies operated under the same board of directors and the same management.

Eksteens, which recruited labour for the Corner House Group of Mines, was the largest of the independent labour organisations that formed the NRC. The head of Eksteens was Mr H M Taberer, who through the Ciskei and Transkei was known as “Teba”, a simplified African pronunciation of his surname. At the first meeting of the NRC on September 28, 1912, Taberer was appointed General Superintendent of the new company with a district superintendent in charge of each labour engagement area. At the next meeting, October 17, 1912, the name “kwaTeba” (the house of Teba) was adopted as the ‘Native’ name of the NRC. In the Nguni-speaking areas it has been called by this name ever since, but in the Sotho-speaking areas it was generally known as “Gaudeng” (the place of gold) or simply as “NRC”.

WNLA became known among most Africans as “Wenela”, a word easily formed from its initials and happily closely similar in sound to the Nguni verb meaning ‘to satisfy’.

As the word ‘recruiting’ was no longer an accurate description of a company that was, in fact, an employment bureau and as the word ‘Native’ had become an unacceptable designation of the African people, the names of the two companies were changed in 1966 to Mine Labour Organisations (Wenela) Limited and Mine Labour Organisations (NRC) Limited.

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