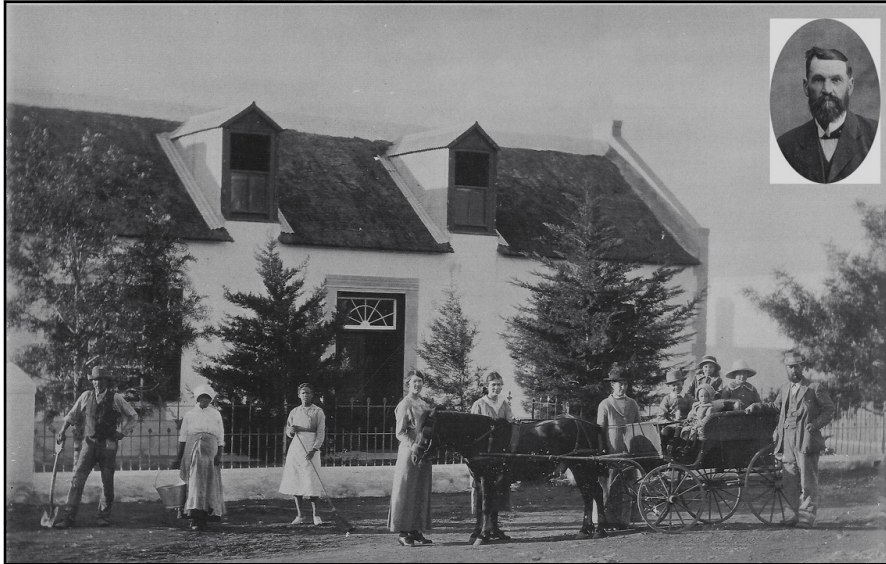


The Sun is shining again on Sonskyn



This photograph was taken in front of Sonneskyn, Prince Albert. The basket chariot with its Basuto pony was a gift from Gideon [Muller] to his wife Helena for her to do her rounds: Sunday school, children's circle, ACVV, Vrouesendingbond, and visiting the sick etc. Inset: Probably Gideon Muller
Photograph by Gawie Beukes

- Derek Thomas -

There is Work in Progress at *SONSKYN*, the historic farmstead located at the northern end of the town and once a highly productive farm going back hundred and fifty years and beyond. Some older Prince Alberters have great affection for the farm and give vivid accounts of their growing up years at *Sonskyn*, their toil on the productive lands and its extraordinary role in the town's cultural life.

According to an old surveyor chart dated June 1907, *Sonskyn's* land was extensive, stretching from Meiring Street to Stokenström Street, or to what is known as *Koelhoogte*. The farm complex once comprised the stately farmhouse, the wagon house, and other structures, including the chaff store (*kafhok*), the threshing floor (*dorsvloer*), a workers' dwelling (*volkshuisie*) and a dam with drinking trough. All of which still stand today and are familiar landmarks on the east side of Church Street. Since the mid-1900s sections of the original land on the northern and southern ends have been portioned off so that the farmstead and wagon house stand alone on the remaining quarter hectare erf.

Today the scale of the farmhouse and its interiors remain impressive. They bring a surprising stylishness where no other example of such architecture exists close by. With the skills and energy needed, the current owners (Lance and Kerri Speirs) are in the process of restoring the integrity (and dignity) of this grand dame of yesteryear. The good soil on the northern side is receiving structured landscaping, and being cultivated with fruit trees and berries so that *Sonskyn* will once again be the proud provider of quality farm produce.

Oom Frans Bothma recalls that his father CJ Bothma owned *Sonskyn* around 1941, where Frans lived until he was eighteen. The farm, he tells, cultivated wheat, peas, peaches, grapes, vegetables and lucerne, most of which were marketed within the town. He sold potatoes in front of the hotel. The bean crops were particularly good, Oom Frans recalls, and the surplus peas were turned into fodder for the cows after first being crushed on the threshing floor using a tractor or donkeys. But for the donkeys to trample, the pile had to be kept low.

Leon Uys tells of his Oupa Michiel who was owner of *Sonskyn* from 1956 to 1964.

He confirms that even at that stage the farm stretched down to *Koelhoogte*, where his grandfather's nephew Stockenström owned the gable house, which still exists as one of the eighteen gabled houses in the town. He recalls that the portion on which the BP Garage now stands was sold off around 1961, probably to Jan Minnie, a councillor at the time. During those years, *Sonskyn* had three windpumps and its irrigation water (*leiwat*), which today is one half hour at half stream.

Leon speaks of the resourcefulness of the owners that characterised townlife of a different era, of living off the land and the rewards of hard work. His *ouma* kept ducks for their down, his *oupa* had one morgen of sweet potatoes. Lucerne was dried on the land and the wheat crop was cut with sickles. Sheep and goats were kept in pens along the eastern boundary. Oom Dan, the café owner, loaned his mules for the threshing of the wheat, after which the chafe was stored in the chafe store, and the wheat put into sacks

(Continued on p 18)

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(The Sun is shining... Continued from p 17)
and taken to Albert's Mill for grinding. Leon himself milked the Swiss *bokke* known for giving good cheese.

Where many of the town's farmhouses of yesteryear were styled with front gables, *Sonskyn* boasted an entirely different originality. The photograph taken during the time of Gideon Muller shows a plain, but stately and well-proportioned building, side gables with parapets and mock chimney apices, a distinguished-looking front door, and two dormer windows providing a strong and pleasing symmetry. The fanlight over the front door is strikingly decorative against the simplicity of the facade. The covered *stoep*, added in the mid-1960s, and the removal of one of the windows has, in my opinion, lessened the visual integrity of the original architectural intent.

Sonskyn remained in limbo until the Speirs took up the challenge of restoring the house with the particular skills needed. Their intuitive sense of the architecture's style and authenticity is returning *Sonskyn* to a wor-



Sonskyn, present day

thy example of how to restore an historic building and add value.

By contrast, adjoining the farmhouse, the old wagon house with its yellow wood beams (until recently in a poor state) has received a makeover for accommodation. Using the modest character of the wagon house as the starting point, and by following the 'something out of nothing' principle, they have

recreated the Karoostyle experience for the enjoyment of visitors.

The sun is rising again on *Sonskyn* with resourcefulness that could well be emulated today in the restoration of other old buildings, the hallmark of Prince Albert's heritage, a major factor in the town's unique cultural landscape, its lifestyle and its compelling attraction for tourists.

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