

## Mid Month Visit – September 2022

Most wars reveal secrets long after hostilities have ceased, and the South African War (1899-1902) was no exception. However, this mystery goes deeper as it doesn't involve secrets around combatant activities, but rather around personal and political aspects. The 'secret' revolves around two men, who in 1904, 90 years before the release of Nelson Mandela, competed in the Olympic Games, totally unrecognised as this participation defied the laws and rules of the 'game' – apartheid. And these two men, had it not been through research done by Professor Floris van der Merwe, of Stellenbosch University, would have gone unheralded forever. Additionally, thanks to the late Robert Forsyth and his daughter Sarah of Kedar Heritage Lodge, they will now enjoy the fame they so richly deserve. A statue, in honour of their achievement was unveiled at Kedar Lodge on 17 September 2022, more than 100 years after the event, and witnessed by a number of prominent local politicians.

So how did this all happen?

During the South African War, most senior Boer soldiers had 'agterryers', or in military terms, auxiliaries. They were black people who shadowed their white counterparts, looking after horses and the well-being of their 'superiors'.

The two auxiliaries about whom this story revolves were Len Taunyane and Jan Mashiani, who were both captured at Paardeberg, along with General Piet Cronje on 27 February 1900, along with over 4 000 men and 50 women.

They spent the rest of the war on the island of St. Helena.

After the war they returned to South Africa and resumed their pre-war duties, in conjunction with the onerous task of re-building structures and infrastructure destroyed by the British.



*Picture: Len Taunyane & Jan Mashiani*



In 1904, St. Louis in the United States of America, staged their World's Fair to commemorate the centenary of their being, which incorporated the Olympic Games of that year. Millions of dollars were spent to build the 1 200-acre fairgrounds and it's nearly 1 500 buildings. During the eight months the fair stayed open, nearly 20 million people visited the event. On display were marvels of technology, agriculture, art and history, as well as amusement rides and entertainment. The fair also had a focus on anthropological exhibits – in some cases, the organizers brought people from around the world as set pieces among re-creations of their home environment or villages. A re-enactment of the South African War Battles of Colenso and Paardeberg were part of festivities and hundreds of individuals, covering British, Boer and auxiliary, who had had experience in the war were shipped across, from South Africa, to America to become part of the show.



*Picture: the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair*

The South African War re-enactment, not only encompassed the battles, but a typical British, Boer and auxiliary camp were established for viewing. The Boer Generals who took part in this spectacle were Piet Cronje himself and Ben Viljoen. Amongst activities performed by the auxiliaries were tree climbing, mud fights, and races. One such race was a 1 mile race and Taunyane and Mashiani distinguished themselves, resulting in them being invited to participate in the Marathon at the 1904 Olympic Games.

One needs to appreciate that as an 'agterryer'/auxiliary, one of the duties performed would have been that of a messenger, where Taunyane and Mashiani would have had to relay messages between Boer commandos, either on horseback or on foot. These men were super fit.

In 'Runner's World.com', an article by Ashwin Rodrigues, records – *"Trailing close behind were Len Taunyane and Jan Mashiani, both running their first marathon. The two members of South Africa's Tswana tribe were the first Black Africans to compete in the Olympics. In fact, they were the only*



*Black athletes to represent that nation until the end of apartheid 86 years later. Taunyane and Mashiani had no formal racing experience and were in St. Louis performing in the World's Fair's Boer War Exhibition. Taunyane and Mashiani had been message runners for the Boers and were part of a cast of hundreds that twice a day re-enacted battles from the recent Second Boer War, between Dutch colonist Boers and the British Empire, in front of thousands of spectators."*



*Picture: The statue of Taunyane and Mashiani at Kedar Heritage Lodge*

Over 40 participants entered the race but only 32 started. Taunyane was allocated number 36 and Mashiani number 35. Taunyane ran the race bare-foot. The same article also records – "*Len Taunyane (despite being chased a mile off course by a dog) took ninth and Mashiani was 12<sup>th</sup>.*" Bertie Harris, an official white competitor from South Africa didn't finish the race. The race was full of controversy in that the first person to finish, who nearly received the gold medal, was disqualified after it was established that he had completed some of the race in a motor car. The eventual winner was carried across the winning line by his handlers, having received healthy portions of 'performance enhancing' drugs. The article is an interesting record of the race, and ends with the following – "*The infamy of the race, however, set in quickly. Two days after its running, the Post-Dispatch dubbed it a 'man-killing event' and reported that Olympic committee members were calling for its removal from future Games. Sullivan jumped on the bandwagon and*



*quickly turned on the event, publicly decrying it and telling the paper 'a 25-mile run ... is asking too much of human endurance'."*

The statue of the two runners is on permanent display at Kedar Heritage Lodge, a venue which is a must for not only South African War enthusiasts, but for historians in general. There are many statues of significance and the restaurant and conference venues have displays which all deserve close attention. Not far from the Lodge, on the same property, is one of President Kruger's houses – beautifully restored. To do justice to what is on display will take more than a day – and is well worth the effort of a visit. Have a look at what Kedar Lodge is all about on their website ([www.kedar.co.za](http://www.kedar.co.za)).

The South African War has un-earthed many wonderful stories, but this must rank with the best. A country which is starved of stories that can inspire reconciliation surely needs to make more of this one. The Comrades Marathon is a world renowned event – how about a Len Taunyane and a Jan Mashiani medal?



*Picture: A tribute to General Jan Smuts at Kedar Heritage Lodge*

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**Allan Gordon**