



## PILCHARD FEVER

A chapter of the book *Ovenstones – A Story of the Sea*, narrated and produced by Fraser Gill, Public Relations Consultant, Cape Town, and printed by Hortors Ltd, Observatory, Cape Town, 1958

Drawings by Roman Waher..

A three-passenger Ryan-Navion circled over Walvis Bay, principal port of South West Africa, and touched down smoothly and without fuss on the sandy runway at the edge of the town. Chartered at Windhoek by the Ovenstones for a group of official visitors to their pilchard plant, Walvis Bay Canning Company, the aircraft had experienced a bumpy flight until it had reached the vast, arid Namib Desert.

Such a desert . . . eight hundred miles long and extending inland to a depth of from thirty to one hundred miles, it completely enveloped Walvis Bay! Northwards it stretched four hundred and fifty miles right up to the Kunene River which borders Angola and South West Africa and southwards its sandy wastes ran another grim two hundred and twenty-eight miles to Lüderitz. That was what the pilot had told them.

The pilot, Fritz, was a young German and he had demonstrated the newness of his appointment by relieving the usual tedium of the journey with periodic low flying over herds of game, to which he excitedly drew the attention of his passengers. Ostriches, kudu and smaller buck in great herds raced swiftly away.

The kudu, he had commented in an aside as he soared the aircraft back to its normal seven and a half thousand feet, were quite a menace to motorists travelling across the desert. Speeding along at thirty to forty miles per hour, kudu were attracted at night by car headlights and ran straight for them. As a fully-grown kudu weighed about five to six hundred pounds, considerable damage could result and in recent months several serious accidents had been reported.

The utter flatness of the Walvis Bay area, once the aircraft had passed over the high sand dunes on the outskirts of the town<sup>1</sup>, had evidenced itself as the plane approached the airport. Rather noticeable was the fact that many of the houses were on stilts. Walvis Bay is three feet below sea level but the houses, explained the pilot, were not built on their high foundations for this reason but because of the frequent flooding of the town from the neighbouring Khuseb River<sup>2</sup>. In recent years the river had been diverted and now represented

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<sup>1</sup> This was the original airport at the south side of town. Later the army camp was built there and the airport moved to Rooikop. A wooden church building stood in the north-western corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Road and 9<sup>th</sup> Street. South and east of this stretched the airfield, only some low white wooden pillars demarcating it.

<sup>2</sup> Every indication is that the town is now much higher above sea level. It has risen probably due to natural uplift of the land on the western side of Southern Africa. The river flood plain was diverted naturally due to shifting sand and habitation.

Walvis Bay's source of water supply.

"Ach, it is not so bad a place," said Fritz with a grin, as one of his passengers remarked that the streets though wide were untarred thoroughfares which, together with the long rows of single-storeyed, wooden buildings, gave the effect of a flashback to some Western town of the United States in the 'eighties.

"Many fishermen here," continued Fritz. "Everything is fish—the pilchard. They work hard here but also there is fun. There is a club, see? Also a cinema and two hotels<sup>3</sup>. One of the hotels has five bars. You will see—they are very habitable. The fishermen play there much dice. Poker dice I know, but the dice they play here I do not know. You should see they play with six dice. They have a game called 'ten thousands' and another game called 'barmbeck'. These games I do not understand—I do not gamble, see?—but with six dice they play, I remember. And always music. Jawohl, it is good this South West Africa with the music in the bars. But—," Fritz recalled suddenly, "—you must be careful of the white mouse."

"The white mouse?" somebody asked.

Just at this point the aircraft was touching down and the question had to remain unanswered, at least for the time being, as Fritz busied himself with the controls and taxied his machine carefully towards the car that awaited his passengers outside the tiny airport building.

A hundred and fifty years before Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape of Good Hope to take up his new office as its first governor, Walvis Bay already showed on the maps of the adventurous seafaring Portuguese. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the harbour was a safe refuge for traders, sealers, whalersmen—and pirates. The notorious Captain Kidd himself is known to have walked the sand dunes of Walvis Bay.

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Meanwhile at the Cape where van Riebeeck was cautiously feeling his way, undaunted by repeated reprimands from his pernickety superiors in the Dutch East India Company, the richness of the country north of the Orange River, which separated South West Africa from the old Cape Colony, steadily assumed in the roistering taverns the proportions of a legend. There were tales of enormous herds of cattle and of gold and copper. However, it was not until 1793 that the Dutch Government saw fit to take Walvis Bay under its wing by the simple expedient—popular then—of annexing it.

But the annexation was not officially recognised and two years later Walvis Bay was proclaimed British territory. A rich whaling and sealing industry thrived over the next three decades, the ships' crews developing a popular barter trade with the Topnaar Hottentots who dwelt in the surrounding country. In 1828 Captain B. Morrell of the American schooner, *Antarctic*, discovered the now famous guano deposit on neighbouring Ichabo Island and in 1836 Walvis Bay was introduced for the first time to modern land transport in the shape of a wagon. It was that of Sir. J. E. Alexander who was at the head of an expedition arranged under the aegis of the Royal Geographical Society. The trail duly laid, other wagons were quick to follow and the Native chief, Jonker Afrikander, embarked on the construction of a wagon road without the aid of tools to link Walvis Bay with Windhoek in the interior.

Nearly another hundred years were still to pass before Walvis Bay really began to get into its stride. In 1898, spurred into action by German expansion of the more northerly port of Swakopmund, the Cape Government decided to build a jetty at Walvis Bay and thereby set it on its career as one of the leading ports of the south west coast of Africa. Yet, at the turn of the century, Walvis Bay was still peopled by only a handful of inhabitants. Came the first World War and General Louis Botha, the Union of South Africa's first premier, influenced by political and military developments which lost South West Africa to Germany as a colony, built a rail link over the desert to Swakopmund which was later, in turn, connected up with the Union of South Africa's own railway system.

When Swakopmund was closed as a landing point after the 1914-18 war, Walvis Bay promptly assumed a new importance although the extent of her built-up area was limited to three wooden houses, an hotel and a shop, the latter including the port's first shipping business. This was purchased by J. C. ("Joe") Harries who thereafter became responsible for most of the town's development. Harries foresaw a big future for Walvis Bay, if only as a harbour, as apart from fish the area held a tremendous wealth of minerals. It was time something was really done to put Walvis Bay on the map, he felt, and this he did, nursing the little port

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<sup>3</sup> This most have been the *Railway Institute* and the *Atlantic Hotel*, both in 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Probably before the building of the *Flamingo Hotel*. Please see the notes at the end of this chapter for more information.

through its growing pains as a village management board until it became a municipality of which, until only a few years ago, he was mayor from the outset<sup>4</sup>.

Harries has completed over half a century in South West Africa, fourteen years of which he has spent in Lüderitz and thirty-seven years at Walvis Bay.

"We started with no light, no sanitary service and no money," Harries will tell you. To-day Walvis Bay has a total population of nine thousand persons, an income of £200,000 per annum and £300,000 on property account. It was to the go-ahead Harries that Andrew and Russell Ovenstone were later to turn for advice and information about fishing at Walvis Bay. When the Ovenstones founded the Walvis Bay Canning Company, Harries was entrusted with the company's clearing, shipping, forwarding and landing business and he has been associated with the Ovenstones in this capacity ever since.

In 1922 Walvis Bay was equipped with another jetty and within five years the trade of the territory had increased so rapidly that half a million pounds were spent by the Union Government on a large quay officially opened in 1927 by the Earl of Athlone, then the Union's Governor-General.

In spite of the modernisation of her facilities for handling the territory's growing import and export trade, Walvis Bay remained essentially a fishing village until the outbreak of World War II, which brought in its train a world demand for foodstuffs. Her fishing industry suddenly became of vital national importance and Walvis Bay, almost overnight, was set on a new course of considerable economic significance from which she has never looked back. An initial sum of £1,000,000 is currently being spent by the Union Government to improve the port, through which pour vital exports of karakul pelts, strategic minerals and ores. Every month Walvis Bay is now shipping thirty thousand tons of lead and zinc, one thousand tons of manganese and between five and six thousand tons of other ores in the widest variety.

Whilst the territory's enormous mineral wealth was directly responsible for the port's development, what really clinched the future of Walvis Bay was a very small fish, not more than about eight inches or so in length, greedy by habit, quick in action, available in astronomical quantities along the coast—and deliciously appetising in the can which man has decreed should be his final destiny.

The name of this abundant little fish is *Sardinops ocellata*, also known as the common pilchard, and the huge industry at Walvis Bay to which he has given birth is little more than ten years old and provides another story of the sea about the family who established it - Ovenstones.

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Right forward in the bows of the *Privateer*, his large, powerfully-built frame only faintly discernible in the darkness, Richard Kieser, owner of the trim, fifty-six-ton vessel and a highly successful skipper in the Ovenstone pilchard fleet operating from Walvis Bay, managed with the assurance born of long experience to keep his balance as the mounting seas lashed savagely about the small craft.

It was a filthy night, he thought to himself grimly, and they might have several throws to make yet before they reached quota, as up to now the fishing had been poor. They had slipped their moorings at half past four that afternoon and an hour from port he had been the first to throw out his net, the other boats in the fleet hovering in the vicinity, ready to cast their own nets the instant they saw he had run into a shoal.

The result? A couple of kingklip. It seemed hardly possible that the huge net could avoid missing the shoals which Kieser knew were there, for they had shown clearly on the echo sounder back in his cabin, leading off the wheelhouse. The echo sounder, which was based on the asdic principle<sup>5</sup>, had charted a dense formation of pilchards right below the *Privateer* and he could only conclude that the fish had been swimming away from the net when they had begun to run it out. It was unfortunate that although the echo sounder revealed the presence of fish and where the shoals were, it could not tell you in which direction they were heading.

Well, that had been a wasted half hour and he had come in for some good-natured chaffing later over the boat's radio from his fellow skippers who were not equipped with echo sounders. These remarkable instruments had only recently been adopted by the pilchard fishery on the west coast and as yet not all boats in the Ovenstone fleet possessed them. His own echo sounder had cost him £650—a hefty sum, but well worth it considering that it made it possible for the *Privateer* to catch fish during the moon period, in other words,

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<sup>4</sup> The JC Harries Park in the town center bears his name too.

<sup>5</sup> A British code name during the WW1 for their sonar research into underwater detection and ranging using piezoelectric material.

when the moon was full. Then the fish jumped in the water and it was impossible to see them because, of course, the phosphorescence did not show up in the moonlight. The alternative was to hear the fish and that was exactly where the echo sounder paid off. It listened for you down to as deep as five hundred and sixty fathoms<sup>6</sup>, its illuminated panel showing dark patches where the fish were swimming.

The only problem with the echo sounder, reflected Skipper Kieser, was that it made work. Fishing was all hard work, anyway, but whereas without this scientific instrument a skipper relied on his personal experience and observation before sending his nets out, when the echo sounder showed fish, it was more than human nature could resist not to give them a go, often in circumstances where the skipper's own instinct would have caused him to ignore the invitation and press on to a new fishing field. The result of his first throw early that afternoon bore witness to this unforeseen handicap of an investment which he had found otherwise to more than justify itself from the moment the season had begun.

The *Privateer* was one of eleven boats in the Ovenstone pilchard fleet at Walvis Bay which were owned by the skippers who operated them. Four further boats were owned by the company itself, and in this respect the set-up in Walvis Bay differed entirely from that at Port Nolloth, where all the boats in the Ovenstone fleet were owned by the company. The reason for this was a simple, economic one for, although the rock lobster industry is an all-year-round proposition, there are only one hundred and twenty fishing days in the year for the Port Nolloth rock lobster boats and, accordingly, it did not pay the skippers there to own their own boats. Walvis Bay, on the other hand, had a definite season for the pilchard fishery between March and November and there was plenty of fish for the taking if the skipper knew his business.

There could be a lot of cash in that business, too, thought Richard Kieser as he peered across the bows and flashed a signal with his torch to the man at the wheel aft....

Take Johnny Eigelaar, for instance, of the *Langeveld*, or Pieter Spamer<sup>7</sup>, of the *Danie Theron*, the two top skippers in the Ovenstone Walvis Bay fleet. Sound men both, who never failed to catch fish, whatever the weather. Not long ago, in July, 1956, Kieser recalled, Johnny had broken all records with a haul of one and a half thousand tons of fish over the month. During six weeks around that period his boat had earned more than £8,000!

On the other hand, of course, a skipper had to look after his own vessel. He knew the price he would be paid per ton and he paid a fixed price per ton to his crew accordingly, wages representing approximately sixty per cent. of his total boat income.

Then there was the capital cost of the boat itself, not to mention the equipment. Skipper Kieser, for example, had paid £12,000 for the boat hull of the *Privateer*. Its hundred and forty-three horsepower engine had cost a further £5,000. Add the echo sounder at £650, plus the radio transmitter and receiver at £320 and you could kiss your hand to £18,000. The net? If you wanted to economise unwisely, you bought a cotton net for about £1,100. It lasted one season only and its maintenance was high. A marlon net<sup>8</sup>, on the other hand, made of a synthetic fibre, lasted three seasons though, like Kieser's own net, it cost around £2,200. Still, in addition to its longer life, his marlon net was also lighter, easier to handle—hence, more fish, as more throws could be made more quickly.

All other ropes, leads and corks on the boat cost around another £500 and their life was far from being unlimited. A one hundred and eighty foot, three-inch nylon rope with a fourteen ton breaking strain he had just bought, had set him back £75—and this was merely for emergencies! The propellers were about £150 and had a life of only around eight months.

But that was just how it was and there was nothing anybody could do about it, Skipper Kieser knew. Life, for all its problems, was better at sea!

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Silhouetted in the shadows for'ard, Skipper Kieser's figure swayed momentarily as he flashed another signal to the helmsman with his torch. Whilst his subconscious mind had been busily turning over his thoughts, his

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6 About 1.84 meter. A *faam* in Afrikaans.

7 Pieter J C Spamer but beter known by the nickname Petro Spamer.

8 A marlon net normally referred to fishing net made of Marlon yarn spun from mixed polyamide synthetic fibers. It became in big demand in the late 50's because of much beter durability and tensile strength. It was fast replacing the cotton nets that were in common use.

eyes had been scanning the heaving seas closely. He could see fish with the naked eye seven to eight feet below water in the light of his torch, which he flashed hither and thither looking for the phosphorescent glow caused by fish movement. The helmsman in the wheelhouse followed his signals closely. All lights were out and the rest of the crew of ten, on a night as rough, cold and generally uninviting as this, were below decks smoking, sleeping or just sitting until the bell rang that would immediately galvanise them into action.

The bell rang. A flash of his torch and a yell from Skipper Kieser, which was taken up by the helmsman as he swung the boat to starboard in a wide circle, and seven men were running out the huge net to an eighth member of the crew perched precariously in a dinghy which carried one end of the net. The dinghy man. His job was undoubtedly the worst job of all, especially in such a rough sea. He was responsible for keeping up the net, which he achieved with the aid of two large oil drums and by tying up his dinghy to the floating corks. His job increased in importance as the haul was drawn closer to the vessel, as the weight of the fish, if he happened to be too slow in his duties, could have quite easily carried the whole net away—and the net alone, when wet, weighed just on two tons.

As the boat completed its circle the engines were allowed to tick over and she was hove to. It was all hands to the net, including skipper and helmsman. There now began, in dead silence, the remarkable co-ordinated activity of nine men hauling as one, yard upon yard of net which might contain twenty or thirty tons of fish, the actual weight being determined with uncanny accuracy by the experienced hands amongst the crew long before the haul was secured to the side of the vessel.

This stage was reached within about twenty minutes and at last the bag, or the pocket at the centre of the net which contained the actual fish, was tied to the starboard side. The dinghy man steadied himself on the outward edge of the bag to which his little craft was now fastened, and derrick, winch and brailer—or scoop—came into play as the heaving, seething mass of silvery little pilchards was ladled into the hold, piling up high on the decks when the scoop overflowed. The entire operation was observed closely by two inquisitive seals, the whites of their eyes winking in the darkness as they snorted playfully near the dinghy man, who ignored them with studied unconcern.

It was a good haul, decided Skipper Kieser. He stood in the wheelhouse, a steaming mug of tea in his hand, looking down on the rapidly-filling hold. And about time, too. One of the snags in this business was not so much in making the quota, as the fish off this coast were plentiful, but in keeping to it. The "A" section of the Ovenstone fleet had gone out that night—it would be "B" section's turn tomorrow—and the *Privateer's* pre-arranged quota had been forty tons. As her capacity load was a hundred and thirty tons, Kieser, like other skippers, accepted the quota with resignation, as did the company itself. All knew that the system was only wise and fair if the South West African pilchard fishery were to be conserved. There was a credit turn and a debit turn against any skipper who kept to quota or exceeded it. When a skipper received a debit turn, he had to lie-in the next night his section of the fleet went on shift; when he received a credit turn, this meant an extra night's fishing.

The object of this was not merely because the company had to keep to its own general quota, but in order to be fair to the smaller boats in the fleet. Sometimes, however, a larger boat would overstep the mark quite inadvertently when the hauls were erratic. You might, for example, reach thirty out of your quota of, say, forty tons for the night. Another haul would bring in a mere couple of tons and a further haul might yield fifteen, twenty tons or more. Then it all depended on whether the total quota for the fleet that night had been reached, that you were penalised or not.

To-night, the *Privateer* was almost exactly dead on quota and as the net was neatly stowed in position on deck, the bosun leading the movements of the deckhands with his strange but traditional falsetto refrain, "Ek het, hy loop" —"Here it comes, let her go" (or, more literally, "I have, he walks")—Skipper Kieser sighed thankfully at the prospect of the comfortable bed ashore he should reach about three o'clock that morning. He summoned the helmsman to take the wheel and turned into his cabin to radio the factory the size of his catch and the expected time of his arrival.

A final call to Johnny Eigelaar and Pieter Spamer, just to check whether there was a remote possibility of their having fallen short of their usual high returns, and another night's fishing with the Ovenstone fleet was at an end.

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At Walvis Bay, as at Port Nolloth, the Ovenstones began their pioneering pilchard fishing virtually from

scratch. The factory they bought, which was soon to become the largest canning unit on the coast handling, within the short space of a decade, one of the world's richest pilchard-fishing grounds, was derelict.

The premises had been erected in 1925 as a fish-freezing, fishmeal and fish oil factory. The plant proved inadequate and, except in the experimental stage, was never used until the project was finally abandoned altogether. Several unsuccessful attempts were made to restart operations. Then Russell Ovenstone negotiated with the owners and in 1943 Ovenstones founded the Walvis Bay Canning Company for the purpose of salting and canning snoek. This continued until in 1948 the Ovenstones laid the foundations of a new pilchard industry.

After a difficult start with two boilers salvaged from a wrecked ship, the *S.S. Outeniqua*, at a time when the proper new equipment was difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, Ovenstones quickly developed a very large market.

The catches proved enormous and the initially limited facilities of the plant were totally unable to cope with production. Within two years it was completely modernised and reconstructed to cover an area of four acres. The jetty was enlarged and the latest machinery, boilers and other equipment were installed. A fleet of six to eight boats rapidly built up to twenty-four, by which time five other factories had entered the field. Later a Government quota was introduced which reduced all fleets to a maximum of twenty for any one company and at the same time established a ceiling of a quarter million tons per annum, of which the Walvis Bay Canning Company were given three-sixteenths or forty-six thousand eight hundred and seventy-five tons.

Thus, at the outset, a number of interesting economic factors emerge in any consideration of the South West African pilchard fishery. For, in the same way as the crews and skippers are restricted as to the quantities of fish they may catch, which might be only a third of their actual capacity yet which must be endured despite the fact that their overheads are not reduced in proportion, the companies likewise have to tow the line. Quite apart from the limits set on their total catch, and on the number of boats they engage or employ, the operation of their plant is on average restricted to about fifty per cent of potential output. Amongst other companies the Ovenstones have thousands of pounds' worth of valuable machinery standing idle in their fishmeal plant until

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There are other economic problems. Every ton of fish landed consists of approximately seventy per cent. water. Then again, of the Ovenstones' annual quota of forty-six thousand eight hundred and seventy-five tons, only about fourteen thousand tons will actually go into a can. Every fish that comes in is cut, head and tail, to the extent of eleven-twentieths, which means, in effect, that about thirty thousand tons of fish are needed to make fourteen thousand tons net of the canned product. The reason for the discrepancy between this thirty thousand tons and the total quota is that some of the fish are unsatisfactory, some get spoiled at the bottom of the boat and, when there is an excessive load, some must go to the fishmeal plant as the cannery is unable to cope.

The pilchard itself must not be too small, yet sometimes fifty per cent. of the intake is too small for canning purposes. They must also be of uniform condition, not cut about or damaged in any other way. Yet again, the operation of the cannery demands considerable quantities of coal —and railage is heavy. Consumption of water by the canneries runs into millions of gallons monthly. The transport charges for empty cartons and cans railed from Cape Town add twenty per cent. to their actual cost at that centre<sup>9</sup>.

Despite all these and other problems the South West African pilchard fishery remains thriving and vigorous and is of immense and increasing importance to-day to the economies of both the territory and the Union of South Africa, from the viewpoints alike of employment and the receipt of valuable exchange through its exports to countries all over the world.

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When the *Privateer* nosed its way up to the Ovenstone jetty, two boats of the fleet were already tied up and Richard Kieser edged his vessel into the remaining berth and thankfully went home to bed. The factory end of the Ovenstone pilchard fishery now took over.

The three boats at the jetty were discharged, in the usual manner, according to order of arrival. Later boats

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<sup>9</sup> It was before tins were made locally at The Metal Box Company factory.

would have to stand off until a berth became available. The discharging process takes about one and a half to two hours for a full boat and is carried out by suction pump. The discharged fish are flumed or washed away along water channels to an elevator, which takes them up to a weighing bucket with a capacity of two thousand pounds at a time.

The fish are then flumed to the descalers, slow, revolving drums which remove the strange, transparent armour with which most ocean fish are endowed. From these drums the fish are conveyed to the cannery direct, but in the event of the catch being poor, at a certain point after reaching the top of the elevator it is diverted to the fishmeal plant, which takes anything and everything it can absorb. Once in the cannery the pilchards are fed into ten-ton capacity tanks which are drawn on as required by the first department in the factory proper—the degutters.

In the degutting department the fish move along a belt into a number of machines, one alongside the other and each manned by ten operatives who place the fish individually by hand into pockets, or slots, running along either side of the belt. The fish are selected to a more or less uniform size and the head and tail stick out at either end. The heads and tails are sliced off when they reach the cutting knife at the end of the machine and, together with the smaller-sized, rejected fish, are diverted by moving belt to the fishmeal plant, together with the guts which are simultaneously sucked out by a vacuum from a perforated disc as each fish comes past.

The pilchards that have made the grade are conveyed in their beheaded and detailed condition to either storage tanks or packing tables, their immediate destination being dependent upon the flow of production or the size of can, respectively. The method of conveyance is still "fluming", that is, they continue to be carried along in a flow of water. Output is thus carefully and selectively controlled to the packing tables, above which an elevator carries empty cans, the fish being flumed below. Each operative at the packing tables loads his tray with twelve or more cans at a time and, depending upon the size of the particular can scheduled for filling, he quickly inserts the necessary seven, five or three fish. A fifteen ounce A1 tall can, for instance, takes seven fish, four of which he places head up and three tail up. It takes him about a minute to fill four cans in this manner.

Pinned to the operative's sleeve is a card containing fifty clips, each representing so many cans. His filled cans are examined by a tally boy who checks them and then clips his card. Each operative packs for himself and receives a production bonus. He will probably put in four or five cards per day and is supervised by a boy wearing a blue tab, who is the boss boy for his particular table and who is, in turn, responsible to the No. 1 boy of the department who wears a red tab and a plate on his arm which reads "W.B.C.C. No. 1"<sup>10</sup>.

After examination, the filled cans are placed on a moving belt which carries them into an exhaust box. Here they remain for approximately thirty-two minutes and after they come out they are drained. The temperature of the exhaust box is highly important so that the fish are kept in a moist condition. The can is then seamed or, in other words, the lid is sealed on and, here again, a most vital operation is to ensure that no "spurs", or fish bones, are left sticking out under the edge of the sealed lid.

This operation completed, the cans are thoroughly washed and placed in metal baskets which are, in turn, fed into retorts or cookers. A trolley holds about seven hundred and fifty cans and a retort holds eight trolleys. When full, and it takes twenty minutes to fill one of them, the nine retorts in the Ovenstone factory can therefore hold fifty-four thousand cans at a time which are cooked for seventy-five minutes, after which the trolleys are wheeled to a pick-up room where they cool off overnight.

The cans are finally packed in cartons, stored and brought out and labelled as required, some of them under the various Ovenstone brands such as "W.B.", or "John Quality", but countless thousands of the forty million cans that are packed by the Ovenstones in an average season bear the brands of buyers at points as remotely separated as California and Hong Kong, London and Peru, Sydney and Manila. A vast quantity are labelled under such famous brand names as "*Del Monte*" of California Packing Corporation, "*Eatwell*" of Star-Kist Foods Incorporated, also of California, "*Ayam*" of A. Clouet and Company (Malaya) Limited, Singapore, and "*Armour Star*" of Armour and Company Limited, London.

Of the Ovenstone output a select quantity of pilchards goes into the fifteen ounce oval tin which is the top

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<sup>10</sup> The word *boy* was the term of the day for a person of colour. At the Walvis Bay factories they normally were migrant contract workers from Ovamboland who were dependable workers and highly skilled at their job. When their term was up, they would go back home for a few months and then usually returned for a new period. The hierarchy portrayed is common in labour-intensive operations irrespective of the origin of the worker.

line and which always carries tomato sauce. No less than eight hundred tons of tomato sauce are used by the Ovenstones in their oval and other cans annually at a cost of over E100,000. The saucing process takes place just before the lid is sealed. The tomato puree, which contains garlic powder, measured salt and condiment oil is cooked in steel, steam-heated cookers. It is then fed to a homogeniser where the mixture is thickened and the molecules are broken up evenly. From the homogeniser the puree is then piped down and squirted into each can. The other, non-puree lines receive a squirt of brine water<sup>11</sup>.

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At all stages of the entire production sequence there is the strictest form of control, which starts from the boats at the jetty and ends with the cartoned product.

The Walvis Bay Canning Company, like any other Union or South West African pilchard canning company, makes constant use of the Fishing Industry Research Institute laboratory for testing its products before shipment and is subjected to continuous inspection by the South African Bureau of Standards. But the factory also has its own fully-equipped laboratory, staffed by trained chemists, and the Ovenstones already had their control system long before any compulsory regulations were laid down. The functions of the laboratory at the Walvis Bay Canning Company are to maintain constant analysis of the company's products, check the tomato puree mixture, inspect daily the moisture content of the fishmeal, keeping a vigilant eye, also, on the cooking of the meal, and to keep the widest possible statistical records.

As already mentioned, in a typical season output will total some forty million cans of pilchards, mostly exported; it will also yield about eight thousand tons of fishmeal, packed in hundred pound bags, a proportion of which must be sold on the local market, and some four hundred and eighty thousand gallons of fish oil. Ovenstone laboratory statistics further reveal that four and a quarter tons of fish are required to make one ton of fishmeal and one ton of fish to make an average of twelve gallons of oil.

This fishmeal and fish oil output of the Ovenstones' Walvis Bay factory is derived, as indicated earlier, from the heads and tails of its pilchards and from all other waste, including poor quality or undersized fish. Full intake is thirty tons of raw fish per hour and the fishmeal plant's special economic value is that not only is it unaffected when the fishing is poor—it will take anything that is available—but that if the cannery is overloaded with the supply of the best firm, correctly-sized fish, diversion can always be made to the fishmeal plant at any time.

The oil and meal plant at the Walvis Bay factory is more or less identical to that at the Columbine factory in St. Helena Bay, and as both fish oil and fishmeal are the leading features of that plant's activities, we therefore leave this further story of the Ovenstones to a following chapter.

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A three-passenger Ryan-Navion circled over Walvis Bay, principal port of South West Africa, and touched down smoothly and without fuss on the sandy runway at the edge of the town. Chartered from Windhoek by the Ovenstones for a group of official visitors at their pilchard plant, Walvis Bay Canning Company, the aircraft had experienced a bumpy flight until it had reached the vast, and Namib Desert.

Such a desert....

The visitors clambered aboard the aircraft. Fritz, the pilot, started her up. A final wave and they were off on their return journey to Windhoek, thence by South African Airways Sky-master to Johannesburg.

"About that white mouse?" ventured one of Fritz's passengers as the plane became under way. He grinned. "I will tell you."

Almost every ship calling at Walvis Bay these brings young Germans, seeking pastures new in a territory which was once an appendage of the fatherland and which is still very German in many respects. Fritz had arrived in a fresh contingent of his fellow countrymen some months previously and had stayed two or three days at Walvis Bay before taking the train to Windhoek.

Early of an evening he had entered the private bar of the elder of the two hotels, a wooden structure strangely reminiscent of a tavern in a Wild West novelette. Comfortable, red leather seats ran along walls adorned with fishing nets. Ship lanterns hung from the ceiling and the pièce-de-résistance was a half-opened

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<sup>11</sup> Later a spicy chilly source was added to the some of the smaller jitney cans for those who enjoy hot food. The demand kept rising.

sea chest, cleverly floodlit and overflowing with necklaces, jewels and doubloons which, had they been genuine, would have inspired the most moronic customer to potential piracy.

Enchanted by this nautical atmosphere and warmed by a nostalgic number of Steinhagers chased down with small glasses of draught German beer<sup>12</sup>, it appeared that friend Fritz had suddenly observed strange signs of movement amongst the bottles on the shelves behind the bar counter which interested him greatly but which left him with a peculiar feeling of unease. Concentrating with care, his eyes at last became focused upon a small, white mouse. He blinked his eyes hard, looked again.

No small, white mouse.

Glancing round rather furtively, Fritz realised that nobody else in the now-crowded bar seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. All were either conversing animatedly or were busy with the contents of their glasses.

Somewhat reassured he ordered another Steinhager and, just as he was about to down the fiery fluid in the customary swift gulp, he saw it again. A small, white mouse scampering with utter abandon in and out amongst the bottles on the shelves.

Fritz followed these mouse movements with growing concern for perhaps some ten minutes until, overcome by the strain, he beckoned as unobtrusively as he could to the barman and, with a quick glance to right and left, enquired in an undertone:

"Excuse me, but—have you a small, white mouse?"

"Yes, indeed," smiled the barman, "we do have a small, white mouse."

Fritz swallowed hard and murmured something to the effect that the circumstance was most interesting.

"How right you are," replied the barman. "It is not every bar that has a small, white mouse. Also this mouse is quite different from other mice."

"So?" Fritz beamed. "How is this white mouse different?"

The barman leaned forward confidentially. "He happens to be very particular indeed about his diet," he said.

"His diet? Please—I do not understand."

"Oh, well, you see, he is rather fussy—only drinks 'imported'."

Fritz placed his still unfinished Steinhager carefully on the bar, paid his bill and, without a further word, hurried out.

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He turned to his passengers in the aircraft. "Ach, ja, Walvis Bay—it is not so bad a place," said Fritz with a grin. "And you know—there really is a white mouse!"

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A chapter of the book *Ovenstones – A Story of the Sea*, narrated and produced by Fraser Gill, Public Relations Consultant, Cape Town, drawings by Roman Waher and printed by Hortors Ltd, Observatory, Cape Town, 1958

Prepared for the internet with some comments by Servaas de Kock, 2011.

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<sup>12</sup> This drink was called a *kleine-kleine* by the locals

Notes:

The two hotels referred to could also have been the *Atlantic Hotel* in 7<sup>th</sup> Street and the *Mermaid Hotel* in 6<sup>th</sup> Street. The *Railway Institute* in 7<sup>th</sup> Street also had a bar where the thirst of “members” could be quenched at the Railway Institute. Officially it was known as the *Namib Park Club* but we called it *The Institute* or *The Club*. It had a general purpose hall used on weekends for cinema. Here the youth saw their first comics and serials. *Hopalong Cassidy* with his white horse Topper and big favorites *The Lone Ranger*, Tonto and Silver the horse were in great demand. Saturday’s matinee was the place to be in the front rows with its wooden fold up chairs. The hall had a wooden floor and the start of comics and serials was welcomed loudly by the raucous stamping of feet. If you were older and wiser, you sat in the back rows on soft, green chairs holding hands etc of the opposite sex.

*The Institute* also included a bar, lounge, snooker room and library. The complex at the western side of 7<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Road also had fields for bowls, tennis and netball, and later volleyball courts were added. The Walvis Bay Rugby and Fishing clubs were affiliated to the *Railway Institute* and the Photographic and other societies held their meetings there. Somewhere between 1959 and 1960 the *Flaming Hotel* was built on the opposite corner and became an immediate landmark with its purpose built cinema hall. This area, that included the Waldorf Cafe, was the place to be on Saturdays. Several fights were settled “round the corner”, while lovers met in the shadows and smokers took a few secret puffs.

The Club was dissolved about 20-25 years ago and in its place a modern shopping mall arose with space for Shoprite, OK, Mr. Price and several restaurants. The *Flaming* has since changed name to Protea Hotel Walvis Bay after intensive renovations. Today there is no movie house, two more hotels were added and 7<sup>th</sup> Street is named Sam Nujoma Ave.

(Thanks go to Neville Terblanche who provided important information for this reconstruction. He has lived in Walvis Bay since 1961 and today is the owner of Mega Stationers in Sam Nujoma Avenue)

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