

BOEKBESPREKINGS BOOK REVIEWS

N. HELME. *Irene*. With line drawings by Carola Brotherton and Julia van der Byl. Irene, 1976. R9,00.

Local history constitutes a colourful mosaic of the life and ambition of people in a particular area, of their dreams, successes and failures, and is to a large degree the foundation of national history. As such, the story of Irene may be regarded as an interesting and vital link in South African history in general.

The names of pioneers such as the Voortrekker Daniel Elardus Erasmus, Alois Hugo Nellmapius, influential Transvaal personality and confidant of Pres. Kruger, Johannes Albertus van der Byl, descendant of one of the first Cape Free burghers, and Gen. J.C. Smuts, the well-known militarist and politician, are closely interwoven in the early history of this picturesque Transvaal town.

The first chapter, "The beginnings", gives a description of the position of Irene as well as a review of the settlement of the first White inhabitants in this area. Towards the middle of the previous century the Erasmus family established themselves on the farm Doornkloof in the central part of the Southern Transvaal. Two-thirds (approximately 1 125 ha) of the farm was bought by Nellmapius in 1889 and renamed Irene Estates — in honour of his two-year-old daughter.

During "The middle years" (Chapter 2), the untiring zeal of J.A. van der Byl, the new owner of Irene Estates, led to the establishment of the town Irene in 1902. Six years later Gen. Smuts came into possession of the remaining one-third of the original farm Doornkloof, and until his death in 1950 most of his time was spent there. The rural atmosphere and peaceful way of life of the town were cruelly disturbed during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899—1902): Irene and her people could not escape the consequences of this armed struggle and two concentration camps for Boer women and children were erected within the town boundaries in 1900.

After the war there was a revival of socio-economic development in the town and numerous commercial enterprises, religious denominations, sports clubs and other institutions such as the Animal Husbandry and Dairy Research Institute and Irene Film Laboratories expanded or were established. In addition to this, Chapter Three ("Modern times") also sketches the cultural life of the community and throws light on the rôle which well-known personalities such as Sir Arnold Theiler, the founder of Onderstepoort, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, author of 'Jock of the Bushveld' and Stuart Cloete played in the history of Irene.

This publication is an example of excellent workmanship and is copiously illustrated with photographs and sketches of Irene in older days as well as in modern times. It also contains a number of interesting appendices (e.g. on local management and the origin of street names) and an index which includes references to the illustrations. As the author says, he has tried to create a realistic image of the "vibrant inner core" of Irene, "where the physical and the spiritual combine to create an almost overwhelming impression of colour and shade, sparkle and maturity, and remind us of our increasing need for the enduring values of truth and tranquillity, beauty and humility in a rapidly-changing world" (p.119). Helme has unquestionably succeeded in this aim.

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