# Memories of Dryfe House

## on the 60th Anniversary of its closure as a SACS Hostel

by

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**A Little History**

The year 2019 has slipped by us, and for various reasons, I was unable to complete this closer to the actual anniversary as I would have liked, but here it is. I thought we might pause to remember that it was 60 years ago in March, 1959 that Dryfe House finally ceased to be a SACS hostel. This colonial style residence which prominently stood in Orange Street, Cape Town, once served as home to generations of SACS boarders from 1912. It was originally the home of the Jardine family from 1852 and then became a SACS High School hostel in 1912. It was requested by the Government during World War II as a military facility and ultimately in 1946, was passed down to SACS Junior School as a hostel remaining as such, until its closure.

**Vredehoek**

In 1919, the Junior School boarders were housed in another homestead, Vredehoek. Mr. Kipps, the Junior School Headmaster (since 1903), was also the superintendent of Vredehoek, which stood on the location of what our generation would have known as the Vredehoek Sports Club. Vredehoek, which originally belonged to the Mellish family (“Farmer Mellish”), was closed in 1939 due to its derelict condition. Mr. Kipps and his family had moved out in 1936 upon his retirement, and Mr. Westall took over as acting superintendent until the arrival of Bill Von Holdt. The other housemaster at Vredehoek was George van Zyl (Wurmpie). After Bill Von Holdt enlisted in the Forces in 1939, Mr. EG Veater (a well - known High School Master) took over the running of Vredehoek until its final closure. The buildings were demolished in 1941. There are some photographs of Vredehoek, one of which appeared in the Veitch book of the history of SACS. Also, on the back cover of the SACS Junior magazine during at least the 1950’s and 1960’s, there used to appear a black and white etching of what I believe was the Vredehoek homestead.

After the closure of Vredehoek, the boarders were housed in various residences in Wandel Street, adjacent to the Junior School, until Dryfe House became available after the War.

In about 1969, I was able to procure for the Junior School the old plaque that once adorned the front gate of Vredehoek with its name emblazoned in copper, from a neighbor who had saved it from the demolition. In subsequent discussion with Mr. Westall who had also been a housemaster at Vredehoek, I learned some interesting facts. The plaque was made by the boys at school in their metal work class under the supervision of Mr. Burrill, the metalwork master. Vredehoek was only a sleeping facility and provided no catering services. The boys were served their meals down at the school in Wandel Street.

In the mornings they would be marched down to school where they had breakfast and spent the whole day. In the evening after dinner and prep, they would commence the long uphill walk to Vredehoek. During my adult life I did come across a few people who had lived at Vredehoek, but there cannot be many SACS Old Boys still with us who had once lived there. These former residents included Harold Gelb, who came from Namaqualand. I think Arnold Galombik, another Namaqualander, was also there, but cannot be sure.

**Dryfe House**

Please join me on a guided tour of Dryfe House as I remember it. The house was located in Orange Street, Cape Town and to its left were the grounds of the Mount Nelson Hotel. The old Deanery was on the right side. Next to the Deanery was the Labia Theatre which I think still exists, and across the street was the Hiddingh Hall complex which housed the City campus of the University of Cape Town. Adjoining these buildings was the SACS High School. So, this neighborhood was very much SACS terrain. The far end (south) of the Dryfe House property bordered on Wilkinson Street (more about that later).

A pair of spiked cannons rested between the pillars on either side of the front entrance. How these cannons came to be there, I do not know. They might have been a remnant of the occupation by the military during World War II, or they could have dated from an earlier time. Anyhow, the cannons accompanied us to JE De Villiers House in Newlands, where they rested approximately in their former positions.

When you first entered Dryfe House, you were confronted with a long passage which took up the entire length of the house. The first room to the left was the junior dormitory. You slept on iron cots but brought your own bedding. Each boy was provided with a wooden locker which was in essence a free -standing set of drawers where you kept your belongings. No chairs or nightstands that I can recall. These furnishings were old and some of them may well have been used at Vredehoek. This room was occupied by the youngest boarders. I entered Dryfe House in 1957 and my fellow occupants of that room were Sean Day, Sydney Slome, Anthony Watermeyer and Neville Wolfaardt. Later that year we were joined by Peter Dembitzer and Richard Bam. By the time we matriculated in 1966, only Sean and myself of that original group were still boarders, which meant that we had both spent 10 years in the SACS hostel system. The other boys had either become day boys or changed schools.

The junior dormitory had a larger adjoining room occupied by slightly older boys which included a single toilet facility for both rooms. Returning to the passage, the next room up was Mr. Hunter’s study, aka the Parents’ Sitting Room. This was where you were officially welcomed and checked in by Mr. Hunter upon first arrival and subsequently on your return from school holidays. It was also used for occasional canings. Mr. Hunter could also be seen sitting in there early every morning reading his newspaper.

Then came the dispensary which was a large room presided over by Mrs. Hunter and her lieutenant, Mrs. Hettie, who also supervised the boys in the junior dorm. This was where you had your cuts and bruises attended to, and where you took your medications. I can remember certain boys taking cod liver oil because they needed fattening up, so they were told. Then came the laundry room where you collected your clean laundry. You originally placed your dirty laundry in a linen bag with your name tag which was collected from your space.

The right side of the passage consisted of the private living quarters of the Hunter family. The first door to the right was a dining room which led into an adjoining living room. The next room up was the Hunters’ bedroom, which led out to an enclosed porch overlooking a small yard. The next two rooms were occupied by Kathleen and Stephanie Hunter.

The house had separate wings on either side which were physically detached from the main building. The right wing as you faced the house contained four interleading dormitories, with the fourth dorm right up against the sidewalk of Orange Street. If you ended up in the Fourth Wing as the remotest part of the house was known, you had a grandstand view of what went on in Orange Street at night, such as watching theatre goers walking to the Labia and elsewhere. The Wing Dorm as it was known, was occupied by Std. 3 boys. The other wing on the left side of the building of similar structure, was occupied by domestic staff.

When you exited the main part of the house from the passage, you came to a stoop which ran the entire breadth of the house. To the right of the stoop was a small hutment which was occupied by Mrs. Hettie and Cookie, our chef. I also remember Shorty, who was a handyman. I seem to recall that Shorty and Mrs. Hettie were the only domestic staff who moved with us to JE De Villiers House in Newlands in 1959.

To the extreme left of the stoop was the dining room and kitchen. Meals were served on light blue colored plastic plates which were set upon marble style grey rubber place mats. No table cloths, but we had to provide our own table napkins which were kept in small cubby holes which bore our names. This was also where your incoming mail was deposited. Most of the time we had breakfast and supper there. Before entering the dining room for supper, our fingernails and hair were inspected by the house master on duty that day. Sandwiches were sent to school in one of those big Duens metal containers for our lunch, as most of the Junior School had already relocated to Newlands in 1956, with the remaining classes moving at beginning of 1957.

We travelled by charter bus to and from school. The initial bus route was along Sir Lowry Road which eventually became the Main Road to the southern suburbs through which we passed until we arrived in Newlands, about a seven mile journey. They eventually changed bus routes so we then had the pleasure of travelling along scenic De Waal Drive which avoided much traffic.

These were some of the meals we were served at Dryfe House that I can recall. For breakfasts they alternated between Jungle Oats and Mealie Meal porridge and on Saturdays they served Maltabella, a brown substance, which I don’t believe I ever again encountered since completing my junior school days. Sundays was Post Toasties. The various breakfast courses also consisted of half a canned pilchard on toast, toasted cheese sandwich, a slice of French polony on toast, and scrambled eggs which we suspected were powdered eggs, French toast, and on Sundays, hard - boiled egg. They also provided a slice of brown bread with butter and a glass of milk which we all suspected contained more than its natural water content. The suppers consisted of Irish stew, meatloaf, fried fish, meat balls, macaroni cheese. The only deserts I remember were tapioca pudding and rhubarb but there must have been more variety.

So much for the food. Now let’s get back to the house. The stoop led to a narrow - terraced quadrangle and was approached by a small flight of concrete steps which was landscaped on either side. This led to a higher stoop at the extreme left and right of which were institutional type bathrooms. The juniors used bath tubs, two to a tub, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Hettie and the older boys showered. I have never forgotten the perpetual smell of that Lifebuoy soap. We took our baths in the evenings before supper upon returning from school. The next room over to the right was occupied by the housekeeper, a charming lady by the name of Mrs. Dalton. Then came the housemasters’ rooms. When Sean and I arrived in 1957 the housemasters were Messrs. Davies, Esterhuizen and Ross. Later that year, Ross departed and Lex Basson arrived for the last two school terms until he relocated to Michaelis House, where some of us encountered him again some five years later. In that year we also had Rob Comrie who eventually became a prominent Advocate of the Cape Supreme Court. The other house masters I remember were Adrian Montgomery and Kevin Paris, both having arrived in 1958. I think Mike Edwards, Edwin Tyler and Peter Henshall arrived at beginning of 1959 and joined us in Newlands as did Paris. At the right end of the upper stoop was the sick room which had six beds and was adjacent to the bathroom. The middle of the upper stoop led to a narrow passage which in turn led to a large quadrangle, bordered by three large hutments. These were probably remnants of the military occupation. The hutment to the left housed the prep room which also served as a recreation room and store room for our luggage. The middle hutment was known as the Prep Room dormitory where the Std. 4 and some Std. 3 boys slept. The right hutment was known as the Hutment Dormitory which housed the Std. 5 boys. The open space in the center of the quadrangle was a gravel playground, where various sports were played.

In 1958 we graduated from the junior dorm to the larger interleading dorm. That year we were joined by Trevor Kaye and Nelson Babrow who were no strangers to us, as we knew them from school. Louis Baum arrived from Keetmanshoop in what was then, South West Africa, and other new arrivals in that year included Charlie Laurence (Blaauwberg Strand), Michael Conidaris (Paarl – both Michael and his brother Eric are sadly no longer with us), Tony Chapman (Durban) and John Wright (Kenya). At beginning 1959 we were already aware that we would soon be moving to the new hostel in Newlands. Some of us were housed in the Prep Room dorm and the rest of our group were located in the Wing dorm. That same year we welcomed a new group of boys from South West Africa. These included Ernie and Walter Kirsten (Maltehoe), Harry Luchtenstein (Keetmanshoop), Hallie Druker (Aus) and Louis Druker (Luderitz). Robert Gordon (Keetmanshoop) also arrived that year but he was a year ahead of us. Also, ahead of us were South Westers George Curtis and Les Kloot but cannot be sure when they arrived. After my schooldays, I don’t recall having met up with any of these great Southwest guys with the exception of Harry Luchtenstein. I also recall meeting Walter Kirsten at an Old Boys Dinner where we had a long chat.

On Saturday mornings the Jewish boys attended synagogue either at the Gardens Shul in Government Avenue, or Temple Israel in Green Point, whichever denomination they followed. On Sunday mornings, most of the Christian boys attended St Georges Cathedral at the bottom of Government Avenue, but some also attended St Mary’s Cathedral. There may also have been boys who attended the Groote Kerk, Baptist and Lutheran churches. We were allowed to go home on Sundays, Public Holidays and two weekends a school term. We also went home for all school holidays.

Saturday afternoons at Dryfe House were spent in a variety of ways. Occasionally we would be taken to watch rugby in Vredehoek at the Union Rugby Club. We also attended matches at the Gardens Rugby Club at the top of Upper Orange Street. We were able to draw sixpence from our pocket money accounts every Saturday and Wednesday. These funds were handed in upon our arrival at the commencement of each school term. It was usual to bring four pounds sterling. We would be allowed to go to Berlinsky’s grocery shop at the corner of Kloof and Rheede Streets, to buy sweets. I can remember trying to buy a tin of condensed milk (a popular item to share with other boys) but that contract of sale never materialized as Mrs. Berlinsky, who knew me and my family, didn’t think my mother would approve of this.

Other residents of Dryfe House I remember were Richard Day (Knysna), Leslie Pieters (Windhoek), Bernard Henry (Piketberg), Victor Davis (Johannesburg), John Bennett, Rolf Reitz, Paul Kruger, Warrick Windridge, Ronnie Lowenthal (Rhodesia), Alan Susman (Rhodesia), Brian Suttner, Selwyn Kagan, Tony Harris (Elgin), Richard Watermayer (Port Elizabeth), Hymie Slabbert, Manfred Scher, Gavin Windrum, Athol Karemacher (Swellendam), Edwin Van Wyk, Michael Trokis, John Pod, Martin Slabber, Peter McKinnon, Kevin McCusker, Gordon Moss, Stephen Mervis (his dad, Jack Mervis was the Dryfe House doctor), Rodney Blumberg, Peter Mathieson, Alan Wienberg (Ladiesmith), Sean Byrne, Keith Gittins, Christopher Bam, Harold Steven-Jennings, Robin Steven-Jennings, Steven Braude, Giles Codrington, Harry Mellish, Arthur Quinton, Monty Truter, Brian Figg (Onrust), David Abraham (Hermanus), Johan Strauss (son of the UP leader of the opposition in Parliament), James Haig, Norman Price (Rhodesia), Michael McBride, Neil Rossen, William Brunjes, George Tsoutsis, Gordon Wright, Peter Behr, Bill MacRobert, Josie Anstey, Steven Levin, Mel Frank, Glenn Rosemann, Ted Kerwan (He lived at Groote Schuur where his dad worked for Prime Minister, JG Strijdom), Roy Young, Hesketh Young, Martin Ellert.

On the second Saturday afternoon after the beginning of the school year in January, all Dryfe House boarders were bussed to the Junior School campus in Newlands where we enjoyed a braai followed by a watermelon feast. This was preceded by a swim in the cement pool behind the old Stuttaford mansion which eventually became Hensilwood House, and which served as the residence of successive headmasters of SACS Junior School. This was a longstanding tradition which was always looked forward to. It also served as a formal welcome to the new boarders.

We were allowed to bring “tuck” from home after each visit there, which was usually weekly. This was handed in when we arrived back and was locked up in a cupboard at the school in Newlands. In the late afternoon, a housemaster would unlock the cupboard and we would take some of our tuck which we would often share with boys who did not have any. Some of our out of town fellow boarders received their tuck parcels on standing order from the Wellington Fruit Growers, a well - known Co-Operative, where their parents maintained accounts. Tuck was indeed a most necessary food supplement, given some of the culinary perils of hostel food.

What was life like at Dryfe House? I am sure everybody who lived there have their own recollections and experiences. One thing was for sure – this was an institution and was run along those lines. Boys were in Dryfe house for various reasons. In most cases I think it was a facility to accommodate out of town students whose parents either wanted them to go to SACS or did not wish them to be educated at their local schools. There were also a number of boys who were placed there by their parent(s) due to broken homes, arising from a divorce or a parent passing on. Then there were clearly a few boys who were unmanageable at home. Certain boys were there only temporarily, due to their parents going on an extended overseas trip or for whatever reason. A combination of some of these factors could also have been a reason. In some cases, children were placed in Dryfe House because both parents worked in jobs. And then there were boys whose fathers had attended SACS, so their being there was in furtherance of a family tradition.

There were about 85 boys living at Dryfe House during our time, which was pretty much full capacity. Entering Dryfe House for the first time could be a traumatic experience for a seven or eight year old youngster to have to deal with. We all certainly must have felt some form of insecurity which occasionally manifested itself in various behaviors. Discipline was fairly strict and enforced by Mr. Hunter, the house masters to a slightly lesser extent, and the House Captains who were senior boys with limited authority. The ultimate form of discipline was a caning by Mr. Hunter. Gating was another form of punishment, where you were not allowed to go home on a Sunday. Then of course there were also the nice times. In our first year, in the junior dorm, either Mrs. Hunter or one of her daughters would read us bed time stories on a Friday evening after prep. Brer Rabbit was a popular story. After lights out some of the best dormitory activities began – pillow fights were quite popular and midnight feasts were even more popular. Sometimes these were interrupted.

On reflection, I believe the Hunters did their best to ensure that we were well cared for. I think Mrs. Hunter was the driving force behind the running of Dryfe House. The longer you were there, the better she got to know you. Even when I was a boarder in the High School it was always a pleasure to occasionally meet up with her. When I was a university student, I recall meeting her and her daughter Stephanie at Groote Schuur Hospital, where I was visiting a friend. I enquired why they were there, and she sadly shook her head and told me that Mr. Hunter was ill again. He died shortly afterwards. Some years later after one of my concerts, a gentleman came to my dressing room and told me that a lady would like to speak with me. It was a seniors’ audience and he took me to a table and there was Mrs. Hunter. I was happy to see her but was also sad. She told me she was working again, this time as the superintendent of a Womens’ College residence. Stephanie had become the principal of Rhenish School in Stellenbosch which was a great source of pride to her.

Now let me share with you some personal and family experiences / stories concerning Dryfe House. When I was born we lived with my maternal grandparents at 21 Wilkinson Street, a cul de sac, which was approached from Kloof Street. We lived three houses from the end on the left side of the street (there were no houses on the right side because that was the retaining wall of the Mount Nelson Hotel.) The last house in the street was occupied by the May family (Mrs. May taught Biology at Cape Town High). The Mays had a daughter by the name of Marlene and she used to wheel me in my pram when I was a toddler. I had vague memories of her having had red hair. We eventually left this neighborhood and moved to Kohling Street in Tamboerskloof. I started preschool at the Villa Maria, a Convent school which was nearby. By the time I started school at SACS Junior, I had very few memories of Wilkinson Street. My father Jack Wener passed away suddenly whilst playing cricket at Green Point track. He was the captain of Oranjezicht Cricket Club which had its home ground in Flower Street. I was seven years old at the time and was sent to live with my aunt and uncle in Paarl, where I went to school at Paarl Boys Primary for the rest of the year. I then returned to SACS and was put into Dryfe House. I occasionally used to play around the south side perimeter of the property behind the Hutment dorm, and one day I found myself looking up at a red - headed girl who was looking down at me over a wall from what appeared to be her back yard. We just stood there looking at each other. There was something about her that looked familiar, but I could not register. I tried to engage her in conversation, but was unsuccessful. I saw her again on a few other occasions, but the same thing.

Some years later I had cause to visit Wilkinson Street and went to have a look at our old house. I then remembered that the Mays lived in the last house on the street and I dropped in to say hello. Mrs. May recognized me immediately and invited me in. I was sitting with her in the kitchen and for some reason I stood up and looked out of the window, and immediately the penny dropped. I found myself looking down at the back of the Dryfe House property. That red headed girl! That must have been Marlene May. Whether Marlene knew at the time who I was, I will never know. A few minutes later we were joined for coffee by a pretty, red headed young lady and Mrs. May asked her if she knew who I was, and after a moment, her response was “Isn’t this Pharrel?”

This story revealed something else to me. During the two and a quarter years that I lived in Dryfe House, I had not realized that I was living a stone’s throw away from the house in which I had spent the first few years of my life. In fact, one could look down upon the Dryfe House campus from our old back yard. What age does for us as we improve our bearings!

Before concluding, I would like to share this lovely story I heard from a relative who lived in Orange Street. One day, she and her sister were sitting on their front stoop when Stanley Hunter walked past their house. Now they had a parrot who had some foul language in its vocabulary. As Mr. Hunter appeared, the parrot started to shoot its mouth off. You can well imagine what happened next. He thought it was one of the girls who swore at him and immediately went into that Monday morning assembly mode, shaking forefinger and all. The two bewildered girls just turned to each other and gaped.

**Newlands**

We moved to Newlands in March, 1959. Those who lived in Cape Town and its environs, were sent home for an extra - long weekend for the period of the move. (I think they wanted us out of the way).

After we left, Dryfe House became a home for seniors until it was eventually demolished. Disa House, a large modern Senior Center and Residence was eventually built on the site.

Writing this has given me great pleasure and has brought back many memories. I hope that this has brought back those long - ago times to my fellow boarders who were there; and to those who were not there, I hope that these memories will open up a new SACS vista for you. The only source reference that I have had access to was Veitch’s excellent book on the SACS History on its 175th Anniversary, and certain information I obtained online. Otherwise, I have had to rely entirely upon my memory. If my memory has failed me in any way, please accept my apologies.

I am looking forward to reading your memories and views of Dryfe House, and also indeed, JE De Villiers House which I leave to somebody else to initiate.

I would like to thank my old friend and fellow boarder, Sean Day, for kindly agreeing to peruse the first draft of this and his comments.

Many thanks to Trevor Kaye for his excellent management of our website and blogs.

My best wishes to you and your families.

Pharrel Wener