

Extract from the book, *Beyond the City Lights*
by Lawrence G. Green - Witrivier Tragedy (pp97-101)

<http://www.southafrica.to/people/authors/famous/Lawrence-Green/Beyond-the-City-Lights.pdf>

Many of you must have bathed in the Witrivier, one of the most alluring streams in the Western Province when you see it from a dusty motor-car in midsummer. It runs through Bain's Kloof, forming pools of happy memory. But in winter this mountain stream can be a killer, and there are people in Wellington who remember one such episode. Some disasters are remembered for centuries by a nation; others plunge a village into sorrow and then pass into the local annals. But there are deaths which are something more than tragedies; the details linger because of some human quality that marked the event.

So it was with the Witrivier disaster, and the quality was heroism. Drive up from Wellington for seven miles to the point where Bain's Kloof leaves the Seven Sisters range and turns eastwards before running north again to the summit of the pass. Here you see the Sneekops of the Slanghoek range, known as Upper and Lower Sneekop, crowned by snow in winter. (They are not to be confused with the Sneekop on the other side of Du Toit's Kloof where George Africa survived his ordeal.) One mile farther on there is an outspan and a sandy track leading up the hillside and into the Witrivier valley. Mountaineers take that path every year, into the finest rock-climbing region within a hundred miles of Cape Town.

This was the route taken early on May 23, 1895 by two young men, Piet van der Merwe and Carl Pauw, leading Miss Duckitt and another teacher and eleven girls from the Huguenot Seminary. They were bound for Lower Sneekop, which was covered with cloud. Otherwise the weather seemed fair. It meant crossing the Witrivier, but that morning the stream was only a few yards wide. They stepped from stone to stone, a merry band, little thinking of the ordeal before them. The mist cleared while they were on the mountain, then it thickened again, and some of the party were in favour of abandoning the climb. However, most of them went on and reached the summit at two in the afternoon.

Some of the girls suffered from sore feet during the return journey. The climbers split up, with Piet van der Merwe and five of the strongest girls marching ahead. (With the leading party was a Miss Lombard, later the wife of the Rev. G. S. Murray, and she was in 1953 probably the last survivor of that expedition.) Piet found the Witrivier rising and running faster, but he took all his girls through safely. They went on down to Wellington, reporting at half past eight that night that Pauw's group would soon be home.

Then the rain came. Pauw's group did not arrive, and there was anxiety over the weather. At midnight the first rescue party set out, led by a Mr. Walter Ferguson and Miss T. Campbell. Another party was organised by a Mr. Schaff, a Wellington dairy farmer who had been a sailor. Schaff had the forethought to take a long rope and a basket with him. He knew there would be trouble at the flooded Witrivier, and he planned to rescue the girls by the shipwreck method. Food, brandy, blankets and lanterns were taken. The climbers had expected to be

home the same evening and had only light refreshments with them. Among the rescuers, besides the ingenious Schaff, were several brave young men - Christiaan Krynauw, **Lourens van Dyk** and his brother **Francois**, and Izak Joubert. Dr. E. F. du Toit also played an essential part in the rescue.

Other active members were Messrs. Willie van Wyk and A. Coaton.

The rescuers arrived at the Witrivier at two in the morning, finding a raging torrent. Snow was lying a foot deep on Table Mountain that night, and a cold rain was lashing down over the Bain's Kloof area. Nevertheless, the rescuers stumbled along the river bank for an hour, blowing a bugle, until they heard answering shouts from the far side. Nothing could be done in the darkness. They lit a fire and waited for daylight.

Pauw and his girls had reached the river too late to cross, of course, and had spent the dark hours without shelter, drenched and stiff with cold. They had the good sense to wait for help. The girls could never have swum through those roaring waters.

First of all, attempts were made to throw a light rope across the river. All those on the far bank had suffered from exposure so severely that their hands were too numb to hold the rope. Christiaan Krynauw then swam across with the rope at great risk. The heavier rope followed and was made fast to a rock in such a way that it remained almost level with the swiftly-moving stream.

Ferguson, **Lourens** and **Francois van Dyk** and Izak Joubert then crossed safely with the aid of the rope, taking food and brandy. After they had revived the girls to some extent, they decided to take them across one at a time. Lettie de Jager, an eighteen year old pupil who had been the life of the mountaineering party, volunteered to go first.

It seems that the angry river rose still higher while Ferguson, Krynauw and **Lourens van Dyk** were working the girl painfully along the rope. In midstream a rock offered a dubious refuge for the three exhausted men. They managed to push the girl on to the rock, while they clung desperately to the rope.

Francois van Dyk saw the peril they were in, and re-entered the water with the idea of helping the girl and his brother. He reached a large bush, lost his grip on the rope, and could go no farther.

Ferguson and Joubert regained the river bank at the point where they had started. The brothers **Lourens** and **Francois** were helpless. **Lourens** was seen pointing to the girl, appealing mutely to the other member of the party to save her. As they watched the girl was swept away. **Lourens van Dyk** went after her, although he must have been almost at his last gasp. Within a few seconds the torrent had carried them out of sight and they were drowned. Krynauw had reached the rock by this time, but the water surged round him. He soon became unconscious and was swept off. Last to die was **Francois van Dyk**. Someone threw a rope with such skill that it fell across the bush to which **Francois** was clinging. He was too far gone to fasten it round him. He, too, disappeared in the cold welter of that cruel mountain stream.

After this disaster the main rope was moved so that it was suspended well above the flood. Van Wyk, Coaton, Schaff and Dr. du Toit then crossed in a large basket which hung below the rope on a pulley. This contrivance worked admirably, and all the sad and shivering people on the far bank were brought to safety.

Another party was organised to recover the bodies, and this included a young Chris van

Niekerk who was to become President of the Senate.

Someone wrote to the "Cape Argus" declaring that the portraits of the heroes and heroine who lost their lives should hang in every household.

The only relic of the disaster to be seen today is a memorial stone on the path leading to that tragic spot on the Witrivier, bearing these words:

"In memory of the daring and heroism of **L. van Dyk, F. van Dyk, C. Krynauw, Lettie de Jager.** Witrivier disaster. May 23, 1895."

A long elegy by the pioneer Afrikaans author, C. P. Hoogenhout, of the farm Optenhorst, Bovelei, Wellington, appeared in a Paarl magazine. This was written in Nederlands, and part of it runs:

Ja, 't is een treurzang voor Lettie de Jager. Christiaan Krynauw, de broeders Van Dyk; Stort vrij uw tranen voor 't viertal, o klager! Weet het, zij zijn reeds bij God in Zijn rijk



Memorial at Witterivier in Bainskloof Pass, erected by Piet Hugo, who also build the "Spookhuis" in the 1940's



Gravestone of Lourens & Frans van Dyk at Owen Street West Cemetery in Ceres