

Time Travel, Port Shepstone Railway Station 1973

Goal

- Learn about an essential part of Port Shepstone history, the railroad, and compare to today when cars and roads are predominant
- Learn about a time of discrimination and compare to life today and what can be done to reduce the discrimination

Facts

Port Shepstone was founded as a town in 1867 and in the end of the 19th century the town grew bigger. The port was opened in 1880 and functioning until the railroad was built in the early 20th century. There were many Zulu villages around the town that lost their land to the whites in late 19th and early 20th century. The Zulus became workers for the whites as well as the Indians that came from 1860s and onwards.

The railway line from Durban to Port Shepstone reached the northern banks of Umzimkulu River 1901 and in 1907 a railroad bridge was built over the river. The present railway station was opened in 1917 and in 1925 the buildings were completed. The station was the final terminus of the south coast line, Durban-Port Shepstone. It also served as a terminus for a railway line to Harding, later called Banana Express.

Many people used the railroad to Durban. In 1970s it took four hours from Port Shepstone and the train stopped at many stations on the way. There were several reasons for using the railway: visiting relatives in Durban or somewhere along the line; go to Durban and look for work or even all the way to Johannesburg; militaries to their camps; learners went to boarding schools and school classes to sport or music competitions. In the 1970s electric trains replaced steam on the Port Shepstone line.

South Africa was in the 1970s in the middle of apartheid. The whites were considered superior and there was a big discrimination of non-whites in all parts of life. This discrimination you could clearly see at the train station. Everything was separated between whites and non-whites: entries, ticket office, waiting rooms, toilets, benches and on the train there was nice coaches for the whites in first class and hard wooden seats for non-whites in the overcrowded third class compartment. And nobody of the non-whites was allowed to step over the line.

In the 1970s more and more people used cars and trucks became more common for goods; the roads were improved, a new bridge was opened of the Umzimkulu River already in 1959. The south coast railway line closed in 1986 and Banana Express for tourists in 2005.

The protests on the apartheid system increased in the 1970s. ANC and PAC were banned and the support for the Black Consciousness Movement grew gradually. In early 1970s Durban became in focus in the liberation struggle, what is called the Durban moment. Steve Biko was an outspoken leader of South African Students Organization (SASO). He was expelled from University of Natal in 1972 and in February 1973 he was banned, that is he was not allowed to speak with more than one person at a time and not speak with media. And you were not allowed to quote anything he has said, in speeches or in conversation. In February 1973 there were extensive student protests and union strikes in Durban among the blacks. Cultural and sports events were used as a cover for political meetings. And the Indian congress became more political active.

Scenario; The Train station in Port Shepstone, February 1973

There are always a lot of people at the train station in Port Shepstone. Trains are coming and going. Many persons are there to say goodbye or welcoming friends or relatives. There are vendors selling fruit and candy, workers that clean and do maintenance.

There is a big difference between the treatment of whites and non-whites. Whites have a faster line to the tickets, nice benches on the platform, clean toilets and they are treated better. They sit in the comfortable coaches in first or second class, the non-whites have to accept the wooden benches in third class. It is very obvious at the train station, that 1973 is a time of great discrimination, there are first- and second class citizens.

Today the learners from the primary school are going for a great adventure, with the train all the way to Durban for a big music competition. They won the local contest a couple of weeks ago and now they will compete with school groups from all over Natal. Even when waiting for the train they have to practice their songs and dances under the direction of the teacher.

There are several others, young and old, whites and non-whites, waiting for the train, in order to start their trip to Durban. People are rushing to buy their tickets, purchasing refreshments from the vendors or at the tuck shop. While waiting some of the adults play cards and the young ones run around and play games.

The trains are popular, but more and more are using cars. And the goods often go on trucks instead of on train. The roads seem to be prioritized and not the railroad. What is the best means of transport? For people? For goods? Will it be more competitive with the electrical trains?

There is a lot of excitement but also tension at the station. Many ask if this discrimination is fair, to treat some persons in one way and non-whites often in a rude and mean manner? Some are sick and tired of it and even dare to sit on the benches for the whites.

There are rumours that something is happening in Durban. Union strikes? Protests from the university students? Some have heard of the student leader Steve Biko. Is it even dangerous to go to Durban? Or is it anybody of the travelers that even dares to join the protesters?

There is a lot of excitement but also frustration and concerns at the train station today.

Key Questions

- Is the discrimination fair? In what way are we discriminated? How can we change it? Protests? Violence?
- What is the best mean of transport in the future? Do we need more cars and better roads or more railroads?

Roles

The learners are boys and girls from a school on their way to a music competition in Durban.
Their teacher joins them

Some of the adults (five whites and five non-whites) are travelers to Durban

Staff at the train station: station induna, ticket master, announcer/ whistle blower, railway police, workers

Activities

- Practice songs and dances (learners). Leader?
- Gambling, playing cards (whites/ non-whites). Leader?
- Playing games (learners). Leader?
- Cleaning and sweeping (workers). Leader Thulas + gum boot dancing
- Prepare refreshments, fruits, nuts etc (whites/ non-whites/ learners). Leader?
- Secret planning for protests

Disruptive activities: buy tickets, disobedience, news from Durban

Time Plan

07.00 Set up the site

09.00 Learners arrive, facts, scenario, rules

09.40 Initiation, walk through the tunnel

The learners are met by the staff

Activities (whites with gambling and refreshments and non-whites with all activities)

Disruptive activities

11.00 News

11.15 Eat and talk (one group of whites in a nice area, one group of non-whites)

11.40 Announcement of the train, ending

Reflection

12.00 Learners leave

18 March 2013

Ebbe Westergren and Helen Eklund, Kalmar läns museum

The Time Travel group in Port Shepstone