JOHANNESBURG, The Denver of South Africa

JUST NOW THE GOLDEN CAPITAL OF THE TRANSVAAL IS IN THE DEPTHS OF A BAD SLUMP

POST OFFICE AT JOHANNESBURG

COMMISSIONER STREET JOHANNESBURG

IN THE MARKET SQUARE

BY FRANK G. CARPENTER.

I WRITE this in the golden capital of South Africa. Johannesburg rests on a reef out of which has been taken $900,000,000 worth of the precious metal, and which is supposed to have two or three billions left. There is more gold about it than about any other city of the world, and more is coming from it than from any other gold region. Johannesburg is the Denver of Africa, and, like our Denver, it is about a mile above the sea. Indeed, it is even higher than the great mining city on the edge of the Rockies. It is close to 6000 feet, and if you could stretch a wire about the earth at its altitude, it would almost cut the top of Mount Washington.

Denver vs. Johannesburg.

Denver and Johannesburg have many things in common. They are both on high plains and not far from bleak, semi-deserts. They are both in the hearts of the continents to which they belong. Denver is about half way across the United States. It is a little bit over the edge, perhaps, veering toward the west, which, after all, is the best part of our big country. Johannesburg is about half way between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and it is farther north of the Cape of Good Hope than Sandy Hook is east of Chicago. Its nearest port is Delagoa Bay, on the Indian Ocean, which is about 400 miles distant, and it can also be reached by rail from Durban, which is a little more than 80 miles farther.

Both cities are based upon gold, and are fed by the mines. The territories which support Denver lie in the Rocky Mountains at its back, extending a long distance to the north and south. Those which support Johannesburg are right under the city, and they run in a great narrow strip east and west. They consist of several veins, covering a distance of 120 miles. The best part of the whole has only a length of 60 miles, and it is right in the center of this that Johannesburg is situated. Some of the houses are built over gold mines, and the streets run over land which has been honeycombed with tunnels and filled up again, after the gold has been taken out, for fear that the buildings might fall in. When one climbs to the roofs of the houses of this city he can see the smokestacks of the mines extending east and west almost as far as the eye can reach. There are little white mountains of tailings standing out upon the landscape in either direction, and these mountains come right to the city itself.

Founded by Miners.

Both cities were founded by miners. Denver was started in 1858, just a half century ago. Johannesburg dates back only to 1886. The land about both cities was considered almost worthless until the mines were discovered. The ground upon which New York stands was once sold for a half peck of glass beads and brass buttons; the site of Melbourne was bought for a pair of old blankets and the foundation of all Chicago was offered for a pair of cowhide boots. In early days there was a 2000-acre farm on the site of Johannesburg, and it was sold for a team of broken-down oxen. Today the land and buildings which stand on that farm are assessed at about a quarter of a billion dollars, and from it goes out more than one hundred million dollars' worth of gold every year. In January, 1895, two business lots, not far from where that farmer's hut stood, brought $110,000, and it is only four years since the Standard Bank of South Africa purchased the land upon which it has erected a building worth three-quarters of a million. A lot on Pritchard street sold for $200,000 about nine years ago, and there are business locations here so valuable that one would have to cover them with bank notes to buy them. This is so now, notwithstanding that times are hard and business is decidedly dull.

And still Johannesburg is only about 21 years old. When our boys who are to cast their first votes at the coming Presidential election were raw, red babies the country about here was a wilderness and a waste, covered with grass during a few months of the year and a bleak and burned desert for the remainder. It was then in its beginning as a mining camp, and its most striking features were canvas tents, mud huts and ox wagons. The first lots were then selling for a few shillings apiece, and it was not until some time that buildings of tin and galvanized iron began to rise.

The Johannesburg of Today.

The Johannesburg of today is made of steel, stone and wood. It has many five and six-story structures, although the skyscrapers of Denver are absent. It is not as well built as Denver, but it is a magnificent city considering its source of supplies and that it is away off here in the wilds. The town has just about the same population as Denver. It numbers about 150,000 souls, but 60,000 of these are blacks made up of Kaffirs from all parts of South Africa.

Johannesburg is laid out somewhat like Denver. Its streets generally cross each other at right angles, and they run far out into the country. There are something like 200 miles of roadways, and the town altogether has a municipal area of more than 80 square miles. There are town lots far out into the country and enough streets have been planned to accommodate the growth of the next 100 years.

Denver has as good a streetcar system as any city of its size in the world. Its electric lines cover every part of the municipality and reach far into the country beyond. Johannesburg has about the best car system of South Africa, and the lines belong to the municipality. I understand that they pay well and leave a big profit every year in the city treasury. The streetcars are all double-deckers. There is a covered compartment on the roof, and, for a "ticket"—that is, 2 pence—you can go to any part of the city or its suburbs.

I do not know how many churches Denver has. The city is supposed to be wicked, but I venture there is no denomination in the United States which has not at least one house of God there. The same is true of this Baal-worshiping town of the Transvaal. It produces enough of the yellow metal to make a big herd of golden calves, every year, but nevertheless it keeps the Sabbath and has no end of Protestant and Catholic churches. The English Church will hold 1100 people and it cost over $200,000 to build. There is also a large Jewish synagogue, about 20 freemasonry lodges and some other semi-religious organizations.

As to amusements, these South African towns pay more attention to such things than we do in America. Johannesburg has athletic grounds which cover 30 acres, including fields for cricketing, bicycling and golfing. There is a lady's bicycle track and outside the city limits there is a race course, where races are periodically held throughout the year. At the Summer and Winter handicaps, the prizes amount to $12,000 or more, and there is a meeting each season, when the races last for three days. The town has a turf club and social clubs of various kinds. It has a recreation and concert hall which will hold 2500. I think its citizens pay more attention to fun than we do. There is no business done after noon Saturday, and the people then go to the races and club grounds. The city has fairly good theaters. It has a public library, a university and excellent schools.

Sixty Thousand Blacks.

Johannesburg has, in proportion, a larger colored population than Washington. It has 60,000 or 70,000 natives, made up of Kaffirs, Basutos and other negroes of this part of the world. The blacks are not allowed to vote, and they have little to do except as workers for the whites. They have far less rights than our negroes, although they dress and look much the same. The Kaffir here rides in a separate car, a little open trailer, which is attached to the rear of the trains for his accommodation. In going along the streets the negroes must keep off the pavements and walk only on the edge of the roadway or in the middle of the streets. He has his own churches and schools, and the whites expect him to keep to them.

About the only municipal positions that the blacks have are as assistant policemen. They are dressed in uniforms, and carry clubs, which are more like shillalahs than our police clubs at home. The Kaffirs also act as jinriksha men. They have little victoria-like two-wheeled carriages, in which they pull one about for 12 cents per mile or 75 cents per hour. The jinriksha men are mostly Zulus, and they are among the queerest natives I have yet seen. They dress their hair in all sorts of ways, making it stand out from their heads in great rolls or horns. Not a few of them have real cow horns so fastened to their heads that they seem to grow there, the roots of the horns being hidden in the wool. These men wear breeches which reach half way down the thigh, leaving the lower part of the legs and feet bare. They paint the bare portions with whitewash.

The Unemployed Whites.

Of the 90,000 whites in Johannesburg about 60,000 are males and the remainder females. In other words, there are about 30,000 more men than women, and a large part of the former are bachelors who have come here to seek their fortunes. Many of these drifted in here at the time of the war and were soldiers in the Boer or English armies. When peace was declared the country was booming, and for a while they found plenty to do. At that time Johannesburg was growing like a green bay tree. Many new buildings were going up, real estate values rose out of sight, and everything was planned on the basis of Johannesburg becoming a second Chicago. The money paid in indemnities and for the repairs necessitated by the war brought thousands of pounds into circulation, and the demand for labor far exceeded the supply. Mechanics were imported by the shipload, and wages rose. Carpenters got $5 per day and other mechanics proportionately high wages. Then the bottom fell out. It was found that the country was overpeopled and that the towns were overbuilt. The new business blocks could not be rented, and the values of property fell. Houses which were worth $75,000 four years ago can be bought for from $25,000 to $50,000 today, and rents have proportionately fallen.

When the boom burst thousands of men were thrown out of work, and there are thousands of mechanics in South Africa who are now a burden on the community.

A White Man's Job.

It must be remembered that there is a prejudice here against the white man doing what is considered the black man's work. There are many whites who would be glad to go into the mines at about a dollar a day, which is the Kaffir's wage, but the trades unions and the people are against it. There are about six times as many blacks as whites in South Africa, and the whites feel that they must keep up their standing as the superior race in order to hold their own. So far the white men act largely as overseers. They do but little hard work, and after they have been in the country but a short time, they get the idea that hard work is degrading, and turn all jobs of coarse manual labor over to the Kaffirs. Some of the whites have said, I understand, that they will not labor for less than a living wage, and that amount is considered to be at least 10 shillings or $2.50 per day. So you have a lot of reduced gentleman mechanics down on their uppers and half starving out here in this land, which is producing more gold and diamonds than any other part of the world.

No Place for Americans.

I do not think this is a good place for Americans without capital. There are a large number of our skilled specialists, such as mining and mechanical engineers, who do well, but even such men should have a job contracted for before they start. This is no place to wait for a job. Indeed, I doubt if there is anywhere in the world where the bare necessities of existence cost so much. Houses which would rent for $15 a month in any city of this size in the United States, cost here from $25 to $50 a month; and bachelor livings—that is, board and lodging—run from $35 to $50 per month per head. Clothing is dearer than in our country, and as to such luxuries as drinks and cigars, the charges are enormous. Any kind of a bottle of ginger ale costs 25 cents, and at the better restaurants the price of a Scotch highball is a half dollar. I have paid 25 cents for a small glass of mineral water and 37 cents for a glass of lemonade.

The rates at the Carlton Hotel, where I am stopping, are about the same as those of the best hotels of New York, and it seems to me that the face of Queen Victoria on the golden sovereign, the coin which is universally used here, turns pale whenever I look at it and order a meal. I suppose the old lady knows she is going to leave me.

Like Tantalus.

Indeed, the situation of these people makes me think of Tantalus, who was condemned to stand up to his chin in water under a loaded fruit tree and see fruit and water retreating every time he sought to satisfy his hunger and thirst, or of the poor little boy whose face is pressed against the glass of the candy store windows as he hungrily eyes the sweetmeats within. Johannesburg is surrounded by gold, bedded on gold, with gold extending 30 miles on each side of it. It is pouring out one hundred and twenty odd millions of gold dollars every 12 months, and for the past 10 years it has been flooding the globe. Nevertheless its people are poor, and the most of the treasures they dig from their soil go to the nabobs of England and the stock companies of Europe. It is somewhat like Ireland, a country of absentee landlords, and its people are the white and black slaves of these faraway millionaires. In addition to this, the country is cursed by the cheap native and Chinese labor supply. It would be far better off if it turned out less gold and diamonds at a high wage rate and the wages were spent at home.

South Africa in Debt.

As a result of this boom and its collapse, the South Africans are deeply in debt. Both farms and business blocks are plastered with mortgages, and interest rates are comparatively high. The people are optimistic, and they have all the push of the pioneers in a fast developing country. They overestimated everything at the time of the war and branched out upon credit. During the fight with the Boers money flowed like water. England's purse-strings were opened and a golden shower rained down on the Transvaal. New institutions of all kinds were created. Expenses were enormously increased and everything was planned as though the war appropriations and the large war population were to continue forever. This was not confined to Johannesburg, but the boom extended to Cape Town, Durban and all the towns of South Africa. Durban put up buildings to accommodate 100,000 people, and it has now less than 50,000, while this town could take care of 50,000 more without overfilling its houses.

South Africa's Small Population.

Indeed, South Africa is much bigger in the eyes of the world than it is in reality. The whole country has not as many white people as Philadelphia, and in this I might include all the whites who live south of the equator. Nevertheless, there are banks here with capitals of millions. There are several thousand miles of railroad and there are a half dozen cities with great ports and costly improvements. The wonder is not that South Africa is hard up. It is really a wonder that it is at all.

Johannesburg, South Africa.

Seem to Have Human Nerves

On Certain Bad Days They Are All of a Quiver and Spread Unrest Everywhere.

THREE women in a popular New York tearoom the other afternoon had just welcomed a belated friend. As the newcomer received her cup of tea her hand shook so that the china rattled.

"That's what comes of being in a hospital on one of its bad days," she said with a little laugh. "Every nerve I have is quivering."

"Did anything happen?" asked a particularly placid member of the group.

"Happen! Something always happens in a hospital. But the queer thing about it is that no matter what happens the general atmosphere will be quite calm and cheerful until all of a sudden a day comes when the whole institution seems to be as I am now, all of a nervous quiver.

"You know I've been spending most of my time lately with my mother in the hospital. She is getting along nicely and I read to her or we talk, and occasionally I make a little round of calls in the rooms near hers and bring back news to her of her neighbors, most of whom she has never seen.

"Generally there is something rather restful to me in being there. The nurses go about quickly and cheerfully, the doctor comes with his morning joke, one sees flowers and visitors going to the different rooms and one has a feeling of hopefulness about everybody.

"One gets used even to the smell of the disinfectants and to the occasional moans. If these are especially bad you say cheerfully:

"Somebody's coming out from under the anesthetic. He'll feel better soon.

"You hear a nurse humming to herself along the hall, and on mother's floor there is a young fellow, operated on for apendicitis a little while ago, who whistles softly when he can't think of anything else to do. All the doors stand open, and the whole life of the institution seems to be going smoothly and pleasantly.

"Then all of a sudden everything is changed. I knew this morning the moment I got above the first floor that things were not going well.

"Most of the doors were closed. Mother was trying in vain to tell two nurses how to place her in a comfortable position. They couldn't get her fixed right. Of course they couldn't. This was the day when nothing was right for anybody.

"She let them go when I came in, but she was in the state of nerves where she jumped almost out of her bandages when a nurse dropped a dish somewhere down the hall. Nurses always drop things on such days anyway.

"I hadn't been in the room two minutes before a wailing moan began next door. The two rooms had a communicating door, though why in the name of all that is sensible it should have been put there I don't know. At any rate it made the moans from the next door quite as audible as if they had been in our own room.

"I went to the door to close it. A nurse rushed by with a nervous preoccupied expression. The house doctor passed with scarcely a good morning.

"I could hear the bells ringing in the nurses' room at the end of the hall, as if every patient on the floor had a finger on the pushbutton and meant to keep it there till a response came.

"I went back into the room, but the moaning next door went on and on till I thought I should scream myself. I had left the transom open and I could hear nurses scurrying up and down the hall, low exclamations, doors opening and shutting, the rumble of the cart bringing a patient from the operating room.

"I saw the head nurse before I came away and asked her if there had been anything unusual in the way of operations, or if any patient had died, or anything really out of the ordinary happened. Not a thing! It was just a bad day.

"They come about once in so often and its like a zoo then. You've been in a menagerie when a sort of wave of unrest goes through it, haven't you? It spreads from cage to cage until all the animals are howling or roaring or snapping, and even the crowd gets nervous and the keepers are cross and there is a general powwow.

"Well," with a sigh of exhaustion, "that's the way it is in a hospital on a bad day, and this one has tuckered me clean out."