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The Mining Industry

The mining industry was a fundamental part of the economy of South Africa in the late nineteenth century, and control of the region's gold mines was a significant factor in the tension between Dutch and English settlers that led to the Second Boer War in 1899. In 1889 the Witwatersrand Chamber of Mines had been formed to promote the industry's development. Economic problems in the region led the Volksraad of the South African Republic to set up a Commission of Enquiry in 1897 to investigate high tariffs, labour and transport costs which were adversely affecting the mining industry. The 1897 report reissued here was not that of the commission itself, but contains much of the evidence and statistical material presented to it, in the hope that the mining industry would adopt its recommendations. As such, this detailed resource remains relevant to economic historians of South Africa and the British Empire.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06234-3 - The Mining Industry: Evidence and Report of the Industrial Commission of Enquiry

Compiled by the Witwatersrand Chamber of Mines

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The Mining Industry

*Evidence and Report of the
Industrial Commission of Enquiry*

COMPILED BY
THE WITWATERSRAND CHAMBER OF MINES



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THE MINING INDUSTRY.

EVIDENCE AND REPORT

OF THE

INDUSTRIAL COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY,

WITH AN APPENDIX

CONTAINING

THE LETTER OF THE CHAMBER OF MINES TO THE COMMISSION,
THE PRINCIPAL LAWS OF THE REPUBLIC AFFECTING THE MINING INDUSTRY,
AND OTHER DOCUMENTS OF INTEREST APPERTAINING TO THE
EVIDENCE GIVEN AT THE ENQUIRY.

Compiled and Published by

THE WITWATERSRAND CHAMBER OF MINES, JOHANNESBURG, S.A.R.

Johannesburg:
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—
1897.

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JOHANNESBURG :
PRINTED AT THE JOHANNESBURG TIMES PRINTING AND PUBLISHING WORKS.

P R E F A C E .

SINCE its formation in 1889 the Chamber has been mainly engaged in endeavouring to secure the mines relief from the heavy burdens imposed on them. The cost of living, and hence the rate of wages of the white employees, has been rendered unduly high by the duties on the necessaries of life and on all articles of ordinary requirement, while heavy railway tariffs and the dynamite monopoly, and the difficulty of obtaining an adequate supply of native labour at reasonable pay, have militated against the profitable working and development of the industry as a whole. As is shown in the letter of the Chamber to the Industrial Commission all these matters have again and again been brought to the notice of the Government and the Legislature, but on the most important questions redress has not been obtained.

At the annual meeting of the Rand Mines, Ltd., in March last, especial stress was laid by the Chairman on the manner in which the development of the industry was being retarded by the excessive rates for transport of coal and other articles of prime necessity for mining, by the extortionate price charged for explosives, by the high cost of white labour, due to the duties on foodstuffs, and of native labour, consequent on the inefficient administration of the Pass and Liquor Laws and the scant assistance afforded by the Government in connection with procuring a sufficient supply at moderate wages. Subsequently at meetings of other companies similar complaints were made, and it was pointed out that unless relief were obtained many mines which were barely paying expenses would be forced to shut down, while others, which under favourable conditions could and would be profitably worked, would continue inactive.

Meanwhile the disastrous effects of rinderpest on the farmers and of bad trade on the urban population were becoming evident in a constantly widening area of acute distress.

Among the Executive Council minutes presented to the Volksraad is one which records, that, on the 24th March the Executive Council considered a complaint regarding the excessive tariffs charged in the South African Republic and other States of South Africa, and deeming it desirable to institute an enquiry into the state of affairs generally of the mining industry of the Witwatersrand, resolved to appoint a commission for that purpose. Accordingly on the 14th April the following notice appeared in the *Government Gazette* :—

“It is hereby made known for general information that the Executive Council has seen fit to institute an enquiry with reference to the present alleged state of affairs in connection with the mining industry of the Witwatersrand diggings in general, and to furnish the Executive Council with a report regarding all matters that may have stood in the way, or have hindered, and still may hinder the development of the mining industry, and further, so soon as possible, to make such recommendations as may tend to the improvement and amendment of such matters.”

“The Commission, charged with this enquiry, consists of the following gentlemen:—S. W. BURGER, member of Executive Council; J. S. SMIT, Commissioner of Railways; C. J. JOUBERT, Minister of Mines; G. SCHMITZ-DUMONT, Acting State Mining Engineer: and J. F. DE BEER, First Special Judicial Commissioner, Johannesburg, as ordinary members, with Mr. THOMAS HUGO, as financial expert; Messrs. E. BROCHON, J. PIERCE, and A. BRAKHAN shall either jointly as a Commission, or severally, support the permanent members of the Commission with their advice, whenever requested. In order to make the work of the Commission as wide as possible they are authorised to take evidence on all those matters that can forward the aim of the Commission.”

“The Government desires to bring under the notice of all persons concerned that the willing tendering of evidence and information by each and every one, no matter from whom required, will greatly assist the above described aim.

(Signed) C. VAN BOESCHOTEN,

Acting State Secretary.

Government Office, Pretoria,
14th April, 1897.”

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Messrs. H. Bosch and E. Levy were appointed Secretaries, and with the consent of the Government, Messrs. James Hay (President of the Chamber of Mines) and George Albu (Chairman of the Association of Mines) were later added to the Commission as advisory members.

From the minute of the Executive Council of the 30th March it is clear that the duties of the financial expert and of the advisory members were intended to be of a very limited character. Mr. Hugo was not to be an ordinary member of the Commission, but was to sit merely as financial expert and as such to have the right of voting on financial matters; the advisory members were appointed as members to assist the Commission, whenever desired so to do, with information, explanation and advice.

But when the Commission started work it became evident that the advisory members by their knowledge of the questions under consideration were able to render indispensable service in eliciting evidence and examining and cross-examining witnesses, and they assumed and were accorded in all respects the same rights as those exercised by the ordinary members, eventually taking part in the drafting of the report and attaching their signatures to it.

The Commission opened their sittings, for the taking of evidence, on the 20th April and closed them on the 4th June: the actual time devoted to the hearing of witnesses having been twenty days. Their report was signed and presented to Government on the 27th July, and was laid before the Volksraad by the Government on the 9th August, with a request that that body would appoint a committee to act in conjunction with the Government in considering the various points contained therein, and make such recommendations as they might deem reasonable and desirable: and to refer to the Second Volksraad all such subjects as would properly come under the cognizance of that House.

After a protracted debate the proposal of the Government was adopted on the 10th August and the following committee, with instructions to submit its recommendations during the current session, was appointed, viz: Messrs. F. H. G. Wolmarans, A. D. W. Wolmarans, B. J. Vorster, C. J. Tosen, and L. Botha.

The mining industry responded willingly to the request of the

Government to give evidence before the Commission, and a mass of valuable statistical data in connection with the working of the mines, and the way in which the low grade properties were kept idle by the various burdens and administrative shortcomings which artificially raise working costs, was submitted.

With the object of preserving this important evidence and rendering it available for the mining companies for purposes of reference, the Chamber determined upon publishing it in book form. It was also deemed advisable to embody in the volume the different laws of the State bearing directly on the mining industry and the agreements entered into by the Government in connection with the railway concession and the dynamite monopoly, which formed the subject of frequent reference by many of the witnesses; while population and other statistics have been added as being of interest in relation to the questions dealt with by the Commission.

For the convenience of the reader the evidence of those witnesses, whose examination did not proceed continuously, has been brought together; marginal notes have been furnished throughout, and the index has been arranged to facilitate reference to the various subjects covered by the enquiry.

It had been hoped that the report of the Volksraad Commission would have been published in time to have been included in this volume, but that expectation has not been realised. The report has still to be presented, and it remains to be seen to what extent the Legislature will then approve and give effect to the recommendations of the Commission. These recommendations, though not proceeding so far as the Chamber would have desired, are generally regarded by the industry as liberal and statesmanlike; and it is clear that if adopted they will do much towards permitting that expansion of mining operations which would result from the working of the poorer mines of the Witwatersrand.

By their condemnation of monopolies and concessions, by their recommendations for the lightening of the duties on foodstuffs and of the railway rates on coal and other articles, in their plea for the better and more effective administration and enforcement of the Pass Law, the

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Liquor Law, and the Gold Thefts clauses of the Gold Law, the Commissioners appointed by the Government to enquire into the state of affairs of the gold mining industry of the Witwatersrand have testified in the fullest possible way to the reality of the grievances which are bearing so heavily on the mines and to the justice of the demands for redress, which unfailingly, year by year, the Chamber has laid before the Government and the Legislature of the Republic.

Chamber of Mines,

20th September, 1897.

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ERRATUM.

On page 425, in the first marginal note, “Simmer and Jack
Shafts” should read “Simmer and Jack East Shafts.”

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