

Kat River citrus co-op celebrates its centenary



First shed around 1909

A remarkable story that spans 100 years was discovered in the CRI archives in Nelspruit.
By Jon Roberts

At the time of research for this article, the Kat River Co-op (Katco) was preparing for its centenary celebrations on 17 November 2023.

When it comes to its contribution to the history of the South African citrus industry, Katco punches well above its weight. This relatively small citrus co-op has continued to play a significant role in industry development. Historically, Katco has been known as one of the finest navel-growing areas, with 14 Brix being common for navels.

In the Kat River and Koonap, the industry was pioneered by Lewellyn James Roberts

in 1903 and according to the earliest *Citrus Grower*, *Katco Notes*, the first commercial navel orchard was planted in the Kat River (and possibly the first in the country as well). More orchards were planted by growers in the following years, as the Kat and Koonap Rivers became one of the first areas to export citrus.

The names of these early growers could be seen as far back as 1910 in the archives, as winners in the navel categories of the Johannesburg Maize and Citrus Show, and the Port Elizabeth Show. The Eastern Cape was home to the early leaders of Katco. George White was one of the first chairmen of Katco who became involved in pushing for the building of a railway. It was later built in 1927 to transport – amongst other products – export citrus from the East Cape Midlands to Qhebherha (formerly

Port Elizabeth) harbour. At the time, he also travelled to the UK on behalf of Katco, to better understand the challenges in the transport and logistics of citrus fruit abroad. An excerpt from one of his reports 100 years ago, highlights similar challenges to those faced by current growers. His son Donald advocated for the building of the Kat River Dam that secured water availability in this arid region. He also served on the board of Co-op Shipping, a company that specialised in the shipment of citrus to foreign markets.

According to *Horticultural Varieties of Citrus*, 1967 by Robert Willard Hodgson (a Californian botanist), Roberts sourced his first navels from Flanagan Brothers Nursery in Khomga in the Eastern Cape in 1903. According to the publication, these were the first commercial navels planted in the Cape. Hodgson describes the variety as the

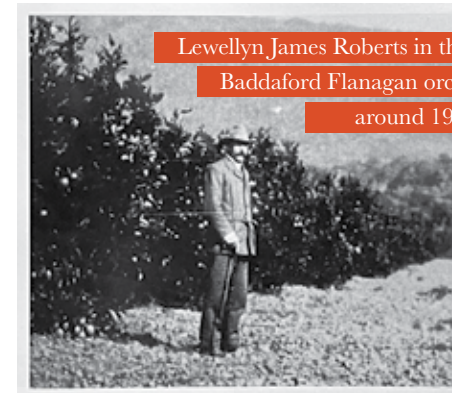
Baddaford ('Flannagan'), "selected from a single tree in the Flannagan orchard". According to Hodgson, reportedly, the variety was Bahia from a single Bahia tree that was imported from Brazil by the Cape Colony entomologist C.P. Lounsbury, (a friend of Roberts) and presented to Flanagan, a recognised botanist, to grow navel trees at his nursery in Khomga.

Hodgson described the Baddaford Navel as typical of Washington, except that twig growth was finer and thinner. "The Baddaford Navel was much used in the early part of the South African navel industry," according to Hodgson. It is known that the early orchards in the Kat and Koonap Valleys were from this source.

In *Sundays River Valley* Jane Meiring writes that the Mosenthals of (the then) Port Elizabeth were the first to export citrus oranges to England in 1908. The Baddaford 'Flanagan' orchard having been the first one planted in the Eastern Cape in 1903, these oranges were probably from this orchard.

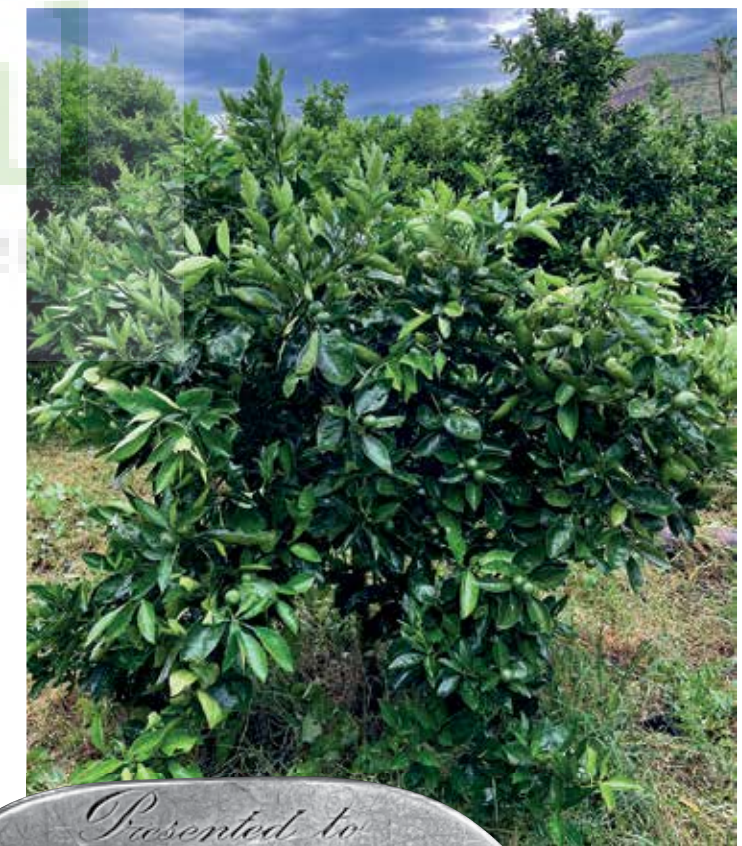
In a later edition of the *Citrus Grower*, a 1926 publication, I found another noteworthy article titled "KAT RIVER CO-OP NOTES, Kat River official opening of the Katco Central Packing House, on the 21st of June 1926". The Katco had been constituted several years before in 1923, but this was the first packhouse built for Katco members who, up until then, had packed in small sheds on their own farms.

At the opening of the Kat River Co-op it was reported that, "A most happy and appropriate incident in the official opening was the presentation of a suitable memento to Mrs Llewellyn Roberts in grateful memory of her late husband's (Llewellyn Roberts) incomparable services to the community. As the great pioneer and founder of its industry, he may well be regarded as the pioneer of South Africa's citrus export industry."



Lewellyn James Roberts in the Baddaford Flanagan orchard around 1908

Beyond the history of my great-grandfather's pioneering work, I wanted to find out more about that memento that I had been unaware of. As a young boy, I regularly had tea with my grandmother Isobel Roberts. Weekly, she had a group of friends over who helped her discover improved selections in the "Flannagan's" Baddaford navel block. My gran would use the family silver tea set for these special occasions and



Baddaford Navel (Flannagan clone)



I remember an oak tray with silver rails being used to carry the tea set. I've since inherited the tray and after my discovery in the CRI archives, I used a magnifying glass to read the plaque, to see if it had any connection to the memento mentioned in the Kat River opening article. The faint, thin script read: "Presented to Mrs L.J. Roberts by the Kat River Cooperative Citrus Co Ltd., on the occasion of the opening of The Cooperative Pack House, in remembrance of the Founder of the Citrus Industry in the Kat River Valley June 1926."

I had joined the dots across 100 years. It was staggering to have made this connection so many years later, to the tray I had always known about. Likewise, it was fascinating to learn about the origin and history of the Baddaford 'Flannagan' Navel variety in SA, used by Katco growers in starting their industry, and their recognition of my great grandfather through this tray.

It is significant that the blood lines of these early growers and leaders, continue through to the present day with George Hall, one of the longest serving CGA board members and current Exco member of the CGA. George is the great-grandson of George White, (Katco chairman 1922 - 24) and grandson of Donald White (chairman 1947 - 76 and director for 44 years).

Likewise, Jock Danckwerts is the son of Lance Danckwerts who served on the citrus and SACCE boards from the 1960s and was chairman of SACCE (Outspan) from 1976 to the mid-80s. Jock (chairman, 1998 since) was the previous chairman of CRI. He assisted in guiding the CRI through the challenging inception and early stages of growing into the world-leading entity that it is today. Jock has also been a member of the CGA board for many years. Both Jock and George are the longest serving members of the CGA board, having both served on the CGA Cultivar Company board and River Bioscience board.

Jock and George were both present at the centenary, along with the very same families that have been Katco members from the very beginning. Justin Mildenhall (chairman 1982 - 93) whose father started planting citrus in 1935, attended the centenary joined by his children Barry, Ros, and son-in-law Pete Van Coller, as they continue to grow the family business.

The same legends, present in the early years of citrus in this area, Mike Mildenhall, Peter Johnson, Ernest Devilliers, Gordon Knott, Dudley Long, and Ronnie Smith were represented at the centenary by the new generations of Katco members of Mildenhalls, Devilliers, Johnsons, Knotts, Longs, Danckwerts, as well as Ronnie's wife, Junette.

Also present, were friends and associates of Katco, the directors of the CGA Board, CGA CEO Justin Chadwick, CRI CEO Vaughan Hattingh, and many friends and associates of the Katco family from around the world, which speaks to its standing in the citrus industry. Freek Dreyer (CEO of Zest Fruit) and a director on the Katco board presented the centenary toast using a fitting analogy of AmabokoBoko. He started by commending the hospitable people of the Eastern Cape, being the home of Siya Kholisi, Rassie Erasmus and no less than four previous Katco growers having represented Eastern Province rugby, where the languages of Xhosa, Afrikaans and English intertwine. It's not uncommon to hear a scrumhalf shout during a scrum, "Icala lakho [your side]", or "jou kant".

To reach the achievement of 100 years, Freek reckons, these criteria had to be met (the same as for the Boks).

Leadership: Rassie, Jacques, Siya and his leadership circle, where Rassie's strength is strategy and vision, clear communication to his staff and players, of their roles and accountability and being an "out the box", innovative thinker.

Defense: Jacques Nienaber, a 7th team Grey Bloem boy, decided on a career in

rewriting the book on defence, where he immersed himself in every aspect of defence, taking it to a game within a game, by breaking it down intrinsically into a binary process where your outcome is either 1-0 or 0-1. You win or you lose, and the margin is irrelevant.

Team: According to world media, it was not a star-studded team – they chose only one Bok into the World Cup dream 15. However, the Boks were formidable as a team, adopting the "Stronger together" theme where everyone played a part whether on or off the field.

Freek felt that these same criteria were evident at Katco, where strong leadership at the co-op and at industry level have played an important role over 100 years. Innovation and strategy enabled the first growers in the industry to plant citrus in a hostile environment that – as Jock Danckwerts reminds – even Piet Retief decided to leave.

Further connecting the dots of continued innovation, Glenmuir (the neighbouring farm to Roberts's Baddaford Farm) is where owner Glenam Knott discovered a Red Navelina (the 'Red Lina' referenced in previous articles). This navel variety from the small Kat River Valley was recently introduced by the CGA Cultivar Company throughout the navel producing world. The first commercial volumes were released on license to Spanish farmers in 2023 and will roll out further across the Mediterranean basin and the US in 2024.

As pointed out by Jock Danckwerts, the Katco has always been vertically integrated as a grower-packer-marketer company, except in the SACCE (Outspan single channel marketing) years. But even then, Jock's father as the then chairman of SACCE, was involved at leadership level. He added that all Katco members own their businesses. A grower from up north was heard saying, "Julle is daai ouens wat hulle vrugte by name ken." They manage their businesses efficiently, with strong support from Isabel Sparks (head of technical) who provides technical, advisory and industry information transfer to meet the

Flanagan orchard
foreground 1918



required specifics for export and their markets.

The Katco packhouses, expertly led by Trevor Lentz have been an integral part of Katco from 1926, as described on the plaque on the tray. However, from those early "rope and roller" lines, the new pack lines have evolved into state-of-the-art optic sizers with grading capabilities from Holland. New lines will be required as Katco's crop continues to grow.

The marketing committee led by Jock Danckwerts and his daughter Lindsay, who joined recently, has been actively involved in the marketing of Katco's fruit around the world. When Freek proposed a toast, I presented two glasses of wine to Jock and Freek on stage, on the the same tray that had been given to my great-grandmother 100 years ago at the opening of the Katco. On Jock's request, I

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explained the significance of the tray. My great-grandmother and great-aunt (wife of Jock's great-grandfather, also a citrus grower) received the tray at the opening a century ago, and at the Katco centenary celebration the two great-grandsons (Jock Danckwerts and I) witnessed a poignantly related occasion.

At the centenary celebration Charles Rossouw (CGA director of Senwes) challenged me to have a replica made of the tray, in recognition of Katco, spurring them to continue for another 100 years. A great idea that has already been actioned. 🍊

