

The Legend of Damon

Three things trapped Damon the droster: the sheepskin clothes he wore, the pit full of bones in his cave and the fact that he was trapped, literally, red-handed.

For 12 years Damon slaughtered pigs and sheep on Worcester farms and carried them back to his cave in the Langeberg mountains. Hunted by farmers he miraculously escaped capture time after time. When his cave was eventually discovered the pit full of bleached bones told the story of his long primitive survival. In a sense, Damon was the last of the old time drosters who had their beginning in the early settlement of the Cape.

MOUNTAINS

Fugitive slaves and absconders, the drosters formed colonies in the mountain ranges of the Cape in the areas largely inaccessible to the settlers and vigilante groups who searched for them. Damon's persistent and efficient thievery - and particularly his ghost-like elusiveness - made him a legend in the early 1900s. A man who recalls the raiding days of Damon is Mr Ettienne Kloppers of Cape Town. At his Sea Point home, Mr Kloppers produced a comb made of bone, the one found in Damon's cave at the time of his capture. 'I was a boy then,' says Mr Kloppers, 'but I remember Damon's reputation well. I remember the way farmers lay in wait for him, set traps and searched the district. 'But the wiley Damon was always one step ahead. It was my father, Dawie Kloppers, and his brother Kowie who finally caught old Damon on the farm Phillipsdale in the De Wet district of Worcester.'

TREKKED MILES

The guile of Damon is illustrated by the fact that he refused to steal sheep from the well stocked farm of Mr Gawie van der Merwe which lay below his cave. Instead he sometimes trekked for more than 10km to other farms carrying his freshly butchered carcasses away by means of a leather thong. Blood trails from the fresh meat petered out. Damon's footsteps disappeared at streams on the high ground as if the thief were a phantom.

Damon was to tell his captors of his close calls and of the night he stood frozen still in the bushes while farms inspected sheep's blood no more than a metre from his sheepskin shoes. It was his leather carrying thong that was the undoing of Damon the droster. After a successful ambush with his brother, Dawie Kloppers caught hold of the training thong.

ESCAPED

'Damon spun around and knocked out my father's two front teeth with a rock,' said Ettienne Kloppers. 'A friend who was with Damon managed to escape. his friend used to sell fynhoud - fine firewood - in Worcester to provide Damon with flour, matches and basic necessities. After that night, he was never seen again.' Damon's captors were astonished at the inside of Damon's cave. They found a 12-year-old newspaper tucked into a crevice, dating the length of Damon's stay. As they penetrated the foul smelling hole they found utensils and the comb made of bone. The cave grew bigger until it fell away altogether into a vast pit full of incriminating evidence - bones. Damon went to jail, but the story has a happy ending. On his release, Dawie Kloppers, wearing a new set of teeth, was outside the prison waiting for Damon. he offered the droster a job a handyman. The retired sheep thief, dressed in smart whites,

excelled in his new job. 'He often carried my little sister around on his back as he scrubbed the floor,' said Mr Kloppers, 'I think then for the first time in years he was really happy.'

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