

HISTORICAL



FARMHOUSES OF NAMIBIA

Wally Peters

Rich in architectural variety, the farmhouses of Namibia blend, and sometimes contrast, with the arid landscape.

Policymakers of the former German South West Africa envisioned the territory as a settlement colony and a new agricultural frontier. Yet during the first two decades of colonisation, development was slow and hesitant, attracting only very few adventurous immigrants, otherwise almost exclusively colonial troops released from service, who, having come to love Namibia, decided to make it their home. Life for a farmer, trying to eke out a precarious living in the Namibian veld, troubled by low rainfalls, a lack of markets and transport, and an ever-present fear of epidemics, was grim and difficult.

The pivotal point in German policy was the calamitous era of the Herero-Nama uprising, during the years 1904 – 1907. Hereafter a new spirit of determination set in, copper was successfully exploited in the north, diamonds discovered in the south, and the railway network expanded. Concerted efforts were made to improve the agricultural basis of the colony, cattle breeding was encouraged and karakul sheep imported. With a sound economic foundation Namibia soon became the most important German settler colony.

During this era, termed the Wilhelmian period after the monarch, Wilhelm II, Germany itself was experiencing an industrial revolution. The flood of unemployed emigrants to the U.S.A. was halted by the growth of industrial centres. Men who emigrated to

Namibia needed to be reasonably affluent; few farmers could afford decent houses, and opportunities for credit were scant. For this reason the majority of emigrants to Namibia were not farmers but people whose way of life had been shaped by the city rather than by the countryside, and it is largely to such men that Namibia owes its imprint of manor houses.

The varied backgrounds and urban upbringing of the immigrants then explains the wide variety of farmhouses evident in Namibia. A family resemblance of farmsteads as in those of the South Western Cape was no longer possible in the experimental architectural era at the turn of the century. It is however very evident that the typical German farmhouse, the *Einhaus*, whereby house and stable are accommodated under one roof, is not to be found in Namibia. This is in part due to the fact that there is little need to house animals in the warm climate of Namibia, and in part due to the absence of tall and straight trees to provide the timber required for the construction of an *Einhaus*. Instead one finds farmhouses characteristic of the settlers' area of origin, expressive of the urban tastes and desires, and their wish for certain imagery within the framework imposed by the availability of certain local building materials.

Only in one house is the image of the *Einhaus* vaguely present, that on the farm Gras, situated on the Fish

River, west of Kalkrand. On this farm, Carl Woermann, son of the shipping magnate, built a new house in 1908, the design of which most likely stems from Friedrich Höft, house architect of the shipping line. This house can be termed the culmination of a most successful architectural career in both coastal towns of German S.W.A. – Lüderitz and Swakopmund – if one measures Höft's importance as an architect according to the originality of his style.

Though the plan in no way conforms to the *Einhaus* characteristic of accommodating both house and stables, Höft made use of that image to meet with the restraints of climate in providing a comfortable home. He used the many louvred gable openings to ventilate the large roof space, thereby cooling the house. A similar principle is applied along the long facades, where an arched verandah protects the rooms of the house from the direct influence of the sun. Because of the narrower width of the verandah the rooms are not dark, nor cut off from the beneficial influence of the sun during the winter months. Höft modulated the width to provide a look-out niche off the doors of the master bedroom and to create a larger airy seating space on to which both dining room and lounge open; a present day photograph along the walkway reveals the fine quality of the spatial form of this verandah.



² Due to the extreme climate, this outdoor seating space served probably as the main living space, and to give it external expression Höft positioned a tower with bell roof along the main saddle roof at this point. To cool the house further the floors are generally of coloured tiles and the kitchen, which by its nature is hot, is separated from the house, food being conveyed to the dining room under a linking covered walkway.

Whether the image of the *Einhaus* was deliberate remains enigmatic; perhaps the higher building costs involved are the reason for this generic solution not eliciting further experiments in this form of environmental control elsewhere in the colony.

For the owners of the farm Gras, building costs were obviously of no concern for all building materials were drawn the 215 km from Windhoek by wagon, a return trip taking four weeks and longer. In other cases, locally available materials became the means for building. On the farm Okongava, near Karibib, the original farmer Rösemann, made use of the marble deposits on his farm to construct his kraals and service

building, a phenomenon which must surely rank as rare. On discovering marble on his farm, Gustav Voigts of Voigtland, west of Windhoek, had the verandah posts of his house substituted with a marble arcade to form a loggia, incorrectly termed by some a "tuscan loggia".

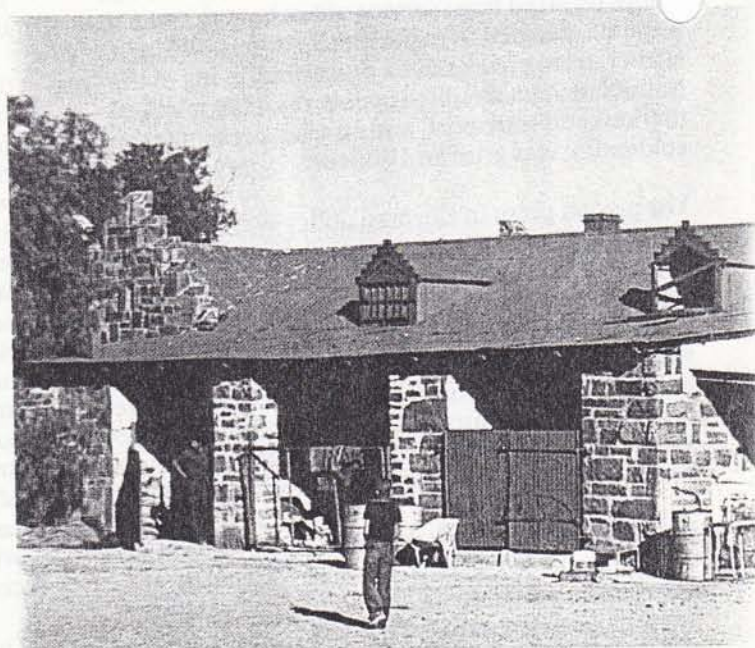
The use of locally available building materials has always added the aesthetic characteristic of blending a building into its landscape. This aim is achieved particularly well in the farmhouse in Duwisib in the Maltahöhe district by the use of local red granite. Baron Von Wolf chose Wilhelm Sander, an architect with a strong liking for mediaeval form, to design his house. Sander conceived the farmhouse in the form of a fortified castle with four corner towers and a "Corps de Logis".

Giving external expression to the great hall, living accommodation is placed on three sides of a quadrangle, the main living rooms spatially flowing into one another, their climax the double volumed hall with minstrels' gallery.

Von Wolf unified the farmstead by using red bossed granite blocks for the construction of the paddocks, service building and servants' quarters, their common stone walls a further unifying influence. In the service building the stepped end gables of the roof are echoed in the dormer windows, in the latter case, however, having to resort to the use of timber for consistency of form.

Laudable as these aesthetic aspects are, the house however fails to meet the basic environmental requirements for family living. Because of the southern and therefore cold orientation of the living rooms and the restricted ventilation of the bedrooms by means of firing slits, the house is neither warm in winter nor cool in summer.

The typical Namibian farmstead is not made up of such overpowering castle imagery. It generally consists of a modest dwelling house, the service buildings, *kraals*, paths, a few eucalyptus trees, the ubiquitous windmill and associated drinking troughs. In Namibia it is



3

The farmhouse on the farm Gras, photographed soon after completion. The Einhaus image is vaguely present in the use of the large jerkin headed roof and the timber framing above the ceiling line. (State Archives, Windhoek).

2. Front elevation of the farmhouse on Haribes. Note the sturdy verandah columns built as simple shafts without base nor capital.

3. The step-gabled service building at Duwisib, also of red granite.

4. The step-gable outline echoed in the dormer window design of Duwisib.

5. The Räucherhaus on Haribes.

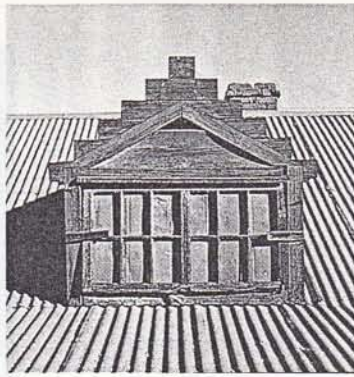
6. View along one accommodational wing of Duwisib, opening to the quadrangle.

7. Service building on the farm Okongava.

8. The minstrels' gallery of the double volumed great hall at Duwisib.

9. The focal tower of Gras with bell roof giving external expression to the importance of the airy seating space off the diningroom and lounge.

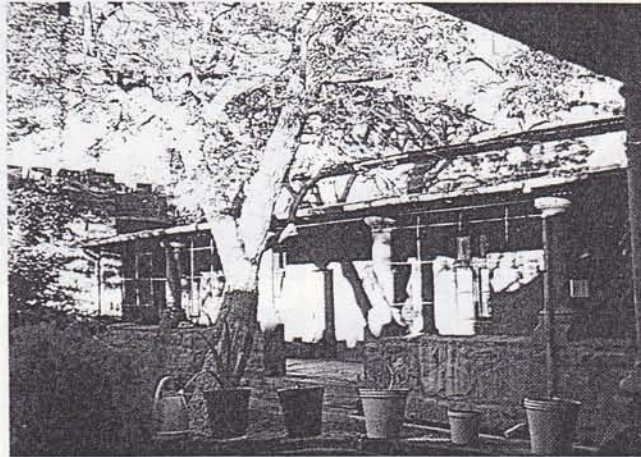
10. South elevation of Duwisib. Note the corner towers, the central Corps de Logis and the machicolated cranellations of the farmhouse conceived as a fortified mediaeval castle.



4



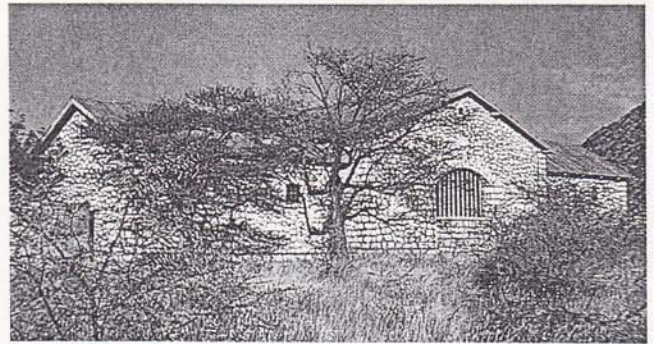
5



6

customary to select a site with a water well but which, at the same time, is well drained, to cope with the sudden summer cloudbursts. The farmhouse is located where greatest advantage can be taken of views over the farm and towards naturally attractive features. Windows in the living portion of the farmhouse are then oriented toward these views, while service buildings and *kraals* are kept away from this part of the farmstead.

A well laid out farm is that of Albert Voigts, who on his farm Voigtsgrund, situated between Mariental and Maltahöhe, began experiments in Karakul breeding in Namibia as early as 1900. Voigts layed out the service buildings along the farm access road which runs along a spur and terminates in a turning circle at the farmhouse. Beyond the garden are views over the barrage on the Tsub River in the valley below. At the



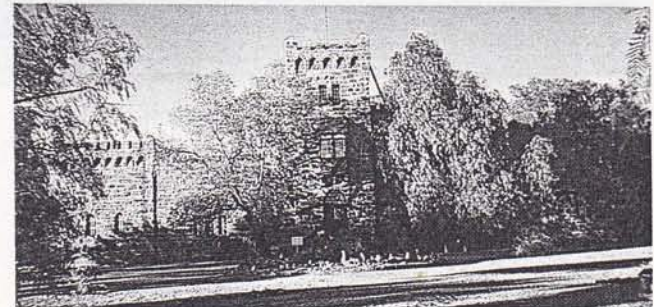
7



8



9



10

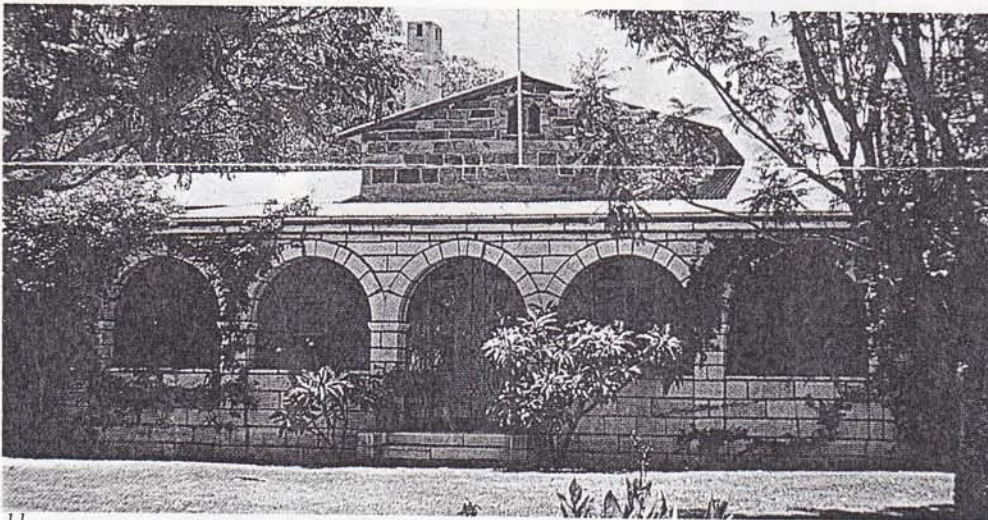
time of the official visit of the German Secretary of State for the Colonies, Dernburg, in 1908, Voigtsgrund was the largest farm in Namibia. It was reported that the gracious sounds of a grand piano, brought by oxwagon from Windhoek, rustled through the spacious rooms in the cool evenings.

Another large farm was New Heusis, west of Windhoek in the Khomas Hochland, originally designed for the breeding of cattle and processing of meat for export. Although the farmhouse is well perched, taking advantage of the rolling countryside, it is probably the

most discordant in that rolling landscape and hence termed *Pralltriller* by the public. It was most likely built to the managing director's personal idiosyncratic plan and is in fact a forlorn town house in the landscape. Its abrupt ending and situation on a high plinth, leave it with none of the features related to a farmhouse. It is unusual for its two storeys and large number of bedrooms all accommodated in the upper floor, i.e. in the attic of the mansard roof. The main living rooms of the lower floor open up on to a large balcony, which is in fact the roof of a motor vehicle garage equipped even with a mechanic's pit, notable for 1912, the probable date of the building.

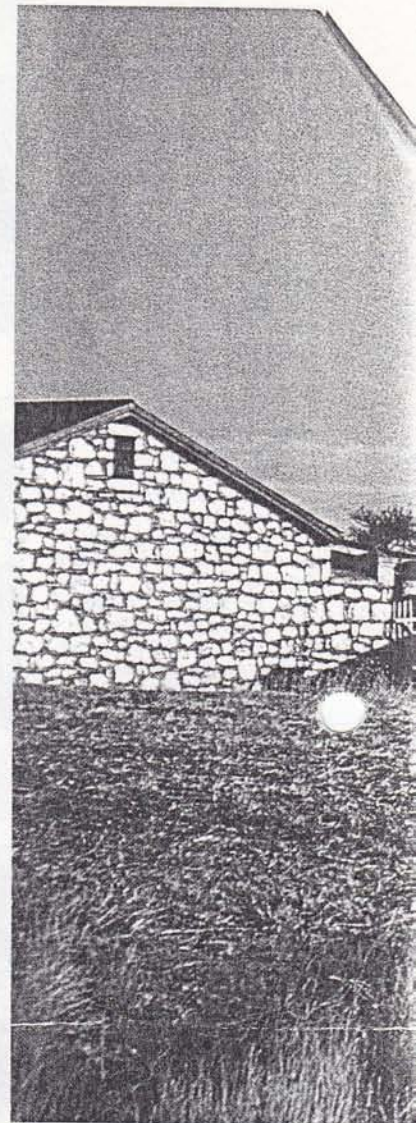
One of the service buildings is provided with a dungeon-like basement which could possibly have served as a gaol. This large estate comprised a post office, police station, a shop, and what must be a novelty on Namibian farms, a bowling alley for the entertainment of the large staff community. One of the staff houses is crowned with crenellations and a watch tower, which was probably designed for defensive rather than romantic reasons, an estate of this scale requiring a "keep" in times of strife.

After his diamond find, August Stauch broadened his base and turned also to farming, a decision well received by the population. He acquired the farm Haribes, west of Mariental, and intended farming with

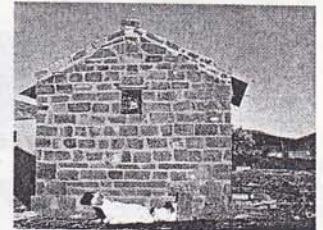


11 cattle, sheep, horses and ostriches. The farmstead was layed out along the lines of a German *Gutshof*, with a mound, offering a site well protected from floods, reserved for the farmhouse which was reported to be under construction in 1912. This is a relatively large house, yet restrained in appearance and can in some ways be termed a vanguard to modernism in Namibian architecture. Noteworthy is the simple and yet powerful roof form and especially the verandah columns, built as sturdy shafts without base or capital. This simplification is indicative of a tendency away from the historicist architecture of the 19th century toward the unadorned architecture of the 20th century. At the rear, and due west, the roof has a large overhang, protecting the bedrooms from the harsh afternoon sun and at the same time offering weather protection to the staircase, which at this point connects to the cellar. Across a yard is a building often associated with farmsteads in Namibia, the *Räucherhaus* or smoke house used for curing sausages and other meat products.

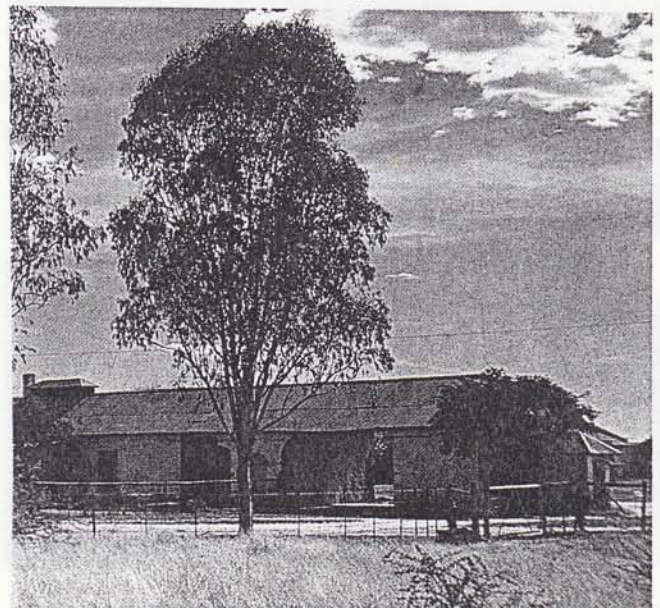
- 11. Loggia of the farm Voigtland west of Windhoek.
- 12. A service building on Neu Heusis. Access to the dungeon-like basement was by way of the porch at the right.
- 13. Kraals defined by walls of marble on the farm Okongava.
- 14. A typical servants' quarters building in Duwisib.
- 15. The Karroo influence of the catslide roof of corrugated iron sheets of alternating colours and the steeply pitched saddle roof and projecting gable, vestiges of Cape Dutch thatched architecture.
- 16. The access road on farm Voigtsgrund terminating at the farmhouse.



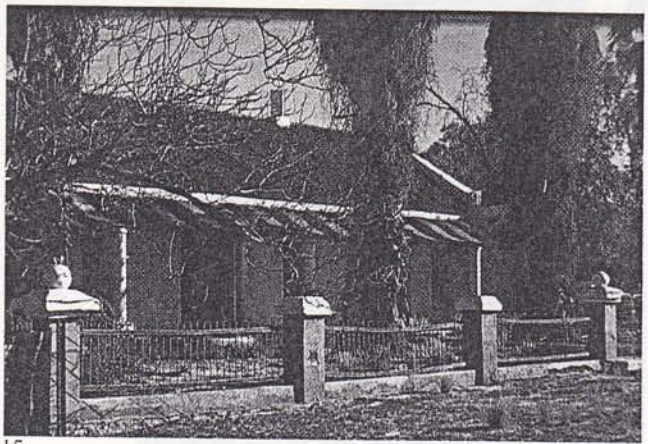
13



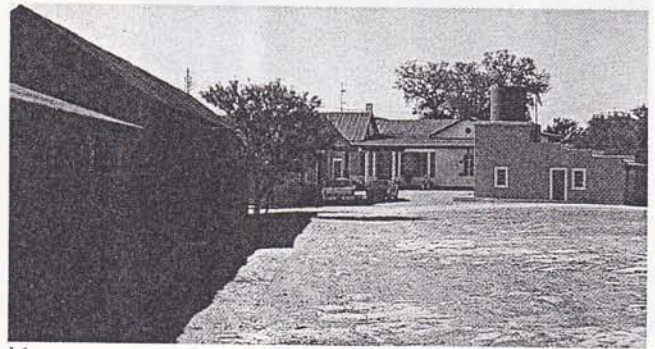
14



12



15



16

Another Karroo characteristic found on farms around the Fish River Canyon is the use of a corbelled roof. In the Williston district of the Great Karroo, the severe shortage of timber brought about a method of roofing by corbelling whereby each flat stone course overlaps the one below until the space is roofed.

Unfortunately several of the farmhouses discussed are in disuse, some having been deserted for a long time, causing their slow dilapidation. It is therefore most pleasing to find the occasional adaptation of a deserted building to a new use. The former barracks of the 2nd Battery at Johann Albrechtshöhe near Karibib is a case in question. The richly crenellated tower has been restored and the former proud landmark now serves as a farmhouse.

The process of adaptation is also evident on the farm Voigtskirch converted by Gustav Voigts from a deserted missionary church to become a farmhouse. This farmhouse is well sited at the confluence of the Nossob and Otjihase Rivers, west of Windhoek, and because of its elevation, enjoys fine vantages. Realising this, the architect Sander in his additions built a mediaeval "curtain wall" around the riverside of the hose and created a view pavilion of what would otherwise have been a barbican.

In a country as vast as Namibia, the melange of styles of farmhouses on the relatively few farms adds great interest to the visual landscape. The family resemblance of Cape Dutch farmsteads would tend to be monotonous. A landscape with a paucity of dramatic features and lush greenery demands bolder architectural solutions to create senses of identity throughout the vast territory. The characteristics of the Namibian farmhouses can thus be said to be their richness in variety, for they represent faithfully the pioneering farming development of the German settler colony.

Contrary to his policy of using local building materials, Rösemann, on his farm Okongava (already referred to), built a plastered Räucherhaus. The farmhouse, also in some ways indicative of the modern approach to architecture, contains vestiges of a classical order in the played treatment of the shaft.

The regional origins of the settlers becomes clear in the external expression of the farmhouse. Often a German farmhouse can be identified by the tower with pyramidal roof and flare eaves, as is the case on the farm Streitdamm at Aroab. At other times German houses are imbued with characteristics of the official architecture of the colony, for example segmental arches and quoined surrounds to window and door openings as well as at the building's corners, as at Westfalenhof along the Swakop River, near Gross Barmen.

Some South Africans settled in the southern parts of Namibia, bringing with them the Karroo tradition of building. The house on the farm Stinkdorn, north east of Karasburg, has a catslide roof covering the verandah with alternating corrugated iron sheets of different colours, a characteristic found throughout the Karroo. The body of the building, however, with its simple yet steep saddle roof and projecting gable, is a vestige of a Cape Dutch thatched roof.