

AFRIKANER COLONY IN ARGENTINA

Staff writer Lionel Mundell sent us this report from Argentina about the small colony of Afrikaner descendants farming in the Sarmiento area



Frequent visitors at Wonderfontein are Gorrie and Jan Venter, also Afrikaner descendants in the area. With them are junior members of the Eloff family and a friend.

TIME is threatening to completely sever the once strong ties between the tiny community of Afrikaner descendants at Sarmiento in southern Argentina and their friends, and even relations, in South Africa.

Since the lonely community of hardy farmers originally established themselves in the inhospitable and windswept plains of Patagonia more than 70 years ago, strong ties have been maintained with their homeland — until recently that is. Now, it appears the passage of time, distance and assimilation of subsequent generations by the local population are poised to deliver a knock-out blow. All meaningful contact is definitely in danger of being finally broken.

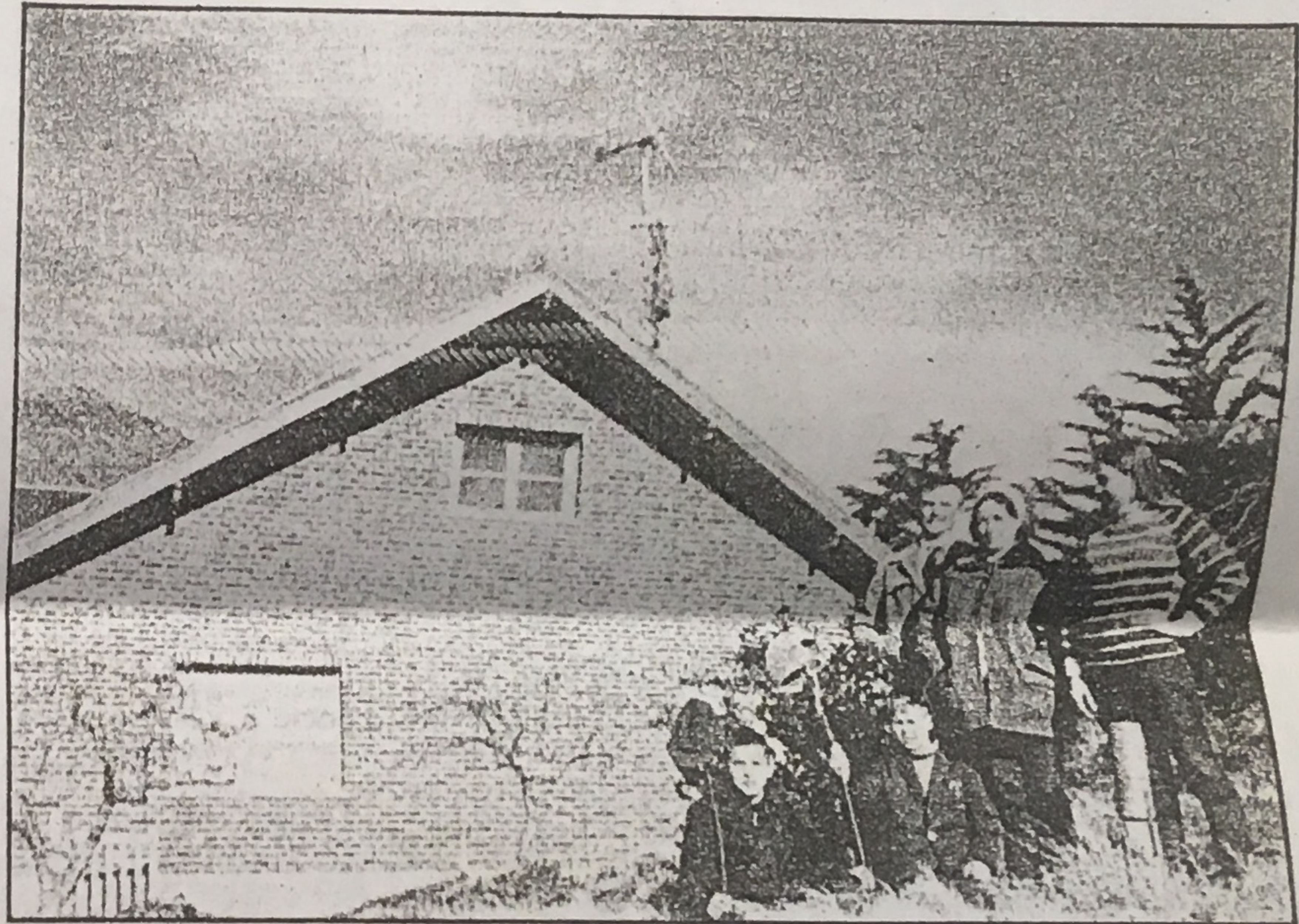
At present there are a total of about 200 Afrikaner descendants — including children — in the area, many still farming Merino sheep on farms with names such as Voorspoed, Boshhoek, Vrede, Bulhoek and Ventershoek. Family names such as Myburgh, Venter, Viviers, Trichardt, De Bruin, Visser, Vorster and Grimbeek are common in the area.

Most of the older folk still speak fluent Afrikaans as well as Spanish — the language of their adopted country. However, the younger generation speak

only little Afrikaans and have become typically Argentine in their habits and mannerisms.

There has also been a steady swing away from the once staunch Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk congregation. At one stage the congregation at Sarmiento was so strong that a dominee was sent from South Africa to look after their needs. However, it is said this kindly man found it very difficult to adapt to the area and returned after a short stay. Nowadays a minister serving the Dutch community in Buenos Aires flies to Comodoro Rivadavia, near Sarmiento, once every few weeks to conduct services, marriages, christenings and other duties.

Over the years — the first immigrants arrived in October, 1903, after political differences in South Africa — the tightly-knit community clung to their Afrikaner traditions and tended, to a large extent, to marry partners within their ranks. But as time began to erode memories and the aroma of *vetkoek*, *beskuit*, *pannekoek* and *koeksisters* the younger generation became more and more Argentine. Today many of them are married to Argentines, speak only



Dr Eloff and his wife at Wonderfontein, their farm in Argentina. With them are their daughter, Diana, and son, Alexander (immediately in front of his parents) and a friend.

Spanish and no longer live in Patagonia.

HOWEVER, the core of the community — from *oumas* and *oupas* down to *kleinkinders* — is still in the Sarmiento area, and most are as keen as mustard to revive the once strong bonds with friends and relations in South Africa.

One of the leaders of the community, Dr Max Eloff, of the farm Wonderfontein, told me that he was making a last ditch effort to rebuild relationships between the Afrikaner descendants at Sarmiento and anyone in South Africa who wanted to be friends with them. At present he is trying to organise a trip to the Republic in February next year for about 60 members of the community. He hopes to include as many young people as possible so that friendships can be made and maintained in future. "We would obviously like to visit some farms in South Africa and I am trying to arrange get-togethers for the various families," he says.

The South African office of Aerolineas Argentinas is also hoping to offer a trip for South Africans next year to visit the community at Sarmiento.

Dr Eloff, who was born in Argentina

and trained as a veterinary surgeon in that country, is a prominent Merino farmer and no longer practises as a vet. He is a friendly, unassuming man of many talents, and one of his great ambitions is to rebuild the once strong bridges between the community of Afrikaner-descendant farmers in Patagonia and their South African friends and relations.

He is a radio "ham" and has, himself, never lost contact with South Africa — the land of his forefathers. "If I can't manage to call up my contacts in South Africa I try Gough Island where I often speak to members of the South African meteorological team on that forlorn dot in the ocean. It is a warm kind of communication between people so far apart and yet in not totally dissimilar situations."

Dr Eloff and his wife, Petronella, (née Venter) regard themselves as Argentines and Argentina as their home. Although both were born in Argentina, "we still have a strong, invisible attachment with South Africa. It is the land of our forefathers and we would like to see Afrikaner traditions and the language preserved for as long as possible here in our small corner of the world," they say.



Diana Eloff on a gaucho's (herdsman) horse.