

Boer brought tulips to Argentina

By Peter Schirmer
who has returned from a tour of South America.

ally constructed raft and brought in through the breakers. Several times it seemed that the raft would capsize and the drill be lost.

Within a week drilling began at what was considered to be the most likely spot, two miles north of the tiny settlement, on the Du Plessis farm. Instead of water the drillers found oil.

It was the beginning of an oil industry which was to change the complexion of Comodoro completely. Though the direct benefits of the discovery were confined to those Boers on whose land oil was found, there were indirect benefits in

Cape Town had been grown from bulbs which his Huguenot ancestors had brought from the Cardinal's own tulip gardens.

"Everyone thought that Kobus was mad. They told him that the flowers would never grow," 86-year-old Piet van der Walt, the oldest member of the community, told me the evening after my arrival in Comodoro.

"Sure enough, the first two years — the winters were bitter and the springs and summers were not much better — there were no flowers. Then, the third year, they grew. They were very beautiful, and we had a bowl of them on the communion table at nagmaal."

It was on the Du Plessis farm, one of the nearest to Comodoro, that oil was first found in 1909 — an accident which was to cost Du Plessis his farm, though he made a good profit from the oil rights.

One of the main difficulties the early settlers in the Comodoro area had to face was the lack of fresh water.

Even 25 years after the landing of the first settlers the Rev. A. D. Luckhoff reported in Die Kerkbode that the town was known among the Afrikaners as "Vrek van Dors" (Die of Thirst). Today the water scarcity has been solved by piping water from the chain of lakes near Sarmiento, 120 miles inland.

These facilities did not exist for the early settlers, and after long negotiation with the Argentinian Government a drilling machine was shipped down the coast in 1909.

"Oom" Jan Venter, one of the

leaders of the community today, was in his teens at the time.

"We had travelled by wagon to Comodoro for our supplies, and watched the ship bringing the drilling rig as she anchored in the Gulf of San Jorge. The drill was lowered on to a speci-

"A PITY you were not here in the spring," said the distinguished-looking Argentinian huddled in his llama-hair overcoat as the aircraft bounced roughly over the wastes of Patagonia. "The tulips were quite beautiful, a carpet of colour."

I was surprised and said so. Patagonia, which stretches from a latitude 11 degrees (further south than Cape Town) almost to the Antarctic, seemed an unlikely place for tulips to grow.

In Comodoro Rivadavia, "capital" of Patagonia, I had not seen a single garden. The bitter winters and the year-round winds are inhospitable to flowers or anything more luxurious than grass and rough scrub.

My travelling companion, who proved to be Don Felipe Bonadeo, general manager of one of the large oil companies based on Comodoro, explained:

"Ah, the tulips do not bloom every year. Only after an exceptionally mild winter followed by a warmish spring — about every six or seven years. They were brought to Comodoro by one of the Sud-Africanos and were planted on his farm, where our offices and several of our oil rigs now stand."

Beautiful

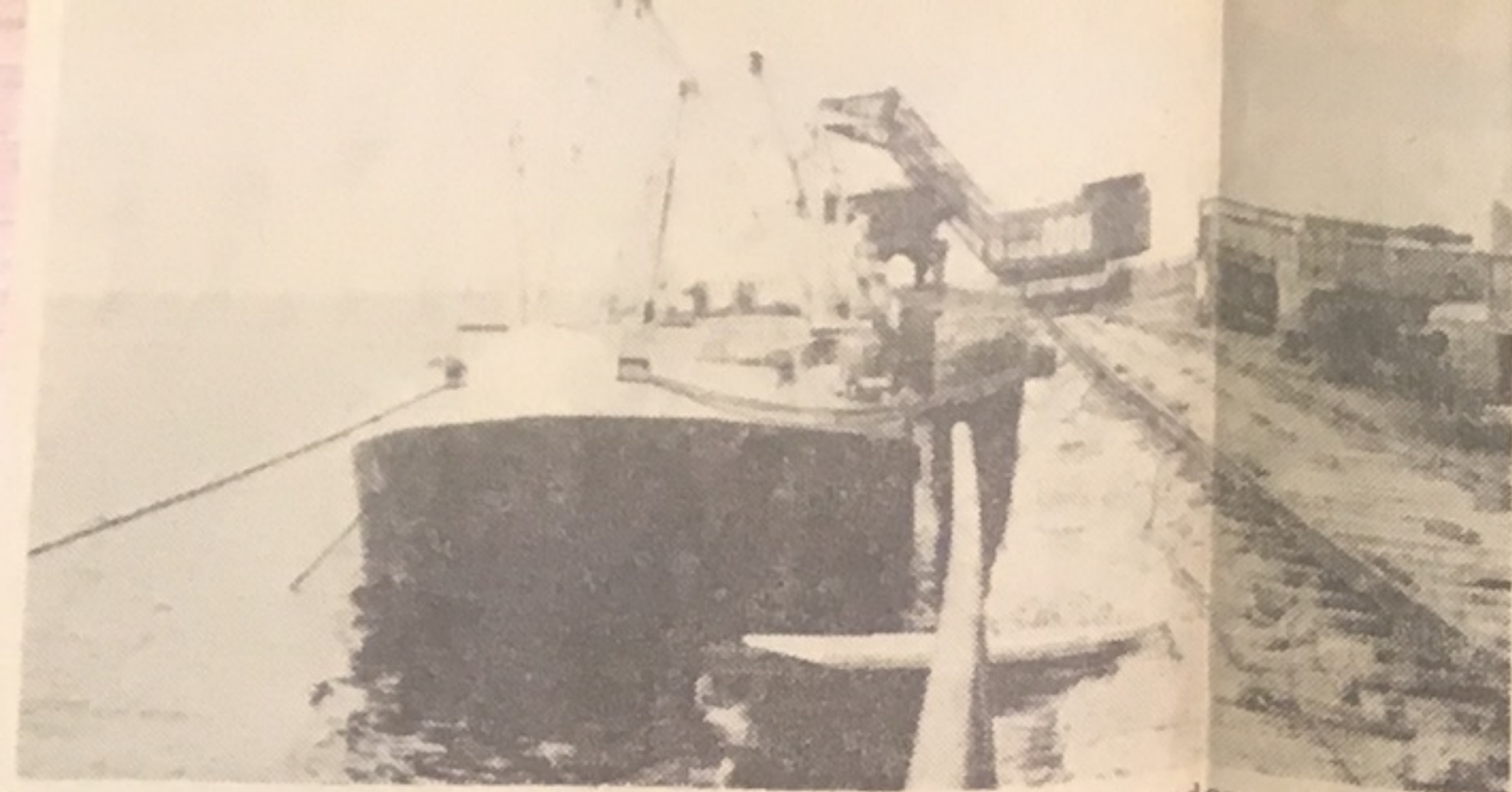
LATER Don Felipe showed me colour photographs of the tulips — an incongruous, but beautiful, patch of colour against the stark browns and ochre of the Patagonian hills, broken only by the harsh steel structures of the oil rigs.

I was on my way to Comodoro Rivadavia to visit the 600-strong Afrikaans-speaking Boer community of Patagonia — descendants of the "bittereinders" who had emigrated from South Africa rather than remain in their homes under the British flag at the end of the South African War.

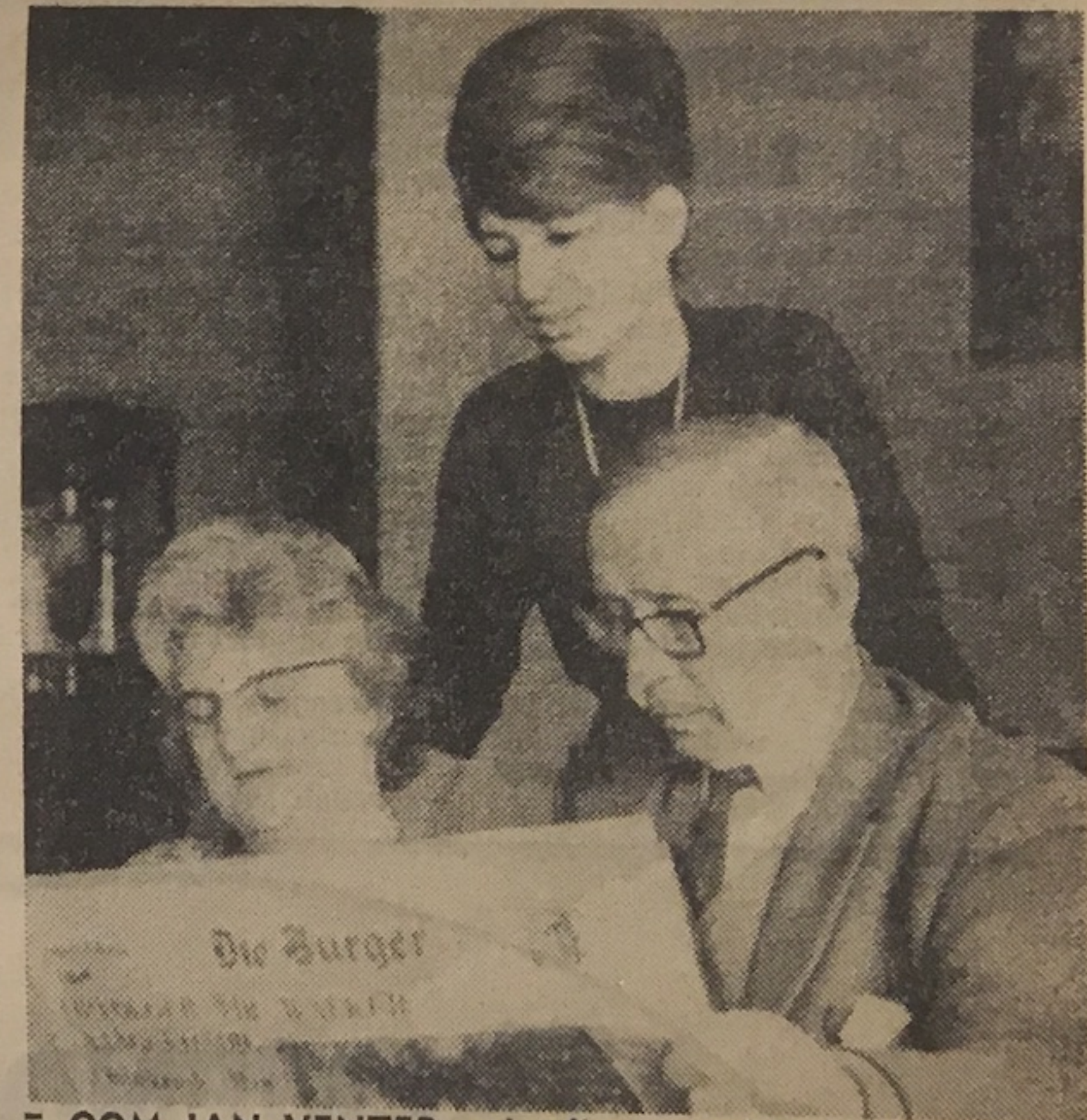
It was one of these men, Mr. Kobus du Plessis, who had planted the tulips.

Three treks

THERE were three main treks over a period of four years and Oom Kobus was a member of the trek led by Louis Bauman. He was directly related to Cardinal Richelieu, and the tulip bulbs which he took with him in the S.S. Lapampa when she sailed from



A breakwater and jetty built to serve oil tankers at Comodoro Rivadavia, ships much of the Boer farmers' wool to Buenos Aires or Bahia Blanca.



OOM JAN VENTER a leading member of the community, and his wife—one of the first women born in Patagonia's Boer colony—read an Afrikaans paper sent by air from South Africa. Their daughter, Margrita, looks on.

NEAR THE ANTARCTIC

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← Part of the sprawling town of Comodoro Rivadavia. No houses are built more than two storeys high because of the strong winds which blow steadily for most of the year.

terms of improved transport facilities and easier access to the developments of the rest of the world.

Oil was found all around the town, and several hundred yards out to sea. Plans were laid for a railway and roads from the north, but these were only completed in the late 1930s after innumerable difficulties.

From a sleepy farming dorp Comodoro suddenly became a bustling cosmopolitan town which today has a population of about 50,000. But apart from the extra comforts which they were able to obtain and a ready market for their mutton and other farm produce, the Boers were unaffected.

Collapsed

THE town's oil prospects collapsed nearly three years ago, when the Argentinian Government, under President Illia, cancelled the oil contracts signed by his predecessor with 11 foreign and Argentinian oil companies.

Most of the companies have withdrawn all but skeleton staffs from their concessions and thousands of Chilean peons, who formed the bulk of the population, have been thrown out of work.

Half-completed buildings are scattered about the town, and the peons live in them, scrounging what food and clothing they can. Many are lawless and have created a new threat to the Boers' main interest — their flocks of sheep.

"Stock theft has rocketed in the past two years," Mr. Gerhard Slagter, the unofficial South African "vice-consul" in Comodoro, told me. "The police force is far too small and the farms too large for proper patrols against the thieves. We estimate that at least 50 head of sheep are stolen each week."

These figures seem high, but as more than two million sheep are run in Patagonia, mainly owned and developed by the Boers, they are small in comparison with the death toll among sheep during the heavy winter snows.

Mr. Stoffel Myburgh, son

of one of the treks' leaders said: "Often we find a huddle of sheep buried completely, living in a sort of cave beneath the snow."

The main breeds of sheep are Merino and Romney Marsh, which seem to have adapted themselves to the bitter winter conditions and the cold winds that sweep their grazing grounds throughout the year.

Farmers in the area believe that it is this cold which has left the area free of sheep diseases. The early Boer colonists found that the only disease affecting their sheep was scab, and even this was soon eliminated.

Today their only losses are caused by the elements and thieves.

Some farmers have a lamb crop of up to 15,000 per season, and at least two farms must be among the largest privately-owned sheep farms in the world.

"Oom" Jan Venter runs more than 22,000 sheep on his farm — and he is not quite sure of the size of the farm. It takes

three days to ride across it in one direction and two days to ride in the other.

Two farms

MR. MYBURGH, who farms with his two sons, owns two farms on which he runs more than 30,000 sheep.

He has now retired to a small house in Comodoro, and he and his sons — one runs each farm — keep in touch with each other by a private radio-telephone system.

"It is the only way that we can know what is happening over the vast distances," he said.

Conditions have not always been so easy for the farmers. The early Boer colonists faced incredible hardships to carve the area into its present prosperous state.

"We didn't have only the elements to contend with — there was hunger and wild animals — pumas, mountain lions and the large grey Andean

jackal which is more like a wolf," Oom Jan Venter told me.

"During the second winter we were here a jackal attacked my five-year-old sister, Sukie, not more than ten yards from the shack which we had built. My father chased the jackal away before he had done more than bite her arm. He was probably hungry — we certainly were."

On another occasion, this time during the summer, his sister was attacked by a puma.

"I was alone at the homestead at the time, and Sukie was playing under a tree in the yard. The puma sprang from the branches and started to maul her. I drove it off with a heavy stick. Sukie was badly scratched and frightened, but her wounds healed quickly."

A year later Oom Jan himself was attacked by a puma which sprang on his back while he was on his horse checking the small flock of sheep which the family had raised.

"The horse shied and I fell from the saddle with the puma on top of me. I had my rifle

in my hand, and before it could get to my throat I shot it."

Oom Jan still has the skin of that puma — the first of many he shot — and rows of scars down his back as mementoes of the encounter.

"Today very few pumas are left in the area, and the jackals are kept out by fencing. We lose very few sheep to four-legged marauders, though the two-legged variety are still a nuisance," he said.

In place of the old shacks, with their guttering home-made candles for light, the farmers' houses today are well-built and modern. Most of them have their own generators and running water — installed through the profits of their annual wool clips.

One thing they lack, however, in spite of all other modern conveniences, is fresh milk. Milk cows cannot exist in the area, and although frozen milk is flown to Comodoro it often turns sour when melted.

"If only we could get fresh milk instead of the powdered variety, we could have really good melktert," Mrs. Martha Eloff, wife of Comodoro's "vet," told me with longing.



Mr. Stoffel Myburgh (right) with his wife Maria, his son Gert Petrus and grandson Niclaas. With his two sons he runs one of the largest areas of sheep land in Patagonia.