

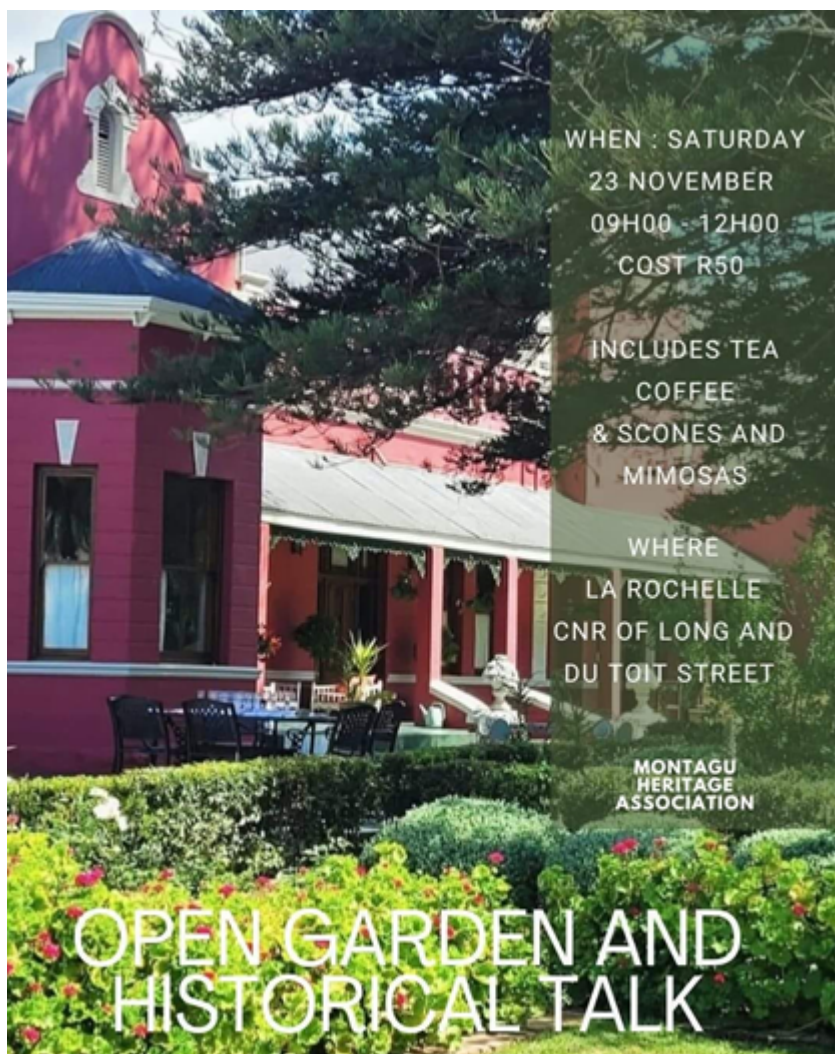
120. La Rochelle

A Talk given by Chairperson Montagu Heritage Association Irma Jordaan (2024)

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Story number: 30.
<https://montagumuseum.co.za/montagu-stories/short-stories-2/>

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<https://montagumuseum.co.za/montagu-stories/the-jouberts-of-montagu/>





Event hosts Elaine and Anna-Marie Coetzee in their family owned property

Irma Jordaan



Babsie van Zyl – one of the icons of Montagu said “La Rochelle

is the nearest thing to a stately home that Montagu has ever produced" In its hey-day at around the turn of the century all important visitors to the village were received there. For instance in 1905 sir Hely-Hutchinson the then Governor of the Cape Colony spent the night here. Receptions were held for Jan Smuts and Louis Botha when they visited Montagu on separate occasions, and countless other dignitaries too many to name.

Willem Adolf Joubert or "oom Willempie" as he was affectionately known arrived with the "groot trek" from Wellington and in 1875 purchased a certain piece of land from a Mr Willem Johannes Rootman for the amount of £250. One would assume that a dwelling already existed on this land.

On this ground his son PJ would later build his dream house "La Rochelle".

Willempie was the founder of the brandy distillery that became known as the Montagu Co-op Winery in 1878. The distillery was located on the corner of Kohler and Long Streets yes the same building where we watch movies on a Wednesday night. The double storey section in which we now find the Odean movie house was built specially to accommodate the brandy still.

Willempie became an important person in Montagu. Not only was he the first Mayor of Montagu from 1895 to 1903 but he also represented the area as member in the old Cape Parliament. He also owned a general dealer store which was located in the building in Bath Street where we now find the Hospice shop.

In 1887 at the age of 23 PJ joined his father in this shop and it became known as WA Joubert & Zoon. In 1904 PJ bought the business from his father for £2500 and renamed it "PJ Joubert General Merchant". He also owned a winery and mill located diagonally across from his shop in Bath Street – where we now find Full House and Pep Home. Not only was he exporting his wines overseas, but was also the biggest supplier of Muscadell

and Port in the Cape Province. He also had a garage next to his shop which had the Ford agency.



Unfortunately there is no reliable date for when he built La Rochelle but one would assume it was probably in the 1890's.

The builder was a Mr. Willie van As and the house was built to the likeness of Melrose House in the Transvaal where the Peace of Vereeniging was signed to end the ABW. Melrose house was built in 1886.

PJ married Hester Jordaan one of my grandfather's sisters. The two of them had 5 sons and three daughters between the years 1889 and 1906.

A governess was appointed to tutor the 8 children in the schoolroom on the top floor of the house. A spiral iron staircase – which still exists in the house to this day was installed to gain access to the classroom and other rooms in the loft. Only a few of these type of staircases are still in existence. It would appear from old photographs that there was a small balcony on the right hand side gable. Perhaps this was closed off in dr Coetzee's day. The present owner is planning in due course to restore the balcony in the gable.

The colour of the house now is the same as when it was built.

PJ's hobby was gardening – he loved his roses. The rose garden was situated on the right hand side of the house next to the tennis court – with a large fruit orchard, a greenhouse and vegetable garden at the back of the house.

The croquet court was to the right of the gate.

The family loved the garden and they often took to take tea on the lawn.

In 1919 PJ purchased an extra piece of ground where we now find the La Rochelle Villas. This enabled him to gain easy access to his businesses in Bath Street.

With so many children – I suppose it was difficult to keep track of their comings and goings. An example of this was a story which was told of a traveller stopping a stranger in the street late one night to ask for directions to the hotel. He was told to carry on till he sees the big building with lots of lights – which would have been what the Montagu Hotel is now. Somehow this man misunderstood the directions but eventually found a building which he thought was the hotel. On entry he was warmly received, given a plate of food and shown to a room. The next morning when he wanted to pay after breakfast he discovered that he stayed not at the hotel but at La Rochelle. The Jouberts thought he was a friend of one of the boys and was therefore were happy to give him a room for the night.

In 1931 PJ's daughter Lettie died. The next year both PJ and his son Pierre died, and in 1935 his son Willa. Willa's widow and her 5 daughters then moved in with the widow Joubert. They lived there until 1943 when the house was sold to dr Edwin Coetzee.

Dr Coetzee qualified as a medical doctor in the mid 1930's from Trinity College in Dublin Ireland. During his time in

Ireland he met an Irish lass named Edna and they got married before coming back to South Africa.

After a short stint in a medical practice with his older brother Jimmy, he opened a practice in Heidelberg Cape where he spent a lot of his time fishing at Port Beaufort, which is at the mouth of the Breede River.

Fishing became his lifelong passion resulting in him gaining Springbok colours when captaining the British Commonwealth Tuna Fishing team competing in Nova Scotia in 1951 and 1952.

In 1943 he moved to Montagu and bought La Rochelle where he joined the then resident Dr Muller as a partner. Dr Muller practised at "Airlies" opposite the Post Office.

Eventually he set-up his own practice at La Rochelle where he built on a surgery on the left side of the house.

When the practice became too large for one man he was joined by the newly qualified dr Gert Oosthuizen (Ernie Oosthuizen's father). After some years in a successful partnership Dr Oosthuizen went on his own and remained in Montagu until he retired.

Being the action man that he was, Dr Coetzee became interested in Bisley shooting and became an active member of the local team. In time he gained his Springbok colours in this discipline. It only followed that he developed an interest in big game hunting and at one time he together with Epsie Joubert (PJ's son) they went on a 6 week hunting trip to the Northern borders of Angola.

As a result of his interest in hunting he befriended a certain Mr Boet McDermid, who owned a big game farm bordering the Kruger National Park. Each year Dr Coetzee would organize a fishing holiday for Mr McDermid, whilst Mr McDermid would then reciprocate by organizing a few weeks of big game hunting up on his farm.

Charles Torrance, grandson of Dr Muller remembers as a youngster falling over about 5 lion's skins with heads intact on the lounge floor.

Soon Dr Coetzee became a member of the golfing fraternity in Montagu, after developing the love for the game as a student in Ireland to pay for his student debt. He soon became a scratch golfer. It so happened that Bobby Locke, the golfing legend married a girl from Montagu and whenever he and his wife came to visit the in-laws they stayed with the Dr Coetzee. Bobby kept himself occupied by playing exhibition matches against the best of the surrounding towns with Dr Coetzee as his partner. Of course they made the best of the after-game hospitality.

Terence, Dr Coetzee's son recalls them coming back rather late from such a match with Dr Coetzee driving and Bobby Locke sprawled on the back seat playing his ukulele and them singing rather risqué songs.

Dr Coetzee loved children – he regarded them to be his best patients. He was for greeting his tonsil patients with a bowl of ice-cream when they came out of anaesthetic.

At that time because of the tunnel in Cogmanskloof – the circus only came as far as Ashton. Because Dr Coetzee attended to the circus folk when they were in Ashton – he became quite friendly with Stanley Boswell after they had discovered that they had a mutual passion for fishing. Dr Coetzee then made a deal with Stanley that if he allowed free entrance to the circus matinee performance for all the boys from the orphanage he would arrange a fishing trip for him to Kosie Marais' dam at Klipdrif outside Robertson.

This was duly arranged and Tickey the clown who was also an enthusiastic fishermen accompanied them.

Dr Coetzee got into a relationship with a lady Kosie Botha, who at that time looked after an old Englishman in Montagu.

This man subsequently died and left Kosie a house in Swanepoel Street in Montagu and a beach house in Jefferies Bay.

Kosie moved in with dr Coetzee after the death of his wife and they were together until his death on 21 July 1979 at the age of 72. Kosie then inherited La Rochelle from his estate.

Kosie was an interesting character who became rather eccentric in her old age. She was a hoarder and even built on a room on the right side of the house especially to store all her "treasures".

I found an article which appeared in the Dec/Jan 1986 Style magazine. Amongst the people interviewed is one with Kosie. It reads as follows:

"Like any self-respecting mastiff watchdog, Boelie the boerboel is less than welcoming. Miss Kosie Botha lives alone in the vastness of the eight-gabled La Rochelle set in ample gardens, and she has to take precautions. The dog is removed; I enter.

She (Kosie) wears a floppy straw hat ("My Liewe Heksie Hat"), an ankle length skirt, she has tidy grey hair, an elegant profile, cornflower-blue eyes with a decided twinkle".

Then furtheron in the article "La Rochelle is a fine house, with high ceilings, intact old fireplaces, a magnificent spiral staircase leading to the loft. First Kosie shows me round the surgery. On the wall is a 1979 calendar, with a ring round the day on which Dr Coetzee died: 21 July. Kosie opens one of the doctor's record books dating to the early 1940's and points to an entry: Confinement of a cow, 1 guinea.

Then we tour the rest of the house and it's an eye-opener. Decidedly, Kosie Botha is the mistress-in-chief of the objet trove. To the last shelf, chimney piece, dado rail, La Rochelle is crammed with items that have taken her imaginative

fancy: "Look, the bird with the broken wing; the angel Gabriel; Glenda's python; a firemen going on duty Isn't that beautiful, I just couldn't throw that away. The wide eyes compel agreement."

Kosie was also known to have a quick temper and was known to frequently fall-out with friends and neighbours.

In her later years when she was short of money, she sold the piece of land to the right of the property to Richard Knipe who then developed it into plots which he sold individually – this is now known as La Rochelle Villas.

Kosie then sold La Rochelle to Junior and Maretha Jordaan in 2007 for an amount of approximately R1m. Kosie then moved to Worcester to live with her sister until her death.

Apparently the house was in a terrible state – infested with all sorts of creepy crawlies and termites in the floor, whilst the garden was so overgrown that you could hardly see the house from the street.

Junior Jordaan started a Spillhouse agency in Montagu. Unfortunately in 2014 he was tragically killed in Pretoria a motor car accident. His wife Maretha and children stayed on in the house together with her parents Ben and Louise Janse van Rensburg.

After Junior's death his wife sat down with an architect to change the floor plan of the house. Major interior changes was necessary as there was only one very old bathroom.

Once they started working they discovered a major problem with the sewerage pipes and the entire court yard had to be dug up and all the pipes had to be replaced. The big kitchen was built, bathrooms added, and the garage enlarged to name just a few of the changes. They also tried to save the original woodwork. Since all the doors and window frames were painted Maretha and her dad sat for days burning off the paint and

thereafter sanding the wood by hand. Mr Janse van Rensburg also made and installed the stained glass windows on either side of the front door. Maretha painted the interior of the house herself.

In 2016 Maretha sold the house to current owner Albert Coetzee where his mother Elaine and sister Anna-Marie now live and moved to Cape town with her parents.

The Coetzee's hard work and dedication is evident in the way they have brought both the house and the garden to their former glory. Elaine and her team of dedicated gardeners have worked relentlessly to give Montagu their very own Kirstenbosch.

All pictures from the Montagu Heritage Association Facebook page