

107. The Father of the KWV

DR. C.W.H. KOHLER



1862 – 1952

Chairman of the K.W.V. : 1918 – 1952

Compiled by Irma Jordaan

As the driving force behind the creation of the Ko-operatieve

Wijnbouwers Vereniging van Zuid-Afrika, Beperkt (The Co-operative Wine Growers' Association of SA, or KWV) in 1918, Charles W.H. Kohler can be regarded as the most important figure in the Cape wine industry in the twentieth century.

Under Kohler's leadership this organisation saved the wine industry from certain ruin. It was he who guided the KWV through good times and bad as chairman of the board for more than three decades until his death in 1952. In so doing, he achieved his initial goal, which was to stabilise the wine industry.

Kohler's contribution to the industry was important to the Western Cape in a wider sense, because tens of thousands of people, including wine farmers and their workers, depended directly or indirectly on this most important industry of the region. For this reason alone Kohler fully deserved the epithet "Father of the KWV" bestowed on him by his contemporaries.

The creation of the KWV arose from the depressed state of the wine industry at the start of the twentieth century. Wine depressions, where production grew sharply and no proper markets could be found for these surpluses, had occurred periodically since the early eighteenth century. The inevitable result of these conditions was a drastic drop in wine and brandy prices, threatening the livelihood of wine farmers and their dependants.

At the end of the Anglo Boer War in 1902, the large incidental markets for Cape wines and brandy created by the large British military presence disappeared. At the same time wine production was growing apace after the re-establishment of vineyards that had been decimated during the preceding decade by the Phylloxera blight. In 1907 more than 260 000 hi of wine and 60 000 hi of brandy more than ever before were produced. Huge surpluses resulted and wine prices fell to under -£3 a barrel (about 578 litres), making wine farming unsustainable.

In subsequent years the situation deteriorated until the wine industry found itself in a crisis by 1916. Charles Kohler was moved by the plight of the wine farmers, and thirty years later recollected this experience as follows to his biographer Annette Joelson:

There were now few wine merchants and many of these did practically as they pleased with regard to the prices paid to wine farmers ... The price of wine has already dropped to -£2-15s a leaguer and there was every prospect of it falling still further, for the wine-farmer was completely powerless and while prices were fixed arbitrarily he was forced by bitter circumstances to accept whatever was offered to him. Never before had the wine industry been at so low an ebb as in 1916. Never before were wine farmers in deeper despair.

At this point, with the wine industry facing the most serious crisis in its history, Kohler came forward with his life-saving proposal. But who was this man? Charles WH Kohler, the son of a British architect and engineer, was born on 14 October 1862 at Calvinia in the former Cape Province, where his father designed and built government offices. After making his fortune on the Witwatersrand gold-fields, Charles Kohler settled on the farm Riverside, next to the Berg River near Simondium in the Drakenstein area.

After 1904 Kohler was involved in several initiatives, of which the most significant was his master plan of 1916 to save the wine industry from its woes.

Although the co-operative idea was new and untested in South Africa at that stage, Kohler believed that uniting all wine farmers in one giant co-operation was the only solution to the dilemma in which the industry found itself, and also the quickest way for gaining control and establishing stability. His idea was in essence that such a body should be restricted to bona fide producers for the protection of their interests, inter alia against the arbitrary actions of wine merchants.

Minimum prices would be set to establish a basic price for the producer that would guarantee an adequate, consistent yield from his produce. Annual surpluses of distilling wine would be declared, for which the farmer would not be paid directly. This wine would be collected by the co-operative and distilled into spirits that would be exported or otherwise disposed of, on condition that it was never sold on the South African market for less than the set floor price.

Kohler was sure that his master plan would convince most farmers to unite in a large co-operative. Towards the end of 1916 he consequently started propagating his plan personally with fanatical zeal to wine farmers in the most important regions. He invited them to a planning meeting at Paarl, at which a draft constitution for the proposed co-operative was to be discussed. On 13 December 1916 the historic meeting of delegates took place in the Paarl Town Hall. Kohler, who was elected chairman, presented his draft plan for the co-operative. The delegates enthusiastically approved the draft, containing the above-mentioned principles and procedures. The co-operative would be known as the Co-operative Viticulture Union of South Africa, which was later changed to the Ko-operatiewe Wijnbouwers Vereniging van Zuid-Afrika, Beperkt.

Armed with the approved constitution Kohler held numerous meetings in the main wine-growing areas in the course of 1917, encouraging wine farmers to join the proposed wine co-operative by endorsing the constitution. Thanks to his persuasive powers there was immense enthusiasm and by the end of 1917 more than 90 per cent of all farmers had signed. With such support the interim board under Kohler as chairman could proceed with the registration of the co-operative: this was done in December 1917 and formalised on 8 January 1918.

This was the official incorporation date of the KWV and the realisation of Kohler's dream. The co-operative was founded as an ordinary limited company in terms of the then Cape Company Act (Act 25 of 1892) with founding capital of £100 000 divided

into 200 000 shares of 10s each. The first special KWV shareholders' meeting was held in Paarl on 8 May 1918. On this occasion the first official board of twelve was elected with Kohler as chairman.



KWV building and personnel 1918

The creation of the KWV brought immediate success and initial stability to the wine industry. After the establishment of the co-operative the floor price for wine was double that of 1916. In fact, due to a shortage of wine and speculation by wine merchants, the price shot up to an astonishing £20 a leaguer in 1920, an enormous price for the time. All participants were overjoyed by this positive development and Kohler received widespread recognition for his dynamic role in the creation of the KWV.

An objective observer of the KWV in its infancy would already

have seen some warning lights flickering: the abnormally high wine price was not the result of sound business practices by the KWV but rather due to an unusual demand for wine and especially the wild speculation of wine dealers. The control that the co-operative could exercise inside the wine industry was also subject to many restrictions. For instance, its first articles did not give it the legal authority to control the dramatic increase in the planting of new vines and the consequent rise in production. There was also no legal obligation on farmers to join the KWV or to remain members. The KWV furthermore initially only exercised a measure of control over distilling wine and that depended on the voluntary co-operation of producers.

When the wine surpluses started increasing sharply after the end of 1920, all the above shortcomings started emerging, to such an extent that the survival of the KWV was put in jeopardy. The KWV was simply not able to dispose of its total surpluses efficiently and was obliged to destroy a large percentage of the surplus built up between 1921 and 1923. This, as well as the sharp drop in wine prices compared to those during its boom, led to an exodus of members, while others conspired with wine merchants by selling their distilling wine at less than the floor price. Most of the merchants also refused to buy from the KWV.

The body's continued existence was balanced on a knife edge in 1923, and the only solution was to ask the government to give the KWV sufficient powers through legislation to control the industry effectively. The breakthrough came in 1924 after Kohler and other prominent members had made serious representations to government. The act controlling wine and spirits was introduced through the personal intercession of Prime Minister [Jan Smuts](#) that same year.

The KWV was given legal control over distilling wine, brandy and wine spirits, but quality wine was excluded from the act. In practice the organisation now had the authority to set

minimum prices for the products over which it had been given control. To accommodate the merchants, the KWV and its members were prohibited from selling any form of wine spirits in Africa south of the equator at less than the floor price.

Kohler headed the KWV with distinction from 1924 until his death, turning it into the most successful agricultural co-operative in South Africa. During this period the organisation not only stabilised the wine industry, but also undertook initiatives for the benefit of the wine industry and the South African economy in general.

The KWV's control over wine surpluses eliminated unexpected crises, and this in turn guaranteed a secure living for its members, even during the Depression of 1929-1933, when the wine industry would have foundered without the KWV. In 1940 the KWV also gained legal control over quality wine and the right to impose import quotas when circumstances demanded a limit to domestic wine production. These new legal control measures were in fact a vote of confidence in the KWV, Kohler and his board.

As a business the KWV went from strength to strength under Kohler's firm leadership. Its strong financial position was reflected in the fact that its assets amounted to £718 205 in its tenth year, while liabilities amounted to a mere £64 518. It had more than £200 000 invested in government bonds and it had reserves of tens of thousands of pounds to provide against wine surpluses and the costs involved in maturing export wine and brandy. By the end of 1939 it already possessed the largest, most modern above-ground wine cellars in the world and a large, well-equipped head-office building in Corporation Street (the present Kohler Street), Paarl.

Apart from its cardinal role in the stabilisation of the wine industry, the KWV was also instrumental in the establishment of South Africa's wine export trade in the twentieth century. From the 1920s surplus supplies were turned into products such

as perfume, liqueurs, sherry, dessert wine, port and brandy, and from the 1940s also into world-renowned red wines.

The KWV spent millions on developing export markets for its wines and spirits. Although the results were often varied, the value of wine and brandy exports had reached almost £600 000 by 1945. Kohler took a great personal interest in promoting exports and made numerous visits to Europe and the US his last at the age of 86!

The successes of the KWV were in large measure attributed to Kohler; as early as 1939 some KWV members wanted to honour him for his contribution to their welfare by awarding him the title "Life Governor and Chairman of the KWV". He declined, regarding it as a sufficient honour to be known among the members as "our chairman". In 1947 Stellenbosch University bestowed an honorary doctorate in commerce on him.

***References**

This biography is a modified extract from the following source: Van Zyl, D. (1999) "Charles W H Kohler" from *They Shaped our Century: The Most Influential South Africans of the Twentieth Century*. Published by Human and Rousseau. p. 399-403.

The below article appeared in the July 1947 K.W.V. NEWS under the heading OUR CHAIRMAN, MR C.W.H. KOHLER

"Though Mr. Kohler has already reached a ripe old age, he still possesses that clear mind which is so indispensable to the Wine Industry. The name of Kohler is ineffaceably engraved on our Wine Industry – Kohler and the Wine Industry are synonymous – the K.W.V. is his monument! Mr. Kohler will always be the inspiration of the wine-farmers; he is the greatest apostle of agricultural co-operation".

This tribute was paid by the Vice Chairman of the Paarl Farmers' Association in proposing the toast, on the occasion of a dinner recently given in the Paarl Town Hall in honour of Mr. Kohler.

Though Mr. Kohler has achieved distinction in his fight for the South African Wine Industry, and has earned the gratitude of our wine-farming community which he has so conscientiously and successfully led through various crises and pitfalls, he was not born from a wine-growing family. His father was a Government architect and engineer.

Charles William Henry Kohler, who was born in the Cape Province on 14 October, 1862, was educated at Cape Town and on leaving school practised dentistry. In 1886, after gold had been discovered on the Witwatersrand, he went to the Transvaal to seek his fortune, and successfully managed several gold mining companies there. However, he had to leave the Rand for reasons of health and, after going on a trip with his family to Europe and America, he subsequently returned to Paarl where he purchased the farm "Riverside", interesting himself principally in viticulture.

As a farmer he believed in the future of quality products and his untiring efforts in this direction were crowned with success when, in 1920, he won for the third year in succession the Burgoyne Cup for the best 50 leaguers of light wine, suitable for export. As this trophy had to be won for three years in succession in order to become the property of the winner, he had then won it outright.

After he had made a careful study of conditions affecting farming, not only in South Africa but also overseas with a view of solving the problems which faced farmers in the Cape Province, he realized the necessity for organisation and subsequently became the Chairman of the Paarl Farmers' Association.

In 1909, after heavy excise duties had caused a decrease in liquor consumption which had brought the wine-farmers to the point of ruin, Mr. Kohler took up the cudgels on behalf of the farmers, and, not being able to get satisfaction from the Government, he organised and led a monster demonstration of wine-farmers to the House of Parliament to urge the abolition of excise duties.

Beyond gaining public sympathy and focussing attention on the grave position of the wine-farmers, the ultimate results were, however, disappointing. After other attempts to alleviate the position of the wine-farmers in South Africa had failed, Mr. Kohler started preaching co-operation, and launched a campaign for the formation of the great co-operative enterprise which to-day stands as a monument to his zeal and forethought – the K.W.V.

It was during these first years of the K.W.V. that Mr. Kohler showed his mettle. The Association was not a baby born in tranquillity of a perfect family circle, and some of the members did their best to kill off this infant when they realised that its existence might limit their freedom of action. But the child was happy in having a father who was ready to fight for its existence; to fight with such ability and perseverance that the battle could not but be won.

Farmers had to be convinced and cajoled, opponents had to be threatened and even taken to court, but the K.W.V. was kept going until the winegrowers in 1924, managed to convince General Smuts of the necessity for giving the Association through certain control legislation a large measure of stability in the S.A. Wine Industry. Although things have since been easier, there have still been fights, but notwithstanding his growing years, Mr. Kohler has always entered the fray with zest.

Though in his 85th year, Mr. Kohler is still assiduously devoting his energies to the interests of the Wine Industry,

which he has already served for 56 years. Since the K.W.V. was founded early in 1917, Mr Kohler has been its Chairman without break.

And he declares in his autobiography:-

“The race is still on. Perhaps I am not quite so nimble footed, so light of heel, as I once was, but I am in the running still. And how much I enjoy it!”

Mr Kohler married Jessie Rademeyer in August 1884 – when he was 21 and she 19. Out of their marriage 3 daughters were born Gladys, Evadne and Jessie. His wife Jessie passed away in the November, the same year that they had been married for 50 years.

In February 1936 after a short courtship, he married a widow named Ruby Pearl Pullen. Following the marriage they entertained about 400 guests at a garden party on his farm “Riverside” in Paarl.

During 1937 the newly married couple travelled to England – where Kohler attended the Imperial Conference in London as the non-official advisor of the Union of South African government’s delegation. He and Mrs Kohler also attended the coronation of George VI at Westminster Abby and were guests at the garden party following the coronation, where both were presented to the new King and Queen.



Invitation to attend the Coronation of King George VI & Queen Elizabeth



The happy couple attending the Coronation

Whilst in England they were also guests at the National Day reception in South Africa House, as well as attending a cocktail party hosted by the Duke of Athlone and Princess Alice.



To Mr. Charles William Henry Kohler

*Chairman of the K.W.V. from his Fellow-Wine-Farmers, on the
occasion of the 27th Annual General Meeting of the K.W.V.,
Paarl, 20th June, 1945.*

Dear Mr. Kohler,

It is as a sincere expression of appreciation that we, your fellow-wine-farmers, wish to take advantage of this opportunity to present to you this address as a token of our real gratitude for the unselfish and self-sacrificing services which you have rendered us, frequently at a great personal inconvenience, for so many years.

You are rightly named the Father of our Wine Industry, as you have, for forty years, been our counsellor and spokesman. When we were discouraged and helpless, you united us, and welded us into one entity. As long ago as 1909, you called us together at a monster meeting in Cape Town, and you were the first to appreciate that our salvation could only be found in joint action, i.e., co-operation. Singly you drew up the Constitution in 1917, and to-day we continue to build on the foundation of the sound principles you then laid down.

In more than one respect you are a remarkable personality. Endowed with an especially clear brain and insight into affairs, a strong personality which commands respect from both friends and opponents, a fearless spokesman for a cause which you are convinced is just, you have been the undisputed leader of the wine-farmers. It is little wonder therefore that you have continually, since the establishment of the K.W.V., been its chairman.

Your philosophy in life has always been an inspiration to us. You have never admitted defeat. On the contrary, you have returned to the fray even more determinedly and with renewed courage and strength.

You do not know the meaning of the word "can't", and your slogan, "Where there's a will there's a way", has always inspired us with confidence.

We cannot erect a better monument to you than what you yourself have built up during your lifetime, namely the K.W.V. Few people are as privileged as you to see the fruit of their labour. You have not only lived to see it, but have in addition earned the gratitude and appreciation of your fellow-wine-farmers.

We are grateful to Providence for sparing you so long to us, and our prayer for your future is:

"Strength and joy."

As a token of the esteem in which the members of the K.W.V. held Mr. Kohler – he was handed the scroll (left) on the occasion of the 27th Annual General meeting held on 20 June 1945

DIE EERSTE WYNFEES OP MONTAGU IN 1950



Peter Joubert proe wyn saam met 'n baie bejaarde Charles Kohler wie die ere-gas was by die 1st Montagu Wynfees in 1950

S.A. SE EERSTE WYNFEES Die wyn en die fees is onafskeidelik en daar is geen fees soos 'n wynfees nie. Vonkelende wyn, sprankelende musiek, sierlike vlotte, aanvallige dametjies en opgewonde vrolikheid het die Montagu Muskadel wynfees gekenmerk, en op 29 April 1950 het die streek daarin geslaag

om 'n nuwe en romantiese hoofstuk by die reeds luisterryke geskiedenis van ons wynbedryf te voeg. Die eerste Suid-Afrikaanse wynfees sal lank onthou word. Maar dit is nie slegs die kleurrykheid en vrolikheid wat onthou sal word nie. Die wynfees sal ook onthou word omdat, ten spyte van die agitasie en agterdogtigheid wat deur sekere groepe gesaai is, dit 'n fees so nugter vrolik soos 'n skoolbasaar was en daar was nie 'n enkele geval van dronkenskap nie. Dr. C. W. H. Kohler, vader van die KWV, het in sy boodskap na hierdie feit verwys en hy het gesê dat dit afdoende bewys is dat die volk wyndrinkend kan wees dog nugter kan bly. Dit was 'n lus om op die feesterrein rond te stap om die sierwaens te besigtig en om na die opgewekte stemme en skerts van die mense te luister. Die sierwaens is hoofsaaklik deur die wynhandelaars van die muskadel- streek ontwerp en opgebou en het hul pogings hul nie aan vindingrykheid of skouspelagtigheid ontbreek nie. Die wynbedryf is ryk aan tradisie en dit was dus nie verbasend dat hulle hul inspirasie in die verlede gevind het nie: sierlike ou Hollandse-gewels, swierige Franse Hugenote en ou slaweklokke het orals op die versierde vragmotors gepryk. 'n Priël waaronder jolige jong Hugenote sit en wyn drink; Dr. C. Louis Leipoldt se "kinderkamer" met een vet seun op wyn gevoed en een pateties tingerige seun op melk gevoed; Neptunus besig om twee waternooientjies op muskadel te trakteer was maar drie van die vlotte wat deelgeneem het aan die skouspelagtige optog deur Montagu se strate. Op die sportgronde het Dr. C. W. H. Kohler 'n sterk pleidooi vir die belange van die wynbedryf gelewer. Hy het met trots verwys na die roem wat Suid-Afrikaanse wyne in Europa in die verlede en vandag geniet en hy het die wynboere aangemoedig om op hierdie gesonde grondslag voort te bou, Verwysend na toestande hier in Suid-Afrika het dr Kohler gesê dat ons drank wetgewing verouderd is en hy het aan die hand gedoen dat die Regering te geleë tyd 'n kommissie oorsee moet stuur om drankwetgewing en toestande in ander wynlande te bestuur. Hy het die huidige stelsel betreur waarvolgens ons naturellebevolking die reg ontsê word om die gesonde produk van die wynstok te geniet, en het voorts

verklaar dat alhoewel hy die organiseerders van die wynfees wou gelukwens met hul poging, hy nogtans spyt is dat die Kleurlingbevolking geen aandeel in die feesviering gegee is nie. Ten slotte het hy die hoop uitgespreek dat die wynfees 'n gereelde instelling sou word en dat dit van krag tot krag sou groei.



Mej. R van der Merwe van die Paarl (links) het die Suid-Afrikaanse Wynlied gesing by die Montagu Wynfees.

EERSTE
SUID-AFRIKAANSE
WYNLIED

Uitgegee op die 2de Februarie 1941, die 282ste geboortedag
van ons Wynnywerheid

en

opgedra aan „Ons Voorsitter”, Meneer C. W. H. KOHLER,
die Vader van die K.W.V.

Musiek en woorde
 deur
 HANS ENDLER



FIRST
SOUTH AFRICAN
WINE SONG

Published on the 2nd of February, 1941, the 282nd birthday
of our Wine Industry

and

dedicated to „Ons Voorsitter”, Mr. C. W. H. KOHLER, the
Father of the K.W.V.

Music and words
 by
 HANS ENDLER

Uitgegee deur / Published by „WINE AND SPIRIT REVIEW,” en „DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE
WYNBOER”, Stellenbosch.

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Die Eerste Suid-Afrikaanse Wynlied is gekomponeer deur Hans Endler en is opgedra aan mnr. C.W.H. Kohler “die vader” van die KWV.

Die lied is oorspronklik uitgegee op 2 Februarie 1941 – die 282ste geboortedag van die Suid-Afrikaanse wynnywerheid

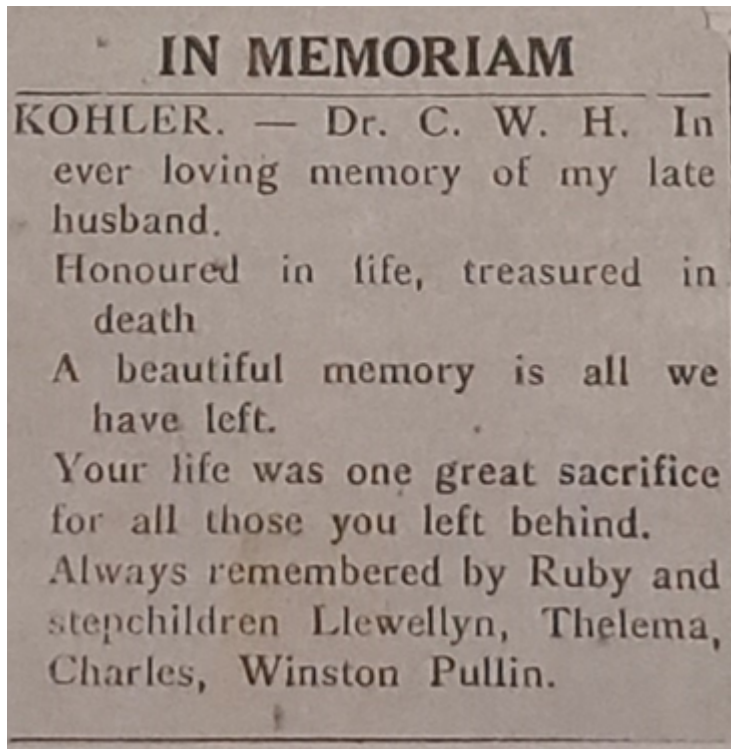
WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR NAMING THE STREET IN MONTAGU AFTER KOHLER?

Heinie Heydenrych

During the 1920's the KWV, cellars were erected on either side of the street north of Long Street. From the word go, the economy of Montagu had revolved around agriculture, and for many years the wine and brandy industry formed one of the mainstays of Montagu's economy. It was therefore logical that the street alongside which the KWV cellars were situated should be called after the founder of the co-operative. Before the name was changed the street was known as Smith Street.

After 33 years without a break as chairman of the KWV the "Father of the KWV" acted in this capacity for the last time at the 33rd annual meeting on 15 June 1951 at the age of 88. He died at his retirement home in Fish Hoek on 6 February 1952. His coffin was transported to Paarl where it lay in state in the KWV's Cathedral Wine Cellar before the service. Here many people paid their last respects to Kohler before his body was taken to Cape Town to be cremated. With this, Charles Kohler disappeared from the annals of the South African wine industry. His legacy and brainchild, the KWV, played a crucial role in the establishment of a vibrant wine industry that became an important source of revenue and earner of foreign currency, in the process creating an industry that provided a livelihood for tens of thousands of people.

Source : Netwerk 24



After the death of her husband, his widow Ruby Kohler purchased Qui-Si-Sana on Bath's Hill (now known as P'Jure 2024) from Mr. Caesar Schlesinger for the amount of £30,000. She made this her winter home and owned the property until her death in the sixties.



Qui-si-Sana when Mrs Kohler lived there and before it was damaged by fire in 1974

KWV – DEPOT OP MONTAGU SLUIT

Deur: Beula Liebenberg

17 Junie 1990

MONTAGU – Op 'n onlangse vergadering van die direksie van die KWV Paarl en die direksie van ongeveer sewe koöperatiewe kelders van die omgewing, is besluit om die plaaslike KWV-depot aan die einde van Augustus te sluit.

Die besluit is geneem omdat verstokingskoste meer ekonomies sal wees op Robertson, depot vir die stookwyn van die Klein-Karoo. Die omset sal gevolglik ook groter wees.

Die depot op Montagu sal nog lede-wyn ontvang en die gebou word voorlopig behou indien dit in die nabye toekoms moontlik weer benodig word.

Heelwat gesinne is na Robertson en Worcester verplaas. Die bruin personeel sal daagliks per bussie na Robertson vervoer word.

En so kom 'n era tot die einde.....

Source: Montagu Archives, "Herinnering van Kohler van die KWV" / deur Annette Joelson and internet
