

Village Life

CAPE OVERBERG WHALE COAST

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This Erica cerinthoides, its sticky, hairy flowers holding insects, added a splash of colour on a misty hike to the Gantouw Pass near Grabouw.

The delicate world at our feet

Living in the richest plant kingdom on Earth is a privilege, and it is there for us to enjoy. A wonderful world is right at our feet; all we have to do is stop and look. Many of the fynbos flowers are so delicate and small that one will only see them when looking carefully. But then one sees another. And many others. Pink and blue and yellow.

In this issue we introduce a woman who distills aromatic oils from fynbos and has written a book on the medicinal qualities of the plants, and her daughter who cultivates fynbos – page 4.

Or walk amongst lovely fynbos while retracing the steps of the first travellers in our story on the first wagon routes into the Overberg – page 11.

You can also win a two-night getaway with your photographs of wildflowers in a competition organised by the Bredasdorp branch of the Botanical Society of South Africa – contact Sharon Brink on 028 425 1050 for details. ■



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At his last till the very end

TEXT & PICTURES BY MARÉ MOUTON

Shoes and boots made by Mr John Theart of Napier were worn all over Southern Africa and as far away as Germany and Scotland. When he died in December 1984 at age 72, his wife closed his workshop and everything in it remained untouched for 19 years.

In January this year two of his three granddaughters tackled the task of sorting through the items collected during a long life of hard work. At its peak, Theartist Shoe Factory employed eight people and produced 12 000 pairs of boots and shoes per year. For many years Mr Theart cut the upper leather for each and every pair of shoes and boots by hand – it was only in his later years that he bought a stamping press.

John Theart was born at Aurora in the Piketberg district in 1912. Work was scarce, and as a young boy he went to work for a shoemaker. He soon started his own business, serving the Hopefield-Velddrif area. When the Depression hit, he looked around for better opportunities and in 1936 started a business, with one assistant, in Napier.

Initially he repaired shoes, replacing heels and soles. "Shoes looked brand-new when he had done with them," it was said. Soon he also started making his own boots with pieces of tyre used for the soles. These became very popular amongst farmers, anglers and mountaineers.

"I am most interested in the Motortyre Boots..." wrote a Mr A B Berrisford, a mountaineering supplier in Greenock, Scotland, in 1953.

Mr Theart also specialized in making orthopaedic shoes. His workshop had shelves full of custom-made wooden lasts, each for a specific person. He also made satchels, handbags, rucksacks and Bible covers, and even handcrafted new covers for car seats – a real artist with leather.

Willie Simons, who worked for Theartist Shoe Factory for many years, remembers a young man from Elim who had no toes to



A mixed bunch of cobbler's lasts of various sizes tied together with a piece of string, just a few of dozens left in the workshop. Mr Theart made shoes even to fit a person's bunions.

either foot. Mr Theart made him a pair of rugby boots which enabled "Stumptoes" to become the star goal kicker. "When he placed the ball, even on the halfway line, you just knew it would be over," recalls Willie.

John Theart married local girl Bettie Gerishuys, and they had one daughter, Eleanor, who now lives in Sutherland in the Karoo. She had three daughters – Eleanor and Louisa, who



His beloved pipes were lying in the ashtray exactly as he had left them.

live in Cape Town, and Lizette, who lives in Kimberley. There are seven great-grandchildren.

His business grew and Theartist moved from Tamatiekraal to a building in the Main Street. Later this building was replaced by a workshop of his own design, with a home upstairs. A shoe shop was added that carried popular brands.

Mr Theart's business became the best known landmark in Napier after the imposing church, where he served as an elder for many years.

Demand for the tyre-soled footwear eventually dropped off, and shoemaking moved from craftsmen to factories. Theartist's staff dwindled to only one, but John Theart kept working at his lasts until the day he died.

After that his wife still sold a few pairs of shoes when people asked her, but the workshop remained closed, the lasts, equipment and tools collecting dust. A bottle of sugared water was still standing on a shelf when his granddaughters started cleaning and packing.

Bettie, now 90 years old and frail, moved into Huis Klippedrif in Napier eight years ago.

The building will now be let and a restaurant is expected to open there soon. ■

• More about Theartist on page 2.



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