

A HISTORY OF THE MOTOR FERRY INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

(Notes by Al Turner - issued April 2001)

1. IN THE BEGINNING

From the 1920's until the 1970's, the SAR&H (South African Railways and Harbours as they were known at the time) delivered the majority of motor vehicles from the Assembly Plants to the Dealer's closest station or remote siding throughout the length and breadth of South Africa. For many years "shorts" were used. These were open top ES type rail wagons that were fairly unstable on the track having only four wheels and carrying one vehicle. The more commonly used and more stable DZ had twin bogies and carried two vehicles. These were loaded with great skill by the Plants at their sidings and were secured by stretched fencing wire lashings that were tightened with a spike - "Chinese windlass" style. The exceptions to rail were the "self collects" by the local Dealers, the outlying Dealer who required a specific vehicle urgently or who happened to be in town. Volumes were initially low until the Second World War, during which time all vehicles were imported. The Ford and GM Plants reopened soon after the war and the Hudson, Peugeot and Triumph Plants started up a little later.

Damage caused by "fly" shunting and burn marks from the steam locomotives used at the time was a continuing problem. Initially, protective wax was applied and then pads and tarpaulins were experimented with but chaffing mostly exacerbated the problem. This system evolved into some Dealers specifying and paying for a tarpaulin stretched over a steel frame forming a protective canopy.

SAR&H continued this practice for many years but were not coping with the ever increasing volumes. In 1954, Auto Carrier Transport (Pty) Ltd was born. The founder, Mr Paul Guicherit, entered the market with home built road carriers that carried five car/light commercials. He operated from his home in Cape Town. SAR&H was virtually a Government Department and the National Transport Commission only granted certificates that allowed Auto Carriers to operate until 1959. Thereafter, as SAR&H believed that their capacity to cope had increased, certificates were begrudgingly issued on an annual basis. Nevertheless, this fleet of carriers grew over the years to 43 two-tier carriers carrying eight vehicles each.

Also during the mid 1950s, vehicles and tractors were being shipped in small volumes from the Port Elizabeth harbour on the MV Gamtoos (see # 3 - Ships).

In 1965 it was becoming more and more obvious that SAR&H and Auto Carriers were not coping with the volumes. So, other carrier companies, Fauna Motorvervoer (Edms) Beperk and Natal Carriers (Pty) Ltd, with similar vehicle transporters, went into competition with Auto Carriers. Other ferry companies started with drivers delivering vehicles on their own wheels from the Plants to the Dealers, such as Controlled Deliveries (Pty) Ltd, Impala Ferry Services (Pty) Ltd and Intervia (Pty) Ltd.

2. THE ERA OF OAKTREE

In 1970, Barry Mills, who was delivering Volvos and other products at the time, approached Alec Roberts, informing him that Feltex were going to buy him out. Barry Mills and Alec Roberts visited Eddie Corlett, a chartered accountant in Durban, to set up a deal with Feltex's Ben Fielding, Bob Hartley and eventually, Barry's father-in-Law, Corbishley.

Feltex bought out:

Alec Roberts Drive Delivery Service (Pty) Ltd

de Bruin Carriers – Barry Mills and the Krugers (this became Fauna Motorvervoer (Edms) Beperk)

Intervia - Pienkus du Plessis & Paul Marais (became Motorvia)

Controlled Service Stations (Pty) Ltd

Falstar (Pty) Ltd

Impala Ferry Services (Pty) Ltd

Lombard Vehicle Transport (Pty) Ltd

Natal Carriers (Pty) Ltd

Feltex also formed a subsidiary called Oaktree Investments (Pty) Ltd and this group became Transvia (Pty) Ltd.

Although the Vehicle Manufacturers were producing the vehicles, the Dealer was expected to conduct a thorough inspection and correct any faults as a pre-delivery service for their customers. The Dealers were paid for this service and the Plants hoped that customer complaints would reduce. Oaktree however decided to build large PDS centres outside Port Elizabeth, Durban and Krugersdorp to consolidate, conduct and be paid for these pre-delivery services themselves.

During this period, Oaktree dominated the vehicle delivery business except for Auto Carriers who remained independent with car carriers and Southern Star Organisation (Pty) Ltd who were mainly delivering General Motor's products by road convoy.

A "non-Ferry man" was made MD by Feltex and the hungry beast of these large PDS centres could not be satisfied. If volumes tailed off, dealers would carry out their own PDS's and the quality emanating from the Plants had generally improved. However, the major reason that Transvia collapsed and was liquidated in 1972 was considered to be purely mismanagement.

There was chaos everywhere and many vehicles were never traced. To pick up the pieces, a few of the original ferry company Directors of Oaktree recommenced the ferry business under new names, most notably Intervia and Alec Roberts (Pty) Ltd. Fauna also reverted to the carrier business. The Intervia group immediately formed Motorvia with Noel Wescott who has been acknowledged by most to be the founder of road convoys.

3. SHIPS

In the early 1950s, Intervia purchased a small Ro-Ro (roll-on roll-off) vessel called the 'Greta Delport' to ship vehicles between Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban. Difficulties arose, as shipping was an unfamiliar business. For example, a sick captain was difficult to replace when there was no backup. Unicorn Shipping Lines eventually bought this vessel from Intervia and also began to operate a second vessel, the 'Swartkops'. These two ships carried many vehicles for some years and throughout the Oaktree era. With Oaktree's collapse, Unicorn formed its own Controlled Sea Deliveries (Pty) Ltd in 1971 and ventured into unknown territory. They collected vehicles from the coastal Plants, shipped them to the other ports where they were delivered to the Dealers. Demands dropped and the 'Delport' was sold, considerably extending the delivery frequency. Controlled Sea Deliveries was changed to Sea Deliveries and the 'Swartkops' continuing until 1979. It was then replaced that same year with a larger vessel, the 'Mkuze'. Alec Roberts (Pty) Ltd, Motorvia and Southern Star seldom used the vessel during this period, as all deliveries were by road convoys except for a few car carriers operated by Motorvia until 1978.

In 1979, the four remaining major ferry companies, Alec Roberts (Pty) Ltd, Auto Carrier Transport, Motorvia and Southern Star Organisation acquired the share capital of Sea Deliveries from Unicorn. This reduced Unicorn's role in the Ferry Industry from an active participant with its contracts to deliver Toyotas & Leylands along the coast, to the role purely of ship owner/operator.

So Sea Deliveries, under new management, chartered the MV Mkuze on an exclusive Contract of Affreightment from November 1979 to move vehicles between Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. Sugar and detergents (and occasionally vehicles) were also offloaded in Mossel Bay during its eight-day sailing schedule. From January 1982, The SA Railways refused the shipment of further vehicles during peak volume periods by means of ramps onto Unicorn's other coasters, MV Gamtoos and MV Gouritz, so flexibility was reduced. The Mkuze eventually completed 323 voyages, the final in April 1987, before being sold as scrap, although it was rumoured that she continued to operate in the Far East.

During March 1987, the MVBorder and Barrier conducted trials and entered service. These were two fairly large and versatile Ro-Ro ships that conveyed containers, trailers, general cargo and all sizes of vehicles and equipment between Durban, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. The vehicle delivery frequency improved to twice per week and included a weekly service to East London.

The Border, on a special trip (V41-Feb 1988) to Richards Bay, experienced a crankshaft explosion and she was laid-up in Durban for one month for repairs. There was a huge build-up of vehicles again, especially Toyotas, when she was

withdrawn from service in October 1992, initially for three weeks, but this extended to three months to rebuild her rudder pintles. Special Two Tier Car Trains from Durban to Cape Town, international Ro-Ro ships and the MV Swartkops did assist in the clearing up of these vehicles. During this lay-up, special stowage racks were installed on the main deck to carry 40 additional cars. After trials, similar racks were also fitted to the MV Barrier. On another occasion, the Border hit a concrete caisson on entering Durban Harbour and ripped her hull that took about six weeks to repair.

General volumes were lower than anticipated and these vessels finally proved to be too expensive to operate and were sold in May 1993 after completing 270 & 285 voyages respectively.

Unicorn had investigated the shipping market and was scheduled to purchase the MV Autostrada in February 1993 when the sellers suddenly changed their minds. As the Border/Barrier had been sold, panic ensued. Fortunately, at the eleventh hour, a very pretty MV Edna came onto the market and Unicorn made an immediate purchase. She was renamed MVBoundary and entered service from the end of April 1993. She had been designed for the Baltic ice, was 20 years old and could carry 750 cars and 28 twelve-metre containers.

Toyota volumes were again very high and for a few months from December 1994, a supplementary service started when Auto Carriers shipped vehicles in TEU containers from Durban to Cape Town on Unicorn's container vessel MV Pongola. The Boundary was laid up between 4 Apr – 29 May 1995 with serious fire damage in the engine room that had wiped out all the controls. Deliveries again became a real headache but fortunately large international Ro-Ro ships, Jolly Bianco, Jolly Verde and Excelsior, were able to assist with three trips. A few months later in July and August 1994, the entire Motor Manufacturing Industry went out on a five-week strike. With no vehicles being produced, the Ferry Industry was naturally crippled. The Boundary was positioned off Durban for four days and Sea Deliveries organising alternative trailer movements for Unicorn to minimise huge penalties in the shipping contract.

In 1995, a major exercise to increase volumes by fitting special car decks to Unicorn's other coasters, MV Bastion & Bulwark, was investigated but these two vessels were sold shortly afterwards.

As this Boundary service was only once per week, the Plants were increasingly applying pressures to improve delivery times. Furthermore, the Ferry Industry could not accept the 30% increase in operating costs proposed by Unicorn in early 1997. Unicorn eventually sold the Boundary in April 1998 after she had completed 204 voyages. Alternatives had been considered, such as reducing the service to an 8-day frequency, providing a supplementary service or operating two smaller vessels but none of these ideas were found to be viable.

4. THE TWO TIER TRAINS - TRAINKAR

In 1972, when volumes were continuing to increase and Oaktree/Transvia had collapsed, the SAR&H introduced the special two tier trains that could carry cars and bakkies (light pick-up trucks) in bulk. SAR&H wisely insisted on the Plants and Ferry Companies combining their rail interests through the conduit of one company. This would ensure that they talked with one voice, maximised their co-operation and capitalised from the economies of scale. It was essential that the trains ran 100% full in the "up" direction and returned with as many vehicles as possible to ensure the financial viability of the entire project. This was spearheaded by NAAMSA (National Association of Automobile Manufacturers), under the auspices of the MIF (Motor Ferry Association).

The resultant company was named Trainkar Company (Pty) Ltd and consisted of 'A' & 'B' Board Members. The 'A' members were from the Plants and monitored the Ferry Companies operations. They were also forced to place significant bank guarantees with SAR&H and carried all the risk for performance and of damage (unless proved to be the fault of SAR&H and that was often very difficult). The 'B' members were the Ferry Company representatives who were intimately involved in the actual physical operations (scheduling, loading, lashing, etc.). This included integration of vehicle deliveries with their road convoys, car carriers and the coastal shipping service. The resultant spectrum of representatives at Board Meetings interestingly ranged from pinstripe suited senior executives to a despatcher with a leather lumber-jacket.

SAR&H initially set the rates for the haulage and the rentals of the wagons, terminals and parking areas at a lucrative level for both parties and provided incentives to encourage increased usage. These special trains operated very successfully for many years despite the various impracticalities and difficulties experienced when the Company had such a large and overwhelming diversification of Directors with differing objectives and goals. The Ferry Companies

committed themselves fully to use these trains that were considered to be an ideal high volume/long distance service, very suited to South Africa's geographical conditions and especially considering the locations of the manufacturers and dealers. As proof of this commitment, the scrapping of over 55 road car-carriers was carried out in this first year.

The first train, dubbed the "Million Rand Train" by the Eastern Province Herald, left Alocs with some fanfare on 13 October 1972. Four to five trains, (called Two Tier Train no.1) of 400 vehicles each, initially operated per week from Alocs (outside Port Elizabeth) to Kaalfontein (north of Kempton Park on the Reef) conveying Fords, General Motors and Volkswagens. Partial loads of Datsuns, Peugeots, and other makes were moved on the return leg. The service was later extended to a weekly trip on the Natal route (TTT 2) from Isipingo, Durban, to Kaalfontein, commencing 5 June 1974 to handle Toyotas and Mazdas. Later from August 1978, a half-sized (200 unit) train (TTT3 also operated between Kleinvlei, Cape Town, and Kaalfontein to uplift the BMC/Leyland products and later on, Renaults. This 25 wagon train was hauled with the 50 wagon TTT1 train between de Aar and Kaalfontein and was the longest train in South Africa at the time, being over 1.5 kilometres.

5. THE TWO TIER TRAINS – RAIL DELIVERIES

SAR&H changed its name to S.A. Transport Services in October 1981 and it was common knowledge that assets had been re-valued and "inflationary accounting" principles applied to the ageing rolling stock and other assets. Rates were increased by SATS and in 1985, BMW and Nissan who had continually objected, eventually pulled out of Trainkar. This led to a domino effect. Guarantees were upset thereby placing untenable burdens on the other players and volumes became unbalanced on return legs. The service of the entire car train set up collapsed and the last train operated end March 1985.

The Manufactures were unable to reach a compromise and SATS were deeply embarrassed. The Ferry Companies had been forced to become so reliant on this train service, yet were contractually obligated to continue to deliver vehicles. It was consequently the Ferry Companies' initiative to re-negotiate the continuation of the service. SATS were given the option of turning their rolling stock into "razor blades" unless rates were financially viable. Agreement with the four role players was reached and rates were once more set for the four components (haulage, rental of wagons, terminals & parking areas). It was fully understood that this arrangement would be profitable to all parties, albeit to a much lesser extent than in the past. This was during the period of reducing volumes. The market had peaked in 1981 with 301,528 cars, progressively dropping to 183,662 by 1992 and subsequently never exceeded 249,000.

Most of the Directors of Trainkar (Pty) Ltd from the Ferry Industry became Directors of the new Company - Rail Deliveries (Pty) Ltd and the service recommenced in April 1985.

To obviate the need for these onerous bank guarantees, the principals involved gave their personal assurances that the trains would be fully supported. This was based on trust built up since 1972 and with many years of involvement and experience. There were only assurances that stipulated that the Shareholders were aware of their portion of a R1.2m credit facility that increased in 1991 to R2.4m. This remained unchanged until February 1994 when Spoorntet started a new "Gemini" accounting system that highlighted inadequate cover and caused panic when they threatened to stop the trains overnight, with no prior warning. These 'comforts' were consequently increased to R5.5m & again to R8.4m in 1996. During all these years, Rail Deliveries was obliged to provide their audited annual financial statements, although it was a non-profit company, with no tangible assets. Spoorntet periodically made attempts, without success, to obtain the Shareholder's financial statements.

This cycle of re-evaluating the assets was partially repeated when SATS changed its name to Transnet on 1 April 1990. Each subsequent year, Rail Deliveries encountered unacceptable rate hikes with difficult negotiations having to be conducted. The Manufacturers and the Ferry Industry found it difficult to understand the proposed annual increases of such magnitudes as 16 or 20%, when the prevailing factors were considered. PPI and CPI indices were below 10%, Spoorntet was reporting such profits as R98m in 1996, many railway stations had been closed down, their headcount had been drastically reduced and rolling stock (SCL wagons) should have been depreciated over their 25 years of service. Furthermore, very little had been spent on the maintenance of these wagons, loading ramps and the rail terminals. The absorption of the truck rental into the haulage rate at a later date was a reason often used for lack of funds for maintenance. However, a considerable number of SCL wagons had been carelessly stored next to the sea at Algoa Bay and, despite repeated warnings from the Ferry Industry, some became so rusty that they had to be scrapped.

Spoornet moved cars on enclosed SCL wagons attached to the Blue Train and Trans Karoo/Natal trains which Rail Deliveries felt was in conflict with the spirit of the contract. This was however accepted as it was supposed to be for passengers only and volumes were insignificant. In 1991, Spoornet tested the system again by moving Venter trailers. This was lost on a technicality as Spoornet did not consider a trailer to be a vehicle.

At the end of August 1995, Portnet approached BMW and negotiated to load their imports received into the Durban harbour directly onto a Two Tier Train that had been refurbished from old unused wagons. The train of 20 wagons was shunted onto the quayside and moved directly to the Plant in Brits, Gauteng. This was a direct foray into the Ferry Industry's traditional business and, with the anticipated increase in exported and imported vehicles, led to a large marshalling and storage yard being developed on 'T' berth near Durban's old mail ship passenger terminal. (A similar terminal was also built in East London).

In 1996, Spoornet started to negotiate separate agreements on other routes with some Ferry Companies and Manufacturers. This proliferation meant more fragmented movements and worked against the initial concept of maximising the economies of scale. With this lack of co-ordinated effort, the usage of the Two Tier Trains gradually reduced on a two directional basis and that increased the cost burden on the other users of the train.

There also appeared to have been a hiatus within Spoornet in developing new routes for the Industry for both the SCL and other wagons. All such initiatives had originated from Rail Deliveries or the Ferry Industry, and some had been implemented very successfully i.e. Durban to Windhoek. However, in mid-1997, Spoornet negotiated directly with Delta Corporation to move Isuzu KP pick-ups across Beit Bridge in refurbished and modified cattle wagons. This was in direct opposition to Southern Star's carrier service that had been very successfully carrying out this operation. (It was also ironical that Spoornet introduced many of these new ideas only after Rail Deliveries had ceased to operate).

Based on the know-how developed over two decades, the Ferry Industry, through Rail Deliveries, approached Spoornet in a letter dated 23 May 1997 formally suggesting some future venture with Spoornet or even the outright purchase of the wagons. Spoornet however had decided to shorten the Agreement and cease dealing with Rail Deliveries entirely from end December 1997. The overall liaison and co-operation therefore came to an end with Spoornet's objective then of dealing with each customer on an individual basis.

6. THE ENDING OF TWO ERAS

After 15 years of relatively successful operations, it was suspected that Spoornet cancelled the contract as they viewed Rail Deliveries as a cash cow and a monopoly. Rail Deliveries however operated a very small office in Pinetown on a non-profit basis and the need to enforce all players to use the trains could only be achieved with the main players on board in a so-called 'monopoly'. Nevertheless, the service ended at the end of December 1997.

Sea Deliveries, run from the same office in Pinetown, had its last three voyages in April 1998 and this was due to Unicorn's intention to increase the freight rate by 30% and the Plants requiring a more frequent service. Suitably sized car carrying ships were becoming increasingly scarce and very expensive on the world's markets. They were generally last built in the 1970's using old engine technology and consequently had a high consumption of bunkers.

7. SAMFA

The Ferry Companies initially met for the first time on 6 October 1967 when an "Association of Road Ferry Undertakings" was formed. Those in attendance were:

Alec Roberts Pty Ltd (A C Roberts)

Auto Carriers (D C Lindsay)

Car Ferry Services and Western Cape Ferry Service (B Mills & J F Gillespie)

Controlled Deliveries (N Westcott)

Intervia (M van der Spuy)

Falstar (P J Marais)

Fauna (W J Kruger - Jnr & Snr)

Impala Ferry Services (G v E du Plessis)

Southern Star Organisation (E Pieterse)

Mr van der Spuy was its first Chairman and J H van Huyssteen its Secretary. The first balance sheet showed the annual income as R378.95 and expenses of R75.84. On 20 May 1970, there was a name change to that of South African Motor Ferry Association, with Mr G v E du Plessis as its first Chairman. The Association joined up with NAAMSA during February 1972 to co-ordinate the introduction of the Two Tier Trains. Mr F Lock headed the team and Messrs. Collier, Wiid, Kok and Coetzee represented the Railways.

8. ALEC ROBERTS' STORY

Alexander Christopher Roberts was born in Durban in 1930 and attended a local school and technical college. Between 1948 and 1952, Alec remembers that he was first involved in the ferry work when he was an apprentice motor mechanic for Stanley Motors in Durban. He, together with other apprentices and drivers used to collect Hudsons and Peugeotts from Natalspruit on a convoy system to ensure some form of control, especially as there were no speed limits and the roads were very poor. In 1952, he worked for a BMC agency in Bulawayo, in Southern Rhodesia, and sometimes collected vehicles from Beit Bridge. He crossed it in 1953 to marry and return with his wife Joy, worked for a year in Salisbury for the Rhodesian Railways and moved to Salisbury.

Between 1954 and 1960, he had left the car industry and was appointed, at the tender age of 26, as Transport Manager for Caltex for the entire Federation (Southern/Northern Rhodesias & Nyasaland). In 1961, he returned to Durban to work for Jack Mills at Farewell Service Station in Smith Street and again became involved in some ferry work. At this stage, Alec wanted to enter the ferry business full time and a friend, Don Currie, knew Brian Downard who ran Grosvenor Motors, a Ford dealership. Ford Motor Company was persuaded to release the units for this dealer and Alec Roberts started Alec Roberts Drive Deliveries and used Sharwoods in Port Elizabeth to collect and store the vehicles from the Ford Neave Plant. J&J Deliveries were also stationed close by and was being used by Ernest Pieterse.

Alec was initially the Supervisor/Pilot Driver and collected around 16 units per week from Port Elizabeth. Enter Allan Hutton, who used to help Alec when he could be spared Volumes increased and so did the number of seats in his first pilot van, a Thames 800. As the system worked so well, the units for a second Durban dealer, Huddleston Motors, were added. Steyns in Pretoria then joined and in 1967, Alec convinced Ford that delivery prices would drop if his volumes kept growing. Increased volumes meant however that many units were often parked all over Gale Street in Durban awaiting washing before delivery.

In 1963, Alec had to move into better facilities and he bought a Shell service station called Green's, renamed later to Old Dutch. Volumes kept increasing and eventually all Ford deliveries were given to Alec Roberts. Many dealers complained but eventually changed over. One exception was Nagington Motors, run by Ron Jurie - his deliveries continued to be carried out by Ernest Pieterse. Ron's brother, Eric, ran the largest Johannesburg dealership, Ericson Motors, and had a relation, Paddy McNair, who did his deliveries. It took some time to change - initially Alec being thrown out of Eric's office, to eventually being a close personal friend. Westridge Park in Durban was rented to store excess vehicles and these often overflowed onto the tennis courts.

The Oaktree fiasco started in 1970 – the details are recorded elsewhere. Despite strong objections, Felix Fielding was appointed as MD of Transvia, although he knew nothing about the Ferry Industry. Feltex had paid out Alec in Oaktree shares at 50c each and Feltex at R2.50 each. Some were sold shortly afterwards at R3.00 but most of them were sold at under R1.00. The Oaktree shares could only be used as wallpaper.

One good turn was the visit by Alec to the USA to review the latest in car carrier transporters and rail wagons. This was during the time that SAR&H were investigating and developing their own system but were not interested in Alec's contributions. Alec however was instrumental in talking others to join the discussions with SAR&H, especially David Taylor of Auto Carriers. It was also felt that the 'new' ferry companies needed to co-operate with each other to prevent a recurrence of the Oaktree era and in an endeavour to improve a tarnished image.

Directly after the Oaktree liquidation meeting in 1972, Alec flew to Port Elizabeth and, with cap in hand, informed Ford Motor Company of the circumstances and that he was back in business. The first exercise was to locate all in-transit vehicles abandoned around the country. He visited every Ford dealer, checking service stations en route. Only four vehicles were never accounted for.

One day, after arriving back home in Durban late from Port Elizabeth by air, Alec's wife informed him that there had

been a bad accident near Kokstad involving “a truck”. After investigating, it was established that there were three Ford D Series with tipper bodies. Some local children had apparently moved a deviation sign and the leader driver had driven over a steep cliff and tumbled many times before landing in the valley below. Two more drivers promptly followed, before the fourth driver realised something was amiss and stopped. Alec & Allan Hutton immediately drove to Kokstad in Alec’s Galaxy, arriving at midnight. Two drivers had been killed and the third was in a critical condition in hospital. After special permission had been obtained from the local Magistrate, the two bodies went into plastic bags into the trunk of the Galaxy. These corpses were then delivered to the relatives near Durban. The Galaxy was sold shortly afterwards.

In June 1982, Alec Roberts (Pty) Ltd changed its name to Co-ordinated Transport. They had been the sole delivery agent for Ford Motor Company for the past 15 years, 1970 until 1985, until the production of Fords was moved from the Port Elizabeth plants to Samcor in Pretoria. This was additional business for Motorvia who already had the contract to deliver the Mazdas emanating out of Samcor.

A consortium of Cargo Africa and Co-ordinated Transport developed into Forecourt Express. In 1997, one of the reasons that they were able to penetrate into the ferry business was the termination of the Two Tier Car Trains and withdrawal of Unicorn’s coastal ships. In April 1998, they took over the deliveries of Volkswagens out of Uitenhage from Motorvia who had provided this service for the past 25 years.

9. AUTO CARRIER TRANSPORT

Between 1971 and 1981, Auto Carrier Transport delivered vehicles by carrier to:

Mercedes from East London throughout SA

Peugeot from Natalspruit to the Western Cape

General Motors from Port Elizabeth to East London and the Piketberg area

Leyland from BMC in CapeTown throughout SA except along the coast (that was handled by Sea Deliveries)

Chrysler from Cape Town to the Transvaal until the Plant moved to Silverton, near Pretoria.

However, during this period, Auto Carrier Transport radically changed itself from a carrier and general transport company to become a company that delivered only vehicles by any method available. They consequently acquired interests in both Trainkar/Rail Deliveries in 1972 and Sea Deliveries in 1979 and also entered into the delivering of motor cycles, forklift trucks and other equipment.

10. SOCIAL OCCASIONS

Jannie van Huyssteen arranged a Trainkar Board Meeting on the Blue Train that left Cape Town on 20 September 1978. The previous evening, a tour and dinner had been arranged at the Nederburg Wine Estate with Gunter Brozel and Ansie Kemp as hosts. This was followed into the early hours of the next morning by a very serious tasting of various ports.

AGM’s were held at various venues that included another Blue Train trip from Johannesburg to Cape Town, Sun City, Wild Coast Casino, Groot Moddergat near Hout Bay, Cape Sun, etc. One at Granny Mouse’s Country House in Balgowan on 6 June 1989 would be the last time this venue was considered. On 28 November 1997, as a ‘Thank You’, all the players and their wives in Rail Deliveries were invited by Lester (& Sharon) Miller & Christelle Rentsch to dinner on Spoornet’s private trainset to Franschhoek and back to a night’s accommodation at The Table Bay Hotel in the Cape Town Harbour. (Barnards, Fentons, Jonkers, Pieterses and son, Roberts, Taylors, Thompson, Turners, van Huysteens and van Niekerks all attended).

11. MISCELLANEOUS DETAILS

Management/Officials:

Minister of Transport was Eli Louw in 1988

Minister of Transport was Mac Maharaj in 1994

Prof Louise Tager was Chairman of Transnet in 1996

Dr Meyer ran SATS in 1989
Dr Anton Moolman ran Transnet in 1994 left Aug 1996
Saki Macozama took over from Dr Anton Moolman as MD Transnet in Jul 1996
Mafika Mkwanazi was Spoornet's Executive Director in 1996
Braam le Roux ran Transnet in 1996
Thys Rossouw took over the Car Train portfolio May 90 & left for Iscor Jan 1997
Christelle Rentsch was responsible for the car trains from 1990
Duke Davidson ran Portnet in 1991
Neil Oosthuizen ran Portnet in 1994 and left mid 1996
Rob Childs ran Portnet from Feb 1997

A new Strategic Manager, Dr Siphon Nyawo, was employed by the port in Durban in 1995 and, although he appeared to make very little difference to the port's planning, was promoted to run Portnet nationally. However, in Feb 1996, Transnet's Chairman, Professor Louise Tager and Public Enterprises Minister Stella Sigau instituted criminal proceedings against him for misuse of his credit card. He was discharged later that year.

12. HEAD OFFICE

Al Turner was the MD since inception of both Sea Deliveries from 1979 and of Rail Deliveries from 1985. It was very coincidental that both Companies ceased to operate within two months of each other, being March 1998 and December 1997 respectively. He was also 60 years of age and was retiring although he continued as the Secretary of the SA Motor Ferry Association from 1985 until March 2001.

He was ably assisted by various members of staff but notably the wife of the Durban Depot Manager, Sue Lambert, and her replacement, Pat Smith as the Accountant, Lyn Aitkenhead worked as an assistant throughout the entire period and long serving Secretaries were Jackie Trott who was replaced by Merle Pilkington.

The office was initially located in Durban Bay House, then Southern Life Building, both in Smith Street in Durban, before moving to Pinetown to the old Medical Centre in Crompton Street.

In the early days, Unicorn named all its vessels after SA rivers. Al Turner was brought up on a mission station in the Magisterial district of Mkuze in Zululand. It was coincidental, possibly fortuitous, that Unicorn's first car ship was called MV Mkuze. An auditing firm (Hackner Benn & Corlett) was selected by Alec Roberts to handle the Company's financial affairs. Equally coincidental, a partner in this firm, Stuart Burt, was appointed to handle this account. He was brought up 100m from this mission station in the very small village of Ubombo in the Mkuze district.

13. SHIPPING

Unicorn Management consisted of Murray Grinrod as chairman throughout. Mike Groves was Unicorn's MD. In October 1991, Michael Meehan was promoted to deputy chairman and was replaced by Ivan Clark as MD. Liaison Managers were Captain Colin Ogg, Nigel Paul, Simon Pryce, Liam McKenzie & Terry Groves. A most useful and reliable contact throughout was Larry de Jager.

Rates were calculated and periodically increased so that sufficient income was being generated to meet the expenses of the freight costs. This rate was applied to the length of each vehicle shipped, measured in centimetres. There were some exceptions where lower rates were intended to attract incremental volumes and it was agreed that carriers could be moved on certain legs, either full or empty, at a special rate. Motorvia however only used this concession during 1993.

Damages consisted mainly of scratches and dents but every now and then something very serious occurred. One was in August 1991 when two containers, locked together but not secured to the weather-deck, fell over during a storm at sea and slid around destroying 8 Delta units, 8 VW's and 8 Honda's (coincidentally an even split over the three Shareholders). The Oceanis sank that very same weekend.

Lashings were initially the responsibility of Unicorn but damages to the lashings were causing serious disruptions and

Unicorn complained about excessive costs. Sea Deliveries took over the maintenance for a reduction to the contracted freight rate. The problem was that the lashings were of various imported ratchet types with steel cables that were costly and caused scratches to paint work. Sea Deliveries Management experimented with a rope type lashing that evolved into a most successful design used during the following fifteen years. It was made from cheap reinforcing rod off-cuts, common chain links and specially braided rope. Costs were low and the lashings were much easier to use.

Initially the Mkuze was berthed in the Port of Durban at Maiden Wharf where new vehicles were parked on the adjacent public roads, unlocked and with keys in the ignition. How times have changed! The Border and Barrier went to the Container Terminal (Berths 203 & 4) and so did the Boundary until container traffic increased and Portnet was persuaded to build a crossover at Berth 100 to handle the Boundary's ramp there and so relieve the pressure from October 1996.

The Durban Harbour Depot, next to the new Seaman's Institute, was initially managed by Chris Smit but he eventually returned to Unicorn. A new depot was built at the end of Pier # 2 when Hugh Lambert became his successor, followed by Harry Haggis when the depot reverted to being operated by Motorvia.

The Port Elizabeth Harbour Depot moved from the container terminal to the café end and the first formal lease for 280m² started in 1985 but was reduced to the area used (60m²) only by the office and storage container. In May 1996, Motorvia erected a fenced off area and the cost (R39,424) was absorbed by the Sea Deliveries' Shareholders. The lease was however never increased to incorporate this area. The Manager was initially Charles Bairstow for a very short and troublesome period. He was replaced by Dick Moore, Tommy Randall and finally Bennie Stander when Southern Star took over the depot's operations.

Mike Cloete was the Manager of the Cape Town Harbour Depot from 1971 during all the periods when Unicorn, Sea Deliveries and finally Auto Carriers operated the Depot. The depot began as a caravan on the docks, then a workshop and yard in Paarden Eiland, to end up in mobile offices in various positions near the container berth. The staff initially offloaded the ships, delivered Fords to the dealers as far North West as Springbok and returned with vehicle wrecks for repair in Cape Town for various insurance companies. A fleet of F350 Ford horses, pulling homebuilt 5-car semi-trailers, were used for this purpose but these were later replaced with Toyota DA 110 mechanical horses.

SDCT Properties (Pty) Ltd, (Sea Deliveries Cape Town) was a Company formed to purchase a 2976m² property at 51 Auckland Street in Paarden Eiland from Hunt, Leuchars & Hepburn for R180,000 in November 1984. It was initially used as a Sea Deliveries Depot with Mike Cloete as the Manager. It was later leased to Co-Ordinated Transport and eventually sold end March 1988 for R300,000 to Natsea (Pty) Ltd.

In April 1990 SA Harbours became Portnet, a separate entity under the umbrella of Transnet Ltd.

Port Charges had always been a contentious issue with numerous attempts over the years, some with success, to keep costs down. For merely driving across a dock's quayside incurred the charges that were considered to be very unrealistic and was an unnecessary burden on the overall delivery cost.

Since inception, CCTB's were the documents that had to be originated and approved by the authority in each port for each consignment of vehicles (there was a "provisional" copy followed by a "liquidating" copy). Fortunately, a deal was struck with Portnet Head Office in Johannesburg and from May 1992, this clumsy procedure was replaced with one consolidated schedule and one cheque payment for all of Sea Deliveries' shipments for the month. This unique arrangement continued until the final termination of the service despite Portnet having introduced a new invoicing system (Portis) in 1993 that stipulated that each port was autonomous.

Replacement Ships

Unicorn's intention was to sell the Border/Barrier and they were looking for a replacement carship. The Beli was surveyed but the main engine was in an appalling condition. During February & very early March 1993, Al Turner was urgently invited by Unicorn to join the Unicorn "experts", Dick Young and Quentin Foyle, who were already flying around Europe checking out some possibilities. These three viewed the Primula in Koper, Slovenia, (too expensive to operate), Rapoca in Venice (during the annual carnival) but this vessel was then taken off the market, the Beli (Rapoca's sister vessel) in Southampton and the Autostrada in Rotterdam. The Autostrada was the most likely with the other being unsuitable and in bad condition. Unicorn were about to commit on the Autostrada but they were thwarted at

the eleventh hour and fortunately found the Edna (renamed Boundary). A Memorandum of Purchase was signed on 10 March, the same year, showing the urgency.

14. TWO TIER TRAINS

Train Damages continued over the years, predominantly stoning. However, in 1972, filings from the brake pads burnt into the new vehicle's paint-work and caused rust. The Railways quickly changed to fibre blocks. Brake fluid or battery acid also sometimes leaked onto vehicles below and during 1972 & 1973, the expanded mesh on the upper decks was replaced with solid steel sheeting.

Never ending stone damage caused dents or scratches, mostly small and easy to repair, but nevertheless very annoying due to the penalty costs incurred and the considerable inconvenience with delayed deliveries. After experimenting with various types of protection, it was finally decided to erect wire netting across the openings along the sides of the wagons and between the stanchions on the upper deck. Minor damages were cut by over 85% but rocks, the size of a football, were still occasionally dropped off bridges with drastic effects.

To save costs in 1996, Spoornet removed the guards' vans. Soon afterwards, some vehicles on the last wagon of a train near Elandsfontein had its lashings loosened in what was believed to be a hijack attempt. It would have been fairly straightforward to use planks as a ramp. Fortunately, no further attempts were reported. Stopping the train en route, either due to derailments or accidents, always caused headaches, as they were extremely vulnerable to pilferage, concentrated stoning or sheer vandalism.

From 1987 until 1991, a type of spasmodic staining occurred to the vehicles loaded on the top decks behind the locomotive on the Aloes trains. For a period of two years, an empty SCL wagon was fitted as a buffer. It was eventually established that grease from the overhead cable lines was collecting on the locos, only to be trailed onto the front vehicles when it rained. Cleaning the loco roofs and reducing the grease application eventually resolved this frustrating problem.

Rusty decks also caused damage with the rain washing off the upper decks and smearing the new vehicle's carried below. Sagging overhead power cables occasionally shorted out and caused nasty burn marks on the cab roofs, especially at tunnels and during summer. Appeals of bad maintenance were always made and reimbursement was sometimes successful. There were three occurrences when the loading ramp came loose during the loading operation although only one vehicle was badly damaged when it fell through the gap.

There was a major derailment on 15 January 1982 at Nottingham Road, Natal. Two more followed over the years, one of which was fortunately an empty train.

Isipingo Rail Depot (Durban) had a serious drainage problem and flooding occurred on 14 March 1978. 66 vehicles were badly damaged, the storm water rising 55 mm's and covered the seats of Cressidas, Mazda1000s and Capellas.

Aloes Rail Depot (Port Elizabeth).

Kaalfontein Rail Depot (Between Johannesburg and Pretoria).

All three depots were leased separately to Rail Deliveries and were renewed with each new freight contract.

Kleinvlei Rail Depot (Cape Town) consisted of a 29,145 m² area that was leased for Motorvia's use from 1972 to date. A further 32,396m² was leased to Auto Carriers from 1972 during the BMC and Renault eras. The lease was initially between Rail Deliveries and SAR&H until 1993 when Intersite Property Management Services (Pty) Ltd took over. From 1994, Motorvia handled the lease directly with Intersite.

Bloemfontein Rail Depot was the old Parcel's Depot and was leased separately. The platforms were under cover and used for storage of vehicles handled by Motorvia and Southern Star Organisation.

Advertisements by Spoornet for this Industry were scarce but in 'Time' and various financial magazines in August 1994, strong objections had to be lodged. A Corporate advert pictured a distraught patient being carried on a stretcher with

the words “We asked this driver to do 10400 in one hour and show nothing on the clock”. The accompanying statement referred to “our terminals”, whereas these had been leased exclusively to Rail Deliveries. Spoornet also stated that they could deliver wherever wanted, whereas the rail service was limited and the Ferry Companies carried out this function. It had obviously been directed at the Manufacturers and was completely against the spirit and legal terms of the contract between Rail Deliveries and Spoornet. It was immediately withdrawn. Spoornet however continued to advertise the carrying of passenger’s cars on the Blue Train and other mainline expresses. At one time they attempted to extend this service to other trains and to non-passengers but were discouraged to do so.

The Payment Method was initially messy with the different operations and terminals but eventually was negotiated into one monthly cheque for all services provided by Spoornet. In 1990, SATS informed all their clients that they were on the road to privatisation and each area was becoming autonomous. In October of that year, a milestone was reached when, for the first time in seventeen years, the Railway’s statements were correct. This however deteriorated again the next month and continued as an on-going problem every month over all the years.

SCL Wagons were 20.504m between couplings and each carried four vehicles on the upper and four on the lower decks. The exceptions in the earlier years were the five small Fordson tractors. This also applied in the latter years to Renault R5’s, Fiat Uno’s, Delta Corsa’s and VW Chico’s.

The wagons were built by Dorbyl viz: Apr-Sep 1972, 52 wagons; Oct-Apr 1974, 52 wagons; Apr 78–Apr 79, 104 wagons, Jan–Oct 1983, 100 wagons; plus 10 spare wagons. In total 318 wagons.

These wagons were joined with a type of solid coupling except in the middle and ends of the initial 52 wagon train sets and some spare wagons that all had the more common M-couplings (shaped like a ‘C’) at each end. These allowed complete inter-changeability of connections but the many solid couplings ensured that the last wagon left the terminal at the same time as the locomotive, thereby preventing any ‘whip-lash’ and strain to the vehicle’s lashings.

Generally, all motor cars could be carried, with most of the 2 X 2 type bakkies (light pickup) but only on the upper deck. The height of the 4 X 4 and Minibuses were too high. There was an unofficial height restriction of 1.605m as a special exemption off Spoornet’s normal standard. This was the absolute limit as any sagging overhead power cables had already caused nasty burn marks on the cab roofs.

The vehicles were loaded and unloaded using a high ramp for the upper and a low ramp for the lower decks. These ramps ran on their own wheels and were manually pulled up and connected to each opposite end of the train set once the loco had been removed. The vehicles on the two decks consequently faced different directions. The objective was for the vehicles on the upper deck to face backwards while travelling to reduce the costs from damage caused by stoning. It was less costly to replace the rear window than a windscreen, especially on a pick-up truck. A special side loading ramp was built onto an old DZ type truck for use at the old Bloemfontein Parcels Depot.

The four per vehicle ratchet type lashings, sliding on retaining bars on each deck, were extremely strong and secured the vehicle even after some wagons had been overturned as had happened with a few derailments. The trick was to right the wagon with the vehicles still on board. With the first derailment, the vehicles were intact but released before the wagons were up-righted. This caused a considerable amount of subsequent damage to the vehicles.

Various experiments to SCL wagons and routes were conducted. In 1985, Rail Deliveries paid (R60,000) for converting 30 of the older type SCL wagons from vacuum to air brakes. Six drawbars were also changed (R12,000). This was to initially cater for shorter trains to Kleinvele and East London although the East London train never materialised due to the rate being too expensive. The wagons were eventually used many years later to transport vehicles to and from Bloemfontein, being attached behind the TTT1.

One SCL wagon had its top deck removed in 1987 and was used for six months to carry 3 or 4 high vehicles on the Isipingo route. The revenue earned per wagon however was not cost effective (8 cars versus 3 or 4 trucks). Raising the upper deck to accommodate higher vehicles beneath was also investigated but incurred the redesigning of the uprights and the costs were excessive. To make the decks moveable (up & down) would be even more costly. In 1987/8, the feasibility of a passenger coach being hauled on occasions behind the car trains to carry drivers was investigated but was considered to be impractical.

Early in 1989, SATS’s engineers were asked to cover the trains to reduce stone damage to the vehicles but their

estimated costs were prohibitively high. Later that year, alternatives were sought and hinged plastic sections to cover the wagons were less costly but were still not justifiable. Eventually, a fencing company gradually fenced the lower and upper decks of all the wagons used.

In the same year, the “Abba” and “Roadtrailer” were two attempts by Spoornet to take cargo off the roads. The first constituted special wagons with an under-slung chassis that carried semi-trailers and the latter, special bogie units between the semi-trailers. These concepts may have had potential for the movement of new trucks but Spoornet rejected both ideas despite them being a great success in the USA over many years and still currently in use.

During 1990 and 1991, two surplus wagons were moved to Aloes and Southern Star’s engineers experimented with closing in the tops, sides and ends with steel. Reduced damage to vehicles and the secure conveyance of general goods on empty legs were the objectives. Again, the fitting of a permanent roof would have prevented many bakkies from being conveyed and Spoornet discouraged any other cargo movements besides vehicles on these wagons.

In 1995, Delta were very keen to have part of the train moved from the Aloes Terminal to their Plant in Kempton Road in Port Elizabeth. This was discouraged due to the adverse costs and logistical implications.

Bridge plates between the SCL wagons had to be lowered and raised at the termination of each trip and this was heavy and time-consuming work. In 1996, concertina wooden frames were fitted between the wagons to measure the movement around the curves en route. The result proved that the plate’s profiles could be cut to not snag the channels thereby remaining in the down position at all times. Spoornet however refused private enterprise to modify the plates and their quote was again financially prohibitive.

15. VOLUMES

	Car Sales	Commercial	Total
1950	36758	7676	44434
1960	98779	20385	119164
1970	201854	95719	297573
1980	277058	127708	404766
1981	301528	152013	453541
1990	209608	125171	334779
1991	197750	110325	308075
1992	183662	100297	283959
1993	195032	103019	298051
1994	191978	111144	303123
1995	236584	140200	376784
1996	249838	143142	392980
1997	239762	127113	366875
1998	203821	110589	314410
1999	189370	106405	295775

16. DIESEL PUMP PRICES

Coast/Reef – Cents per litre

Jan 1970	7.13/7.99	Feb 1971	7.43/8.29	Dec 1972	8.33/9.19
Oct 1973	10.03/11.23	Dec 1974	13.13/14.53	Oct 1975	18.48/19.88
Sep 1976	20.98/22.68	Apr 1977	24.97/27.07	Jul 1978	26.00/28.50
Jun 1979	50.10/52.60	Apr 1980	51.10/53.70	Jul 1981	57.40/60.40
Sep 1982	61.50/65.10	Aug 1983	57.20/60.80	Jul 1984	59.60/64.40
Nov 1985	96.00/102.00	Apr 1986	78.00/84.00	Jul 1987	75.00/81.00
Sep 1988	75.00/81.00	Apr 1989	102.00/109.00		