

Paper Number: 541

The Okiep copper mines – the most historic mining district in South Africa

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"Copper! It is a malleable, enduring metal that has served man for untold centuries. Certainly it has served Namaqualand well. More than anything else it has made Namaqualand what it is, and to mention the one without the other is to censor history" [1].



Figure 1. The town of Springbok, viewed from the adjacent Blue Mine, the first mine commercially operated by Europeans in South Africa. Bruce Cairncross photograph, 2011.

The Okiep copper district is located in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa and covers an area of approximately 3 000 km². It includes the towns of Springbok, Nababeep, Okiep, Concordia and Carolusberg located in a geographic region referred to as Namaqualand. The copper mines in the Okiep district of Namaqualand are steeped in South African mining and geological history [2]. The Dutch colonialists “discovered” the deposits, although mineralization was known to the indigenous Africans prior to European occupation of the Cape Colony. Governor Simon van der Stel led an expedition to the region in 1685 and members of his group were the first Europeans to exploit an economic geology deposit in South Africa. In 1852, the first mine to be opened by Europeans in South Africa in the Okiep district and the first South African mining company was established in 1852 to mine copper from the deposits. Other notable ‘firsts’ for the region are that the first South African geological report and first geological map produced in this country describe and depict these Namaqualand copper deposits.

Several famous 19th century explorers visited the copper deposits prior to and during the first mining activities began in the mid-19th Century. Amongst these were famous geologists such as W.G. Atherstone, Andrew Wyley and E.J. Dunn, and also Andrew Geddes Bain and Charles Bell. Bain produced the first

geological report published in South Africa. Bell was the Surveyor General in the Cape Colony at the time and in 1855 visited the Okiep mines and the Cornish miners who were already working the deposits.

Today, the Okiep copper district is devoid of mining activity. Fluctuating copper prices, coupled with a somewhat remote setting, have collectively caused varying degrees of success and failure in the 150-year history of the mines. Derelict and abandoned mining apparatus, some imported from Cornwall, can still be seen scattered around a few of the old mine sites. Nevertheless, there are some national heritage sites and national monuments declared in the region including the discovery site of the copper ore outcrop by Simon van der Stel in 1685, and some of the preserved mining equipment from the late 19th century. This Namaqualand region is now more famous for its early spring flowers than for its geological and economic history.

References

- [1] Steenkamp W (1975). *Land of the Thirst King (2nd edition)*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 192 pages
- [2] Cairncross B (2004). *The Mineralogical Record*, (35): 289-317.

