

How I became a Woman Prospector

by

Lucy Lindley Mitchell Molteno

Introduction

Lucy Molteno (nee Mitchell) (1874-1969) was Charlie (John Charles) Molteno's wife. She was an American. Born in 1874, her mother was Sarah Lindley Mitchell (1839-1912), whose father had been the Rev. Daniel Lindley, an American missionary in South Africa. He had served as a predikant to the Voortrekkers in what became Natal shortly after they left the Cape Colony to found an independent existence for themselves. But he resigned as their minister in 1847 and instead set up



Lucy Mitchell at the time of her marriage to Charlie Molteno, 1897

a mission station to the Zulus at Inanda. For many years, he preached under a huge tree each Sunday; this tree was still standing a hundred years later. Lucy, therefore, had some connection with Southern Africa. She met Charlie (1860-1924), who was the eldest son of Sir John Molteno, during a three year long tour on which her mother, Sarah, took her and her sisters, Carol and Nan, following the death of their father, Clarence Green Mitchell, in 1893. They spent some time in South Africa because of this being where Sarah had been born before moving to the United States, and in order to meet their Uncle Bryant Lindley's family.

Lucy was only about nineteen or twenty when she and Charlie met at the Cape. She was, Effie Stanford (nee Anderson) told her daughter, Cynthia Payne, one of three beautiful sisters. And Cynthia herself remembers that 'her features were so perfect that, even in her old age, she remained beautiful.' Charlie fell in love with her. Already in his mid thirties and a Member of Parliament in the Cape legislature, he was also running his late father's farms at Nelspoort. But he pursued her to the United States. And they got married there on 23 December 1897.

On their return to the Cape, Charlie decided that they would live in Cape Town rather than the Karoo. He bought the property of Sandown in Rondebosch, and this is where they spent the next 25 years of their married life. Charlie himself died prematurely of pneumonia following a routine operation in 1924. Lucy was now just fifty. Her five children were almost all grown up, and two of them, Lucy and Virginia, moved to England where they eventually married and settled.. Lucy herself outlived her husband by 45 years.

She was a petite, courageous and independent-minded woman. She became involved in women's suffrage issues in Cape Town, and through this activity became a lifelong friend of Olive Schreiner, the famous South African novelist, feminist writer and political activist.



Lucy Molteno (left), with her daughter, Carol Williamson, and son, Peter Molteno, at family gathering, late 1960s – at her niece, Kathleen Murray's (in wheelchair)

In the short piece below, she explains how she decided to do another quite exceptional thing – to go prospecting for minerals in what is, without doubt, the most remote, undeveloped and almost unpopulated region of South Africa – the vast, desert-prone expanses of the Northern Cape stretching up to the Orange River. Lucy faced numerous obstacles. One of these was she always had to find someone reliable to drive her in the remote wilds of Namaqualand where the roughest of tracks were the nearest thing to roads that existed. On one occasion in the 1950s my brother, Wallace Molteno, accompanied her. On another, Peter Gibbs, the brother of John Mike Gibbs who married Lucy's granddaughter, Margaret Williamson, drove her. Peter, who shortly after became one of the first people to canoe down the entire length of the Orange River, kept a diary, and this also is reproduced on this website. He gives a real sense of the tough terrain and hardships such prospecting involved. Although Lucy never made any significant money from her constant trips and the claims she pegged, she did do something that perhaps no other South African woman has attempted before or since.

She was right, apparently, about one important mineral find, although this only became clear years after her death. Cynthia Stanford records in her recollections how 'Aunt Lucy', who 'spent much of her time prospecting for minerals ... up the West Coast as far as Angola', once told her that she knew there was oil in Angola. Cynthia also remembers how Lucy 'always looked a perfectly dressed lady and was never seen

abroad without a hat. Even when she was very old and more or less confined to her room, she did not receive visitors unless wearing her boudoir cap, usually beautifully made by her daughter, Carol, with whom she was living.'

A Tribute to Lucy Molteno by P. Weidner

Lucy lived into extreme old age and only died in 1969 at the age of 95. Here is a lovely tribute to her published in the press (probably the *Cape Times* or the *Cape Argus*, sometime in 1969). It comes from P. Weidner, himself a prospector, founder of the Pella Group, and living with his wife in Karasburg, Namaqualand:

Sir,

This verse, originally written to the memory of the late Dr David Draper and included (with acknowledgement) in the brochure of the Pella Group Story, was reprinted as a special tribute to the mining pioneers of Southern Africa.

*He tried his luck in Paraguay,
He tried in the U.S.A.
He dug for diamonds, gold and tin,
His luck stayed out, but friends came in.
'Old boy!' they cried, 'you've won the game
By bringing home an honest name.'*

Many prospectors laboured hard and diligently in difficult circumstances and conditions, but they also remained honest, sincere and independent. Lucy Molteno, 95 when she died, was one of those who 'won the game by bringing home an honest name'.

The writer, who claimed to be a sincere and intimate friend of hers, did not know just how many mining claims in the Steinkopf-Richtersveld and Bushmanland she held under peg, but she lived just a little bit too early to reap the rewards of her labours. Atomic energy only came into demand after World War II....

On several occasions offers were made to her in which she was asked to take part in the formation and registration of a mining company. She always refused by giving the promoters the same answer: how can I sell something when I don't know what it is worth? I have many prospecting claims but they have not been developed.

Lucy Molteno never stopped trying. Although she lived in Cape Town – in her sixties, in her seventies, yes, even in her eighties, she would roll up in Namaqualand. She was not able to drive her vanette herself but advertised for a driver – and heaven knows, she entrusted her life to cowboys and speed fiends and in six years on four occasions she landed up in hospital before she even reached Springbok. People who remember the old road between Vanrhynsdorp and Citrusdal will understand why – that road was no road for an amateur driver. Things got so bad that her family, in bidding her goodbye on her trips, would ask her: Where must we pick you up this time, Mother? Smilingly she would answer: One day I'll bring home the bacon – be patient until then. Begging and pleading with her not to go out on these excursions was of no avail.

Lucy Molteno remained a true prospector till the end. (R.I.P.)

P. Weidner, Sen.
Karasburg

Other writings by Lucy Molteno and her prospecting days

You can read on this website not only the following very short piece by Lucy on how she became a mineral prospector, but also her more substantial memoirs, *What a strange thing is memory*. I have written a more detailed account of Lucy in the Introduction to that piece. Finally, also reproduced on this website is Peter Gibbs' diary of the two month-long trip he took with Lucy as her driver through Namaqualand and Namibia (South West Africa) in 1953 when she was already 79 years of age.

Robert Molteno
June 2013



The Richtersveld, giving some idea of the terrain where Lucy Molteno prospected

After residence abroad for several years, I was one day visiting a friend in her lovely country place.¹ She was a keen horsewoman and gardener and her taste in clothes was austere and tailored. So all the more noticeable was a lovely emerald that she wore nonchalantly as a pin. Now, emeralds are my favourite stone. I can never resist staring at a fine stone. And this being a friend, I spoke about it. "Oh! My emerald was found in my sister's mine", she replied. And then followed a most amazing story of how two women, my friend's sisters – one of them a widow, short of cash but full of enterprise – had started on their quest. Braving fever, crocodiles and crooks, they succeeded in discovering the finest emerald mine ever found in South Africa. They nearly died of fever and the heat. They had many adventures. But there was the tangible proof of their success. Later my friend's daughter became my daughter-in-law and I heard many details of her aunts' adventure and saw a piece of the grey mica schist in which the emeralds were embedded.

A few months after my son's marriage, I had one afternoon taken a short train journey. The time of day meant the train was empty and only two other passengers got out at my destination. They were gypsy women wearing brilliant gypsy colours and scarves, and the freedom of the hills was in their movements and flashing eyes. I had never seen any gypsies here before. But I remembered that I had heard there was a troupe who had lately come. And I subsequently found out that they were leaving the next day,

¹ This was Mrs Judd who lived on the farm of Foxwold at Koelenhof in the Boland. Her daughter, Margaret ('Margie'), married Lucy Molteno's second son, Peter, in 1937. The sisters of Mrs Judd referred to here were Aunt Lily and Aunt May. Aunt May's daughter, Zoe, married John Molteno, Lucy's eldest son, following his divorce. Margie and Zoe were therefore first cousins.

having evidently made a mistake in getting out at my station. The younger gypsy begged me "to cross my heart" and she began the usual rigmarole until I felt I had had enough and said I must go. But she said: "Only one thing more. Look out for the 19th of next month – something very good will come to you." I laughingly told my family to remember the date and then I forgot all about it.

About six weeks later my daughter-in-law had a letter which she said was a great secret, but that she was given leave to tell me as I had been so interested in her aunt's emeralds. The letter said that mutual friends of ours had discovered real emeralds in *another* part of the country, this time in a good climate. I was thrilled and wanted to rush off at once and peg out claims. But I was told they had already pegged any likely places. Later in the day, my daughter-in-law reminded me this was the 19th...! From then on my mind was made up – I, too, would go prospecting.

Changes had lately come into my life. I was now free to make plans. First, I realised I must have some knowledge, even if slight, to go upon. So I consulted friends who had educational contacts and was fortunate in being able to arrange for private lessons at the University from a delightful teacher who entered into the spirit of my adventure. As it was now the long summer vac, I had the opportunity of supplementing my lessons with hours alone in the University Museum studying geological specimens and getting familiar with the appearance of the different stones.

The summer vacation ended. Private lessons were no longer possible. And a regular Geology course would take too long. So I frequented the public library and read all I could find. The weather upcountry turned cooler. Now was the moment. I determined to do it economically and finally arranged to get a Chevy delivery van. The only one left was black – a bad colour for the heat and looking like a Black Maria! But I did not want to wait weeks and months to send away for another colour. So I bought it and had two extra windows built in so as to let in light and air, and I had a wireless installed.

About this time I heard that a man with a farm in the part of the country which had interested me from things I had read, had brought down samples to be analysed. He was anxious to get someone to prospect his farm with an arrangement of an option and possible further purchase. I did not know the man. But I went to a young lawyer friend and, by dint of enquiries, we tracked the man down and arranged a meeting at my club. I took the precaution that the lawyer should be present. I would take no risks.

The man proved to be a Turkish Jew with the polished manners and taste in cigarettes of Constantinople.² He was an elderly man who was in bad health and therefore anxious for someone else to do the prospecting. He showed his surprise when we met and asked if I knew what kind of place I was going to – absolutely in the wilds, the loneliest spot imaginable. And that I was taking too big a risk and should only go with a party and at least have my son or one or two men friends as protection. I could be murdered there and no one would hear! However I assured him that I would have a revolver with me and would get a reliable white driver. He replied the man would have to be a *very* good driver as only the most expert could manage a car in such country. My lawyer friend seemed a little anxious, but said he would get a friend if I was waving signals of distress. I felt this venture, even if not a success from a prospecting point of view, would serve as a beginning and jumping off place.

² Lucy would have instantly recognised these cigarettes since her sister, Nan Mitchell, had lived for some years in Constantinople where she helped 'White' Russian refugees fleeing the October Revolution. On one occasion Lucy holidayed with Nan in the city.

I now began to buy equipment and supplies, and to look out for a driver. I also interviewed Mining Departments in regard to the law [Eventually] I had all the necessary papers in order. And I had arranged with the Turk the date when we were to meet at the nearest town to his farm. The farm was some 80 miles further on. He would show me the way. But it was difficult to find and I could not do so without a guide. It was now imperative to get a good driver quickly. I made many enquiries and several leads failed. Then one morning I started out determined to find the man. I went first to see a friend and told him about my quest. There happened to be with him that morning a charming woman I had not met before. I asked her if she knew of anyone and miraculously she knew the very person. She kindly telephoned for me. And that night it was all arranged. I have been grateful to her ever since.....

[Editor's Note: Lucy's handwritten account ends abruptly here. There is no evidence, unfortunately, that she ever wrote the rest of it.]