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SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR HISTORY

While the Indians were working in the sugar plantations, what was happening to the Africans? We mentioned in Part I how white farmers in Natal were unable to find enough Africans to work for them, and so brought Indians to this country to work for them.

Yet today, there are millions of Black workers in the towns, giving their labour to the mine and factory owners. Why did they leave their land? How did this happen?

The 19th century was a time of the making and breaking of nations. In Natal, the Zulu nation had to defend their country against white colonialists who were searching for more land. At first the Zulus won battles because they were brave fighters, but they could not defeat the gun which the white man carried. Eventually the Zulus lost nearly half their land to the whites.

In many cases, small tribes broke up and the people were scattered. Much of the land that remained was unsuitable for agriculture. One man reported that the land was fit only for the owl and the eagle, the baboon and the jackal, because it was so rocky. Many had no choice but to work for the new white farmers or to rent a small piece of land from them. They were called squatters.

These squatters became quite successful after a few years and sold their crops for good prices. In 1877 a magistrate said: "Taking man for man and acre for acre, the native produces more than the European." Many white farmers complained that Africans were lazy because they would not work for the low wages that the whites offered. As long as Africans could work on a small piece of land they could remain independent. They had their own source of wealth, even if it was small.

But in the meantime, diamonds were found in Kimberley and this was to change the whole system of wealth in South Africa. It is important to look at what happened in Kimberley, because this was the start of many unfair labour customs and laws that we still find in South Africa today. It was also the making of the Black working class, a people who sell their labour in return for wages.

People of all races came from all over the country to Kimberley to find diamonds and riches. In the early years, Black workers were able to improve their wages because they were free to sell their labour for the best price. In two years a diamond digger's wages rose from R1 a week with food to R3 a week with food. This was in 1871, when money was worth more.

But these conditions did not last. Next week we will write about how things changed.