

Holding Ground Against Winds of Change: The Story of the 122-year-old RA Bailey Store in Palapye, Botswana

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Palapye is a village or town that has become well known for a retail explosion that has seen high-class malls spring up throughout the village, jostling for both the increasingly wealthier local population and abundant AI highway traffic. At every strategic intersection in the village, a new shiny mall is rising, millions of Pula being spent on modern designs and finishes. The billboards and insignia of trendy retail brands are emblazoned at the malls, indicative of the fierce competition being waged for the hearts and minds of consumers.

Standing quietly in the midst of the retail storm is a 122-year-old business that dates back to the early days of the Central District village. RA Bailey was amongst the first businesses to open in Palapye, being a small outlet offering limited services to an equally small rural farming community at the time. Situated in what is now Old Palapye, RA Bailey would grow from those humble beginnings as a general store, to set up shop throughout the district and beyond, becoming an indelible part of the growth of villages and their transformation into modernity.

In its birthplace, Palapye, RA Bailey dates back to a time when there was no Botswana Pula and the currency in use was the South African Rand. (The Pula was introduced in 1976). However, the new malls sprouting all over Palapye do not alarm RA Bailey. The general store's current manager, Hilton Freeman, says in its 122-year history, they have seen it all before. New players have mushroomed and experts have written RA Bailey's obituary, only to see the legend remain standing. 'We do not feel threatened by the sprouting of new names in the industry because we know that we will never go wrong if our customers know they are getting a fair deal from us', Freeman explains. 'We are not after accolades but we are here to run our business and satisfy our customers. That is what has kept us going for over 100 years. In fact like the other businesses here, we are optimistic that the growing population will allow us to remain comfortably in business', he continued.

Today, the historical gulf between RA Bailey and the new businesses is evident, even in the location. The general store is situated where the village's peak area used to be. Now, RA Bailey and another old industry player, Haskins hardware, are tucked away in one end of Palapye, while the village and its shiny new businesses has grown in another direction.

The current location of the business was strategic back then as the highway to Francistown passed next to RA Bailey towards Kgolagano College. Today, the area appears desolate, but loyal customers are evidently able to locate the general store. RA Bailey is in the village's Old Mall area, which was a hive of activity in yesteryear Palapye, particularly as the train station was, and still is located there. Back then, the area from the Old Mall to the AI roundabout was dominated by thick bushes, wild animals and traditional thatched houses. Today, that same wild area is where Palapye's new business area has grown.

As you enter RA Bailey, you will see a cupboard containing a lot of archives and archaic accessories such as an old telephone model, typewriter and a post scale. The shop also boasts plenty of historical materials ranging from diaries that documented daily transactions and occurrences, as well as

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letters that relatives back in the day used to write each other. There are even some official documents signed by Tshekedi Khama, the iconic Bangwato regent (1926-1949).

Large scales that were used to weigh and determine the price of cattle are still visible at RA Bailey, as well as exhibitions of the trucks that were used at the time. All along the walls within the store are certificates recognising RA Bailey for having ‘started a petroleum station and operated’ it 50 years ago. That part of the business was taken over by Shell company some years ago. RA Bailey also ventured into the hospitality industry by building Palapye Hotel which remains fully operational today.

Generally, the existing Palapye general store and other RA Bailey around the country have kept true to how they used to operate as far back as 20 years ago. The old scales that used to weigh course salt are still visible on the counter and are still in use. Also on show are trade licences that were acquired in 1961 and signed in Mafikeng, South Africa by the then Bechuanaland Protectorate (colonial Botswana) government. At the time, the Imperial Reserve was based there and that was where Botswana was governed before independence in 1966. ‘Back then Botswana was the only country with a capital city (sic) situated in another country’, Freeman says.

RA Bailey, affectionately known as ‘Kwa goora Bele’ in the local language, started operating in Old Palapye with other white traders back in the late nineteenth century but moved to Palapye in 1896 when Chief Khama III and the white traders went to establish Serowe in 1902. At the same time the aggressive British imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes, was building a railway line to pass through what is now Palapye on the way to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). He (RA Bailey) chose to remain in Palapye instead of migrating to Serowe. Despite the challenges of running a small business in those early years, RA Bailey was able to spread to many villages in the Tswapong region such as Ratholo and Mogapinyana, and more branches in Palapye itself. The general store went on to setup as far as Letlhakane, Makalamabedi, Gweta, Maun and Rakops.

According to Freeman, back then the only mode of transport was horse back and ox-wagon and the stock was ordered from Johannesburg in South Africa. Because there was no currency at the time, Batswana would bring cattle in exchange for cash then use the same cash to buy groceries from the shop. RA Bailey himself was a renowned cattle trader. ‘I remember that at some point I drove trucks that transported the same cattle to Rhodesia for sale because Botswana Meat Commission had not been set up. I would drive truck loads of cattle from Matshelegabedi quarantine to Rhodesia for sale. RA Bailey used to travel in an ox-agon from Palapye to Maun outlet because there were no road networks then. A single trip would take more than two days and when it rained, they would get stuck for days’, Freeman recalls. He adds that the Letlhakane shop was established way before anyone thought there would be diamonds found there. ‘The area was a cattlepost belonging to Benny Steinberg (who would later become the first Boteti Member of Parliament) and the shop in Letlhakane is still fully operational even today.’”

He noted that when the small shop was opened in Palapye there were not many people and stock was delivered by train and distributed in trucks to other branches as the use of ox-wagons passed by with generations. Permission to open branches in other villages was then granted by Tshekedi Khama who was the then overseer of the Bangwato territory. The business also thrived through people who would be in transit between Rhodesia and Johannesburg by train. ‘The cattle trade was also good and sustained our business immensely. We would also load them to markets in Johannesburg and eventually Botswana Meat Commission started by the colonial government came into the picture, then we started trucking to Lobatse’, he said.

Through thick and thin, the general store has resisted the winds of change. From a position when

it was the village's economic mainstay before and after independence, RA Bailey is looking forward to being part of the future. 'We are still operating here in Palapye and we survived all these years because we are well known and our quality is guaranteed. We do not have any intention of relocating to the new central business area where we will be drained by rentals. Our existence is guaranteed for the next 100 years', promised or prophesied Freeman.

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