

# The DRISA Volunteer Project

## (Digital Rail Images of South Africa)

There is an international surge in the study and recognition of our civil engineering heritage as historians start to appreciate how advances in transportation and sanitation, to name but two, have enabled the urbanisation and economic development of the modern world. Nowhere is this better evidenced than in South Africa, where vast distances and relative isolation had to be conquered. The recognition of the Woodhead Dam and the Agulhas Lighthouse by ASCE (American Society of Civil Engineers) as International Historic Engineering Landmarks speaks for itself. As the history of technology deals with tangible objects, historical photographs are an obvious and valuable primary source.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Publicity and Tourism Department of the South African Railways employed a permanent group of professional photographers to not only record the wide range of activities of the SAR, but also to promote South Africa as a tourist destination both locally and abroad. In this way, a valuable collection of photographs was accumulated which covered all aspects of South Africa – its railway and broader technological development, its natural beauty, its peoples and cultures, agriculture, monuments, cities and towns ... the list goes on. Readers of the SAICE magazine over the last few years have seen numerous of these images illustrating some of the articles on our engineering history. The collection of about a quarter million photographs is now in the custody of Transnet Freight Rail in a basement in downtown Johannesburg. Sadly, the catalogues have been lost, and the preservation of the collection has become an urgent priority.

A few concerned retired engineers initiated a pilot project three years ago to do something about it. The ultimate dream is to have a complete catalogue on the Internet, with a proper description and thumbnail image of each photograph, freely accessible to anyone in the world. Technical procedures and archival standards were developed, the complexity of the collection was unravelled and two young interns with matric were trained and are now working on a full-time basis, supported by a few small cash contributions from individuals. Meanwhile, a Memorandum of Understanding has been negotiated between SAICE and Transnet Freight Rail and signed on 29 June 2016 during the SAICE president's visit to the SAICE Railway and Harbour Division. The

project is now officially launched and got a solid start with a generous donation from SAICE's Railway and Harbour Division. A mammoth task lies ahead, with the best estimate that it will take at least three to five years to completion.

SAICE members who are interested in this exciting initiative can send their email addresses to [johannes@haarhoff.org.za](mailto:johannes@haarhoff.org.za), with no obligation other than to be informed of DRISA's progress. The main focus at first will be on the physical scanning and archival description of the images, but soon volunteer engineers with experience will be required to provide further identification and interpretation.

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SAICE president Chris Herold signing the Memorandum of Understanding; looking on from left: Johan de Koker (SAICE Railway and Harbour Division), Johannes Haarhoff (SAICE Fellow, leader of the DRISA initiative), Fana Marutla (chairman SAICE Railway and Harbour Division), Elvin Harris (CEO Transnet Freight Rail) and Yolanda Meyer (librarian Transnet Heritage Library)