

Postal Runners - The Heroes of Early Communication

Gondwana Collection Namibia

Talk about snail mail! That's putting it mildly. Are the loved ones back home all right? Are mother and father still alive? Will head office send the urgently needed bibles or not?

Missionaries in Namibia used to have to wait two years before they received an answer to letters sent to the home country. Every now and then they waited in vain. Around 1840 the mail route was not only very long but was also dangerous.

Namibia's first postmen were real heroes who certainly deserve to be honoured. They covered hundreds of kilometres on foot, in the murderous heat of summer and bitter cold of winter.

They were able to carry up to 17 kg of mail. The mailbag was tied to a stick that they carried on one shoulder and a bag carrying their provisions was attached to the other end of the stick. They took around 12 days to get from Windhoek to Walvis Bay.

Apart from the exertion, postal runners also had to withstand many dangers. One of the runners who was the communication link between the mission stations of Bethanien, Warmbad and Kommagas, disappeared one day.

Tracks were found shortly afterwards which led to the assumption that he had fallen prey to a lion. One of his successors met with the same fate.

In this case, however, neither the postal runner's mortal remains nor the mail was ever found. People were also a threat. During the armed conflict between Nama and Herero, sealed documents were viewed with suspicion by both warring parties, even though the missionaries did their best to remain neutral and mediate between the two.

Because of the distances and dangers involved, mailing was far more expensive than it is today.

In addition to the postal charges from Cape Town to Germany via Britain, the wages for the runner as well as his provisions had to be paid in British Pounds, then the valid currency at the Cape, and in kind.

Photo: Walter Moritz