



# Old Res at Onderstepoort: 100 years old

*Written by Annette Boshoff and Heloise Heyne of the Veterinary History Society of South Africa*

On 14 April 1924, Sir Arnold Theiler inaugurated the brand-new student residence at Onderstepoort, now known as Old Res. To celebrate this momentous occasion, the largest reunion of OP students in a hundred years will take place on Friday 5 and Saturday 6 April 2024.

## History of Onderstepoort

When the dreaded rinderpest epidemic reached South Africa in 1896, President Paul Kruger appointed the Swiss veterinarian, Arnold Theiler (1867-1936), as 'gouvernements-veearts' (state veterinarian) for the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. Together with Herbert Watkins-Pitchford (1868-1951), the Principal Veterinary Surgeon of the Natal Colony, a successful vaccine was developed in merely six weeks. Theiler then established a veterinary laboratory near Daspoort pass on the western outskirts of Pretoria where he manufactured the vaccine against rinderpest (and a successful vaccine against smallpox in humans). This laboratory was relocated to the farm De Onderstepoort to the north of Pretoria in 1908.

The newly built Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory was referred to as an "extravagant palace of science". As could be expected from such a vast complex, there were several laboratories, an operation theatre, a postmortem hall, a pathological-anatomical museum, stables, a cattle byre, a piggery, dog kennels, a vaccine production facility and staff quarters.

## Inauguration of 'Old Res'

As a testimony to Theiler's vision, there was already a hostel for student accommodation built in 1908 as well as laboratories and a lecture hall for envisaged future veterinary students in the 1st floor of the 'Old Main Building'. These facilities were built fourteen years before the first cohort of veterinary students arrived at Onderstepoort.

In the meantime, the designated student residence was used for several purposes until the first students arrived at Onderstepoort for their third year of study in 1922.

**The first group of eight men to enrol for veterinary science in 1920, had to complete their first and second year of study at the Transvaal University College before transferring to Onderstepoort.**

The new residence was completed in April 1924 and was situated on the grounds opposite the Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory. The residence was built to house 40 students. It could thus accommodate the whole cohort of 32 students enrolled for the BVSc programme at that time, namely eight fifth years, ten fourth years, seven third years and seven second years. Today's 'Old Res' has been the home to 40 students annually since April 1924.

**Old Res housed nearly four thousand students over the past century.**

Today, the first residence built in 1908, houses the South African National Veterinary Museum. The museum is open to the public and well worth a visit. Contact the curator to arrange a visit:

<https://samuseums.co.za/museums/south-african-national-veterinary-museum/>

In the next edition of VetNews, an account of the accommodation for female students and the other residential blocks that were built in subsequent years will be given.

**INVITATION to all alumni of Onderstepoort House / OP Village to send photographs and their stories about Old Res and the other student accommodation at Onderstepoort House / OP Village to [OldRes100years@gmail.com](mailto:OldRes100years@gmail.com) for possible inclusion in a commemorative publication and/or articles in VetNews.**



**For more information on the reunion of 5 and 6 April 2024, contact:**

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*Sir Arnold Theiler, c. 1920 (1867-1936), Director of Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory (1908-1927) and first Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science (1920-1927).*



*Onderstepoort Bacteriological Laboratory with the auxiliary plant that provided steam and electricity to the north-west of the building, c. 1908.*



*First hostel at Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory (built in 1908 and used as a student residence from 1922 to 1924)*



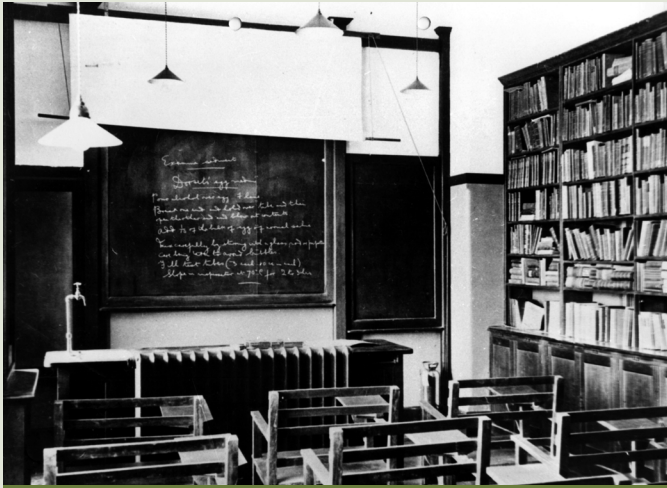
*Daspoort Bacteriological Laboratory (left) and Rinderpest Station (right) with Pretoria in the background, c. 1906. Today this is the location of the Tshwane Market.*



*Old Main Building, Onderstepoort Bacteriological Laboratory, c. 1908.*



*Students' laboratory modelled after the laboratory at the Veterinary Bacteriology Institute, Bern University, Switzerland c. 1908.*



**Lecture hall and library c. 1923. Note the method for Dorsets' Egg Medium which was used for culturing mycobacteria, written on the blackboard in the background.**



**Old Res in 1924, then the new residence for veterinary students at Onderstepoort.**



**'Old Res' at OP Village nowadays.**



**The first Onderstepoort veterinary students with the house mother in front of Theiler's residence at Onderstepoort, c. 1923.**



**Aerial view of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty student residences in 2023.**



**Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory complex with first hostel in the centre of the picture, c. 1945 - 1950s.**



**SANVM. Today the 'Old Hostel' houses the South African National Veterinary Museum and OVR Archives.**