I feel tremendously honoured and privileged to be invited to attend the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Orapa discovery. Thank you, Leon Daniels and Debswana.

This will be a very emotional and exciting experience for me to return to Orapa after 50 years, where early in the morning of the 21st of April 1967 my team of twelve Motswana explorers and I stepped onto a low calcrete hill littered with kimberlitic indicator minerals. This was not entirely unexpected, as some months earlier Dr Gavin Lamont (the exploration manager) and Jim Gibson (the senior geologist) had detected such minerals during a road sampling survey into this isolated region south of the Makgadigadi Pans. However, what was unexpected was the enormous size of this kimberlite pipe that was destined to become the world-class Orapa diamond mine.

Gavin and Jim arrived in my camp on the 25th April where they examined the excavated material and confirmed it to be crater facies kimberlite like that at the Mwadui Mine in Tanzania.

The field work that led to this discovery was physically very demanding as access tracks had to be cut, hundreds of miles of traverses were walked at eleven miles per traverse per day, heavy soil sample bags were carried often through thick thorn bush in the hot sun and the ever present danger of snakes. It was a tough job indeed (Fig. 1).

Little did we realize then that the Orapa discovery would not only be a company maker but a nation-maker. Surely God was smiling on the Motswana people, for with Independence in September 1966, came the rains that ended the six years of crippling drought, followed by the diamond discovery that was destined to secure the country’s economic future and would positively impact on so many people. To me, that is surely the greatest legacy of the Orapa discovery. To paraphrase Neil Armstrong: This one small step onto the Orapa pipe led to a giant leap in the lives of countless people, many of whom are gathered here today. After Orapa their lives were changed forever.

Before the Orapa discovery most of the major kimberlite mine discoveries were made by prospectors such as Allister Fincham (Finch Mine) and Williams (Mwadui Mine). The period after Orapa saw the discoveries by DeBeers and other companies of the Venetia Mine in RSA and the Argyle Mine in Australia. With the Canadian Mines came the entrepreneurial geologists such Charles Fipke and several others I would like to mention here today.
The third person to see the large oval Orapa pipe feature on the aerial photograph was Chris Jennings who was then the deputy director of the Geological Survey in Lobatse. When I radioed Gavin Lamont at his Lobatse office on the afternoon of the 21st of April with the news of a huge concentration of kimberlite indicator minerals in sample 21/2125 B, I also suggested that he has a look at the aerial photo covering the positive sampling traverse. The only other copy of that photo was held at the Geological Survey. When we had the next radio schedule an hour later Chris pointed out several other interesting photo features apart from the obvious one that turned out to be A/K2, 3, 4 and 5.

As we now know, Chris soon left the Survey to pursue a very successful entrepreneurial career in diamond exploration. Notably, the Tsabong kimberlite province, the fabulously rich Maarsfontein pipe and then his involvement in the Canadian diamond mines.

Then there was the De Beers consulting geologist Dr Louis Murray who was rewarded with a De Beers directorship. He was the first geologist to be elevated to the board in 100 years.

His deputy was Barry Hawthorne who realized that De Beers would need to open its vast data base to academia in order to remain competitive in a world with a renewed interest in diamond exploration.

The person ideally suited for this task was a geochemist called John Gurney from my old alma mater UCT. John went on to establish his own mineral laboratory in Cape Town and became one of the leading diamond entrepreneurs and kimberlite consultants in the world. In 1971, John and Barry amongst others were instrumental in convening the first Kimberlite Conference at UCT in Cape Town which I was fortunate to attend. In September this year the 11th Kimberlite Conference will be held here in Botswana which I encourage you to attend.

However, the greatest leap forward was reserved for the people of Botswana. That small step 50 years ago has ensured the future of many generations of Motswanas. The impact of the diamond mines was felt throughout this society in the form of hospitals, schools, universities and an extensive road network. Debswana project manager Mike Brook has meticulously researched the history of the Botswana diamond story in three magnificent books in which this great leap forward is wonderfully documented in a chapter called ‘Botswana before and after diamonds’.

When people ask me what the most lasting memory I have of the Orapa story my reply may be surprising for some. It happened in June 2014 when I attended the 45th Debswana celebrations at Orapa. When the beautifully dressed children in the school choir sang like angels it moved me to tears because I realized then that that one small step had secured a bright future for those children and many generations to come.

The Botswana mines stand as a beacon to the wise leadership Botswana has always enjoyed, led by the first President Sir Seretse Khama. His vision was that the wealth generated by the diamonds would be shared by all of his people. If you seek evidence of his wisdom then just travel through Botswana and look around you.

May God continue to bless Botswana