

A Pioneer's Daughter's Childhood

by Gertrude Atkinson Morrison.

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Gertrude Morrison, born 1911, was the daughter of Alexander and Lillian Bishop. This account was taken down by her daughter, Heather, in 1989.

As a very young child, aged about six weeks, I was taken to Africa, with two older sisters and a brother, where we lived in Chinde, hosted within the British Consulate Compound. When I was four, for education facilities, we were taken back to England (we being my eldest brother, two older sisters and myself) and stayed with grandparents till my parents came home at the end of the first world war.

Our family now being nine children, we then went to live in Cheltenham, the north of England being too cold for my mother, but we only lived there a couple of years as my father had made arrangements for us to go to boarding school in Rhodesia. So off all nine of us set out to go back to Africa. We four oldest, (perhaps I should say that I'm one of ten,



all of us still alive and between us 754 years) were dropped off at boarding school in Salisbury (now Harare) while the rest of the family travelled on to Chinde. Our first trip home on school holidays, we travelled as far as Dondo by rail; there we were shunted off onto a pump trolley in charge of a French teacher and it took us another four days to get where they were building the Zambezi Bridge. There were about 12 of us, two boys being sons of one of the Bridge Construction crew. We in school uniform, navy blue serge! There had been a storm the night before and, as we next sat in the back of an open lorry, then one can guess what muddy little objects we looked.

The man at the camp (I've no idea what nationality, but name of Sundaram) was also a contractor to supplying firewood for the river steamers and the rail. He took good care of us overnight, had our costumes cleaned and at dawn we crossed the Zambezi in canoes and on up the Shire and as far as Chiromo in Nyasaland. From there after lunch we went to Limbe, hoping to meet our parents, but they had been recalled to Chinde as there had been a severe cyclone which are just about wiped out Chinde. This might sound very short and brief but I can assure you that, at the age of nine, it was a great experience and, when one realises that today children just get on a plane and one hour later they are at school, to take 5 to 6 days travelling backwards and forwards was a novelty for any child.

Prior to the bridge being built, we went to Chinde by coastal vessel to Beira and then rail to Salisbury to school.

My father was transferred when the bridge was in operation and we moved up as far as Muracca and for six months we lived on a paddle-steamer as there was no housing. The day we moved to that housing was a nightmare. 102F in the shade and we walked through thick deep sand. Our stay on the houseboat was in very restricted accommodation. We spent a few months there and then my father left the British Central Africa Company and

worked for transport company owned by a Colonel John Saunders. I think from there we used to travel backwards and forwards to Salisbury to school but it was always a great adventure. We would start off in a very high spirits but, after 2 or 3 days in a dirty, cold smoked atmosphere from the steam trains, we were glad to get to school.

I Had a very happy childhood. We lived as I said in Chinde; this is part of the delta of the mouth of the Zambezi. Chinde had very few British families, a few of the shipping company staff, my father who worked for the British Central Africa Company and one or two others, a few naturally being children - there were of course a number of Portuguese nationals living outside this concession.

We had no other mode of transport except by 'mashiilla' - this being a long canvas seat slung between two thick bamboo poles and was carried by four mashilla boys - the entire seat being called a mashilla. We were taken every day out to the beaches, the most glorious beaches anyone could wish to see. Our trips to the beach each day were a highlight of any child's life; the beautiful, beautiful sands and bright blue Indian Ocean were lovely. We lived a quiet life and had very little fresh vegetables, fruit, meat or milk. We did have lots of lovely fresh fish.

Our home was a large bungalow with 12 foot glassed-in verandahs on all four sides. For coolness, our house was built up on 6 to 8 foot poles. We had great fun playing in this empty place.

Our father was very musical; we always had plenty of people around for musical evenings and we thoroughly enjoyed life. Later when we had to move from Chinde I thought my parents must have moved with very sad hearts. They had lived there for so many years, made so many wonderful friends. We moved as I said before to Muracca. Whether this still exists today or not, I have no idea but in my young days, the river Zambezi was planted up on either side with sugar cane. This seemed to be the main trade. Further on beyond the Zambezi Bridge was Tete, a coal mine station. All this has changed, of course, and it is no longer Portuguese East Africa. It is now Mozambique and like a lot of the Africa we grew up in it is entirely run by Africans.

On one of my trips to school from home, which was, as I have said before, a paddle-steamer at Muracca, we went down by rail as far as Beira. This trip became a nightmare



as I developed enteric fever and was very ill by the time we reached Beira. My eldest brother decided to stay with me in the hotel and two older sisters carried on to school, leaving my brother to wait with me until my mother arrived to take me home. The Portuguese doctors were most adamant that I was not to be moved but my mother was also adamant that I would be much better off under her special care at

home. I was put on a stretcher into the guards van and we travelled, I suppose, a quarter of the way when to our horror we noticed flames shooting through the roof of the guards van. After lots of shrieking and the brakes going on, the train stopped. We found the driver was drunk and that somehow or other live coals had been allowed to filter along the roof of the train as far as the guards van, where they caught fire. It was most horrifying, terrifying in fact; I couldn't move so I was carried, once again, off the train until the fire was extinguished. Then we proceeded home to Muracca where I stayed for a little while and, when my parents were transferred up to Limbe, I went up there. I never returned to boarding school in Rhodesia as the enteric had affected my health rather badly and my mother and father were persuaded that I was much better to stay nearer home. I attended the convent in Limbe, La Sagesse, and thoroughly enjoyed my days there. The Mother Superior was a very talented woman who had painted the little chapel.

On a return to this Limbe convent after many years, in fact about 50 odd years, I was astounded to see it was still in good repair, still being used as a school and that one of the old Fathers, Father Basle, was still alive. He was confined to a wheelchair, but still did his little bit by visiting the lepers in the leper colony about 10 miles away.

Our life in Limbe where by this time our family now number nine, was also a great pleasure. Our father by this time had bought our own home (in Blantyre) and nothing delighted him more than to have a crowd of young folk around the piano which he played, also the banjo, which he and my eldest brother played, and we would have a glorious sing-song. This was his big delight as he was very fond of young people and always did his best to keep us amused. Another delight was to summon as many of the young folk around Blantyre as possible and take us all out for a picnic at the nearby river at Lunzu.

My father, unfortunately, died a comparatively young man, as in his day there was no penicillin or drugs that one can get so easily today and he died of double pneumonia.

My mother, brick that she was, in fact, was a very strong character, brought up the ten of us, my youngest brother then being only 4 years old. She took great care of us, my oldest brother worked on a tobacco farm, which has originally been my father's but I'd been sold, and later worked for Mandala before joining the Customs Department. My two older sisters also were employed, so, although we were not well off, we were comfortable.



Although we (my own family) now live in Australia, my heart will always be in Africa and I consider myself a white African having lived there for 50 years and it is God's own country, a beautiful country. I've been back three times, once with my youngest daughter and twice with my husband. My husband, by the way, is also much travelled. He was in the Colonial Police and spent nine years of his service in Palestine before coming to Nyasaland to take up service there where we met and married

As, I've said before, I've had a wonderful life. I do not regret any of it and although today I do not enjoy the best of health, I would not change one minute of the past.