

GRANNY'S BOOK

'The Land of the Lake'

Part 2

By Mary Brill

So, having arrived in Nyasaland, we spent the night with the Agricultural Director and his wife. Then it was a long drive up the Matope road (*Matope means mud in Chinyanja*). I think prior to that we did some shopping in Blantyre for provisions. I now began to realise what a very different life I was to have. Africa had a magic of its own, its people, although of a very different culture, were so kind and friendly and always smiling. I was longing to get to my new home and settle down after a very long journey. We arrived at the farm feeling very hot and tired, and covered in dust from the earth roads, so after a hot bath and food it was bed. I soon realised that now I had to start buying food and planning meals.

Reg told me that we had a good cook and houseboy of only fourteen years; called Handwatch, we were soon to be introduced to this young boy who was to become one of the family for the next fifteen years. He was also to look after Robert and be his helper until Rob went to school. Handwatch was a very faithful boy all those years. He learnt to be a very good cook - he made excellent cakes!

Travel in Nyasaland was mostly on earth roads, they were very corrugated and full of potholes. We saw little wildlife, just African bush, scrubby trees and coarse grass. It was impossible to stop and picnic on the road side, swarms of ants would appear at your feet, and climb up your legs. Then a lorry or a car would pass by and cover you with a cloud of



dust. There were very few places that you could stop, maybe a small African store out in the bush. These small buildings, usually no bigger than a large shed, with a thatch roof and small veranda, with tables and chairs to sit and drink a Coke or Fanta or a Castle Beer. If you had tea it looked and tasted so strong and smokey from the wood fire. You could buy the odd packet of biscuits, which were often soft and stale inside. Inside the store were shelves of tinned foods such as bully beef, beans and peas, sacks of sugar, flour and salt all of which stood on a dusty floor. The whole place had a musty smell of stale food and paraffin. Sometimes these small stores had corrugated iron roofs which made them very hot and stuffy and really unbearable in summer. If you drank the hot strong tea you could feel the sweat run down your face. Cars would pass by, covering you with dust, which was almost unbearable.

We always carried spare petrol in a tin in the car and of course fresh water and some food in case of breakdowns, or delays, which could be caused by flooded roads in the rainy season turning the dust earth roads into a sea of mud, sometimes one had to turn back

and make a detour. If you did breakdown in the bush help never seemed far away, because soon a crowd of people would appear as if from nowhere. Children with skinny bodies and extended tummies caused by malnutrition, women with babies strapped to their backs with a cloth or small towel wearing a long sarong type of skirt with a loose top to cover their breasts. The women always walked very erect and regal with bowls, firewood or baskets of food on their heads with a sway of their bodies as they walked – but these people were happy and laughter used to fill the air. I suppose their laughter comes from the sun, without its warmth these people could not have borne the hardship of their lives. They are a simple race of people who are able to grow all their own food except in times of drought and floods. In Africa it is amongst its people that you learn the real meaning of life. These people lived simple lives, they were happy. It was quite a lonely life in the bush, but we enjoyed it and found that living under a blue sky and lots of sun very wonderful, not as complicated as life today.



We were on famine relief work for quite a few months. The sacks of grain came up on the train to Balaka and twice a week we all used to go to the station and spend the day there.



We took food for our lunch. These days were hard and long and the awful smell of dirty sweaty bodies filled the air making you feel quite sick. We distributed the grain to these starving people who were so frantic to get food that they used to push their way through the lines of people waiting patiently for their rations. The DC's messengers

assisted us to keep order. Often it got so bad they used to close the doors until they had managed to quieten the people down and so they could let a few in at a time. It was sad to see so many starving people, so many skinny bodies. Those children who were very ill were sent to a famine relief hospital to be cared for, their mothers went with them. These were difficult days for me, because all the people were desperate for food. Rob spent most of the day being looked after by Handwatch.

We left the farm to start a new life building dams. Reg and I went to Mpemba near Blantyre for one month to enable Reg to prepare all the machinery for the journey, it was not an easy task as many of the parts had to be replaced, he would spend months waiting for parts which wasted hours of time. Many of these parts were made by Africans in the public works departments.

The first part of the journey was by train up to Salima, which was the end of the line. From then on everything had to be taken along earth roads for a distance of about 500 miles to the north. We started out on our journey with the first few days the worst, I drove the car and went on ahead with Handwatch to make camp, but after spending three days on the road we had only reached Lilongwe and we had to spend a very cold night at Dowa which was in cloud. I wasn't feeling at all well the next day so when we reached Lilongwe we went to find a doctor only to discover I had malaria. This was certainly a blow but luckily some people we knew from Blantyre were living on the tobacco buying market and as this was the buying season the market was open. So I was able to stay in a small house there whilst Reg continued the journey. The house was meant for an



employee and was just a room with a bed. Nicky Hemming brought food over for us every day, sometimes they were too busy and employees came over. I felt very ill and so lonely

and homesick, I needed my mum but had to hang in and get better and wait for Reg. I was taking Mepacrine tablets which turned my skin yellow, malaria is very debilitating making you feel very low and miserable, I was unable to eat much but Handwatch fetched me fruit from the market mostly bananas as well as biscuits from the store.

I remember when Handwatch went off in the afternoons I used to give small African boys money to stay with me and play with Rob, just to keep him company. How thankful I was that Reg arrived back within the week, so it was not too long. I was still feeling very ill when we arrived in Mzimba and we sent for the doctor who gave me a quinine injection. But it was quite a few weeks before I felt better, I certainly felt very homesick for a while. Reg was then away for a week at Luwawa starting to build a dam but luckily people were very kind. I remember the night we arrived, Fred and Dennis who lived next door, brought us a lovely steak and kidney pie - how good it tasted.



There was a golf course which had been made around an emergency landing strip used by the Beaver aircraft. I learnt to play golf and spent many happy hours practising. Dennis and Fred played every afternoon from 4pm when they left work. It was a welcome change for me to live in a community

along with other wives with whom I could visit, enjoy tea or coffee with them and Robert had other white children to play with and he enjoyed their company. I think it very important for children growing up in Africa to have other children around them be they white or black.

TO BE CONTINUED