

Life in Fort Johnston on the Banks of the Shire River 1956-1958

Christmas 1955 we spent in Zomba living in temporary accommodation waiting for our move up to our next posting which was to be Fort Johnston. In the New Year of 1956 we moved up to the Fort (now Mangochi) and into a lovely little Bush House with a Thatched roof. The house was shaped like a clover leaf and I was so proud of this lovely home. I bought some new material from the Indian store made new curtains and bedspreads for the two bedrooms. There was a sitting room and dining room, a veranda at the back with a toilet of the usual bucket and sand convenience and a separate Bathroom. The kitchen was a separate building along with the servants quarters. I remember one thing quite well, I had no lampshades, then one day a boy came along selling small baskets to use for waste paper. So I bought some and turned them into perfect lampshades! They looked so attractive, we had them for years and were quite a talking point!

This small town had wide roads with lovely flame trees down either side of the main street leading down to the river and the ferry across the Shire river allowing travel on to Namweras and into the hills beyond. Most of the houses were set back from the road. There were a few Indian stores in the township and one of them was opposite our bush house. A small Mandala store was on the road which ran along the river bank. The Boma and Police Station were on the wide road just beyond our house and the Gymkhana Club along the road to the right of the Monument (pictured right). The Indian stores there had lots of useful items. I even found a lovely Pringle twin set in one of the stores. We could also buy dress material and I made most of my cloths and dresses for Maggie. Robert our son needed school uniform which I purchased in Blantyre and Reg's uniforms were made by an African tailor and these tailors were very good and would copy cloths for you. There was very little traffic through the day, Malacias fish lorries would sometimes come into town but most of them were on their way to Zomba and Blantyre. We all used the Club and gathered for drinks and played snooker there. Lots of us played Tennis in the early evening and at the weekends often starting our game as early as 6am - before it got too hot. It was lovely playing while it was cool and the Barman was always on hand to serve beers and soft drinks.



Reg and I used to borrow a boat from Dr. Lamborn who lived next door to us. We would use it go fishing on the river Shire which was so peaceful. Out on the river there were lots of birds in the reeds and pelicans sitting on the larger branches of the trees looking to catch fish and, of course, we had to keep a sharp look out for hippos. For our supper the fish we caught were sungwa, they were lovely pan fried and flavoured with a slice of lemon ~ I also pickled and curried them be it for supper or lunch We tended to keep an open house and often entertained visitors to lunch including Walter Seymore, Dr Fitzmaurice and Arthur Dent - or any others who happened to pop in to visit.

We went to a lot of trouble to grow vegetables in the small garden next to the house. Reg discovered a pile of leaf mould in the empty plot next door to us. It was behind the walls lining the road and had accrued there over the years when the fallen leaves from the many trees lining the road were cleared and thrown over the wall and there they lay turning into wonderful compost for the garden. With the help of this and plenty of watering we produced some wonderful vegetables - carrots, beans, cabbage, even tomatoes and cucumbers. I also grew some lovely flowers, Zinnia, African Marigolds and others. Not many people bothered to grow veg there, people would have them sent up from Limbe.

Our stay in the Fort was a very happy one and sometimes I was asked to help out at the Airport mainly meeting the Beaver Aircraft which involved doing the weight load sheets, collecting parcels and seeing the passengers get safely on to the little Beaver, which flew in twice a week. Peggy Borley was the agent at the time and I helped out when she wasn't available. Later that first year I was asked to help out with a Census which was being carried out that year ~ 1956 I think it was. I took the district on the lakeshore up as far as Cape Maclear which was quite an adventure for me. Setting out each day in our little Hillman Husky with Handwatch the houseboy and our daughter Maggie who was then only four years old. (Robert our son who was 8 years old he was away at boarding school in Blantyre). So, I was meeting all the lakeshore dwellers including Dr. Fitzmaurice, Walter Seymour, Helen Maclaren and her partner W. A. Bregger (known to all as Breg) with whom I had lunch. I really enjoyed meeting all these people and helping them fill in their forms. Walter Seymour was a great character and we often used to visit him at Nkudzi Bay where he lived near the lake. He used to go out hunting with his servant although he would shoot only for the pot. Our children loved to come with us and listen to his stories that he told and watch the expressions on his face and how he would use his hands as he told the story. His servants used to make biltong with some of the meat which was hung up to dry after cutting it into strips. The children loved it and grated in sandwiches it tasted like Marmite.

Walter was born in Ireland but went to Canada to work as a lumberjack and he also worked in the mines in Malaysia. A man with a wanderlust he had also been in Rhodesia before coming to Nyasaland. Lastly he moved to the UK in the late 1960s to live in Cornwall, at a hotel in Falmouth. We used to visit him there and he would drive up to see us. Sadly he died a few years later, we attended his Funeral in Falmouth and met up there with Reg Kemp and his wife, Reg was a retired Captain of the Lake Nyasa steamship Ilala. His son, John Kemp, lives in France and has written extensively about his father and Fort Johnston (*"A Schoolboy's memories of Fort Johnston in the 1940s" published by the Society of Malawi - Historical and Scientific*)



Sometimes we would be invited for a day out on the DC's launch, which was a wonderful experience. I well remember coming back up the Shire River in the early evening watching the sun go down and, with the dusk, up came the hippos, rising up to take the air. With mouths wide open they would look up at us, just staring as we passed by them - a sight I will never forget.

I loved driving and would take Robert to school in Blantyre when Maggie and I would then spend a few days in there staying with Bill and Ann Lamborn. Bill and Ann would also

visit his father, Dr William Lamborn, who lived next door to us in the Fort. We would often be invited by Dr Lamborn to visit him up at his home in the hills at Namweras. He had a lovely garden and a small dipping pool where the water was freezing cold. We stayed friends with the Lamborns until his death but I still keep in touch with his son Tony in France and his second wife Mona in Namibia.

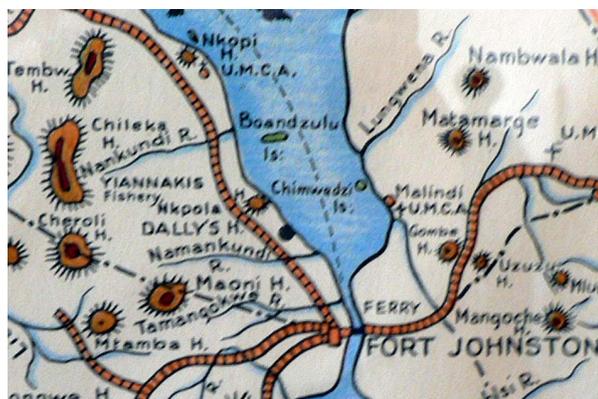
We also met up with another old timer, Tommy, who was a captain on one of the lake steamers. He lived up in the hills near Dr Lamborn's house, he taught me how to pickle unripe Mangoes to look and taste like Pickled Walnuts. Put them in salted brine then dried in the sun which made them wrinkly and brown, then pickle in vinegar. He died in late 1957 or 1958, Reg was a pallbearer, it was a wet day and the ground around the grave was very slippery, Reg slipped over and nearly followed the coffin into the grave. Quite a shock for him! I can remember helping Robin Bonifant to make a wreath, we managed to find some white lilies and green leaves, it really looked lovely and we had to keep spraying it with water to keep the flowers fresh. Robin was in the Agriculture Department. He and Reg got on very well and we stayed friends for many years. He married a nurse, they had two daughters and lived in Frome, Somerset, in the 1970s.

We also met Arthur Dent at that time and he often came to lunch with us. Very kindly he used to lend us his lovely Bermuda rig sailing yacht. Reg and Bill Lamborn had some lovely days sailing up the river and out on the lake. They had one adventure when a storm blew up and they had to ride it out in the mouth of the river - quite frightening for them.

One afternoon we were out in the DC's launch when we had to rescue Bill who was out fishing in his father's small boat and got difficulties with hippos in the river. We towed him back to the Fort and I dread to think what might have happened if we had not been there. We heard of a few accidents including a local out fishing in a his canoe when he was crushed to death by a Hippo.

There were some Sundays when we would visit Dr Fitzmaurice, know to us as "Fitz", who had spent working life as a medical doctor in Nyasaland. We would have a swim followed by lunch and a beer. After a short rest Fitz would take Reg & Robert out in his small boat catching chambo, an enjoyable pursuit making for a tasty evening meal. Later in 1958

when we moved to Blantyre Fitz would come and stay with us, and we would visit him for a bit of local leave, He also took Robert back to stay with him for a week enjoying his company during the school holidays. We took cine films of those wonderful holidays at Fitz's lovely house on the lakeshore which overlooked Boandzulu Island (see map right). We never talked much about his previous life. He lived for the present and spoke little about his past. In the house he



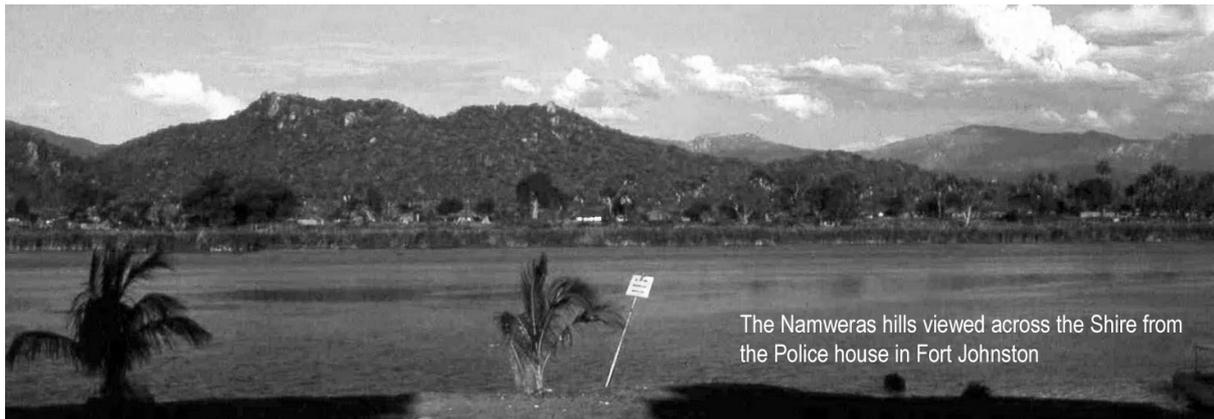
had Persian rugs on the floor which were his pride and joy and he loved you to admire them. His servants kept them clean by washing them in the Lake and hanging them out to dry. (I now know they must have been a present from his brother who spent his life in Persia and

Afghanistan). He was a very private person, he hated to be photographed and we felt very very privileged to have known him.

Some weekends we would visit the Palm Beach Hotel owned and ran by Ted and Pixie Sweatman. They were a lovely couple and full of fun. They had a daughter called Patsy who married a Percy Rowe who was a crocodile hunter, We also met him and Peter Gurney who hunted for a living. They often came to the Gymkhana Club but spent many evenings out in their canoes hunting crocs.

There were occasions when we were invited by the Greek Fisheries to spend the day with them, drinking their strong black coffee and enjoying fresh grilled fish for lunch. I recall spending an evening with the Malacias family together with Dr Gilchrist. We started the meal with fish soup, then a whole grilled fish was served with head and eyes still there. Their small son ate the eyes, scooping them out with his fingers. Our daughter, Maggie, thought this this most amusing - but she did not partake of this delicacy!

We were very sad to be posted back to Blantyre in 1958. Now, in 2016, I have managed to keep in touch with Bill Lamborn's son, Tony, who lives in France and John Kemp.



The Namweras hills viewed across the Shire from the Police house in Fort Johnston

Mary Brill

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