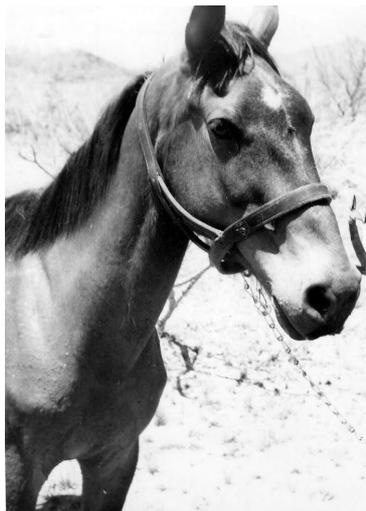


Mick Thacker and the Horse of the Year

(By Mick Thacker)



I first briefly saw him as he crossed a bridge at Mwanza on the Mozambique/Nyasaland border. He was being used as a packhorse on a mounted trek being made from Bulawayo to Nairobi by a young Rhodesian. There were two horses and both looked as though the hard slog through the Zambezi Valley had nearly finished their reserves of strength and they were stiff legged with fatigue. The packhorse was in very poor shape, with a bad gash on its neck and open sores on its back. Its long coat was matted and dirty and it looked a dismal spectacle. The horses and the rider went on to Blantyre, the Provincial capital, where the Veterinary Department was quick to point out that the horses were in no shape to continue the journey and the packhorse would probably have to be destroyed. I was in Blantyre later on a duty trip and saw the

horses in the Police Station yard. I took a fancy to the packhorse and thought it worth a try to nurse it back to condition.

The owner was very fair and pointed out that the horse was not probably broken and had no name as people usually only swore at it. After very little haggling I found myself in possession of a sway-backed, roman-nosed, hairy, ill-tempered and very much the worse for wear horse, complete with boer saddle and pair of saddlebags. My knowledge of things equestrian was somewhat sketchy but I hurried round to one of the local Indian stores and bought what I thought would be the essentials. Much to my surprise I even found a curry comb which I suspect was really intended for use by a ridgeback dog owner. The vet supplied some tick grease, assorted powders and ointments and, most important of all, a movement permit to move Muffin, as I now called him, back to Mwanza. I arranged to have him walked there in easy stages and then left for Mwanza myself.



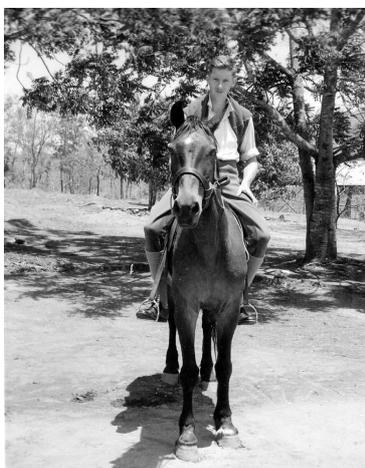
Muffin arrived the following afternoon and was duly installed in the garage as a temporary measure. I was, at the time, the only government officer resident in the district, and as the staff houses were not yet built, I had been given an old estate house some two miles from the Boma. Next to the house was a very nice quadrangle of land bordered by full grown blue gum trees on three sides and jacaranda on the fourth side. I decided this four acre plot would make an ideal paddock. The gaps between the trees were

easily closed with bamboo poles and a light and quickly erected fence was made. Having by this time been quite carried away by the pioneer spirit, I shouldered axe and gun set off to select timber for stable. The gun, incidentally, for that most delicious bird, the guinea fowl, which were occasionally flushed from the surrounding bush.

In due course a very fair stable was constructed with eight essential upright posts and split bamboo interwoven walls. The roof was thatched and the floor bricked over. At this point a minor snag was encountered - Muffin would not go near it. He had grown accustomed to his roving life I did not like being boxed, particularly it seemed, in this magnificent structure made purely for his own cussed use. There then began a campaign to get one strong minded horse out of four acres and into its loose box. After a very long time a motley assortment of dusty, bruised and impressed group of locals managed to assist in achieving this. The 'haji' or 'kavale' was the first one many of them had seen and they clearly thought

me mad for even considering riding this wild beast which was all hooves and teeth. The various sores took several weeks to heal but by frequent bathing them and putting on powder, I was able to get Muffin in better condition. It was also necessary to regularly do an oil change and put tick grease on dock and ears and between the legs. This usually meant a real wrestling match in a flurry of dust with all and sundry being flailed against the bamboo walls. A horse will very soon become ill unless ticks are kept at bay as this hectic ritual has to be adhered to regardless of Muffin's violent dislike of it.

Another difficulty with soon presented itself was of course the fact that there were no farriers in the area and shoeing was not possible. I therefore removed the existing shoes and rasped the hooves to prevent splitting. Since we were on comparatively sandy soil and not being particularly active this seemed to work out quite well. A few ground nuts and other oil ingredients in the mash seem to keep the hooves in good condition. By the end of the second month Muffin had lost his long coat and was looking very fit and sleek. He was certainly no thoroughbred and his somewhat mulish appearance and very inelegant posture made him rather a caricature of a horse, but I became quite fond of him. As soon as I was sure he was really recovered I began taking him out on a lunging rein and leading him over small hurdles.



He was by now rather well fed and a bit frisky for his ten years. For the first few times he was mounted he went berserk and it got to the stage where I was beginning to think that I was never going to get any cooperation from him. By cutting down on the fresh feed and sticking to a strict routine for feeding I was able to calm him down a bit and get him a little more domesticated. After a few months of regular morning and evening rides he did eventually reach a point of agreeing to differ but both travelling in roughly the same direction. Muffin's main failing was his inability to remain tethered whilst out in the villages or visiting the neighbouring estates. He completely disgraced me at a friend's house by violently taking off at a canter and neatly extracting the main support of a lean-to

garage to which he was tethered. The garage subsided with a groan and ended up as a twisted heap of corrugated sheets. After sickly grins and mumbled excuses I hurried off to intercept Muffin before he demolished any further property with the pole he was trailing.

Muffin was a holy terror to the local villagers and a frequent source of complaint and resultant compensation. He became positively addicted to green maize and developed an almost crafty ability to obtain it from various sources. I have known him to nip off during the night and go through a nearby crop of maize like a vacuum cleaner and then be back in the stable by the time anyone was around in the morning. He would also wait for women walking down the paths carrying buckets of maize to the local market place. When he judged the time was right he would canter out woofling and snorting and generally putting on an act that was worth an equine Oscar. This usually resulted in the women running, screaming and leaving the maize scattered all over the path for Muffin to gorge at leisure. I have on several occasions seen him peering up a path from behind a clump of bamboo on market days, and I swear he always looked sheepish when caught in the act of waiting to ambush a fresh batch of maize carriers.

Muffin also developed quite a nose for 'kachasu', the local bootleg hooch which was made in crude stills in the surrounding bush areas. He clearly enjoyed finding these and the resulting Police action involved in this aspect of living in an outstation area. However, despite his efficiency for this purpose it had to be curtailed for fear that someone would resort to putting poison in his mash if he was continually used to locate this illegal business.