

## 4. A MIXED BAG

### *A jumble of memories*

I have many typical memories of my growing up period. Memories which do not fit into a neat chronological order.

Electricity was not the basic commodity that it is today. In the lounge, we had a pressure lamp. These had a pump to pressurise a kerosene feed which burned inside a mantle of lime, and were as bright as any modern bulb, but whenever the light output dimmed they had to be pumped up and were too dangerous to be left unattended. In the lounge I could read a book with ease.

Toilets were a hut at the end of a path, where one sat on a “thunderbox” over the “long drop”. At night, a hurricane lamp, with its wick turned down, would hang from a low nail driven into an upright post on the verandah. I would feel my way to the verandah, take down the lamp, turn up the wick and walk in the cold night air to the latrine. Here I would hang the lamp on another nail, sit on the thunderbox and let nature take over. I would then make my way back to the house, turn down the lamp and hang it up before feeling my way back to bed. After a time I was given a torch to see my way in the house, but the old fashioned zinc and carbon batteries were expensive and had a short life, so use of the torch was kept minimal.

The wood and iron farm house on the ranch at Athi River had an indoor convenience for use at night, with a flap on the outside wall of the house, so that the bucket under the thunderbox could be removed and emptied. It also had a primitive form of electric night lighting. A wiring circuit, controlled by small, silver switches and connected to a tractor battery, fed strategically placed car side-light bulbs. However, the battery had a limited charge and this system was only used for short periods, such as a trip to the loo or to enable one to find and light a hurricane lamp. There were two batteries for the tractor, which would be swapped around to recharge the one that had been in the house.

Later on we had big, single cylinder Lister diesel engines on the farms, connected to a generator, controlled by an electricity distribution board with large dials, knobs and fuses. There was a lever which lifted the inlet and outlet valves on the engine's cylinder and a large, heavy flywheel with a spindle for a crank handle. At a quarter to seven each evening the operator, who needed to be quite strong, would lift the valves, fit the crank handle and turn the fly wheel, gradually building up speed, air hissing and sucking in and out of the massive cylinder as the engine revolved. At the right moment the handle would be whipped off and the valves dropped into place. There would be a strong but muffled bang and a huge puff of black smoke would emerge from the exhaust as the engine built up speed until there was steady murmur of gentler, muffled bangs. When the large meter on the board showed the

correct voltage and frequency the main switch would be thrown and a bulb in the outhouse roof would shine, while a hundred yards away the farm house windows could be seen glowing in the evening twilight. Many a night I would read in bed, listening to the steady beat of the distant generator until, at around nine, it faded and died, the light bulb beside my bed turning to a red flicker before extinguishing. When I was older it became my job to take a hurricane lamp, go to the outhouse, cut the fuel supply to the generator, and walk back in the gloom.

Without electricity, refrigeration was minimal. At Limuru we had a kerosene fridge, in which a small blue flame (it had to be blue to work) would heat the refrigerant which by some magical trickery then cooled the interior of the fridge. It could even gradually produce a little bit of ice, but kerosene fridges could not be opened too often if you wanted to keep their contents reasonably cold.

For refrigeration at Athi we had an ingenious device, an excellent example of simple applied science. It was a galvanised metal box, about two feet on each side, canvas lined on the outside and with a wood insulated door. Except for the door area, the box was surrounded by a 2 to 3 inch layer of charcoal, held in place by chicken netting. The device stood against a shaded wall of the house, on legs about 3 feet high, and above it was a water tap, which dripped constantly on to the charcoal. The evaporation of the water kept the box cool, although not freezing cold. It was, however, cool enough inside to allow meat and milk to be kept for a reasonable time and to stop butter melting, despite the 30 degree heat of Athi River.

Another ingenious device on the Athi ranch, which was plagued by flies, was the fly trap. It relied on the principle that flies have to lay their eggs in rotting matter and prefer to do so in the dark. Rotting meat would be placed in the bottom of a large, open tin, which had had slits cut into it near the top. These slits were bent inwards to make it easy for flies to enter, though not to leave. An open cone, rather like an inverted funnel, was placed on top of the tin. Indeed, the cone was often made from a funnel which had its spout cut short. Finally, a large glass jar, into which some pyrethrum powder had been poured, was placed, upside down on top of the cone, the powder falling down into the area where the jar and cone met. Flies would enter via the slits, feast and lay eggs, then head for the daylight showing directly above them through the centre of the cone. Now in the jar they would buzz around, trapped, and eventually fall into the deadly powder. Every few days we would empty out the dead flies and then burn the meat, to kill the maggots that would have formed the next generation of flies. We always had flies, but the traps kept them under control and I wonder why no one seems to market this effective device today.

Mummy Ingeni was a born entrepreneur. With high cream content Jersey and Guernsey milk coming from her dairy farm at Karen and with ordinary milk also coming from her ranch at Athi, she had a lot of produce and she decided there was an opening for an ice cream parlour. Around 1947 she took prime premises up the steps and to the left of the main entrance of Nairobi's newly built indoor market and asked my big sister to choose a name for it. Ingeborg decided it was to be called the "Polar Bear". Mummy Ingeni imported Kenya's first ever ice-cream making machines for producing soft ices, and with them the first ever ice cream cones. The Polar Bear was a hit, and during the holidays I could sometimes go there with a friend for a special treat, like a banana split. I think she sold it in 1952, for a good profit, although she continued to supply the parlour with discount price cream. By this time many places were beginning to offer soft ice cream. She knew when to pull out of a business!

For her food she never used anything but butter. Everything, from cakes to egg and bacon was produced using butter. However, she realised that the Indian community consumed a lot of ghee, which was made by clarifying butter over a low heat. Of butter she had plenty, especially after selling the Polar Bear, so she set up a special, low temperature cooker and mass produced ghee, selling it wholesale for others to market, but getting a much better wholesale price than plain butter would fetch. She also did a bit of "retail" from the house.

Only in the larger towns were there tarmac roads, and even in those not all roads were tarred. Even in Nairobi it was unusual to find tarmac more than five miles from the centre of town, and bridges, where they even existed, were usually very narrow.

Small wonder that the East African Safari was acknowledged as being the toughest rally in the world, its three thousand miles of bush roads that had to be negotiated during the four days and nights of Easter eventually attracting the finest drivers and teams from around the globe. Yet these internationally renowned drivers were often beaten by local drivers, who had grown up learning to nurse a car over rough roads without wasting time. To give an idea of how tough it was, out of eighty to a hundred entrants each year sometimes fewer than ten managed to finish the event, and even in a "good" year at least half the cars would retire, stuck in thick mud or with mechanical failure. Yet the rally ran over "everyday" roads, which were often the only route to small towns and so were open to the public even during the rally itself!

Mummy Ingeni drove an old Dodge lorry most of the time, and a newish pick up otherwise. I would find a space among the milk churns and general cargo in the back while my sisters travelled in front, unless Mummy Ingeni had a more important passenger. We would bump and rattle along the road, and on sunny days I would often stand near the front, holding on to a railing and looking to see where we were going. On miserable days I would huddle as

close to the cab as possible, using it as a shield against both the wind and the rain. Although she lived mainly at Karen, every week she would visit Athi, sometimes only for the day and sometimes staying overnight. As it was a beef ranch, Athi could be left in the charge of her head stock man, a reliable fellow, for much of the time.

Her driving technique was elementary. Although vehicles had three forward gears, as far as she was concerned first gear didn't exist. She would put it into second, rev the engine strongly and then slip the clutch until it started to move. Once we were travelling at 15 miles an hour she would put it into third and that was that. Unless she actually stopped, it would remain in third, and if necessary she would half depress the clutch, rev the engine and slip the clutch until the reason for the problem, such as a steep hill, had been negotiated. How she ever got her driving licence I don't know.

I do know how my father got his. Having bought a used car he drove to the police station and asked the official in charge for a licence. It was midday, so the official said it might be a good idea to retire for a snack and a beer at the club. After a pleasantly oiled lunch, they drove back and my father again raised the question of a licence.

"Well, you got me to the club, we're back and we haven't had an accident, so I'll just fill in this form and issue you a licence."

By the time I needed a licence, in 1959, Kenya had one of the toughest tests around. There was a board test, where I pushed a dinky toy around and was checked for my choice of lanes as well as making sure I stopped at appropriate points, and a test of my knowledge of road signs, hand signals, speed limits and general driving theory. The actual practical test involved a trip into the busy heart of Nairobi. I was then directed to the area of a steep hill, where the examiner told me to stop at the edge of the road. He then placed a matchbox under the back wheel and told me to drive forward 30 feet and stop again. Having watched to ensure I checked for other traffic and made all the correct hand signals before pulling out, he examined the matchbox to see whether I had crushed it by slipping back even one inch. During the test he even sneakily altered the rear view mirror to see how long it took me to notice and re-adjust it. The UK test was a lot easier to pass.

*... Or was it?* When a friend, Jack Simonian, went to England, he decided to get a UK driving licence and duly sat the test. He was failed, a decision which brought a wry smile when it appeared in the Kenya press. You see, Jack was a garage owner and car dealer and was a highly respected and long standing member of the official Nissan team, driving for them during their most successful years in the East African Safari Rally!

In the late fifties, as Mummy Ingeni started to wind down her farming activity, putting the Athi ranch up for sale and reducing the size of her dairy herd, we prevailed on her to get rid of the lorry and buy a car instead. Eventually she purchased a Rover 90 and when after twelve years the poor Rover gave up an unequal struggle for survival against her (*when at one time it got stuck on ruts previously made by her lorry on a terrible shortcut to the Karen farm she hitched up a team of oxen and dragged the Rover, scraping its underside along the ruts for about a hundred yards.*) she bought a Mercedes, which survived less than a year, and finally a Toyota Crown Estate. She would refer to them all, sweetly, as “my little shopping car”.

For years, unless a tree was right in front of me, I saw it as something resembling a thick pole with variously shaped, green blobs on top. Eventually, even from the front row of the class I found it hard to read the blackboard and an eye test showed I was both short sighted and astigmatic. From the age of nine I wore glasses, which were a revelation as I realised that it was normal for people to be able to make out individual leaves on the tops of trees.

Still to add:

A childhood Christmas, boxing day, etc.

Tenants, ginger beer.

Farm life,

Swimming pool and club house.

Old man replacing his Swedish drillers with Africans, in the early fifties, i.e. long before others. Skills needed like technique of feeling the cable “whip”, sharpening bits, etc.