

A Colonial Family Story

by my Sister, Susan

When a working class man and woman from a utilitarian terrace house in a nondescript grey London street are sent out to The Colonies in the year of 1950, it is expected that many strange and unforeseen things will happen.



Our father (who may be in heaven) applied to the Colonial Office in 1949 for a posting abroad to one of the numerous countries over which England held sway, in the hope that he would escape the dull ration lines of an exhausted victorious Britain. He charged off under the imperial banner to a small country on the West coast of Africa; The Gold Coast, capital Accra. The enticement was a thriving little group of white English and Scottish gentlemen who were hell bent on extracting every bit of gold, ivory, coca products and anything else that could be wrested from the rich and fertile land.

Our Dad was known as an Information Officer and his role was to (and I use the terminology of the times) 'educate the natives'. He had an office and a workshop under a thatched roof in a swept dirt 'compound', he had a clerk who was called Moses, and two drivers called Bicycle and Gideon. These two gentlemen would each take turns to drive a mobile cinema van, accompanied by our father, to the in and outlying villages in order to teach the up to that moment quite satisfied people, about the joys of western standards of hygiene (Hah – in the 50's !!!) and the benefits of western medicine. This must have been fairly futile because, never having seen a screen before, the mysteries of perspective defeated them and they could not understand why a mosquito was portrayed as bigger than the man standing in the background. Never mind – it's irrelevant now.

OK then – life for colonial children in the under the red sun of the British Empire. 2 children aged 6 and 2. Girl (me) boy (Colin). Mother (Nora) Big bungalow on 10 foot high stilts – to grab any bit of wind that may be around. The garden boy, one Isaac, told us kids it was to keep the snakes out of the house! The houseboy, Kofi, would sit outside in the garden doing our family's clothes washing in a big tub, singing mightily. The other houseboy, Little Kofi, dusted, swept the floors



and polished them with a vast amount of polish. The rooms were big and dim because the house was surrounded by a 12 foot wide netted verandah to keep the sun out of any part of the house. There were big electric fans in the middle of every room and the refrigerator stood with its feet in tins of paraffin. We had an African grey parrot on its perch on the verandah which could emulate the opening and pouring of a bottle of beer, the subsequent burps, and the sound of my father's car. It also drove all the outside wild birds to distraction because it could imitate all their calls. I don't remember all the dogs – too many. We children did not have dinner with our parents – we



had a nanny until she locked Colin in the cupboard for a couple of hours and subsequently was fired – so our mother supervised our early supper and packed us off to bed. If they dined in (in the old London days they would have had supper), they listened to the BBC and no doubt congratulated themselves about all the rationing they had escaped. Most nights were spent playing canasta at the Club (old days it would have been cribbage) My parents hadn't reached the heady echelons of Bridge.

Typical day of the colonist. 6.30am. Tea brought by one of the house boys. Breakfast served by ditto. Parents smoked two cigarettes (each) before getting up. Dad into white starched cotton shirt and white cotton shorts (Bermuda length) (both items of clothing made by my mother), long white ribbed socks (up to the knee) and brown lace up shoes.

Famous colonial knobbly knees (usually sunburned) sticking out between shorts and socks. Off to office at 7.30 to supervise the working of empire until 1pm when he drove home for the day. Yes, that's right (good and full day's work accomplished), had lunch with wife served by houseboy, or if houseboy's day off, the other one), Then stagger to bed for the afternoon 'measuring of the mattress', tea served guess by who at 3.30 pm. Load kids and dogs into car and drive to



beach where much jollification, surfing on body boards, drinking of more tea out of thermos flasks, and chatting with any other person that happened to be



there. Sometimes the surf boats of the Africans (terminology at that time) would be out catching fish and Mum would buy our beautiful protein. Oh yes, I forgot; during the morning our mother would drive to the market where lovely big fat mummies sat behind piles of plantains, coconuts, tomatoes, onions, and where the eggs were put into a bowl of water so the freshness could be deduced. Chickens

were slaughtered on site (with minimum distress on all sides), then to Kingsway the European shop where bread, tinned milk, flour and all staples from England could be purchased. Including materials for home made shorts, shirts, dresses, curtains etc., because in those days just about EVERYBODY'S MUM AND WIFE made clothes.

Right, in the 18 month tour that all colonists did at that time, there was three weeks local leave granted. I guess that was because the exhaustion induced by 5 hour working days got too much after a while. Our family would drive 6 hours up to Kumasi (which was in the jungle) where we would stay with a bachelor friend who kept baby crocodiles in this bath tub. These would be hauled out into a bucket when one wished to bathe. No, to this day I don't know the reason. After 3 weeks of the same sort of lazing about and avoiding baby crocodile bites, back to Accra and back to business.

Periodically, H.E. (that's the Governor (*His Excellency*) to the unenlightened) would have a cocktail party (much flurrying amongst the lesser colonialist ranks wives) and much purchasing of material for new frocks. My mother bought some lovely floral material to make a really sweet little dress which, to her dismay on arrival at the Governor's mansion, matched their new drawing room curtains. Never mind, she no doubt bore up under the strain with a true stiff upper lip. ALL POWER TO HER AND HER ILK. She was the sort of person who could concoct a meal out of almost nothing cooked on a primus stove at the side of an African road and still smile. A link to my brother's site [HERE](#)



At the end of the 18 month tour, home leave of 6 months (Yup, it's true) would be granted and the family would sail 'home' on one of the ships that ferried people back and forth. Later, planes would be used more frequently but in the 50's it was cheaper to go by ship than to fly!



When Colin and I reached the ages of 5 and 8 respectively (1952), we were taken down to South Africa and enrolled in the English Medium School in Pietersburg in the then Northern Transvaal. We flew



home to our parents once a year at Christmas time, and the rest of the holidays we were farmed out to various families – usually to Afrikaans owned farms. As I wrote that last sentence – here in the liberal world of

2015 – I find it difficult to believe that was the normal way English colonialists treated their children. No wonder we grew up very strong and resilient – we had to or go under. A link to my brother's site [HERE](#)

In 1957 the Gold Coast became the first colony in Africa to be given its independence under the new President Kwame Nkrumah, and my father obtained a position in Nyasaland, a rural country incorporated into the Federation of Rhodesias and Nyasaland. Zomba was the administrative capital

and Blantyre the commercial capital. Because these countries were much closer to South Africa, the acquisition of material goods was much easier. At that time, of course, South Africa was one of the richest countries in the world with a very well educated and cosmopolitan ruling white class. I have no intention whatsoever of getting into politics here but I will say one thing – nobody went hungry.



It is not commonly known and I think it is worth mentioning that leprosy, under the colonial system, had been virtually eradicated and TB had become a comparatively rare disease.

Anyway, back to general life.... My brother Colin was sent, at age 14, to be trained as an officer in the Merchant Navy (see [HMS Worcester](#) web site) during the time we were enrolled as boarders in St Andrews High School, Blantyre. We followed the Cambridge syllabus in this school and it may surprise younger people to know that we studied Latin, French, English, English and world literature, all branches of mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, world history, geography (large bits being red!), music, art, and homecraft.



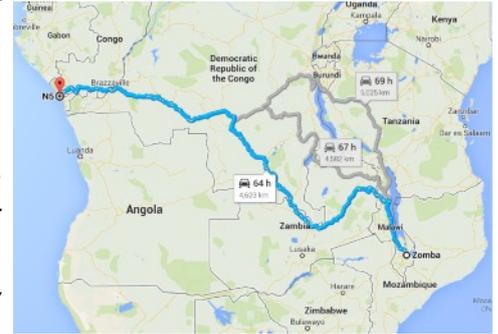
Compulsory games included rugby, soccer, cricket, tennis, swimming, field sports (boys) and netball, basketball, tennis, swimming, field sports (girls). Prep from 2pm to 3pm, then sports until 5pm, baths and leisure until 6.30pm, dinner, and prep from 7.30m to 8.30. Lights out at 9pm. Once a week a film would be shown and once a month we had a 'hop' (dance) on am Saturday night in the school hall. No TV, no radio, no phones, and letters to be addressed home every week. There we are – that's what bred the last of the colonials. Like it, hate it, admire it, ridicule it, that's what made our British passports valuable and meaningful.

One of the stories that I have been asked to relate concerns my parents move from the Gold Coast to Nyasaland. For some obscure reason, they decided to drive!!! In a 1953 Rover 75, they set out with containers of water,

petrol, oil, all relevant tools for repairing minor car problems, some dried food and some clothes! They took a ship from Accra to the Belgian Congo, through that country, into Northern Rhodesia, turned left, and into Nyasaland! 2 months on dirt roads with one of the most memorable bits (for our Mum) when, staying



overnight in a Belgian Roman Catholic mission, my mother was asked by the resident priest if she would care to take a shower. That, being a very rare occurrence on that trip, was eagerly accepted by Mum and, happily swinging her towel, went to the hut pointed out. Upon entering, she was rather nonplussed to see no taps and no shower head, but a reassuring voice from above asked if she were ready. On looking up, she saw a large black man with a watering can. Accepting defeat, she shed her clothes and waited. A good long shower she said it was!



The modern map shows 64hr.
How things have changed.

School was completed under the Cambridge system of O and A levels and, for myself, a year in secretarial college in what was then Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. Back to England at the age of eighteen by Union Castle Liner – a trip of six weeks from Durban to Southampton. What a way to travel that was – no silly cruise directors and Butlins type holiday rallying. No, apart from the Captain's cocktail party and the last evening's dinner and dance, the entertainment was informal and primarily sorted out by the passengers. Deck games, crossing the equator ceremony – slippery poles and all – card games, the library, and, for most of the young people, much flirting, dancing and going up on deck in the dark – if not to the various young officers' cabins!! Long stops at all the ports on the way 'home' with various inland trips laid on. One of the most popular was Cairo and the pyramids.



It was an extraordinarily almost innocent time – the dreadful AIDS virus had not yet reared its head and the young people's thoughts were on amour libre and the banning of the bomb, followed by the flower people and the hippies.

Well, that's it really. It covers a bit of that time and I am glad to have been there. I am now a rather disillusioned oldie, but that is normal.

Goodbye.

Susan 2014