

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 3
Samburu Safari

c/o Barclays Bank
Queensway
Nairobi, Kenya
August 25, 1953

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Roger Brown and I stopped at Isiolo to fill up with gasoline before proceeding to the Samburu District of northern Kenya. Roger is the government veterinary officer at Nanyuki, 50 miles south in the European highlands, but his jurisdiction extends north into Samburu. He had invited me to accompany him on a three-day safari to inspect Samburu cattle for foot and mouth disease.

Samburu, situated in the Rift Valley Province, is much like the Northern Province (formerly known as the Northern Frontier District), which borders it on the north, east and west. A large part of Samburu and practically all of the Northern Province is barren desert and the two areas support only a tiny population.* Samburu itself is one of Kenya's finest big game areas and is the home of a pastoral tribe of that name that is very similar and closely related to the more famous Masai of southern Kenya.

While Somali attendants filled the tank of Roger's Studebaker pickup truck and two five-gallon cans of extra gasoline, I took a look at Isiolo. The village, with a few hundred Moslem, Hindu, Christian and Pagan souls, cannot be considered one of Kenya's tourist attractions. Dusty in dry weather and muddy during the rains, it consists of a series of corrugated-iron shacks sprawled out along the road from Nanyuki. Most of these shacks house Indian-operated dukas and some are residences. The important buildings are the telephone exchange, operated by an African youth, and the district commissioner's headquarters. The weather alternates between warm and hot. The altitude is 3,000-odd feet, compared with 5,000 to 7,000 in the chilly highlands. At Isiolo, one first encounters the haggaya, a wind that blows strongly and steadily from the southwest at this time of year. The African population includes, besides Somalis, Boran and a few Meru. Mau Mau has not penetrated that far north and Bwana goes about unarmed.

* Samburu, with a population of 26,040 (only a few Europeans) has a population density of 3.1 per square mile. Total area: 8,223 square miles. The Northern Province, with 116,782 square miles---slightly more than half the total area of Kenya---has a population of 187,451 (57 of them Europeans), or 1.6 per square mile.



Isiolo, looking south
from the gas station

Leaving the gas station, we started north and were halted by a red and white striped road barrier at the end of town. We had to cross a spur of the Northern Province to reach Samburu and the Northern Province is closed to the general public. It is so vast that stranded tourists would be likely to die of thirst before being found. Tribal warfare erupts frequently and, although Europeans seldom if ever are attacked, the authorities feel it is better that they stay out of the way. A European police officer in the Northern Province cited these reasons when I asked him why the province is closed, and added: "And we don't want Europeans coming in here and upsetting the people and slaughtering the game. We want to keep it just like it is."

Roger signed the book in the sentry box as a government official and an African askari with a "Beau Geste" pillbox cap saluted and raised the barrier.

A few miles further on, the road forks. One leads to Somalia and, 699 miles away, Mogadishu. The other leads to Ethiopia and Addis Ababa, 752 miles in that direction. We chose the Ethiopian Way and proceeded to Archer's Post, 25 miles further on.

The desert began in earnest now. Rock, gravel and sand, dotted with tiny thorn trees, bushes and dusty weeds, stretched out in either direction from the road.



A half-hour later we arrived at the edge of the 9,000 square mile Marsabit National Reserve, shared by game and Samburu herds. Roger swung the truck off the road, saying he wanted to show me the wonder of the desert and after a mile of swirling dust on a two-rut bush track, stopped the truck at the edge of three crystal clear pools of water. It was the famous Buffalo Springs, where pure, tepid water bubbles out of limestone rock, tumbles through the three pools, then wends its way as a stream to the Uaso Nyiro river.

Dead leaves on the half a dozen sun-burnt palms at the edge of the pools

rattled in the fierce haggaya. The much-needed water had little effect on the desert. It gave life to only the palms and a thin fringe of grass at the very edge of the pools. Beyond that were only the thorns and tumbleweed. The haggaya and flash floods caused when it does rain had carried of what topsoil ever existed.

Back in the truck, we pounded up a winding rocky road to the home of Neil Englebrecht, manager of the veterinary department's abattoir at Archer's Post. Roger had hoped that Neil would be there so that we could spend the night in his home. We had brought camping equipment just in case, but it turned out that Neil was at home.

Neil is an Afrikaner by birth and an Afrikaner by temperament. He lives alone near the abattoir with his dachshund and cat. One hundred African laborers live in huts nearby.

Neil formerly lived in a thatched-roof house, but recently replaced it with a one-story austere structure with three rooms. The floor is concrete and the walls are of rough plaster. His meals are prepared in a nearby hut by a Nandi who has been his cook for 35 years. Some of the chairs are camp chairs and these have seats and backs made from hides of Thompson's gazelle. Neil has no telephone, no running water, no electricity and no neighbors. Every week or so, he drives to Isiolo for mail and groceries. He has a battery-operated radio---over which hangs a picture of the Queen--- and this is his only daily contact with the world. He rises at dawn, dines at sunset, listens to the radio for a few minutes, then goes to bed.

When Roger asked Neil if he is lonely, Neil broke his usual silence by replying in his thick Afrikaner accent: "I like it here. I've lived by myself all my life." He was never married. Later Roger said to me, "You could only get an Afrikaner to live out here. An Englishman might stand it for a while, but then he'd want his dances and parties. The farther an Afrikaner gets from other people, the better."

Neil, at 60, is short and wiry, with sparse white hair. He wears shorts and short-sleeved shirts, slouch hat and sandals. The desert has given him a deep sun tan. He was brought to Kenya by his parents at the age of 10, just after the Boer War. They had heard of a new country opening up and wanted to try their luck. They trekked inland by ox cart and later began farming in what is now the European highlands. Neil gave up farming because he considered the highlands too cold.

That night, hyenas howled outside the windows. We inspected the abattoir at dawn. Up to 50 head of cattle can be slaughtered and dressed there daily. There were no operations going on that morning, though, as the next herd had not arrived yet. The abattoir is part of a post-war government program for marketing native cattle---more about this later in the newsletter. Operations are carried on either in the open or in thatched roof, wall-less huts. Neil lent a hand as he directed some Africans in moving some equipment.



The abattoir

Archer's Post is the recipient of a half inch of rain a year. There is plenty of water nearby---the roaring Uaso Nyiro river---but, like Buffalo Springs, it promotes little vegetation because of a lack of topsoil.

The river, only a few hundred yards from Neil's house, has cut a gorge 50 feet deep and 100 to 400 feet wide in the lava and limestone desert. Its muddy water crashes through the gorge in a series of cataracts. The roar of the water added to the ever-present haggaya sounds like the pounding of storm-tossed surf on a beach. In flood time, the river rises many feet, almost filling the gorge. There is a thin strip of vegetation along the river's edge, but beyond that nothing but the savage desert and the distant mountains.

A few crocodiles, drawn by blood in the abattoir's waste water, and marabou storks and the hyenas, also drawn by the slaughtering, inhabit the area, but nothing more. There is a lonely, harsh beauty about the place.

The Uaso Nyiro rises as a trickle in the Aberdare mountains, cascades through the desert, then disappears. It ends as it started---as a trickle, in the Lorian Swamp.

Debris from a recent flood blocked the old channel temporarily so that the futile river dried up even before reaching the swamp. The swamp, a great game refuge, quickly became a desert and elephant, rhino, hippo and other animals perished by the hundreds. The river now has started to work its way back to the swamp and life is resuming there once more.

"Inspanning" the Studebaker, we struck out for Wamba, only 45 miles across the bush, but three hours away in traveling time. The map described our route as a "motorable track." It is best suited for bulldozer excursions. Even by Kenya standards, the road was bad. A vehicle a week passes over it. Flash floods cut deep luggas or eroded ravines, some many feet deep, across the road. Only a sturdy vehicle can batter its way up the 45-degree sandy slopes of these luggas. Worse still are the axle-breaking miniature luggas of only a foot or so in depth. They are practically invisible until you are almost in them.

The track led through the Marsabit Reserve and on the way we sighted all sorts of buck and small game, and one cheetah. Once in a while we passed a solitary Samburu moran guarding a herd of native cattle, spear in hand. The game is protected.



While watching for luggas, Roger at the same time kept an eye on the bush and continually pointed out game that I otherwise would have overlooked. Like many men out here, he is completely fascinated by the strange beauty of Samburu and the NP and makes safaris into those areas as often as possible. And like many government officials I have met here, he is a combination of sportsman, competent administrator and somewhat of an intellectual.

Roger is over six feet tall and he is husky. He wears a heavy black beard and mustache. ("Darn nuisance, that shaving.") He is quiet in manner and pursues his work with a sort of easy-going determination.

He is 29 years old and received his veterinary training at London University, then took a colonial service appointment after the war and was sent to Kenya. He and his wife, an Austrian refugee girl he met in London, live in a comfortable home in Nanyuki. They have three small children.

Roger has done a lot of shooting and fishing in his life, but says he may sell his rifles soon and buy a good camera for photographing game. If a man may be judged by his library, Roger would receive a good grade. His bookshelves are filled with volumes of good fiction, poetry, drama, philosophy and non-fiction books of general interest. There are only a few volumes on veterinary medicine.

Roger's father is a schoolteacher in England and Roger at first wanted to be a newspaperman. Later, prompted by an interest in game, livestock and the out-of-doors, he took up veterinary medicine.

In his dealings with Africans, Roger is no crusader, but neither is he one of those who regard Africans as wild animals or as likeable though mischievous children. He has no interest in developing friendships with Africans---even with the educated handful---and can be quite critical of what he regards as "African traits." Yet---and Africans we met on safari seemed to appreciate this---he treats them as men. Unlike many Europeans here, he has no hesitation about rolling up his sleeves and showing an African how a job, even a dirty one, should be done. He believes that this inculcates respect for him and because of this makes the African more inclined to follow his example.

He believes that Europeans and their government must promote maximum African advancement, but says this must be done in stages, first building sound societal foundations. This will take time, he says. He cites education, saying that the present curriculum---which includes considerable academic work---should be replaced by manual training, with academic work for only the brightest young Africans. At present there are too few African craftsmen and too many would-be clerks to form a balanced, modern society among Africans, he says.

Roger's views are not unique---a good many Europeans here say the same thing and with varying degrees of sincerity. And Roger adds to them the old Kenya refrain: "These people were savages 50 years ago. How can you expect them to do in a few short years what it took us 1,000 years to do? It will take them 100 years at least."

Whatever the number of years it will take, Africans I have encountered generally are a long way back on the road to civilization. My first impression is that more of an effort could be made to advance them than is now being made, not only by government, but by individual European citizens.

Roger, like many Britons here, is appalled by petty thievery committed by Africans and this, I suspect, colors much of his attitude toward them. The British have a high sense of public and private honesty and are genuinely shocked by what an American might be inclined to dismiss with a shrug.

As an example, Roger, during a conversation about Africans, told me that he, another European veterinary officer and an African veterinary officer had taken a motor safari. At the end of the journey the European found that a chocolate bar of his was missing from the glove compartment. "Do you know, the African had pinched it!" Roger declared heatedly, departing from his usual composure. "The European chap asked the African about it and he admitted it." I have heard many a well-intentioned Englishman draw sweeping conclusions about African honesty from petty instances of this sort. Equally exaggerated to me was the reaction of several Europeans in Nairobi on hearing that I had left £10 in my hotel room all one day and that the African "room boy" had not taken it. They all insisted I should give him a "reward." Ten pounds, incidentally, represents a couple of months' wages to an African hotel employe.

Roger said he was drawn to Africa by the scope of the work and by the lure of Africa's game and vast expanses. The altruistic opportunities played some part in it, but not a major one. He is able to live better here than in England, but still must watch each shilling closely.

At home he would be examining sick cattle and here he functions as a sort of public health officer for all livestock in an area of several hundred square miles. He plans and carries out inoculation programs, controls movements of huge herds and supervises some aspects of mass cattle purchasing programs.

Surprisingly, our axle was still intact when we arrived at Wamba. It was green---by northern Kenya standards---but you certainly can't call it verdant. A tiny, brackish stream runs from the foot of the mountain and that is the reason for settlement and greenery, such as they are. There are no telephones, no telegraph, no regular mail, no paved streets, no running water, no sewage system, no doctor in Wamba.

The European population totals five persons---two elderly missionary women, a veterinary department live stock officer, his wife and their young son. There is an Indian storekeeper and his family. One of the most important men in town is a Kikuyu---he is the government's District Officer. Several Samburu and Somali families complete the population of Wamba.

Roger had to blow the horn repeatedly to make cattle move off the main "street"---in reality, a wide path. We bought food for lunch in a Somali-operated duka. Harsh Somali music poured forth from a radio tuned to a station in British Somaliland.

The Samburu greeted the Bwana Doctare with friendly respect. A pastoral people, they rate the medicine man for cattle high in the scale of things. Samburu herdsmen employed by the veterinary department drove 340 steers into a corral. One Samburu lad put on a right good performance of steer wrestling. Roger busied himself with prying open reluctant mouths and hoisting up reluctant hooves for examination. He found one active case of foot and mouth and several healing cases. Orders were given for isolating them.



Samburu herdsmen

Later we visited a Samburu manyatta. The Samburu have many of the characteristics of their Masai cousins. Like the Masai, they are rather tall and slender and have features that show their Hamitic origin. Unlike the Masai, though, they cooperate eagerly with the Europeans and some have made top-grade askaris. But, even though not as fiercely independent as the Masai, they retain a pride and manly bearing. They have a somewhat similar moran or young warrior system, wear the same wind-tossed blankets---and nothing else---and live in the same type of cow dung dwellings.

The manyatta had an outer circle of brush and sticks as a protection against maurading man and beast. Inside were a circle of huts made of sticks plastered with cow dung. Inside the circle of huts was another circle of brush and sticks, which functions as a corral.

Each hut is waist high and six to 12 feet in diameter. There are no windows. Entrance is gained by crawling and one can only sit, hunched over and scratching fleas, inside the huts. Although it was hot that day, the Samburu were doing their cooking over fires inside the huts. Despite the presence of smoke-holes in the roofs of the huts, the smoke was very thick inside the huts. The smell, quite strong, was intensified by the presence of several new-born goats in each hut.

Adults, children and animals alike were covered with flies and several of the adults had eye diseases, which are transmitted by the flies. The Samburu made no effort to brush away the flies, but this was understandable. The flies are so tenacious that one would have to keep fanning his face with his hands---and doing nothing else all day---to keep the flies away. An ophthalmologist recently was sent by the government to Wamba and had a dawn-to-dusk field day treating Samburu who flocked to his clinic.

The Samburu in this manyatta were veterinary department employes. Plans have been made to build European-style houses for them, but Roger said it is not always easy to get the Samburu to accept a new way of living. He cited one instance of where the government built a cottage for a Samburu family. A government official returned later and found that the family had pitched a tiny tent in one corner of the cottage and were living under it, leaving the rest of the cottage bare and unused.

We had lunch that day in a mountain pass near Wamba. Roger stopped the truck in the road. We lowered the tailgate for a table and set up camp chairs in the road. "There won't be another truck along here for a month," Roger said.

Roger then outlined the government cattle buying program in Samburu as follows:

The Kenya Meat Commission was set up a few years ago and given a meat purchasing monopoly for the country. The government had a controlling interest in it. Because of what Roger described as settler pressure, the commission purchased only cattle from European ranches. "European beef" is of better grade and better weight than shenzi or native cattle. Meanwhile the African cattle population continued a dangerous increase.

Africans generally do not raise cattle for sale, but for prestige and dowry purposes. The increase in population results in overgrazing with consequent surface erosion of the land. This further reduces the grazing and the increasing cattle population becomes thinner and thinner. But that is all right with the African. He wants numbers. That he is ruining his land and cattle does not concern him.

The veterinary department urged KMC to purchase native cattle so as to cut down on overgrazing, but KMC refused. The department pressed for permission to undertake such purchases itself and was authorized finally to form the African Livestock Marketing Organization (ALMO), which began operations last year.

Under the present set-up, KMC still does the purchasing and marketing of European beef, but in addition now slaughters and markets native beef sent to it by ALMO. The worst of the native cattle are sent to Neil's Archer's Post abattoir, where biltong (dried beef) and other products are made. An exception to the overall set-up is in Nyanza, where ALMO sells native cattle direct to the Uganda market.

In Samburu, destocking is compulsory. The Samburu must sell 1,000 head a month to the government, for which they are paid the market price. Taxes are collected while the money is still on the table. Tax money and profits from the Archer's Post abattoir go to the African District Council for Samburu welfare projects. These projects include much-needed bore holes. A native hospital for doctorless Wamba is being built from these funds.

Once purchased by the government, there is a big job to be done in moving the cattle to the abattoirs. This was the history of the 340 head examined by Roger at Wamba:

They were collected at Wamba originally, but then an outbreak of foot and mouth disease was discovered. They were cleared finally and moved to Archer's Post, 45 miles and a three day journey away. From there, they were to be driven 75 miles---five days---to Nanyuki and there entrained for the KMC slaughter house near Nairobi, 125 miles further on.

Roger had decided to go to Wamba and check to make sure that the herd was free of foot and mouth. Otherwise it would be too risky to let the herd pass through the European settled area north of Nanyuki.

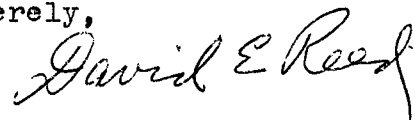
However the KMC plant broke down. Because there is no grazing at Archer's Post, the cattle had to be driven back to Wamba, where there is both water and, as a consequence, grazing. This took the urgency out of Roger's trip but he decided to go anyway.

There is not much veterinary medical work to be done in Samburu except for imposing quarantines for foot and mouth disease until it has run its course. "Tick born diseases are the worst in East Africa and there are not many ticks up here," said Roger. "The sun and the sand make good sterilizers and the jackals and hyenas clean up any garbage."

When inoculation programs are carried out, they are done at a low cost to the Samburu, as well as to other Africans. They are charged 50 East African cents (\$0.07) per head for all shots but rabies, for which they pay 2 1/2 shillings (\$0.35). Europeans pay from one shilling (\$0.14) to 7 1/2 shillings (\$1.05) per head. When inoculations are compulsory, there is no charge.

That afternoon we saw several rhino and elephant. Back at Archer's Post that evening, we decided to take baths. With Neil, we piled into the truck and drove five miles to Buffalo Springs. A herd of 10 elephants that had been drinking at one of the pools moved away a few hundred yards at the approach of the headlights. They remained there, waiting for us to finish.

Sincerely,



Received New York 8/31/53.