

Itimbwe Ranch  
mid1949 - mid1951  
Part 5  
Footnotes, Add-ins and Finale

Revenge



Regret

Photograph by J. B. McGee

## **From Part 1: The Beginning**

### **Footnotes:**

**#1** Neil had just begun school at Luanshya Convent School when we left for Abercorn. One thing he had learned was how to stand to attention so he always did when he thought the occasion warranted. Posing to have his picture taken fell into that category—serious business!

**#2** Neither of my parents could drive a car when we set out for Itimbwe. They both used bicycles to get around town. Now they were faced with the prospect of being isolated on a property out of town without transport. Nevertheless the need to buy a vehicle and Dad learning to drive had not been in the forefront of their priorities. That changed when they began the road journey to Abercorn. Then it rose sharply up the list.

### **From Part 1:**

#### **#1 Add-in:**

##### **Teaching Dad to Drive**

The noise of the van being driven at high revs in low gear came to us from the distance long before we caught sight of it. We ran to the end of the veranda beside the office to get the best vantage place and were delighted to see our van weaving along the Abercorn road towards us.

We were even more delighted to see - eventually - that it was our own father at the wheel and not Benjamin. The vehicle approached the house from around the lower part of the rose garden round-about without changing speed. Now we could clearly see Dad's face. His expression was not one we had seen before – perhaps it was the one most of us wears on our first driving lesson. Had we been older and wiser we would have been alarmed ... especially as the vanette was showing no sign of either slowing or turning with the driveway. The engine screamed.

We gaped in horror at what was about to happen. Dad was staring straight ahead and appeared to be frozen at the wheel. The vanette was going to hit the wall ...!

At what must have been the last available second a black arm reached across and pushed the steering wheel to the right and the vehicle sped along in front of the house then suddenly braked, skidded, shuddered and lurched to an abrupt halt. A sort of stillness seemed to settle on the van – one of those moments when time and everything else seems to freeze – and then it all begins again.

Neil and I were already on the move and at the top of the stairs when the passenger side door opened slowly and Benjamin appeared looking ... a little dazed perhaps.

Dad came bustling around the front of the van, doing his best to pretend he wasn't pleased with himself ...and relieved it was all over ... for the moment!

He fed bits of information to me about that first lesson as he remembered it years later. I gather it was quite a difficult experience. There were several problems with the vehicle he had to contend with: the steering had some degrees of play in it so that it was very easy to overcorrect. The nature of our bush track required a deal of steering around potholes, so when dad drove the passengers got out feeling seasick.

The clutch slipped – that is to say it did not engage immediately – so he had to learn its little ways.

The engine was also slow to respond to the accelerator.

Dad developed a 'lead foot' on the accelerator, which he never lost, but in that old vehicle it made learning to drive even more difficult because the one thing that had been fixed in Kasama prior to us getting the van were the brakes. Benjamin, Dad's instructor, had trouble getting over the concept of 'feathering' the brakes in English so he resorted to saying

"bechana Bwana, bechana, bechana!" - meaning: 'a little Sir, a little, a little!'

But for a long time stopping became the most hazardous time for any passengers - especially those riding in the back – holding on to something became a survival skill.

All things considered Dad was justified in feeling satisfied with his performance in that first driving lesson.

## From Part 2: The House

### Footnotes:

**#3 The hall gun cabinet.** Guns were to become one of the most important resources we had on the farm. The assortment consisted of seven or eight rifles and two handguns. One of the rifles was a long barreled large caliber German weapon for which there were only two or three bullets. It was referred to as an elephant gun and received a lot of attention from visitors but in fact was only used once by Dad. There was one other 'foreign' rifle for which there was no ammunition but the two shotguns and two 'three o threes' were well provided for.

The cupboard base of the cabinet was stocked with numerous boxes of cartridges and various grades of shotgun shells. Included were the lead and implements for making pellets for shotgun shells, as well as a little 'primus' (kerosene) stove for melting the lead. We used that on the first night in Itimbwe house to make our tea.

**#4 Light at night in the dining room.** There was no electricity on the farm at that stage. We used candles and 'hurricane' lamps to provide light at night. This was less of a shock to my parents than I would have thought but they had grown up with uncertain power supplies so they took not having it in their stride. All the same it caused a bit of a scramble on the first night when the lamps had not been prepared. Fortunately we had found candles in the dining room earlier .

## From Part 2: The House

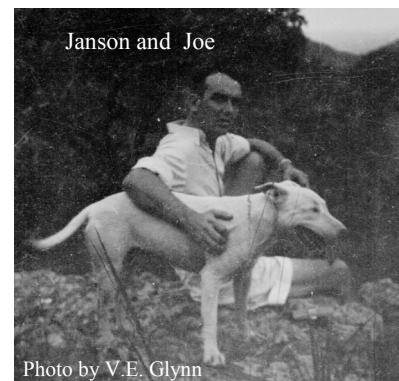
**#2 Add-in: Mother makes a name for herself in the kitchen.** One day we were just sitting down to have breakfast when Matthew asked 'Missus' to come to the kitchen 'checha checha' (very quickly). Mum got up and hurried downstairs and so did my brother and I in spite of being told to finish our porridge. Mutale, our native hunter, met us at the door and grimaced told us - mostly in his own language - that Janson had been injured by a porcupine. Mum listened while looking past Mutale at the still form of our beloved Janson lying on a pair of blood soaked maize sacks on the floor near the stove. We could see long slender black and white quills protruding from his neck and shoulder. I gaped in horror and felt tears begin to steal my sight but I could not move from the doorway.

No one had told us about porcupines but we had seen animals lie as still as this before. Neil let out a loud sob and we both looked imploringly up at Mum as if for a miracle. We had seen a lot of death. We knew how final it was. Neil's face was a teary, crumpled mask and I'm sure mine was too but Mum had taken in the fact that Janson was still alive from where she was standing and - as we hoped she would - she began to give orders.

Joy replaced despair in the time it took to blink away our tears. Matthew was told to put water on the stove to boil and to fetch a bottle of iodine and cloths from the store room, my brother and I were sent to the work shed to tell Dad the bad news and to bring back a pair of pliers. While we sped away, Mutale helped Mum to get the dog up onto the kitchen table and Rose was sent to fetch the sewing box. She fetched the bandages herself and when she had everything ready her team got to work to save Janson.

Mutale held the dog firmly on the table while my mother drew out a quill. Janson squirmed feebly but gave little resistance. With the quill out Matthew washed the area around the wound with the scalding water. Then Mum poured generous amounts of iodine into the hole. Rose handed Mum the needle she had threaded and the opening was sewn up, more disinfectant applied and they moved on to the next quill. Of the five porcupine quills removed that day the last was the most difficult to get out and for Janson, one imagines, most painful. It had skewered diagonally up through the jawbone and tongue and emerged from the cheek on the other side of the dog's head.

Apart from the occasional whimper and wriggle our dog had proved to be a model patient and our mother had gained the status of a very important healer; a status confirmed when Janson began to walk about three days later. She was treated like royalty when she visited the native settlement on the farm or the one at Siasi especially by the women.



**#3 Add-in: Mum the dining room teacher.** A parcel arrived some weeks after we had moved into the farm house. It was a cardboard box containing the materials for 'home schooling'; There was a manual for Mum but the rest of the kit was intended to be used by Neil and me. We were keen to begin lessons next day after breakfast.

Mum spread out the goodies on the table as we knelt on our seats to get a good look. She explained uncertainly how it all worked and the lessons began. The enthusiasm Neil and I had was short lived but hers lasted a little longer.

We tried hard to keep Mum encouraged by giving the work our best shot; for a while at least. Neil would scowl his concentration, stick his tongue out of the left hand corner of his mouth and breathe heavily as he traced the letters and numbers onto his slate. In this he made good progress but cutting paper with the scissors frustrated him more than he could endure.

The gummed paper took on a life of its own once the backing was moist. Parts of it remained fastened to his fingers while other parts found homes almost anywhere but where he wanted it to go. I had an advantage over him because I had spent more time in school than he had but we both soon became bored by the repetitive tasks and began to look around for distractions.

Neil came up with a very successful tactic. He sat up in his chair. Then slid very gently—like one of Dali's melting clocks down the back of it, across the seat and out of sight under the table. Mum never actually caught him performing his 'melt' so he was able to change chairs whenever he wanted.

She was puzzled when he took to appearing in a different place. He had a way of spreading his efforts out on the table so a stationery mound in front of a chair was no clue to where he had been. The look of exaggerated innocence on my brother's face together with the frown on my mother's was too much for me and I eventually got the giggles – and gave the game away—she guessed what he was up to.

### **From Part 3: Building the House**

#### **Footnotes:**

**#8 Brickwork:** There are two other Bonds for brickwork that have similar advantages to English Bond in terms of strength; Dutch Bond and Flemish Bond. The former looks very much like English Bond without the quarter closers on the alternate row ends while the latter retains them. Dutch Bond is often considered the stronger of the two. The decision to work with English Bond must have added time to the work but clearly a price the builder was willing to pay.

**#8 The fresh water system:** Part three lauded the fresh water system used at Itimbwe Ranch. This requires some qualification. Whereas the dispersal of the water when it reached the house was very satisfactory, the fragile nature of the collection and transportation to the house retained an unacceptable and ever present risk of disaster. I don't doubt that the supply line and was originally intended as a temporary measure. The main concern seems to have been concentrated on protecting the water supply from human intervention. However, naturally occurring events like bush fires, storms and seismic activity in the form of earth quakes could also have consequences for the pipes by shifting the rocks on the cairns supporting them. Similarly the pool might have been breached by rock movement or the water contaminated or animal activity.

Attention should have been paid to making the collection and delivery of the water more secure. The fact that it survived the 20 years before and during our tenure is testament more to luck than sound engineering practice.

## From Part 4: The Farm

### #4 Add-in: Clearing the Orchard

Except for two lemons and a pair of avocado trees all the rest in the orchard were orange trees. There were eight rows of perhaps six well spaced trees planted down the slope to form a more or less rectangular block. The lemon trees were included in the serried ranks but the avocados on their own were beside the chicken enclosure to provide shade. Time, disease and neglect had taken its toll on the citrus trees; several had died off leaving only blackened withered trunks to mark their place in the lines. Many of the others had blackened limbs and produced little fruit but there were some that did and although not very big and a little sour the fruit was highly prized by everyone. The lemons were plentiful – no good to eat but great in drinks and deserts.

Dad, impressed, by the way the cattle had grazed clear the maize fields, conceived the idea of using goats to graze clear the orchard grass for us. The animals were not used to a door and became very difficult about going in or out of one. The fifteen goats had to be physically manhandled into the orchard, then to make matters worse, once inside the enclosure, they ate practically anything - except the grass! In addition, because they were vulnerable after dark, my father ordered that they be rounded up and put into the brick chicken house for the night. This involved getting them through two more doors; the first into the mesh enclosure the second, a wooden one into the brick building.

The first time this was attempted problems appeared immediately. The goats quickly spread out and with the trees for cover were easily able to avoid capture. With their natural speed it required a small group of men to secure each animal.

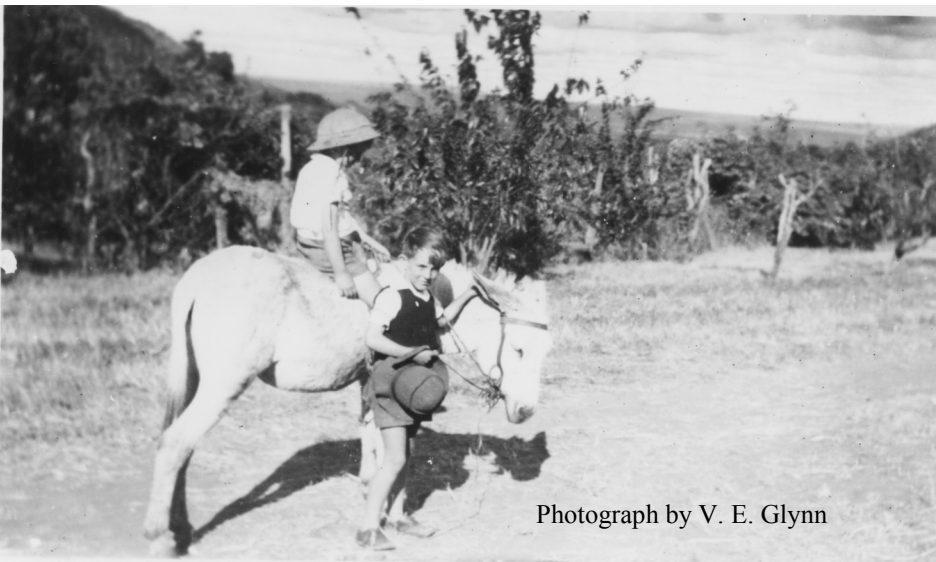
Janson, usually uninterested in anything relating to goats, suddenly became very animated when he saw the men trying to corner an animal. This was similar to his role when tracking wounded quarry. The object there was to run the animal to ground by exhausting it. So naturally his 'help' consisted of barking madly and chasing the goat until it stopped running. So far so good perhaps, except that Janson's next move was to nip the tendons of the hind legs of a hunted animal.

The goats drew the line at that and a bitter standoff resulted that was only resolved by one of the men scooping the dog up and putting him outside the fence.

With Janson gone the cornered goat at once took off again. The others, having witnessed the chase and drama it entailed were by now terrified of the men and determined to avoid being caught. Janson's efforts certainly made a difficult task no easier. The shadows were very long indeed before the exhausted men bade Dad goodnight and staggered back to their huts.

The donkeys were also unimpressed by the orchard gate but once they saw Jacky, led through they followed without too much trouble. This time Dad's plan was a success. The placid animals settled quickly and were soon happily munching the grass at rate that pleased my father.

Eventually Dad made a temporary entrance in the mesh on one side of the enclosure so that even one or two calves could be let in with the donkeys.



Photograph by V. E. Glynn

Picture: Neil riding Jacky beside the orchard. Terry leading.

## From Part 4: The Farm

### Footnotes:

**#9 Felons:** I suggested in Part 2 that not everything we experienced on Itimbwe was appropriate for children our age. In the period before Jimmy McGee arrived to take some photographs of the dead baboons we had watched a dreadful scene. One of the young females suddenly stirred. She was still alive even with the gaping wound in the side of her abdomen.



Slowly at first she began to pull at the wound. The rips increased in ferocity until she had exposed her entrails. These she began to pull out frantically. I looked around and saw that the men were laughing. Someone said something—perhaps that Jimmy was coming—and they stopped watching and hurriedly dispatched the poor animal with a rock. The gun was back on duty on one of the towers so could not be used.

During my time at Teachers College years later I spoke to a visiting African chief lecturing on African culture and asked him why the men laughed at something so sad. He told me the obvious: Every year untold numbers of villagers went hungry because of the damage done by insect plagues, monkeys, wild pigs and even large animals like elephants. Seeing one baboon die painfully was a kind of revenge for men who had known that kind of hunger.

Regret for this, he said, was a luxury reserved for the well fed.

### Cattle Predators:

#### **#5 Add-in: Kangangari the crocodile fighter**

Kangangari was not a local man. No one ever told us where exactly but we knew that he came from somewhere in the north. He spoke the local dialect but the foreman claimed he swore in Swahili. So perhaps he came from Tanganyika or Kenya.

We were told that as a child or youngster a crocodile had caught him by the arm while he was washing a cooking pot in the shallows of a lake. Kangangari beat the animal off using the pot and escaped with his life but not the use of his left arm. It became withered and hung useless by his side and the rest of his life. But how he came by it made him a living legend.

Now village life in Africa generally is not kind to cripples. Everyone, other than a chief, is expected to pull his or her own weight. Though I have to say the women seem to pull a lot more weight than the men folk by and large. It is probable that Kangangari became a cattle herder because that was all he could do. Also probable is that he was taken in hand at some time by a clever herbalist possibly a relative.

He certainly had a good knowledge of cures for ailments among the cattle according to my father. Once, when one of the oxen was bitten on the leg by a snake Kangangari made a paste from various shrub roots and leaves. Wrapped in a piece of cloth it was tied on into the leg of the beast with tree bark string. The ox was back at work within a week or so.

He had an air of authority about him that my father could not abide for a long time. It seemed, to begin with anyway, that most instructions he gave to the foreman at Siaisi were checked with Kangari first who was not above vetoing any directions that in his view were unwise. Dad fired the man twice but he simply ignored the dismissal and continued running the herd as he had done. Dad continued to pay him. Within a few months my father had grown to appreciate his skills and was not above asking his opinion also.

They actually got on quite well. One day Dad asked Kangangari why he wanted to work, considering his age. He thought about it for a moment or two then he reached out and touched my father's shirt sleeve. His answer was in the native dialect and the men listening let out howls of laughter when they heard it.

Benjamin, our driver, translated. "He says he wants to buy 'mpasha Bwana; a new shirt." Everyone knew that Kangangari only ever wore a single length of cloth.

On another occasion Dad asked him where he would go to when he died. This time he answered immediately. He hit the ground with the end of his long stick and said simply "Lapa" (there).

**Finale: The Last Months**  
**The Christening**

The birth of Bernard McGee on the 18th of November 1950 in Abercorn marked the countdown to the Itimbwe-Abercorn experience for both families. The next occasion of note was the christening at St Pauls Mission Church in early December. Ron and Joe were the godparents and Bernard very well behaved throughout the ceremony.

Picture:

Left to right: Roisin, Terry, Mary, Patricia, Bernard held by Ron, Priest (unknown), Neil and Joe. Taken at front entrance of the Church.



Photograph by J. B. McGee

**Christmas 1950**

Christmas was celebrated at Itimbwe together. Neil and I did particularly well that year thanks to Aunty Roisin. The cowboy outfits might have been a little big for us but that didn't matter at all because we had the 'real six shooters' and holsters. Even if wearing them and being able to draw was still to be worked out. In the picture Roisin is advising Neil on the subject. Patricia, on my right was underwhelmed by her new Dutch Milking Maid outfit and unconcerned about my difficulty with the holster.



Photograph by J. B. McGee

Picture: Patricia, Terry, Neil and 'Little' Roisin

The adults must have found the occasion quite sobering. The only certainly in the year ahead was that we would all be somewhere else at the end of it. Mary and Jimmy with two school age children and a baby were especially concerned.

**Easter 1950**

But the year rolled on and soon it was Easter and a big event for some of us. It was the day on which Patricia, Neil and I, along with several other children, made our First Communion.

The 25th of March (1951).

Picture: First Communicants with siblings: The picture right shows three groups of children from left to right. The three boys in the first group were two brothers (dark haired) who were Italian (I think), the blond boy I remember as being Belgian. The girls have Roisin in the middle with Patricia on her left and an unknown child on her right. Neil and I and the brother of the blond Belgian lad made up the last group. Note how many have their feet together—standing to attention, a relic of the War must still have been taught. Both pairs of brothers had visited Itimbwe but I'm not able to remember their names.



Photo by J. B. McGee



### **A Lake Chila Party**

Everyone went to the lake for a celebratory picnic after Church. I remember there was a great deal of showing off by some of the older children. At some point one of the boys dived onto a rock and cut his head. He was taken away for stitches. But the party continued. Beers for the adults, soft drinks and cake for all and a BBQ to top it off.

Baby Bernard, now referred to as 'Barney' photographed here at lake Chila with Ron was a happy healthy baby and always the centre of attention.

For the Glynnns this was the full circle in some ways of our Abercorn experience. Lake Chila was the place enjoyed the most when we arrived and it was just as much fun when we were leaving.



### **The Last Goodbye**

The final days at Itimbwe were marked by the usual organised chaos of packing. This was made much simpler than our departure from Luanshya. Mother had discovered minimalism! She discarded much of the paraphernalia she had realised was simply unnecessary—hat boxes, enormous travel trunks and many of the suitcases. We all felt the 'pain'; Dad lost several dress suits and pairs of shoes. He enjoyed looking 'elegant'. Neil and I parted with nearly all the clothes we hated—like the uncomfortable pith helmets and wellington boots we never wore. Mum said that she had thrown out most of her expensive dresses, shoes and hats. She still managed to look pretty smart though.

One late afternoon we were summoned to the veranda balcony to find the men and women, including some of the elder girls, of the farm workers gathered below us on the driveway. They formed a semicircle in front of the house with the women in the middle and the men in two groups on either end.

At a sign from the foreman the women began to sing. We had no idea what the words meant but Mum said that it sounded happy.

When it ended there was a pause, a moment of quiet, a sort of tension; broken at last by a single clear voice from a girl. She sang a short phrase or two then the others took up the chorus. When that finished a new leader followed and the process began again. It was the music my mother loved so much when she heard it in the barn but here in the stillness it was very beautiful.

When that ended we discovered why the men were on opposite ends. Now the men were the leaders with the women supporting the chorus. But now actors from the groups performed in a dance showing what the songs were about. Both Mum and Dad were the subjects of two stories each; one funny and one serious. First Dad was depicted as a great hunter tracking and killing his prey. Which was given to the people to eat. Mum was shown as the amazing healer, sewing up the dying dog and bringing it back to life.

Then the mood changed and Dad was shown as a champion jumper out of the way of a charging bull. The little tableau concluded with a parody of Mum losing her shoe in the kraal cow manure. All of the scenes were very well performed and none needed translation. They were all things most of us had witnessed.

I'm not sure how it all ended. There was applause from us and a thankyou from Dad. The people left. My parents were deeply moved. Mum shed some tears and put us to bed. Dad poured himself a larger than usual whiskey.



## End of Itimbwe we Knew

Neil was shocked by the completeness of the reversion of Itimbwe to bushland as I was to see the photographs and hear what he had to say about the Ranch house.



Photograph by Joanne Glynn

This beautiful picture is one of the photographs taken when Neil and Jo visited Itimbwe in 2004. The scene is a lower level version of the view of the farm shown in my mother's picture shown in the Features section of Part 4 and shot from somewhere close to the then Siais road. The predominantly grassed area mid left could be where one of the maize fields once were.

The memories we have of the house are based to some extent on the old photographs that were kept by the two families for more than half a century. Our memories will leave when we do and the photographs will eventually join us. Perhaps one or two of you who read this little scrapbook might be prompted to ask a question or two about something in it. Don't wait too long to look for an answer.

Each of us begins with a new mental notebook in which to record their world as they see life unfold. I have enjoyed sharing some of the pages in mine. I did get a great deal of pleasure revisiting some of these images and remembering what I thought I'd forgotten. I did find answers to questions I would have liked to have asked too. In truth it is often not really necessary to ask a question. Knowing what you would like to know is.

There isn't any way to make this collection of pictures, notes and anecdotes coherent. There are too many gaps in the physical evidence, too many actors and theatres of activity and it was all so long ago. I hope the reader can find a thread to follow here and there and patch together what life might have been like in the African Outback in the middle of the twentieth century living in a grand house. Thank you for reading it.