

38 YEARS IN ABERCORN

THE LATE Mr. J. H. VENNING

Mr. J.H. Venning, whose death on Oct. 7 is reported on Page 1, was the son of the Rev. E.H. Venning, who was Headmaster of Reading School, England, just 100 years ago. Jack Venning, on the death of his father when he was 16 came to South Africa with his elder brother, Hugh, who had qualified as an engineer and was later well known in Rhodesian mining circles. One of Hugh's achievements was the construction of the Mulungushi power line to the Broken Hill mine.

Both young men were restless and eager to press north from Johannesburg. Then Hugh was attracted by sensational gold discoveries in British Guiana (but spent only a short time in that country) and Jack Venning, soon after the Jameson Raid, took a contract to deliver 100 remounts to the British cavalry regiment, then at Fort Victoria, for the Ma-

tebele War. He is said to have delivered 101 (as against the 70 or 80 which more experienced drovers used to hand over) and this is a striking example of the meticulous integrity which, in common with so many of his generation, he displayed throughout his life.

After some years of transport riding (with ox-wagons) and trading and prospecting in the Fort Victoria area—including a period when, as a lad of 18 or so, he found himself in charge of the steam driven electric light plant of that township, established and operated by two German brothers—he was invited to join the B.S.A. Company's administrative staff as an assistant native commissioner in Northern Rhodesia.

FOUNDER OF BALOVALE

His first important task was to establish the administrative post at Balovale, then accessible only

by a canoe journey of some weeks up the Zambesi. He selected the Boma site there and constructed from local materials, the primitive housing and office accommodation then thought adequate his only staff being a dozen or so unarmed messengers.

He established excellent relations with Lewanika, whom he regarded as a friend, and often had meals with him. At one period he recovered from Angola a number of people who had been captured in what was probably the last slave raid in that area. He did this by detaining—quite illegally—an Angolan chief who had organised the raid and just as the matter looked likely to become extremely embarrassing, the chief secured the return of the villagers.

He was greatly respected in Barotseland and was able to influence Lewanika to provide some 3,000 carriers for the East African campaign in the 1914-18 war. The Chief sent his son, Mr. Godwin Lewanika (then a boy), and, with him as symbol of Lewanika's authority, Mr. Venning conducted this large party on foot for many hundreds of miles.

Mr. Venning served at Feira, Magoye and at Chilanga before Lusaka was thought of. He was magistrate at Broken Hill and would have continued on the legal side of administration had it not been for that measure of deafness which so often overtook early dwellers in the country, probably from the effects of constant dosage of quinine.

BY CAR TO ABERCORN

From Broken Hill he was posted in 1925 to Abercorn, then a three weeks' trek with carriers, and insisted on driving his Ford car over the unmade track which he covered in six days, thus being the first man to drive a passenger vehicle to Abercorn and saving the Government a substantial sum, although he used to tell the story of how long it took him to get reimbursement for the petrol—a procedure then quite without precedent.

Abercorn was then Provincial Headquarters and Mr. Venning came here as Provincial Commissioner which was the post he held when he retired some 30 years ago to Chisungu, the estate which he acquired on the Mpulungu Road.

Abercorn then had a number of active and well-off settlers who hoped to develop the old B.S.A. Company freeholds here on the lines of the Highlands of Kenya and Tanganyika and the Eastern Highlands of S. Rhodesia. Coffee was being established on quite a large scale.

There was an active social life and a favourite picnic spot was the then overgrown and almost inaccessible lake shore at Mpulu-

ngu. The Liemba in those days came in to Katuta Bay which was not only shallow and necessitated loading and discharge by canoe, but was also seriously exposed to the frequent lake storms.

A PORT FOR £150

Mr. Venning and a party of settlers, in the course of entertaining the first Governor, Stanley, to a champagne picnic at this spot, pointed out to him that it was an ideal site for a sheltered, deep-water port. The Governor asked Mr. Venning how much he would need to make a passable road for vehicles over the 28 miles, to build a Customs House and to construct a jetty to take the Liemba. Mr. Venning said—£150; and the Governor said he would see it was provided.

When taken to task afterwards by the settlers for not having asked for much more, Mr. Venning said he well knew how much the Governor could sanction "off the cuff" and it would be better to get that rather than wait for London approval of a larger sum. He did, in the end, get these three things done within that sum.

During his term as Provincial Commissioner Mr. Venning strongly resisted Government's plan to establish an agricultural station in the upper Lunzuwa valley. His argument was that the three villages there contained the only true agriculturists in the whole area, who practised a primitive rotation of crops on good land which they kept in permanent cultivation and provided a most important grain supply which could be developed on the sound, if elementary, lines they had naturally established.

However, on his retirement this plan was put into effect and the people resettled elsewhere where they do not appear to have maintained their former sound practice. The Abercorn area then became to a large extent dependent on grain imported from Ufipa in Tanganyika, the staff at one time maintained at Lunzuwa being among the largest customers for this imported food. The station had only a minimal effect on the general agricultural progress of the countryside and is now, of course, defunct for other uses as reported in our last issue.

TSETSE CONTROL

Mr. Venning, with the detailed knowledge of the area he had gained from constant touring—often on foot—was able during his retirement to supervise on a part-time basis the whole tsetse control organisation of the area, at first for the East African High Commission and later for the Northern Rhodesian Government, and carried on this work until he was approaching 80. The Lake Tanganyika shore and many "drainage areas"

(See Page 7)



REGULAR PLUS TETRAMEL

AGENTS:

CENTRAL AFRICAN ROAD SERVICES

Mr. Venning contd

were cleared and maintained free of bush under his direction.

He also took charge of the coffee factory established by Abercorn Co-operative Society and this supplied all the coffee sent to the forces in East Africa during the last war. Local supplies were supplemented by purchases from East Africa and processed, blended and packed here. He would permit no adulteration of this product which had a high reputation wherever it was available.

Mr. Venning was also, with Miss A.M. Gamwell and her sister, a pioneer of the gathering, growing and distillation of the valuable essential oil plant, nindi, and regularly sent small parcels to the London buyers. Not only did he himself construct the necessary distillation plant originally in use, but he also installed a small water turbine which has supplied lighting to his house for many years from a 100 foot head of water available from the escarpment on his farm.

The loss, through effluxion of time, of people of his generation is, of course, inevitable, but many will feel that it is regrettable that replacements with the same wide measure of valuable qualities are now more difficult to find and those qualities no longer valued as they used to be.