

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

We are indebted to Mr. E. H. Lane-Poole, a retired Provincial Commissioner, for the following notes on the building of the Great North Road:-

The Great North Road was originally known as the "Traction-Engine Road" and was referred to by Europeans and Africans alike as the Chitu-kutuku road. The notion of establishing a rubber factory on the Charnbezi River close to Kasama for the collection, processing and distribution of rubber originated with Jocelyn de Yong, at that time in charge of Agricultural Affairs in Northern Rhodesia. The traction engine was required to operate the machinery of the factory and to transport it to the site, the Chitu-kutuku road had to be constructed.

If after nearly fifty years, my memory serves me aright, it was in the dry season of 1913 that a sparely-built person with a reddish neatly-trimmed beard appeared on a bicycle to ask our help in obtaining labour for the clearing of about 200 miles of road in the Serenje District as far as the Mpika border, He was J. E. Stephenson known throughout the Territory as Chirupula. We supplied him with a couple of hundred men and he forthwith set to work on the road. About a year later I was inspecting the road when I met an employee of the Public Works Department, named Quincey, engaged upon the same business, who later drove the engine to the Chambezi. A few weeks later, C. D. Simpson who was in charge of the whole project arrived with his wife.

Shortly afterwards in August, 1914, the Great War was declared and we heard little more of the traction engine or the rubber factory, but it was currently supposed by the sceptics that if the engine got to its destination at all it must have been manhandled most of the way.

The traction engine was, however, not the first vehicle to use the road. In the early months of 1914, a Captain Kelsey of the Welche Regiment conceived the idea of being the first person to travel from the Cape to Cairo by motor car. His vehicle was what in those days was popularly known as a "tin Lizzy". Several months had been occupied by him in travelling by short stages from Kashitu, delayed by frequent shortages of petrol which he seemed to have expected to find anywhere in the bush when he wanted it. In April he had reached a point near Chitambo Mission where he came upon and wounded a leopard. Following the wounded beast into long grass, a proceeding which any novice would have warned him against, he was badly mauled. Mr. and Mrs. Moffat devotedly attended to his lacerations at the Mission and he was apparently cured when complications supervened and he died at the source of the Lukushashi River. I buried him.

A direct result of the war was the conversion of the Chitu-kutuku Road to a military transport route. Up to that time the quickest way by which military intelligence could be transmitted from the front at Abcocom to Headquarters on the railway line was by a system of Dispatch Runners who, travelling in pairs by day and night accomplished some extraordinarily fast times. However, it came to be suspected that the system was abused and the mail bag tampered with. The service, therefore, was discontinued and it was decided to erect a telegraph line along the road.

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In October, 1915, I was engaging labour for the telegraph construction which was in the charge of Rushforth of the Post Office. The line was completed from his camp which I think was at a village named Luputa to Kashitu, and I was allowed to communicate on the telephone with J. E. Stephenson. Motor lorries were already using the road as far as his camp, and ox-drawn waggons were testing the virulence of tsetse fly. But the African bush is apt to thwart human ingenuity and human endeavour. A herd of elephants whose habitat was in the Ika Hills rejoiced in the man-made road and in their nocturnal perambulations brandished aloft their exuberant trunks, bringing down the telegraph wires in coils for the Bantu maidens to turn into bangles for their own beautification. The oxen died by the score, their flesh providing carcass meat for the troops. Abandoned waggons and the chassis of lorries divested of all usable and portable parts lay derelict by the side of the road for months and often for years.

In 1915 the main body of the Northern Rhodesia Rifles trooped along this road, a force composed chiefly of civil servants and local volunteers, followed by a contingent of the Southern Rhodesia Regiment. The latter required 1,000 native porters a month to supply their needs, and the sparsely populated district was called upon to provide 150,000 lb. of native meal a month. After a year spent in providing men and food for the front, I left the district and never saw the Great North Road again.