



HOW MPULUNGU WAS FOUNDED

By J. H. VENNING

THE following talk by Mr. J. H. Venning was broadcast from Lusaka radio in 1954. It may interest you to hear how Mpulungu—Northern Rhodesia's only lake port—first came into existence.

When I first came to Abercorn in 1925 Lake Tanganyika was only accessible on foot or by bicycle, but a bicycle was of no use within some miles of the lake shore owing to the deep sand. The only route was the old Stephenson road which reached the lake at Kituta Bay and was no more than a track for bullock wagons.

On being posted to Abercorn I left Broken Hill in a four-cylinder Ford car, the first car to travel over that route for some years. I found the road surprisingly good all through to Abercorn (see letter in this number). Later I went down the wagon track to see the lake, Mr. Goodall, whom I was relieving, and Mrs. Goodall accompanying me. We had little difficulty getting to Kituta but the return trip was no easy matter, the car was quite unable to plough through the deep sand up the steep hills bordering the lake and it was only with the help of a gang of natives that we were able to get back. Tanganyika lies at an elevation over 3,000 feet below Abercorn.

The Tanganyika railway steamer, the *Liamba*, called regularly at Kituta Bay but, owing to the shallow water, was unable to reach the shore and had to anchor about a mile out, goods being brought ashore in dugout canoes. If the weather is at all rough it is always rougher in Kituta Bay than elsewhere so merchandise usually got soaked with water. This was so often the case that merchants became shy of using the lake transport and preferred to have their goods brought up by carriers from Broken Hill, about 600 miles away, although carrier transport was neither cheap nor reliable, there was so much pilfering *en route*.

In those days a trip to the lake from Abercorn was quite an undertaking. One had to send out for carriers and take a tent and all necessary equipment. Although the distance by that road was only about sixteen miles the deep sand and steep hills made it quite a tiring day's walk, especially on the return trip.

Captain Duigan, who was at Nakatali Farm, had a twenty-foot steel boat which he kept at Kituta. The boat had an inboard engine and he used to take me out fishing occasionally. We used to visit the islands and then camp on the mainland shore opposite Nkumbula Island—a delightful spot entirely sheltered by the island which was only a few hundred yards from the mainland at that point. The small hill under which we camped was known as Mpulungu. It seemed to me to be an ideal spot for a harbour for, besides being sheltered from the weather, the water was deep within a few feet of the shore. With a good sheltered harbour the prospects for opening up the lake route would be greatly improved so—as I have always been keen on fishing—I was determined to do what I could about making the lake more accessible for that reason also.

It was in 1926, so far as I remember, that I was told that the Governor, Sir Herbert Stanley, and Lady Stanley intended visiting Abercorn and were keen to see something of the lake. I mentioned this to Captain and Mrs. Duigan and they offered to put up a camp at Mpulungu—our picnic site—and invited the Governor and his party to be their guests there. The invitation was accepted—I was included in the party—and we spent a few very enjoyable days. Colonel Stephenson, one of the party, caught the largest fish, it was a Nile perch weighing 52 lb.

When I first heard of the Governor's intended visit I went out on a ten-day trip to find out if there was any possibility of finding a route where a road could be made fit for motor traffic to connect Abercorn with our delightful picnic spot at Mpulungu Hill. For some days it seemed quite a hopeless task owing to the steep Lunzuwa Hills, but eventually I did a route which seemed practicable.

When he was at Mpulungu the Governor seemed very charmed with the place and much impressed by its favourable situation for a port, but said that the main obstacle was its inaccessibility. When I told him that a road could be constructed he told me to send him a report on it to Livingstone—then the capital—and he would consider it. I then told him that I had already mapped out a route through which a road could be made; I said that it was quite a small matter, if he would allow an expenditure of even £50 I would promise to get a road through which could be used for motor traffic. He then said, "If you think you can do anything with £50 you are at liberty to go ahead with it". Captain Duigan and others rather blamed me for asking for so little, they said I should have asked for nothing under £200, but I knew official ways better than they did, I felt sure that had I asked for more than £50 the answer would have been that the matter would be considered when he returned to Livingstone and that would have meant shelving it indefinitely. Besides, I did know something about road making, I had been responsible for making very many miles of road in this country. Before 1926 the usual allowance for road construction was 10s. a mile and I knew what could be done for that sum in those days. The road from Kawambwa to Fort Rosebery had only cost 5s. a mile and the most expensive road I had ever made was between Broken Hill and Kapiri Mposhi which cost 25s. a mile. I reckoned that the distance between Abercorn and Mpulungu would not be more than twenty-seven miles so £50 would give me more than I had ever been allowed before. But there were a few small streams to be bridged and a larger bridge over the fast flowing Lunzuwa River, so £50 would not be any too much.

The road only took about three months to put through and it proved quite satisfactory. Up to that time my Ford was the only car in the place but before long other

people brought up cars and there was quite a lot of traffic on the road, all in Abercorn flocked down to the steamer whenever it came into port.

Sharpe, the captain of the *Liimba*, came to see the port and was very satisfied with it. He asked me to get a jetty run out to which he could make fast the ship for loading and unloading. I then applied for a grant to build a jetty, a Customs warehouse where goods could be stored and I asked for more money for improving the road and bridges. For those three objects I was allowed £150. The jetty had to be forty feet long and run out into water about nine feet deep.

This £150 did not seem too generous, even in those days, but material was cheap and labour was far cheaper and far more efficient then than it is to-day. For 10s. a month the people would work, and work well, from 7 o'clock in the morning to 5 at night, with, of course, a break. One man's labour was worth more than that of three men to-day and cost about a sixth as much.

The jetty was constructed, a Customs warehouse built—brick, iron roof and cement floors—and is still used for Government purposes, I believe as a post office. Part of the £150 was spent in strengthening bridges and improving the road in places. A Customs clerk then became necessary and I was instructed to engage a man at a wage not exceeding 12s. 6d. a month for it was thought at headquarters that it would be many years before the port could afford more than that; but how wrong they proved. Business at the port steadily increased and a regular transport service was soon organised to meet all steamers and goods were brought to Abercorn in lorries. To-day, 1954, the port revenue, apart from Customs duties, amounts to about £70 monthly and the merchandise handled monthly is about 300 tons.

To-day Mpulungu, though it has lost much of its pristine beauty, is a small township with its post office, police camp, stores, dispensary and warehouses. In, so far as I remember, 1930 a really good jetty was constructed by the Tanganyika Railways. After I retired in 1930 a good wide road was put through at a cost of, I believe, £8,000, very different from the £50 allowed for its original construction. It follows my old road for about thirteen miles, otherwise it runs parallel to it, not far away. I am told that about twenty motor vehicles now pass over that road daily.

Mpulungu harbour was not one of those carefully planned and surveyed Government undertakings. It arose—as I have related—more or less by rule of thumb and in a very small way with the simple idea of gaining access to the lake and improving the conditions for loading and unloading goods.

Port traffic has been steadily increasing all the time and small improvements are constantly being made. War-time arrangements for zoning all supplies for a time held up full development of the route and the difficulties in modernising the forty-year-old steamship, the *Liimba*, also had their effect; but there is no doubt that this small beginning established a trade route which has been of great benefit to the Northern Province. Now that there seems little prospect in the foreseeable future of any rail connection with East Africa the port seems likely to become more and more valuable as this part of the country develops.

I hope that it has been as interesting to you as it has been to me to recall the beginnings of an enterprise which was born at a fishing party rather than on the drawing-boards of expensive consulting engineers but which, nevertheless, has fulfilled its



[Photo: E. C. Dunn

Great North Road, 1928

Left, Chirupula Stephenson; right, Edie a Road Foreman (See letter, page 304)

purpose for nearly thirty years and may yet reach a size and importance which was very far from the minds of any of us who enjoyed Captain Duigan's champagne at Mpulungu in 1926.

Note.—Since the date of above broadcast, 1954, many additions have been made at the port and business there has increased considerably.

DEATH BY LION

By R. I. ROTBERG

Late in September, 1900, Walter Riddell Johnstone, a young British South Africa Company Assistant Collector, left Mporokoso to investigate the western limits of his assigned area, the Katwe-Mporokoso division of the Tanganyika District.¹ He habitually resided at intervals in Katwe or Mporokoso. On this particular tour of his division, Johnstone was attempting to take a census and sketch in certain features of the country lying about sixty miles west of Mporokoso. This was Johnstone's last *ulendo*, however, for a wounded lion carried the Assistant Collector from a tree, and proceeded to chew Johnstone in a systematic fashion before being killed itself.² Twenty-three days later Johnstone himself died, evidently from complications arising from his wounds, and perhaps from lack of immediate medical attention.³