

# Early Days in Northern Rhodesia

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The very early days in Northern Rhodesia have been described by H. C. Dann in his book *The Romance of the Posts of Rhodesia*. However, this book only dealt with the days up to the first War, and perhaps a description of the posts at the time when I was appointed to Northern Rhodesia in 1930 should be recorded.

My first station was Luwingu, in what had been North-Eastern Rhodesia, and to get there, the mails from home came out by sea to Capetown, by rail to Broken Hill, by lorry from Kapiri Mposhi to Mpika and Kasama, and from Kasama by runner to Luwingu.

To a bachelor in a strange country, home mails were of great importance, and they arrived, for some curious reason, at about ten o'clock every Sunday morning. Far down the road there would be a flash of scarlet, and the mailman, clad in his red fez and his scarlet tunic and shorts, and barefoot, would be seen walking rapidly down the road at the end of his 120-mile stretch. Normally there would be only one mailman, but at Christmas time when there would be parcels as well there might be two or three.

Although they wore uniform, mailmen were not a disciplined force but this did not prevent them

from giving a very unorthodox salute on arrival, before casting the mailbag off their shoulders on to the office floor. The mailbag itself, of very stout canvas, was sealed with a lead seal, through which the string tying it had been passed. As the bag was flung on to the floor, out from its folds was shaken a collection of cockroaches of all sizes, and there was usually a good deal of stamping round the office by the African clerks and myself to try and destroy them before they infested our files. The mailbag would be heavily stained and almost black with the sweat of the mailman, and as it was often used as his pillow at night, parcels were often dented at the place where his head had lain.

To receive the mail, the Boma office had to be opened, and the outgoing mail left two hours later. The exact time of departure depended to a considerable extent on the whim of the District Commissioner. My first two District Commissioners would have written their letters earlier on, and very often did not put in an appearance and waited for the incoming mail to be carried to the house by the houseboy. The third District Commissioner, however, was a middle-aged bachelor, and he

never wrote his letter home until he had opened and read the incoming mail.

As the Cadet, I was expected to wait until he had written his letters, when they were handed to me with the comment "The mail may now leave". He would pick up his walking stick and his terai and walk off to his house for his pre-prandial gin. The returning mail would be sent off to Kasama, where it joined the mail lorry coming down from Abercorn, then proceeded by the so-called Great North Road back to the line of rail.

In those days the Great North Road - often referred to as the Great North Rut - was an earth road, marked by an incredible number of pot-holes of various sizes and depths

One pot-hole north of Mpika became famous because a cormorant took up residence on it. This sounds like a tall story but I saw the cormorant with my own eyes, departing in haste as the lorry began its descent into the unplumbed depths of the hole.

I cannot recall occasions when the mailmen were attacked by lions or other animals, though I can remember anxiety if the mails were delayed, and speculation that a man-eating lion might have disposed of the mailman.

While I was at Luwingu I was sent down to the Bangweulu swamps to buy fish and meal to

feed the workers who were constructing the aerodrome at Mpika. For some six weeks I lived within 30 yards of five or six tons weight of dried and stinking fish. Nearly fifty years on, the smell lingers yet in my memory. It was not possible to site my tent any further away than this, because I was living on a small island. Very large dug-out canoes were sent to me to move the fish and meal to Chambeshi, whence it went by lorry to Mpika. This was of special interest to me when, two years later, I was transferred to Mpika and saw the aerodrome being constructed, and saw the first Imperial Airways plane carrying mails to Europe.

When I eventually went on leave, rather naturally, I flew home, and it was interesting to be invited to the cockpit and shown the map on which the pilot was flying. I knew the country very well on the ground, and was able to tell the captain that most of the villages marked on the map had ceased to exist some twenty years before.

I have a vivid recollection at Mpika of the postal clerk coming to me just before the mail lorry was due to leave and giving me a letter from a stamp dealer with a bunch of first-day covers, and asking what he was to do about it. I began to read the letter, which consisted of lengthy printed instructions as to how the stamps should be put on, where the registration labels should

be placed, etc., and realised that many of the directions were contrary to postal regulations. I also found it irritating that the letter was in the form of instructions, without any "please" or "thank you", and I was not at that time a philatelist. When the lorry-driver began to hoot, indicating that he would not wait much longer, I personally stamped the covers at great speed, and they were certainly not done in accordance with the instructions. I have often wondered if I have ever handled one of those covers in recent years!

The journey to England by air took ten days, but I was also given half the difference between flying-times and travel by train and ship, to add to my 4½ months' leave, so it was certainly worth it.

On return from leave I was posted to Mankoya in Barotseland. To get there, I went up the Zambezi River for three weeks in a flat-bottomed barge with a crew of paddlers, and then walked for five days, and at that time there was no quicker way of getting there. At Mankoya also, the mails were taken by runner as far as Mongu, where they were put on to mail barges for the journey down the Zambezi. The journey downstream could be done in about eight days. I shall never forget the sight of the mail barge as it set off very early in the morning. The crew were all picked paddlers, and the pace at which they

moved down the river was most thrilling.

Let it not be thought that the mail barge had an easy trip to and fro. Far from it: there are innumerable rapids in the river, and in the dry season the water sinks considerably and a very accurate knowledge of the rapids is needed to get through them. Going up the river, the whole crew had to disembark and struggle waist deep in the water, pushing the heavy flat-bottomed barge against the current and between the rocks. There is also one waterfall which no barge could negotiate, and here the barge was run ashore and towed by a team of oxen through the sand for a mile or two to rejoin the river above the falls. I can remember more than one occasion when the mail was lost owing to the barge being upset by an irate hippopotamus, and I have no recollection that the mails were ever recovered.

When the downstream barge reached Kazungula, the mails were put on a lorry and taken forty miles through the sand to Livingstone, which was still the capital of Northern Rhodesia at that time.

From Mongu to Mankoya there was at that time no road, but only a mail path, and this ran through heavy sand till it reached the Luampa River, from which as far as Mankoya the path got steadily harder. Mankoya had its own three mailmen, who took it in turns to

walk to Mongu and back, with a week's rest at home in between each journey. Rather naturally, they also brought every sort of rumour and story with them from the Great Metropolis of Mongu. I remember the whole African population of Mankoya mourning for several days and nights at the reported death of the mother of a well-known personality: the following week, the incoming mailman brought a message from her to say that she was quite well and had only had a temporary indisposition.

There was no mail eastwards from Mankoya at that time, but, after I had been there some 18 months, I was instructed to begin road work in both directions, to Mongu 130 to the west, and to Mumbwa about 180 miles to the east. During my second tour of duty at Mankoya we used to employ our own mailman to go by bicycle to Mumbwa, taking our letters to and from home, as this was far quicker. This private mailman had a demanding job, as although he was able to use a bicycle, owing to the harder surface, he had to pass through a very lonely uninhabited game reserve, and I think he often spent the night up a tree sitting on a branch, tied there by his belt,

It was during my second tour at Mankoya that the mail-man service was abolished, and first lorries, and then later, aeroplanes took over. I had levelled a large area behind the

Boma, cut out the scrub bush and constructed a landing ground, which is no doubt still in use. The pilots used to come in their light planes from Lusaka, calling at Mumbwa on the way, and arrive in time for a late breakfast. I can remember how exciting it was, talking to a pilot who had often spent the previous day in Salisbury, Bulawayo, Beira, Lusaka, or elsewhere, while my wife and I had not left our district for over a year, and had seen exceedingly few white people in that time.

The period I have covered in this article is about nine years - 1930 to 1939. What a difference in the mails during that time, from runner to aeroplane! And now when I handle a cover of that period, what memories are evoked of the journeys it once undertook!

## **STAMP COLLECTING**

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