

BULAWAYO

Suitable jobs were scarce in post-World War II South Africa, so my father and uncle left Pretoria to hunt for work in Southern Rhodesia. The rest of us would follow when we received news of their success. In the meantime, friends and acquaintances who learned of our potential move north commented how Rhodesia was like South Africa's Wild West. For five-year-old me, that sounded quite exciting, but not so much for the adults.

Three months passed with no positive news, prompting my adventurous mother and me to head north to see for ourselves. We travelled by early morning train, linking up with the Rhodesia Express, heading for Bulawayo, the country's second city.

At first, we travelled with South African Railways, and changed to the Rhodesia Railways at Mafeking. One downside to the changeover was the latter did not use the xylophone to call passengers to mealtimes. In the mid-afternoon, the train stopped for the locomotive to replenish the water in its boiler. It was in the middle of nowhere, a hot, dry, treeless spot, without a person to be seen. The vegetation comprised small scrubby bushes all the way to the horizon. I'm not sure if it was Mahalapye or Palapye, but being mid-afternoon, it probably was the former.

Then, like magic, a hoard of African vendors appeared from nowhere, selling carved wooden masks, spears, and various other curios. They also sold bush babies, which I found fascinating. Passengers still haggled with the vendors when the train jerked and moved, frustrating a few last-minute deals. When it's too late, one always knows what one should have bought, or what price one should have accepted.

The sunset over the dusty, dry, flat Bechuanaland was spectacular. And travelling at night, watching the full moon racing to keep up with the train, kept me occupied until bedtime.

Next morning, after breakfast, the white-uniformed Southern Rhodesian immigration officers boarded the train at Francistown. A scramble for pens to complete the forms ensued. The helpful, smart-looking immigration officers gave us a good first impression of the country.

As the train entered Southern Rhodesia, the bush thickened, helping to build the passengers' excitement about reaching the journey's end. Bulawayo was only fifty-four miles from the Bechuanaland border, and the train moved at a good pace.

Soon, the cooling towers of Bulawayo's power station were in sight, and the train pulled into the railway station with its long, cool platforms. Customs officers waited on platform one to welcome the new arrivals. They appeared to present a minimal delay for most passengers, and none if you nipped past them without looking too suspicious.

Platform one at Bulawayo Station is where I first set foot in Southern Rhodesia. It must be the reason it's one of my favourite places, not just in Bulawayo, but anywhere.

There was no one to meet us, so we caught a taxi to the Fairway Hotel with its broad, shady pavement and colonial charm. A cheerful doorman greeted us and carried our luggage to the reception counter. Over the next few days, with little to do, I befriended the doormen working their shifts. They reminded me of the soldiers on guard duty at the boom gate of the army camp in Trombay, in India, except they weren't afraid of getting caught chatting with me while on duty.

If my five-year-old memory is correct, the Fairway Hotel was somewhere near the corner of Rhodes Street and Ninth Avenue. We were there only ten days when my mother moved us to another hotel. Sadly, The Fairway Hotel was demolished shortly after, so I never saw it again.

The Royal Hotel on the corner of Rhodes Street and Sixth Avenue was our new abode. There was no broad, shady pavement or doormen, but the hotel boasted the first active neon sign in Bulawayo. Our corner room was near the sign, flashing the hotel's name in red and blue all night long. It entertained me on the first night, but I soon tired of it.

I couldn't understand what had happened to my father, whom I hadn't seen since he left Pretoria almost four months earlier. My mother said he was staying at the Roslington Private Hotel, which was a residential hotel, popular with job seekers coming up from South Africa. If I remember correctly, it was close to the corner of Selborne Avenue and Wilson Street. It wasn't long before I realised my parents wouldn't be getting back together again.

Mercifully, my uncle found a job and my aunt, cousins, and maternal grandparents moved up from Pretoria. We moved in with them, in their new house in Queens Park East. The new, treeless suburb boasted dirt roads thick with dust, and across the road from our house lay virgin bush.

Yes, it looked a lot like South Africa's Wild West.