

WILLSGROVE, BULAWAYO

I thought my aunt's house in Willsgrove looked impressive. It lay on a seven-acre block at the end of a long drive. The roof appeared flat from the road because of a surrounding wall enclosing the gutters. This, together with the broad steps leading up to the long front veranda, gave the house a castle-like appearance.

Acacia trees (Umbrella Thorn Acacia *Vachellia tortilis*) dotted the long yellow grass that covered most of the property. I would later discover these trees dropped large, menacing, three-pronged white thorns onto the ground.

In front of the house stood an enormous, raised, elliptical-shaped 'garden bed' of hardened earth and clumps of yellow grass. It acted as a roundabout for cars to exit the property.

The front veranda and steps were red from Cobra wax polish, and inside the house, brick-sized wooden parquet tiles covered the floors. This combination was common in Rhodesian homes.

The house's design was unusual because all the rooms led into each other. Every room, bar one, had two internal doors. To access the bedrooms in the house's front and back corners, you needed to walk through two other bedrooms. The enclosed back veranda mirrored the front veranda but was internal to the house.

If you opened all the internal doors, you could run around the entire house, bypassing only one bedroom in the front corner. Anticlockwise, from the front room, you'd pass through the first bedroom, into the second, bypassing the third, and enter the fourth. Then, you'd pass through the enclosed rear veranda, the single bathroom and toilet, kitchen, dining room, and back to the front room.

It was clear no architect had designed the house, but the large, cool rooms reflected the wide, open grounds, and the endless, blue Rhodesian sky. All the rooms had flat-iron, rectangular burglar bars, more usual on factory office windows than residential properties. As an average-sized ten-year-old, I found it quicker to climb through the burglar bars than use the rear veranda door.

The back fence was about six metres behind the house, and beyond that lay thick bush. About seventy metres to one side of the house stood the servants' quarters, and in between lay my uncle's small chicken farm. The hens produced eggs for sale, but occasionally, one unlucky chicken was selected for Sunday lunch.

On the other side of the house was an expansive stretch of yellow grass dotted with white ant (termite) hills. Beyond that was another seven-acre property which lay undeveloped, save for a kia or storeroom made from grey kia bricks, which I now know to be Besser bricks.

Behind the house, thick bush formed an almost impenetrable barrier, while on both sides of the property lay virgin Rhodesian bush. The entire area was tailor made for exploration and adventure for my male cousin and me. But first, we needed to celebrate Christmas.

Crepe paper ribbons and bells, pinned to the picture rails, hung in the lounge and dining room, and a decorated Christmas tree stood in the lounge. Annuals were popular at

Christmas time, including the Girl's Own and Eagle Annuals for the children to enjoy. The adults claimed the first read of the Giles Annual cartoons, which also later entertained us kids.

Between Christmases and birthdays, we got many other presents, including games such as Jokari and Swingball. Jokari was a rubber ball on a long elastic anchored to a heavy weight. Two of us using wooden paddles would stand to one side of the weight and bash away, with the ball coming back at us faster than when we hit it. Swingball was a tennis ball on a chord attached to a weighted pole. We stood on opposite sides of the pole, attempting to hit the ball in opposing directions.

My cousin excelled at model making, so he often got model kits. They either included a block of balsa wood to carve into the shape of a plane, or strips of balsa wood to build a plane's frame. I can still smell the dope he used to toughen and make taught the tissue that covered his model planes' wings and fuselages. I didn't have the patience for carving or glueing, so I collected dinky cars instead.

Other gifts included kites, microscopes, bicycles, and a compendium of games that incorporated chess, draughts, backgammon, Chinese checkers, tiddlywinks, and snakes and ladders.

Most gifts were aimed at entertaining us while developing our physical or mental abilities. Rhodesia didn't yet have television, and the radio intruded less on family life. Meals were in the dining room, where dinner table conversation helped our social skills and educated us kids in current affairs and improved our general knowledge.

A summer Christmas in Bulawayo didn't have the same romantic atmosphere as an elusive white Christmas in England, but we still enjoyed all the Christmas traditions. Morning tea greeted us with mince pies and a large bowl brimming with unshelled nuts. A nutcracker was handy for tackling the almonds, walnuts, Brazil nuts, and hazelnuts.

Christmas lunch began with Christmas crackers and included all the traditional items, such as the roast turkey, stuffing, roast potatoes, carrots, Brussels sprouts, parsnips, gravy, and cranberry sauce. And, of course, there was the traditional flaming Christmas pudding and custard. We all hoped to find a silver tickey (thruppence coin) in our portion of the Christmas pudding. No wonder Christmas Day afternoon was such a soporific time.

There was also the decorated Christmas cake with its colourful paper frill. The white icing with its underlay of marzipan and delicious fruit cake was a highlight on Christmas Day and for morning tea over the next several days.

One advantage of Christmas in Bulawayo was the weather, which almost always allowed us to use our outdoor presents on Christmas Day. It wasn't always like that in England, where you could spend Christmas Day wishing the rain would stop.

Soon, Christmas was over, but there remained a couple of weeks to explore the surroundings before school started. After our time in Queens Park East, I'd not seen my cousins for over three years. There was much catching up to do.