

## Milton Senior – Form One

Most pupils at Milton Junior moved on to Milton High School, more commonly known as Milton Senior. An exciting mix of feeling grown up, while being the school's most junior.

Milton Senior became the largest high school in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, with well over a thousand pupils. Several junior schools in Bulawayo fed the enrolments, and this meant potential new friends and more competition in sports and in the classroom.

The growing number of pupils led to streaming, based on academic records. In week one, we all faced an anxious wait to see where we would settle, with several pupils moving up or down a level.

In form one, we sat in the school's heart, in the original, old, solid, sandstone classrooms, looking across to the assembly hall. School assemblies proved interesting because it brought home to me for the first time the differences between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. At school assembly, the Protestants entered the hall first, followed a little later by the Catholics. After the prayers and hymns, the Jews entered. I puzzled over this separation until a Jew told me they didn't believe in Christ. When I mentioned this to my classmates, they ridiculed the idea, thinking I was joking.

Our flat at Kingston Court, on the corner of Galway Road and Seventeenth Avenue in Fama, was a fair distance from Milton Senior. It meant I, like many other kids, needed to ride to school each day. A small cycle shed near the school's entrance stood crammed with bicycles during school hours.

Prior to its relocation two hundred yards down Townsend Road, the main school entrance for pupils stood at the corner of Selborne Avenue and Townsend Road. Each morning, a prefect guarded the entrance, taking the names of late arrivals. Some would just give you a warning. Others, drunk with power, would take your name and order you to attend the prefects' common room at break time.

Prefects held the authority to cane pupils, and in a high school environment, a few relished that responsibility. Most teachers didn't cane the boys. Only the woodwork master did, with his handy store of suitable offcuts. One teacher used the tapered cap of a Bic ballpoint pen, held between her fingers, to hit inattentive pupils at the back of the head. I recall an elderly master giving an open-handed slap to the back of one boy's head. It was so loud and unexpected, the entire class jumped. Those were different times back then.

Our young form master in form one was popular with the boys, though he had favourites. If you weren't one of them, you risked ridicule and humiliation if the opportunity arose. Pink Floyd's video, 'Another Brick in the Wall', always reminds me of him.

In form one, my favourite subject was history. Upon hearing this, my Uncle Colin in England bought me a twelve-volume set titled *The History of the British Empire*. They were beautiful old books with tissue-guard paper protecting the lithograph images. The books and the freight were expensive, so each month he'd pay for a volume and send it to me. But at the end of the year, we needed to drop two subjects. With English and mathematics compulsory, most of us, including me, dropped Latin and history.

For a second language, we could choose between French and Afrikaans. I chose French because of its wider international use. Nowadays, I'm happy I made that choice, but at school I regretted it. In the exams, most of us taking French got scores of thirty or forty percent compared to those taking Afrikaans scoring in the eighties and nineties. As always, the language teachers were the last to release their marks. That meant, even if I was coming first in class, I'd end up second, third, or even fourth after the French and Afrikaans results.

Meanwhile, at home, we enjoyed our comfortable first-floor flat, which I preferred to the others we occupied over the next three years. The slender building comprised two levels, and a small four-car shelter which stood half empty most of the time. The rest of the sizeable block of land was a smooth open area of hard, compacted, sandy surface, so typical of Bulawayo. It lay twice as wide as the building and made the perfect open space for us kids, so it became our domain.

The first Christmas in Kinston Court was the most disappointing I can remember. Malcolm and I both got the presents we wanted. Mine was a metal locomotive for my Marklin electric train set, bought from Addicotts in the Kirrie Building on the corner of Abercorn Street and Ninth Avenue.

We couldn't wait to open our presents, and soon after midnight, we got up and unwrapped them. So late, and with little sleep, we soon went back to bed. The next morning, with no presents to unwrap and tired from lost sleep, we faced a duller than usual Christmas Day.

This was the year our sister, Melody, was born. She spent the first few weeks of her life sleeping in the drawer of my mother's bedside table. I remember one afternoon when she was in her drawer, fractious, and crying for no identifiable reason. At last, she fell asleep, but just then, a dog across the road started a relentless barking and wouldn't stop, despite its cajoling owner. Worse still, it headed in our direction, and the barking was getting louder as it continued to disregard its owner's calls.

I realised the dog would pass right by our apartment and risk waking Melody. I hurried to fill an enamel washbasin with water and waited for it to arrive. Peter, a visiting school friend, stood with me on the public balcony, looking down, eager to see what happened. Unfortunately, the dog was running faster than I expected, and I could see the torrent of cold water would miss its target.

With the speed of the guilty, I ducked behind the balcony wall the second I saw the owner's head appear around the corner. Peter stood frozen in place. Boy! Did she let him have it!

Marbles were popular back then, and it gave me the chance to increase the size of my collection. Each afternoon we'd meet with our guns (ball bearings with the *u* pronounced like the *oo* in *book*) and cannons (marbles). A few years later, Melody took on the marbles challenge and lost my entire collection, along with the memories they represented of India, England, and Rhodesia, where I'd collected them.

Often in the afternoons, I'd use the side of the carport as a tennis wall. In the quiet block, we seldom saw the other occupants, so I don't think I disturbed anyone.

Rubber moulds for Plaster of Paris figurines were the latest craze. I only possessed one mould: Cecil John Rhodes sitting in a chair. Certain moulds proved difficult, and mine was no exception. The thinnest part of the mould was Cecil Rhodes's neck, and I produced several headless statuettes. After many attempts, I at last produced one that was intact.

Time to go into business. Who, in Rhodesia, could resist a statuette of Cecil John Rhodes? Two and three-storey blocks of flats lined Galway Road and Seventeenth Avenue. Lots of doors to knock on, and bells to ring. I painted the statuette and took it around the blocks, selling sixpence lottery tickets. At the end of the week, as promised, I drew the lucky ticket and delivered the statuette to the delighted elderly lady. But informing everyone else of their lack of success seemed a big ask. I didn't fancy seeing all those disappointed faces, so I left it. I hope they didn't think it a scam.

Kinston Court inspired my mother to make the prototype of her later famous lemon meringue pies. Although it smelt delicious in the oven and tasted just right, the crust was rock hard. It didn't stop Malcolm or me from swallowing a large slice. The surprise was Malcolm asking for more. The pie was filling, and even with his healthy appetite, he struggled to finish the second slice. Each mouthful was an agony, and although he groaned, he took it in good humour. I enjoyed his second helping almost as much as he did.

In the September school holidays in form one, I decided to contact my father, whom I'd not seen or heard from for over eight years. My mother gave me his address, and on a Saturday afternoon, with my school friend, Peter, in support, I cycled to his house on Byron Road in Malindela.

We walked up the driveway, and on the front veranda found a young man in his early twenties working on his drop-handlebar bicycle. The bicycle chain soaked in an oil bath in an enamel basin, with spanners, nuts, and inner tubes lying scattered about. The slender Frejus cycle frame told me he was involved in cycling as a sport.

I explained who I was and asked if my father lived there. He confirmed he did and called out, 'Ken, your past is catching up with you.' My father appeared in the lounge doorway, looking a little wary, and fuller than I remembered. It turned out he was living with the young man's family.

My life was entering an interesting new phase.