

MILTON SENIOR – FORM TWO

The year began with a significant political event, and I wondered if we Rhodesian Whites faced a long-term future in the country. Garfield Todd, Southern Rhodesia's left-leaning prime minister, was deposed when his cabinet rebelled and resigned en masse. The prime minister wanted to speed up the Africans' enfranchisement, but his European cabinet colleagues felt he was moving too fast.

This started a series of events defining the nation's destiny. Prior to this, I'd not considered the African nationalists and their ambitions. Soon, I forgot about the episode, though my concerns would return and grow over the following years.

Form two at Milton Senior proved to be an unusual year for me. The novelty of high school was gone, with no favourite subjects and no interest in learning. We occupied a new, isolated row of classrooms set between a tall hedge and the back of another classroom block. Although quite near the main building, housing the administration and classrooms, it seemed remote from the centre of learning. My studies suffered that year with the feeling I could catch up later if I wished.

One incident that later made me chuckle related to the mid-year geography exam. I'd not focussed during class and struggled with the paper. For example, I drew a map of New Zealand showing the prevailing winds coming from the East, only one of my many mistakes.

After the exam, two or three of my classmates accused me of letting my friend next to me copy my answers, but if he'd done so, I'd not noticed. Most times, I got high marks for geography, so the others felt I'd given him an unfair advantage when determining class positions at the end of the exams. On this occasion, I got low marks in geography, the worst in my entire time at Milton, and my friend fared no better.

In form two, my interest centred on cricket and tennis, and every afternoon, I'd be playing one or the other. Often at night, I'd treat my beloved Slazenger cricket bat with the distinctive smelling linseed oil. I also needed to bounce a cricket ball on its face to break in the bat before using it to play. My nylon strung tennis racket required little attention apart from keeping it in a press.

The phenomenal sporting facilities at the school catered to almost all interests. Close to the Pioneer House boarding hostel stood four tennis courts and two tennis walls. Beyond lay the main rugby field, where we'd gather for winter Saturday home games to chant the Milton war cry. Farther on, lay the first team's cricket pitch and pavilion, and squash court.

Alongside these facilities, set back from Townsend Road, were the swimming pool with its diving boards, cricket nets, and two more sports fields. And across Selborne Avenue lay six more sports fields for cricket, rugby, and soccer.

Two basketball pitches occupied the school quadrangle, which lay bordered clockwise by the assembly hall, the gym, the boarders' dining room, and the Pioneer House boarding hostel. The gym featured wooden stall bars on the wall and climbing ropes to the ceiling. It also facilitated badminton and, for those of us who'd seen Scaramouche at the movies, a fencing club one night a week.

Only the school and inter-school sports days took place off site, often at the Central Sports Club in Grey Street, opposite the Old Falls Road.

At home, Helyn House offered no phenomenal facilities, and we soon moved to St Ives, a block of flats on the corner of Fourteenth Avenue and Borrow Street. Across the road (Fourteenth Avenue), lay a triangular block of ground formed by the junction of Borrow and Wilson streets. On the vacant block grew an expansive cobweb of vines, the perfect place for us young teens to hang about, swing and climb.

My mother worked for a short time at Lewis Cox, the car auction business, which was in Rhodes Street, if I remember correctly. Their Wednesday night auctions with the bottomless Coca Cola icebox filled with free bottles of Coke were a big attraction for Malcolm and me. Coke always tasted better in the old glass bottles than in the aluminium cans or plastic bottles. Like all auctions, the bidding for the cars also proved interesting.

Sometimes at night, Malcolm and I entertained ourselves by wandering the streets, looking for small stones to roof-rattle the corrugated iron roofs of the houses in the local area. By chance, we discovered where a young male teacher at our school lived. We knocked on the door of his ground-floor flat and ran off before he opened it. It was great fun, but perhaps we overdid it.

The third time we knocked, the door flew open, but we were equal to the task. We didn't need Red Bull to give us wings. Malcolm raced off down the street, and I turned into the back alley next to the teacher's apartment block. I don't know why he followed me, rather than Malcolm, because the pitch-black alley prevented us from seeing where we ran.

My goal was the tarred road surface reflecting the street lights at the end of the block. I couldn't see if any obstacles stood in my way on the alley's uneven dirt surface. Often, the African workers and domestic servants would sit in the alleyway behind their workplace on chairs or wooden boxes. It occurred to me they may not have removed them when they left for home. I could hear the heavy thud of the teacher's feet right behind me, but I was flying, and soon enough, he gave up the chase.

On weekends, I'd often visit my father. An added attraction was the enormous fish tank in his garage, straddled by a smaller tank on one end. Small creatures that crawled, hopped, flew, or swam always fascinated me. The large tank was a jungle of Vallisneria, so it took several visits before I'd glimpsed all the inhabitants. The smaller tank housed a sizeable community of guppies, the fish that first caught my attention on a visit to the British Museum in London five years earlier.

Together with a business partner, my father opened Pets and Aquaria at the northern end of Main Street. They imported tropical fish from Singapore and Hamburg, offering a variety that most aquariums would be proud to carry, even today. The fish arrived in unpainted cake tins with the lids secured with cello tape. The tins were inside cardboard cartons padded with crumpled newspaper to minimise any shock to the contents and retain heat. It fascinates me how all those years ago, Bulawayo seemed to lack for nothing.

Most of Pets and Aquaria's income came from cooked dog food sourced from a butcher around the corner. Soon, the butcher discovered how much money it brought in, and cut out the middleman.

At my father's house, two male cocker spaniels, a black and a golden, lived in the backyard. An old male springer spaniel had the run of the house and the smaller front garden. The dogs had history and hated each other, and my father warned me never to leave the bottom half of the kitchen's stable door open.

One Sunday night, when listening to Elvis Presley's Jailhouse Rock on the L M (Lourenco Marques) hit parade, the stable door clicked open, and the backyard boys entered the kitchen. Pandemonium ensued with the dogs' snapping and frothing, and my father trying to separate them. When at last he expelled the intruders, Elvis was still belting out his song. I thought it to be a most appropriate soundtrack for the fight. I needn't have worried about the old springer's safety. He was a wily old fellow, and though outnumbered, held his own.

Meeting my father's surrogate family, including Lew, a married daughter, and Mr and Mrs D, would soon lead to welcome and unexpected benefits. Lew sparked my interest in cycling, and on the occasional Sunday morning, I'd enjoy watching him race on the sloping concrete track at the Central Sports Club. I wasn't tempted to follow him in the sport, as I'd had my fill of drop handlebars on my Phillips bicycle in Willsgrove.

But most special was the treat Mr D later had waiting in store for me.