

A Caravan Holiday in Matabeleland, Rhodesia in December 1974 * by Patrick Coyne

** This is part of an article which was published in CAR Magazine in May 1975, entitled "More Caravaning per Litre". Our family - my wife and myself and two children - were visiting our relations in Balla Balla, in Matabeleland, Rhodesia, travelling from Durban in our BMW 1800 SA (called the Cheetah in Rhodesia) and towing our new Jurgens 460 caravan.*

On reaching Beit Bridge we filled up to the brim with the last petrol at South African prices. The allocation of Rhodesian petrol coupons to us was generous - we didn't use half of them in the end. I noticed that our fuel consumption so far was 13 litres per kilometre. We never did as well as this again until we had crossed the border back into South Africa - the speed limit in Rhodesia was 20 km/h higher than in the Republic, and it was only human nature to want to take advantage of this...

Stopping for lunch under our favourite baobab tree not far from the border, we noticed some startling differences compared to our last visit a few years ago - the grass was luxuriantly thick, and the birds were singing. Record rains had transformed Matabeleland, which is normally one of the driest parts of Rhodesia, into a lush green world ablaze with wild flowers and flowing with streams and strongly running rivers. The dams were full, and the cattle were sleek and content. The long and disastrous drought had been broken at last.

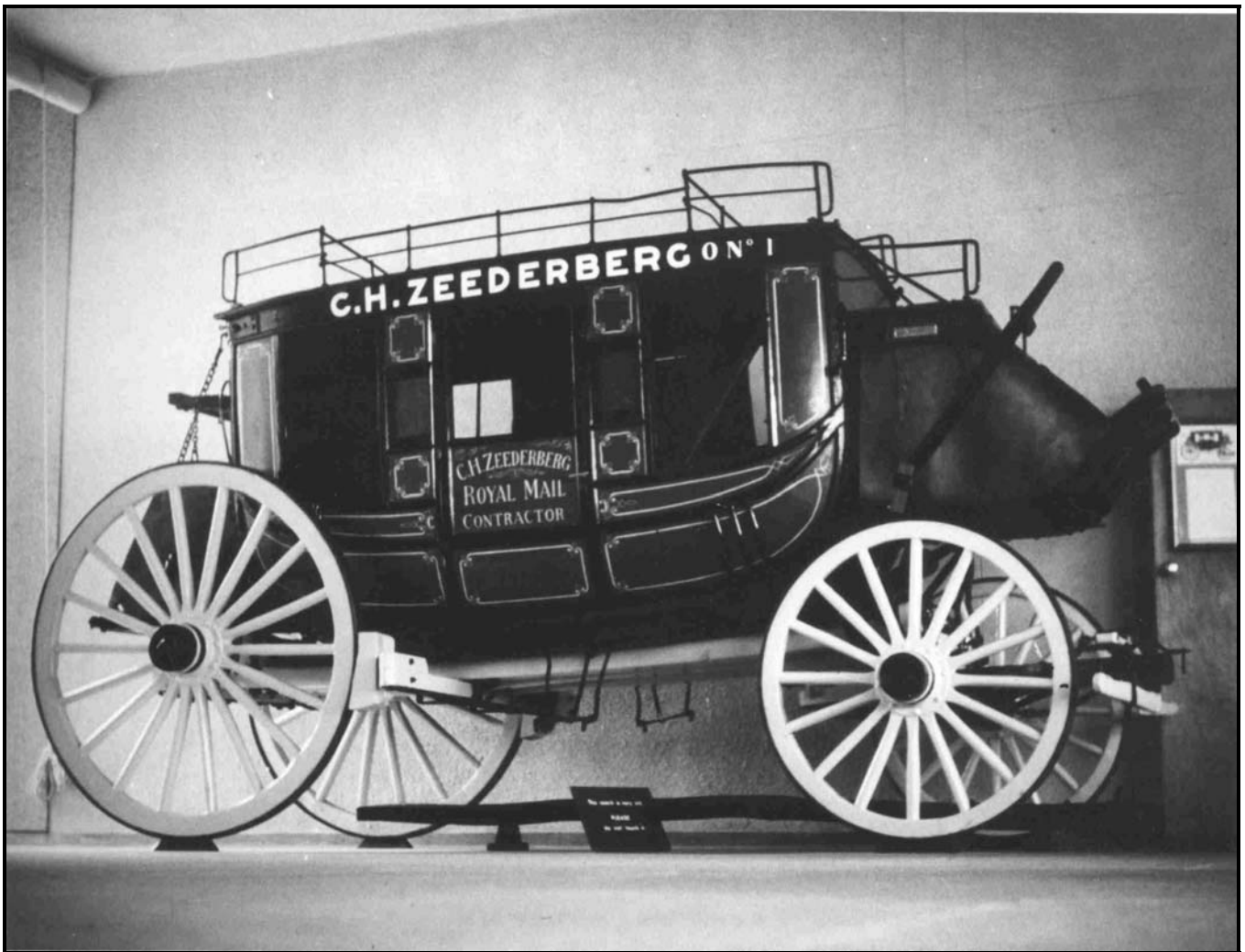
The history of Matabeleland is full of such droughts and the flash floods which followed them. Nowadays, when roads are so good, the traveller welcomes the rains and the cooler conditions which go with them, but before the turn of the century they made an already hazardous journey into something of a nightmare.

A first hand account written by a woman passenger in one of the famous Zeederberg coaches tells of an attempted crossing of the Shashi River, a tributary of the Limpopo, when the ford at Tuli was deep in swirling floodwaters. The coach, drawn by its long team of mules, moved gingerly out into the river until water was rising round the passengers' ankles. At this point the mules refused to go any further. The marooned passengers, including the lady's two small children, were rescued by a boat which itself got into difficulties on a sandbank. They were eventually carried to safety by African volunteers who dumped them 'carefully face downwards on the shore'...

On brother-in-law Hal Poultney's farm 80 km south of Bulawayo, it was fascinating to see ancient wheel ruts scored deep into the rock of a trail leading down to the site of an old ford. These grooves are thought to have been made by the wheels of those same hardy travellers of the early pioneering days.

A very well preserved example of one of the Zeederberg coaches can be seen in the National Museum in Bulawayo. This was made by an American firm famous for its stage

coaches, Abbott Downing of Concord, New Hampshire, in the year 1889. It had been ordered by a Pretoria firm, George Heys and Co. Its first journeys were to Pietersburg, the eastern Transvaal goldfields, and later Kimberley. When CH (Doel) Zeederberg took over the firm soon after 1895, it made history by providing transport for the Commander and staff of the Matabeleland Relief Force from Mafeking to Bulawayo at the height of the Rebellion. A strenuous journey, this - ten days of almost continuous travelling over what then passed for roads.



If you stop for petrol at Essexvale, the new wine producing area of Rhodesia, you will see that the Zeederberg family is still intimately connected with transport and vehicles, though of a somewhat different type to the one mentioned above.

The village of Balla Balla lies among a group of immense domes of rock, the first outposts of the nearby Matopos Hills. When one realises that these granite hemispheres are anything up to 3 300 million years old, it is easier to imagine the long drawn out process of fracturing and weathering which changed what were originally piles of giant rocks into the smoothly rounded shapes we see today.

Think of the hills and you think of acacias, for this is the preserve of the mountain acacia, that graceful tree that lives in shady groves in the valleys, and in clusters up the sides of the boulders. To stand on a smooth-topped rock surrounded by these glorious trees, gazing out over the green savannah, is to come for a moment a bit closer to nature. High over the peaceful world you might see a bateleur eagle, wheeling round in a typical display of power and grace. Moving through the bush you are likely to come face to face with impala, steenbuck, duiker, or the regal kudu.

Our caravan was parked near the farmhouse. One night I woke up in the small hours and looked out of the window. A large herd of impala was grazing all around us, some within a few metres. The steely radiance of the moon turned their bodies to painted stone, until they moved forward in their grazing, silently and delicately. It was a scene of haunting beauty. Eventually they passed out of sight among the trees.

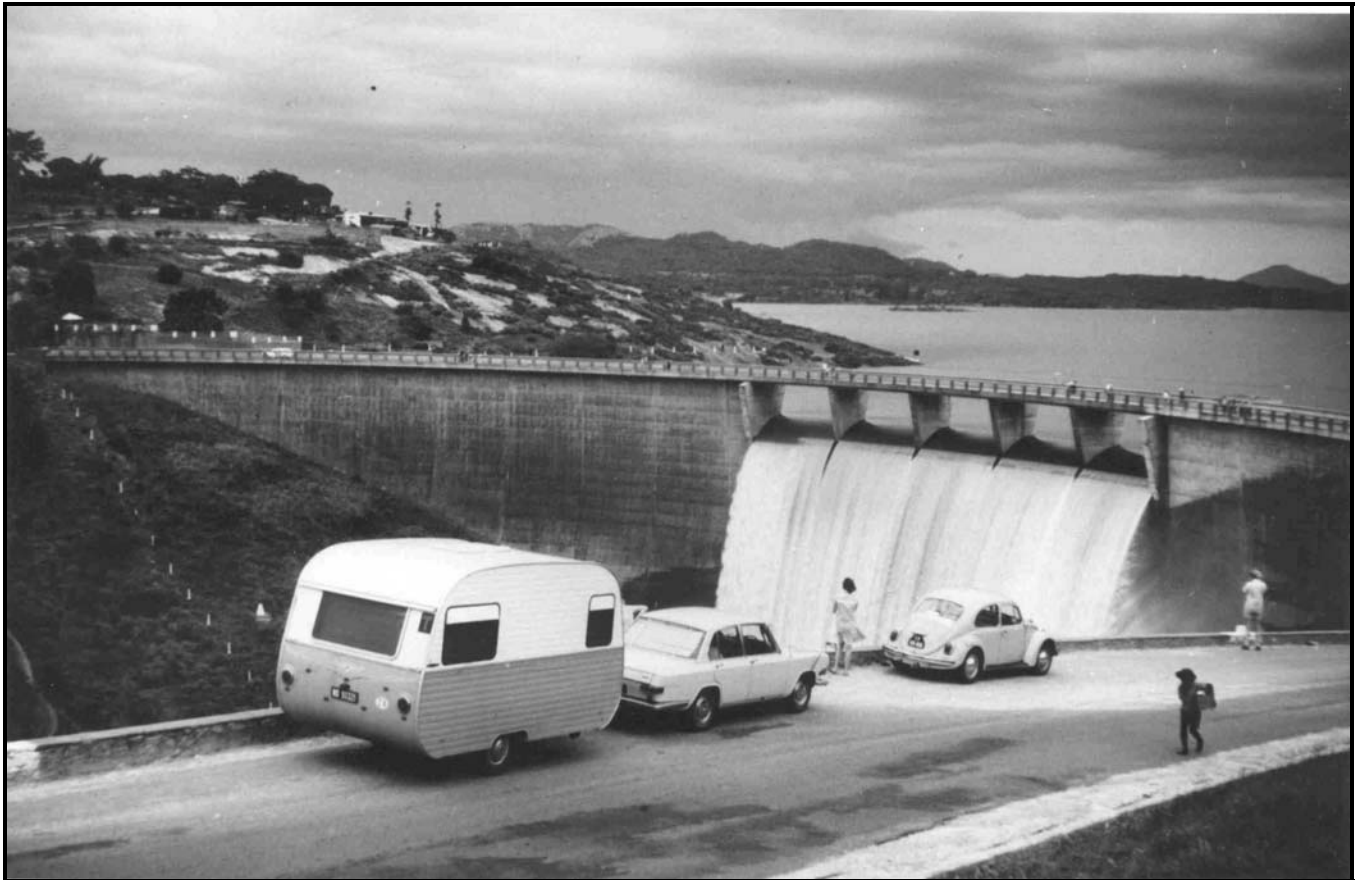
This was a memorable stay in the heart of unspoilt Matabeleland.

The next leg of our journey, the 260 km between Balla Balla and Fort Victoria, included one of the last sections of 'strips' left in Rhodesia. The famous strip roads were the brain-child of Stuart Chandler, who was responsible for laying these two thin lines of tar just the width of an axle apart all over the country between 1925 and 1943. Now, the few sections that remain as a monument to his efforts are either being replaced by full width tarmac, or are used by farmers as private access roads.

Much of the road was an excellent full-width tar surface. When we did hit the strips we found that they were as bad as we had ever remembered. Some of the edges of the tar had been eaten away, leaving a narrow tight-rope along which to steer, avoiding the potholes at the same time. How did the combination handle? Brilliantly, in the circumstances. Getting off the right-hand strip before a blind rise or when you were being overtaken was easy, but getting back on again was tricky. There was a fractional delay before the caravan would consent to climb back up the gravelly camber. Once again the stability of the Jurgens was remarkable and the unit never at any time felt unsafe.

Strip roads are characteristically a series of switchbacks. The section we were on at that time may owe some of its undulations to the fact that it crosses the southern end of the Great Dyke, the reef of valuable metals which stretches for 515 km across the country. On our route we passed asbestos mines, chromite mines, and emerald mines. We were impressed by the important asbestos town of Shabani. The ice-cream seller who magically materialised out of nowhere on a deserted road in the midday heat caused amazed and enthusiastic remarks to be written in the logbook by the younger members of the party.

Our destination was Lake Kyle, and we spent the night at a friend's house overlooking the lake. The next day, the Murray McDougal Drive round Lake Kyle was spectacular. The dam was full, and was overflowing for the first time in its history, pouring over the wall itself at a depth of nearly a metre. It was an awe-inspiring sight. We parked and walked along the dam wall, where the thousands of tons of water slid under the roadway with deceptive smoothness and then crashed to the floor of the ravine with a deep roar and a vibration that shook one to the back teeth. It was hard to tear one's self away from this hypnotic spectacle with its awesome sound effects.



We arrived at the Zimbabwe Ruins Caravan Park at 6 p.m. and at 6.10 p.m. the storm which had been threatening, broke overhead. Next morning the ranger told me that he had measured 50 mm of rain in three hours. But this was a first-class park, and the water had run off with ease. We have always enjoyed the Zimbabwe Ruins (now called Great Zimbabwe) and surprisingly, on this their first visit, our teenage son and daughter were most impressed. Everyone loves a good mystery. Despite the careful research of archeologists over the years, many of the mysteries about the ruins remain unsolved to this day. The 'Acropolis' with its gigantic boulders, ramparts, and narrow passageways, gives one the irresistible picture of a fortress with one man holding off an army of attackers. However, we are told that it is thought to have been the burial place of kings.

The 'Temple' with its massive walls and brooding air of a vanished civilisation is presumed to have been a royal palace. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is more to the place than the stones themselves. Even the most insensitive visitor cannot fail to catch something of the aura of the superior race who lived there. To visit the Ruins at night, as I did way back in 1948, is to have one of the most extraordinary experiences imaginable. Don't miss Great Zimbabwe.

Fort Victoria to Beit Bridge means good scenery, Tribal Trust lands, picturesque African villages, goats, and donkeys. We had one or two hairy moments when meeting the latter, but our excellent 'PBR' air braking system saved us each time.

The caravan park at Bubyie was not in same class as the Zimbabwe Ruins Park, but we enjoyed our overnight stop. The "Lion and Elephant Motel" provided a substantial bar meal at the reasonable price of 65 Rhodesian cents. As this was our last night in Rhodesia, a slap-up meal out for the whole family was indicated, together with suitable liquid supplements. Bubyie was also noteworthy for a tame giraffe which, attended by its bosom companion, an ostrich, followed us around and grazed in the caravan park. In a magnificently large enclosure behind the motel we found a family of leopards, including two delightful cubs which could not have been more than a week old. The logbook notes that mosquitoes were troublesome at night.



Back at home in Durban, we found that the petrol economy for the whole 4 130 kms trip had come to 12.8 litres per 100 km. (This included three solo shopping trips from Balla Balla to Bulawayo and back.) We had used only 532 litres of fuel. This excellent figure

owed much to the smallish 1800 cc engine of the BMW. A few years before we had done the same trip over the same distance towing a Gypsey III caravan with a Jaguar having an engine capacity of 4200cc, and had used 733 litres of fuel. The improvement in economy was therefore not to be sneezed at.

Postscript written in 2002: As a South African family who never lived in Rhodesia, but who had and still have many dear relations and friends living there, we have followed the contemporary history of that land with sadness and, at times, disbelief. But, looking back on that trip from a distance of 28 years, we feel glad and also privileged that at least we experienced the country when it was at peace and prospering, and when the beauties of its flora and fauna were unspoilt.

Patrick Coyne, Durban 2002