



*Hunting party from South Africa with Black rhino in  
Maasi reserved. L-R: van Nieuwenhuizen from  
Calvinia, v.d. Westhuizen from Loxton &  
Hansie David from Olkaria, Kenya  
& Kiptok, a Kikuyu tracker.*

# Golden Years

## in Kenya

*By Willie Vermaak*

**Africa, the "Dark Continent", has woven its spell over many people in the past and continues to do so, and East African Kenya is the area where Africa's wildlife was romanticised and where the "guided hunt" originated. The tradition of the present African hunting industry was established here with the "White Hunter" as a trade professional, and it is rumoured that it all began when two brothers from South Africa, Harold and Clifford Hill started charging people money for shooting lion on their ostrich farm near Machakos. The magic Swahili word "safari" (going on a long journey) still conjures up the thrill of a wildlife experience.**

And it was to this wild and beautiful land that my forebears went. The maternal side of my family formed part of the early Afrikaner pioneers from South Africa who settled there in late 1900s. Mom's family left the "Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek" just after the Anglo-Boer War. From the "Lowveld" (today Mpumalanga – "Place of the Rising Sun") they trekked northwards with ox wagon and horses, journeying through modern-day Zimbabwe, Moçambique, Malawi and Tanzania into Kenya where they settled in the mild climate of the "Highlands".

My great-grandfather, "Buurman" van Rensburg took part in the epic struggle of World War I between the German forces of Von Lettow Vorbeck and the British East African Army in which Selous served and was killed. Three generations and barely 60 years later the family had to retrace their footsteps as a result of the Mau-Mau uprising, and the full swing of the post-colonial era when they were no longer wanted.

But stories of that time live on. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of those spent

listening spellbound to the tales related by my grandmother. "Oumie" was born and bred in pre-colonial Kenya, as were her children, including my mother.

Oumie experienced the change from animal-drawn farming implements, and horses as transport over non-existent roads, to modern-day world travel with airplanes and fast cars. She was of the era of the classic foot safari: when they left in 1960, an African hunt was a motorised, "short" three-week to one-month affair. My grandfather Adam Janse van Rensburg died in his early fifties shortly after their return to South Africa, a year before I was born. He played the main role in most of the adventure stories Oumie shared with us and he became a kind of demi-god to us grandchildren, especially in hunting anecdotes.

Hunting then was a way of life, a means of procuring food as well as supplementing the farming income. Crocodile skins and ivory helped sustain the farm activities in the early years. These hunts lasted anything from three weeks to two months, depending on farming priorities and availability of game animals of

suitable quality. The hunt was usually a big affair consisting of the whole family, camp labourers, and a heavy truck or "lorry" piled with all the necessary equipment to set up a temporary home in the wilderness for at least a month. Hunting quotas in those days regarding elephant and crocodile were quite royal compared with those of today.

My grandfather's choice of rifles measured against today's standards was both practical and cheap for the time, although a bit light in "stopping power", especially on elephant. Although Kenya was a British colony, English hunting rifles were much more expensive than their German counterparts and, in many a case, ammunition and calibre was of the "proprietary" type and expensive. Double rifles were out of the question.

He used three original German Oberndorf Mauser rifles that today would be considered valuable ... how times change! His battery consisted of a .22 rimfire, a 7x57mm, which was a "sniper sporter" with 28" barrel and a 9.3 x 62mm. Apart from, this he had a .32 Webley top break revolver and a cheap, double-barrelled English shotgun. The 7x 57mm today is owned by a nephew, whilst the Webley is a prized possession of mine. The 9.3 x 62mm rifle was used to great effect on elephant and my grandmother thinks he usually used "solids" and took only headshots at close range. The 7x 57mm was used with good measure on virtually all other species with equal success.

The little .22 rimfire was used by my uncle when he was 19-years-old to dispatch a troublesome leopard that took to catching calves from a kraal (enclosure/pen) at night. My grandparents kept a number of plucky fox terriers, which my grandfather would take with him, especially when hunting lion.

(His favourite, Snipe, was nearly killed by a warthog which had sliced her stomach open, but he got to her in time, sewed her up, and she eventually recovered.) Anyway, the story goes that after a calf too many was taken, a gin trap was set to catch the troublemaker. The cat was caught but succeeded in freeing itself and got away. Very early the next morning my uncle took off with Snipe and the .22. The terrier was hot on the spoor and started barking furiously in a very dense patch with large trees. My uncle could not see the cat at all.

Then luckily he followed the direction in which Snipe was barking, in time to see Mr Spots up a tree, crouched and readying itself to ambush them. But because of the noise the dog put up, and as it was aware that the hunter had now seen it, the cat was off. They kept on following it for some time and suddenly the dog doubled back and started barking madly behind them! Out of some short scrub, the leopard charged at the dog. Snipe took off and the

leopard turned towards my uncle. As it jumped for him, he instinctively shot at it, firing below the left eye into its brain. Talk about luck! The skin was duly tanned and made into a floor rug and many a time as a child I would pick it up in my grandmother's house, look at the tiny bullet hole and try to picture the scene. Today, after examining a number of leopard skulls a chill runs through my body when I realise just how fortunate he was. If that little projectile had been five centimetres higher it would have glanced off the flat bone forming the top of the skull and he would have been severely mauled. The claws of this specific leopard were set in silver, made into two bracelets and given to my mother and her sister.

Another leopard incident took place on a hunt when my mother, her sister and brother all were still quite young. My grandfather was out hunting and Oumie took the two girls on a stroll around camp as they were getting

troublesome. Nearby was a little granite hill and they were walking at the base of it, when Oumie began to feel uneasy. She sensed some sort of danger but did not know what it was. The girls were holding a hand on either side of her, and it flashed through her mind that she wouldn't be able to pick up both if the need arose. She stood still, surveying the immediate vicinity until her eye caught some movement about 30 metres away, between some jumbled boulders. It was the tail of a big leopard tom watching them intently. When she made eye contact, it lifted its lips in a soundless snarl. She realised that she had to be calm and leave the area without instigating an attack. She averted her eyes but kept looking in its general direction whilst slowly retreating, trying to strike a nonchalant conversation with the two children, making a game of it without them becoming aware of the danger and possibly upsetting the situation. She says that she will never, ever forget the cat's eyes,



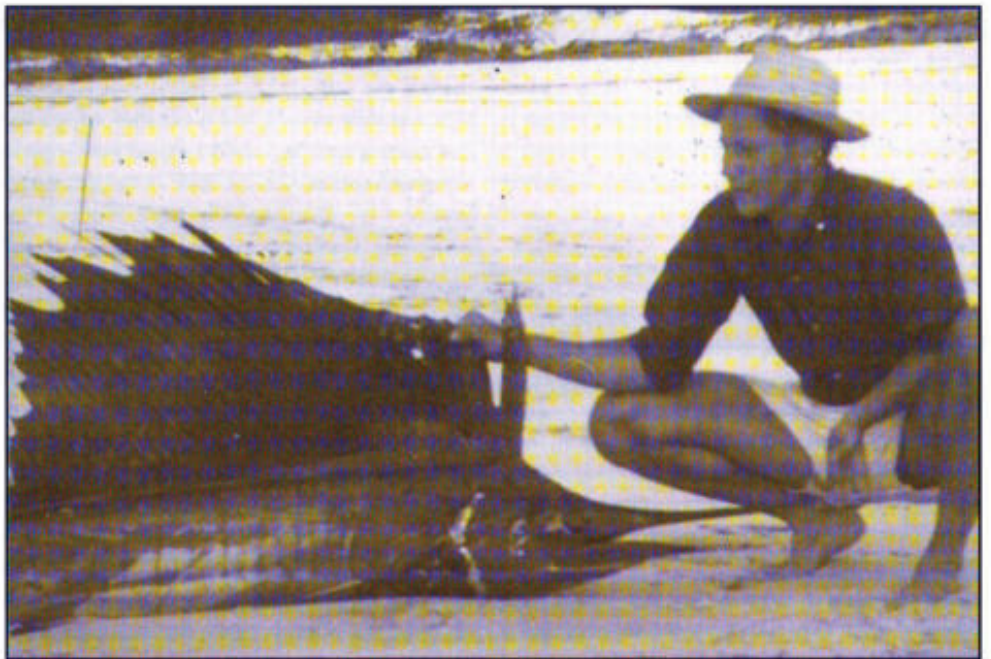
*Elephant my grandmother shot after her husband wounded it.*

and remembers that subconsciously she still was able to marvel at the leopard's beauty in spite of their predicament.

As a child, my Uncle Adam was the centre of another tale. Whilst on safari near Ewaso Ng'iro, my grandfather and a friend decided that they would not hunt that day but would rather go and fish in the nearby river. The boy did not want go initially, but during the morning decided to change his mind and join the men. Although the river was not far off he thought that to take some food would be a plan. The idea was fine, the choice was not: out of the kitchen tent he rushed with a nice big yellow banana.

Not far from camp some baboons decided that one puny human was not entitled to this delicacy. The happy band of primate would-be Robin Hoods swung into action. The ensuing fracas of unearthly yells of a seven-year-old mingled with the aggressive grunts and screams of the troop lent wings to the feet of rescuers. Little Adam was not savvy enough to realise that the wiser action would have been to hand over the banana and retreat with dignity. Instead, he stood his ground and yelled in defence of himself and his property. My grandfather was the first at the scene, and, being bushwise, summed it up in an instant. Opening his arms to make himself look bigger, and screaming loudly, he laid into the baboons with the bamboo fishing rod he was still holding. The foiled robbers left in a hurry, and my uncle was left much the wiser with his backside quite tender for at least some part of the day.

Grandfather used to hunt most of his elephant in the area of Karbatula, near the Tana River which today runs through the Kora



*Sailfish caught off Malindi by late M.D. Nick Enslin, South Africa.*

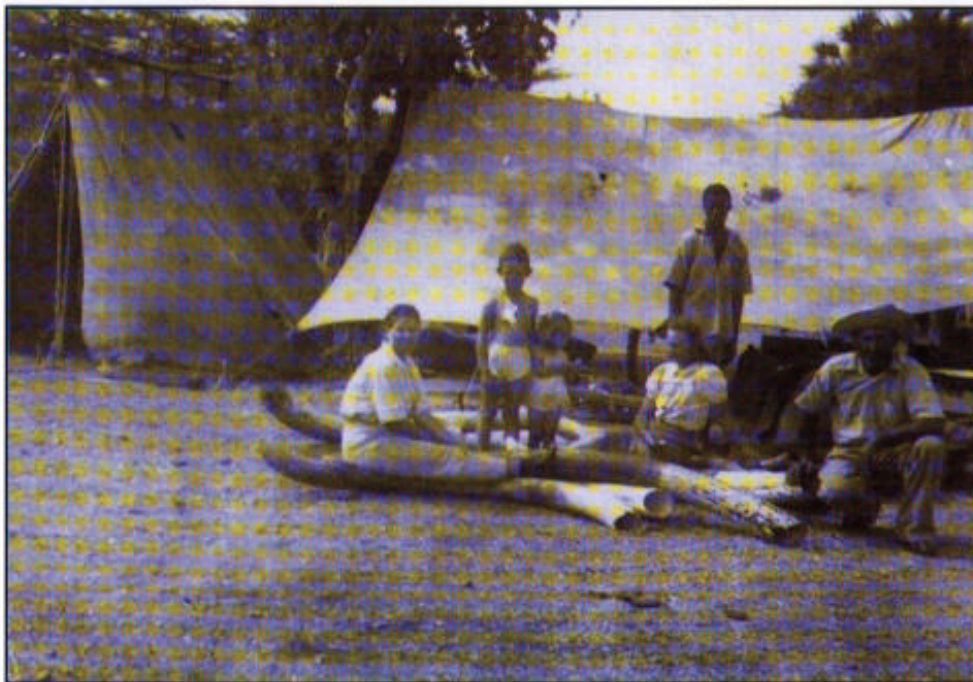
National Park, eastwards into the Indian Ocean at Kipini on the coast. The first elephant permit cost 50 British pounds Sterling and the second was 100. These he bought from the magistrates' offices in Nakuru. The heaviest ivory he ever took was 154lbs and 143lbs a side. This was from an animal that was apparently well-known in the area and many a hunter had tried to bag it, which resulted in it becoming very aggressive towards humans. After killing it, my grandfather found no less than nine old bullet wounds in the beast.

On another occasion he took my grandmother with him, and he found two very decent bulls together and decided to shoot both. The first fell to a single shot to the brain but the

other was wounded, warned by the gunfire, and charged off. They started off following up. The elephant rushed into some maize fields belonging to the native people who scared it off by rattling stones in tins create a din. Making for the thickets it almost ran into my grandmother. It was so sudden that she barely had time to line up and brain it. When the huge pachyderm went down she turned and got out of there as fast as she could. My grandfather found her nearby perched on a big termite mound!

Crocodile skins fetched good prices in those days and the reptiles were plentiful. These hunts also took place on the Tana River. My grandfather would scout the embankment and sandbars of the river for three or four days and talk to the locals to establish where the biggest ones lived and then hunt them by ambush. He would find out exactly where their preferred "sunning sites" were and then creep up on them in the thick riverine vegetation, a dangerous tactic, as crocodiles are extremely aware of their environment and quick to notice any change. He would wait until the reptiles were relaxed, generally basking with wide open mouths, when he would shoot them in the brain. Good shooting was required to hit the palm-sized brain. The skins were tanned using the bark of Australian Black Wattle trees which my grandfather had planted on his farm, "Ewenaarsrus" (Equator's Rest) situated on the equator, just north of Thompson's Falls.

Apart from the bush, with its variety of game and plant life, Kenya has some of the very best beaches in the world. There are wonderful coral reefs and even a bigger variety in sea life than in the inland creatures. It was on return from the coast one day when my grandparents and the children had another interesting experience.



*Elephant ivory collected when on safari. My grandparents, Uncle Adam and one of his sisters, other family relations and Jeroki.*



*Crossing Tana River in native dugout when hunting for elephant.*

They visited the Gedi ruins and then travelled via Voi back home after visiting at Moshi. Daylight came to an end when they were still en route and they decided to overnight at Tsavo. Now, what few people knew is that after the railway was established and George Patterson got rid of the man-eating lions terrorising the construction workers, (the story is told in his book, "*Man-eaters of Tsavo*") there were still two lions specializing in human prey.

At Tsavo they noticed nine sheep and goatskins pegged out which in itself was not strange. After offloading a mattress next to a huge termite mound they settled for the night. At about 10.30 p.m., an approaching vehicle wakened them and a man warned them not to sleep there as the man-eaters were around. The sheep and goatskins were those of animals killed the previous night by the marauding pride which had tried to get to the herdsman himself! They hurriedly packed the vehicle and drove on to Kibwessie, which they reached at two the following morning, and stayed there till daylight. The next morning they found that someone else had overnighted there in a little tent next to the road. My grandfather went over and found it to be John Hunter, the famous "white Hunter" who was a friend of his. Hunter told him that he was on his way to the Tsavo

River as he had received two telegrams the previous day from the DC instructing him to hunt some man-eating lions that were terrorising the district!

In the late '50s, my Uncle Adam came to South Africa to study at the Potchefstroom Agricultural College followed soon after by his sister, (my mother) who was to take up nursing. She became friendly with another girl who had a brother. They met on a weekend visit and, as the saying goes, "the rest is history". In 1960 my father and mother flew from Johannesburg to ask her parents' consent to marry. Uncle Adam and his cronies decided that it was time to make life difficult for the budding groom and to take him "hunting". They tried their utmost to make him lose his direction in the wilderness and in the process they got lost themselves! They spent an entire morning trying to get back to the hunting car, eventually finding it at midday with my father patiently waiting next to it.

Another night my grandfather wanted to know if my father could shoot straight. They drove down to the maize (corn) fields and, unbeknown to my father, his future father-in-law fiddled with the sights on the little .22, moving the rear sight forward so that he would overshoot. After some time Grey duiker eyes shone in the light and after carefully taking aim

my father shot it right between the eyes! My grandfather was astonished and called it a fluke shot. What really happened was that my father did not judge the distance correctly and thought the little antelope to be much nearer than it actually was and compensated for it by aiming a bit lower. Talk about luck!

In 1977, Kenya shocked the hunting world by banning all commercial and guided hunting. Many of the old-timers in the industry lost everything. Some, like Harry Selby, left and made a huge success in countries mainly south of Kenya, such as Mozambique and Botswana. So many things have changed, and I can only be grateful that we heard about those "golden years" firsthand from our forebears.

Although it is easy to romanticise their way of life, in fact it was filled with hardship and loss: but it was a life less hurried and complicated than the one we have today with the the privilege of having lived so close to nature.

Their generation is all nearly gone. All that is left are yellowed black and white pictures, mementoes and memories, and their influence on my life. Perhaps my chosen career as a hunting outfitter with a PH licence is thanks to those childhood stories that Oumie told. I cherish them.