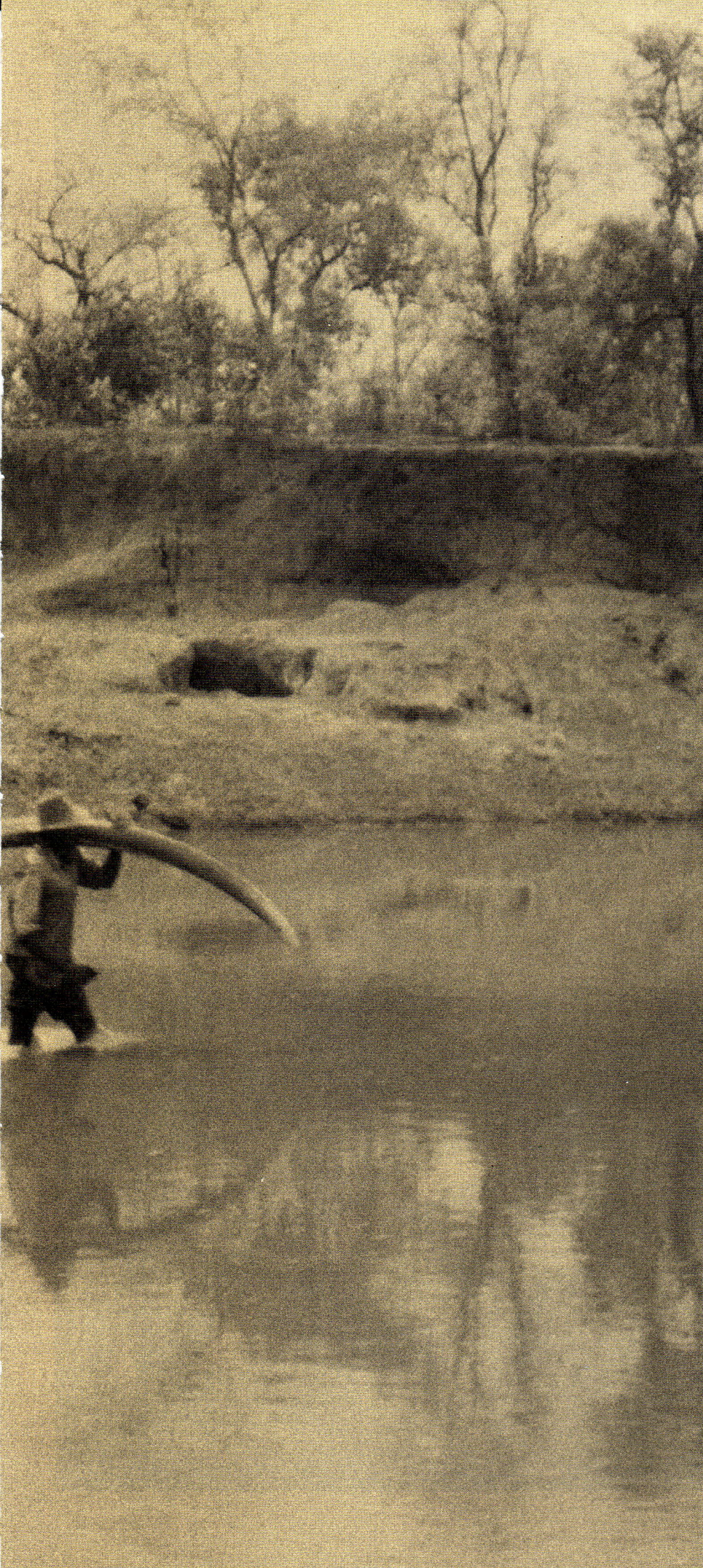




THE GOLDEN AGE OF ELEPHANT HUNTING IN EASTERN C.A.R.

by Rudy Lubin

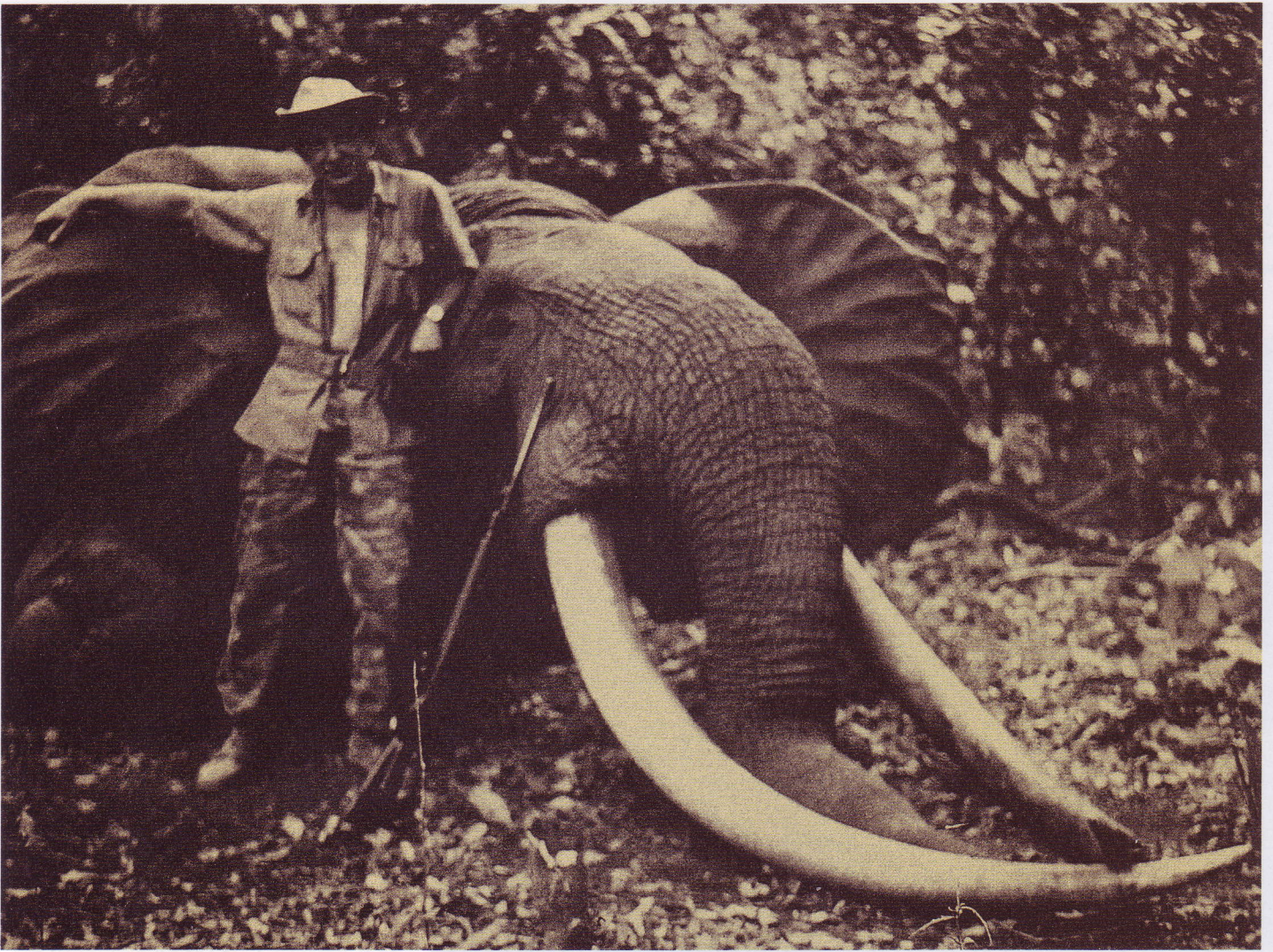
This story, by professional hunter Rudy Lubin, is an extract from Safari Press' book "Hunting the Dark Continent" a sort of updated version of James Mellon's classic, African Hunter.



Nestled in the dark heart of Africa between Chad to the north, Cameroon to the west, Sudan to the east, Congo/Brazzaville and the ex-Zaire to the south, until the early 1980's the Central African Republic was a fantastic destination for hunters intent on taking the proverbial Hundred Pounder. At the height of the elephant safari industry in the early 1970's, the country's best elephant hunting was in the M'bomou and Haut M'bomou provinces in the southeast, close to where the borders of CAR, Sudan and Zaire meet – an area known to hunters as the Obo-Djema-Zemio Triangle. Here, the famous ivory hunter James Sutherland would have found results and adventures comparable to the best elephant country in East Africa. At the end of the 19th century, didn't the Sultan of Bangassou enclose his palatial residence behind a wall of elephant tusks?

The hunting domain known as Haut Chinko, situated just to the north of this triangle within the boundaries of the above two, as well as the Haute Kotto provinces, was opened in 1972 by Daniel Henriot after a long career hunting crocodile and conducting safaris in Gabon. This huge concession of several million hectares of woodland savanna, rocky outcroppings, floodplains and riverine forests was located within a vast, uninhabited territory characterised by the predominant river, the Chinko, as well as its tributaries, the Vovodo, the M'botou and Kawadja. No administrative roads existed beyond the village prefecture of Yalinga; a track of 150 kilometers – just to reach the hunting area based around a locale designated as Trois Rivières – was carved out of the rocky, laterite soil by hand, with pick, axe and shovel for no road-building machinery could be brought this far from the capital, Bangui, 900 kilometers away. It took years, but eventually, a 1,300-meter landing strip suitable for twin-engines, and more than 1,000 kilometers of tracks, hunting trails, fords and rough-hewn bridges crisscrossed this raw territory which boasted a rich and varied wildlife: lion, leopard, Lord Derby eland, roan, buffalo... in the savanna; bongo, yellow-backed duiker, giant forest hog in its countless riverine forests. And, of course, *doli* – elephant.

Although the Haut Chinko region was located along the ivory and slave-trading routes between the sultanates in southeastern CAR and the Emirs of Raga and Zeim Zuber in Sudan, barely a trace remains of whatever villages dotted that track of tears for human and animal alike. Only an occasional clay pipe, the remains of a slag-heap, the imprinted lip of a jar or an iron leg-ring speak out as witnesses of a mostly undiscussed chapter of African history. When the French arrived at end of last century, hardly a soul lived in the entire immense eastern region of CAR, due, in part, to the presence of tse-tse fly which prevented the establishment of domestic animals. The few scattered villages that did exist were compelled by the colonial regime to settle along the



Elephant taken in the riverine forests of Chinko where the landscape dictated sporting fair chase hunting by tracking on foot.



At Chinko, hunters mostly encountered solitary or old bulls.

administrative roads where it could keep an eye on them and even conscript the natives for labor – a practice that existed until after World War II. Those that refused – *les kreichs* – moved into Sudan, leaving the east a No Man's Land, still practically uninhabited today.

The game that was harvested for food or trade products by villages and caravans was hunted by snaring or rudimentary weapons, leaving the populations of buffalo, antelopes and elephants virtually intact. With only the forces of natural selection and predation at play, Chinko's wildlife fared well, undisturbed except in its eternal dance with big cats and scavengers and occasional outbreaks of disease.

The elephant, whose huge consumption of vegetal matter was not in competition with village agriculture here, especially benefited. With an abundant food supply, year-round water and no harassment, generation after generation of *doli* thrived.

After hunting in Cameroon and with SAFOV, at 25-years-old I joined Daniel Henriot at Chinko in 1974. During his first two safari seasons, he had developed a good idea of this Eden's "What and Where." Here, far from any village and with access difficult at best, and virtually impossible during the rainy season when we too left, the elephants were numerous, unstressed and serene, and first-class adult males were far

from rare. Everything indicated this population was naturally protected from poaching and had not been subject to hunting pressure.

Contrary to the "pure" savanna elephants in northern CAR where herds often numbered more than 100 individuals, in Chinko and in all of the east and southeast, hunters mostly encountered solitary or old bulls, often accompanied by one or several "pages." These elephants, although classified as *Loxodonta africana* like the northern populations, were really a transition population between *L. africana* and *L. cyclotis* of the equatorial forests. The former is of great height, 2.7 to 3.9 meters at the shoulder; the ears are bigger and wider, the ivory more "cracked," and shorter and thicker than forest elephants which are smaller in body size (2.3 to 2.7 meters at the shoulder), with smaller "round" ears, and thinner, finer grained ivory.

The tusks from Chinko were excellent: long with a good quality of ivory. During its heyday, we averaged 25 elephants a season – 25 adult males. Few trophies ever came in below 32 kilos; average length was seven feet. Our biggest set of tusks weighed 119/120 pounds; the longest – two veritable works of art – measured 9'10" and 9'11" respectively. Hunting success was by determination plus luck, and it was not excessively rare on a 21-day safari to take a

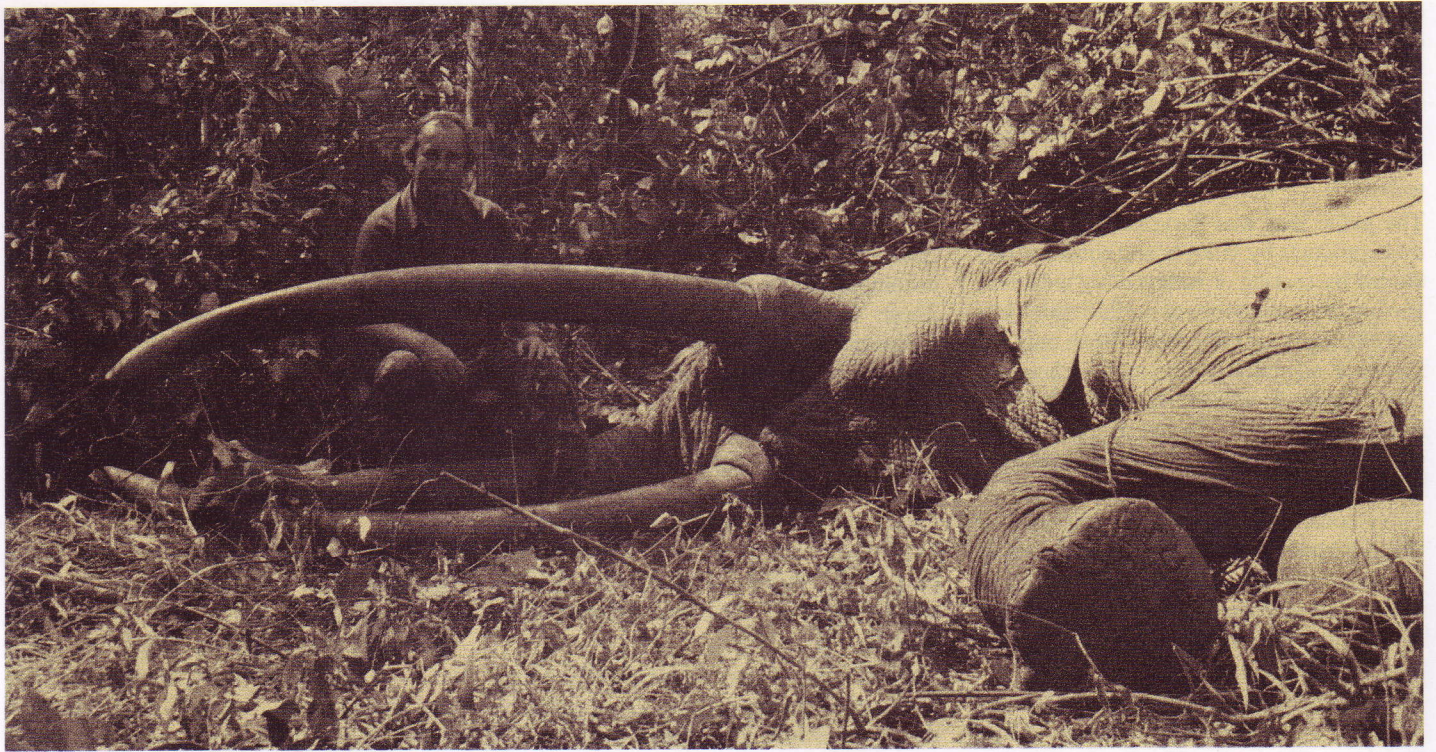
100-pounder, although farther south, along the M'bomou just at the border of Zaire, the size and number of *gros porteurs* (big ivoryed elephants) was greater. I personally know two hunters, Marc P. and Maurice L. who took 151.3- and 142.5-pound tusks.

The landscape at Chinko guaranteed that the elephant hunting would be sporting far more chase by tracking on foot only. In the beginning, aided only by *Institut Geographique Nationale* (IGN) maps on a scale of 1:200,000 and some aerial photos, we determined the location of the natural salt-licks, *salines*; those near rivers were especially "active." The salines, plus the well-worn elephant-pounded trails that linked them, indicated where we would concentrate our efforts.

Our safari season began every year at the beginning of the dry season in mid-December when the water level in the numerous rivers dropped sufficiently for us to cross them without too much trouble and the floodplains started to evaporate. Interestingly, at the height of the dry season in March, the elephants would mysteriously disappear into the very bowels of the gallery forests, emerging again only towards mid-April when the carita nut, *Butirum spermum Parkii*, which they dearly loved, were ripe. To pick up a good track, you needed only to go where stands of these trees were plentiful. And often, not much farther, for the ele



During Chinko's heyday, they averaged 25 elephants a season. Few trophies ever came in below 32 kilos; average length was seven feet.



*These elephants, classified as *Loxodonta africana* are really a transition population between *L. africana* and *L. cyclotis* of the equatorial forests.*

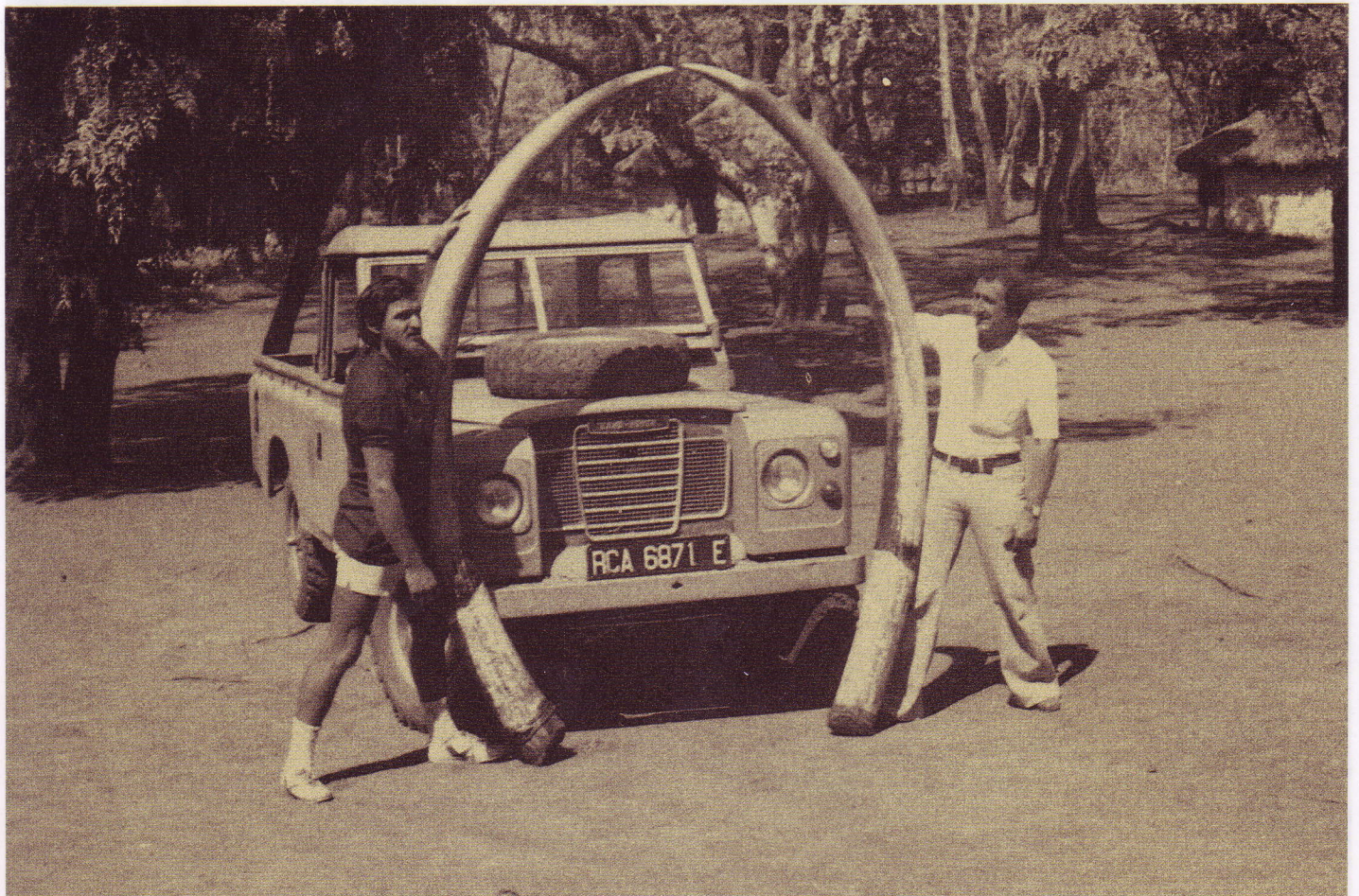
phant would move out of the sun into the closest shadow, returning to gorge on these succulent little fruits towards the end of the afternoon. We hunted until the end of June when the regular and abundant rains made transport impractical, giving both the animals and ourselves a rest until the following safari season.

In the east, the elephants fed in the savanna, retreating into the many riverine forests dur-

ing the heat of the day. They frequented the salines at night. There, at first light, we would look for a clearly-marked big "foot" measuring at least 42 centimeters – the sign of an adult male with a potentially worthy pair of tusks. Just finding the track was enough to get the adrenaline going; it increased as the distance between ourselves and our quarry shortened. In the absence of fresh "cabinet" (the polite africanized-

French euphemism for feces) or just-broken branches indicating the time and direction our six-ton prey had taken, in French, Banda and Sangho and often Italian, English or German, our tracking strategy and subsequent course of action were laid out.

Having started out in the open savanna at daybreak, we were now in the thick vegetation of the cool, damp forest where *doli* found refuge from the heat while leisurely



With determination and luck, it was not excessively rare on a 21-day safari to take a 100-pounder.

feeding, resting, half-sleeping in the deep shadows. After hours of tracking, measured only by the sun rising higher and higher in the sky, our vigilance might wane, snapping back when our Lilliputian-sized clan of conspirators found a messy pile of dung, still warm when Sognoce, the head tracker, plunged his hand into it. Minutes later, we stood silent at the clean outline of where the elephant had laid down, leaving a long curved line tipped with the puncture mark where his tusks had entered the humid soil. A muffled sound, the rumbling of his guts, a branch snapping, the dull thumping of his ears marking time betrayed his presence only yards from us, but stubbornly hidden from view.

The final stages of tracking were often in nearly impenetrable vegetation. First Sognoce, then the PH, the hunter, and the gunbearers, Djouma and Daya. Our immediate goal was to get close enough to get a good look at and judge the ivory. Then to show the hunter the tusks, acknowledge his satisfaction with the worthiness of the trophy, and finally, to get him into a position to take a killing shot. Keeping track of the wind and any of the old male's companions lurking in the neighborhood while not making the slightest sound caused time to compress. We are generally only ten to fifteen meters from the grey mass, and the hunter is about to burst from a half-dozen contradictory emotions welling-up inside him. Only the final explosion from the barrel of his rifle would dissipate them.

Shooting distance in the wooded vegetation of Chinko was short. A .375 H&H was the

minimum recommended caliber, but we suggested a .416 or .458 Magnum; a big English double express such as a 500/465, 470, or 500 for those who were lucky enough to have access to reliable ammunition; or as a last resort, a .460 Weatherby. Sometimes, the weapon trembled so hard that to avoid a calamity, I judged it prudent to pull back, using the pretext of a mediocre trophy. But retreating without disturbing an elephant requires even greater precautions than simply hunting him – especially if he is not alone.

The density of elephants at Chinko in those days was such that if we followed-up a bull that proved inadequate in the morning, we might still find a suitable trophy that same day. We couldn't know that the time-honoured tradition of elephant hunting in Oubangui-Chari was coming to an end in the Central African Republic for all time. In the middle of our 1980 safari season, on April 2 to be exact, the guillotine fell with the official closing of elephant, ruining or shutting down nearly all of the safari companies. Thereafter, the Kalachnikov's dry ra-ta-ta-tat would replace the thick, selective reverberation of the big game hunting rifle, for this "protective measure" to preserve elephants in fact created a free-for-all for poachers both within and outside of the country.

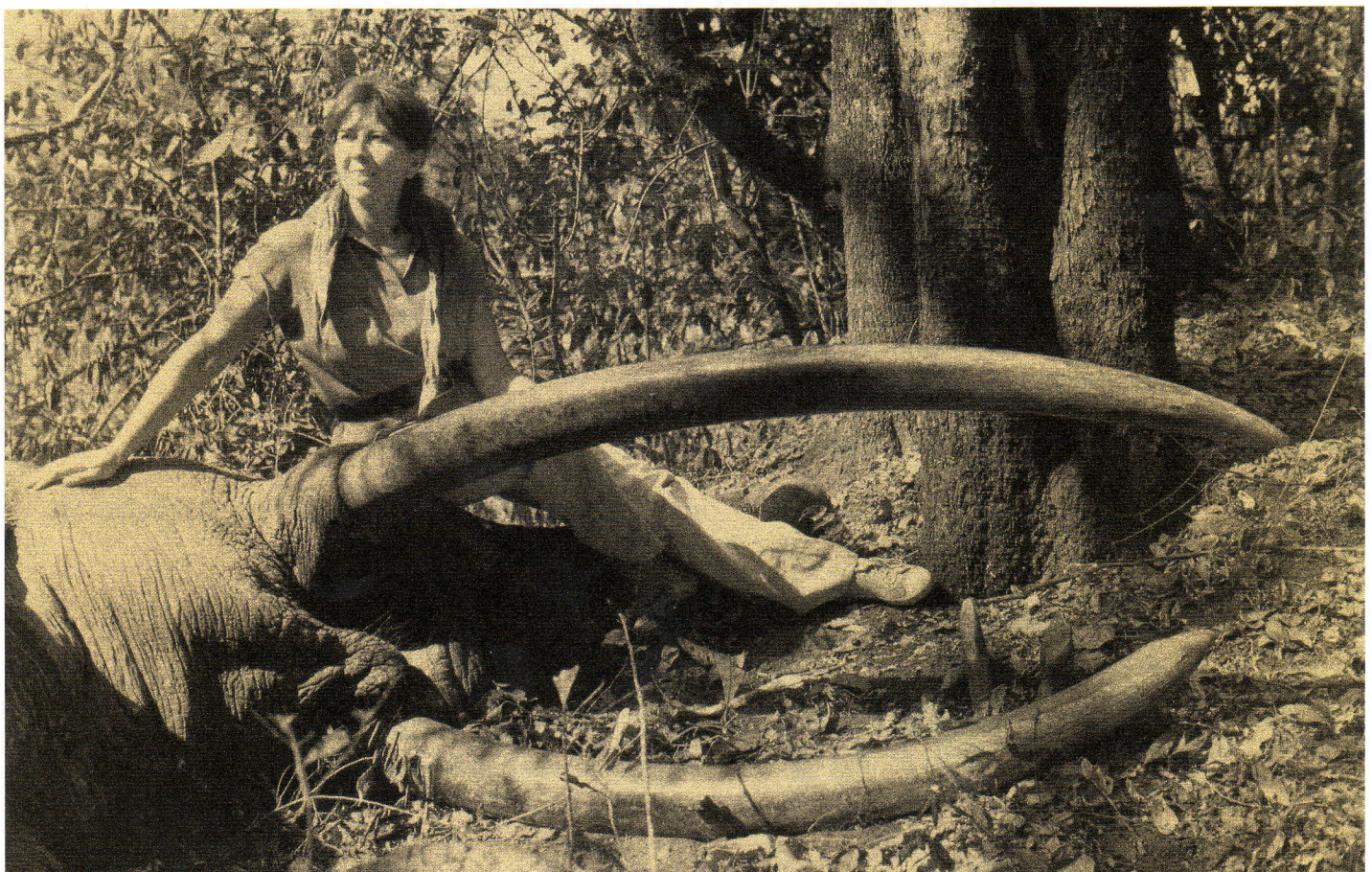
But when the closing of sport trophy hunting of elephant made it difficult for "officials" and "businessmen" to unload their hordes of ivory, the door swung open again – at least temporarily.

Powerless against the well-armed Sudanese

poachers that swarmed into the east, and confronted by the government's complete indifference to the fate of its elephant populations, in 1981, Daniel and I retreated inland and continued to hunt elephant for two more years along the Banga river. The landscape here was inhospitable, even hostile, to our efforts. The hunting was too tough for most sporthunters, and the results were often meagre. Elephant closed again, this time definitively, in January, 1985. It was over. Now, only the indefatigable poachers know the powerful sensations of hunting the grey giants of the bush and forest.

We returned to Chinko in 1983, and developed an international market for Lord Derby eland, lion, buffalo, leopard and bongo. But in our hearts, ultimately, nothing could take the place of this noblest of quarry.

The elephant at Chinko have not been totally exterminated. If in the past we could hardly drive 10 kilometers without crossing paths with them – or their havoc – today, they are elusive nighttime and rainy-season visitors. More than ever, they know the scent of man is perfumed with death; even the tuskless fall victim. It is a genuine tragedy that at Chinko – a potential veritable wildlife sanctuary, far from any competition with human endeavors – this anachronistic giant cannot find refuge. But human folly will undoubtedly continue to transform this noble monument of nature into carcasses rotting in the sun and irrelevant trinkets. □ *I would like to thank my wife, Brooke, for all her help with the English version for this text.*



Angelita was one of the first women to accompany her husband on safari in the Central African Republic and returned with her husband many times.