

# Harry Selby

## – An African Legend

By Joe Coogan

*The half-century mark in the safari business is a significant one because up to now there has only been one Professional Hunter who can rightfully claim to have guided enough continuous seasons with clients to celebrate a golden anniversary in the safari business. That unprecedented accomplishment was achieved by the remarkable Harry Selby in 1994.*

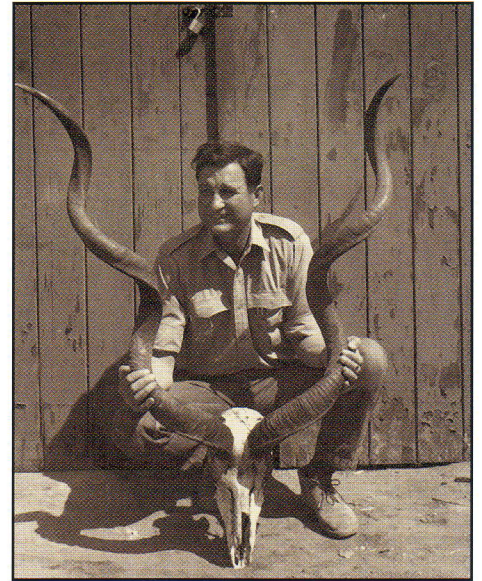
A sharp hunter's instinct, honed by years of experience enabled Harry Selby to guide his clients up to Africa's largest game on a daily basis for more than 50 years.

In 1997, after completing his 53rd safari season, he throttled back from the demands of full-season hunting, and plagued with knee problems, he finally retired from professional hunting in 2000. But as a self-confessed "gun nut", Harry's still a long way from hanging up his guns, occasionally hunting for meat for making biltong, and indulging his interests in wildlife photography.

Although he grew up on the plains of Africa and shot his first game animal – a Thomson's

gazelle – at the age of eight, Harry's start in the safari business happened almost by accident. As soon as WWII ended, East Africa was gearing up to begin again the safari hunting, which had been interrupted by the War. Philip Percival, the white hunter of Hemingway's, Green Hills of Africa and considered the "Dean" of East African Professional Hunters, needed some help to keep his vehicles and equipment in working order while on safari. Harry, good with his hands from working on his family's Kenya farm throughout his younger years, was recommended to Percival for the job by an older brother-in-law.

Percival initially signed Harry on as his field mechanic, but the veteran white hunter quickly



*Attracting attention in books by Hemingway and Ruark, the Greater Kudu became a sought-after trophy. When Harry moved to Botswana he was delighted with the quality of the Greater Kudus he found there, as is evident by this 58 incher.*

recognised that his talents extended well beyond his mechanical abilities. His personable nature, combined with a considerable amount of big-game experience and skilled gun-handling made Harry's transition to the hunting side of safaris imminent. Percival arranged for Harry to be issued a Professional Hunter's license through the Kenya Game Department and promoted him to second-hunter status for the next few safaris. Harry's fate to become one of Africa's most recognised and respected Professional Hunters was sealed before his 22nd birthday.

### Life on an African Farm

Born in 1925 in South Africa, Harry was only three years old when his family moved to Nanyuki, Kenya. His family sailed north by ship along the East African coast from Mozambique to Mombasa, Kenya.

From there they travelled by train to Nairobi, crossing the famous bridge over the Tsavo River where man-eating lions held up work on the railway in the early 1900s. The last leg of their journey was from Nairobi to Nanyuki, which took the family several days travelling in an uncle's open truck.



*This Waterbuck was one of the excellent trophies that Robert Ruark collected with Harry on his first safari to Tanganyika in 1952. This safari resulted in Ruark's book, "Horn of the Hunter".*





*Kenya's Northern Frontier District (NFD) was one of Harry's favourite hunting areas, and hunting there in April 1951, Harry (middle) collected with Bob and Harriet Maytag a huge tusker weighing more than 120lbs per tusk.*

Harry's family eventually acquired 40 thousand acres of ranch land within sight of Mount Kenya, in a district about 30 miles from Nanyuki. Here the Selby family homesteaded prime rangeland – land suited well for cattle. But it was also wild, country – mostly open plains grasslands punctuated with scattered flat-topped acacia thorn trees and the wispy whistling thorn bush.

Harry's earliest recollections of Kenyan farm life are of the cattle and the natives that worked there. He remembers playing with the children of the African farm labourers, like most youngsters do,

with slingshots and marbles. He also remembers trekking to school each day with his sisters in an ox cart and the excitement one morning of spotting Martin and Osa Johnson's zebra-striped and giraffe patterned amphibious planes flying overhead.

Harry first became aware of big game on his family's farm, which was also home to herds of Thomson's gazelles, zebra, eland and magnificent large-horned impala. Seasonally small groups of buffalo and even elephant passed through the property, and from time to time lions or leopard

might appear. In protection of livestock, the presence of a lion or leopard often initiated a hunt, involving all of the farm's available men folk, and including those of neighboring farms who jumped at the chance to join in the excitement of the hunt.

On one occasion the tracks of three elephants were found. A young Harry followed along with his father, brothers and uncles as they tracked the elephants just to have a look, but not to shoot. The tracking party

eventually caught up to an old bull accompanied by two younger bulls standing in the shade of an acacia tree.

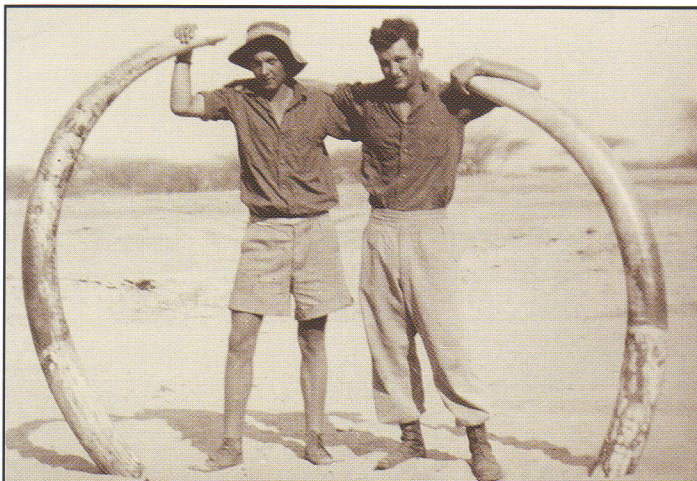
"One of the younger bulls got wind of us and came in our direction and everyone ran – I ran as well." Harry recollects with a smile. "When we regrouped, someone said to me laughingly, "Why did you run?" and I said, "Heck, I was only following you," which gave everyone a good chuckle. Of course, we had to run to avoid having to shoot the elephant."

At the age of eight, Harry was considered old enough to handle the responsibility of hunting with a single-shot .22 rifle. His lifelong hunting exploits began with this modest sporting piece. Young Selby's early pursuits with that single-shot rifle kept the family's larder well-stocked with guinea fowl, francolin and gazelle chops.

The farm was not fenced and game that competed with the cattle for grazing, often needed culling. Zebras were the most destructive and when big herds moved into the area, extensive shooting was the only effective deterrent. It was during these times that Harry perfected his gun handling and sharpened his shooting eye, then using an old blue-worn, silver-looking .303 British military rifle with iron sights.

#### **Hunting Dangerous Game**

Harry became familiar with dangerous game early on by learning to avoid them while hunting smaller game on the forested slopes of Mount



*Taking time between professional safaris in 1948, Harry and Tony Henley hunted Kenya's NFD for big tuskers in order to finance exploration of the country, by the sale of ivory. At the time they both conducted safaris for Ker & Downey Safaris, the top-rated Nairobi-based safari outfitter.*



## Legends of Yesteryear



*In the mid-1950s Harry and Eric Rundgren examined a prototype Winchester M70 rifle chambered for the new American big-bore round 0458 Winchester Magnum – which had been provided to Rundgren for field testing.*

Kenya. The heavily-forested slopes were full of elephant, buffalo and rhino and when Harry and the young natives he hunted with came upon any of these animals in thick bush their survival often depended on outwitting or out dodging the ill-tempered brutes.

When Harry began hunting dangerous game, he did so with experienced native trackers who taught him the bush craft, so essential to survival on the plains and forests of Africa. These trackers were ace-hunters in their own right, hunting even the largest game with bow and arrow. Their intimate knowledge of the bush and experience with dangerous game was imparted freely to the eager Selby, who soaked up the benefit of their wisdom like a sponge. They in turn, came to respect Harry's expert rifle handling and cool-headedness. But most of all, they liked hunting with him because they knew whenever he pulled the trigger of his well-worn .303 rifle it meant fresh meat in camp.

### **The First Elephant Hunt**

In his late teens Harry went on his first elephant hunt with a cousin who, like himself was a keen hunter, but with only slightly more experience than Harry. They each bought an elephant license



## Legends of Yesteryear



*In 1970, Donald Ker and Syd Downey travelled to Botswana to visit the newly-built Khwai River Lodge, Botswana's first photographic lodge.*

and travelled in an old three-ton truck to Kenya's Northern Frontier District (NFD). It was, and still is, considered the wildest and remotest country in East Africa.

In those days in Kenya, with a valid hunting license you could hunt anywhere you wanted to. For his first elephant hunt Harry bought a Westley Richards rifle in .425 calibre, which pushed a 400-grain bullet at about 2 300 fps. That particular rifle had a 28-inch barrel, which was

unusually long for a heavy-calibre rifle, but proved to be very accurate. Harry's cousin carried a .450-calibre double rifle.

"We stopped at a place where elephants had dug in a dry riverbed to find water and put our camp there. We parked the big truck in camp and our hunting was all done on foot." Harry explained. "We took five or six of our native farm hands with us and hired a local tracker from a nearby village to show us where the game was



*Harry discovered that there were many fine maned lions in the Okavango region.*

concentrated.

I'll never forget that safari. One day we tracked eight bulls for quite a distance into the back country. When we climbed up on a rocky outcrop for a look around, we found all eight bulls spread out in front of us. Three of those bulls carried tusks that weighed well over a hundred pounds apiece."

My cousin, who did have the experience of some previous elephant hunting, told me that we should both shoot at the same elephant. We whacked the big one and watched the others run away. The one we knocked down was a superb elephant with tusks of 135 pounds aside. Two of the others were also hundred-pounders. In fact,





*Kenya's NFD had vast areas where vehicles were prohibited and safaris were conducted with horses and camels. Ruark went on a horse and camel safari with Harry in the late 1950s*

one had shorter but thicker tusks. If we'd had more elephant experience and knew what we were doing, we certainly could have taken the two biggest out of the group. But instead they pushed off for parts unknown. We looked for their tracks for the rest of our time there but never ever found them again. I still sometimes wake up at night dreaming about those other two hundred-pounders and wonder just how big they might have been."

Not only was that Harry's first experience with elephant hunting, but it was also the first time he'd been to the NFD. When he began conducting hunting safaris, and up until the early 1960s, Harry returned to that same area with clients and guided them to several hundred-pound elephants – considered by many to be the holy grail of African hunting. Many clients over the years planned their safaris around opportunities to hunt for big elephants in the NFD with Harry.

experience between them, serving as directors for Ker, Downey & Selby Safaris and later for the Friedkin-owned Safari South.

In 1952, Harry took out a newspaper columnist from North Carolina, who came to Africa with his wife, Virginia, for a month-long hunt in Tanganyika (currently called Tanzania). The man was Robert Ruark and his first trip to Africa resulted in a book called, *Horn of the Hunter* – one of the most widely-read books ever written about safari life. It also put Harry's name in the history books. In terms of business, it created a demand to hunt with Harry so great that clients were booking their hunts with him three to four years in advance.

With subsequent trips to Africa, a second book followed, called *Something of Value*. This is a fictional novel largely influenced by Harry's experiences growing up on a farm in British colonial Africa and his later exploits as a top-rated East African Professional Hunter. Ruark modeled his main character, Peter McKenzie, directly on Harry's life and personality.

But this kind of attention also put greater pressures on Harry, demanding an unflinching performance for some clients who expected guaranteed success from the now famous young hunter. Ruark's placement of Harry at the top of the list also strained his relationship with a few of his jealous associates. "At the time, I was no better or worse than any number of capable hunters who were my contemporaries, but Ruark's attention

### Ruark Years

Harry remained with Phil Percival's company, African Guides until he joined Ker & Downey Safaris in 1949. His first safari with the new company was done with Tony Henley, a boyhood chum who would also spend most of his career hunting professionally. Many years later, Tony and Harry teamed together again with Ker, Downey & Selby Safaris in Botswana. By then both were seasoned Professional Hunters with many years of



*Harry sighting-in his trusty .419 Rigby rifle, which he used from 1949 until he retired it in the early 1990s. Introduced in 1911 the .416 Rigby/Mauser combination made a magazine rifle a viable option for dangerous game hunting.*



## Legends of Yesteryear



*Two of Harry's trusted and long-time camp crew were his headman, Juma and his cook, Ali. They were part of his team for 15 years and even came down to Botswana with Harry in the early 1960s.*

created jealousies among them that was both surprising and disappointing to me. Ruark's books created a reputation – maintaining it for 40 years has been the hard part.”

In an article written for Reader's Digest called,

*The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met*, Ruark described his friend Selby in this way, “Harry Selby, a Professional Hunter of Kenya, British East Africa, is the most man I ever met. It is a rare thing to find a man who can combine gentleness

with toughness, bravery with timidity, recklessness with caution, sophistication with naïveté, kindness with harshness, mechanics with poetry, and adult judgement with juvenile foolishness. And, all the while, making every woman he meets want to mother him or marry him, and every man he meets respect him. I forgot honest. He invented it.

“I have seen Selby slap a lion in the face with his hat. I have seen him hide from a woman. I have seen, equally at home with Bernard Baruch and with a witch doctor in Tanganyika. His business is killing, yet he is gentler with animals than anybody I ever saw.”

Ruark continued to hunt with Harry through the 1950s, sometimes travelling to Africa two and three times a year. Together they visited different countries where Ruark, on magazine assignments, monitored the politics of newly independent nations. Ruark often referred to the chaotic beginnings of independence as the “winds of change sweeping across Africa”.

### **The Move to Botswana**

In 1962, with Kenya's own independence looming imminent and the future of hunting there uncertain, Harry looked for new hunting fields. At the same time, he was offered a directorship in



## Legends of Yesteryear



*Harry with an excellent buffalo.*

Ker & Downey Safaris, which became Ker, Downey & Selby Safaris (KDS Safaris).

It was also agreed that he would manage the company's new venture in a little-known country called Bechuanaland (currently called Botswana). His wife Miki hails from South Africa so it was a natural choice for the Selby family to move southward to begin a new chapter in their lives.

When Harry first travelled to Botswana it was still a British Protectorate, only granted independence in 1966. Most of the southern part of the country is made up of Kalahari Desert and the northern third is dominated by mopane

scrubland, seasonal waterholes and tsetse flies.

Between these two distinctive areas spreads a 6 000 square mile delta system called the Okavango. Here gin-clear water flows along palm-fringed islands and over grassy flood plains to support an amazing variety of big game.

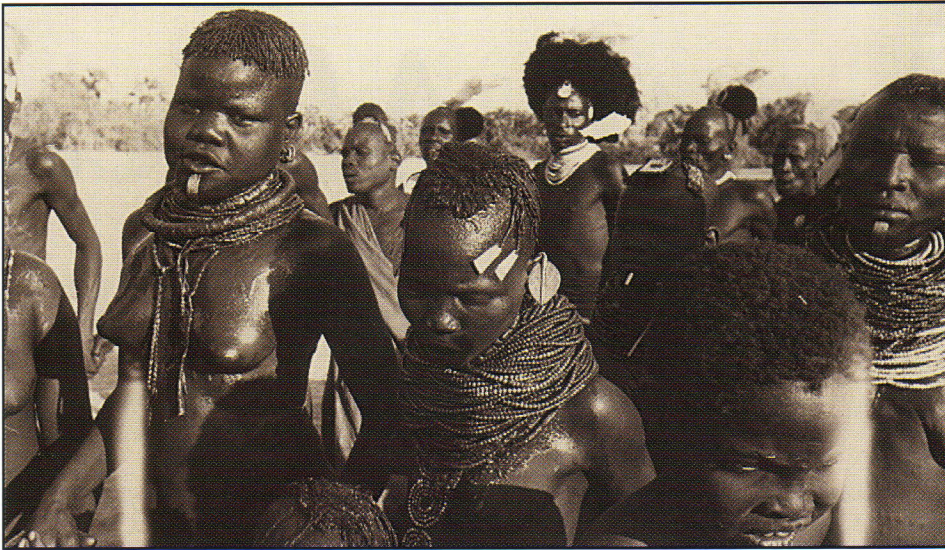
In early 1963 Harry spent a total of 20 hours surveying the Okavango Delta and Botswana's northern areas from a Piper Super Cub. In spite of recent rains, long grass and scattered game, Harry recognised tremendous potential for the area. He was also struck by how peaceful the country was, especially after coming away from the hustle and

bustle of Kenya, which had just begun to experience a boom in tourism. Harry's initial reconnaissance of Botswana confirmed its suitability for safaris and began the move southward of hunting clients, securing Botswana's place among Africa's greatest safari destinations.

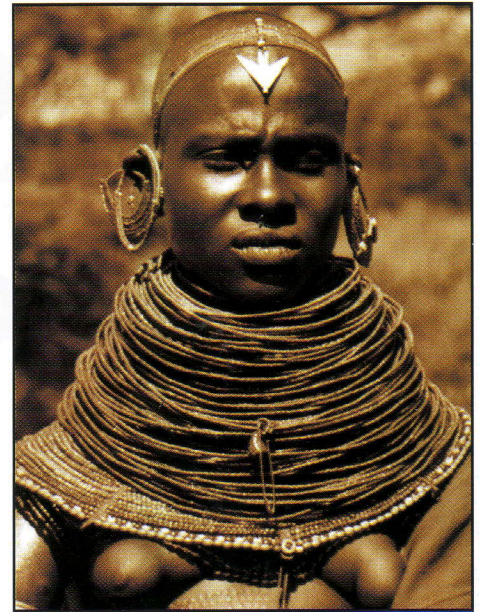
After initial meetings between KDS, whom Harry represented, other safari companies and Botswana government officials Harry obtained a one-year lease agreement for concession areas totalling nearly 10 000 square miles along the northern edge of the Okavango Delta. At the end of the first season the original agreement was renegotiated to give KDS Safaris control of the Khwai and Mababe hunting concessions for a period of four years with a renewable option for four more years after that. Harry helped the government structure a package license for overseas hunting clients that included one elephant, one lion, one leopard, several buffalo, plus kudu, sable, zebra, warthog and most of the desert antelope species found in the Kalahari – this "Package A" license cost all of \$150.00 back in 1964.

Excited about the prospects for this new safari destination, Harry moved his family to Botswana and for the next 15 years he and his wife Miki managed KDS Safaris. The Botswana safari





*Kenya's colourful tribes included the Turkana, who lived in seasonally harsh conditions near Lake Rudolph (now called Lake Turkana) in Kenya's NFD.*



operation was headquartered in the village of Maun, located along the banks of the Thamalakane River. During this time Harry continued taking out safaris himself with more and more of his clients joining an exclusive, but ever-increasing list.

The interest in photo safaris in East Africa influenced Harry's decision to build a 30-bed lodge and two 10-bed tented camps dedicated to photographic safaris. Khwai River Lodge, completed in 1970, was the first photographic lodge to be built in Botswana catering to photo safari tourism aimed at overseas clients. Limited plains game hunting and bird shooting were also offered from Khwai River Lodge.

Like Harry, his children Mark and Gail grew up in the shadow of acacia trees and within the sound of roaring lions. At the age of 14, Gail hunted an elephant with her father taking a bull with 50-pound tusks. On that hunt she used a Rigby .275 originally belonging to the legendary elephant hunter "Karamoja" Bell, and which had been given to her brother Mark by his godfather, Robert Ruark. Mark, having gained dangerous game experience early with his first buffalo taken at age 11, was issued his first Professional Hunter's license by the age of 18. He currently conducts safaris in Tanzania for Tanzania Gametrackers Safaris.

In 1978, KDS Safaris amalgamated with Safari South. The combining of the two companies made the operation the largest and longest-running safari hunting company in Africa. The concession areas then totalled more than 90 000 square miles with a roster of Professional Hunters, which besides Harry included Tony Henley, Lionel Palmer, Wally and Walter Johnson, Dougie Wright, Willie Englebrecht, John Dugmore, Mark Selby, Daryl Dandridge, Colin Dandridge, Soren Lindstrom, Simon Paul, Tom Friedkin, Charles Williams, Don Lindsay, Hugh McNeil, Steve Liversedge, Javier Alonso, Ronnie Kays, Brian Marsh, Chris Collins and myself. The 1980s saw

the gradual but eventual break up of the large safari companies in Botswana and today the huge concessions that we once hunted have been divided between a variety of photo and safari hunting interests.

I was fortunate enough to have served an apprenticeship for my Botswana Professional Hunter's license under Harry's guidance back in 1972. Since then I've done many safaris with Harry and have hunted with him as recently as 1999, when he came up to Tanzania to join his son Mark on safari. One day we stood at Fort Ikoma, an old WW I German fort perched high on a hill overlooking the edge of the Serengeti plains. We looked out across a landscape of story-book Africa, when Harry pointed to some large trees at the edge of a green meadow below us.

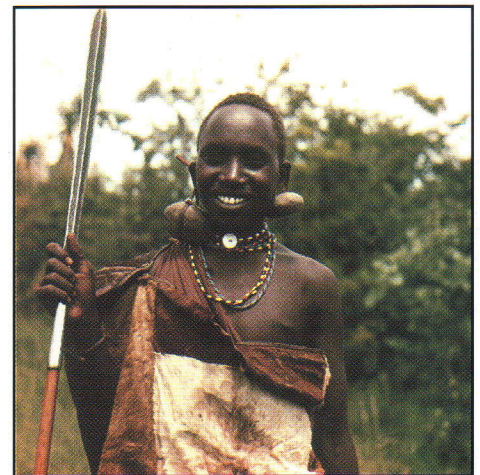
"See those big acacia trees? That's where I put up Bob Ruark's first camp on his first safari, the one he wrote about in *Horn of the Hunter*." Standing beside Harry at Fort Ikoma and listening to him recall Ruark's first safari back in 1952, when it took two days driving across country from

***"See those big acacia trees? That's where I put up Bob Ruark's first camp on his first safari, the one he wrote about in *Horn of the Hunter*."***

Nairobi to reach this spot, is a special moment that I will never forget.

Later that evening, sitting around the campfire and listening to Harry reflect back on his incredible career, I asked him which of the big five he likes hunting most – it seemed to me, after hearing his stories about big ivory that it might be elephant. The light of the campfire danced in his eyes and he smiled, savoring the memories of past hunts.

"Hunting elephants for big ivory still has that special attraction like it did when I first hunted the NFD. But at a young age I rapidly found that I was excited by all kinds of hunting. And even today, I think one of the most exciting hunts, and



*Kenya's colourful tribes have retained their traditional dress and customs, and still live in a way that is little influenced by modern times.*

most challenging, is leopard. Although you bait them, it's always a case of matching wits – yours against his. You do something and the leopard will respond to it and then you have to counter that with something else. It's as if he is trying to outsmart you...

"And I think that if I had to choose something for real fun, it's to creep up into a herd of buffalo and have them all around you – your senses are completely alive. That's probably one of the greatest feelings that big game provides. Now if you want real chilling stuff, it's tracking lion in thick bush – nothing can compare," Harry declared with conviction backed by vast experience.

His answer was thoughtful and clear with no words wasted. It bespoke a respect, even compassion, for the animals that he's spent his life hunting. Harry has experienced the situations he describes many times, but he still enjoys the bush, walking among big game, sleeping in a tented camp, and embracing the events of each day he spends afield, which constantly adds to his wealth of knowledge, experience and memories – these are the safari trophies that Harry savours the most.