

The Story of Main Camp, Sinamatella,
and Robins Camps; Chap. 5 in:
Hwange National Park

The Forest with a Desert Heart

Gary Haynes

A photograph of a savanna landscape. In the foreground, there are several large, leafy trees with green and yellowish foliage. The background shows a vast, hazy landscape with more trees and a distant horizon under a bright sky.



Zambia

Harare







ZIMBABWE

Hwange
National
Park

Bulawayo

160 km

Elevation (meters)

-  0 - 500
-  501 - 1000
-  1001 - 1500
-  1501 - 2000
-  2001 - 2500
-  2501 - 2800

South Africa

Mozambique

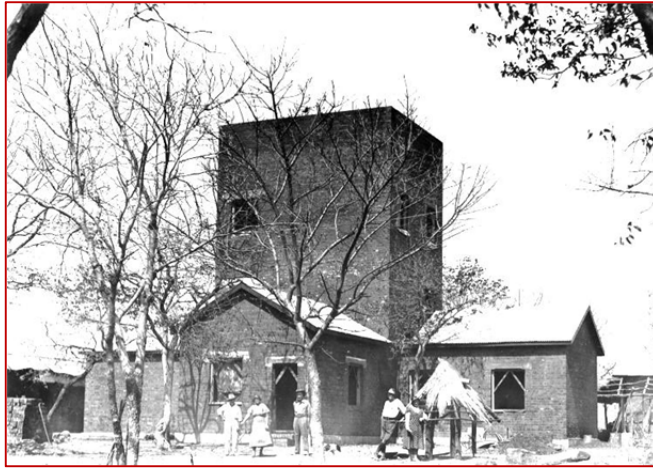
Botswana

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5. The Story of the Camps

The construction of the tower at the future Robins Camp, 1934

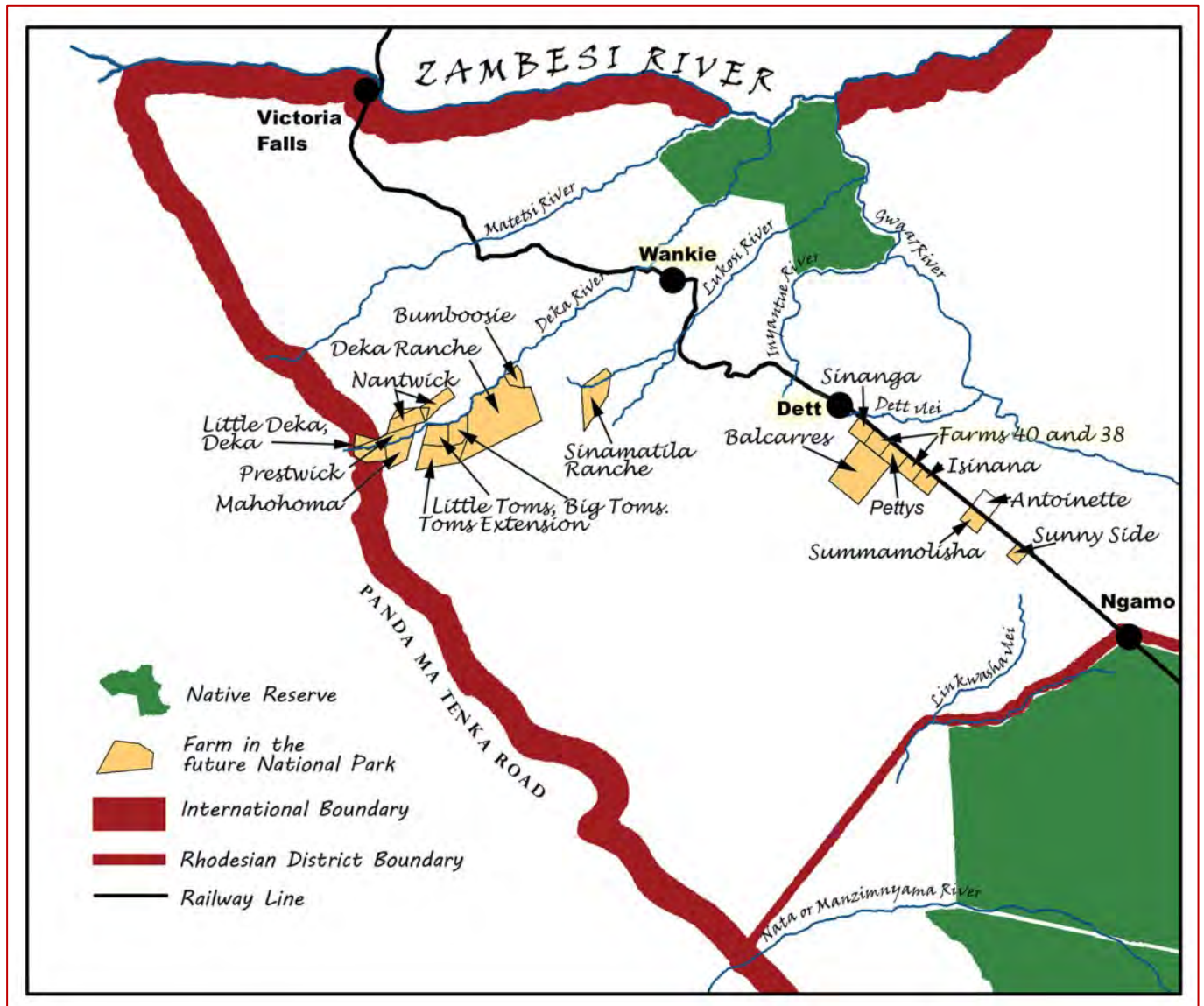


National Parks accommodation in Main Camp, 1960s



Inside one of the Main Camp accommodations, 1960s





Farms in the future National Park, and nearby Native Reserves. Spellings are from a 1924 *Financial Times* [London] map (The National Archives [Great Britain] file CO 1047/790)

The Places That Became the Camps: Colonial-Era Settlement in Hwange

At the beginning of the 20th century, the place now called Main Camp was a farm. A trace of the farm is a single marked grave about a hundred meters from Main Camp's central offices. The grave was dug in loose grey sand. Thorny little acacia trees surround it now. The needle-pointed little seeds of the sand plants will stick in your feet if you walk over to take a look at it. The grave had been covered with a thin layer of gravel, and it has a brick and cement border once ringed by two cables strung through short iron fence posts. Animals had trodden down the corner posts

and scattered the white gravel.



A woman named Sophia Carolina Petty is buried there. She died of blackwater fever on 24 March 1909, aged 44 years. *The Bulawayo Chronicle* notified Southern Rhodesian readers of her death; she was "the beloved wife of A.E. Petty." Her death was "deeply regretted." The modest tombstone

says she was "A True Friend and Loving Mother."

Now you know as much about her as I ever did for the longest time, although I chased after some paper record of her for ten years. She was not mentioned in any other newspapers or archive or correspondence. Her husband's name appeared from 1905 to 1912 in the *Bulawayo Directory*, later the *Rhodesia Directory*. He was a bricklayer who rented a house in a Bulawayo suburb which no longer exists. In 1913 he was given the rights to work lime on a 10-acre part of a large farm called Mount Prospect, later Balcarres, the farm where his wife is buried. The pits he dug for lime are still open in Main Camp, although nearly lost from sight in thick scrub now. A. E.



Petty disappeared from the record shortly afterwards.

One of the old Main Camp lime pits

A few years later a man named Francis Harding Going and partners bought the hardscrabble farmland that is today the heart of Main Camp.

Going was an Irishman who had been a Matabeleland storekeeper, trader, and prospector in the late 1890s.⁶⁷ In a partnership called the Malindi Syndicate he owned the two farms known as Balcarres and Petties,⁶⁸ totalling about 30,000 acres.

Ironically, this farmer Going and another farmer named Cumming lived on opposite sides of today's national park. Petties (aka Petty's) Farm was a 6,000 acre box of land bounded on the east by the rail line. Balcarres was a 25,000 acre rectangle that stretched from around Dom pan to Long One pan in today's Park. In 1931, the government acquired this land from Going's heirs and the future Park's administrative center took shape around Sophia Petty's gravesite.

No one who worked in the Park ever wrote a word about Sophia Petty or the grave. Not even the Park's first Warden, Ted Davison, who wrote a popular book about his 30-plus years in the Park, ever mentioned her name. Sophia Petty has been completely forgotten in history.

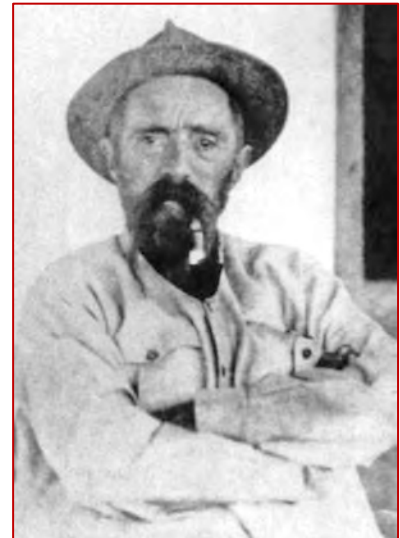
The gravesite of Sophia Petty in Main Camp, 2007, looking north towards the Park office in the background



We know much more about Albert Giese, an important character who was alternately revered by some as the 'Father of the District' and reviled by others who knew that his favorable "reputation outside the district [was] very different from his reputation within it."⁶⁹

Albert Giese, probably late 1920s

Born in Germany, he had come to southern Africa to join a surgeon uncle, after an unsuccessful attempt at medical school. He panned for gold, shot game for sale, and knocked about until he heard of a far district's black stones that burn. In 1898 he staked claims to the future Hwange coalfields, was rewarded with a farm, and settled down to raise cattle and trade in food and goods with the newly formed Wankie Colliery Company. His partners abandoned him when they caught him stealing goods from the inventory and raiding the profits for pocket money. He became an agent of the Rhodesian Estates Office, and spent the next few decades trying to draw fellow settlers near his farms 35 kilometers (ca. 21 miles) from the old Pandamatenga station, a very lonely part of the district on the western edge of the future Hwange National Park.⁷⁰ One of the first settlers he attracted was J. M. Kearney, who worked for the Wankie Colliery, and who first published a description of the old Bumbusi Iron Age stone ruins, now a National



Monument within the Park.⁷¹ In 1907 Giese pegged a farm for Kearney, Mahohoma Farm, on a dry streamway of the same name, within the boundaries of today's National Park.



Giese at his huts, at the upper Deka River, 1906



Remains of the Deka huts, 1993

By 1910 two more potential farm tracts had been surveyed by the government. The trickle of newcomers continued. A Mr. W.B. Cumming arrived from Kimberley, South Africa, bringing his wife, daughters, and sons, 10 servants, three wagons, three carts, many household effects, 34 heifers, five bulls, 15 horses, 20 mules, 50 donkeys, 150 sheep and goats, two Berkshire pigs, 10 dogs and 12 white leghorn chickens. He arrived armed with nine rifles, one combination gun, four shotguns, and five revolvers. The walk from the rail stop to his new farm near Pandamatenga killed 25 goats, two sheep and two cows. He was the possessor of "a lot of rough useless ground."⁷² He continued complaining about the property for some time to the Estates Office.



Relics of the old Mahohoma homestead; glass, rusted bits of farm equipment (photographed 1993)

Within two more years, 50 potential farms had been surveyed, most of them covering about 3,000 morgen (6,350 acres), the customary size at the time. The forests of the Kalahari Sands were considered of no value due to the lack of water and the "thin scanty useless grass" covering them.⁷³ The sand-covered belts were to be left alone pending the future discovery of a use.

Giese was choosy about his potential neighbors. Earlier a Macedonian Greek named Apostolos Londos had written to the B.S.A. Company's Land Department: "I beg to Apply for Farming Regulation Law Book. I wishe to see it if you Let me Have a Farm to Wankie District. I can take one...Extrymely obloge...Your Faithfully...Apostolos Londos."⁷⁴ He had also written H.N. Heman, the Native Commissioner in Wankie, asking support for his application to the Land Department and its local agent Giese: "I like to satle in this District."⁷⁵ When asked to comment, Giese wrote to the manager of the Estates Office that Londos' application was for "the most valuable piece of farming ground" around, and Londos, according to Giese, was "reputed to be fairly wealthy," so he should pay top price. But – "Mr. Londos can hardly be called a desirable addition to a new settlement."⁷⁶ The Land Settlement Office withdrew the offer of a farm after Giese's counsel to them: "Mr. Londos is regarded as a slippery customer in the District."

Over the next five years Londos tried three more times to buy a farm, until he finally got a piece of land that was mainly mopane woods with no permanent water, straddling a river called Sinamatella by some whites (a mispronunciation of a word that means thorns or stickers). Some local Africans called it Lumbambala. When Londos joined the land-surveyor for a closer look, he was "sadly disappointed at the ground," so sadly that he asked for a reduction in the price. The surveyor himself called the land "thoroughly bad," but thought Londos should take it or leave it.



Sinamatella homestead, 1925; it sat below the present-day Park buildings atop the hill.

In the 1920s Londos put a Greek shopkeeper in the Sinamatella homestead, the short and stout Peter Garos. Shortly afterwards Londos died in Greece. Peter Garos lived for the next quarter century on Sinamatella Ranch, where he did his share of hunting on neighboring unsurveyed lands, including protected areas where no one could legally shoot, explore, or graze livestock. One year Garos, his cook, a worker named Sispense (siss-PEN-see), and another white man named Smith ventured out beyond the ranch boundaries to dig for gold at the Iron Age African ruins called Mtoa. Some time later the "wily" Garos⁷⁷ was accused of cutting timber and shooting animals⁷⁸ in the protected land around his farm. Garos could not identify his ranch's original boundaries, and a new survey was undertaken. The ranch ended up 500 acres smaller. Garos, unhappy of course, offered the whole ranch to the Government, expecting a good price, but because of global economic depression, he was offered only his purchase price of many years before.⁷⁹ Sinamatella was clearly not a valuable piece of land to anyone interested in farming,



cattle-ranching, or game-poaching. It was a dangerous place for wildlife.

All that's left of the Sinamatella homestead

* * * *

By 1914, 227 whites were known to be living in the Wankie District, and at least 6,663 black Africans. Giese was well known to all of them.

A total of 45 other white farmers owned 2,000 cattle and 3,000 small stock.⁸⁰ Wild giraffe, sable, and eland were said to be plentiful in the north, while elephants were found mainly in the south and west. Lions were spread evenly, and "wild pigs" were everywhere. Malindi Siding, 147 miles (ca. 235 kilometers) from Bulawayo on the railway line, was a "general centre for big-game hunters."⁸¹ The main motorcar road from Bulawayo to Wankie town headed directly for Malindi where Bushmen guides could be hired to take parties westward along the ecotone between the Kalahari sands and the rocky hills in the north.⁸²

The settlers knew what they getting into, and all of them must have preferred this rough outdoor life with game and birds to shoot, delegating much of the heavy work of the crops to cheap African labor, and with a wide separation between neighbors. The most famous neighbor, Giese, expected to receive some deference to his status as an Estates Agent of sorts, and some respect for his historical place in the district. His neighbors found him an intense man, with a "keen desire for power,"⁸³ unmarried and living far from his nearest neighbor. He began brooding over imagined slights, minor disputes, or misunderstandings. He feuded with white neighbors over his physical control of the local Bushmen, who were useful to the farmers as cheap labor. Giese claimed his "mild" control was for their "general improvement," intended to "make useful and intelligent material of them."⁸⁴ But neighboring families disputed these claims and loudly complained that he framed the Bushmen for slight and imaginary offenses.⁸⁵ Giese enlisted the police at least three times to thrash Africans who broke his rules.⁸⁶

Newcomers into the district soon learned Giese's darker side. He was accused of living with black women, taking the wives of his Bushman "retainers" as mistresses,⁸⁷ picking up African prostitutes in Wankie town, and illegally supplying liquor to the Africans, an offence for which he was convicted. To some whites he seemed to be "unscrupulous," a "distinctly dangerous type of man,"⁸⁸ yet to others (such as the Colonial Administrator R. Coryndon) he was looked upon affectionately, a one-time compatriot in adventure during the early 'frontier' days.⁸⁹



Giese, on right, with two hunters who used to work for Westbeeck at Pandamatenga (photographed late 1890s).

He was a dark man with a naturally brooding look to his face, once thin and serious in his loneliness, but in later life he became worn and unamused, almost haunted by weariness. When he was an old man he married a Cambridge widow and acquired British nationality, having been a stateless person since 1883, when he had denounced his German citizenship.⁹⁰

He died in 1938, 72 years old.⁹¹ He is buried – alone – at now derelict Mbala Lodge (*right*), on the Lukosi River, a few kilometers in one direction from the coalfields and a few kilometers in the other direction from the boundary of the



National Park. This was his finest and last farm, whose beautiful stone buildings were abandoned in the late 1990s to bats, dassies, and mice. On a hill above the present-day ruins of the house, which has an entry gate with a boom to stop you before entering the Park boundary, you might be allowed to walk up a little overgrown garden path where elephants trample the bushes, and look out on woodlands and hills. His solitary grave is there. On the tombstone, the copper lettering of his name (spelled wrong) is falling off.



Giese's grave in the thorn scrub above Mbala Lodge, 2009

The Rhodesian government regularly updated the handbooks used to recruit new settlers into the country, and advertisements frequently popped up in London's cosmopolitan journals.⁹²

**RHODESIA
THE GARDEN COLONY OF SOUTH AFRICA
WITHIN 21 DAYS OF GREAT BRITAIN
Land For Sale on Easy Terms**

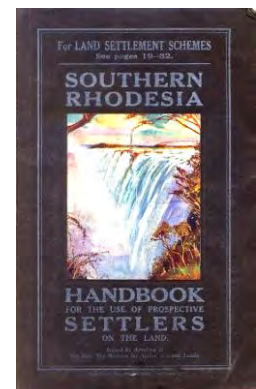
Rhodesia possesses a healthy climate and offers exceptional advantages to men with reasonable capital. Rhodesia possesses a splendid railway system and immense mineral resources. Rhodesia offers excellent educational facilities. Taxes are light.

Land is cheap.

For full particulars and illustrated Handbooks, apply to ---
INFORMATION OFFICES FOR RHODESIA
2, LONDON WALL BUILDINGS, LONDON E.C.
140, BUCHANAN STREET, GLASGOW

The land in the Wankie District may have been cheap, as the ad promised, but it was also sandy, stony, dry, and very unfriendly. English-born James Francis Kennedy learned this after he rented a farm on the Sikumi vlei – just east of present-day Hwange National Park – in 1913, when he was 30 years old and unmarried.

Within 5 years of settling on his rented farm, Kennedy had a monthly income at £100, made from selling vegetables to the Veterinary



Department's wild-game killers shooting in the Gwayi area to eliminate a disease spread to livestock by biting tsetse flies. Kennedy asked permission to buy his rented farm,⁹³ proposing to invest £40 a month in the land, which boasted 200 chickens, three horses, 56 cattle, several wagons and carts, ploughs, harrows, planters, cultivators, and dairy appliances. Yet within three years he had moved away and settled on another farm near Victoria Falls, where he soon fell into arrears on his rent. His name then disappeared from *The Rhodesian Directory's* regularly published country-wide list of farmers. What is left of him in the district now is remanence of a sort – his name is on a railway siding, put there only because officials in the Rhodesian government had grown tired of African names all along the rail line.⁹⁴ Two pumped pans and the long, winding grass-covered land between them in Hwange National Park also carry his name.⁹⁵

Far away to the west of the Kennedy vlei, another early rancher held on to his rocky soil for years. Percy Durban Crewe called his main farm "Nantwich," a kind of geographic joke – Crewe and Nantwich are towns located next to each other in England. Crewe had been one of the old Rhodesians – a member of the entrepreneurs, in the words of one early pioneer, the "company of keen glorious adventurers,"⁹⁶ who preceded colonial government into Matabeleland. Crewe had lived on the edges of Ndebele king Lobengula's kraal in the 1890s, and he was one of a handful of whites stuck there during those tense weeks of Rhodes's invasion of Matabeleland.

In 1896, he was a sergeant in the Grey's Scouts mounted force during the war with Lobengula's Ndebele people, and he was entrusted with conducting Lobengula's peace envoys to the British High Commissioner in Cape Town, a journey of well over 1000 miles. The party was deliberately delayed en route, taking a month and a half to arrive. The High Commissioner in Cape Town would not agree to the envoys' demands, such as to be allowed to punish Africans who broke Lobengula's laws, so

Crewe led them back to Bulawayo. Lobengula lost the war.



P.D. Crewe (right) sharing a drink with H. G. Robins, around 1930

Crewe had risen to local prominence by prospecting and mining, brokering both land and native labor, and speculating in land over the next two decades. After the Matabele war, he worked for Albert Giese on a Deka farm, supplying beef to the Wankie coal miners. Then he became a storekeeper, and later a farm-holder in his own name. The glorious adventurers of the Rhodes era

began splitting up as each man moved to his appropriate level in the developing social construct. Crewe also never made much more mark beyond the circle of his Matabele war friends and business acquaintances. He was affectionately remembered by Sir Robert Coryndon when Sir Robert was beginning his rise to political eminence in the colony of Rhodesia ("Good luck to P.D....he never sings 'Clementina' now I suppose ---alas!"⁹⁷), but his personal character was too rough to merit the reverence that new Rhodesian colonists offered the first white men to have entered the "old man's [Rhodes's] country."⁹⁸

By the time he was in his late 30s, Crewe was living and traveling with an African woman named Vuvuka, Ndebele for "swollen." This is not a surprise – Giese also had black mistresses, and F.C. Selous had traveled for years with an African woman before taking a white Englishwoman as his wife. Crewe and Giese wrote each other often to share their successes in commerce and romance. In 1909 Crewe was prospecting a reef that he hopefully called "the Californian," about 480 kilometers (ca. 290 miles) south of Nantwich. In his own words, he was living a lifestyle characterized as "goats and opium." "The cock still crows thank God," he wrote to Giese in December 1909, and "as you say, as long as that lasts one can be thankful."⁹⁹ A month later he asked Giese if he was "living as a cock virgin for a change, or is it Goats + opium?"¹⁰⁰ The Californian reef turned out to be disappointing, and Crewe expected to be out of work and on the "bone of my arse again."¹⁰¹ "You will probably hear of my tramping through the country shortly with a pack on my back + a tin Billy, accompanied by a black lady."¹⁰² (Ironically enough it was in this same year that the British government issued its "Crewe Circular" – not named for P.D. Crewe – banning concubinage in the Empire.)

Vuvuka, also called Vuvu, lived at Nantwich farm, but after a few months far away on the Californian reef, Crewe sent for her. Later he dispatched her and another woman (Umhutjwa) back to Nantwich and told Giese that he would be posting money for them – "they know what it is for."¹⁰³ They could buy anything they wanted in Wankie town. "I shall be sending £2 every month for Vuvuka + she provides for herself (I wish to Christ my prick was 300 miles long)."¹⁰⁴

Crewe was a festive man, and well known for it. Long-time acquaintance and fellow farmer in the Wankie District H.G. Robins felt that alcohol was the downfall for P.D. Crewe as well as the rest of the Crewe family. Vuvuka was famous for making strong African beer, the kind that could flatten a drinker.¹⁰⁵ Crewe's correspondence of the 1920s was written in an ever shakier hand; he also became absent-minded and chronically ill. He abandoned his farms to spend time in hospital or live with relatives.

P.D. Crewe died in 1931. The record of Vuvuka may be gone with the memories of people who died 60 years ago. Crewe's obituary in *The Rhodesia Herald* said he had "a most genial and entertaining disposition." He was "generous

to a fault; a whiter man Rhodesia has never seen." He is buried alone in a walled little spot just above Hwange National Park's Nantwich Camp. The marker says he was "one of Rhodesia's earliest pioneers."



Marker at the grave of P.D. Crewe, Hwange National Park

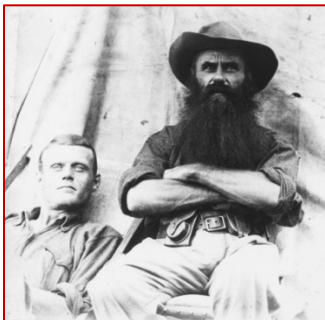
If ever a white settler in the Hwange district needed a sympathetic biographer, it is Herbert George Robins. Never photographed smiling, he was another Hwange man who could be widely hated and ridiculed by some while others revered him. He could be cranky and difficult; yet some thought him generous and lovable. He ended up giving everything he had every year to entertain hundreds of tourists who traveled the rough, long, and dusty road to his home to view the wild game on his land. H. G. Robins planted the seed of the future Hwange National Park, and he alone stood his ground protecting the district's wild animals when everyone around him sought to kill them all.

Robins had left England in 1884 when he was 17 years old, after three siblings had died in the first 5 months of that year. 1884 was the same year representatives of 14 European countries sat together at a conference in Berlin and signed a Treaty that handed bits of Africa to themselves; it was the year that South African writer Olive Schreiner's book *The Story of an African Farm* sold well in England; it was the year that gold was discovered in the Transvaal, and the year that Hiram Maxim perfected the Maxim gun.



Robins (right), ca. 1890(?)

He fought for Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company in Lobengula's 1896 War of Rebellion. His mother died while he was away from England in 1899, and his father died twelve years later while Robins was again "in the wilds with savages."¹⁰⁶ His life in Africa was not unusual for lonely men of the time. He prospected, traded, bought and sold land and town lots in Bulawayo, and got involved in minor adventures of one sort or another. Once he shot somebody's two cows and a calf "by accident."¹⁰⁷

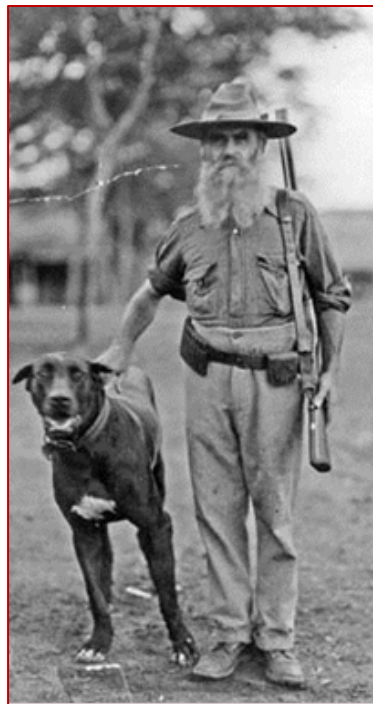


Robins (on the right), ca. 1905-10 (?)

In 1902 he mounted an expedition into the central African jungle. He found tin deposits in the Belgian Congo, and prospected for diamonds and minerals in wild and dangerous territory in northeast Angola, where he freed a

few slaves, including a woman taken by a party of Africans to sell for a cow, and a man held hostage for robbing a field.¹⁰⁸ But he finally had enough of the threats, hardships, fighting, and fevers – "I am very anxious to get out of the country," he wrote in an official report to his company.¹⁰⁹ "Starvation is rampant,... and one passes many skeletons of natives who have succumbed to hunger." "This country is the worst and the most trying to a man's health and constitution that I have been in for a very long time."¹¹⁰ Over the next 26 years he fought his body's pain and weakness brought on by this nightmare country, not letting the sickness keep him from working long and hard many days when he should have been resting.

When he failed in an attempt to enlist in World War I, he decided to farm in Rhodesia. He took his life savings of £10,000 and acquired "Little Tom's Spruit," a farm in the northern part of today's Park (*see map on page 63*). He had no other family members left alive but one sickly younger brother, whom he felt obliged to care for, but his brother turned down the offer to live in Africa under old Shocker, as Robins was called by his brother. So H.G. Robins lived alone.



Robins (on the left without the big beard and on the right with it) and two of his Great Danes, Prize winners at Bulawayo Kennel Club competitions

The first time Robins saw his farmland he was sorely disappointed: "The track from here to Wankie [town] is one of the worst I have ever seen" – this from a man who had spent years leading dozens of African bearers and laborers through unmapped and trackless jungles and forests on prospecting missions into central Africa – "it cannot by any stretch of imagination be called a road." "It is quite

hopeless to think of growing Mealies or other agricultural produce to sell at a profit."¹¹¹ The water usually failed on his farms, grass fires were frequent and destructive, and rainfall was light and uncertain; the roads were awful, the markets too far away, and if he had known all this before he bought the first farm he never would have committed himself to this part of the country or spent so much of his own money moving all his possessions and those of his assistant¹¹² to the District.



Robins in his moth-eaten Stetson, scowling at the camera, 1930s

Between 1915 and 1925 he ran up to 1,700 head of cattle on his land, sharing forage and water with the wild game. After 1925 he reoriented his farms as a private game reserve, and all hunting was forbidden. He eventually cleared 60 kilometers (~36 miles) of roads on his land to allow game-viewing by visitors, and as his reputation spread people began showing up at his gate to see the wild animals that he sought to protect. Other Rhodesians even started viewing him as a legend in Africa. His big beard reminded one visitor of another living African legend, Trader Horn (real name Aloysius Smith).¹¹³

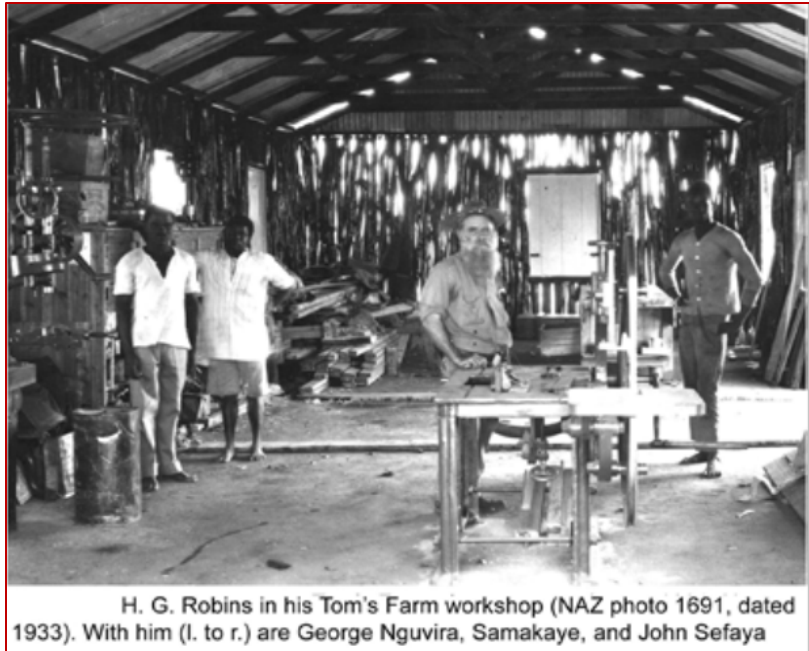


Robins strongly impressed people who had never met him or seen his wild animals, through the medium of popular magazine articles and newspaper stories distributed throughout the world. A *Sunday World Magazine* article entitled "The Hermit of Little Tom's Farm" so moved a German woman living in New York City that she wrote him to say "How I admire and envy you!!" "What a serene happiness you must have enjoyed in this undisturbed solitude! What sublime thoughts must have been yours!" "Having made some sad experiences here in N.Y.[.] Nature shall be my consolation at all times..." She asked for a photograph of Robins's "friends in the jungle," and a letter providing her with one of Robins's many wise thoughts inspired by solitude. Her thoughts, she promised, would be with "those friendly animals of the jungle."¹¹⁴

Robins seems to have found the best way of living for a man turned so completely inward. He had a friend only in himself, although he could learn to be friendly enough with people whom he did not repel immediately. In 1928 he wrote to the Southern Rhodesia Publicity Bureau: "I am what I have been termed...a

`recluse,` and do not seek personal publicity... I never leave my ranch unless I am obliged... Nor can I say that I have any keen desire for `company`." ¹¹⁵ In 1935, when the other owners had moved away from all the farms between Wankie town and the Pandamatenga road, except for one other and himself, he wrote "I am now the only European between Wankie and Brownlee Cumming's place!...suits me though!" ¹¹⁶

He was as often personally disorganized as he was compulsively over-organized, a predictable trait among recluses. To save himself the need of daily decision, he wore the same set of clothes for days on end, usually consisting of a knitted white night-cap with a tasseled end (or a battered and bug-eaten Stetson when going to town), a pajama shirt top, khaki trousers and high-top boots (replaced by plain shoes on his trips to town). The pajama top was an old-fashioned, casual preference that was common among early settlers in the 1890s. He often put on all his warm clothes to shake his constant chills and catarrh.



H. G. Robins in his Tom's Farm workshop (NAZ photo 1691, dated 1933). With him (l. to r.) are George Nguvira, Samakaye, and John Sefaya

In his office were middens of receipts, letters, and papers covering his large desk and the floor space around it. His meals were provided by his servants to follow the cycle of breakfast-lunch-dinner without regard for the time of day, so that he could simply order food when he was hungry and he would not have to decide upon the appropriate menu. A change of clothes about once a week merited comment in his diaries, as did a bath. He did not shave but he cut his hair, and even learned to take some pride in his big beard. When R.F. Windram visited to write an article for the 1934 *Rhodesia Annual* ¹¹⁷ (*photo right*), he heard that Nambya speakers sometimes called Robins "Chindevu," the man with the beard. He had had this beard for many years, and it was his personal emblem; when Albert Giese wrote to ask for a photograph of Robins in 1910, Giese stressed that it must be "not without the beard." ¹¹⁸



* * * *



Robins in knitted cap looking uncomfortable with female visitors, 1930s

A two-meter (~6 feet) long telescope on a tripod stands in the tower at Hwange's Robins Camp, one of Robins' more expensive pieces of equipment, with a maximum power of 380-400 diameters. He used it to view game and to seek poacher's fires as often as he viewed the stars and

planets. He also used it to spy on his farm workers loafing in the fields instead of working.¹¹⁹

By 1928 H. G. Robins no longer had faith in anyone else's background or skills, and he thought no one else cared, or had as much hope, or could do what was necessary to save the wild game in the Wankie District. He did not want his game sanctuary to be absorbed in the Rhodesian government's newly proclaimed and much larger Wankie Game Reserve. And he was obsessed with dislike for the Game Reserve's first appointed Warden, Ted Davison.

Robins wrote to the Secretary of the Rhodesian Department of Agriculture and Lands:¹²⁰

"I have resided here for over twenty years, [and]...during that period I can say, without exaggeration, I have had to do with hundreds of Government Officials, and thousands of the general public, and...the Warden of the Wankie Game Reserve is the only man I have been unable to get on with quite amicably!"¹²¹

Ted Davison, 1933



"I am not a cantankerous old man, apt to sustain a quarrel... without due cause!"¹²² His feelings towards Davison were not irrational, he claimed. Robins was sick for over a month while he struggled to draft this and other letters about his feelings towards Davison. The Secretary of Agriculture, a Major Mundy, politely suggested that Robins' complaints had become obsessive.¹²³

By 1932 H. G. Robins was saturated with tourists coming to view his pocket of protected wild animals. He had told local acquaintances who suggested bringing

organized tours to his land that he "already had quite enough visitors."¹²⁴ As many as 300 people were coming in a year, each person getting a three-hour tour with an African guide. This number far exceeded those coming to the government's Wankie Game Reserve. Robins was now almost constantly ill and very tired, and he inevitably became more and more disillusioned with tourist vandalism and insensitivity. In 1933 Robins asked a Bulawayo firm of attorneys to draw up a Deed of Donation, promising his land to the government after his death in return for reimbursement of expenses for building himself a good house.

He settled even further into his private friendless refuge in the last three years of his life. By then Davison had acquired assistant game wardens, such as Jim Till in 1936 and Jim Verney in 1938, who were able to get along much better with Robins. When Robins first met Till on June 28, 1936,¹²⁵ he wrote: "He seems quite a decent chap. Very different to Davison – well educated and with a head on him – which is more than Davison has got!" But Till soon asked for a transfer, and Verney (known as Mpoposha to the African people who worked with him, meaning talks-too-much) went away to war and was killed in action in 1941.¹²⁶



Jim Verney, 1939 or 1940

Robins wrote friends, "Please remember me kindly to young Till.¹²⁷ [I] shall be pleased to see him any time he can call." This was worlds apart from his feelings about Davison, "the brilliant Game Warden" as Robins called him sarcastically.¹²⁸ Eventually Robins agreed to allow a new road to be cut through his game reserve connecting the town of Dett (entry point for the Wankie Game Reserve) with Wankie Town and Victoria Falls beyond.

For years he had strongly resisted this, on the grounds that the Wankie Game Reserve's tourists were badly behaved compared to "his" tourists, but he was forced to allow it in the end, because he wanted new boreholes and the drilling rig needed to have a road opened from the Wankie Game Reserve. The "Boring Engineer" Hubbard turned out to be a nice man who helped Robins with his car and became a sympathetic ally against Davison.

Davison resented that Robins always wanted the last word on any matter¹²⁹ and called him a "bigot" for the depths of his feelings about everyone being a potential poacher of his farm's game. According to Davison, Robins closed the new road after the drill rig had finished the boreholes and ordered a secret trench dug across the roadway, hiding it with sticks so it would destroy any vehicle using the track. When Robins died in 1939 Davison opened up Robins's house and grounds as a visitors' camp, and during his tour of inspection he nearly drove into the hidden trench. Fortunately one of Robins' men was riding along with Davison at the time and stopped the truck in the nick of time by pounding on the roof of the cab. A still bitter Davison later wrote in his book about Wankie National Park, "Robins was not

the benign old gentleman that his friends made him out to be."¹³⁰

But Robins never intended to destroy anyone's car in a trap. He had been putting trenches across his roads for at least a decade, to prevent elephants from following the roads and entering his fields, brickyards, or cattle dips.¹³¹ Even Ted Davison's own assistant Till had blocked another of the drill-rig's roads with a deep trench near the Dolilo River.¹³² The road that nearly killed Davison was intended to be only a purely temporary track, as Davison himself wrote in a letter of 8 April 1936 to Robins, and as Robins emphasized in a letter of 22 April 1936 to Davison. Davison had nearly driven into an overgrown trench abandoned three years before, and in his annoyance with Robins he too invented another colorful story about the old man.

Anyone who visits Hwange National Park will sooner or later hear about eccentric and prickly H.G. Robins, especially those visitors who travel to Robins Camp. I don't remember the first stories that I learned about him – probably the few anecdotes told by Ted Davison in his book *Wankie: The Story of a Great Game Reserve*. Robins was a disagreeable old man with a long beard; a hard person, I thought. A strange, unlikable hermit who set the stage for the Hwange National Park.

Then about 10 years later I ran across a bug-eaten stack of carbon copies of some of his letters from 1931 to 1937, kept in a crumbling folder in the strong room at the National Park's Main Camp Office. Engagingly testy letter-writer, I thought about him then. And a persuasive man, often eloquent and deliberate in his arguments. There were some copy-photographs of him in the strong room, too. He was a reluctant photo study, standing or sitting uncomfortably and looking with impatience towards the camera, and this was a man who had taken the fine, artistic and expressive photographic portrait of the BaRotse king Lewanika, a photograph that had become famous worldwide. Wanting to know more about H.G. Robins, I began a paper chase after him in Zimbabwe's National Archives and historic reference collections. I read the copies of the letters, newspaper clippings, the reports, the other scraps of paper, and all the biographies and travelers' stories and obituaries.

The story of Robins' life is not the jungle fighting, the lion-killing, or the lonely battle to save game; it is the love and the loss that his own family created in his heart. Over the course of two and a half decades he took leave of his family in England and later returned to them looking for a sign of permanence in his returning, only to feel the need to go away again, over and over. Finally he left them for good. This is a bigger story I'm glad to tell about him, in addition to the story of his testiness and his way with visitors and his unswerving belief that he knew best how to preserve wildlife.

Robins knew that he was dying for the last years of his life. He was ill, his head "in a muddle,"¹³³ alone, dazed with fever,¹³⁴ and despondent for weeks at a time.¹³⁵ "Too old for good work," he wrote. P.D. Crewe's brother Harry died about daybreak November 2, 1937,¹³⁶ six years after his brother had passed away, and Albert Giese died in hospital in 1938, only one year older than Robins. Wankie Thomson from the colliery came to "bid me goodbye" after Giese's death set the neighbors "wondering who be next."¹³⁷

On New Year's Day, 1939, he confessed to his diary that he always felt "extra depressed" by the Christmas season, and would be glad when it was over.¹³⁸ Perhaps he still remembered the last Christmas in England, when he said goodbye forever to his family. He was endlessly sleepy, and regretted that he had no fields this year to plant and weed and harvest. When his houseman left after five years with him, Robins told him "hamba gashle" (more correctly hamba kuhle) – the traditional Ndebele parting – "go well."¹³⁹ Over the next week he was very weak and shaky. His last diary entry, for ever, was on 27 January: "First number (for Jan/39) of 'True Detective Mysteries' turned up in yesterday's mail." He was taken to Wankie hospital, where he spent two months recovering. He returned home in April, but in June had to be taken back to the hospital.

A last letter came to him in the hospital, a handwritten note from his servant John Sefaya, "I hope that you are Now Better Sir...All the Game Sanctuary all Very Well, Sir. Sir I send you my love Sir from your Boy John Sefaya." At the bottom Sefaya added "ans me Sir."¹⁴⁰ There is no answer in the file. Bert Robins died in Wankie on Tuesday, 28 June, 1939, at 3:30 in the afternoon. The *Rhodesia Herald* called him a "character known from the Cape to Cairo," a "legend on the high road of Africa," and "an uncompromising autocrat."¹⁴¹



He is still there on his farm, buried alone outside the gateway to Robins Camp. A simple stone marks the grave.



NOTES

"NAZ" refers to documents on file at the National Archives of Zimbabwe

- 67 NAZ GI 1/1/1, letter of 31 December 1897, folios 4-5.
- 68 Originally Petty's, but eventually transformed by indifferent spellers.
- 69 NAZ S 707 1911-1923, Report...26 October 1912, T.R. Jackson.
- 70 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 129, letter of 28 July 1910.
- 71 Kearney 1907.
- 72 NAZ L 2/1/55, letter of 23 September 1911 to Estates Office.
- 73 NAZ SG 2/1/33: R.C. Simmons, 6 December 1910 "Report on..."
- 74 NAZ S 456 54/22, letter of 10 November 1909.
- 75 NAZ S 456 54/22, letter of 11 November 1909.
- 76 NAZ S 456 54/22, letter of 20 January 1910.
- 77 Letter of 4/4/36 from Robins to Davison (carbon copy in Hwange National Park Main Camp strong room).
- 78 Garos had a number of "Bushman" families living on the ranch in "flimsy huts;" the men hunted for game meat, and did not work in the fields, as did the other African workers (Interview with Ndobale Shoko, 7/95, Mambanje Communal Lands).
- 79 NAZ S 456 54/22.
- 80 Guide to Rhodesia For the Use of Tourists and Settlers With Illustrations[,] Maps and Plans 1914, Beira and Mashonaland and Rhodesian Railways, Chapter XX, pp. 215-221.
- 81 Guide to Rhodesia..., 1914:147.
- 82 The guidebook for settlers was reprinted ten years later, and the description of Malindi Siding was repeated verbatim (Guide to Rhodesia For the Use of Tourists and Settlers With Illustrations[,] Maps and Plans, [2nd and Revised Edition]. 1924:365). Only 3 years later, the biggame hunting would be officially stopped when the land became a government Game Reserve. Oddly enough this same entry for Malindi Siding as a hunting center was still being reprinted word-for-word in the fourth edition of the Official Year Book of Southern Rhodesia, 1952:747, 28 years after the hunting was stopped and 3 years after the land was declared a National Park.
- 83 NAZ S 707, Report of Acting Native Commissioner T. R. Jackson.
- 84 NAZ S 707, letter of 26 May 1912 to Native Commissioner, Wankie.
- 85 NAZ S 707, letter of 22 June 1912 to Native Commissioner, Wankie
- 86 NAZ S 707, pp. 16-17 of Jackson's report.
- 87 A letter from a later Wankie Native Commissioner to the Superintendent of Natives, Bulawayo, 27 May 1915 (NAZ S 707, 1911-1923).
- 88 The Native Commissioner who wrote this was also the Assistant Magistrate (Wankie), and he is worth remembering for another slightly less libelous letter that has been preserved for us, this one addressed to the Department of the Administrator, Salisbury (20 April 1915, in NAZ S 707). In this letter the writer (F. W. Posselt) protested the appointment of Miss L. Graham as the new Wankie town Post Mistress. Miss Graham, the 16-year old daughter of a Colliery official, was an "inexperienced school girl, with indifferent control over her tongue." She was no more than "an irresponsible flapper." Picking up mail in Wankie town must have been an interesting experience.
- 89 NAZ GI 1/1/1
- 90 NAZ S 2279/267 Giese.
- 91 His tombstone at M'Bala Lodge says he was 74.
- 92 For example, in *The African World* for 19 February 1916, Vol. 54, p.44.
- 93 NAZ S 707.

- 94 NAZ A 3 27/4/16, folio 63.
- 95 Hwange National Park's long drive along the linear prairie often called the Kennedy vlei in actuality follows the Summamalisha vlei, scene of many nineteenth century ivory-hunters' camps.
- 96 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 42, letter from R. Coryndon to A. Giese, 27 November 1907.
- 97 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 45, letter of 27 November 1907, Coryndon to Giese.
- 98 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 41
- 99 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 93
- 100 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 99.
- 101 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 115, letter of 8 April 1910.
- 102 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 116.
- 103 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 136-139, letter of 31 August 1910.
- 104 NAZ GI 1/1/1, folio 138.
- 105 NAZ GI 1/1/1, vol. 1, letter of 16 December 1909 from Crewe to Giese.
- 106 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 934, letter of 1 March 1912 to Ernest and Florence.
- 107 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 7.
- 108 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folios 1765 and 1767.
- 109 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 1789, p. 36 of his report.
- 110 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 1790.
- 111 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folios 1809-1810, letter to B.S.A.Co. Director of Land Settlement, 12 August 1915.
- 112 This was a relative Sidney Emptage, his sister-in-law's brother. Emptage didn't last long; he came to roost in Plumtree, far enough from Robins to avoid him most of the time.
- 113 Alderson 1933.
- 114 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 1905.
- 115 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 1847, p. 6 of letter of 7/9/28.
- 116 NAZ RO 1/3/15, 13 December 1935
- 117 1934 Rhodesia Annual, pp. 102-104.
- 118 NAZ RO 1/3/1, folio 471, letter of 8 November 1910.
- 119 NAZ RO 1/3/15, 28 November 1935.
- 120 NAZ S 1193/T4/17, P 2/2592, 11 June 1928, p. 2.
- 121 He was once angry enough to tell P.D. Crewe to go to hell. Crewe had said he would like to see 1,000 men hired to shoot every head of game in Wankie District (NAZ RO 1/2/1, folios 1877-1885, letter of 30/12/28 to Mr. Fletcher [Minister of Agriculture]). Robins also made a note to himself in his diary when Crewe's brother Harry and niece Ursula drove by his farm without stopping and did not answer a letter: "must not forget this" (NAZ RO 1/3/13, 31 July 1932). But all in all he was generous in his diary, even about the people who argued the most with him.
- 122 Letter of 26 December 1936, to Secretary, Department of Agriculture and Lands, p. 2 (carbon copy in Hwange National Park Main Camp strong room).
- 123 Letter of 15 December 1936 to Robins (carbon copy in Hwange National Park Main Camp strong room).
- 124 Underlining in original, NAZ RO 1/3/13, 20 November 1932.
- 125 NAZ RO 1/3/16.
- 126 His photograph once hung in the Hwange Main Camp office. A bronze plaque memorializes him in the office courtyard. The information about his nickname came from interviews of 27 June and 4 July 1994 with Penny Nkomo.
- 127 Letter of 23 September 1936, to Mr. and Mrs. Hubbard; Mr. Hubbard was in charge of drilling boreholes on Robins's land, as part of the deed agreement with the government (carbon copy in Hwange National Park Main Camp strong room).
- 128 Letter of 23 September 1936, to Hubbard p. 2 (carbon copy in Hwange National Park Main Camp strong room).
- 129 11 September 1932: NAZ RO 1/3/13.

130 Davison 1967:56.

131 NAZ RO 1/2/1, folio 1845, letter of 7/9/28 to Bulawayo Publicity Bureau.

132 NAZ RO 1/3/16, 5 July 1936.

133 NAZ RO 1/3/16, 21 November - 23 December 1936.

134 NAZ RO 1/3/18, 14 July - 31 August 1938.

135 NAZ RO 1/3/18, 24 June 1938.

136 NAZ RO 1/3/16, entries of October 1936. Harry Crewe was hospitalized several times near the end of his life. The year before he died he had a miserable stay in hospital because he was allowed only 4 tots a day. During his last year of life whiskey was finally forbidden him, but he was allowed to drink French brandy (NAZ RO 1/3/17, entry of 8 October 1937).

137 NAZ RO 1/3/18, 7 August 1938.

138 NAZ RO 1/3/17, 25 December 1937