

If Clark Gable had worked for anyone in *Mogambo*, he would have worked for Ker and Downey Safaris. Rock Hudson in *Something of Value* probably *did* work for Ker and Downey, because that's where Robert Ruark would have put him!

Safari in those long gone golden days was quite a lot different to what it is now. A client like as not could arrive on a steamer, as James ".450" Watts did as late as 1957, or by air - one of those old BOAC Tudors that made the Bermuda Triangle famous (the only real mystery was why any of them ever *arrived* anywhere at all). Rather than bother with a lot of awkward luggage, once you had been collected by your PH, he would take you to an outfitter who would measure you up (the fellow might have also conveniently been the undertaker) and within a day or so your safari kit would have been tailor-made to order. While you were waiting, you would probably be ensconced at the old Norfolk Hotel, and that evening in the bar you might keep a respectful distance from Ernest Hemingway who would be holding forth about that new lad, Harry Selby - "Still wet behind the ears, but he's as good as (Philip) Percival."

Today, no one but pirates travels by ship, and the aircraft are more likely to arrive, but British Airways will have given your firearms to a 500 pound silverback lowland gorilla that they keep in the basement at Heathrow to fine-tune passengers' firearms in transit. You will arrive with all the latest designer kit, and hopefully someone will be able to repair your rifle, the latest proprietary .300 magnum. You will like as not stay a couple of days in the home of your PH, so getting to see Lord Delamere on horseback in the pub of the Norfolk shooting the bottles off the bar (he always settled the bill) will be out of the question. Ah, for the good old days.

Donald Ker was six years old when he arrived at Mombassa, Kenya in 1911. Theodore Roosevelt and his son Kermit had just returned a couple of years earlier from a protracted hunting and collecting safari, but still little was known of the "interior".

Nairobi was still a one-horse town, with muddy streets traversed by ox wagons and rickshaws. In much of what used to be colonial Africa, you can still walk down alleyways today and see rectangular apertures that have long since been bricked up in the walls at the rear of buildings. These alleys in the early 20th century were called sanitary lanes,



*A young Donald Ian Ker and Syd Paul Downey.*

because into these apertures would be placed metal trays containing all manner of human waste - there was very little indoor plumbing. The ubiquitously-named "lavender carts" would come in the dead of night, and the waste would be emptied into their large tank and the trays replaced. Small outbuildings with chimneys marked where fires were built under 44-gallon drums to heat water - a number of the sheds for these old "Rhodesian boilers" can still be seen today in Harare's Avenues district.

The Kers moved into a house in the area known as Groganville. One evening Donald's mother saw a leopard sitting on their verandah, and the remains of lion kills on 6th Avenue - now Kenyatta Avenue - were not uncommon sights as dawn broke over the town. Sensibly, political correctness mercifully being almost a century away, Donald was given his first .22 rifle at the age of 8, and he never looked back. Ammunition was expensive, and Donald learned to carefully stalk the plentiful Thomson's gazelles, keeping the family supplied with meat and selling the surplus rams at five Rupees each - which enabled him to open a savings account at the age of 11.

Repairing an old Model T Ford, Donald at age 16 went on his first elephant hunt, accompanied by a school friend Mike Cottar, son of Charles Cottar who owned Cottar's Safari Service. With tyres showing canvas, they drove 300 miles to the Tana river. As they were following elephant spoor into the bush, Mike Cottar came down with blackwater fever - a serious end-stage of malaria. When they finally managed to get Mike to "civilization" - the tiny outpost at Meru, a military medic administered

copious quantities of the cure of the day - champagne. (The seventh recurrent attack would kill him in Tanzania in 1941.) Within a month, the boys were back on the trail of elephant, and Donald shot his first one in the Lorian swamp.

Donald Ker was apprenticed as a learner accountant, but always yearned for the bush. His age meant that he missed World War I, and by 1928 he was accompanying hunters like Denys Finch-Hatton on safari, with clients like the future King Edward VIII of England. In the 1930's he was apprenticed to Bror Blixen, and it was during this time that he joined Syd Downey of Safariland Ltd. on a number of hunts.

Sydney Downey was Donald Ker's age, and had grown up on the Argentine pampas where his English father was the manager of a large estate. Educated in England during the Great War, Syd Downey could think of nothing other than getting back into the wild places - not necessarily South America - any wild places. As 1925 dawned, his opportunity came, having been sent for by his older brother who was managing a coffee estate just outside of Nairobi.

In 1928, Syd Downey became the first person to ride a motorbike from Nairobi to Mombassa, already beginning to establish a name for himself. He had a natural aptitude for mechanics, which was a very important attribute in Kenya in those days, and one that would see him in good stead later in life.

Syd began hunting professionally in 1930 in the Kedong Valley, and soon ventured into the Masai-Mara - soon to become known as "Hemingway country". During his initial forays into the Masai-Mara, the only tracks



*The historic Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi as it would have been in 1928.*

he encountered were those of Philip Percival - it was totally wild and untamed frontier, for the taking. It was in 1932 that he first became involved with Safariland Ltd., being asked to go along on a hunt into Tanganyika as number two hunter to Percival himself.

Syd Downey and Donald Ker both enlisted in the military on the same day in 1939. Ker served with the East African Reconnaissance Squadron, rising to the rank of captain, while Downey was posted to the Intelligence section, and was later transferred to the 2nd Ethiopian Battalion under General Wingate. He was taken prisoner, but freed with the fall of Addis Ababa, and also finished the war as a captain.

The war had changed the entire world, and though something of a backwater, Kenya was no exception. Because so many fighting men from both sides had seen its potential, there was a boom in immigration, commerce, and tourism. But though Ker and Downey were quick to appreciate the potential, the war years had brought about serious attrition to their equipment and venture capital was scarce. The bush had reclaimed most of the hunting tracks, and fuel and vehicle spare parts were few and far between. But the business was there. Hemingway's *The Green Hills of Africa*, *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, all published before the

war, had awakened a tremendous interest in Africa and safari.

Ker and Downey's first office was in Donald Ker's house, from whence they rented space at the New Stanley Hotel. Their first safari was a film company shooting *The Macomber Affair*, the film adaptation of Hemingway's book, in the Masai-Mara in 1946. Ker and Downey not only outfitted the safari, but consulted for the film, starring Gregory Peck, Robert Preston and Joan Bennett. Far from today's computer-generated special effects, one scene from *The Macomber Affair* had Donald Ker dressed up as a wounded lion with a brown khaki coat over his head! Many a film project followed - *King Solomon's Mines*, *Where No Vultures Fly*, *West of Zanzibar*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *Mogambo*, *The Lion*, *Call Me Bwana*, *Hatari*, *Sammy Going South*, *Mr Moses*, *Cowboy in Africa*, *Gilligan's Last Elephant*, *Ashanti*, *Quest for Fire*, *Sheena Queen of the Jungle* - up to *Out of Africa* in 1986. And that wasn't counting myriad documentaries; Ker and Downey offered the best specialist service anyone could ask for in moviemaking in Africa, though Syd Downey rapidly lost interest and ceded that part of the company's operations to Donald Ker.

As Ker and Downey Safaris grew, both Donald and Syd found themselves more or less continually on safari, so that neither of them was minding the store

back in Nairobi; furthermore they soon discovered that the two of them were not able to keep up with the demand, and over the years they engaged the services of a number of other professional hunters - men like Tony Henley, Andrew Holmberg, Tony Dyer, Harry Selby, Myles Turner, John Souttar Cook, John Sutton, Bill Ryan, John Allan Cook, John Kingsley-Heath, Terry Mathews, Roy Home, Tony Archer, Don Bousfield, David Ommanney, Allan and Dennis Ker and emergent African PH's like Kaduki Akabonyo and Mumo Kumunga. All of these men were big names on the East African hunting scene - some would contract to Ker and Downey, and others would join the firm.

It was also necessary for Ker and Downey to have a more diverse company infrastructure, and this was to include secretarial and administration, as well as hospitality. Before she opened her own secretarial agency, Dorothy Wood handled all of Ker and Downey's correspondence and bookings while the two were in the bush.

A very lucrative partnership emerged between Ker and Downey and local businessman Jack Block, who was the man behind Block Hotels - a necessary ancillary part of the safari business. Jack Block arranged for Ker and Downey's clerical work to be undertaken through Block Hotels, and offered them office space in the New Stanley Hotel. Block

became managing director of Ker and Downey in 1948, having guided the company's business side while Donald Ker and Syd Downey guided the clients.

Following Kenya's 1977 ban on sport hunting, Ker and Downey focussed on photographic and sightseeing safaris, and fishing safaris to the coast. By this time, though, both Donald Ker and Syd Downey themselves had lost interest in the killing side of the business, having watched an awesome and pristine natural wilderness over-hunted and exploited to the point of implosion. For almost twenty years, up until his retirement in 1973, Donald Ker had only conducted photographic safaris; Syd Downey retired the following year, not having guided a hunting safari for fourteen years.

By 1977 very few of the old hands had any problem with hanging up their guns, although it was lost on most of the outside world that while professional hunters like Donald Ker and Syd Downey had plied their trade, the East African Professional Hunters' Association had been successful in maintaining a strict code of ethics and standards. The professional hunters themselves kept poaching very largely contained, and policed themselves. Sport hunting - which could be controlled and regulated - was replaced by poaching, which could not. The initial problem, of course, had been that while game was originally plentiful, very little was known in scientific terms of carrying capacities and population dynamics. Once populations had unwittingly been decimated, a hunting ban was seen as the only way to rectify the problem. Over the last three decades, countries like Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa, which actively manage sport hunting practices have been able to protect their natural history heritage through hunting as a conservation tool. Kenya, having largely stabilized its wildlife populations, has still not learned this lesson.

Donald Ker died at the age of 76 in New Zealand in March of 1981. On the last morning of his life, having travelled halfway across the world to visit his brother Kenneth, he complained after



*A Royal Safari - a young Prince Charles seated in the KD & S vehicle.*

breakfast to his wife Edie of not feeling well, but maintained he was fit enough to continue their journey through the South Island. That evening he suffered a heart attack, and died in the ambulance on route to the hospital. His remains were cremated in New Zealand, and flown home to Kenya where they were scattered over the Masai-Mara.

Sydney Downey passed away aged 78 in Kenya in January of 1983. Syd had had problems during his hunting career with osteomyelitis and sleeping sickness, but had been generally healthy his whole life. In later life, he was operated on for an appendicitis, and as a result had to undergo two further operations for peritonitis. Also diagnosed with a pulmonary embolism, he was discharged to recuperate at home. He collapsed and died, also of a heart attack, on the eve of his thirty-second wedding anniversary.

Ker and Downey Safaris lived on. A fitting tribute to Donald and Syd took form in a number of conservation initiatives. Collaboration between Dr Richard Leakey, then of the National Museums of Kenya and the Royal Geographical Society resulted in Ker and Downey being approached as consultants for the Kora Research Project. The Kora National Reserve was the focus for the project, to conduct an ecological

survey of the *nyika* vegetation and its surrounding habitats. Ker and Downey was a trustee of the project, and supplied much logistical and administrative support. Ker and Downey Safaris has also contributed material support to the Department of Wildlife Conservation and Management, and Rhino Rescue.

A number of prominent PH's continued with the company, undertaking guiding and photographic safaris - men like John Fletcher, David Williams, David Mead, Peter Davey, Anthony Seth-Smith, Nigel Dundas, Allan Earnshaw, Derek Dames, Alan Binks, Dave Richards, Robert Cronchey, Bill Winter and James Robertson all carried on with Ker and Downey after Donald and Syd's deaths. The legendary Harry Selby took the operation to Botswana in 1962 as Ker, Downey & Selby.

Ker and Downey still lives on, albeit as Thomas Cook Travel still survives, but in a markedly different incarnation than old Thomas probably envisaged when he died back in 1892. Today, Ker and Downey is "a USA-based, award-winning luxury tour operator with over four decades of success in the industry." They even offer singles tours. Whether Donald and Syd are spinning in their graves or gazing upon their namesake with ghosts of bemused smiles on their faces is left to you to decide. 🐾