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WRESTLING WITH RHINOS

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA - PART 2

by Dr Jerry Haigh

In Part 1 of Old Africa's condensed version of Jerry Haigh's book **Wrestling with Rhinos**, *the author arrived at the Kabete Vet Lab as an intern and treated a giraffe for foot rot. Here is Part 2 where the author deals with tropical diseases in cattle and learns about the problems of communication by radio-phone. You can order the full book from the author's website www.jerryhaigh.com or from amazon.com*

Tropical Challenges

1965 The daily routine started with a gathering at the clinic office, at which we divided up the day's cases. We usually had two of us on the large animal circuit. The area we covered included a mix of farms, from the small holdings to large farms where dozens of sleek and gentle Channel Island cows, of Guernsey or Jersey breeds, produced high-quality milk for the Nairobi market. We also had other dairy breeds to deal with, and some beef cattle, as well as the odd riding stable that trained race horses.

We paid regular visits to the East African Veterinary Research Organization's research centre at Muguga, some ten miles from Kabete. Here they studied beef cattle management and a large herd of Hereford cattle seemed to need constant attention.

My first visit to Muguga was to see a cow with an eye problem. Our route took us up the main road towards the tea-growing country of Limuru, through an extensive area of small holdings in the so-called Kikuyu reserve. We turned off down a steep scarp to the railway crossing at Sigona and then up to the research station, which had extensive paddocks.

Three cows waited in the corral. One was a Hereford, with the typical reddish-brown coat and white face. The others were large, sleek versions of the rather scruffy native humped cattle. One was a pale dun colour, the other a dark cream. Their large humps wobbled above their shoulders.

"What breed are those?" I asked Paul, the animal health technician travelling with me.

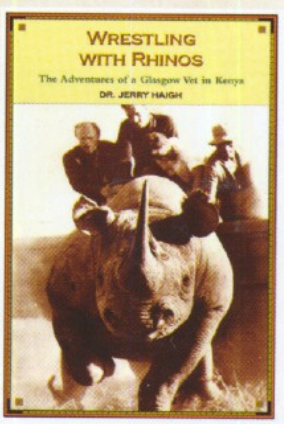
"Those are Boran cattle. Here at Muguga they are comparing the success of these with European breeds."

After the usual greetings, the herdsman said, "We have three cows for you this time, doctor. This grade one (grade cattle referred to breeds of European origin) has a bad eye, and I'd like to know if these other two are pregnant."

The herdsman herded them into the crush, a stoutly built affair made of gum tree logs, and I examined the eyes of the Hereford. Each eye had a small growth in one corner, at the edge of the third eyelid. After Paul placed a couple of drops of local anaesthetic in each eye, I removed the growths with a pair of scissors.

Later, I discussed these animals with Jimmy and Dean McIntyre. "The data are interesting," said Dean McIntyre, or Mac as we definitely did not call him to his face. "The Herefords grow faster and put on much more weight than the Borans. However, the Herefords also tend to get cancer of the tissues around the eye. The lack of pigment on the head makes them susceptible to the effects of the sun. The Borans don't seem to be affected. Growing cattle is not just a question of weight gains and food conversion. Hardiness and immunity are part of the equation."

An easily dealt-with case of eyelid cancer was virtually nothing compared to the host of novel challenges which had faced European cattle owners when they first began to arrive in the early 1900s, bringing their stock with them. Early accounts of farming and ranching describe many problems, including marauding lions, which could devastate a herd once they got the taste for prey that couldn't run nearly as fast as buffalo, antelope or zebra. Lions continued to be a nuisance when I came in the 1960s and in the Mount Kenya area it was not unusual for me to hear of a farmer sitting up in a hide all night waiting for a pride that had already



taken some cattle to revisit the site. Leopards continued to prey on stock as well. One rancher described the leopard to me as "the greater spotted sheep-eater."

Life was not all work, work, work. On Sundays off we could explore. I soon got to Nairobi National Park. It was easy to reach, cheap to enter, and full of fascinating species. Giraffes browsing high up on flat-topped acacias. Wildebeest staring, moving nothing except their tails, until they suddenly snorted, swivelled, and started to move away en masse with a rocking motion. A waterbuck looking strangely unbalanced with one horn broken off close to his skull.

I soon learned that sports, and in particular the sports club, was at the core of social life for most white people - Wazungu or Europeans as they were collectively known. In the middle of the hockey season, some of the other interns and I headed to Kericho for a weekend of games and socializing. We drove past the Muguga turn-off and on up past the country town of Limuru, with its heavily advertised Bata shoe factory. Roadside vendors offered sheep-skins and fruit. Suddenly the road began to drop, and down we went into the Rift Valley. The road twisted and turned as we passed a tiny church and came to the valley floor. The dormant volcanic cone of Longonot rose in front of us. Huge multi-branched euphorbia dotted the plain alongside yellow fever trees. We passed through Naivasha and Gilgil. As we drove by Lake Nakuru, we had a stunning view of the shoreline, which appeared pink because it was edged by up to a million flamingos. Our route led us up to the Timboroa summit, a spectacular climb during which we passed a yellow-and-black sign claiming to be exactly on the equator. Finally we arrived at Kericho, the tea-growing capital of Kenya. Huge tea estates with rolling carpets of bushes seemed to go on forever. In some fields women stood waist-deep among the plants, throwing leaves over their shoulders into large wicker baskets on their backs.

After a weekend of true rural hospitality we headed home and back to reality, and work. Apart from duties in the field service unit, all the interns had responsibilities with the in-clinic animals - cattle and horses that had been admitted for a variety of reasons. A pedigree Aberdeen Angus bull had been trucked all the way from a farm high on the northern slopes of Mount Kenya. The local veterinarian had been unable to help him with his difficulty in breathing, and he had not responded to antibiotics. We too were foxed. Even the dean came down and examined him.

"He sounds as if he's got pneumonia, but it's certainly not typical," he said in his typical brusque manner. "There are fluid sounds throughout his chest. The swelling on his brisket is full of fluid. I've not seen anything like this before. Try him on Penbritin. It's a new product, it may kill any resistant bacteria."

We started him on a ten-day course, but suddenly, on a Sunday morning when I had the misfortune to be on duty, the bull dropped dead. I had completed my rounds of the stables about three hours earlier, and when the barn man came to feed him at 11 am there he was, stretched out on his side. I arranged for him to be shipped for a post-mortem, and on the following morning I reported to the dean.

"What do you mean, dead?" he said. "You were on duty, why didn't you check him to see how he was?"

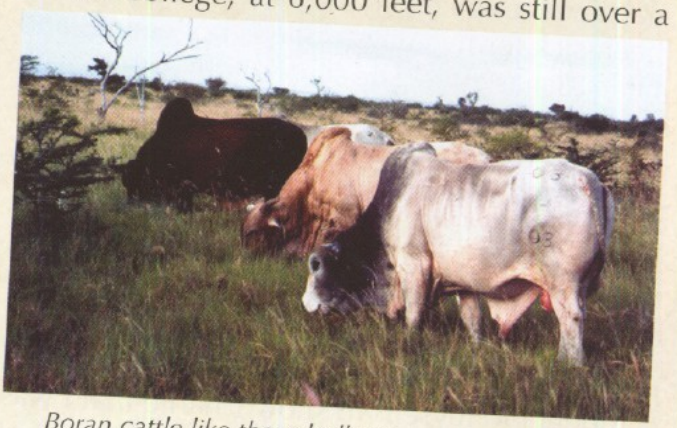
"Oh, I did sir, about 8 am. He was no worse than usual." I had the medical file showing the recorded visit and treatment in my hand.

"Well, you should have checked him more often," he said. Silence was the best option.

The post-mortem determined that the bull had been suffering from a condition known as high mountain disease, or altitude sickness. Some animals, cattle and sheep especially, are unable to manage the thin air at high elevations, and their lungs fill up with fluid. There is usually severe permanent damage if they are not brought down to lower altitude quickly.

He had come from Marania, a farm that lies at an altitude of about 8,000 feet.

The college, at 6,000 feet, was still over a



Boran cattle like these bulls were compared with Hereford cattle at the Muguga research station. (Photo courtesy Jerry Haigh)

mile high, and I wonder if a trip to a truly low altitude would have helped him.

I had the unenviable task of informing the clients of the sudden demise of this expensive imported animal. I had to use the radio-phone. My first try at noon was a failure. The operator said, "Mr Murray will be up on his radio at six o'clock. Call then."

"Hello, is that Mr. Murray?"

A longish pause followed. Then up he came, over a line that was as much extraneous noise as words. "Good crackle zzzzt Haigh. Bzzzz zzzzt say 'over' each time you finish. Bzzzz, this is George Murray. Over."

"Mr Murray. I have some bad news. The Angus bull you sent here last week has died of high mountain disease. Over."

"I only got half of that zzzzzzzzt zzzzzzt understand you to say that the bull has died. Over."

"Yes, that is correct. I will send you a report as soon as it is ready. Over."

Mr Murray's end of the conversation continued to sound like a disjointed mixture of bubble and squeak, with the odd word thrown in. I had no way of knowing how much of my own message was getting through in an intelligible form, but we proceeded as best we could. Finally, the call came to a muddled conclusion.

"Right you are. Zzzzt you for telling me. I look forward to seeing the full report. Over and out."

I later learned that the word that had entered the Swahili language for the radio phone was 'ova-ova' because of the need to shout, "Over, over," to let the other person know it was their turn to speak.

Soon afterwards I got back into the dean's better books with another case. Charlie Kiengo and I went to Limuru to see a cow thought to have pneumonia. The owner said the cow had been sick for five days. "She is not eating, and her milk has gone. She started with a cold, with water coming from her nostrils, but yesterday her eyes became cloudy, and she cannot see."

"What's her temperature?" I asked Charlie, who had already put a thermometer where it would do its job.

"*Mia moja na tano*," he said, testing my Swahili comprehension, just for the devilment.

"A hundred and five. Wow, that's up there," I thought to myself. To show Charlie that I was with him I said out loud in Swahili: "*Kumbe! Moto sana.*"

The 'cold' that the farmer had described had turned into a really nasty runny nose, with crusts over the bare skin on the muzzle, and pus streaked through the mucus. There were several ugly ulcers inside her mouth.

"This cow is very sick indeed, Charlie. I don't think that it will live, whatever we do, but if the farmer is willing I may be able to persuade the dean to buy it as a teaching case. How long has the farmer had this animal here?"

Charlie explained my proposal in Kikuyu, and translated my question. "The cow was born here, and has never left the farm, except to go to the neighbour's for servicing when she wants the bull," was the reply.

The farmer agreed to our suggestion. Back at Kabete I found the head of the field service section, Dr Bill Luke, walking the large animal wards, dapper as usual in blue shorts, with white knee stockings and a white shirt. He leaned over a stable door and stroked his equally white beard. "Jambo, Jerry. What's up?" he asked.

"I think that there might be an interesting teaching case. It may be malignant catarrh, but there is no history of wildebeest contact. I don't imagine there are any wildebeest within 70 miles. The fellow does have a few sheep."

The animal arrived the next day, even sicker than when I had seen her. Mac was delighted and congratulated me generously on spotting the possibilities. By the time the cow died three days later, all the students and faculty had had a chance to examine it, at the dean's insistence.

At that time, no one really understood how this usually fatal disease was transmitted to cattle, although it was well-known to be associated with wildebeest and sometimes cropped up in association with sheep. The Maasai, who had lived among wild animals of the plains for centuries, never let their cattle anywhere near wildebeest at their calving time. The wildebeest never showed any signs of sickness from the condition.

Scientists at the veterinary laboratories in Kabete had worked out a great deal about the wildebeest form of the disease and had shown that a virus caused it. The sheep-associated form was much less well understood. Hence the excitement, when I brought the sick cow in to be studied.

To be continued...

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