

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-14
Kenya & Uganda
Railway

c/o District Commissioner
Bukoba
Tanganyika
East Africa
19 December 1950

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 18, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Some time ago I needed to go from Kampala, Uganda, to Nairobi, Kenya; and since these are two of the few points connected by rail in East Africa I decided to get the experience of a train ride, and double-check all the comment I had heard. Some of my friends had said the Kenya & Uganda Railway was wonderful, but most had belittled the feat of construction and complained of the "dinky coaches and the quaint accommodations and service."

The usual practice in Kampala, for a European wanting to arrange a rail trip, is to send a houseboy to the station with money and a chit. The boy stands in the ticket queue if there is one, and if he has other work waiting back at the house he will generally step aside and allow Europeans to go ahead. Eventually he comes back to the house with a ticket and reservation, and his employer can adjust any error when he arrives at the station a few minutes before train time. Just to see what would happen, I did not send a boy, but tried to arrange this first African rail travel as I would in the States.

First I used the telephone, fingering the dial carefully and listening to hear the relays click, pausing between digits. After three tries I got all the relays to behave properly, and heard a nasal Hindustani accent, with telegraphic noises in the background.

"How do you do, sir. What is it you are wanting?"

"I should like a first class reservation to Nairobi on the next train. Can you give me one - is this the reservation window?"

"Uh - what is it you are wanting, sir?"

"A reservation, first class, a place on the train."

"You are saying what train, sir?"

"The next train to Nairobi. There is a train leaving Monday morning at about ten oclock. That train."

"That train. What is it you are wanting on that train?"

"Never mind. I'll come down to the station physically."

"Phisi cully? Phisi cully? What is it you are want---"

An impression of this method having been obtained, I turned the hotel phone over to the next in line behind me and drove my car the three miles from Silver Springs to Kampala railway terminal.

The station is a long, recent-looking building of brown brick, with a wide, U-shaped driveway leading down and back from the tarmac Kampala Road. The ticket and reservation windows are in the walls of a big archway near the center, near the gates to the passenger platforms.

Inside the ticket window three Africans and an Indian were sitting or leaning, none facing the counter. One was typing and the others were talking, the Africans to one another and the Indian to a friend over the phone. For a moment they took no notice, but after a minute or so a white shirted and shorted African turned around and asked in perfect English what I wanted. He told me yes, there was a train, and if I would get my reservation across the way he would sell me a ticket. After a short wait at the other window I was able to return with the promise of a place on the train and buy a ticket. Then I went back to the reservation window to have the ticket endorsed. The Indian reservation clerk was polite, but extremely deliberate, keeping his back turned to the queue the greater part of the time, writing slowly in his book and on the coach-layout diagrams.

Two mornings later I appeared at the station well before train time. A crowd of willing porters came to the curb to grab my bags. They were uniformed in khaki - not in rags like the station coolies I remembered from India - and they did not fight and shove at one another.

The passenger platform is very long, covered with a roof supported by steel T-members. The arms of the Ts point outward at a dihedral angle so that the roof is concave, draining rainwater into a tightly fitted gutter running down its middle. The pipes carrying this water down are heavy duty cast iron - not the tinny rainpipes which are adequate for the rains in the States. Towards the center of the platform a chart of all the passenger coaches of the day's train was posted, showing by name the location of each first and second class passenger. A large sign hung above asking passengers not to tip the porters, but it seemed to be ignored by all.

The first class coaches were all of the side-aisle variety, with doors for each compartment to the aisle and outside. Leather cushioned seats opposed in the four place compartments; and with the baggage shelf above, each seat could be folded into a two-tier bunk. Mattress, sheets and blankets were available at shillings 2.50 (\$.36); the passenger did not need to furnish his own bedding as in wartime India; and unlike the trains in Japan the bunks had length enough for a six footer. The outside windows, reflecting their design for a railroad astride the equator, were equipped with curtains, Venetian shutters, and wire insect screens - each of which proved on my trip to be more useful than the glass pane.

The walls of the compartments, English style, were covered with various scenic photos, notices of the Railroad Management, and warnings and advice of different sorts. One notice requested the passengers not to give money or food to children begging along the line. It explained that African parents and tribal authorities wished to discourage children from the habit of begging. Another sign warned that compartments should be locked or watched while the train was standing and that articles of value should not be left unguarded. Julian Huxley noted in Africa View that these trains had bottle openers fixed to the walls of the lavatories. I noticed that they were placed almost everywhere - on the compartment walls, in the aisles, and in the lavatories as well.

Leaving the town, the train went through a large area of what is often called the "monotonous green" of Uganda near Lake Victoria. The crowded, aromatic-leaved Australian gum trees seemed to prevail, a tall, hardy tree planted wholesale throughout East Africa - in swamps to help dry them up, on hillsides to keep the soil bound, along roads for shade, and everywhere to supply firewood.¹ Banana plants are next, a different tint of green with huge, broad leaves; and in the scattered uncultivated areas the darker rain forest types occur, with vines, creepers, and large parasitic growths sprouting from crotch and trunk. Cassava, corn, coffee and cotton grow along the tracks, the latter now showing a few white spots. Palm trees - not coconuts - contribute yet another greenish tint. The only brown - a rusty red - is afforded by the sterile, stalagmitic termite heaps, commonly called anthills. Nothing grows on the smaller, new ones; later on they will become clumps of trees or bush. Some landscape brown is also furnished by the walls of the thatched huts, but this too is usually supplied by the termites. Lake-Uganda is fecund, in nearly every sense of the word.

Besides the lush vegetation there is a wealth of birdlife: grotesque hornbills, squeaky, gaudy weaverbirds. And there are plenty of people. The basis for all is water - the rain and steamy vapor which rusts the meter gauge rails and metal ties. Where you have it in East Africa, and where it does not all come down in cloudbursts in a few weeks, you have crowded green things, birds, and people. Where you do not have it you usually have dry, scrub brush, tsetse fly, wild animals, and elbow room.

The first halt, a small station with the usual triumvirate latrine - one little white house for Africans only, a smaller one yet for Asians only, and a tiny one marked Europeans only - had its platform heaped with large logs of the giant African mahoganies. Even these cut logs, apart from their own size, attested to the biological fecundity. The cut ends, and the cuts in the bark, had been daubed with creosote; otherwise, after a few days storage, they would have been honeycombed by termites and other insects.

1. Eucalyptus globulus and eucalyptus saligna.

The train moves past Jinja over the impressive Nile bridge and some rapids which will soon be removed in the construction of a dam. Hundreds of swallows or swifts dart around the moving train, feeding on clouds of insects flushed from its track. The green quickly gives way, beyond the river, to dryer scrub. The sky clears, visibility becomes much better except during the noon hours when syrupy mirage blurs distant objects at ground level. The climbing is steep, for a while, but the engine - with small, strangely-shafted drive wheels, is built for the job. There is no undue strain or labored chugging, even later on when the rails pass over 9,000 feet elevations, earning for the Kenya & Uganda Railway its distinction of being the highest in the British Empire. Before reaching the Great Rift Valley there is a long stretch of plateau. Darkness came before the descent, but from the feel of the train it was curving and swift. The floor of the Great Rift is fairly level, and largely scrub brush and plain.

Coming up the east wall it was daylight: a look back would show the train snaking its way up a series of carved ledges, and a look down revealed the width and flatness of the Valley. The east wall is native land, with small cultivated patches and sheep and goats. Both look like poor, underfed animals; a settler friend told me that the only way of telling native goats from native sheep was to look at their tails. The latter have flatter, down-hung tassels.

From the far wall, the green came back into the countryside, but never so much as in Uganda. The clear, well-kept corn, wheat, and grazing fields of the white settlers could remind one - except for the more brilliant equatorial sky - of Missouri or Ohio or Indiana. Fine, fat Holsteins and Herefords grazed in the meadows - in one case, perhaps rare, I saw a small herd of gazelle mixed in with the dairy cattle. The better cultivated land, with an occasional sisal field with its bayonet plants laid out in military patterns, continued through to Nairobi. This sprawling, unhandsome town, with warehouses, railyard, and crowded native quarter, looked much the same as a few months ago.

I got off into the crowd, taxied over to the Norfolk Hotel, foiling the almost standard attempt at overcharging by checking the distance-price card drivers are required to carry. A week-old telegram was handed back to me and I was sent to the Spread-eagle Hotel some six miles out of town; the Norfolk had been full three weeks ahead, but the desk attendant, with typical intra-European hospitality, had telephoned all the hotels around and found me a room. The Spreadeagle is a larger hotel, and only its name would remind you of the Spreadeagle, Thame, where we gathered last spring. When I arrived there it was too late for me to run any errands or call any of my friends, so I had an early dinner and opened a thick book which I had brought to read on the train. The book was heavy, large, and a rather unspiced recitation of facts about the Kenya and Uganda Railway's history, recently published, entitled Permanent Way (East African Railways and Harbours, Nairobi, Kenya). But the bare facts of the construction seemed very interesting to me; and as I got into the tales of

hardships overcome, hazards of disease, famine, and even man-eating lions I began to give the book the same attention I gave as a child to my father's stories of train wrecks and adventure as a fireman on the Burlington. I think the book would be interesting to anyone concerned with 'comparative transportation' studies, since it tells of the building and operation of a railway through the last great wilderness. It also casts some light upon the difficulties associated with government engineering projects overseas.

All sorts of motives for the building were ascribed. Before the actual building was undertaken in 1896 the idea required a lot of selling. It was argued that a railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria would put an end to the slave trade, halt the raids of Masai warriors on neighboring tribes, and extend British power inland to provide a realistic basis for the protectorate treaty with Uganda. Also, the competitive aspect of getting a railroad into the interior to match the one being built in Tanganyika - then German East Africa - was important. The commercial advantages were less emphasized; most of the arguments were based upon humanitarian or imperial attitudes. Proponents ran head on into anti-imperialists in England, who felt that imperialism and humanitarianism could not exist together. To get the main line, 570 miles, through from the coast to the lake, required not only the mastery of disease and hostile tribes in Africa, but a continuous lobbying and pressure effort in Parliament at home.

Even after the work was begun the project remained under constant attack in the Houses. A Mr. John Burns called the railway "one of the worst of the crazy imperial schemes into which this country has been misled" and a Mr. T. M. Healy, after raging that the estimates for station construction were being exceeded by some £200,000, went on to point out that some sort of 'facilities' would be required at each station, even for Africans. He suggested that, since a succession of bridges had been named the Salisbury, the Devonshire, and the Chamberlain, it would be quite appropriate to honor the railway's leading supporter Lord Rosebery by christening the leading imperial lavatory "The Roseberry."

Other 'home' obstacles should be familiar to people living in East Africa now. Strikes in England delayed deliveries of rails and engines, and labor difficulties also affected shipping. (Any who have thought American industrial influence unfelt in Victorian Africa can note that 36 out of 92 locomotives, in 1900, had been supplied by American companies; also that the steel work of 22 large viaducts on the ascent and descent of the Mau Range were erected by the American Bridge Company's engineers).

The local difficulties, however, seem more interesting. They included a rebellion of Sudanese troops; a rinderpest epidemic and resultant famine, so that feeding the force of more than 15,000 Indian coolies became a severe problem; the death of nearly all the animal transport upon which the early building parties relied; the unpredicted, seasonal rainfall which in one place caused an 18 inch

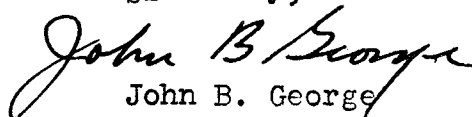
culvert to have to be replaced by a 40 foot span; and the killing and terrorizing of personnel by maneating lions. In march of 1899 an engineer named O'Hara was dragged outside his tent and killed in the presence of his wife; a year later the Superintendent of the Railway Police was taken from a coach and killed. These were in addition to the victims listed in Colonel Patterson's The Maneaters of Tsavo, a railway engineer's adventure story which became a big game hunting classic. These two lions had previously brought the construction work to a complete standstill for three weeks.

By 1905, at a cost to the British taxpayer of nearly eight million pounds, the permanent main line was completed to the Lake. For about two decades it operated on a very casual basis; schedules meant little; trains would halt to allow passengers to shoot at game; and passenger fares often were not even collected. Management was altered and this condition was bettered during the twenties, after a delay while the railway played a decisive role in the capture of German East Africa, but much remained to be done. World War II set everything back except profits; the road had all the business it could handle but there was no replacement of the rolling stock. The post war period has seen some improvement, but there are many visible faults. Slowness is one of them - it took me thirty hours to travel 436 miles to Nairobi.

The Kenya and Uganda Railway no longer exists as a managing body. In May, 1948 it and the Tanganyika Railways and their associated harbors and shipping services were absorbed into the East African Railways and Harbours administration. This administration is huge (a branch of the High Commission, or interterritorial government of Tanganyika, Kenya, and Uganda) and responsibility is very difficult to trace through its channels. Very few of the administrative officers, district commissioners and others I have met, have been satisfied with the way the organization seems to work. Even its own employees are slow to defend it.

The original humanitarian and imperial purposes have been achieved; the railway ended the slave trade and established the supremacy of Britain in East Africa. Also, the venture was financially successful and it enabled the European settlers to move in greater numbers to the central highlands of Kenya. Some say now, though, that the railway has become the worst kind of a vested interest. It is accused of misusing monopoly rights to block truck haulage competition, while furnishing only mediocre service itself. The remote control from Nairobi is said to have promoted an attitude of 'the customer is always wrong.' Most Africans seem to dislike it most because it brought in Indian labor, which stayed on and multiplied. For the many here who are seeking something to blame for the present racial-cultural mess, the railway is an excellent choice - much better than blaming one another, it would seem.

Sincerely,


John B. George

Received New York 1/12/51.