INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RFG - 14
Serengeti Turnpike

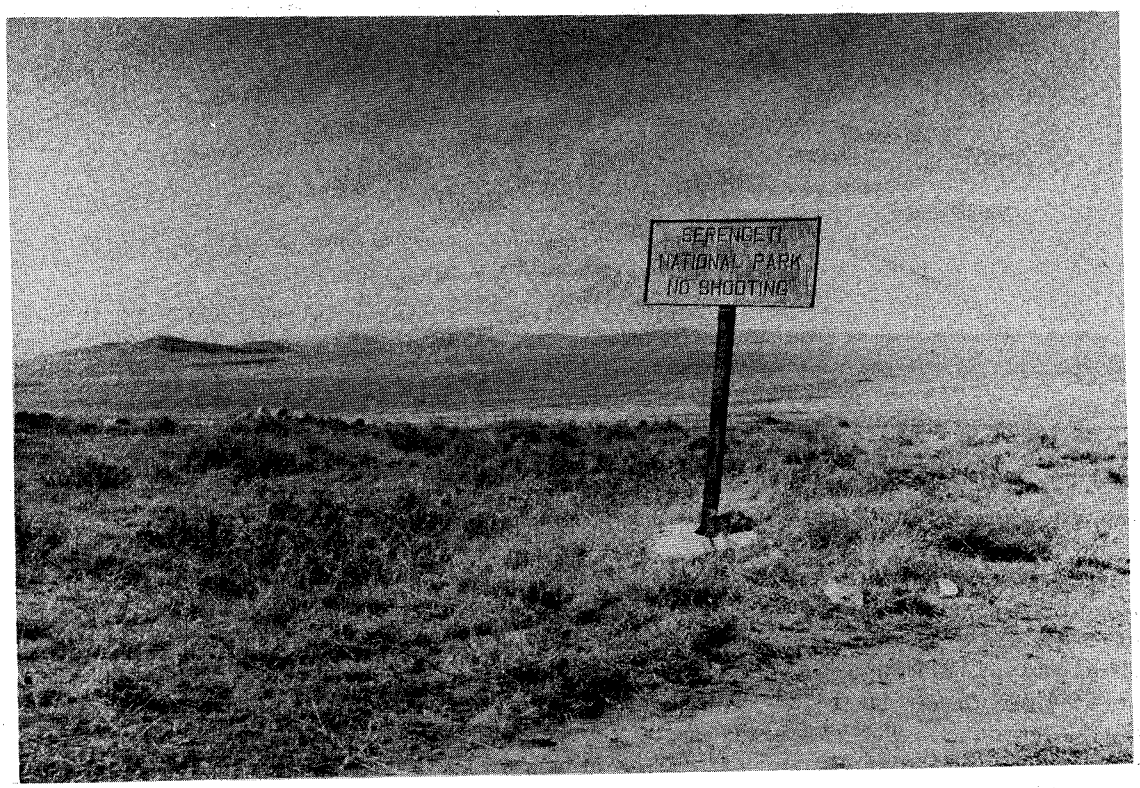
c/o Barclays Bank
Arusha, Tanganyika
September 16, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N.Y.

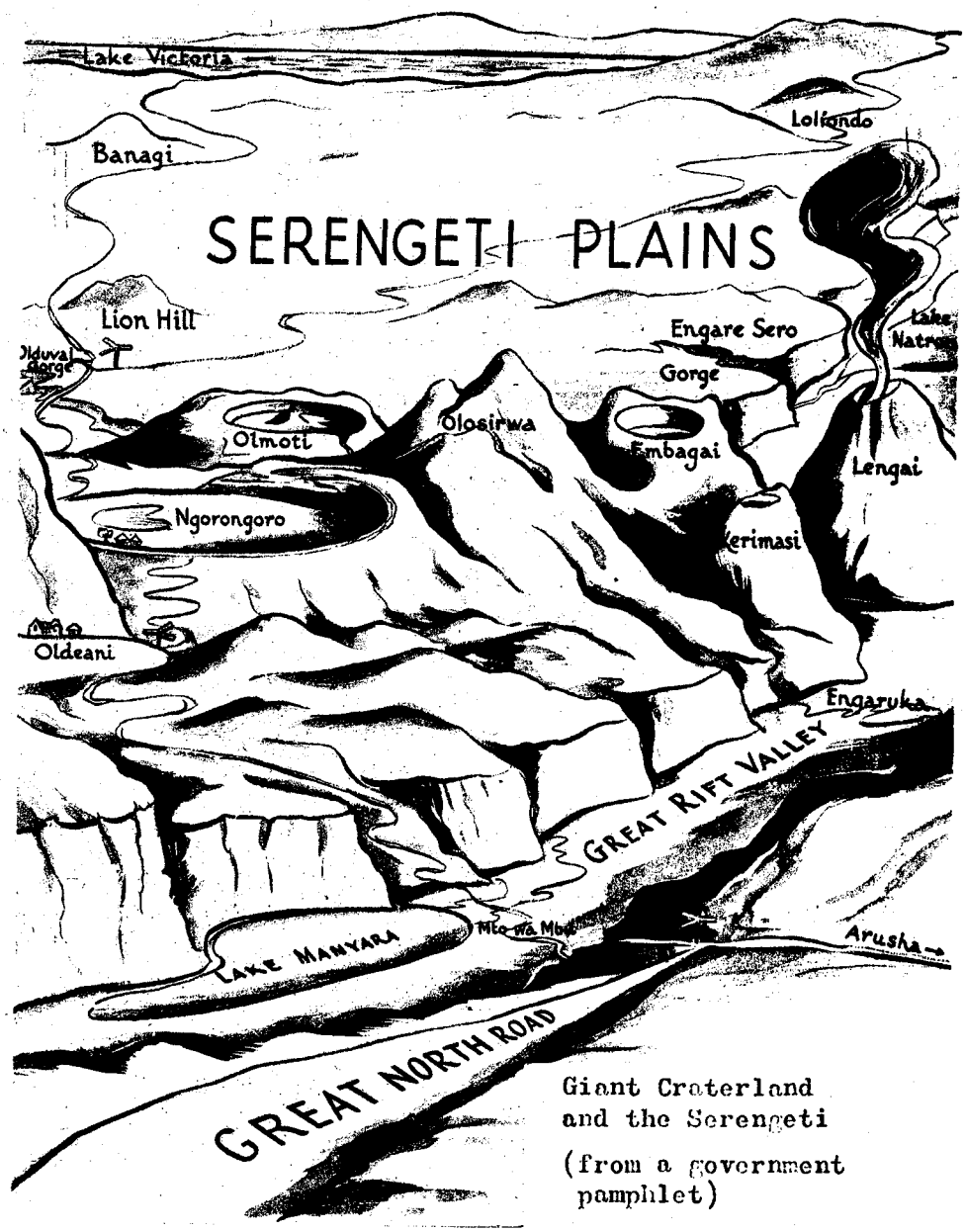
Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Take along five gallons of extra petrol in case you get lost, and ten gallons of water. Most of the driving will be done in low gear, and your car is sure to boil. I hope it is dustproof, because there is a following wind both ways, and you travel in your own dust cloud." With these cautions, the D.C. Masai District ended the interview, having given his official blessing to our plans for driving to the northwest corner of Masai District in Tanganyika for the purpose of visiting the Sonjo Tribe.

I was less intimidated by his dire description of the journey than I might have been several months earlier. In the meanwhile I had traveled up and down the Great North Road in rain and sunshine; had explored many of the dubious bush roads leading from it in Mbulu and Kondoa Districts; had crawled up the Rift Escarpment at three different places; had forded steams, been stuck in the mud, and passed with trepidation over the most rickety bridges. In short, I was secretly confident that I knew all about African roads. But crossing the Serengeti Plain has been a new chapter in my driving career.



Serengeti Plains from the North



Giant Craterland and the Serengeti (from a government pamphlet)

Betty and I have now made the crossing three times, and so far the D.C.'s worse predictions have not come true. Our Chev Carryall has not yet boiled away its water or run out of gas, but it has hit bottom on rocks, floundered in sand, and given us some moments of anxiety.

Although the distance from Arusha to Sonjo is only about 250 miles, it takes us most of three days to make the journey. The first and easiest stage is to Ngorongoro. Following the familiar Great North Road for fifty miles out of Arusha, we turn off at Makuyuni and cross the Rift Valley to Mto-wa-Mbu which is located under the Rift Escarpment at the north end of Lake Manyara. The shore of Lake Manyara between Mto-wa-Mbu and Mbugwe has long been a favorite area for big-game hunting, but very recently it was declared a "protected area." During our first trip to Sonjo we passed the

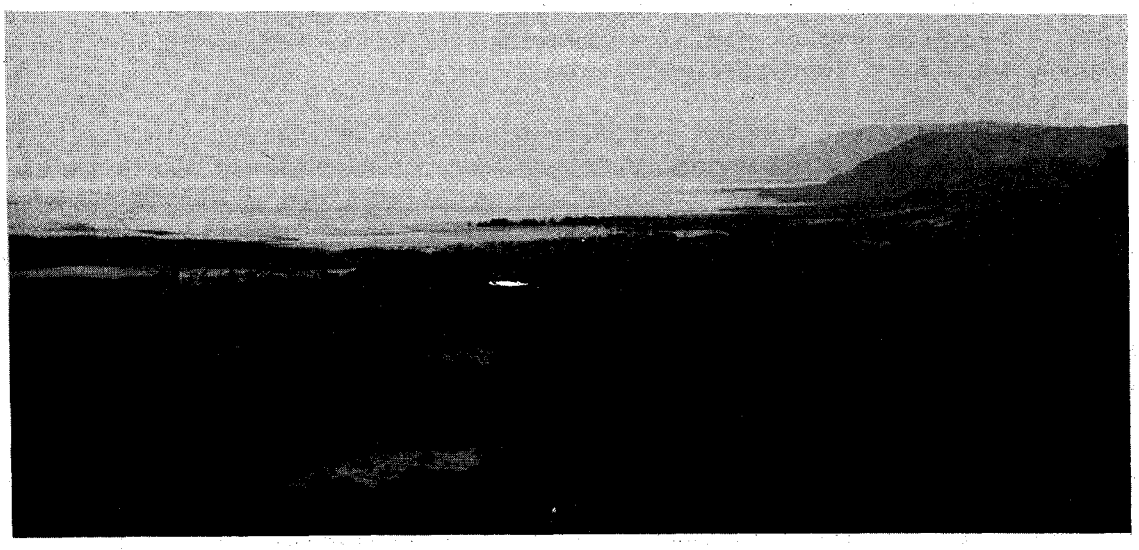
tents of the movie company which is making the film "Tarzan." The cool green jungle near Mto-wa-Mbu evoked nostalgic memories of other Tarzan movies that I had enjoyed at a more impressionable age.

After crossing the verdant but narrow Mto-wa-Mbu valley, the road abruptly climbs the Rift Escarpment, which at this comparatively low pass is 1,500 feet high. After gaining altitude one starts getting glimpses of Lake Manyara while negotiating the steep hairpin turns. Lake Manyara is the southernmost of a string of lakes--Natron, Naivasha, Rudolph, and some smaller ones--which are located in the Eastern Rift Valley. The waters of these lakes have no surface outlet, and hence they are salty and alkaline. The rainfall over an enormous area of East Africa drains into these lakes and never reaches the sea. Just after the rains, Lake Manyara is a broad sheet of water extending thirty by fifteen miles, but, except for swamps at either end where permanent streams enter, the water soon evaporates under the hot sun or sinks into the ground leaving a crust of alkaline salt. When we first drove up the Mto-wa-Mbu Escarpment in August the salt was still dazzling white, having the appearance of a frozen Minnesota lake after a fresh snowfall.

Above the Escarpment the road crosses the Mbulu Plateau, a cool rolling country with fertile, dark-red soil. To the north and west appear mountains piled on mountains merging with the clouds at 10,000 feet and more. This is the fantastic Giant Craterland of Tanganyika, a tangle of massive volcanoes, some of which are still occasionally active. Where the road skirts Oldeani Mountain one sees the broad wheat fields of the European farms which constitute the "bread basket" of Tanganyika. Then the road starts climbing steeply again, and soon it is shaded by the lofty tropical rain-forest interspersed with glades of lush green pasture. On our first trip we passed a herd of elephants in one of these glades walking in single file a hundred yards from the road. On another trip a group of buffaloes were lying along the road sunning themselves. These animals know they are safe on the rim of Ngorongoro Crater, because it is within the Serengeti National Park where shooting is strictly prohibitive.

We broke our journey at Ngorongoro, arriving at the tourist camp in mid afternoon. This camp, consisting of a dozen log cabins, is well booked up on weekends and holidays by visitors who spend several days viewing the abundant animal life in the floor of the crater and the surrounding forest. The crater of Ngorongoro (correctly a "giant cauldron") is twelve miles in diameter and the largest in the world. The flat floor, which is 2,000 feet below the nearly circular rim, contains an alkaline lake and a small forest surrounded by grasslands which support large herds of game and also some cattle. Attempts by the Park Administration to remove the native cattle which were traditionally herded there were strongly resisted by the Masai, and so far the eviction order has only been applied to native cultivators. During our few hours of leisure at Ngorongoro we climbed half way down the rim and studied game through our binoculars.

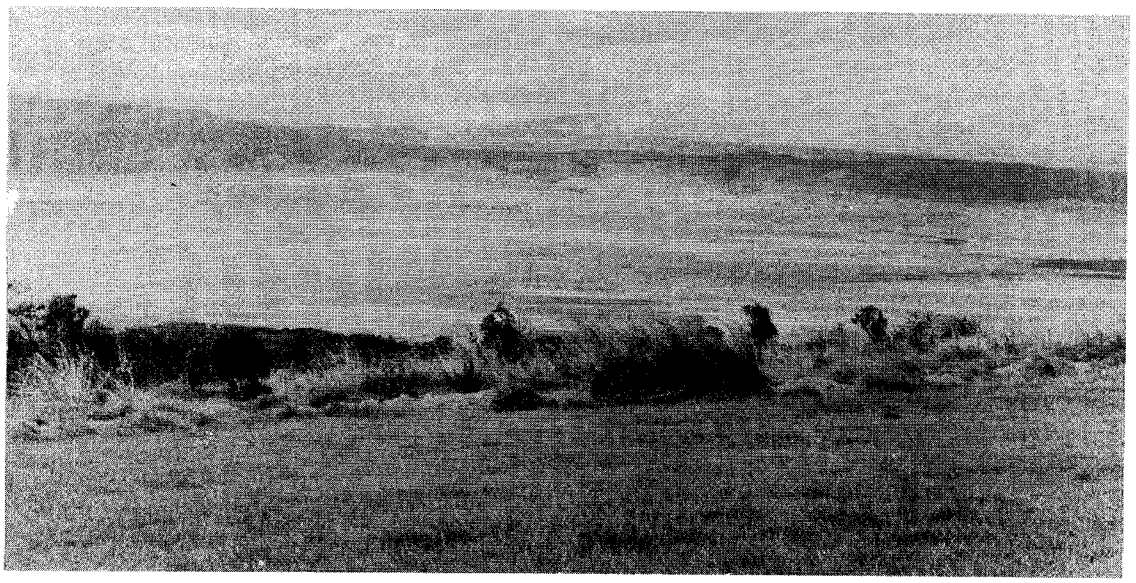
We left Ngorongoro the next morning in swirling mists after picking up a young Masai who had been appointed by the D.C. to guide us across the Serengeti to Loliondo. The road follows the rim of the crater for a few miles, then descends abruptly to the sunlit plain below. My first experience of the Serengeti road was sobering. The main track through the sandy soil was so deeply rutted that my car frequently scraped bottom. I soon pulled out of the main track, as I noticed others had done before, and followed a new parallel



Lake Manyara from Mto-wa-Mbu Escarpment

track. Although the grade was gently down hill as far as Olduwai Gorge, my speed was reduced to ten miles an hour or less. The wind from behind blew slightly faster and carried my own dust ahead of the car, so that at times I could not see the road. I discovered that, wherever possible, it was best to leave the track altogether and drive over the short dry grass of the plain. In that way I was able to increase my speed enough to keep ahead of the dust most of the time, but ran the risk of hitting a concealed rock or pot hole. After a few cars have passed over the same track, the grass disappears and the track is churned up into bumpy sandy ruts which greatly impede speed. Then a new track is started. In crossing ravines and rocky outcroppings I had to return to the main track and plow and bump through in extra-low gear.

Twenty-five miles from Ngorongoro we crossed Olduwai Gorge which Dr. L.S.B. Leakey and other excavators have found rich in fossils and archeological material. Just beyond Olduwai Gorge the road forks, one branch leading northwest to Serenera, where there is another tourist camp, and thence to Musoma on Lake Victoria; while the branch which we followed continues north to Loliondo. After that we encountered a new phenomenon in the "Shifting Sands." To describe them I quote from a government tourist brochure extolling the wonders of Serengeti National Park. "Consisting of formations of very fine black sand, almost identical with that used by moulders in steel works, they are shaped like a crescent and move several yards a year. When rubbed by the hand they give out a strange sound and during high winds there is a steady moaning noise. It is because of this moaning noise that the area has been given a bad name by the local African inhabitants. These Sands are well worth a visit." I will only comment that except for the Masai, who graze their cattle here during the wet season, the nearest "inhabitants" are forty or fifty miles away. As for the "bad name" of the Shifting Sands, that can be easily explained without reference to the sound they make: cars get stuck in them. Some fifteen or twenty of these long thin dunes cross the road at intervals of from a quarter of a mile to a mile. The first ones were small, and we sailed through on momentum. Then an ominously large one loomed ahead. I struck it at full speed but stuck fast. It took the four men of our party two hours to get the car out. Embedded in the shifting sands we found a mat



Looking across Ngorongoro Crater from the Tourist Lodge

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of thorn twigs indicating that other vehicles had been stuck there before us. I found that the main track through these dunes was impassable for my car. It was necessary to stop and reconnoiter a new track for all but the smallest.

Leaving the Shifting Sands behind, the road enters a vast undulating plain of grass extending as far as the eye can reach, with no tree or shrub breaking the horizon. The grass was very short and dry and brittle. Except for a few Grant's gazelle we saw no living thing for thirty miles. During the dry season there is no water in the 120 miles between Ngorongoro and Loliondo. Grant's gazelle seem to be able to exist for long periods far from a source of water. On first seeing this plain I hoped it would be possible to drive over the short grass at a good speed and make up lost time, but I had not reckoned on the game tracks which cross the road every fifty or hundred yards. During the rainy season great herds of game come to the Serengeti Plains to eat the fresh grass. Apparently these animals move in long parallel files which leave deep furrows in the ground. The tracks must be crossed slowly by cars to avoid breaking springs.

If it has no other virtues, the Serengeti road, like the Pennsylvania Turnpike, is at least free of traffic problems. During our three crossings we only met one other vehicle--a large truck which sailed by half a mile to the west of our track, like a ship passing at sea. There is no single road, but rather a half-dozen or more tracks that fan out widely on smooth stretches and funnel together to cross ridges and stream beds. As a rule, only large trucks or Land Rovers (the British version of the Jeep) attempt to cross the Serengeti. Trucks with double rear wheels and high clearance seem to prefer to follow the well-worn tracks. Our car, having comparatively soft springs, did best over the grass.

As we started ascending to the highlands of Loliondo, the character of the country changed. Trees and bushes appeared again and a variety of

game could be seen. The road now became a single track, with one or two alternative routes through bad places. For the last fifteen miles into Loliondo there were signs of road building and repairing--ditching, grading, and spillways. Over the Serengeti there is no attempt at road maintenance. The general opinion is that it would be futile to build any kind of road there short of a tarmac road, which, in view of the light traffic, would be prohibitively expensive.

Arriving at Loliondo with a gallon of gas to spare, we removed the thick layer of dust from our faces, had dinner with the D.C., and slept at the rest house. Loliondo is the administrative post for the northern part of Masai District. It consists of two dukas run by Sikhs, a primary school, a dispensary, a prison, and the usual government offices and houses. Normally there are only two or three European officials stationed there. But to meet the danger of Mau Mau terrorists coming over the Kenya border several miles away, a special border patrol has recently been organized. This consists of five strategically located posts, each under the command of a European police officer. The posts are manned by contingents of regular police and Masai deputies. On the day after our arrival we were taken around the patrol posts by the officer in charge of Mau Mau defences. Each post has twenty Masai volunteers and a few regular policemen. Half of the Masai are armed with shotguns and carry out organized patrols with the police. The other ten Masai are armed with spears and serve mainly as intelligence agents, visiting the different Masai bomas in the region in search of information about Mau Mau activities.

On the following morning we filled up with expensive gasoline, made last minute purchases from the dukas, and started on the last lap of our journey.

Serengeti Road

Sonjo is fifty miles from Loliondo and we made the trip in three and a half hours, which included a couple stops to shoot guinea fowl. The road was better on the average than the Serengeti road and we had no serious difficulty.

We made the return trip to Ngorongoro without a guide. I was apprehensive in starting because we had been warned of the danger of losing the road or following a false track. However, I roamed widely over the plain and had no trouble at all. Arriving at Arusha, we made preparations to return to Sonjo for a stay of several months. On the second trip the car was loaded very heavily with camp equipment, food, and books. As we had made the north-south crossing safely without a guide, I was fully confident this time that I could keep to the road, though we had been warned against following several tracks which branch off and lead nowhere. These tracks, which represent efforts to discover better routes or which once led to Masai settlements that are no longer inhabited, all fork off from the main road to the northeast. Driving southwards, if you hit these roads while roaming over the plain they can not lead you astray, for they eventually join the main road. But if they are followed on the northward crossing they gradually lead you away into the wilderness. This happened to us several times on our second trip. I would notice that we were veering more and more to the East and that we were approaching unfamiliar hills. Realizing that I had left the main road, I then had the choice of regaining it by retracing my steps or by cutting cross-country to the northwest.

We found ourselves in this situation about halfway across the Serengeti and decided to cut cross-country. All went well till we came to a particularly big dune of shifting sands which measured some four feet high by thirty feet wide. There seemed to be only one pass through the dune and it was badly drifted with sand. I lunged the car at it but stuck less than halfway through. This was at eleven o'clock in the morning. We spent the rest of the day trying to back the car out of the sand. Fortunately we were near a patch of thorn bushes which we cut to put under the back wheels, pricking and cutting our hands in dozen of places on the wait-a-bit thorns, which are like tiny fishhooks. But the black sand seemed bottomless and the thorn twigs simply washed out. We dug the sand from underneath the car, but the back wheels dug down until it was again resting on its belly. After four or five hours of this work I began to despair of ever extricating the car without mechanical help. We did not know how far we were from the main road or when the next vehicle would pass. It was Saturday afternoon, and the weekly mail truck from Arusha would not pass till the next Thursday. In fact we had been advised to make the crossing just ahead of the mail truck so that if we broke down help would be at hand. Early in the afternoon we had unloaded the car to lighten it, and to top our anxiety had discovered that the jerry-can of extra water had sprung a leak and that only a gallon and a half of water remained. Ngorongoro was two day's walk across the desert and Loliondo was at least three days away.

These thoughts inspired me to new mental and physical exertions. We went to work with our panga on the largest of the thorn shrubs and hacked out a pole to use as a lever against the front bumper. It was of no use because the sand gave way under it. Another pole was cut to serve as a fulcrum. Betty put the car in reverse, while Thomas (our rather puny cook) and I heaved mightily on the lever. Inch by inch the car ground its way backwards. Finally, just as the sun disappeared behind the purple hills, the back wheels found solid ground and the car lurched out of the clutching

sand. We gave a shout of victory, then made a big fire and drank cups and cups of tea, ate sandwiches, and went to sleep under the glorious African sky lulled by the steady moaning noise of the shifting sands. The next morning we found the main road only two miles away, and except for a stretch of mud caused by an unseasonable shower we arrived uneventfully at Loliondo in time to make Sonjo the same night.

I am still wary of the Serengeti, but feel that I have come to grips with some of its tricks. From Loliondo a road goes to Narok in Kenya and from there to Nairobi. It is seldom traveled and is reputed to have pitfalls which are unknown on the Serengeti. Betty and I have been talking about going to Nairobi for a week end soon. If we decide to take the Narok shortcut I may be sending more motoring news in a later letter.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Gray

Robert F. Gray

Written at Sonjo Camp

Received New York 9/27/55.