

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 5  
Meet the Cunninghams

42 Fereday Drive  
Eastlea,  
Salisbury,  
Southern Rhodesia  
August 27, 1953

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
c/o Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

May I introduce our friends, Ken and Irene Cunningham. Ken is the popular sales manager of Fuzey & Diss Motor Co.--he sees that the trickle of Morris Cars (Oxfords, Minors, MG's, and Morris Sixes) that come to Salisbury move smoothly through his company's showrooms onto Salisbury's streets and onto the strip roads that bump and hump their way overland through the bush and granite boulders to Umvuma, Umtali, and Que Que. He would be the first to tell you that he is just an ordinary fellow, no different from people like him in Gatooma and Gwelo.

If he knew that I was writing a letter for the Institute of Current World Affairs about him and his family he would first laugh, as though I were kidding. Then he would josh me a bit about being crazy. And then he would forget about it and go on with his life in the usual manner--boiled eggs for breakfast, inventories at the office in the morning, meeting Irene for lunch, sales at the office in the afternoon, and then home for dinner, cooked to perfection ("The new houseboy is a wonder--only hope he stays"). In the evening he would relax as usual in his lounge (living room) with his feet up and try to coax a few American radio programs from his ornate radiogram--while "Renee" (rhymes with beanie) sits across the room tapping the tip of her pen against her teeth, writing a letter to their daughter, Anne, at school in the Union of South Africa.

They are very usual people. They are pleasant, generous, and genuinely glad to see us. Ken wears brown or grey business suits with a sweater under his coat and a silk necktie patterned with tiny "MG's" or the Morris coat of arms. He likes his white shirts well starched and in between houseboys complains that his collars never look right. He is about 5 feet 10 inches tall and is picking up a slight bulge under the sweater. He wears rimless glasses and a well-trimmed, sandy moustache and carries himself very straight. He probably votes for the conservative United Party.

Renee says he looked "beautiful in his uniform." Now he is well into middle-age. From the distance his face looks ruddy. But when you come close to him you see that the red color in his face comes from tiny red lines and blotches that a physician could diagnose in a minute. I can only guess they come from living a day-to-day, tiring life for a long time, with only a prospect of more of the same in the future.

We first met him in Bulawayo. When our Comet landed at Livingstone it was several hours late, and we were whisked abruptly into a two-motored, Central African Airways transport, bound for Bulawayo. When we had found a safe spot for Julie's bottle bag and had fastened ourselves into our seats, we found we

were facing an attractive, dark-haired woman and an effervescent young girl who was obviously the woman's daughter. They laughed when Julie tried to order Bourbon from the stewardess and had to settle for Scotch.

In a short time we had struck up a shouted conversation over the roar of the engines. They lived in Salisbury, it seemed, and wouldn't we come to visit them when we got settled? Mrs. Cunningham and Julie swapped addresses and small talk about flying and the Comet (Mrs. C. had never been on the Comet, although she knew all about it from the accounts of the Queen Mother's arrival at Salisbury in the newspaper). In no time at all we saw the lights of Bulawayo's city of prefabricated houses thrown up to accommodate crowds at the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition and we were landing on a grass airport and jouncing up to the low line of airport buildings.

We lost sight of the Cunninghams until we were standing at the airlines desk arranging for our continuing flight to Salisbury and trying to explain about our overweight luggage. It was paid for as far as Livingstone, it seemed, but we would have to pay 12 shillings more to take it on to Salisbury. I reached in my pocket, but the cupboard was bare--all I had was 14 American dollars--and dollars were no good. I explained that we had had no time to change the dollars to pounds and shillings, but it was no good. We needed shillings.

Then Ken Cunningham came to our rescue. He offered us 12 shillings. We said no, he said yes, we said no, he said yes, and finally we had to say yes or spend the night in overcrowded Bulawayo.

They stood and talked with us while our transportational difficulties were being ironed out. Ken muttered something about "fighting the battle of Detroit during the war" and "just paying you back for some of the hospitality I enjoyed in the States." He had driven the 280 miles from Salisbury to Bulawayo to meet Renee and Anne who had flown from Salisbury to Livingstone to visit Victoria Falls. They were going to spend the next few days at the exhibition, where Ken was in charge of the Morris exhibit, and then drive home. We would see them then, they promised.

And then they said good-bye, bustling out of the lighted (and unusually gay) airport waiting room into the darkness and their Morris Minor, chattering in a family way. Suddenly we felt very lonely.

We saw them again a week later. We found that we needed a car desperately--and since we had to see Ken to thank him and return his 12 shillings, we decided to kill two birds with one stone. We walked the four blocks to Puzey & Diss, picked our way through a glittering array of Morris cars and into Ken's office. Over the door was a sign, "K. Cunningham," but there was nothing more to indicate he was an executive. No receptionist, no secretary--not even a closed door. From his cubby hole of an office you look out over the tops of fifteen or twenty automobiles. We returned the money, then told him we wanted to buy a car and described our wants.

"Well," he said, "what you want is a Morris Oxford. But I don't want you to just take my word for it. Let's go and see what the other places have to

offer." For the next two hours we traveled from one show room to another--Ken standing to one side talking to a fellow sales manager while we talked to a salesman. In the end we bought a Morris Oxford--and began to see more of Ken and Renee Cunningham.

They came to our house one evening for "sundowners"--cocktails to us--and Ken told us of his visit to America during the war. He had been sent to Detroit to learn about engines as part of lend-lease. "I learned more there and enjoyed myself more than I had in ten years in England," he said. "I told myself that when the war was all over I would go back to England, begin manufacturing, and use all these techniques I had learned."

All the while he was talking he was fighting a silent battle with Cleopatra, the cat we inherited with the house. Ken doesn't like cats, and he was unknowingly sitting in Cleo's chair. When people sit there Cleo takes it for granted that the only reason they are making a lap is for her to sleep in it. You must imagine this conversation punctuated by Ken's useless efforts to keep the cat on the floor without making us think he disliked her.

"I was in the desert when Rommel was making such a fuss," he said. "Of course I was behind the lines in a motor repair depot, but there were always jerry planes to make things hot for us. Then I went to the States, and how I loved it. Ask Renee if I didn't. I used to write her letters about how things were and what I was going to bring her when I came home." And when Ken did come home he brought things that symbolized America to him. He brought a set of Community silverplate because of the advertisements featuring the beautiful young girl with stars in her eyes greeting the handsome young man home from the wars. He brought a complete outfit of clothing for Renee and some suits for himself. And he brought Nylon stockings.

American know-how impressed Ken tremendously. When he returned to England he tried to introduce American methods in the small machine shop he helped to manage. But he could not get the necessary machines and the forms and questionnaires he had to fill out to change his manufacturing processes depressed him to such an extent that he soon gave up the idea. "There we were, back in the same old rut," he said. "Finally I couldn't stand it any more so I sold out and came here."

With Anne and Renee he went to the Union and went to work for the Morris agency in Durban. After a few years he was transferred to Southern Rhodesia and Salisbury's Puzey & Diss as assistant sales manager. Now he is sales manager and has his sights set on becoming factory representative in Canada.

He has not lost that attitude of "one eye to present business and the other eye to making things better" he says he acquired in the United States. On the way back from Bulawayo and the Exhibition an auto passing in the other direction on one of the strip roads threw up a stone which smashed Ken's windshield.

Windshield glass here is made so that it does not shatter, but merely bends, sending a thousand cracks through the glass which "frosts" it and makes it opaque. Ken had to stop, break a hole in the glass to see through, and continue with the cold night air whistling into his face. The next day Renee came down

with a cold.

After checking at other auto agencies to see how many windshields are replaced each week because of flying stones, he went to work and invented a plastic windshield screen which is shatter- and crackproof, perfectly transparent, and is tinted to filter the sun's glare. When he had finished his design he applied for a patent, visited a machinist he knew, and is now in the windshield screen business. In a few weeks his first screens should be on the market.

We used the American silverware to eat a Sunday dinner with the Cunninghams not so long ago. They live in an average apartment building called Avon Park on the north side of Salisbury. Anne was on vacation from school and we were going out to watch polo that afternoon. Before lunch we sat in the lounge in overstuffed chairs and watched Ken's collection of tropical fish glint and glimmer back and forth in a large tank set on the window sill. The room seemed bare to us. There were no pictures on the wall and the only furniture was the sofa, two overstuffed chairs, and the dining room table. Along one wall of the room was a very elaborate piece of furniture which, I learned later, was the radio-gram (or radio-phonograph). It was as long as the couch, about waist high, and very heavily carved. It had separate compartments for the radio, the phonograph turntable, and record storage.

After Ken had poured us each a dollop of sweet sherry we sat and talked. It was one of those times that the Cunninghams were between houseboys so Renee flitted in and out setting the table and Ken talked about the sorry condition of his shirt collars. After a few minutes Anne came in and put some records on the machine. Vic Damone sang a few bars of "I'm Walking Behind You" and then Ken made her turn it off.

Anne and Julie began comparing schools and Ken and I talked about America. "There's one thing I want to do more than anything else," he said. "I want to take Renee ~~back~~ to America and show her around. I want to buy a caravan (trailer) and drive across the country and let her see it--the whole thing." Ken figures the best way to get to the United States is to get to Canada first and then move south. British subjects are strictly limited as to the amount of pounds they can take from the sterling area. But if Ken could get sent to Canada by the Nuffield Co., makers of Morris Cars, he would have solved the whole problem.

"I've dropped a word or two here and there about being sent over," he confided, "but nothing's happened so far."

He has an expansive admiration for things American. American cars are the only ones that can stand up to punishment. American cigarettes are the only kind to smoke and still expect to use your throat for breathing. American food is the only food for a civilized man to eat.

"How are you at chocolate chiffon pie?" he asked Julie. "Oh, if I could only get back to the States and find myself a piece of chocolate chiffon pie."

He is not wealthy. With his salary and the small amount Renee earns as a clerk at a local real estate agency they can just afford to live in their

small apartment and send Anne to a good girls' boarding school in the Union. Anne wants to go to a University next year when she graduates, but Ken can only say "We'll see."

He drives a small car--which doesn't belong to him but is a Puzey & Diss demonstrator. He is proud of its color--maroon--because it is the only maroon Morris Minor in all of Southern Rhodesia. He is proud of their newly-acquired dachshund because it is one of the few dachshunds in Southern Rhodesia.

He has not had a new dinner coat since 1938. I found this out when I had to borrow it to attend a government house reception. He is toying with the idea of buying a movie camera like our Kodak Brownie (\$39.75), but he can't right now. "We just can't afford it."

He has what I call a keen sense of his position in life. When we invited him and his wife to our house for canasta the other evening he accepted readily. Then, very cautiously, he asked whether we also had invited the Soames's. Bob Soames is one of the Puzey & Diss salesmen, subordinate to Ken. When we said we hadn't, his face broke into a relieved smile. "Oh, good," he said. "It's not that I don't like Bob, it's just that business and pleasure don't mix and it's not good that we get to<sup>o</sup> chummy outside of office hours." He would have felt just as uncomfortable, I feel, had we invited Mr. Diss or Mr. Puzey.

Ken may never get to America. He may never taste another piece of chocolate chiffon pie. His windshield screen may be a flop. His next-door neighbor may buy another maroon Morris Minor. Anne may not be able to go to the University next year. But Ken and Renee are optimistic. And, basically, they are realistic. I think it is this feeling of optimistic realism that has brought federation into being--that brought Rhodes and the pioneers here to this "God-forsaken spot" in the first place.

As I have said, there are dozens of Ken Cunninghams in Salisbury, and more throughout the federation. I will not call him typical; yet there is something so real about him that I say to myself "This is Southern Rhodesia. In spite of the native leaders and the politicians, Ken Cunningham and his like is what makes the whole thing tick."

Perhaps what I've tried to put into this letter is not what I have been sent here for. I am fascinated by the politics and the native problem and will write about them soon. But, perhaps by way of relaxation, I decided to take time out and introduce you to Ken Cunningham and his family. I will introduce you to more people as time goes on.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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