

Hauling down the flag at Mochudi

NAOMI MITCHISON

Lady Mitchison, a member of the BaKgatla tribe in Botswana, visits her people for Independence.

SO THERE WAS BESSIE HEAD in Francistown and me in Mochudi, and all the top people in Gaborones, the capital. Did Bessie think of me? I know I thought of her! It is part of the white myth that Francistown, which is really a wretched little place, like a wild west town in an old fashioned movie, is dignified as a town while Mochudi with almost 18,000 people living in it, and for that matter Serowe with 30,000, are officially villages. Some funny things are done with translation, both in Africa and India; we are beginning to know that.

We had a full programme of Independence events in Mochudi, but most of them had stayed on paper. Far too much of it was imitation European, organised sports and lunches and cocktail parties. If that sort of thing is to come off, it has to be thoroughly organised beforehand. It wasn't. How much better to have had everything spontaneous, African fashion! It was all much more casual at Bokaa where I was on the afternoon before Independence, and goodness, what fun it was, how we all laughed and sang! Earlier, I had got Bokaa

some money from the Glasgow committee of War on Want; it wasn't very much, perhaps, but it was their own to spend, people to people. And now they had a splendid dam; today it must be brimming with water after the rain. They were cutting the bushes below for a big vegetable garden for the village. Coming back, hand in hand with Chief Raditladi of Bokaa, we ran into a singing regiment, Machama, I think. I would have withdrawn modestly, as befits a woman, circling round the edge and tongue shrilling, eyeing the warriors; but dear Raditladi didn't let go my hand, we were both surrounded.

FOR ME, INDEPENDENCE was the singing of the regiments. It had been going on evening after evening at Mochudi. That last evening, I had lost everyone in the general chaos, and drove up to Sethebung to see what was on. A man with a war axe jumped in front of the car; I stopped, pretending to be frightened, and another man with a spear rushed up. They pulled me out: "Mother, see how sharp they are! See how we are

guarding you!" And then "Mother, come and greet your sons!" For there were the regiments, drinking, singing, happy and proud. For the regiments, the *maphato*, are the pride of the tribe, the heart of the tribal organisation. People have to be proud, they have to have confidence. For three generations the people of Botswana have been told, by missions and colonial service, that the white man knows best about everything from electricity to God; our own best was never good enough. That dies hard. But the *maphato* were ours, even if the missions interfered with some of what they once did for people. The older ones had built the schools, made roads; Mochudi was their doing, our dear Mochudi. When I dance with my own *mophato*, Matshego, I feel our sisterhood in every movement, every gust of laughter, every touch of hands or cheeks. And this confidence — we shall need every last ounce of it if we are going to make a success of our difficult independence.

Then it was midnight. I had written earlier on to ask if I might haul down the



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flag in *kgotla*. I felt it was my right. That was agreed. But there were few people there; it was a terrible night of cold sand storms and I had given my coat to my dear little daughter, our new queen, the Mohu-magadi Kathleen. For her, one of the tribe but brought up in Johannesburg, this was very moving. Think of her, an African girl, educated, intelligent, but because she had to live under apartheid, never able to come to flower, then accepting whole-heartedly two things - life among a tribe and a white mother. As to the first, I heard her say fiercely to a friend from the Republic "This is civilisation!". For the second, I know.

SO THERE I WAS IN *kgotla*, looking carefully at the halyards on the flag pole, determined to make a good job of it. That union jack I'd seen so often. I said to myself that there were two flags I might have minded

pulling down; one the saltire of Scotland which was eaten up by the union flag, the other the Dannebrog of Denmark, which is not stained by colonialism. But this one? No. I pulled it down carefully, avoiding the guy wires. The new flag went up. And the spearman of the *mophato* leaped in front of the small crowd, raising his spear and shouting "Lefatse, lefatse" — the land, the land. He was perhaps People's Party. Do these labels matter? I put my hand over his on the wooden shaft of the spear, looking up at our new flag; he put his arm round my shoulder and then behind there were friends speaking about me. *Mmarona*, our mother.

But there was one more thing, the bonfire on the top of Phapane; it had been lit at midnight. South in Gaberones they could see it against the sky. We climbed in the dark, the cold wind biting at us. It was the Scouts who had organised this. I am inclined to think that a country like Bots-

wana can absorb Boy Scouts, turn them into its own, make them another source of confidence. If we leave them as alien importation they will do us no good. Up there I met another white, our V.S.O. printer. He has managed to start a small but essential industry and is training boys into at least a semi-skill position, and a decent wage. Like me, he wanders about Mochudi, listening to the singing, becoming absorbed, sometimes finding a hand slipped into his. As someone said to me "Oh, we don't think of Johnnie as a white."

There was singing too on the top of Phapane, round the bonfire; I sheltered under half of somebody's coat. But coming down the steep path was difficult; I kept on slipping, my sandals got full of little stones. And all the time I was being helped, holding on to a strong arm, with laughter and friendship all round me, the dear Batswana, of whom I am one. ●



LIVING WITH "THEM"

New York, November 1966

BETTER THAN A FULL decade into the legal changes initiated by the Supreme Court's School Desegregation Decision, the persistent hope has been that the social changes will be coming along sooner or later. But racial attitudes in particular seem to remain ossified in America.

Tex joined my U.S. Forest Service fire-fighting crew late in July. "There's a new one over by the office. It's a nigger." This was called to all in the barracks by an earnest young California Mormon who spent his days off surfing and is now finishing university.

"Not another nigger . . .," was the first reaction of a Papago Indian from Arizona. Then for the few minutes until Tex walked into the room to claim his bed, the profane conversation was man after man's vilest testimony against having to live with "them."

TEX CAME SWINGING in, his equipment hanging loose in his arms. He dropped his things on one of the three empty beds, straightened up, grinned at all of us and sauntered back outside. He looked as

nervous as I was.

Before evening I managed to talk privately with the two other people in the fire camp who were not overt racial bigots. We discarded the idea of one of us standing up and giving the assembled camp a lecture on racism, concluding that all we could do was try to assure that the same thing would not happen to Tex as had to the naive and awkward 18-year-old from Watts who had not returned to the camp from his first days off. His week of ridicule had culminated in a viciously jocular good old American "snipe hunt" — on which the unexpected is taken far out into the night to wait holding an open bag for non-existent snipe to enter. The refinements of the Watts boy's snipe hunt had been diverse and racialistically very imaginative.

BUT TEX HAD NONE of the innocent glaucous of the fool from Watts. Tex, it turned out, was an accomplished athlete and musician, recently moved to Los Angeles from Corpus Christi, Texas. A delightful individual, he captured the attentive interest of everyone in the fire camp within a matter of hours.

Tex went on his first fire just a few days after his arrival. We were flown by helicopter to the depths of burning canyon and there spent a day and a half halting the fire's advance. Tex worked well and never flagged, even though the smoke and heat conditions were extreme. He did much better on his first fire than most others had done.

It also developed that Tex was a walker and climber of unusual capacity, qualities which are held very high among forest fire fighters. So ostensibly he fitted into our crew very well.

But the behind-the-hand racial abuse continued — there was even one man, the son of an insurance man from one of the wealthy suburbs of Los Angeles, who would use the word "nigger" in front of Tex without even a break for apology. Tex would just look at

him glumly and try to change the subject.

IN COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL Government policy, not long ago the Forest Service issued a directive to the effect that each district in each National Forest in the land must have, at all times, at least two Negroes in its employ. In this way officialdom feels that it has done about all it can to erase discrimination in its sphere. But almost to a man the career Forest Service officers who came in contact with Tex were vociferous racists behind his back. It was a conflict with one of these men, Tex's immediate supervisor, which helped to bring Tex's life as a firefighter to a close.

TEX HAD A BROTHER back in Corpus Christi, a Protestant minister, who was to be married early in September. Tex was to be the best man. Weeks before the event he asked his supervisor for permission to take leave so that he could attend the ceremony. Repeatedly the supervisor mockingly accused Tex of lying, refusing all along to grant the leave. When Tex left the camp for his regular days off a few days before the wedding, he told me that he would not be coming back for nearly a week. He knew that the Forest Service was not allowed to discharge an employee unless he was absent for ten days.

While Tex was away, we were flown to a large fire in Northern California which lasted for more than a week. When we returned Tex was not around the camp. I found out later, when I located him in the city, that he had come back to camp, found nobody there, and, knowing that his ten days were up, had left the job for good.

He told me that he had not minded leaving the job anyway because he was due to be drafted into the Army in a matter of weeks. And he said that he was not unhappy to go and join the Army with its more strictly enforced desegregation policies, even though he realised that he would most probably be in Vietnam for Christmas. ●