

Mansimvula – historical record according to Boris Balinsky.

Written in July 2016 by Helen David

My father, Prof Boris Balinsky, one of the founding members of Mansimvula, kept detailed diaries throughout his life. I have taken excerpts directly from these diaries, only making minor editing alterations in order to make for easier reading or to correct the spelling of some words. (Names of persons mentioned are written as recorded by my father – apologies if there are any errors. H.D.)

I first learned of the existence of Mansimvula when I received a circular letter in the post inviting me to join a company owning a game farm in the Eastern Transvaal, by the name of “Mansimvula.” The letter informed me that on joining the company, I would become the part owner of a stretch of African land and would be entitled to build my own bungalow there and spend as much time as I wished in this natural wilderness. The pamphlet asked: “Would you like to see a giraffe next to your house, or a lilac-breasted roller next to your stoep?” This prospect appealed to myself and my family, so I contacted Mr Hopps who, in due course, arrived at our house. *(Unfortunately the date of this visit is not recorded. It falls into a section of the diary which covers late 1969 and early 1970. H.D.)*

Mr Hopps was a man in his thirties and arrived with a projector to show some slides of the farm. He explained that the property bordered the Kruger National Park at the northern end and on the western side just touched a bend in the Nsiri River. Two camps were planned, each with its own borehole, “Main Camp” and “River Camp.” Hopps had a plan on which were marked some 40 sites for houses. In River Camp there were two dams marked on streams joining the river and I chose a site for our house overlooking one of the dams. Hopps undertook to build the houses for the shareholders. Shareholders were entitled to enter the farm at any time and use one of the existing communal huts if they did not have, or did not yet have, a house of their own.

The farm was called “Mansimvula.” In Zulu “manzi” or “amanzi” means “water” and “mvula” in Zulu means “damp/wet”... so “damp water.” Rather ironic as the place is a stretch of very dry country. The farm was originally part of a larger property which was later cut up into several lots, the existing buildings having been put up by the previous owner/s.

To join the scheme, one had to purchase a share, the price of which was R3000. A house was expected to be in the region of R2500- R3500, depending on the size. We (myself, Betty and Helen) made up our minds very quickly. Helen was from the beginning very enthusiastic about the matter. It appealed to us all to become part owners of a piece of wild Africa. My son, Vania (John) was at the time in London working on his Ph.D. (Biochemistry) and thus was not a party in this decision.

Hopps claimed to be acting for a small company "Hopps and Associates". I have always been doubtful whether there were any associates. Hopps was English, divorced, with two young sons. During the war he served in the navy.

First visit to Mansimvula - April 1970

We travelled in my old Austin car – Betty, Helen and myself, a journey of 544kms. A couple of kilometres before the "Manzimvula" sign was the Roodekrans Store. This caters mostly for locals. We collected the keys to the buildings from the owners Mr and Mrs Wiggill. We saw several giraffe along the way and one as we entered the property. The existing buildings in Main Camp consisted of one big rondavel (in which we stayed), three small bungalows and a storeroom. There was gas to cook with, but no water. The next morning a man called Vincent appeared, who was a kind of warden and could speak a little English. He took us on a walk, during which we saw a few impala, a kudu and a warthog. Then we drove with him to see the River Camp area and beyond to the fence with the Kruger Park. He also pointed to the line between our farm and the next one, called Manzimquela, owned by a Mr Kock.

Later that day Hopps arrived with his son and started the pump, providing water for us all. There were by now two other couples in Main camp. One of these was a lovely young couple, Mike and Liz Meredith, who became our good friends. Hopps organised a braai for the whole crowd and later took us all to a neighbouring farm called Shlaralumi. This is more developed than Manzimvula, with a score of rondavels, a restaurant, a shop, a car workshop and a swimming pool.

Next day we went to River Camp. This day turned out to be “giraffe day.” On the way to River camp we saw 17, and more later, altogether 53! We also saw a lilac-breasted roller – another vindication of Hopps’ pamphlet.

The “dam” next to which my house was to be turned out to be quite different from what I expected! There was a steep ravine, at the bottom of which a previous owner had attempted to build a small weir of rocks. There was no trace of water. We discussed with Hopps where to place the house and also discussed some details of its construction.

The whole group also went with Hopps to the neighbouring farm, Manzimquela. (*now “Si Bon” H.D.*) Here there was a big house with a laid out garden, an orchard of avocado, orange and paw-paw trees, and flowering bushes with lots of butterflies.

We were pleased with our first trip. This was real, unspoiled Africa and there was enough game in the area to make travelling there interesting. Besides the numerous giraffes, we had seen impalas, kudu, wildebeest, warthog, duiker and baboons. We had seen the spoor of zebra, and heard hyenas and jackals calling at night.

July 1970. Building the house.

There was a drought in the area - not a blade of grass and few leaves on trees or bushes. With Hopps we laid the markers for the house. Based on my plan, he quoted me R1940, to be paid in 3 instalments. Two other houses were already in construction in the northern part of River Camp, for Mr Hamilton-Russel and for Mr Kay.

December 1970 and January 1971.

The drought was now even worse. The shade temperature in the days was 86-96 degrees Fahrenheit. To his credit, Hopps had brought some bales of hay which he spread in the bush to feed the animals. We observed some wildebeest feeding on it.

Hopps told us that he had acquired Manzimquela, though it later transpired that he only had an option on it and had not paid it off, and this was to cause some trouble. Hopps (rather dishonestly) had sold the house on Manzimquela to Mr

Flanagan, who was busy renovating it. Sometime later, when Hopps went bankrupt, his purchase of Manzimquela was annulled and so also was Flanagan's purchase of the house there. Flanagan lost his money (purchase of house and improvements) and had to revert to his previous profession, something to do with training military personnel in radio techniques.

Flanagan was an accomplished wildlife artist and we became friends with him and his wife during the time they were there. *(My parents acquired a beautiful painting of his, of an elephant, which is currently in our house. H.D.)*

There was an old Jeep which came with this property and which we could use to drive on the worst roads, thus exploring more of the property.

We left on 22nd December, just as the rains started to arrive. In places our car had to plough through deep mud. On crossing what had been a small drift, it was now a raging torrent and we crossed with difficulty. The Merediths, who had stayed on at Mansimvula, later told us that the Nsiri river started flowing 2 hours after we left. At some point it ran 4 feet deep, covering bunches of bullrushes in midstream. Frogs apparently came out in vast numbers, producing a deafening chorus, and within a few days there were lilies everywhere, standing a foot high.

We returned to Mansimvula on **8th January** to see that the bush had changed in an amazing way. The trees sprouted fresh green leaves, grass was growing, there were flowers, and there was a large pool against the rocky outcrop below the Hamilton-Russels house, in which swam tadpoles and small fishes.

The big dam on Manzimquela was full and in the trees overhanging the water were many foam nests of the tree frog *Chiromantis*. Eggs are laid in these nests and when the tadpoles hatch they fall into the water below. As I was at the time studying Dragonflies, I noted the different species present *(he lists 8 by their scientific names. H.D.)*

April, May and September 1971. Completion of house.

Three trips were made in this period, and problems with the construction of the house had to be addressed. Hopps had not put in the internal doors yet and the

stoep was too small and sloped unevenly – Hopps had to redo this. A planned window had been left out and the wall had to be broken to allow for this to be corrected. We brought up some furniture on these trips.

On one trip Betty and I were accompanied by Helen and her friend Trevor, and by our son Vania and his wife Doris and their small son Andrew. There was a bit of difficulty accommodating everybody and some had to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags. Night drives were a popular activity and we saw many eyes in the spotlight on some drives and not many on others. Animals seen were mainly impalas and wildebeest, and there were also jackals, springhares, a scrub hare and a civet.

There was great excitement when Helen and Trevor followed the spoor of a cheetah and found it on a freshly killed impala on Mansimvula's Eastern boundary. They returned to fetch us all and we were able to observe the cheetah for a while before it noticed us and ran off.

Two week stay in December 1971

Hopps had engaged a man by the name of Rex Mulcahy as a game warden, in line with his plans to expand the farm. As already mentioned, he had "acquired" Manzimquela, and also wanted to purchase the farm to the West across the Nsiri River, which at the time was owned by a Mr Calmonet.

Mr Mulcahy, an elderly man, had previously been a game warden on the private farms but was now retired. One of the tasks he set himself was to work on the road system of the farm. He created a road through an area which he named "the Everglades" – this bypassed some difficult dips in the boundary road. We got on very well with him during the time that he worked at Mansimvula.

Another new character was a teenager named Dagwa. I do not know what his exact function was, but he was helpful around the farm. It seems he discovered a natural pool in the northern part of the farm, which became known as "Dagwa's pool".

Mr Wiggles, of the Roodekrans Store, was also a builder (as well as a store keeper) and he assisted us with small changes to the house. We also bought bread and gas from his store.

In the damp sand around water holes we saw many tracks, which gave the impression of abundant game, even if we did not always see it. There was leopard and lion spoor, as well as jackals. We often heard lions in the distance at night, as well as jackals.

The most exciting find was tracks of an aardvark in the river bed! *(A few years later we actually saw an aardvark in the Everglades area one night...it remains one of my absolute highlights of any game viewing, anywhere! H.D.)*

Helen once saw a bushpig in the ravine in front of our house.

Bird calls at night included the night jays and the Scops owl and of course there were many wonderful birds to see and hear during daytime.

Because of the abundance of water, frogs of several kinds were active during our stay. Most of the noise was due to *Pixichephalus natalensis*. There were also toads, *Bufo garmani*. As mentioned before, there were also the foam nest tree frogs, *Chiromantis*.

Butterflies identified include species from the genus *Colotis* (red tips) – five of this species occur at Mansimvula. I have also recorded 9 species of the *Acraea* genus, of which 5 are common.

Trees which I have identified include *Terminalia Prunoides* (sterkbos), *Cassia Abbreviata*, *Marula*, *Acacia Nigrescens*, *Combretum Apiculatum* (red-bush willow), *Copaifera Mopane* (mopane). Towards the northern end of Mansimvula the mopane trees become more abundant, growing as compact stands. This tree is of special interest to me as it is then food plant of the mopane worm, the caterpillar of the gorgeous large emperor moth, *Gonimbrasia Belina*. I found mopane worms repeatedly, including on the mopane tree at the bottom of the ravine in front of our house.

April and July 1972

By this time, 3 more houses were being built in River Camp. One of these, which confronts our house across the ravine, is of particular interest as it is being built by someone with his own hands, a man by the name of Gatschi. The second house, on the same ridge, but closer to the river was being built by Mr Wiggill for a man by the name of Johnson. The third house was further south from the

Johnson house, also overlooking the river. This was also being owner built, by a German man whose name I do not know. It is progressing very slowly – it has not got beyond the foundation.

Mulcahi has completed the “dam” near main camp. It is more of a shallow circular tank, but it holds water and there were some tracks around it.

Eliphas was now in charge at River camp.

We often walked on the farm, sometimes quite long distances, even to the Kruger fence. Sometimes we came across giraffes or herds of impalas. Around our house we saw dwarf mongooses and a couple of beautiful kudu and some giraffes.

May/June 1973

Manzimquela had been bought by someone else, a man by the name of van Rensburg – not a good change for us as he was a hunter. During this stay we had the disagreeable reminder that not all visitors to our area are nature lovers. Inside Mansimvula we once met a lorry with 5 rough-looking men, all with rifles. There was quite a lot of hunting and we often heard shots from the west, what we knew as the Calmonet farm, which had also changed hands.

We continue to enjoy Mansimvula, and have shared this place with a number of family members and friends.