

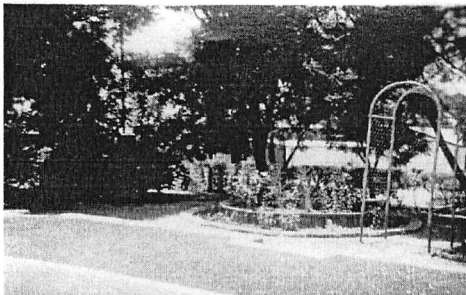
Gwanda – where Grandpa lived and attended primary school about 65 years ago – for Sean, Ryder & Jenny

When I was your age growing up in Gwanda, Zimbabwe, my life was very different from yours although, like you, I remember my sister Lindsay and me having to tidy our rooms and cupboards every Saturday morning. Lindsay did hers well but our mother, Lilian, was hardly ever satisfied with my tidying so I was in continual trouble over that. Lilian had a riding crop – she was a good horsewoman when she was young – and used it on me from time to time for various reasons including not tidying my cupboard properly. I was very scared of that riding crop but unfortunately I didn't become any tidier!

Lilian – my mother and your great grandmother before she was married in her riding gear



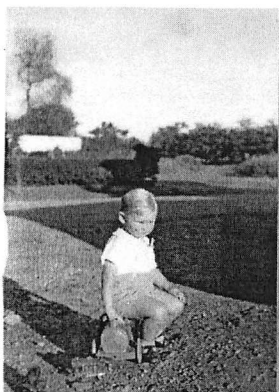
Gwanda is a small town in what was then known as Rhodesia; it was about the size of Shoalhaven Heads although very different. It was hot, dry and dusty (it still is); however, we were lucky to live in a big house with a nice garden that had a circular fish-pond with gold fish and loads of toads that croaked us to sleep at night. The house was surrounded on 3 sides by a wide varandah or stoep where we all slept in summer because it was cooler than in the house – no air-conditioning in those days! Our roof was made of corrugated iron so during rare thunder storms the roar of the rain on the roof accompanied by crashes of thunder and lightning was an awesome experience. I well remember the wonderful smell that arose as the first few drops of rain hit the dusty earth and the coolness after the storm.



The fish pond at the bottom of the garden (when this picture was taken the pond had been filled in to make a flower bed but I preferred the pond)

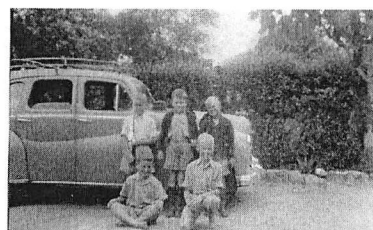
Most people in the town were black; there were few whites and even fewer Asians. The Asians owned the few small shops that sold everything from bread to bicycles. The three groups of people living in the town – whites, Asians and blacks – lived separately and mixed hardly at all. Even the children attended different schools according to their racial group. In the white primary school that Lindsay and I attended there were fewer than 100 kids. All our teachers were from England and all our books came from there as well. So even though we were living surrounded by African bush – much like the Australian outback – in 'nature study', for example, we were taught about oak and sycamore trees and deer which we only knew through pictures.

When we were small Lindsay and I had an African nanny to look after us. Her name was Miriam and we were very fond of her; she was a happy person but also strict. Miriam taught us the local language, Ndebele, which we could both speak quite well when we were young. Unfortunately, I can only remember a few words and phrases in Ndebele these days. One of my favourite things was to eat with our servants near their rooms at the back of the house – we had a cook, a so-called house-boy to clean the house and a gardener, in addition to Miriam – because I loved ‘sadza’, their stiff maize-meal porridge eaten with chunks of meat grilled on an open fire. The trick is to take a handful of sadza and press it by hand into an oblong-shape which is then dipped into gravy and then popped into the mouth along with a chunk of meat. However, my parents did not like me doing that so I had to do it sneakily when they were not looking. I still love sadza!



Your grandpa Gavin and his sister Lindsay when they were toddlers (I was very fond of the toy yacht in the picture but unfortunately there were no nice ponds in Gwanda to sail it on)

For as long as I can remember we were an ‘animal family’ in that we all loved animals, Lindsay and our Dad Jack especially. So I guess that is why I became a vet. The most common animals in Gwanda, apart from dogs and cats, were feral donkeys which we boys liked to try and ride; a group of my mates and I would herd them into a pen at the railway siding so we could catch them and get on their backs. That often didn’t work out well because most of the donkeys were pretty wild and bucked us off! I had many bruises from attempts at donkey riding. On good days though, when we found a few tame ones, my mates and I could perform an exhilarating cavalry charge



The donkey riding brigade – in the photo on the left I am second from the right and in the photo right, in front of our family car of those days, I am kneeling on the right next to Leeland Johnson

I had a fox terrier called Tickey, much like Bandit but with a short tail; most boys in the town also had a dog – so we would go about in small groups of boys and their dogs getting up to mischief. Our dogs were important because, for some strange reason, we believed that our dogs' behaviour reflected the character of its owner. Fortunately for me, Tickie was naturally tough and brave. One day my friend Leland's dog was chased by a cat; very embarrassing for Leland! Our Mum had a black cat with a crumpled ear that jumped over our verandah wall one day and just stayed. Later we had a white cat that produced kittens regularly and was very good at catching snakes. One week that I still remember well, our gardener killed two black mambas on separate days near the woodpile in the back yard (in those days to get hot water a fire had to be lit to warm the geyser so everyone had a woodpile in the back yard). Black mambas are large, poisonous and aggressive snakes when they feel threatened but not as poisonous as some Australian ones. One of the bad things we boys did was to kill snakes and then use them to scare people, particularly Africans, who in those days anyway were terrified of them. My Dad Jack, who was a gentle and kind person, was often exasperated by the thoughtless behaviour of us boys.



**Tickey and the cat
with the
crumpled ear
(can't remember
the cat's name)**

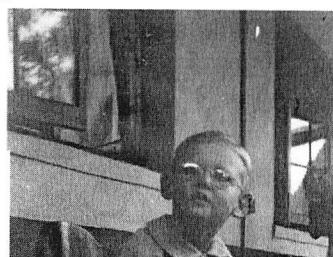


There were no cafés in Gwanda so we knew nothing about milk shakes or ice cream in cones and things like that although our mother Lilian, your great grandmother, occasionally produced home-made ice cream, a wonderful treat. I remember it being much tastier than modern-day ice cream but maybe that's just my memory playing tricks. On Saturdays Lindsay and I received 6d (about 10 South African cents or one Australian cent) pocket money from our Dad. Most of my friends liked to buy sweets from the chemist shop with their pocket money but I preferred to go to the African market and spend my money on cooked sweet potatoes or a stick of sugar cane.

In those days my life revolved around school where I didn't do well – the teachers said because I couldn't concentrate – swimming in the town pool and playing in town or in the surrounding bush with my mates where, I'm now ashamed to say, I spent a lot of time shooting birds with my air-gun. I was the envy of the other boys because I had the best air-gun, a BSA. In those days we were very irresponsible and I remember a 'war' with another group of boys where we actually shot at each other with our air-guns. Luckily, no-one was badly hurt.

Like Sean, I had to wear glasses from the age of two to about seven but I didn't look as good in mine as Sean does in his. So, I didn't wear them other than to school.

'Manglaz' – Ndebele people used that name for wearers of glasses



My favourite place was the nearby river (Mtshabezi) where the boys of the town went to fish, sail our home-made canoes, look for birds' eggs or engage in minor gang wars. Trouble was that the Mtshabezi was infested with bilharzia so most of my mates got that disease but, luckily, I never did (common symptoms are blood in the wee and feeling tired all the time). Building home-made canoes was a major after-school activity. They were made of corrugated iron roofing-sheets; we would hammer out the corrugations and fold the sheet in the shape of a canoe, held in place by a wooden stick at the front (bow) and a u-shaped piece of wood at the back (stern). The iron sheeting was attached to the wooden stick at the bow and the u-shaped wooden piece at the stern with nails. To prevent leaks we used tar which was not easy to find; sometimes we could steal some from teams doing road maintenance. The trick was to have enough tar of the right consistency to water-proof the nail holes. Because the river was quite a long way from town and the canoes heavy, each gang hid its canoes among the reeds along the river bank. For that reason the main gang activity was to steal and re-hide other gangs' canoes. You can imagine this caused many arguments and fights!

One day after heavy rain, with the Mtshabezi in flood, two mates and I went canoeing. Needless to say, I soon fell out of my canoe and so attempted to swim ashore. I suddenly realised that although I was a good swimmer I could not swim against the current; so I was washed a few hundred meters down-stream before I could reach the shore. That was one of my scariest experiences ever. Another memorable experience at the river occurred when I was walking under trees on the bank and suddenly saw a huge python on a branch about an arm's length away.

Our other playground was the local hill which in those days was known to white people as Mount Cazlette but its African name has always been Jahunda. It is about the same size and shape as Mt Coolangatta (you can see a picture of it and the Mtshabezi River if you google 'Gwanda Zimbabwe'). We used to explore and play in the bush on that hill. One day we were having such a good time we lost track of the time and only got home after dark. I got a big hiding from my father Jack as a result! It was one of only two hidings I got from my Dad. Another very popular gang game was called 'kleilaitjie' (your father will explain) in which the two sides attach mud to the end of sticks and throw the mud at each other.

Most of the boys in the school also attended boxing and wrestling classes some afternoons after school; we also occasionally had cricket or soccer but I liked wrestling best. The town doctor – Dr Johnson – Leland's father, was the wrestling coach. If any boy mentioned during wrestling coaching that he was not feeling well he was immediately given a penicillin injection in the bum right through his pants. Dr Johnson was very versatile; apart from being the local doctor and dentist he was a carpenter, a motor mechanic, builder, wrestler and conjurer. Once a year he held a conjuring show at the Mt Cazlette Hotel that most white people attended. I still remember those shows as the best I ever saw. Dr Johnson is definitely the most talented person I ever met but, on the other hand, he was bad tempered and very strong, so I was terrified of him.

In those days in Gwanda there were no flush toilets so most houses, ours included, had a separate lavatory outside the back door of the house. The lavatory itself backed onto what was called the sanitary lane. Under the toilet seat there was a bucket which was emptied every night through a hatch at the back by people we knew as the night-soil team. I never saw them myself but they apparently had some sort of cart to carry the sewage off. Anyway, the problem with the outside lav was that it was cool and dark (and a bit smelly) and so attracted all sorts of insects and lizards but also occasionally snakes. So I was not keen on going there at night; for that reason

On Saturday nights in Gwanda there was a film show at the Mt Cazlette Hotel; the dining room of the hotel was transformed into the cinema. In those days all the films were in black and white; no colour. The projectionist was the local railway station master. Almost everybody in town attended – parents at the back sitting on chairs and the kids in front sitting on the floor. The interval between the news and comedy programme and the main film was always very long because all the dads, although not ours, would go to the hotel bar to drink, much to the frustration of us kids. A thing I hated was that most of the parents, including our mother, smoked throughout the film-show, so the atmosphere was smelly and horrible.

When I was your age there was no Lego but most boys had a Meccano set which was somewhat similar. However, I was not good at Meccano building. There was also no TV, computers or cell phones (mobiles) but we did have nice books and a radio. Our parents used to listen to the news on the radio from the BBC in London every evening at six. The news always began with “This is London calling” For many people – but not us – England was ‘home’ because that’s where most white people in Zimbabwe came from in those days.

That’s as much as I remember of my life till I was twelve. If this is interesting to you, next year I’ll tell you about my time at senior school in Bulawayo, the nearest big town to Gwanada; much as Nowra is to Shoalhaven Heads but much further away.

Lots of love.

Grandpa Gavin