

African Gold *Part One*

By Charles Miess



The primitive rhythms of West African music penetrated the thin walls and blended with the drone of the defective air conditioner as it spewed the sweltering outside air into my dingy room. It was too hot and humid for nightclothes. Too hot for the covering of a sheet. I was a tempting target for mosquitoes carrying malaria, dengue, and yellow fever in their potentially deadly bite. I listened intently for their telltale whine, praying that I could swat them before they bit me.

My stomach gurgled. New fears arose as I thought of the evening meal where I had inadvertently eaten some uncooked lettuce and onions—another potential source of disease in lands where sanitation is poor.

I longed for a cool shower after the grueling twenty hours of travel to get here. But the tap water in equatorial Africa contains nasty intestinal parasites that would happily set up housekeeping in your digestive system if you allow the water to get in your mouth—a risk I was not yet prepared to face. As I lay in that stifling room, I wondered what insanity had made me agree to come to this place. It was my first night in Ghana.

I was traveling with my friend and coworker, Walt, to help install and check out our radio remote control system for a large mining machine. We were scheduled to go deep into a gold mine in the interior of the country to verify the underground operation of a new type radio frequency control link.

Walt and I were accompanied by Jim, a representative from the manufacturer of the mining machine. Jim is a stocky, outgoing, and good-natured veteran of third world mining operations—the kind of guy you like the minute you meet him. This was not his first trip to Ghana. He recalled that on his last visit, he got sick the first day and lost 30 pounds before he recovered. “But I love it here,” he said sincerely. (That didn’t make me feel any better).

Early the next morning, I chanced a shower and met Walt and Jim in the open air restaurant of the hotel. The morning breeze was warm and pleasant as it soothed the skin under my lightweight cotton clothing. I did a quick analysis of my digestive system and decided it was OK—so far. The young waitress was slowly sweeping the floor with a handful of long stiff grass resembling broom corn. Life moves at a leisurely pace in Ghana.

As I ordered eggs and sausage (well done) I vowed to follow the rules: don’t drink the water, no fresh vegetables,

no fruit unless you wash and peel it yourself, and reject food that isn’t piping hot when served. To my dismay, our breakfasts were accompanied by plates of fresh pineapple with the upper part of the shell peeled away and the interior neatly sliced (perhaps under unsanitary conditions) and resting in a boat-shaped lower shell. As I pushed it away, Jim stabbed his fork into a juicy chunk and raised it to his mouth. “Won’t that make you sick?” I said.

“It’s a crap shoot,” Jim replied “ya gotta eat.”

It was the sweetest, most delicious pineapple that I had ever eaten.



You don’t come to Ghana to see big game animals. Oh, there are a few elephants, hippos, and African

buffalo in the northern regions, but the smaller mammals and reptiles in the central and south are secretive, illusive, and seldom seen. One notable exception is the Gecko—a lizard that grows to about fourteen inches long. While hanging around outdoors they seemingly beg for food as they move the front of their body up and down as if doing push-ups. But they are largely oblivious to human activities—just looking for some crawling or flying insect to supplement their diet.

We started our 200 mile trip to the gold mining town of Obuasi (o-BWAH-see) the day after our flight arrived in the capital city of Accra (uh-CRAW). Our driver, Kofi Inkoom, went by the name of Richard. Richard looked to be about twenty years old, but he confided that he was thirty-eight and had three children. Although quiet and shy, he was a terror behind the wheel of that Isuzu pickup truck.



Few Ghanaians own their own car. The vehicles that are on the road are generally in a poor state of repair and frequently loaded to several times their capacity. Drivers switch lanes with reckless abandon as they pass overloaded vehicles struggling up the hills like the 'little engine that could.' Many sported signs across the back such as, *The Lord is my Shepherd* and *Jesus Save Us*.

The countryside on our route had been cleared of rain forest, but the vegetation was lush as it encroached on the small plots of land where the natives tended coconuts, pineapple, cocoa, sugar-cane, mangos, and bananas. It was refreshing to see no signs

of mechanized agriculture.

Men and women in bright, colorful clothing walked single file, dangerously close to the edge of the road, carrying huge loads of produce on their heads. Others were busy clearing the grass with long flexible machetes, rivaling the speed and precision of a roadside mowing machine. Occasionally, a group of barefoot school children would appear in neatly pressed peach and brown uniforms.

As we approached Obuasi, the road suddenly went from paved to a rough and rutted red dirt road. My gaze caught a large building looming above the mud huts. "That is a slaughterhouse," said Richard. Its long peaked roof was lined, wing to wing, with vultures. A mother goat crossing the road stopped midway and crouched to let her baby suckle. Richard beeped his horn and adjusted his speed to pass at the precise moment that the animals were clear of the wheels. There was a faint odor of urine in the air—a result of the scarcity of sanitary facilities in this city of seventy-thousand people.

The road continued to get rougher and dustier as we went deeper into the city. A continuous string of small red clay houses and shops with thatch or tin roofs lined the road on either side. The aroma changed to that of fresh baked bread, tropical fruit and charcoal fires from the streetside vendors as they vied for customers among the throng of passers-by. The women walked erect and graceful. Almost as if by mystical decree, the dust and grime of the city was forbidden to soil their colorful *kente* cloth dresses or their clean, smooth skin ranging in color from maple to walnut to



ebony. The native tongue was sweet and melodious, and the laughter quick and genuine. A school girl in uniform stared at me. I waved. Her face lit like the African sun as she raised her hand high and waved back. Obuasi is a city struggling on the edge. But what a valiant struggle it is!

To Be Continued

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