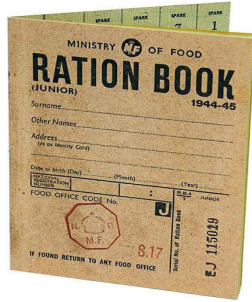


MAKE DO AND MEND

“When needs must”



I was 14 when the Second World War started and living through times of great shortage of food, clothing and many other normally day to day commodities. Even so, when things were available it was ration books issued by the Ministry of Food that determined what could be purchased and in what quantity. So 'make do and mend' became my way of life - if I needed a ball gown then I had to use my initiative so I looked at the curtains!

In 1947 I married and my wedding dress was made from parachute silk made by a friend. These were difficult times. Then in the 1950s I went out to Nyasaland Central Africa, to join my Reg together with our very young son Robert. This was an amazing experience for us. I soon began to realise that being a country girl and having been brought up during a time of great shortage was going to be a big advantage to me.



There had been a drought there in 1949. So when I arrived many people were starving. Their crops had failed that year so there was a food shortage with famine relief centres set up in the various boma areas. “Make do and mend”, or recycling if you like, was just the same way of life for most of the Nyasa people. So all our left over food was put to good use to feed

those who were without even the basics. Cast-off clothing was given away, mainly to the wives and children of employees as well as the house and garden workers who were often in great need. I think sometimes they would sell these things in the local market in order to buy food. I can remember going to the market in Lilongwe, and seeing shoes and sandals for sale that had been made out of old rubber tyres. Many things were recycled into things for every day use. Tin cans made into cups for drinking for instance and children making things like cars or windmills to play with from them. Two gallon petrol tins made into 'debes', buckets for mainly water and we often made one into an oven, particularly 'on Ulendo'. It was useful for making bread or a stew that needed slow cooking. The can would be put into an open fire and covering it with the glowing embers. My cook would often made a raising agent for bread with potato peelings, flour and sugar which he mixed in a bottle and then put in the sun to ferment. The children loved to see the cork pop when it was ready.

The women often went out into the bush foraging for leaves and roots to use for a relish, They would also boil up corn cobs, fish or chicken bones for stock, nothing was wasted. A variety of insects were edible, flying ants being a favourite dish, fried over hot coals. Kungu flies emerging from Lake Nyasa was another source of meals, rich in protein – see the video in the introduction to this piece. The women were very good at improvising not only with their cooking but also for home making, woven mats to sleep on made from the husks and leaves of maize cobs – maize being the staple diet. The men were often seen making



tools from scrap metal and wood found out in the bush. Their houses were made from what was available on hand. Wattle and daub of cow dung for the walls, reeds from the river bank for the roof - all being readily available. Newspapers were used for many things, inside their houses, maybe, for decorating the walls or just lining the walls for insulation as well as for their cigarette paper.

Blankets and old sheets had a multiple of uses, used with the charcoal iron on ironing boards by the expats but very gratefully received by the locals for a variety of reasons, be it for warmth, bedding or curtains and my recollections of seeing the old "Mlonda", the night watchman, outside the kitchen every night well wrapped up in his blanket is one of the many memories taking me back in to those days so long ago. I well remember one Christmas whilst in Karonga having a party for the servants children, I gave the girls cast of dresses of my daughter, Maggie, and I made the boys clothes out of calico - baggy shorts included. A great time was had by all and I can enjoy it all again from the cine film recording.

How much one misses that way of life. Not so complicated and with so much choice of shopping nowadays we throw too much away, just making our world a veritable rubbish dump.

It has to be said that even though the Nyasa people had a hard life and often faced difficult times they were a happy folk, ever willing to help and always with a ready smile through whatever adversity thrown at them.

No more darning socks then!! Oh for more 'MAKE DO AND MEND', after all ***"When needs must the Devil drives"*** as they say

Mary Brill - May 2020

