

**KITALE SCHOOL REUNION,
October 2008**

Was it really just a few short weeks ago I left Cape Town for my Ottawa home & a temperature of 32 degrees Celsius and now it's minus 20 degrees and there's 20 cms. of snow on the ground? (No bonus for the reader who answers "Yes".) Cape Town was the last stop in a five week visit to Africa including Kenya.

The main reason for being in Africa was to attend the 2008 Kitale School Reunion with my partner **Isabel Black**, on 24-26 October, last. Shortly after checking in at the Kitale Club, where we stayed & most functions were held, **Bridget Walton** asked me, as someone with no knowledge of the School or the reunion's participants, if I would record my impressions of the event for a Newsletter. Here are my responses to that request.

Our arrival in Kitale was the culmination of much planning & was our 'retirement gift' to ourselves. **Isabel** had retired in June 2007 after 13 years working for the United Church of Canada. Our trip would give me insight about where Isabel and her sisters **Catherine (Homenchuk) & Jacqueline (Kangas)** spent their formative years. They had lived on a farm with their parents - **Win & Eugene Black** - about 18 miles. from Kitale.

Here we were then: Isabel, Catherine & her husband **Albert**, (Jacqueline was unable to attend the Reunion) and myself, **Maurice Lewis**, in Kitale. Until being in Kitale my knowledge of "A Club" & its activities, which seemed to be a holdover from pre-independence Africa, was virtually nil.

As Kitaleite greeted Kitaleite, at the entrance to the Club & with **Bridget, Tony or Adrienne Mills, or Cherry Dale** standing by, sometimes hesitatingly there were lengthy hugs, introduction of partners, questions galore. Each time it seemed to be a clearly emotional moment. What a pleasure for folks with a common background to meet after so many years.

Knowing nothing of the history that brought people there, something seemed a little strange. Was it the name "Kitale Club"? Was it perhaps a reminder of a colonial past? Most of the activities consisted of a gathering of White folk - of a particular age & circumstance - recalling a long ago past. They were served by a Black staff. While there were some Black Kenyans using the Club's facilities & not attending the reunion, they were very few in number. This observation reinforced the 'oddness'.*[In corresponding with Maurice, he did understand that while membership of the club stood at ±99% African and Asians, these had not attended Kitale School BW.]*

A very important highlight was the visit to **Kitale School**, now **Kitale Academy**. Most wanted to see where they had spent their early school days; for the first time separated from their parents. As we entered the school's gym there was a sense of excitement. I overheard: "This is where I was left by my parents I was 7 years old!" Another said disapprovingly & with a nod to a green space: "There are cows in the fields!" "There's the San" shouted another. Inside there was a whirr, loud voices & the flash of camera lights, & distant memories returned.

After the initial excitement we were greeted by the **Principal, Mrs. Wanyonyi**. She was most generous in her welcome & spoke of the vision for the school: "The future we dream of includes a much-needed new library, a school bus, upgraded buildings & new roads." This message was repeated by the P.T.A's Chair, **Peter Kearie**. There was also a welcome from the Anglican **Bishop Stephen Nyorsok**, of the Diocese of Kitale. Then the students (& some teachers) gave a powerful performance of singing & dancing. So began an all-day programme. As we left the gym to begin our tour I heard: "They are still in the same school colours!" (Some things never change.)

A couple of thoughts about the visit: I was a bit surprised to hear so many Christian references. (I know the school is sponsored by the Anglican Church in some way.) Of course there were pleas to the alumni to help the school with its dreams for the future. What better opportunity to use such a gathering to ask 'those that have' to help out? (Anyone know the response?) *[There was some response at the reunion and I have had a few e-mails since with offers, including my own. I believe, in all, we will have doubled the amount that Michael pledged - BW]* It was mentioned that the time from "then" to the time "now" the School's numbers have increased from 300 to 1800; no wonder the budget is strained.

Clearly the students and staff went to great lengths to welcome us. Food was provided, memories exchanged, teachers & others were generous with their time We talked of work, changing values, the expectations of students & parents. A special thanks to **Carmen Shitubi**, a Special Needs teacher, & **Margaret Kiene**, teacher of the physically challenged - for sharing their experiences - & to **Lucy Okumu** (KiSwahili teacher), our personal guide, & all the students that helped out.

Interestingly only a small number of alumni (compared to the number that attended the reunion) toured the school. Of those that did the tour, I wonder how much interaction there was between the school staff and their guests?



*Jenny C, Lindy, Jenny D
tour the school with
teachers and children*



*Maurice, deep in
conversation*



*Cecilia and Charlie
with Mrs Wanyonye*



*Else and Hugh enjoy chatting
and asking questions*

When it came to the Gala Dinner it was obvious that the organizers had made huge efforts to ensure its success. Food in abundance, plenty of table wines, excellent service, an animated crowd, ensured the evening would be a success. People grouped themselves according to where they had once lived or the school years they had attended Kitale School. For instance, I met the children of farmers who lived along the same road. Certainly 'things' were very different 40 - 50 years ago, and likely there was no nearby day school back then but why send the children to a *boarding* school?

The Dinner included a toast "To Kenya past and Present." **Michael Brookes**, a former headmaster's son, now living in the U.K. & unable to attend the Reunion, donated the equivalent of his airfare to the School. **Nigel Warren**, Nairobi, agreed to administer any funds donated to the School. As well, dinner guests raised KShs 32,040.35 to the Club's staff. (Someone later explained to me the reason for the 35 cents but I don't have it in my notes.)

Throughout the dinner I wandered the dining room; taking photos & listening to snippets of conversation. I tried to find a sense of connectedness with the guests. It didn't happen. (Perhaps you had to be a Kitaleite to understand the dynamics of the reunion?) I wondered how much had changed in the lives of the folk since they had moved away from Kitale, and perhaps Kenya? There was a sense of 'back to the colonial times.' I also wondered where were the current school staff, and PTA Committee at the dinner? There were a handful (including the Principal) but the majority were not present. Why not? *[Invited guests included senior staff members of Kitale Academy, The Governing body and members of the PTA s well as members of the Kitale Club Committee who had looked after all visitors so well during their stay BW].*

We went by taxi to **Isabel's** farm. Much to her great pleasure her parent's home was still standing - sadly that was not true for many others who were at the reunion. Isabel's former home was now being used as a school: **Benjamin Ngaira Academy**. Isabel was thrilled at its new use. True the original buildings were tired looking there were many new buildings to accommodate the bursting school. Inside the original home Isabel & Catherine pointed out: "I slept there", "That was our parent's bedroom", "The dining room was there..."

What a thrill to be "home" after so many years. For me it was an extraordinary experience to meet the people, and see buildings that were so influential for Isabel's formative years. Few people get such an opportunity. It now makes sense to me why Isabel says so many times, "Africa is a part of me." Kenyan immigration officers said when they saw Isabel's passport which showed she was born in Nairobi: "**Karibu sana and come back home!**"

Thank you to all those who worked so hard to make the Kitale School 2008 Reunion such a success. Those memories will remain with me always.

**Maurice Lewis,
December 2008,
Ottawa, Canada.**

As an early recipient of this year's Kitale School Newsletter – yet another sterling effort from memsahib (Bridget, a very big Asante, on behalf of us all) and Maurice's "observations". I feel it necessary to try to balance some of his remarks.

I write as one who is very proud of what our past generations accomplished in Kenya in the first 60-odd years of the 20th century. What was handed over in 1963 at Kenya's independence was a well oiled, smoothly running country with a buoyant economy. The next 45 years speak for themselves even though change is inevitable.

Maurice is very lavish with his praise of the staff at the school, with some justification, but would the colonial staff have received the same praise? My main concern from our visit there was that it was not a "lack of money" being experienced, but rather a "lack of cleanliness". A problem that 1800 pupils with some buckets of water sponges and soap as well as some "jembes" (hoes – for the non Swahili speakers) to tidy the verges etc., could solve very quickly. However, the will of the staff to make it happen needs to be there. As my old grandmother yes, she was in Kenya too, would often say "Cleanliness is next to Godliness".

Maurice seems intent on writing about an event and experience, which he admits to, obviously quite rightly, without understanding. We alumni were privileged to live and attend school in a unique country in a unique period of history. All past pupils had the opportunity to be in Kitale last October including all those post-1963 pupils who should have only had to come from around the district or Kenya as a whole. [*We need to become more aware of the post-1963 era and get in touch – BW*] Cliff, who did make an effort, expressed his disappointment that more of his school compatriots did not attend. That was entirely their decision. It is called freedom of association.

I think that Maurice should understand that the Kitale School and the Kitale Club are totally different entities. The Club was used for the gathering because the school does not offer or have the facilities to offer non-pupils accommodation. Likewise the club does not offer education. 99.9% of Kenyans are black; therefore, from a simple straight mathematical conclusion, one can assume that the domestic staff proportion would be the same. No doubt the club membership will also show the same ratio. The fact that we booked out all the accommodation there for the weekend and not that many members chose to play golf or use the club while we were there is beside the point. I am sure that the club committee is not complaining since their finances certainly received a good boost through our presence. "Tusker" certainly did! The fact that the likes of the Kitale Club may not exist in Canada does not make it a colonial relic. Sports clubs exist in many countries of the world.

The reunion was intended as a celebration and social gathering of people, now scattered all over the world, who are very proud of their Kenya roots and, for the most part, are sad that circumstances did not allow them to stay in their beloved country. We are who we are – **proud Kitale School Past Pupils.**

Chris Hearne
2009

Dear Kitaleites

I take full responsibility for extending the invitation to Maurice that he write about his Kitale experience from a visitor's perspective. That it drew reaction from a staunch and very loyal Kitale School alumni in Chris is acceptable and again, from his perspective, perfectly correct. I, along with Robin and Danie Steyn, have had the privilege of editing both versions with permission from Maurice and Chris. I would like all who receive the Newsletter to read, form their own opinion without sending through any further comment. My great fear is that a request I made in all innocence may see the demise of an association that we have all worked so hard to establish.

From Bridget with love to all