

## African Gold *Part Two*

By Charles Miess



Part I of "African Gold" appeared in the February issue of Kentlands Dot Us. It is an account of Miess's trip with co-workers Walt and Jim to Ghana in West Africa to evaluate radio control of mining machinery in a Ghanaian gold mine. After a long trip inland, they arrived in the gold mining town of Obuasi.

Upon our arrival at the mine, we found that the mining machines had arrived but the radio control systems had not. Phone connections are difficult in Ghana. It took several hours to determine that the radio control equipment was held up in customs in Accra—a four hour drive back from Obuasi. The customs agents were demanding 10,000,000 cedis (about \$4000) to release them. While this was being sorted out, Walt and I decided to visit the village of Abono on Lake Bosumtwi.



Abono is an hour and a half north of Obuasi by car. We hired a local driver—a young man with the unlikely first name of Squist. He was named, he said, in honor of a missionary who converted his great-grandfather many years ago. Although the vehicle was old and without air conditioning, I was secretly glad as I wanted to experience the real Africa—heat and all. But I wouldn't have any problems accepting a nice cold refrigerated beer when we got there. Soon that was the only thought that occupied my mind.

The road ends at Abono. It was at first a disappointment—no restaurants, no electricity, no cold beer. Ours was the only vehicle in the village and our arrival was greeted with a dozen young boys scheming to elicit a tip from us. Soon an older man arrived—probably the Chief of the village. He called himself George and insisted on being our guide for the exploration of Lake Bosumtwi.

Suspicious and defensive, I wanted to establish George's fee in advance. He didn't seem to understand (perhaps conveniently) as he led us down the sand beach. I decided to stay close to George and ignore the kids so I would be obligated for only one payment. *Divide and conquer* must have been their plan as Walt was soon cordoned off by six of the little urchins.

"I like your hat," said one.

"So do I," replied Walt.

"Trade your shoes for my sandals?" asked a second.

"There's snow where I live," replied Walt.

"Can I have some money?" asked another.

“Then I won’t be able to eat,” replied Walt.

“You eat with us, then you don’t need money,” he argued convincingly. Walt was weakening!

George prattled on that the lake was the largest natural body of fresh water in Ghana and was formed from a volcanic crater. It is considered sacred by the Ashanti people. The religious beliefs do not allow traditional boats, so the fishermen use customized logs and paddle with their hands.



“Can I have your pen?” interrupted a small boy in a blue shirt.

“No, no,” I replied.

I glanced down the beach while George continued with his story. Four men, preparing to go fishing on the lake, seemed to be studying us with detached interest. All were tall, lean, and unashamedly naked.

“Can I have your pen?” asked the boy in the blue shirt. I pretended not to hear.

When the pictures were taken and the tour was over, I slipped 15,000 cedis (\$6) into George’s hand hoping the others wouldn’t see. George was pleased.

“Can I have your pen?” asked the boy in the blue shirt.

“What will you do with it?” I asked.

“My school work,” he replied with a smile. He had worn me down. I gave it to him.



Our radio controls had finally arrived. Walt, Jim, and I spent several busy days with the installation, checkout, and downloading of the latest software. One of the machines was driven to the mine site and then down a tunnel that spiraled into the ground toward the 1600 foot level. We didn’t see any gold. Most of it is contained in the rock, which when processed yields a few ounces of the precious metal per ton. The machine and the radio control system worked flawlessly. We had accomplished our mission.

We were still on mine property as we traveled the red dirt road that scarred the hills overgrown with jungle. A half clad man with a machete came running towards us as if in a 100 meter race. A pickup truck with mine security agents popped up over the rise heading for the man with the machete—their guns drawn. He was a gold poacher and had been looking for flakes of gold on the ground. His luck had run out. Life is not easy in Ghana.



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On the way to the airport we were temporarily stalled in traffic. A little girl on the street was balancing a bucket filled with plastic bags of cold water on her head and was attempting to sell them to the travelers. From the car window, I asked to take her picture. She stopped briefly in her work, stood straight, and smiled. The traffic started moving as I pulled a bill from my pocket. “This is for you” I said as we pulled away. She ran up quickly. “Thank you Suh,” she said with obvious delight as her eyes met mine.

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This was not the Africa of starvation, disease, and despair that I had expected. Instead, it was a land of healthy, happy people living a hard and simple life. It was an Africa of proud heritage, rich culture, deep religious convictions, and strong family ties. It was a people that took pride in their personal appearance



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and cleanliness despite primitive living conditions. It was a land where neatly dressed children cheerfully walked miles to a simple school that had no air-conditioning or other amenities.

This was an Africa where each village—no matter how small, remote, or poor—had a *Welcome* sign as you entered and a *Farewell* sign as you left. It was a people that I walked among in friendship and safety. A people that I admired and secretly envied.

We were finally boarding the plane and free of the hustle and bustle of Ghana. “It’s good to be back with my own culture,” I thought absently as the man in the aisle seat stood and allowed me in—never taking his eyes from the book he was reading. As the plane roared into the evening sky my thoughts unexpectedly returned to George at Lake Bosumtwi. I suddenly regretted not spending more time learning and experiencing rather than worrying about the amount of his meager fee. And why was I so reluctant to give that boy my pen? The delight on his face when he finally received it was worth a hundred times its value.

Most of all, I remembered the girl with the bucket perched on her head trying to sell cold water to thirsty travelers. I could still see the gratitude in the beaming eyes of

that nameless street waif as I stuffed a sweat-soaked bill in her tiny hand. In that brief encounter, she had stolen a part of my heart and soul—and was to keep it captive in Ghana—forever.

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## Epilogue

Jim stayed on in Ghana after Walt and I headed home. Several days later, fever and chills forced him to leave work for the refuge of his room at the lodge. “I died for two days,” Jim said, “until friends came by to check on me.”

They took him to a ‘jungle hospital’ in Obuasi where the doctor drew blood and prepared a slide. Just then, the electricity went off! Jim fumbled for the miniature flashlight that hung from his belt. The steady hand of the doctor directed the narrow beam of light to the mirror under the microscope as he peered through the lens and confirmed his suspicions. Malaria!

Three days of shots, pills, and intravenous feeding arrested the disease. Jim is now back in Portland with the other love of his life—his wife and family. But if I know Jim, his tormented soul will soon be torn between them and his next assignment to a faraway land.

Neither Walt nor I have experienced any ill effects from our adventure, although we must be watchful through the next year for symptoms of malaria. But Ghana can get in your blood in more ways than one. Would Walt consider going back? “In a minute,” he replies without hesitation. And so would I!