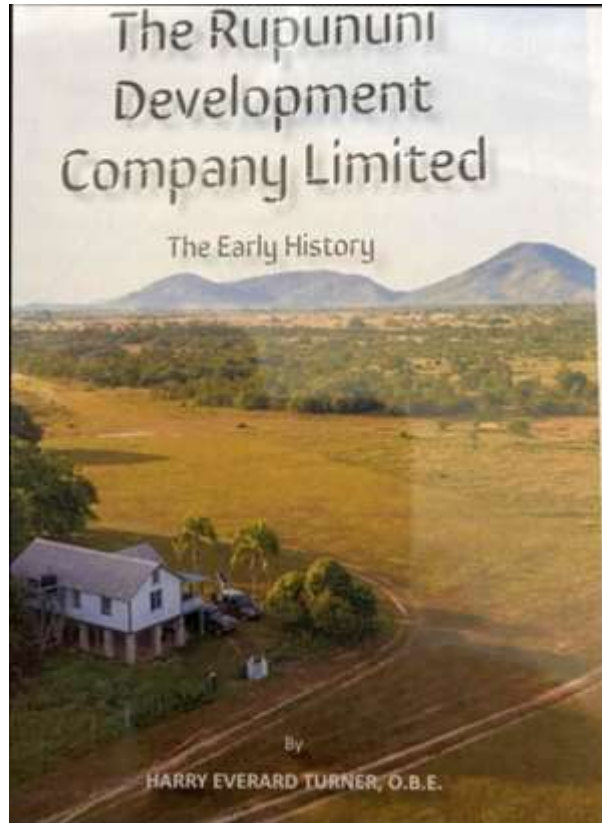


The Rupununi Development Company Limited

- The Early History by Harry Everard Turner

A Review by
Joseph G Singh, Major General (retd)

The Book



- Author: Harry Everard Turner, OBE, who was an Employee of the Company from 1920 and General Manager from 1940 to his retirement in 1965. A Shareholder and Director, he remained engaged as a Consultant until his death in 1970
- This documentation of the history of the Company was prompted by Major C J Bettencourt-Gomes, BEM, Chairman of the Company from 1956
- The decision to form a Company was formalised on 28th October 1919 by Agreement signed by the Governor, Sir William Collet and A P Sherlock -the Head of Booker McConnell and Company, acting on behalf of potential shareholders
- Turner died in 1971 and Terrence McCann finalised the completion and publication and dedicated the book to Turner, Turner's wife, and Jimmie Brown, a Scotsman who had emigrated to Canada and joined the Company in 1939 at age 34
- The Book is 121 pages with 54,480 words.

Photograph of Harry Turner



Photo hanging on the wall of the Ranch House



Enhanced Photograph

Important Aspects of the Book on the Early History of the Rupununi Development Company Limited (RDCL)

- RDCL was formed in 1920 to raise beef cattle for the markets of coastal Guyana and took its name from the interior savannahs where its main Ranch was located

- The Company also sought to diversify into other land holdings and marketing operations in order to increase efficiencies in the value-chain
- The History of the RDCL is therefore the story of one Company's experience of large-scale animal husbandry in a tropical savannah environment
- Because the geographical area of operations was also the homeland of Wapishana, the book also contains aspects of the social and economic history of an important area of the country.

Important Historical Aspects

- Genesis of cattle rearing in the 18th Century: Portuguese travelling up the Amazon to ascend the Rio Branco and settle in the open country, was initially aided by the practice of transporting long-term prisoners to this remote area. Churches and missionaries followed and attempted to resettle Indian tribal groups into more permanent nuclear settlements. Long-horned cattle from the Iberian Peninsula were introduced and these in time, became the main support of the growing immigrant population,
- Meanwhile, the Dutch who concentrated on Guiana's coast made occasional journeys up the Essequibo to trade but the slow, costly and dangerous river trips from Fort Island did not motivate them to establish themselves in the open savannah but a small outpost was built at Kurupukari

- In 1843 Richard Schomburgk on his first journey, reported of Brazilian ranchers grazing their cattle on the eastern side of the Takutu River. He reported on the incident at Pirara between Anglican Missionary Youd and the Brazilian military
- Population estimate of Indians in the South Rupununi approx. 2000 in early 20th Century and they clustered around the forest margins and bush islands, while exploiting the savannahs for fish and game
- First non-Indian Settler was a trader of Dutch ancestry - **de Rooie**, around 1860-1865, who with his wife, settled by the Rupununi River not far from Dadanawa and traded beads, axes, knives and fishhooks for hammocks and other craft. After a while, de Rooie obtained four or five head of cattle from Brazil for milking purposes.

Geography and Ecology

- The Rupununi Savannah is part of the then Rupununi Administrative District (now known as Region 9) in the upper Essequibo
- The Savannah country is bounded in the North by the Pakaraima foothills, in the south by the forested areas contiguous with the Parabara/Karaudanawa/ Achewib alignment, in the east by the Rupununi River and in the west by the Takutu River, marking the Guyana Brazil border. It is bisected by the Kanuku Mts - with the small north savannahs, and the larger south Rupununi savannahs
- Low, undulating country varying from 3 to 500 feet in altitude, lying in the watershed between the Essequibo and Amazon drainage systems

- The book highlights the significance of the rainfall and flooding for several months of the year, and the dry season when rivers can be a series of barely connected pools.
- Details of the vegetation, shrubs and grasses and their relationship to soil types and water courses, are important factors in cattle ranching in the Rupununi Savannahs.

Cattle in the south Rupununi

- De Rooie's few head survived and increased in the 1870s and 1880s
- He was joined by Scotsman HPC Melville, who had moved from Jamaica where his father was a priest, to the Potaro and had been prospecting for gold. Fell on hard times, travelled to the Rupununi and was inclined towards settling like de Rooie at Arawananpau on the Takutu, and then east of Dadanawa. Like de Rooie, he purchased a few head of cattle from Brazil. When de Rooie died in the 1890s, Melville bought out his herd and it is this herd of about 300 head, from which the Rupununi cattle are descended.
- Melville was a striking personality but with little interest in animal husbandry. He married two sisters and utilised extended family to tend his cattle. Loose arrangement meant only at Round Up were cattle supervised. Eventually, as they increased and dispersed, they became uncontrollable, except those that were domesticated for milk production.

The Idea of a Cattle Trail

- Melville's cattle were disposed of in Brazil through friends but the Brazilian government was clamping down on foreign imports of cattle through out the Amazon, so the ease with which cattle were sold depended on the laxity of Brazilian officials
- Melville was then appointed first resident District Commissioner in 1905 and over the next decade to 1915, he was obliged to find new outlets for his increasing herd
- He proposed to the colonial government at the end of the war in 1918, to open up a cattle trail to the coast. It was a timely proposal because of shortage of food and inflation in prices. Project was approved, money voted and Melville was instructed to carry out the work. The trail was completed in 2 years from the most practical route from the north savannah to the savannah of the Berbice River.

The Idea of a Cattle Company

- Cecil Clementi then Officer Administering the Government paid a visit to the Rupununi, visited the savannas, and had discussions with Melville. Clementi was impressed by Melville and when he returned to the Capital started mobilizing prominent business interests with a view to forming a Company to develop and promote cattle rearing in this part of the interior.
- End of the war in 1918 saw a lot of interest in business speculation. Sugar was temporarily booming, and individuals were making fortunes, so opening what was reportedly rich and under-developed cattle country suggested similar prosperity and easy gain.

- A P Sherlock, head of Booker McConnell and Company, the main commercial concern of the colony undertook to promote the Government-backed Development Company. Although neither he nor his associates had any knowledge of cattle keeping in the interior, does not seem to have been an important consideration, nor apparently, the fact that the viability of this project rested on the word of one man-Melville who was more interested in selling out to any new concern, So the wheels began to gain traction and on 6 Sep 1919, a party comprising Melville, the Government Veterinary Surgeon A. Seton-Milne and the Manager of the Abary Cattle Ranch J H Haly, left for the Rupununi to report on the Dadanwa Ranch belonging to Melville and on the Cattle trail.
- Travelling by boat on the Essequibo and the Rupununi Rivers, the party reached Dadanawa 23 days later.

Formation of the Company

- 28 Oct 1919 Agreement was signed between Governor Sir Wilfred Collet and Chairman of Bookers McConnell, by the Government on the one hand and the applicant on the other, with a view to the development of the cattle industry in the interior of the said colony.
- The Agreement required the formation and registration of the company under the name of the Rupununi Development Company Limited.
- The company shall at all times remain a British Company registered in the said colony.

- Authorized Capital of One Million Dollars of which amount, Share Capital to the amount of \$500,000, shall be immediately subscribed by responsible persons to the satisfaction of the Governor.

Operationalising the Agreement

- Lease was a 99 year grazing lease on all of the savannah south of the Kanukus, not already the subject of earlier leases. Melville had a 50 square mile lease around his homestead of Dadanawa.
- Annual rental was set at \$2.00 per square mile with stipulation that the Company increase its cattle holding so as to average 20 animals per square mile at the end of the first six years. The target figure for the leased area would have been 40 to 45 thousand head of cattle
- In 1918, Sherlock had personally taken out an option on Melville's cattle, estimated at 25,000 head at an option price of \$250,000. Sherlock also took out a lease on 2,000 square miles in the south. These were now transferred to the new Company.
- At the other end of the trail, the savannah of Rossfield Ranch was viewed as suitable for the purpose of holding and reconditioning the cattle before they were sold. Rossfield had 3,000 head of cattle and was owned by the Abary Cattle Ranch, located between the Berbice River and the Abary Creek. These assets were sold to the new Company at a share price \$50 per fully paid \$25 share.
- All the share holders of the Abary Cattle Ranch were Directors in the new Company – A P Sherlock, WBM Shields and HE Murray and now HPC Melville. To be a Director

you had to hold 1,000 shares and you were entitled to a remuneration of \$1,000 per annum. Subscription List for the shares was issued on 2 Dec for 14 days and 25,069 shares were applied for by a large cross section in the community and a further 27,145 shares of the same value were issued for considerations other than cash. HPC Melville had 15,000 shares , Sherlock 9,395, Goring 750, and JB Melville 250. Melville also bought two Brazilian-owned ranches at Bon Success and at Sawariwau.

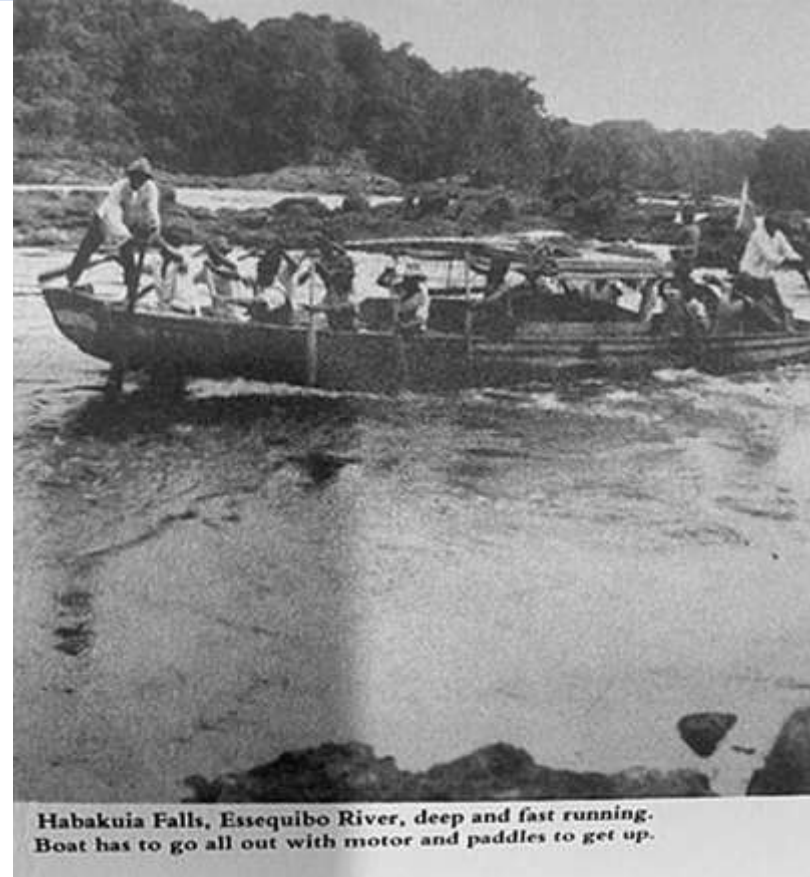
- Prospectus dated 29 November 1919 read: **“The Company has been formed with the primary objective of consolidating and developing the business of cattle and livestock-raising in the Colony, more especially in the Rupununi Savannahs.** The Directors believe that a profitable business can be developed if cattle be raised on the Rupununi Savannahs and sent to the Coastlands and held for sale, being fattened meanwhile. As yet, transportation from the Rupununi Savannahs over the recently constructed cattle track is inadequately organized, but Mr Melville has successfully driven a short while back, more than 50 steers over the track to its junction with the Berbice River, from which point they were sent without difficulty to the Abary Ranch”.

River Travel



Fully laden boat with Crew

Caption for photo at right:
Habakula Falls, Essequibo River, deep and fast running. Boat has to go all out with motor and paddles to get up.



**Habakuia Falls, Essequibo River, deep and fast running.
Boat has to go all out with motor and paddles to get up.**

Navigating the Habakula Falls, Essequibo River

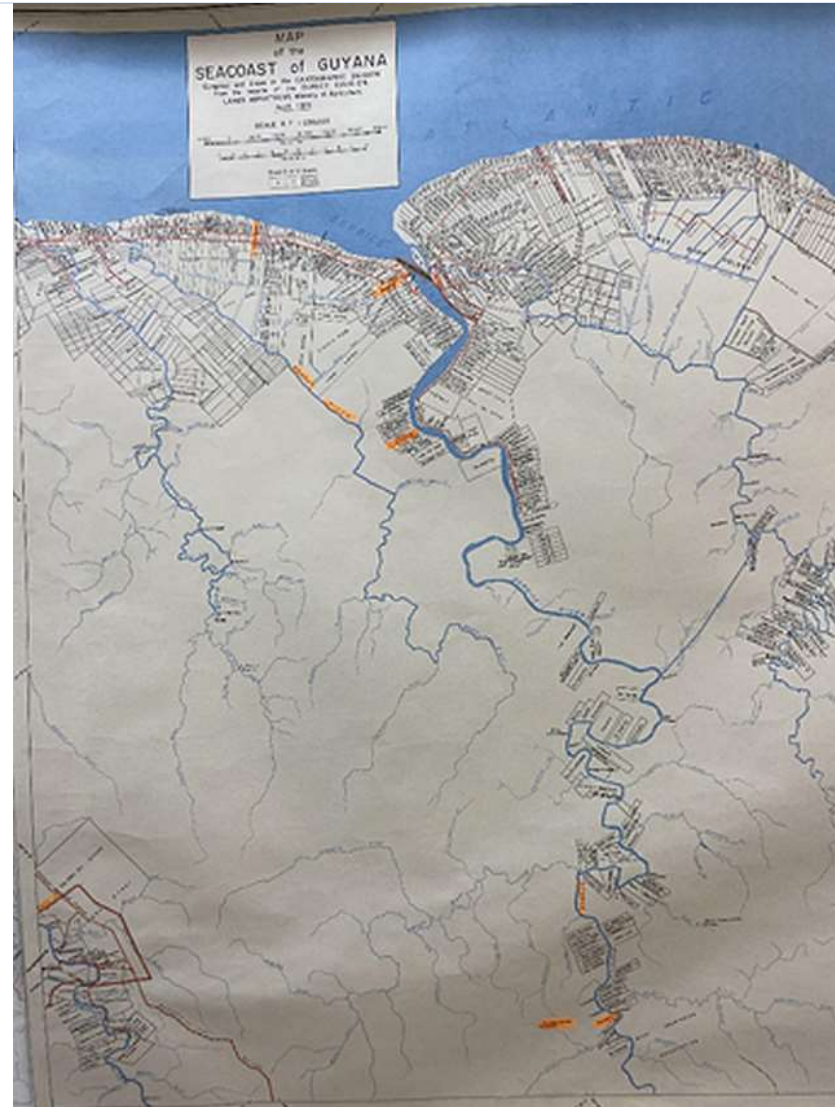
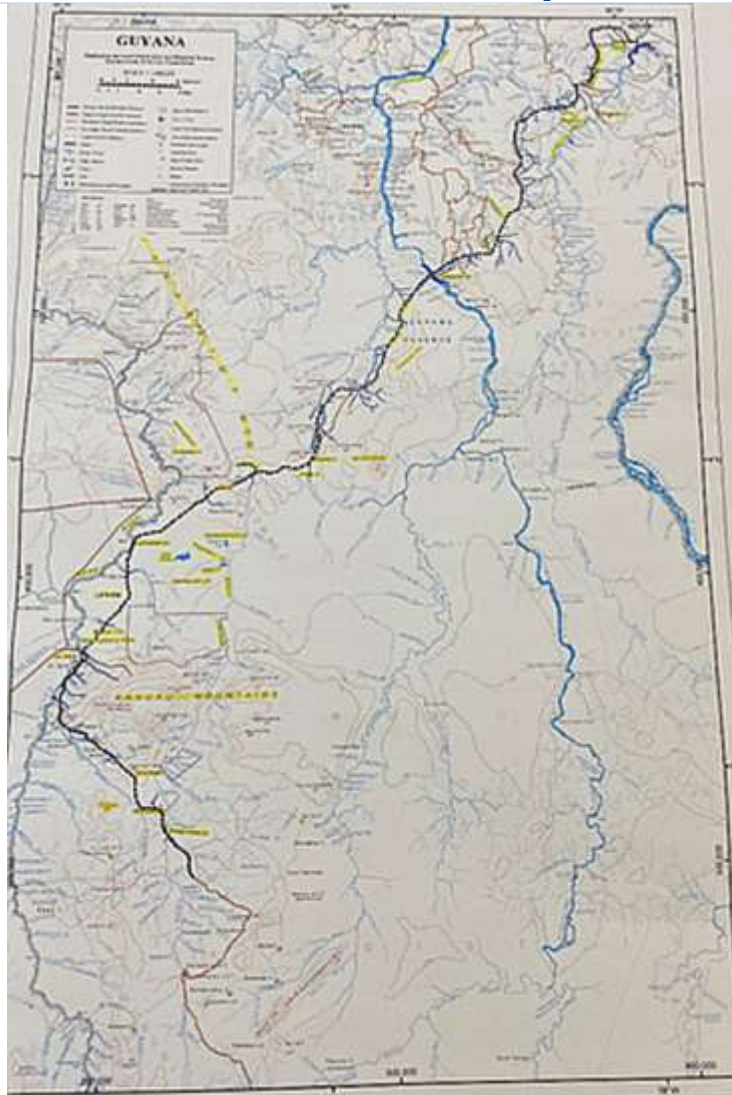
The Reconnaissance Report

- The party inspected (tame) animals reportedly in good condition not far from the ranch
- An abundance of a coarser grass- reported as “quite good feed for cattle”
- At Kurupukari, a half mile crossing, “ there are no difficulties with regard to the transport of cattle – which cannot be surmounted with undue expense”
- At Kurupukari, first herd of 50 tame animals domesticated at the Ranch were seen and they arrived quite successfully after being led through the trail
- Confident expressions of sentiment, based on the most cursory practical examination, helped to promote an entirely false view of conditions generally on the trail.

The Truth

- The inspection only covered domesticated animals and not the rest of the herd which were wild and would pose challenges when driven away from the home range
- The Colony’s Agricultural Officer had in an earlier report on the soils of the Rupununi described them as “barren to sterile” and the coarse bunch grass as having “little or no nutritional value”.

The Rupununi Cattle Trail to the Coast



Early Management

- Melville, the major shareholder, was chosen as Managing Director. Up country Manager was A.M. Gore a 40 year old Canadian with experience of cattle in the USA, and his assistant H E Turner, a young Englishman who had experience of cattle work in western Canada and who had also served in a Cavalry Regiment in northern France and the Middle East. Their duties were to organize and manage the up-country Ranches and supervise Drives to the Coast.
- Turner wrote of the journey: he and Gore travelled from GT on 9 Jan 1920 by steamer to Wismar, by trail to Rockstone, by two boats crewed by Wapisiana and after 28 days paddling, they arrived at a point in the Rupununi River 30 miles from Dadanawa. They walked for 10 miles to a point where horses were left for them, and they rode 20 miles in the moonlight to the Ranch house.
- Name **Dadanawa** derived from **Dada** (Macaw) which, according to legend, lived in the lake and sometimes dragged unwary passers-by to their doom. **Nawa** is a generic term for the many slight hills in the savannah.
- Homestead comprised 3 board houses with shingle roofs, a little store, a traditional mud-walled, thatched building for the vacqueros. The oldest house was Melville's and was the first appearance of European architecture in the Rupununi, Served as his residence for many years and coming to serve him as a District Commissioner's Office and Court Room. The second building had been hurriedly erected upon the visit of the then Governor Sir Walter Egerton in 1911. The third and largest, was a recent addition, built to accommodate an increasing family.

- Melville still had control of the homestead and Gore had to purchase supplies from Melville's store at whatever price was quoted. The Company consisted of Gore, Turner, 16 vaqueros and two herders for the horses.

The Dadanawa Ranch

Next to the Rupununi River



Photo caption:

The Dadanawa Ranch building cluster near the Rupununi River. From this primitive outpost the vaqueros managed thousands of head of cattle that ranged over 3,000 square miles. However, it would be months before I could be considered one of the cowboys. Fresh from English school and with no experience. I had a lot to learn!



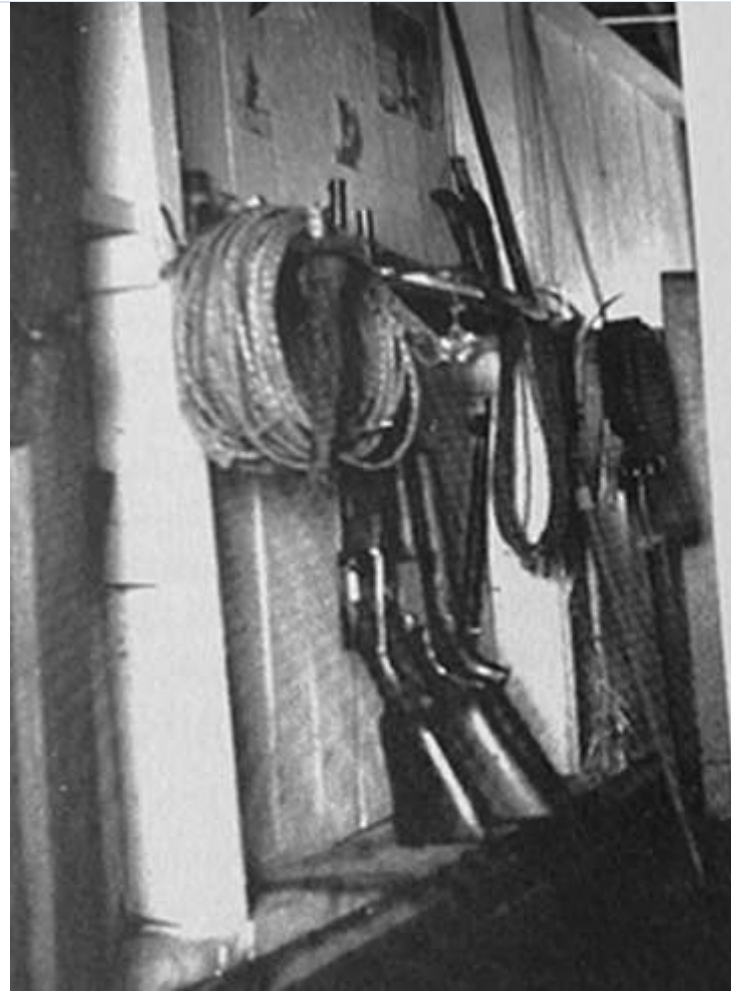
The layout of the Ranch Headquarter

Dadanawa Ranch House



Cowboy Hats

Caption:
A cowboy's hat was an important part of his outfit in the South American sun.



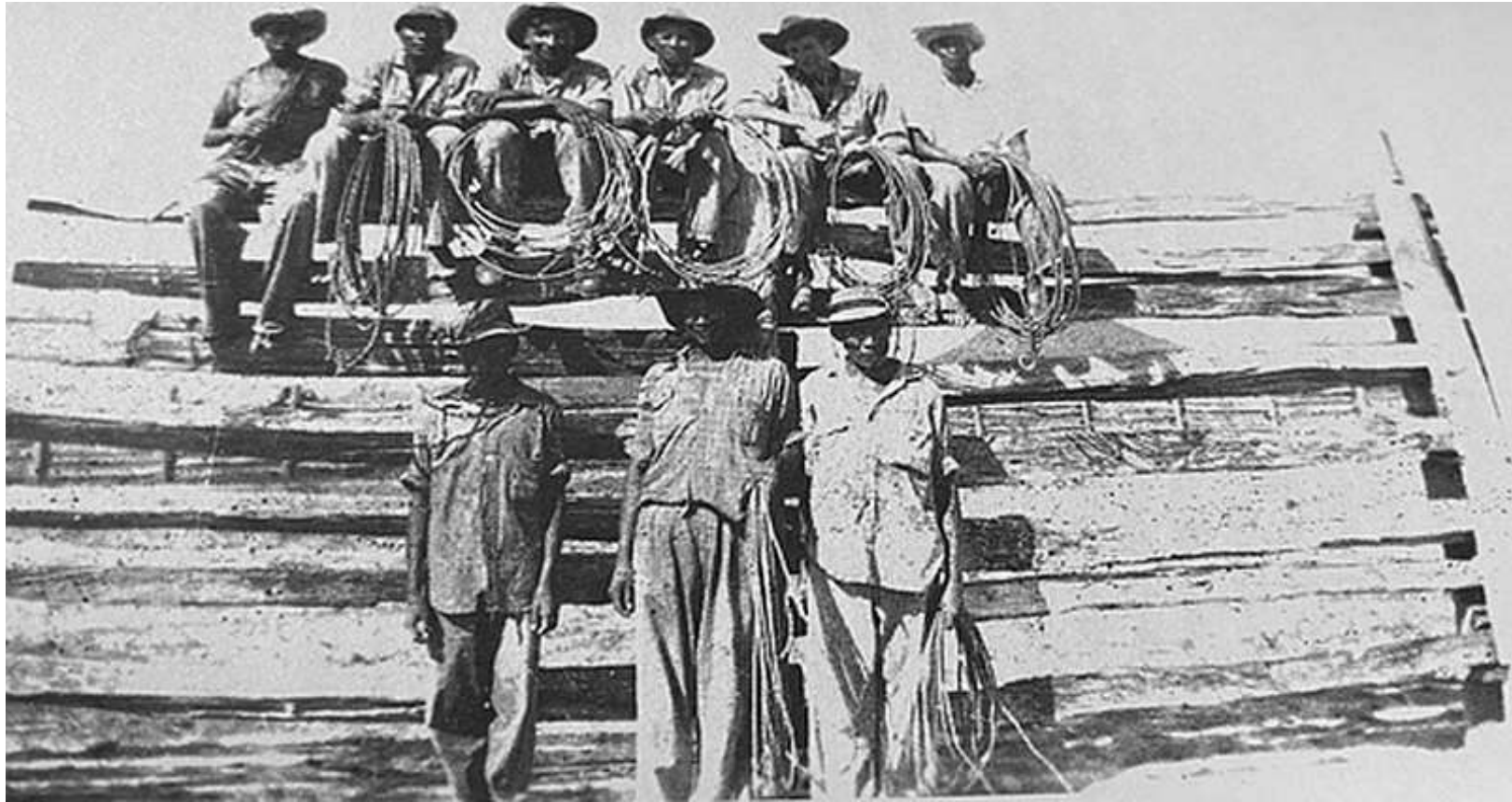
Gun Rack

Caption:
A rifle or shotgun were sometimes welcome.

Dadanawa Cattle Roundup



Longhorns in the Corral
Longhorns were packed into the Dadanawa corrals at round-up time.



Vaqueros at Dadanawa

Rejected initially, I eventually proved myself and became one of the vaqueros. There am I second from the right on the top row. Charlie is third from the right next to me and Bob Barker is next to him.

Cattle Drives by Gore and Turner and Lessons Learnt

- The First Drive in Feb 1920 from Dadanawa, was by Gore and Turner with a 480 Herd. At Tacama, only 140 remained after the journey of 20 days. The Trail was poorly constructed –no fences, inadequate grass and water. Large herds are unmanageable.
- Turner's experience on the Second Drive involved a smaller Herd being driven along the Ireng instead of across the north savannahs and the cattle were in better condition and reached Kurupukari in 4 days with only 4 of the original 150 lost. However, in the absence of fenced clearing at Kurupukari, losses of 70 were incurred there
- Fenced clearings were needed and access to grass and water.
- However, instead of realizing they were misinformed by Melville, the Directors continued to make demands to move 2000 head of cattle the next season after the rains.
- The Directors were no doubt convinced their actions were in the best interest of the Company but the Minutes of the Company's meeting eloquently testify to the way in which a group of well meaning but opinionated men trying to do their best, can achieve the worst. It took the Company 20 years to recover from their mistakes.

On the Trail Drive



Crossing a Creek on the Trail



Crossing the Rupununi River

Crossing the herd over the Rupununi

Trail Drive



In the Hot, Savannah Sun

Trail Drive: Hot dusty work that I learned from the Indian cowboys.

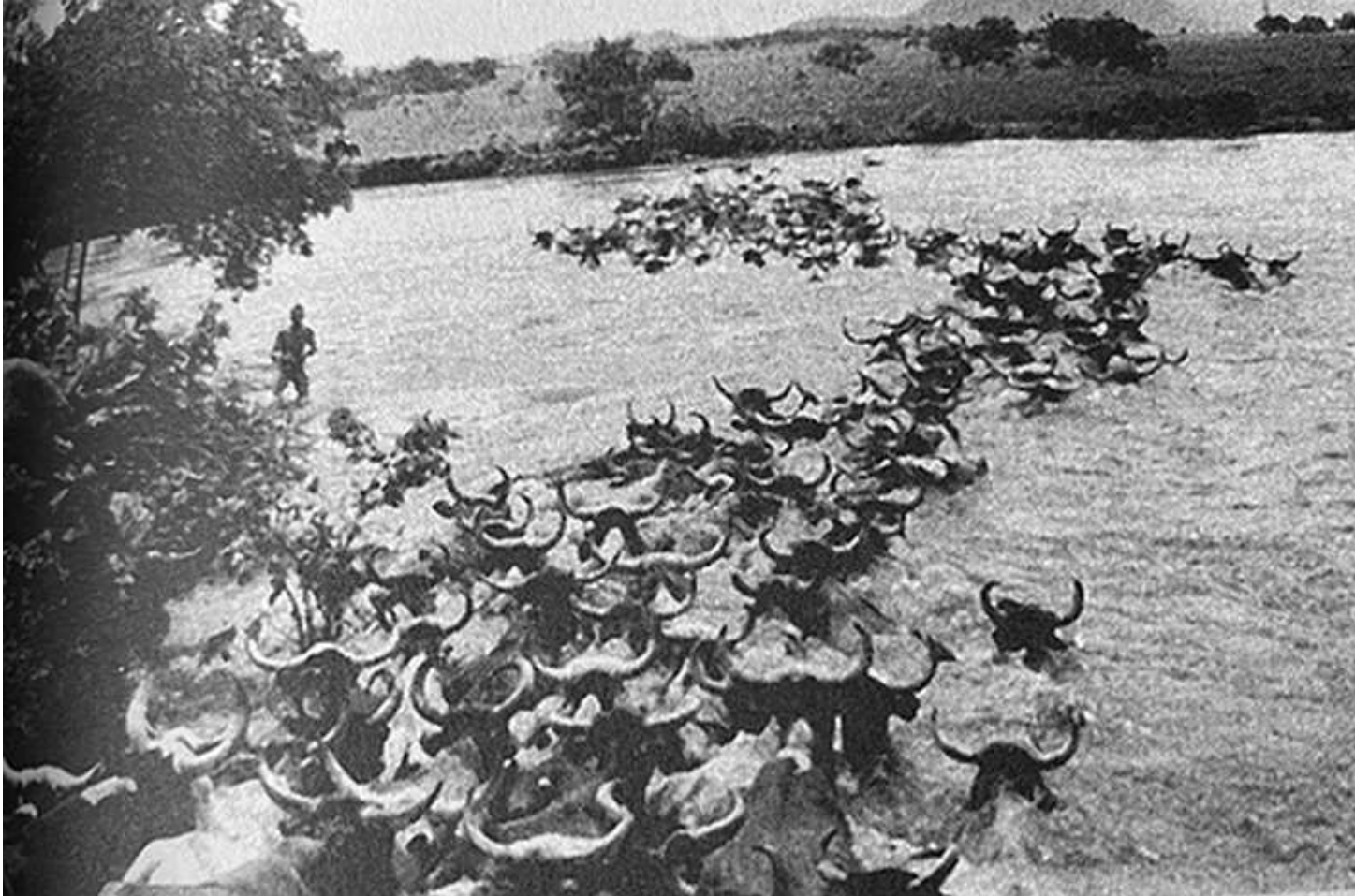


In the Muri Scrub

Other Issues

- Gore (one year before) had been ordering equipment from the USA, without even setting foot in the Rupununi – saddles, buggy and wagon harnesses could not be used in a country with no roads. Brazilian saddles were lighter and one quarter the price
- Wapishanas were quiet and content to hunt, fish, and trade with the Company but not inclined to do settled work
- Gore in exasperation, hired Brazilian vaqueros, who made it clear they were only cowboys and not prepared to do any other work.
- Of the five herds dispatched in 1920, only 50 % reached the Coast
- A new plan was worked out for the 1921 Season - Gore managed Dadanawa with Turner at Annai. Turner, with three men, would drive a herd of 150 bullocks each week through the savannah at Sarama and another set of drivers would take them to Kurupukari. Drivers were Macusi and some from the lower Demerara.

On the Trail Drive



Swimming the Cattle
When the streams flooded we had to swim the cattle across



Swimming the Horses

Board Room Decisions & Management

- In Jan 1921, Melville gave a Contract for the Kurupukari-Tacama section of the Drive to a friend of his who had fled to Trinidad, an ex-Minister of Venezuela and a Bolivarian - General Cipriani. Tall with a long imposing beard, he dealt with the supplies and equipment to both Kurupukari and Tacama . Very efficient systems were enacted but wages were inadequate and Cipriani parted company in 6 months. Melville continued as GM.
- The Board decided to bring in 28 Hereford bulls and 8 stallions from the USA to improve the herd. The horses were poor quality and 18 bulls did not survive tick fever. When the remainder were sent to Dadanawa, no special paddock was ready and only 3 survived. Practically all the white-faced cattle in the Rupununi inherited the characteristic of these three.
- General Cipriani was replaced by General C E Rice. He had served in the Boer War then worked on an Australia Cattle Ranch and came to Guyana in 1911. He took control of the Minnehaha Company dredging for gold in the Potaro. Rejoining the army for WW1, he served in France where he lost an arm commanding an Infantry Battalion, ended the war as a Brigadier General and rejoined Minnehaha. When Melville was to be replaced as GM he was the obvious choice.

Management Issues

- Gore Resigned from Dadanawa and Brigadier C E Rice CBE, DSO, outmaneuvered Melville (under threat) and became Managing Director
- During Rice's tenure, an Outstation of 87 sq miles was established at Waranama at the Berbice end, where cattle driven through the Trail could be fattened. Onverwagt Ranch replaced Rossfield and provided a coastal holding area of 7,000 acres, 12 miles from Rosignol
- Rice recruited former military officers for the various stations at Bon Success, Waranama, and Onverwagt, but most of these were ill-suited and left the employ of the Company.
- Eventually, when Rice resigned in 1927, responsibilities were split with Haly being responsible from Waranama to Onverwagt and Turner being responsible for Dadanawa to Tacama.

Turner's Tenure as General Manager

- From 1930, the Cattle Industry was hit by the Depression and beef prices fell. Ineptitude by the Board compounded the situation, along with flooded conditions in the savannahs, and aggressive action by Governor Denham against the Company by removal of subsidies for rental and repossession of half of the Leased Land at Dadanawa.

- There were also overstocking issues and Turner started a barter arrangement with Brazil – poor quality Dadanawa cattle for Brazilian horses and Zebu Bulls to breed with the Hereford cows at Dadanawa
- Serious financial problems were experienced and Options were examined for sale of the Company or lease of the Ranch's land to be used for settlement of Assyrians in the Rupununi or as a homeland for the Jews
- Eventually, these failed to materialize and Turner, with the versatile Jimme Brown – a lowland Scot who had emigrated to Canada to work as a shepherd, started turning the fortunes around for the better. In 1938, at the 20th Meeting of the Company, a profit was declared of 1,500 dollars
- Turner, who was married to a Nurse in 1932, also found that relations with the Amerindians had vastly improved through his wife's caring attitude and the cordial trading between the Ranch and the Wapishanas.
- Breeding was showing positive results, overstocking was under control, Outstations and Paddocks were being built, and there were improvements in the Trail with fences, grass and water availability
- In 1957, Turner was on the Board of the Company and more structured and strategic decisions were made.
- Brown was joined by Stan Brock in the late 1950s and tractors, aircraft and vehicles led to greater efficiencies.

Wapishanas on the Trail



All the cowboys were Indians



More reliable than the Mechanical Equipment
Wapishanas Indians on the trail to the Dadanawa. They worried less about mechanical problems!

Bullock Wagon in the Rupununi -1930s



Stan Brock

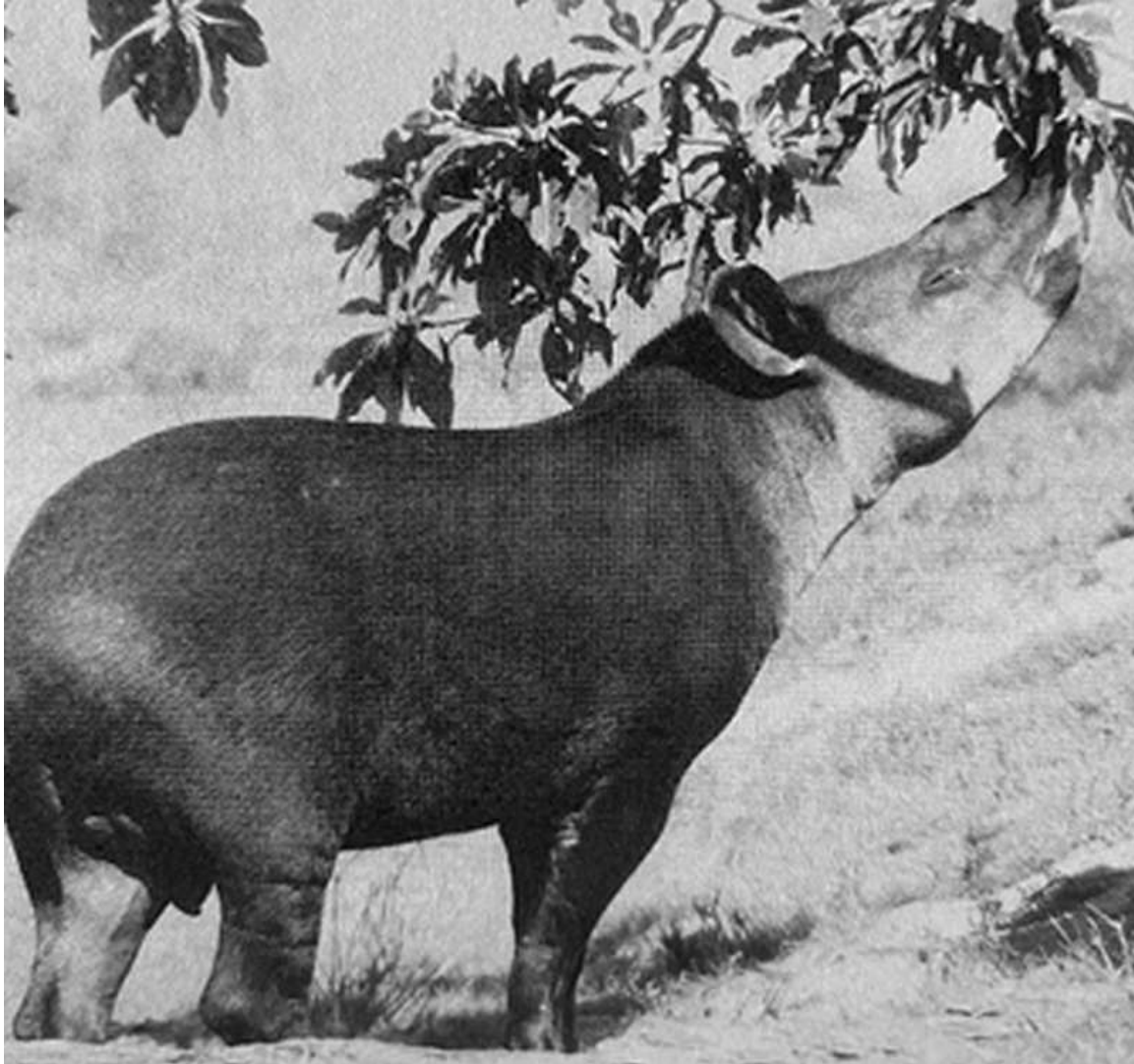


Coffee Break

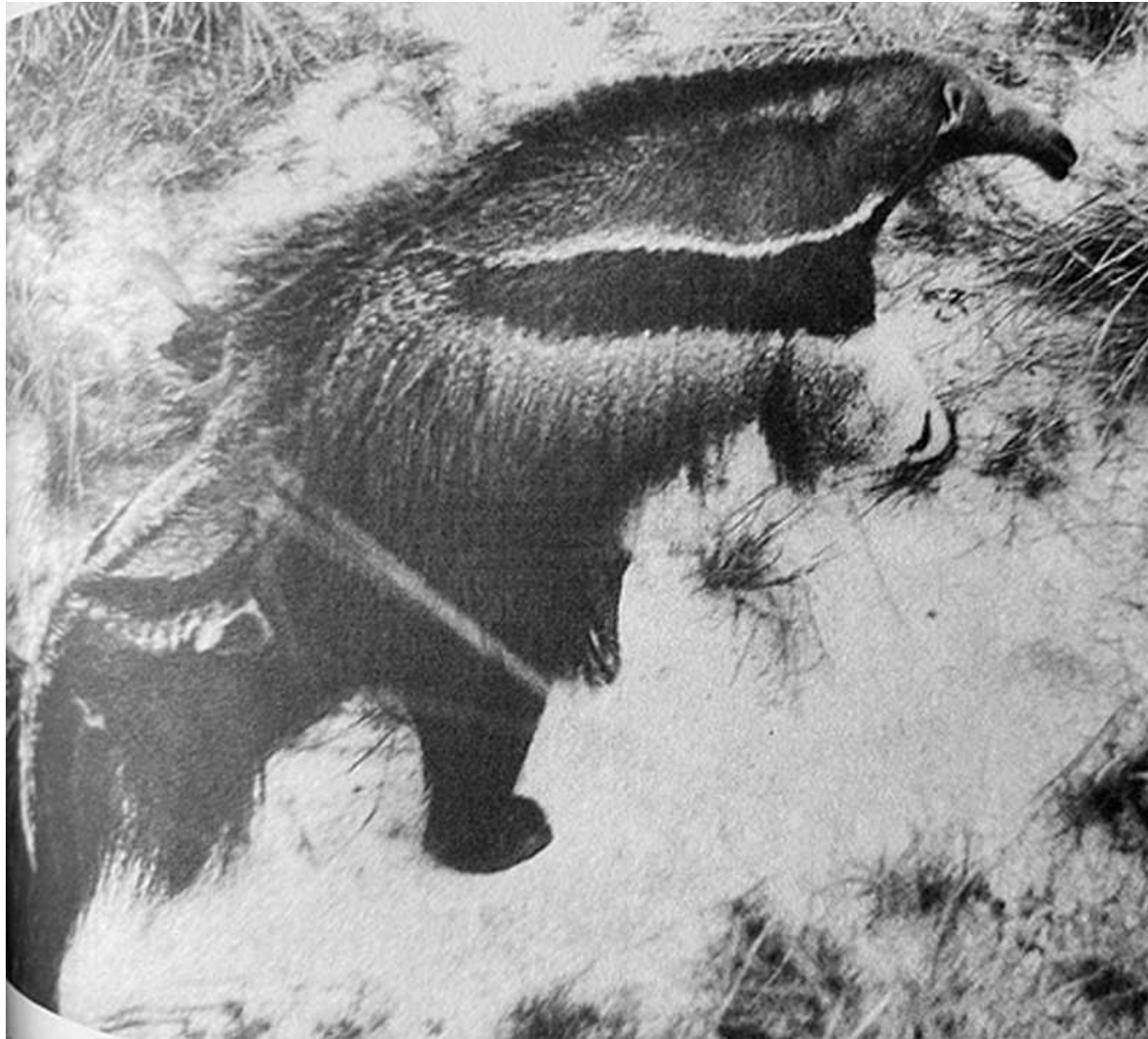


As a Greenhorn

Wild Life on the Ranch

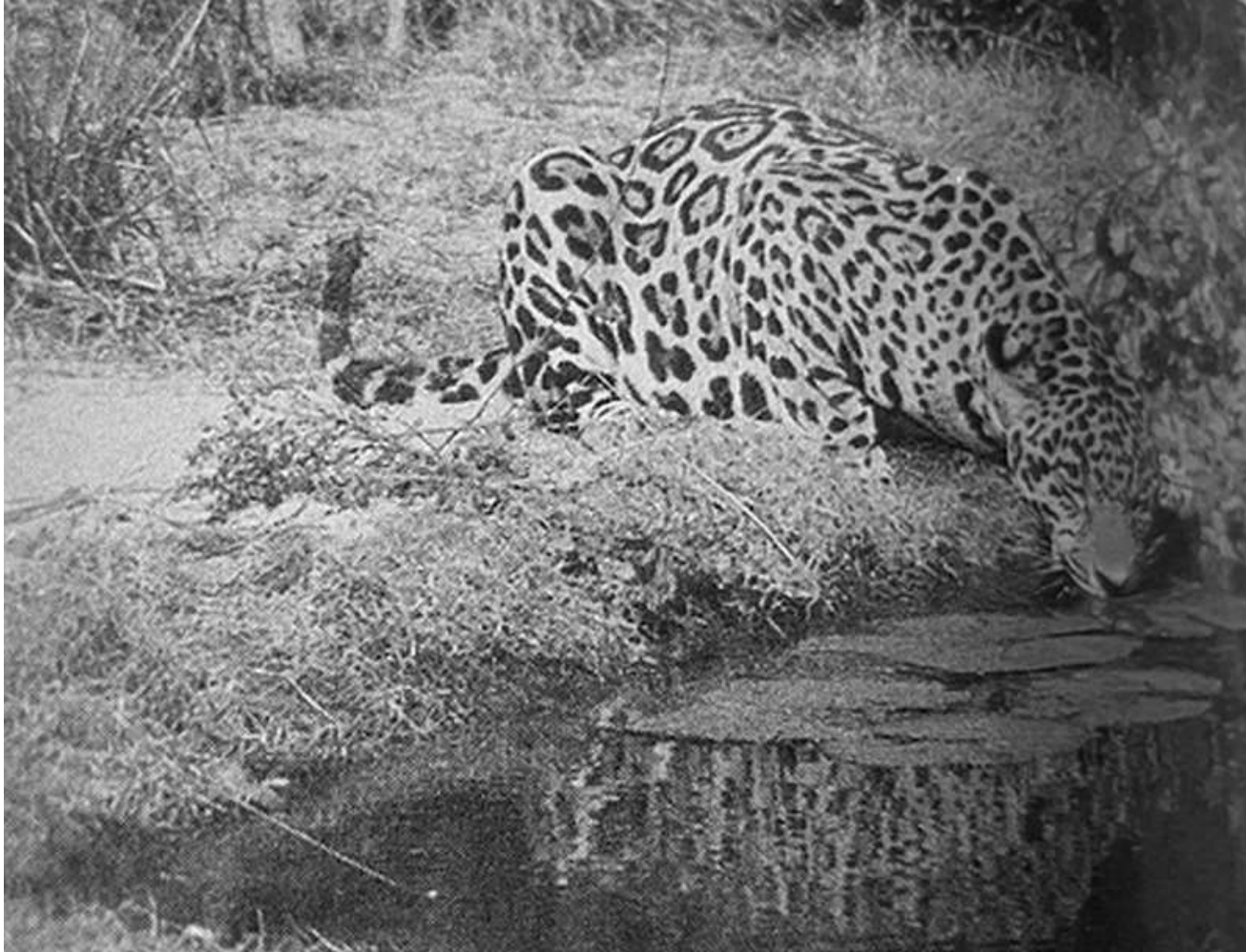


Tapir or Bush Cow



Giant Anteater

Predator at the Ranch



Sipping at the savannah Pool



Held at bay by Hunting Dogs

Potentially dangerous at any time, a jaguar at bay is a direct threat to dogs and humans who hunt him.

Stan Brock



With Leemo the Puma.
My friend Leemo started a strange and interesting trend.



Founder of Remote Area Medical

Remote Area Medical Outreach



At the Ranch House at Dadanawa



Dr Marta Ware (Pixie Gorinsky) and Diane McTurk (the Otter Lady) at
Karanambu

**Gravesite of Harry Prideaux Colin Melville
(1864-1927)**



Gravestone at Twickenham – London



Steve Connelly at the Site

The Closure of the Trail

- The Minutes of the Board are revealing and indicate that for many years between 1920 and 1933 there was a disconnect between the Board and the operational staff, and poor relations between the Government and the Board. Changes in the composition of the Board and appointment of Harry Turner as GM resulted in significant improvements
- From 1937 to 1940 the Company started to make a Profit. Immediately after WW II, the District HQ was moved from Kurupukari to Bon Success and a little later to Lethem
- Logistic upgrades and availability of aircraft, vehicles and upgraded roads prompted changes in the management and operations of the Company
- The last Drive in 1952 saw 1500 cattle sent through the Trail and losses were down to one percent. Profits were \$40,000 that year
- Government closed the Trail in 1953. Cattle were sent by air using the DC 3 and with the establishment of a modern Abattoir at Lethem adjacent to the airstrip , cattle were slaughtered and beef sent by air.

Conclusion

- This book provides a historical report on the early years of the Rupununi Development Company Limited and is an invaluable record of early pioneering economic, social and logistical development activities in the hinterland of British Guiana of a hundred years ago.

- It provides information on the extent of colonial control and decision-making on the fortunes of the colony, and of the social stratification evident at that time on the coast and in the hinterland. It shows the alignment between government and big business' interests, and the lack of consultation and dismissiveness of the upper class in their relationships with the local and indigenous communities.
- It illustrates the fluid relationship between cross border communities in resolving issues without bureaucratic interventions
- It celebrates the pioneering adventurous spirit, hardiness, and resilience of persons in remote communities such as the ranchers, vaqueros, indigenous artisans, river captains and crews, bullock wagon crews and later the bush pilots, such as Colonel Art Williams and Harry Wendt
- It provides information for further research into the ecology of the savannahs, the viability of economic ventures, and the social and environmental impacts of such activities on people, ecosystems and biodiversity
- It celebrates the uniqueness, beauty and diversity of the country and inspires the Reader to learn more about this country and provides examples, such as Harry Everard Turner, of how to overcome challenges using intellect, creativity, team work and a resilient spirit
- The Guyana Heritage Society and those who sponsored this republication of the book, deserve our sincere appreciation.

References:

- 1) [Original Powerpoint Presentation](#) (a very large file!)