

# High Tech in Gaborone

*M. Garrett Bauman*

They built a Holiday Inn a few years back in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana (British Bechuanaland until 1966). This grassland country just north of South Africa is genuinely friendly toward America and eager for contact, so they must have thought a Holiday Inn would make it easier for American business people and government representative who are helping to develop the country. They would not have to endure primitive hotels or village life.

My father-in-law, Ed, lives in a village. The round houses are built of a mud-stucco substance and roofed with grass so they resemble mushrooms. This Texas-sized country with Vermont's population has less road mileage than New York City, and Ed's typical garden pests are not rabbits but elephant and zebra. Yet his last Christmas card, which arrived in mid-February, pictured native-garbed people dancing to a huge, rocking boom box. Ed says when it gets cold, baboons enter the village for warmth and to catch and eat the cats. No one can keep cats long. If the baboons miss, the mamba (a poisonous snake) doesn't. Ed says he keeps in shape by chasing ostrich. "Then, after awhile, they turn around and chase me." He throws rocks at the baboons to keep his arm in shape in case the American embassy in Gaborone ever gets up a baseball game like they did last year. He loves baseball news, but U.S. papers arrive weeks late and the Voice of America broadcasts only "hard" news. "The interesting things about the baboons," Ed writes, "is that one of them is starting to throw rocks back at me." He doesn't like it either that they peek into his doorway at night.

Ten years ago when Ed first arrived in Botswana at age fifty-three as a Peace Corps volunteer, he installed wells and pumps in bush villages in the arid north. Until then, women frequently hiked six hours a day for water. So when the water came, three-day feasts erupted. They drank, danced, sang, and told stories. Ed couldn't have designed a more perfect heaven for himself.

Since his Peace Corps days, Ed has stayed on in Botswana, for mechanics are prized as technological development continues. Most of his time is spent in outlying villages where life is easy going. But once in a while Ed gets a Western itch and hikes or thumbs the 70 miles into Gaborone to stay at the Holiday Inn. It has a weekend special: 145 pula (\$50 U.S.) for a room, food, air-conditioning, pool, barbecue, and even golf. The only thing missing on the links is grass. Dry, 90-to-115 degree summers crisp American-type lawns.

At Gaborone's Community Centre, though, the Dutch embassy tested a new, super hybrid grass. It grew fantastically — which created a problem. They called in Ed, who uncrated a shiny lawn mower as a crowd gathered. When the starter spluttered the mower to life, the crowd screamed and ran in all directions. The people returned gradually, fascinated by the grass shooting out the discharge chute. One man crawled beside the mower, grass spraying all over him as he stared into the magic chute. People stroked the crew-cut grass, lay in it, picked up clippings, and threw them. Boys dared each other to touch the handle. Then the machine fired out a rock — striking the crawling man in the head. He rolled away screaming. Ed rushed over and assured himself the prostrate man was merely grazed.

"Why does he keep screaming?" Ed asked a woman.

"He thinks he's in heaven," she said. "In his religion there's green grass all around. He thinks he died and is in heaven." She laughed.

For many Botswanans heaven does seem on the way: Coca-Colas, boom boxes, water from dry earth, U.S.-financed paved roads, tee shirts, a lawn mower. Outlying towns like Kanye may have solar hot water heaters and even some telephones. Ed has built a few houses in his spare time, and he wires them for the approaching electricity. Botswana loves its technological big brother. The youngsters follow Ed's mowing trail like munchkins in Oz. And if our paved roads lead to Botswana's diamond mines and if we use Gaborone's border location to keep an eye on South Africa, nobody asks us impolite questions. They're a *nice* people.

Ed eventually found a local man willing to take over the "grass eating machine." The recruit sweated as Ed explained the mower operation. He even started it. But when the self-propelled feature kicked into gear, the man fled in panic. The mower ran wild, scattering the crowd in terrified glee, roaring over the flower garden before Ed caught up. This scene was repeated for several weeks until the garden was nearly wrecked. Hilarious crowds gathered for each mowing.

Finally Ed hit on a gimmick that technological societies use. He photographed the man and fabricated an official-looking "Lawn Mower's Driver's License" for the apprentice. Courage bloomed. Soon the driver became a haughty nabob who grinned regally as he mowed, pushing clutch and speed levers with the superior aplomb that computer snobs exhibit in this country. He'd flick out his "license" when introduced to people. Thus is Botswana's new class of the technological elite forming.

Botswana has the most class-free democracy of any African country. Race relations are good, ambitions humble, people happy with their live-for-the-moment philosophy. It is Eden for Ed who was a wandering misfit in the U.S. ten years ago. And it's good work to bring wells to people miles from water. The culture is being Westernized and modernized in good fellowship, not old colonial conquest. That's a measure of progress. But now that he's crowned lord of the lawn mowers, Ed wonders if he's helping to ruin what he loves best about this gentle African country. Lately at night, he hears the baboons moving outside, muttering, then something clunks against his house, and he regrets teaching them to throw rocks.