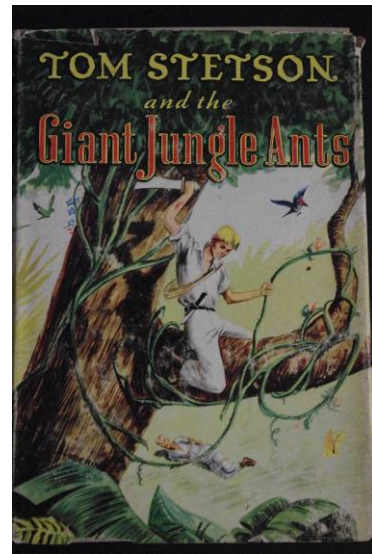


These two stories I wrote were included in a collection of stories by people who had served in the Teachers for East Africa program in the 1960s. They were included in a collection of stories, *We Were Walimu Once, and Young*, by Brooks Goddard. Walimu (mwalimu singular) was the Swahili word for teacher.

### **Giant Jungle Ants** **Ron Stockton**

When I was twelve or thirteen, I read a boy-adventure book called *Tom Stetson and the Giant Jungle Ants*. Tom, a high school junior, went into the jungles of Brazil to visit his uncle who was a medical missionary. He encountered a world vastly different from any he had ever known. I still have that book. According to the flyleaf, “Tom and his uncle strive to rescue a friend from the primitive customs of the savage tribe, and at the same time fight the natural enemies—fierce animals, poisonous plants, and stinging insects.” Among the most traumatic of Tom’s strange experiences with witchdoctors and other alien creatures was the attack of Giant Jungle Ants. Tom described the attack:

*On they came in perfect military formation, a column of gigantic black ants. There was a battalion of warrior ants in front, followed by an orderly procession of worker ants, which were twice as small as the inch-long warriors. The workers were carrying tiny bits of grass, and some carried the bodies of their dead companions. Others had spiders, crickets, roaches and beetles in their pincer-like jaws. As they advanced in a column ten yards wide and two miles long the animals of the jungle were frantically hurrying out of the path of their invasion. Huge snakes slithered before them, and jaguars, elephants and lions rushed to get out of the way. From the swaying limb of a tree three hundred feet tall and fifty feet in circumference Tom watched, frozen with horror, as the black army of tocadeiras slowly advanced toward the tree in which he had sought shelter... On and on they came, in strict military formation, their tiny black eyes glinting savagely in the sunlight. They closed the gap slowly, relentlessly, but Tom felt sure that he was safe from harm, so high was he in the tree... Then, to his horror, the whole column stopped, as if the leader or leaders had given a command. They stood still for five or ten seconds. Then the advance columns wheeled toward the base of the tree. They were beginning to crawl slowly up the bark toward him on every side.*



What I learned from this book was that places far away were not only strange but really scary. Not only scary, but hostile. And some of them had Giant Jungle Ants.

A decade later when I was 23 and told my friends and relations that Jane and I had been accepted into a program to take American teachers to Kenya for two years, most

of them asked me about creepy things, like spiders falling on your head from the giant trees in the jungle. It seemed as if everyone I knew had read some variant of that book.

But Kenya was not what we expected. Machakos School, 40 miles east of Nairobi, was on the border of two climate zones. One got thirty inches of rain per year, when the rains bothered to come (which was three out of four years). With thirty inches you can have reasonable, but not wonderful crops. The other zone, a few miles east, got ten inches a year. Not much will grow so people herd cattle. That was Masai territory.

Living in a dry land was a bit of a shock to people from Southern Illinois. We grew up with generous rainfall and lush, green, humid vegetation (not to mention chiggers, that would cover your legs and waist, and mosquitoes that flew in formation, wore white scarves, and were known to carry off babies). Machakos was the most desolate place I had ever seen, all brown grass with small stubby thorn trees. It certainly was not a jungle (except for my back yard when I let the grass get out of control). It took me six months to realize what a beautiful place this was. The seasonal monsoon rains came twice a year. During the rainy season they would appear over the impressive Iveti hills every afternoon like clockwork (often preceded by a rainbow). The land would go from brown to green overnight. I came to love it. Plus there were no chiggers.

Of course, I heard stories about ants. These stories were from the white settlers in Kenya and usually involved an army of marching ants that would suddenly appear in someone's front yard, heading for the house. They were not ten yards wide, like the ones Tom encountered, but they were a threat. They were allegedly looking for wetter climates, places where the ground was not so dry. If you didn't deflect them, they would march through your house as if they owned it. It would become uninhabitable until they passed on to another place. One person told me about a farm couple who heard their baby crying in the night. When they went into the nursery, they saw the baby was covered with ants, biting his face. These were the stories of nightmares.

The white farmers had an emergency plan for dealing with marching ants. They would have cans of gasoline (petrol, in British English) out in the shed, sitting in wait. One of the farm workers would alert the farmer ("Bwana, siafu!!!") and they would lay out a burning V formation, hoping to divert the ants around the house rather than through it. According to local lore, this worked, most of the time.

I was never sure that these stories were true, but when you are in that situation you tend to believe what you are told. Anyway, the anthills that we saw, some reaching ten feet into the air, made us think that whatever fantastic stories we heard were probably



not exaggerated. Two attached photos of Greg on an ant hill and termite mound (bottom of article) make the point.

But I had never actually seen an army of ants. One day, that changed.

We lived on the school compound which had three classroom buildings, four dormitories, a kitchen and dining room for 500 boys, and a dozen or so teacher's houses with servant quarters nearby. These were aligned along a road that ran through the school compound.

Our house was the last one on the road. (Photo. All the trees in the picture from our 1971 visit were ones I had planted in 1965. I am very proud of that). It was a nice house with a living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom, separate bath and toilet, and study. There was an electric heater in the living room for when the weather got cool. We would sit there in the evening, huddled near the heater, often with a blanket over us, reading or preparing for the next day's classes. The house had a corrugated tin roof that would function as a kettle drum during the rainy season. The roar from the downpour would make conversation impossible. Since the rains came in spurts of ten or fifteen minutes, we would just fall silent until they stopped. This was also true if we were teaching, or even if we had guests over. It is funny to think about a teacher standing in front of a class without speaking, or of four people just sitting there in the living room in total silence, encompassed in a chamber of pounding rain. We would just smile at each other and sit until the deluge ended. What else could you do?

In the front of the house was our veranda, a flat, cement entry way, with a tin canopy over it. We would park the car under the canopy. When it rained, you could stand there for a minute, shake off the water, and wipe your feet before you came in. Jane and I loved this house, which was our home.

When school ended at 3:00, it would take Jane and me just a few minutes to get to our house. One day, as we came strolling home, we saw that our veranda was covered with ants. These were not just the casual ants that would wander around and eat whatever they found but a real,

honest-to-goodness, army of marching ants. The ones on the veranda were probably exploring for food. They covered the area but were not in formation and didn't seem to be moving in a direction. The "army" was a few feet away, fortunately marching across the driveway rather than through our house.



The middle rank was two inches wide and was so compressed that it almost looked like a solid black ribbon with branches coming from it. On the periphery, five or more inches out on each side, were the warrior ants. These were big suckers with pincers that you wanted to avoid. The Masai, pastoralists who lived on that vast expanse of land that got ten inches of rain, would allegedly use warrior ants as sutures when they got a cut. They would pick up an ant, press the two pieces of torn flesh together, hold the ant up to the cut, and when the ant bit into the cut, they would twist off the ant's head, leaving the pincers in place. It sounds primitive but it was cheaper than stitches and you didn't have to walk twenty miles to the nearest clinic. The formic acid emitted by the ant (which stung like the blazes) would also purify the wound, or so we heard.

But if you were an inexperienced American, it was easy to let curiosity get the best of you. You might decide to inspect that two-inch line of marching ants without

realizing there were warrior ants on the periphery. While you were standing there like a dolt looking at the parade, the warrior ants could be up your leg in a trice, as the British would say, and do damage to the delicate parts. There were stories of men tearing off their pants and performing an inelegant dance for whomever was around for the show.

I was smart enough to avoid that scenario. Since the ants were in possession of our entryway and driveway and were not marching through our house, we decided to bend to reality and go into the house through the back door until they departed. The next morning when we came out, they were still there, marching faithfully in step. That afternoon they were there, and the next morning, and the next afternoon, and the next morning. It took them three days to march through our property and off into the distance. As far as we could tell, they never stopped and never rested. (In Tom Stetson's adventure, they followed commands, stopped and started, and could pivot on a dime). We have no idea where they were going, how they chose their route, or how long that line was.

Once I ventured close enough to the center of the parade to get a photograph. I put my house key down on the ground to give some perspective. I was very careful to make sure those warrior ants did not grab onto my shoes and get up me, in a trice.

I am also glad I have that photo. Not only does it show the Giant Jungle Ants but it shows my house key, which I would never have photographed otherwise.



Son Greg on ant hill and termite mound, 1971

## Toad in Stomach, Beetle in River Ron Stockton

Jane and I were at Machakos School in 1965 when the Ministry of Education asked secondary teachers to monitor Standard 8 school leaving examinations. I was assigned to Kitui, well off the main roads. Kitui had a reputation among our Machakos-based students as a center of witchcraft. When I mentioned my assignment to a class, three students took me aside with great concern. They suggested that I not expel anyone caught cheating or they might put a toad in my stomach. Since I did not want a toad in my stomach, I was very cautious about my behavior while in Kitui.

I drove up with my colleague Ed Christensen in his VW Beetle. Beetles were the perfect car for Kenya. They had an advertising campaign that showed a sedan beside a Land Rover. The slogan was, "You need two cars, or a Volkswagen." Beetles were amazing. They could go over mountains or ford streams or cross the bush (as long as you did not run over a thorn). If they got stuck in the ditch, two men could push them out.



What they could *not* do was cross a river. I know because Ed and I tried. The streams had become rivers because of the rains so our road was blocked. We had been told that when this happened you had three options: go back, sit there until the rains ended, or swim across and trade cars with someone on the other side. We decided to try option four, to carry on.

That Beetle was as determined as it could be, and did great until it got stuck in the mud mid-stream. Ed and I pushed on that sucker for several minutes but it would not budge. We could see the bubbles coming out of the exhaust pipe as the faithful engine kept chugging away but finally it choked and gave up the ghost. (The photo is of me and our faithful but temporarily defeated beetle).

Alas, we had no Plan B for being stuck in the middle of a raging stream.

Meanwhile a crowd of curious people had gathered, watching our futile efforts. Ed went over and asked if they could help. They were not inclined to push but one offered his cows. We rented the cows and tied them to the VW and pulled it out. Ed paid a reasonable fee, the VW engine snapped back to life as if nothing had happened, and we were off to Kitui. Fortunately, there were no toads.



Note: I had several friends from Kitui and I can assure the reader that the fears of my youthful students were not justified.