

### **3-1-1-8-2 John Mathiesen tells about the interesting life of his parents, Arthur and Ruby Mathiesen**

3-1-1-8 Arthur (Dudu) Fynn Mathiesen married Ruby Eve Skevington and they had two sons Ronald William and John Norman.



**Dudu and Ruby – Hartley Rhodesia 1961**

My parents were always a pillar of strength for us kids and, as boys, our dad was, and always will be, a tower of strength, role model and inspiration in our lives.

Arthur was always known to the family as “Dudu” his early life was spent with his parents and siblings growing up in remote Zululand on the family trading station. He recalled many stories of his early life which in turn had an effect on our lives. One of these was he, up to the age of 12, was only able to speak Norwegian and isiZulu. As a result, his grasp of English in high school proved difficult, at times speaking in isiZulu with his teacher to make himself understood. The outcome of this was he never wanted us to have Norwegian as a home language as he felt we may face the same issues at school that he had faced. Another story that he was so very proud of was that his father was a huge influence on family life, a “larger than life” personality and he had an amazing gift - he could sing. He recounted that his Dad entered a singing competition in London where he won first prize which included a world tour. He turned this down as he had a family in South Africa that

needed him home. The prize was given to the person who came second – it was Richard Tauber, a man who became known as “The World’s Greatest Tenor”. Tauber recorded a song dedicated to the “Greatest Voice the World Never Heard”. Dad said after they moved to Durban on Sunday’s after church his Mom would play the piano and his Dad would sing and the street outside their home in Manning road Durban would be lined with people who came to listen.

An interesting outcome of Dad’s early life carried with him right up to his death and it was that at night he only ever dreamed in isiZulu – all images and persons in his dreams spoke, in his words, “pure” Zulu with no slang or disrespect. Dad recalled an incident where there was a faction fight between two warring Zulu clans that took place near their store and this was broken up by a detachment of the Natal Mounted Rifles. This action by the Natal Mounted Rifles was the last time that the Regiment went into action mounted on horses. Dad explained to us that the family was given advance warning of the event by a Zulu tradition of simply

pinching the cheek to warn a friend of imminent danger, this was done so that the warning was given without betraying the trust of another.

Dad must have held much respect for Zulu customs and culture as he often told us of songs and stories steeped in tradition – I recall having to prepare a story for a school entertainment evening and Dad had me learn a folk law rhyme in isiZulu about the capture and expulsion of Zulu king Cetshwayo. He also recalled stories of the time of the influenza epidemic when his brothers could recover bodies and bring them back to a mass burial site near their store – he was too small to lift and carry a body so used a trek chain and oxen to pull the body onto a sled and then had in-span the oxen to drive the sled back to the store; he said this took time so he did not make as much money as his elder brothers from the “recovery fee” that was paid.

Dad was on a train heading back home from school when he bumped against a door and fell out of the coach and down onto the tracks. It was only when the train reached the next station that the other kids informed the authorities of the accident. A hand operated “pump” cart was put on the tracks to go back down the line to recover him. He was taken to hospital where his Mom was told that there was little chance of him surviving – his face was badly cut and pitted with gravel. Dudu’s mom sat at his bedside with tweezers and scissors and removed the stones and dirt from his face but unfortunately his right eye was out of its socket and the medical staff tried to protect it by packing ice around it. This was not the correct process and the optic nerve was permanently damaged and he lost his sight in that eye. A small stone was missed in his upper lip and as Dad grew up he would constantly nick his lip when shaving so he grew a moustache which he kept all his adult life.

During the Great Depression he worked with “pick and shovel” filling in swamp land near the Durban Harbour with hundreds of other men all trying to earn a living. Dad had signed up to go to sea with one of the whaling fleets out of Durban when his plan were turned on its head – he met and fell in love with Ruby Eve Skevington an English girl who came to South Africa with her parents and sister Violet. This now brought about a number of changes in his life. Firstly he returned to the building trade and, secondly, he changed his mode of transport from a much loved Indian motorcycle with side car to a family car. Dad’s military career was cut short during the Second World War when it

was discovered he was blind in his right eye and his unit the Royal Durban Light Infantry demobbed him with an honourable discharge.

Dad built their first home in Malvern, a suburb in Durban, in which Mom said he installed an “American Ranch Style” kitchen which was unique in those days. He also buried a 20 000 litre water tank to supply clean water to their home, removing the dependency on Municipal water supply.

Mom treasured a wooden kist that Dad made for Mom to save linen for her trousseau. She was so proud of the intricate workmanship and skill that Dad put into making it – hardly surprising in that he was a qualified carpenter. This piece of furniture is now with their granddaughter in England.

At the end of the war in 1945 Dad and Mom already had a son Ronald. At this time Dad was busy establishing his own building and contracting business. By 1948 a second son John was born, Mom had, in the early period of their marriage, had a still born son and miscarried a daughter as a result of infection from a snake bite.



**Studebaker camper van and trailer  
April 1949**

Dad was disillusioned with the 1948 elections in South Africa when Jannie Smuts' United Party lost the election to the Afrikaans National Party. This change was untenable for Dad and Mom so they packed up and left South Africa to go farming in Rhodesia. All their possessions were loaded into a Studebaker truck that Dad had made into a makeshift camper van.

The trip to Rhodesia took a number of days as the roads in Rhodesia were not fully tarred. Strip roads with only two areas where wheels ran were tarred. More often dirt roads were commonplace. They drove through making nightly stops, to accommodate the needs of two young children on the way to their recently acquired farm "Boskloof" about 10 miles from the small village of Chipinga in the eastern districts of Rhodesia.

Dad's farming career was stopped as he had an offer from the Rhodesian Wattle Company to build a housing estate for the factory that was being built at Silverstreams half way between Chipinga and Melsetter and also to build houses on various Wattle estates in the area.



**Boskloof Farm – Chipinga Rhodesia 1949**

1952 saw a Rabies epidemic in Rhodesia and there were some terrible outcomes from this terrifying disease. Dad's brother in law Bob Evans (married to Violet – Mom's sister) died from rabies – he was a farmer in the Mount Darwin area of Rhodesia. Bob was woken in the night with his dog and her pup's making a terrific noise so he went to investigate taking his .22 rifle and a torch with him. He found a stray dog in the hut with the pups so putting his rifle aside he grabbed the stray's legs and threw it out the window. Uninjured and with the stray dog vanishing into the night he returned to bed. Two weeks later he complained of a violent headache (totally out of character for a tough Rhodesian farmer). Vi drove him to hospital and by the end of the day he had to be restrained, his mind demented and physically violent he had attacked the doctor and a nurse. All people that had been in contact with Bob had to receive the three week course of injections that were given around the stomach naval – this included VI who was pregnant with her second son and her one year old son Rob. Vi and Rob stayed with our family at Silverstreams during this treatment.

Closer to home rabid jackals were common around Silverstreams and in a number of cases they chased the truck Dad used for work and tried to bite the tyres. Two of Dad's workers died from the virus having been infected from walking through the bush and brushing against grass that had saliva from infected animals on it. Dad and one of the Estate Managers had been checking a sick horse which later died and was buried – with the outbreak of rabies the two of them dug the horse up so they could cut off its head and send it for testing the brain to establish if it was infected with the rabies virus – fortunately it was clear.



**Dad, Mom, Ron and John - 1951**

Mom was always a terrific “home maker” in our family while Dad was the bread winner and a pillar of strength, always fair, and lived by his insistence on integrity and honesty. Mom kept us kids in line and never complained even when she suffered from breast cancer in 1964. Mom was the communication medium with us kids while we were at boarding school, always writing letters letting us know the daily going's on back home. There are so many fond memories we boys have of Mom and Dad including the way they always were loving and supportive of our family. They were truly soul mates. Dad always celebrated

Christmas on Christmas Eve and would sing along with all the traditional Christmas carols but in Norwegian while we sang in English. The early years in Rhodesia bring back memories of the remote bush and Dad shooting for the pot

both buck and bird – despite being right handed and shooting left handed he was nothing less than a true marksman with rifle, shotgun and pistol.

Both Ron and John went to boarding school as did all children who live in these rural areas. In 1958 Dad was given the position of Township Manager in Hartley (now Chugutu) a small town in the midlands of Rhodesia. Dad and Mom spent nearly twenty years in Hartley and during this time they built their retirement home at Lake MacIlwane where they retired to in 1974.

Annual family holidays were spent with family in South Africa or Inyanga in the Eastern Highlands of Rhodesia and occasionally to Beira and Lourenco Marques in Mozambique.

When both Ron and John finished high school as boarders in Bulawayo and they went on to complete their military service in the Rhodesian army – both boys ended up moving to Durban South Africa. Ron married Val in 1967 and has three children. John eventually married and had three children before he married Sharon. Sharon was a survivor of the Viscount aircraft that was shot down by terrorists in 1978 – having survived the crash she managed to escape when 10 of the 18 survivors were shot dead at the crash site by terrorists (John and Sharon are currently writing a book about her life).

Dad and Mom eventually went on holiday to Norway in 1969 and Mom told the story of an event that took place on a Fjord Steamer – they wanted to find out when the ship would dock so Dad decided to ask some school children for details of this. Dad come back from talking to them and a tear slid down his cheek as he said he could only catch a few of their words – he had almost forgotten his language of birth and it broke his heart to see this part of his life slipping away.

Dad and Mom decided to return to South Africa in 1978 and lived first in Scottburgh and then bought a home in Pietermaritzburg where they were living when Dad died – Mom died from recurring cancer in 1995. They are sadly missed but ever lovingly remembered.