

My Memories of the Nairobi West General Stores – 1959 and after

As readers would have noticed, the East Africa Nostalgia website is magnificently endowed with glorious pictures generously given to us by RajnikantShamji Shah an ex-Kenyan.

Rajnihbai born in Padana, Gujarat in India in 1936 moved to Kenya in 1949 where he lived until 1967. As events would dictate, he migrated to UK in 1967 where he worked with London Transport for 33 years before retiring and currently resides happily with his wife Previnia in Harrow. He has three happily married daughters and eight grandchildren with whom he makes best use of his retirement and has travelled extensively. Among the places he has visited worldwide are :

1.Canada 2. China 3. Russia 4. USA 5. Australia 6. Chile 7. Argentina 8. Brazil 9. Peru 10. Hawaii Islands 11. Egypt 12. Israel 13. Jordan 14. Cambodia 15 Vietnam 16. Hongkong 17. Singapore 18.India (about 5 times) 19. Nepal 20.Cyprus 21.Uganda 22. Tanzania 23. Kenya of course 24. Zambia 25. Botswana 26. Namibia 27.Germany 28.Italy 29. France 30. Austria. 31. Sri Lanka.

This is what he writes about all his Rafikis:

“I respect you all with admiration and appreciation of your kind intentions. I am fortunate and honoured having such invaluable colleagues. You guys make me feel very proud, sincerely from the bottom of my heart I regard you all with profound fondness and envy”.

Rajnikant Shah

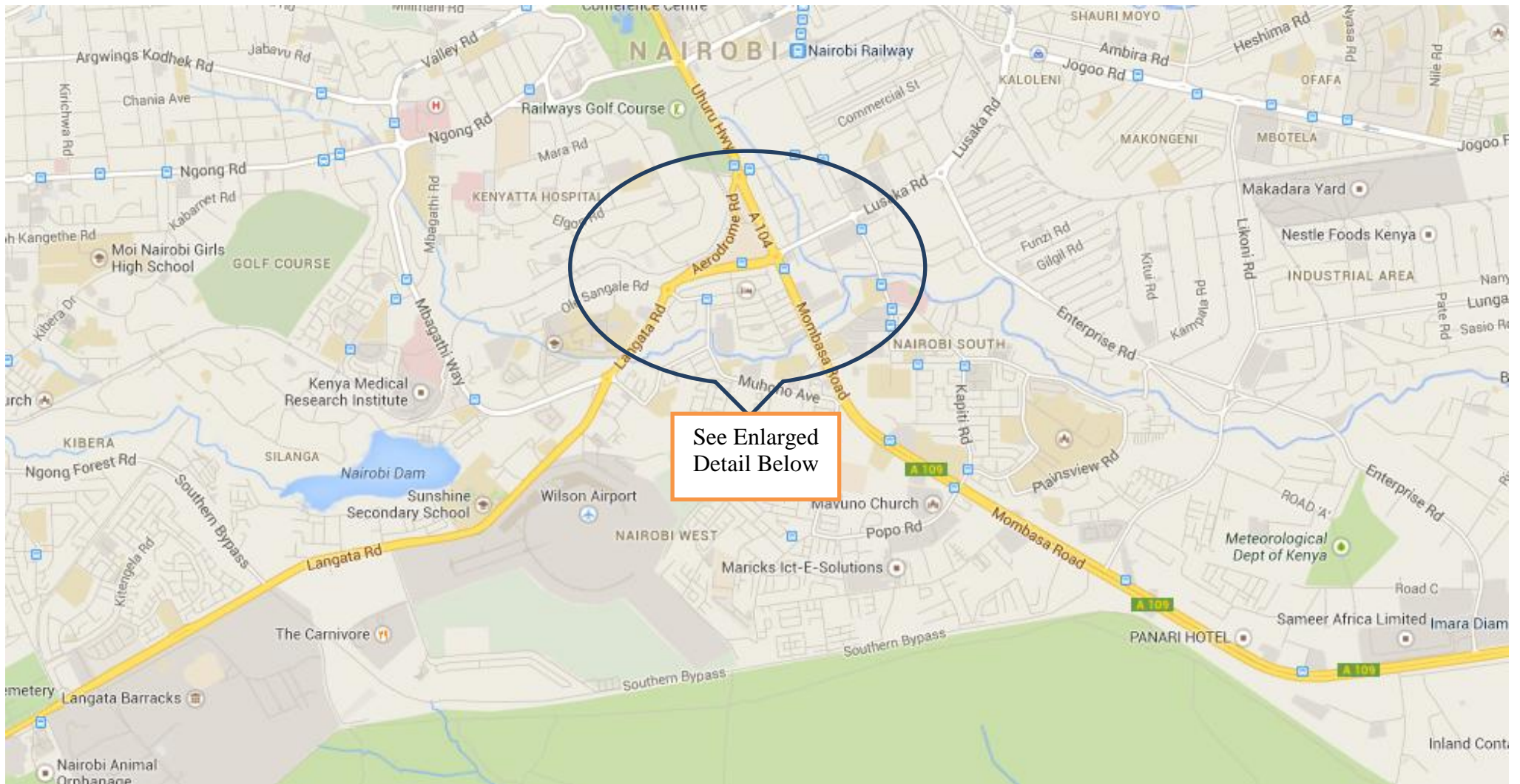
February 2014

The following piece shows how Rajnikant Shah was associated with Nairobi West General Store and the photo of the same shop which is featured in our “Nairobi” Collection.

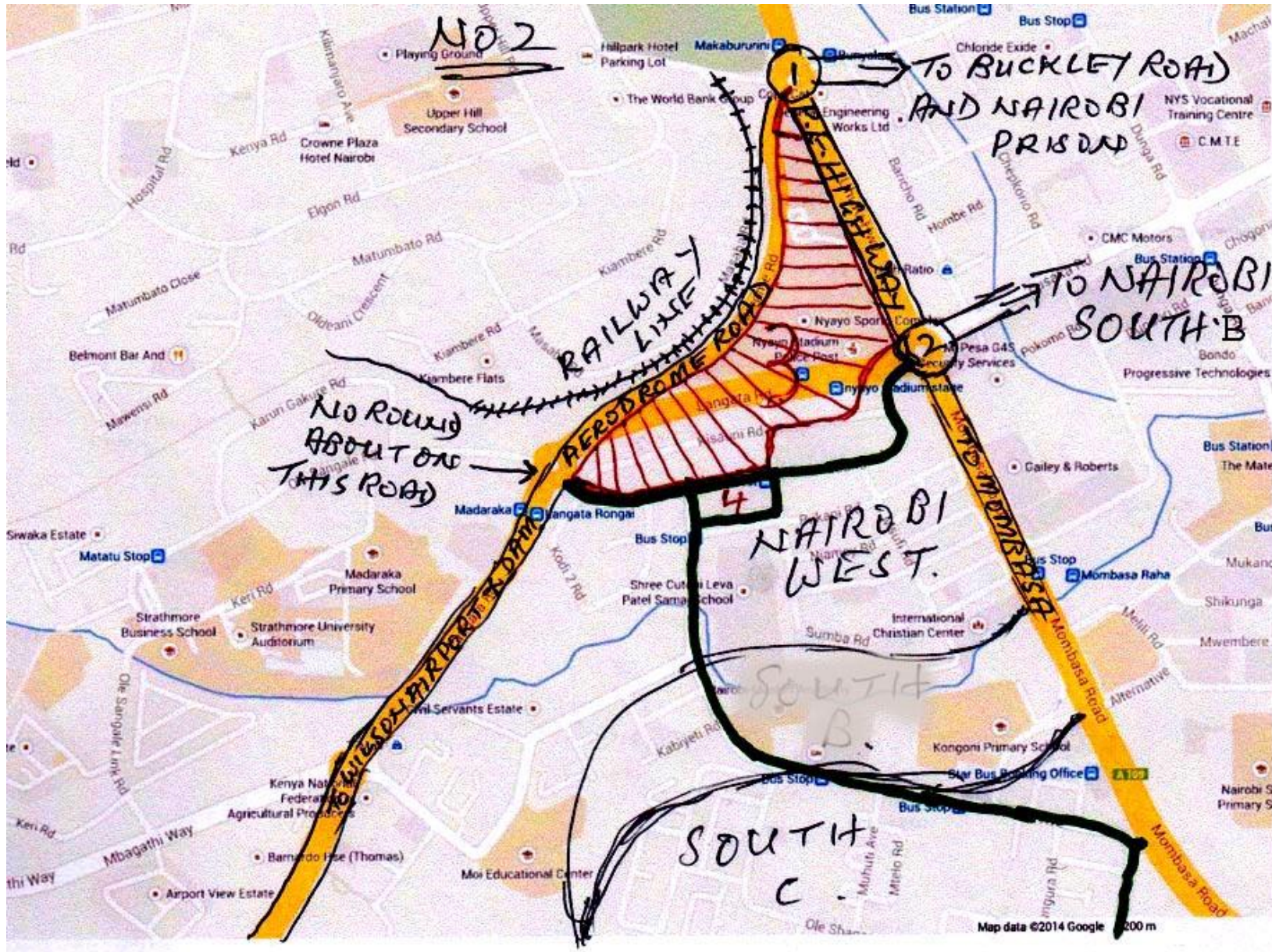




The Nairobi West General Store 1959. For its location, see below



Map of Nairobi West Area - 2014



The above sketch shows approximately how the situation was then in late 1950's to early 1960's:

1. First Roundabout after passing the railway overpass bridge from the City Centre.
2. Second Roundabout was literally the end of Princess Elizabeth Highway.
 - a. The Green marked Road leading to this Roundabout was a dirt road and a short cut access connecting to the highway and the City.

- b. The other green road leading south was the road often taken by Rajni to reach Nairobi South B and South C on visits, branching off parallel to the open air Belle-Vue drive-in Cinema en route to the Nairobi National Park gates which were unmanned. There was also a dirt road running alongside the cinema boundary wall
3. Hatched Area marked red (3) was barren space opposite our shop where in 1960 Circus Brazil were mobilized.
4. Block of shops on both sides. At the rear of Nairobi West General Store were a greengrocer and a shop selling gas cookers and cylinders. Adjoining Nairobi West General Store was another shop cum Petrol Station.



Google Earth snap shot 2014



Inside the Nairobi West General Stores 1959– A little girl being served sweets. Note crates of eggs and bottles of liquor too. Seen here too are Rajni Shah (left) with his Nephew



1959 - An aggressive advertising campaign – Only act missing here is Ronnie Barker aka “Open All Hours”!

Tahir,

Thank you very much for writing to me and seeking some background history of Nairobi West General Store.

To familiarise you and our esteemed readers, this was the patch of barren land on left side of the road leading towards Wilson Airport. Opposite Wilson Airport on right side was the Nairobi Dam (see picture below) upon which canoeing and boat racing took place during the 1940's and 50's. It was regularly used by sailing club members only. Next to Wilson Airport boundary when Kenya got independence, Uhuru Stadium was erected in 1963. Here the first Independence celebration took place. The actual full Independence was granted after a year in 1964.

At this patch of barren land, housing development started during 1956 -1957 and 1958. With this development, Princess Elizabeth Highway (later known as Uhuru Highway) was also extended past Buckley Road roundabout towards Athi River but at that time there was no tarmac road leading to Athi River.

Beyond Buckley Road roundabout on the highway, commercial properties and showrooms began to pop up, like Fiat Car showrooms and many big companies, etc. The next roundabout was the end of the Princess Elizabeth Highway. Beyond this next roundabout there were three dirt road exits: one on the left went towards Nairobi South. Second straight up the dirt road led to Athi River, and thereafter to the main Mombasa Road, branching off parallel to boundary of Open Air Drive in Cinema En route to Nairobi National Park gates, which were unmanned. And the third on right exit was access towards Nairobi West Housing estate.

Empty space on right hand side before you reach the National Park gates was also developed at the same time as Nairobi West, which was later commonly known as Nairobi South C.

It was during 1958 my family (my elder brother) moved in to Nairobi West area. At that time I was at Makindu and my eldest brother with his family was at Mombasa. My brother seeing this opportunity of development taking place in Nairobi West rented the shop while it was still being built, which he later named as "NAIROBI WEST GENERAL STORE ". So you see Tahir, this is the brief history to your query. I am not sure if you ever lived in Nairobi West but that is the photo of my family shop.

I was offered to join the family shop, which I did for a while but I could not continue to work in the shop, so I left the shop after a year and I kept moving on with my life until I got married.

While I worked in the shop I made many new friends. One of them was Sarwar Khan and his family. He had lost his father sometimes back then. He was the eldest in the family with two younger brothers, a sister and his mum also lived with them – a very nice family. He had also moved in this area as he was progressing well in his career. A nice young man who had a good job and who cared about his parents.

I just want to digress here a little more about Anwar Sarwar Khan.

While he was working, he met a Khoja Ismaili girl and fell in love with her. She came from a very rich family but her family did not approve of their relationship, this was unfortunate. When two persons are in love nothing can stop or separate them. They got married without her parents' consent. The girl's name was Zarina. I only met them after they had been married and had a child (daughter) and had moved from Pangani to the new fast developing Nairobi West Area.

Later, for years there was a very serious feud going on between the two families even after they already had a child. It so happened that this friend of mine Anwar was gunned down and murdered in Nairobi West during the late 1950's. I am sure all of you would remember about this incident. There was a police court case, but the guilty person got away tragically leaving Zarina and her daughter heartbroken without Sarwar forever.

After this incident I was in touch with his family for awhile unfortunately I lost contact with them and don't know what happened to Zarina and her daughter. It is so sad to think sometimes about such incidents from the past.

All above are facts - it happened in real life.

Sorry guys, hope I did not bore you too much.

Rajni

Below is a follow up again by Rajni:

Oh, it's been so long time ago, I don't remember so much. I remember that Wilson Airport Road also led to Magadi. You cross over Ngong Hills, where on the other side of Ngong Hills is part of the Great Rift Valley. Once you arrive at the top of the Ngong Hills, during clear day the wide open floor of the escarpment view is unimaginable. On several occasion I had the rare experience to witness the wonder of nature's creation.

In the early 1960's before you branched off to Ngong Road, the authority of Nairobi National Park developed an animal orphanage at the National Park boundary and also new entrance gate to the National Park.

Maybe in recent years things must have changed so much with the spiralling trend of land development and buildings that it must be almost impossible to identify where the old roads and buildings are or have disappeared. I am sure Pushpendra must have noticed the fast growing progress taking place in and around Nairobi.

By the way, I too went through Harjinder's website. He has completely rearranged the site. There is so much to see. Tahir I noticed your contribution. What a fantastic collection.

I liked :- Nairobi revisited in 2012. - Colonial Kenya Photos - Tabora - Tanga - Mombasa photos- Collection of Moshi Photos - Old Restaurants and eating places

Tahir - Mombasa in 1950s - good collection of 12 photos - What about No10 photo how did you managed to get that and from where were you able to obtain it? Actually, that photo was taken by me of Mombasa Railway Station in 1950's. I still have the negative but over the period it has got so damaged that I got no good result trying to scan it.

I also saw the rare photos of Mackinnon Road Mosque, taken by Pushpendra- good contribution

Harjinder, I still have lot of photographs to send to you. Sorry at the moment I am little bit busy trying to sort out my extended family photos, not very far now. Once you get them you will know they will keep coming like conveyer belt.

Best Regards

Rajni

Editor's note:

Tahir Mirza informs us that in 1965, while he was a form-IV student at Highway Secondary School, he used to catch a bus from Nairobi West to travel to Eastleigh. The ride on Bus No. 44 would cost him 30 cents all the way to Eastleigh Section I passing through the City centre, Fairview Road and Pangani after which he would get off at a stop at St. Teresa Catholic Church in Eastleigh. This is how the story of Nairobi West General Stores got unravelled from his sharp memory of school days 50 years ago. Thanks to Rajni Shah who has so aptly endorsed his curiosity with a detailed response covering history.

Incidentally, Nairobi public was thrilled to have Circus Brazil in town in the year 1960. Besides featuring lions, elephants, bears, the program included a scintillating trapeze act, a globe-of-death stunt with two daredevil motorcyclists driving heroically inside a small globe, clown acts and live music playing Eddie Calvert's famous tune "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White".

PS: It is likely when Nairobi West General Store was being built in 1958, the area was generically known as Nairobi West. The area south of it known as Nairobi South C was also developing rapidly in parallel. Nairobi South C became a very nice middle class residential area for the Asians and held its high privileged eminence until early 1980's. However, as of 2014, the area is fast approaching a ghetto.

Belle Vue Drive-in cinema was completed in late 1962 while the new Highway Secondary School was inaugurated in January 1962. Similarly Kongoni Primary School situated not far from the Store was completed in 1963. Also have a look (below) at the tragic demise of Nairobi Dam.

A bit of history there – Harjinder Kanwal



Circus Brazil is also in town in early 1960 seen here doing sales promotion in Nairobi West with “Lily” the bear. Tickets selling at 2 shillings and 50 cents must have been on special offer since peak viewing tickets were selling about 5 to 10/- per head. It did seem expensive then for an average Asian family.

CIRCUS

BRAZIL

IN

EAST

AFRICA



IT has been the lot of the East African Railways and Harbours to transport a circus from Dar es Salaam to Kampala and through Nairobi to Mombasa. During this time the circus has travelled over 1,500 miles by train and across Lake Victoria, the largest lake of Africa.

The s.s. *Nyanza* was specially chartered for the occasion to carry this somewhat unusual cargo from Mwanza in Tanganyika to Port Bell in Uganda. The cargo included an elephant by the name of RANEE, LILY the bear, CHEETA the Chimp and CAESAR the lion.

RANEE provided the port staff with some entertainment and no little consternation when she disdainfully ignored the gangway and loftily stepped over the ship's rail on to the pier at Port Bell.

Circus Brazil is the first circus to visit East Africa for many years and in spite of the attractions of East Africa's vast Game Parks, the circus has proved very popular. The circus, which comes from Brazil in South America, has been continually on the move for the past four years and when leaving East Africa travels to Mauritius.

★ ★ ★

January 1960



Rajni & Previn Shah at the Nairobi Dam-1959/60



**The Scenic Nairobi Dam – seen here in 1960 situated not far away from Wilson Airport. It is no longer in existence as a dam.
(See below)**



Nairobi Dam recent
(picture taken from almost same location as above)

This is what is left of the former Nairobi Dam built in 1953, the exclusive sailing resort where the City's elite until 1988 used to spend their weekends in boats, swimming or simply a family picnic.



Nairobi Dam: The old board is still there

The dam has been cruelly neglected; wild hyacinth allowed to grow and has since turned to a farm which feeds Kibera, the largest slum in Africa. The once flourishing reservoir feeding water to the city has been turned into a marshland and polluted daily by effluent discharged from the adjoining slums.