OF TEAK AND ELEPHANTS: A TEAK - WALLAH REMINISCES

by

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First of all the teak tree. You don't have to go into the forest to see the tree, which grows all round Chiang Mai, in gardens and on roads, and particularly all over the University campus. It is the tree with the yellowish bark, large light green leaves, and just now the white bunches of flower which have a lacy appearance. It takes 80 to 100 years to grow, and at maturity has a girth of about 7 feet, and a height of 60 to 80 feet. It is not the king of the forest in appearance, being branchy and having flutes and buttresses, but is the most valuable of the woods of southeastern Asia. Sometimes it is attacked by creepers, which of course imprison jungle spirits within the teak tree; when passing such trees, a small stick is placed beneath the lean, to support it, because if the tree falls the spirits escape and make trouble.

Reforestation is natural and although plantation schemes have been attempted, little has been achieved, probably due to time lag. You will plant for your son or even your grandson, but thereafter the little so-and-sos have to look after themselves.

The teak seed ripens over the turn of the year and falls in February and March, at which time the forest is hot and dry and the leaves have fallen. These burn gently all over the forest floor, without damage to growing trees, and the early rains in May dibble the seed into the ground, with the ash, so the new plants soon spring up.

Teak is classed as a medium hardwood and is very hard indeed to fall against, if you slip up upon the logs in the forest. It contains silica, which renders it insect-proof, but hard to saw; it is however not difficult to work into furniture and other objects. Its main use has always been shipbuilding; Chinese junks have been made of teak for centuries, and in Europe the ships, and latterly the decks, were made of teak, from the early nineteenth century, in place of exhausted stocks of European oak. 'Hearts of teak are our ships.' In earlier times, pirates in Far Eastern waters built or repaired their ships of teak in ports such as Moulmein in Burma.

A word about teak furniture: the teak tree is always artificially killed by 'ring barking' in the forest and left to dry out for two years before felling and extraction, primarily because the live tree will not float. If furniture is made from live, or as we say, green teak, it will eventually split. I was once very busy at a teak desk which suddenly exploded with a loud report. My assistant ran in hopefully as the manager had appeared depressed that Monday morning, but there was no promotion that day.

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Teak grows in Burma, north and central Thailand and Laos, in that order of quantity and perhaps quality—there is some overspill into neighbouring countries, but it is insignificant. The forests have always belonged to the governments concerned, except in Laos, where they are 'Royal' and remain the property of HM the King. ('The King of Laos my shepherd is, whose timber faileth never. I nothing lack if I have his, but he keeps it all, forever.') Leases and licences are issued by the governmental forest department concerned, and except in minor areas where it is required to clear the whole forest quickly for development or settlement purposes, are worked on what we call a 'sustained yield basis'. The forests are divided into reserves, by stream drainages, and each reserve is worked for 30 years, formerly mainly by European firms, now everywhere under nationalization. I am professionally extinct. Two years before a reserve is due to be worked, the government officer will ring bark and number, with a hammer, the mature teak trees to be extracted in the first year of the lease and will continue annually for 30 years, when the lease closes. Extraction progresses annually in his wake from headwaters to mouth of stream, and in theory may return to starting point at conclusion of the 30-year cycle, sufficient new teak supplies having matured in the interval to replace those extracted. The teak extracted is measured annually by the lessee and government officer, and the government's royalty tax is assessed.

Regarding the history of the teak business in Thailand, the British had moved into upper Burma by 1890, and had greatly expanded their teak business there; they hoped to develop in north Thailand similarly. The first notorious 'teak-wallah' to arrive in Chiang Mai was Louis T. Leonowens, the son of Anna, who was sent up by the Borneo Company from Bangkok in 1888. He found the forests belonged to the chief of Chiang Mai (there was then no government forest department in the country), who was then virtually the local ruler. Leonowens cultivated the chief and used to gamble with him almost nightly; it is said that Leonowens always lost, but after all he would have looked rather silly if he had won. His assistant, Mr. Macfie who eventually died here in 1945, was also called in, as part of his training, but having no transportation was required to swim the river to the palace in his underpants, with dry clothes waiting him on the other bank; he was also given the junior's privilege of gambling with his own money.

Leonowens' diplomacy obtained several leases, as did three other European firms, during the 1890s, mainly in Chiang Mai and Lampang, which also had its palace. The Royal Thai Government Forest Department was formed, originally raised and advised by Englishmen from the Indian Forest Service, and the forests were organized on a sustained-yield basis. Leonowens eventually broke away to form his own firm, it being found by his employers that there was a slight flaw in some of his leases—they were in his own name and not the Company's. The foreign lessees continued in business uninterrupted except for the Second World War, until 1955, when partial nationalization was decreed; total nationalization came in 1960 and today the Forest Industries Organization, which is part of the Royal Forest Department, is the sole lessee.

About forest work. There are, as you know, three seasons in this country—the hot season (March to May), the rains (June to October), and the cold season (November to February). In the hot season forest work ceases: elephants and riders rest and recuperate in camps in good fodder areas, while the rest of us have a short holiday in Chiang Mai—some

doing annual accounts, if we can; some doing almost anything, after months alone in the forest, like reading a good book. Chiang Mai was always as big as Babylon, after the jungle. There is also preparation for the next season's work, and at the start of the rains, all hands go to the forest again and the working year starts. Elephant working camps are built, six elephants to a camp, in each area, and stocked with rice. The European assistant in charge builds himself two or three bamboo huts in strategic places, and also has a tent; he must be as mobile as possible, as it will take him a month to tour his area and visit all his work. He travels with three pack elephants and has his servants and some provisions with him. He may be in charge of as many as 20,000 logs to be produced in the season, and several hundred elephants. Most of these will belong to contractors, who will deliver logs to a specified point for a fixed rate, but he will have a small force of Company elephants to whom the difficult areas are allotted. He is doctor, veterinarian, paymaster, administrator, and walking dogsbody; he is on his own and will not speak his own language for weeks or months; his mail will come in and out by runner from Chiang Mai once a week, which, thank God, is his only link with higher authority; his portable radio will give him some contact with the international scene, if it happens to work; he eats as well as he can, buying local chickens and eggs from villages, and supplements his food, if he can, weekly from Chiang Mai, by aforesaid runner. He may shoot wild pig, or deer, or jungle fowl, but is often too tired or busy for hunting; he drinks water as he needs his own head on his shoulders, and strong legs; he is up before sunrise and filthy by early morning; the teak trees may grow a mile apart and 3,000 feet up the hill, and he has to visit each one; it is vital that he should supervise the cutting up of the felled trees into logs, so that no marketable timber is left behind, and that logs are cut to a maximum length, wherein lies the profit; he may get back to camp in time for an afternoon nap, but by 4 o'clock his office and administration problems commence and he will be busy till 8. If he is not in bed by 9, he should be. No wonder he enjoys a holiday; there are no Sundays in the forest.

His compensation is that he is independent and enjoys responsibility and self-reliance; his hazards are latterly less great; wild beasts and snakes are only serious in theory; his health is nowadays greatly safeguarded by new drugs, though always on his mind; malaria and dysentery used to be his occupational diseases, and blackwater fever and typhoid have decimated him in their time.

The elephants throughout the season work three days and rest two; at the end of each working day, and on rest days, they rae loosed in the jungle, with forefeet hobbled to avoid their straying far; they use their spare time feeding themselves, on bamboo, creeper, grasses and bark. Elephants are rather delicate, and require constant care; heartstrain from overwork is frequent, and they should not be worked in the heat of the day. On working days the rider catches his elephant before dawn, washes it and scrubs it with a hard creeper brush, to clean the skin before saddling; the dragging chains and breast band are then put on, and they go to work. Sufficient trees have already been felled on rest days for the working period and sawn up into logs; the elephant pushes and drags the logs away from the tree stump, down to a graded path which the riders have cut out, and drags along the path, day by day, to a delivery point, often some miles away. The drag path must be carefully cut, as continual uneven pulling on the log may cause a chest or back gall on the elephant, which may be the size of football and

full of matter. This must eventually be cut by the assistant, with a sharp knife, and he will have to dodge what comes out. The wound is then disinfected daily with a stirrup pump, and allowed to heal from the inside.

The felling of the trees is done by axe and saw. The native is a wonderful axeman, and hates the saw, but to avoid waste of timber, the saw must mainly be used. Except in special circumstances, a log must not weigh more than five tons, which is the most an elephant can handle in easy country. A tree however will usually yield two to three logs, totalling perhaps only three tons.

Throughout the rains we are working in the mud around the tree stumps, and beginning to drag down towards the forest delivery point. This may be the bank of a floating stream, or a point in open country from which we can put out a dry-weather trucking road to a main river, where the logs can be put off the trucks and collected into rafts. With the coming of the cold season, our life improves; it is often bitterly cold in the forest—we need three blankets at night, and sit over a large campfire, which the elephants have built for us by carrying dry timber to it in their mouths and trunks. We go about in cold sunshine by day and get paid for it as well. We may even have wives touring with us, if we have some, although ancient managers, always with our welfare and their profits in mind, have waved fat fingers at us and said 'in the forest, a bachelor is a man, a married man is half a man, and a married man with children is no man at all'.

The cold season is spent dragging forward to our forest delivery point and there we measure with the government officer for royalty tax, to conclude the year's work in the forest, and the elephants go to their rest area in March. Trucking now starts and goes on throughout the hot season and early rains until the mud takes over again. It should be noted that if we are delivering to a floating stream, or trucking to a main river, what is meant is that there is only water enough to float logs seasonally, and only during the rains, i.e. when there is a spate. Thereafter nothing will go farther than these places until the second year of operations. Bangkok is the market and is perhaps 500 miles away, so that it will be three to five years before the logs get there, from the tree stump.

Let me follow the logs from our first year's work, from the forest delivery point. If the logs are to be floated, they are rolled down the stream bank by the elephants in June and straightened out in the streambed, to await the first spate. They float off on three or four feet of water, and as the spate drops they jamb and stack up on each other, like an upset box of matches; the elephants then go into the water to break up the stacks and a clever elephant will know, without prompting, which log to move, with his trunk or head, to release the whole stack; this is his game of spillikins, and the process has to be repeated throughout the rains and perhaps the next year or two as well, until the logs reach a main river, where they are also collected into rafts and towed down to Bangkok.

Concerning the elephant himself, his life cycle is similar to a human being, if on a more massive scale. The female is usually overcome by the springtime and some lucky male is attached; they wander off into some deep jungle, right out of sight and later on return smiling, trunk in trunk. We then note in our elephant books that we can expect a happy event in about 22 months' time; it is important to keep these records, as pregnancy is not alway esay to spot,

and the female must be put off work six months before giving birth. The birth is usually also away in the jungle and there is one calf, though twins occasionally occur. Another female, or auntie, will attach herself, to mother and calf, as a protection, particularly against tiger who like young elephant. The calf is weaned at three years and remains wild till then. At three, we take the calf away from the mother and train it; it is put into a triangular enclosure called a 'crush' and tied fore and hind legs, and the trainer, with infinite patience, teaches it to accept a man on its back, to allow hobbles on its forefeet and to respond to the rider's words of command and the guiding movements of his feet behind the elephant's ears. Cruelty in training will result in the elephant being savage. Some males later become man-killers; savage females are rare, but very dangerous; the mother of the white elephant calf at Chiang Mai zoo has killed three people.

From the age of three to 18, the young elephants have little to do, but may be used as pack animals. At 18 they join a working camp and learn the technique of timber extraction; this they pick up very quickly, no doubt from the examples around them. They reach full height of seven to eight feet in their 20s, and are fully mature at 30. They work best between 30 and 40, but by 50 are slowing down, after which they move to light work, or pack work, until they die in harness between 60 and 70. The female of the Asiatic species does not have tusks; some calves are born without tusks, some with only one tusk.

Elephants are sensitive and vary greatly in temperament; some are savage, some completely docile and some hopelessly nervous; and some lazy; it is strange that a dangerous elephant is often easier than others to approach for doctoring, when a nervous one will dance, and even tread upon your feet, accidentally. Savage elephants are also usually the strongest workers. Signs of health in an elephant are fatness and alertness, with ears and tail constantly flapping; also sweating at the toenails, which seems strange. A sick elephant is thin and listless and has weeping eyes; this may be overwork, or parasites, or perhaps a wasting disease called surra. Medicine can be readily given to an elephant, usually wrapped in balls of rice or fruit; some elephants are suspicious and will open up the wrapper with the tip of the trunk, blow out the pill and then swallow the sweet. Elephants are inoculated against anthrax each year, which could otherwise wipe out the whole herd; this is done into the skin behind the shoulder, and can be a frightening business, usually delegated to the most junior assistant, after demonstration.

Most male elephants each year develop a condition called musth. The symptom is an oily dribble from glands on either side of the head, and the condition renders him temporarily dangerously mad. It may last a few days or some weeks. It is thought to be sexual, but not proved to be so. A musth tusker will kill a female elephant as readily as anything else that he meets. The only cure is to tie him up until it passes.

Lastly, the co-operation between man and animal is a vital feature of the work; often a rider will stay with his elephant for years and they understand each other perfectly, the elephant responding to words of command and sometimes working in silence while he intelligently pursues his own method, problem by problem.

After working with teak and elephants, nothing can quite take its place. You can take a man out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of a man.