

## ‘OLDSMOBILE KALAHARI MAIL’

Mr Douglas Smith, a collector in Cape Town, recently showed me an intriguing cutting from an old newspaper, concerning a little-known motor expedition in 1929 and four covers that were carried on that expedition. The cutting, taken from an unnamed and undated (presumably contemporary) newspaper, is reproduced in full below. It is interesting to note the statement that at Gobabis in South West Africa, the mail bag was officially handed over and sealed by the postmaster. Again, at Ghanzi, the postmaster is stated to have “made up a mail bag for the Eastern side of the Kalahari”. Whether this was officially sanctioned by their respective head offices is unknown. Perhaps they were empowered to employ the most efficient transport at their disposal.

Mr Smith kindly loaned the covers which he acquired with the article, as well as an old photograph of the Oldsmobile. All the covers bear impressions of the private cachet used on the expedition. It is a double rimmed 30.5 mm circle and reads ‘OLDSMOBILE / 23 Nov. 1929. / KALAHARI MAIL’. The cachets are struck in black or violet.

### SIDELIGHTS ON OLDS EXPEDITION, Lovers Separated By The Desert

On the eastern fringe of the Kalahari desert lives a young man, engaged to a lady who resides about twenty miles from the last outpost of civilisation on the western side. The courtship is carried on by correspondence. The solitude of the Kalahari no doubt, inspires some wonderful epistles, which their descendants will cherish as a love story of the desert. As the crow flies they are separated by a distance of about 460 miles, yet each message posted takes a month to reach its destination.

When it was known the Oldsmobile expedition would pass through Gobabis to Ghanzi, thence straight across the Kalahari to Molepolole, many requests were made by residents on the western side for letters to be carried across the desert. It was therefore decided to carry a special Oldsmobile Kalahari mail.

When the expedition arrived at Gobabis, the last rail head on that side of the Kalahari, the mail train had just arrived and the mail bag was handed over officially for delivery to the postmaster at Ghanzi. “This particular mail will be nearly a month ahead of its time,” remarked Mr. Scott, the postmaster at Gobabis, as he put the official seal on the bag. He explained that the usual procedure was for a native postman, preceded by a donkey carrying the mail and supplies for the road, to cross from Gobabis to Ghanzi and back each month.

The trip each way takes two weeks and the population of Ghanzi were agreeably surprised when the Oldsmobile delivered the mail in 24 hours.

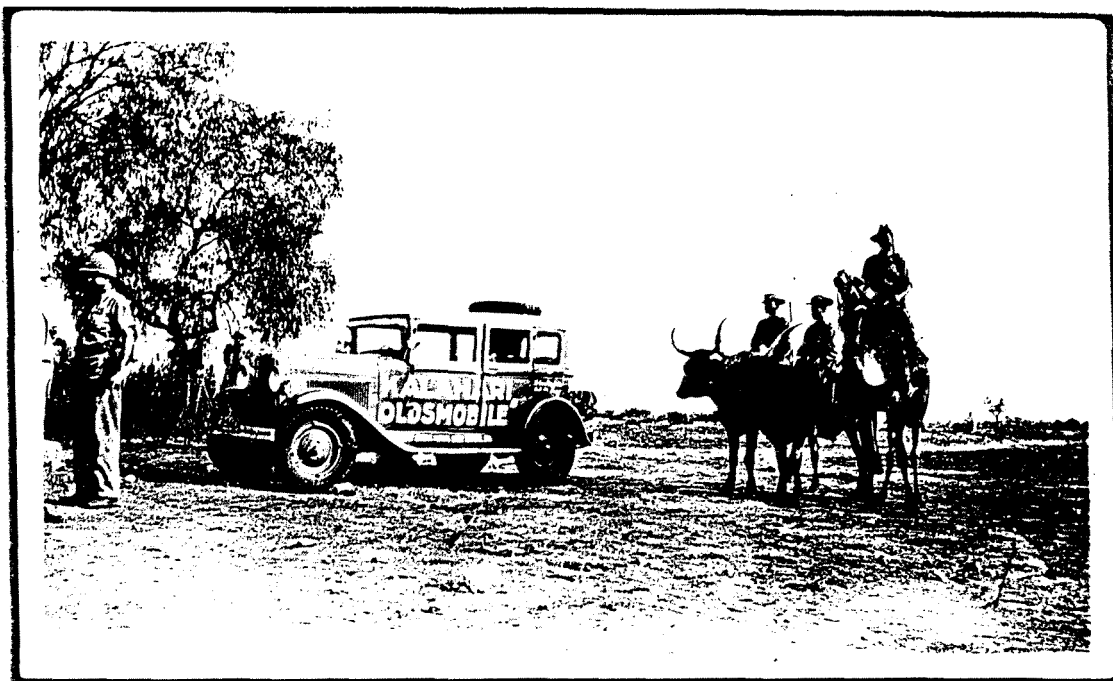
Supplies for Ghanzi are conveyed by ox-wagon which takes about six weeks to cross approximately 210 miles of desert. This is largely due to the absence of water, the oxen having to be unyoked several times during the journey and sent back for water, leaving the load in the desert until they return.

One can therefore, imagine the plight of the lonely inhabitants of Ghanzi should a breakdown occur or in the case of supplies running out before the ox-wagon arrives.

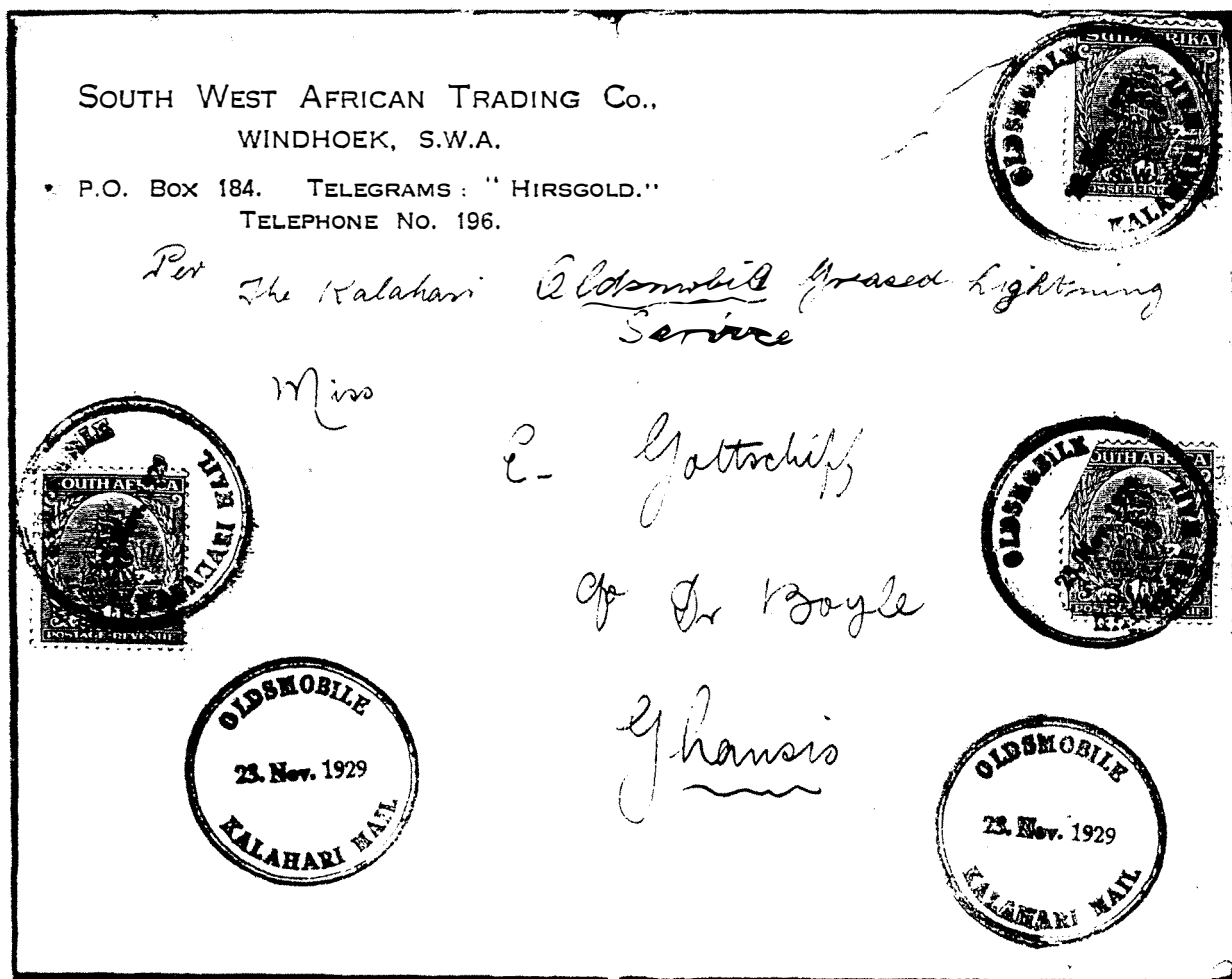
That mechanical transport will shortly supersede the old-fashioned means of conveyance over these desolate wastes is obvious, and the Oldsmobile crossing proved once more how easily the modern motor car abolishes distance and brings civilisation into touch with the more remote outposts in every corner of the globe.

What it means to be isolated for months, and sometimes years, from one’s fellow men, only those who live in such out of the way spots of the earth as Ghanzi can understand. In this little out of the world place, with hundreds of miles of thirst on every side, live three of the pioneers of the desert - Mr. W.E. Ellam, Magistrate; Mr. Boyle, who acts as doctor, chemist and postmaster; with Sergeant Campbell in charge of the Camel and Ox Police. These three hardy men control approximately 70,000 square miles of territory, maintaining order among the bushmen, ministering to the sick, carrying out a hundred and one necessary duties under the most trying conditions imaginable. They insisted upon delaying the Oldsmobile mail for several hours, and their hospitality was unbounded. Mr. Boyle, the postmaster, made up a mail bag for the Eastern side of the Kalahari and the ‘Olds’ plunged into the desert towards the rising sun. It had at least given these lonely guardians of the Kalahari new hope of early and rapid contact with civilisation and pointed out to the passing of the obsolete transport which until now has provided their only means of communication with the outside world.

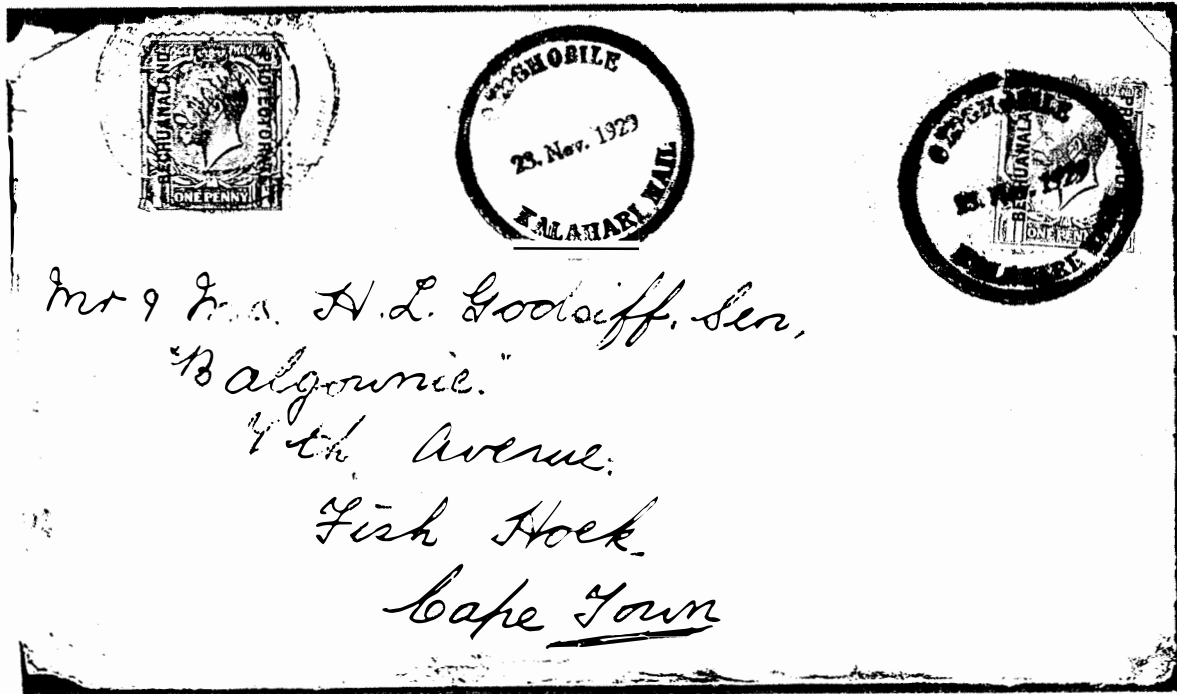
The next delivery of the mail was at Molepolole, 460 miles across the desert, followed by Gaborone and Johannesburg.



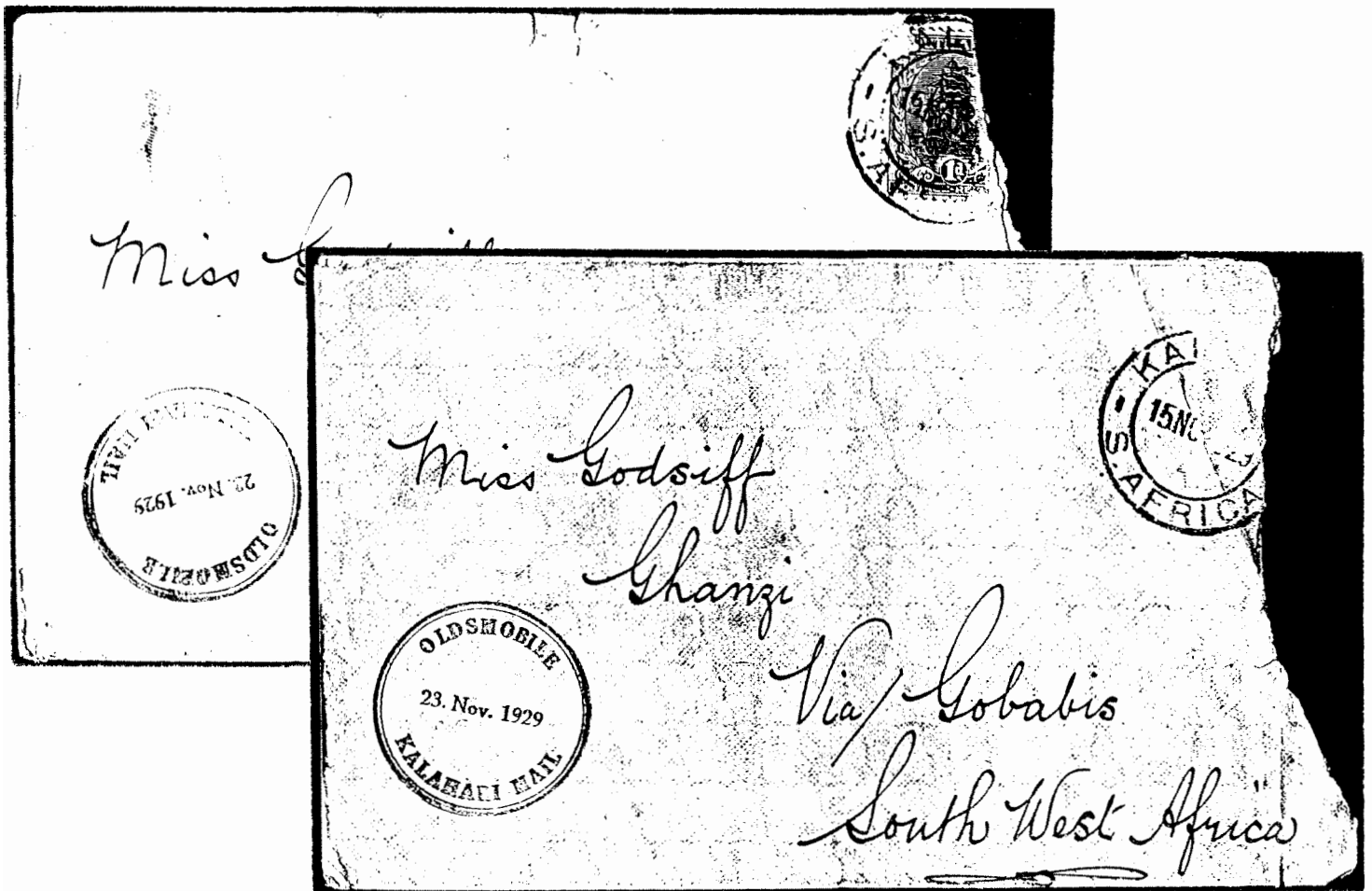
Photograph of the 'Kalahari Oldsmobile' at an unknown location. Note the mounted police - one on a camel.



A cover addressed to 'Ghansis' (sic) bearing three South African 1d 'Ship' stamps overprinted 'S.W.A.' All stamps are 'cancelled' with the special expedition cachet. There are no postal cancellations. It would appear from the imprint that the cover originated in Windhoek. Various manuscript endorsements include 'Per The Kalahari Oldsmobile Greased Lightning Service'.



The second 'outgoing' cover is addressed to Fish Hoek, Cape Town and bears two copies of the G. B. KG5 1d overprinted for Bechuanaland. One is cancelled with the special cachet while the other is cancelled with what appears to be a Gaberones Station cds, where the cover presumably entered the regular mails.



Two 'incoming' covers (both damaged - one with S.A. 1d 'Ship' stamp, and the other with stamp missing) are illustrated above. They were posted on 15 November at Kalk Bay (adjoining Fish Hoek) and are both addressed to Ghanzi 'Via Gobabis'. Both were backstamped at Gobabis on 23 November.