

## **M.V. BONSELLA**

**General cargo, Cattle, Container & Hijacked Vessel**  
**DWT 480 tonnes, L.O.A. 43.5 metres**  
**Port of registry Nassau**

*M.V. Bonsella,  
then Bonanza,  
at Port Said  
on her way to  
Tanganyika*



In 1983, as a holiday job, I flew to East Africa and relieved the master/owner of M.V. Bonsella while he took leave in Europe. I had recently worked in Tanzania, on occasions visited Bonsella and got to know Captain Arie Van de Gevel (Arie). My previous seafaring had all been with liner companies. Being personally responsible for a vessel, arranging her cargoes, doing all the ship-handling and piloting, working with a solely-African crew, and provisioning her from local markets, in a part of the world I was familiar with, was an appealing challenge. Bonsella was a tenth of the size of the smallest of my previous commands, and I was fascinated by her versatility and how Arie had adapted her to new commercial opportunities. Not many vessels can change readily from carrying cattle to containers to general cargo.

Arie, a Dutchman, had served his time with Royal InterOcean Lines and, like myself, had obtained his master's foreign-going certificate in the 1950s. He then transferred to Dutch coasters. In 1960, with family support, a bank loan and a 10% personal investment, M.V. Bonanza (later renamed Bonsella) was built in Holland. She had a single hold, her design included many of his specifications, and she was launched by his wife.

In 1962, he won a contract to ship railway lines and sleepers from the small port of Mtwara to Dar es Salaam, in Tanganyika. The railway lines had been laid as part of the ill-fated British government's groundnuts scheme in Tanganyika after WW2, which was abandoned in 1951. The job was suited to a single-hold coaster, and few of such coasters had a master with a foreign-going certificate.



*Bonsella, clearing old Nyali Bridge,*



*Going under old Nyali Bridge,*

Following that contract, which lasted about 18 months, Arie kept Bonsella in East Africa and carried general cargoes. He based her in Mombasa, Kenya and re-registered her in the Bahamas, which had necessitated the name-change. His Dutch crew had been replaced with Kenya Africans.

Later, Bonsella had a sudden change of employment. Arie, in relating the story to me, said: "One day I was walking up the road in Mombasa and I met my agent who told me that the Kenya Meat Commission (KMC) wanted a quotation for shipping cattle from Kenya north coast to their slaughterhouse in Mombasa. I said to my agent: How long is a cow? How wide is a cow? How high is a cow? On the back of my cigarette packet I worked out a quotation. As my agent walked away up the road, I called after him and told him to double the quotation. KMC accepted that quotation and for the next 15 years Bonsella carried cattle."





*Prime cattle shifted from drought region, discharged down the gangway and ready to swim ashore at Kilifi River.*

beside Kilifi River. At Kilifi, the cattle descended a shipside gangway, dropped into the water and swam ashore.

By 1980, the number of KMC cattle cargoes was diminishing. A container terminal was being built in Kilindini Harbour at Mombasa. Typically, Arie, with the help of his original naval architect, had *Bonsella's* hatchway widened to carry 22 x 20ft fully-loaded containers, in two tiers, athwartships. At the same time, he made her tween deck and cattle pens portable. He then offered a container feeder service between small ports and Mombasa Container Terminal. Between such voyages he was still able to carry cattle cargoes, sufficient to satisfy the reduced requirements of KMC.

Shortly before I joined *Bonsella*, Arie had two consignments of cattle from Tanzania mainland to Zanzibar town quay. He had arranged with shippers to deliver each cargo at an agreed time early in the morning. He arrived on time with the first cargo and, in the absence of receivers, started to discharge the cattle. When receivers arrived, much to their annoyance, some cattle had wandered off into Zanzibar town. Unsurprisingly, with the second cargo, his terms of agreement were adhered to and receivers were there to meet the vessel promptly.



*Bonsella, container vessel*

When I joined *Bonsella* she was in Mombasa at her regular berth alongside KMC slaughterhouse jetty. For readers not familiar with that part of the world, Mombasa is an island set into Kenya mainland, with deep-water Kilindini Harbour on the south side and Mombasa Old Port to the north. Slaughterhouse jetty can only be reached by limited-draft vessels, passing through Old Port, under Nyali Bridge and round to the back of the island.



*and container feeder*

During my takeover period, Arie and I made a couple of trips together in *Bonsella*. The first was to Tanga and back loaded each way with containers. Once at sea, Arie exchanged his in-port smart safari suit for a loincloth and flip-flops. A good reason for such attire was soon to become apparent. At Tanga, we discharged and loaded the containers alongside the lighter wharf.

My second trip with Arie was to Tana River, lightship outwards, returning with a cargo of cattle. Beforehand, in Mombasa, the crew loaded and re-fitted the portable tween deck and cattle pens, which had been left on shore for the trip with containers. At the old jetty in Tana River we loaded 300 head of cattle, which in view of sea conditions Arie had decided was the safest maximum. On clearing Tana River, the vessel started to roll, and I noted how quickly cattle on deck faced athwartships and coped with the rolling. Whilst I stayed on the Bridge Arie went below to inspect the cargo. When he reappeared he was covered in cow muck. I then appreciated his preference for a loincloth and flip-flops!





*As a ro-ro ferry*

Bonsella being old had sparse accommodation, but thankfully had good showers!! The cattle were neither watered nor fed during the 36-hour voyage to Mombasa. After discharge, the vessel was thoroughly washed down. Water in the hold was removed using a submersible portable electric pump. Having been brought up in a farming environment, I felt perfectly at home working with cattle.

Before he left, Arie introduced me to various people I would have dealings with in his absence, most importantly his bank manager. At Mombasa shipping office, my name was added to Bonsella's certificate of registry, and I took command. Then, as master, at Kenya Ports Authority office, I met the harbourmaster, explained my experiences in East Africa, and (thankfully) he agreed to issue me with a Pilotage Exemption Certificate for Mombasa. Additionally, I was given full use of Arie's furnished apartment in Mombasa, serviced by a house girl and garden boy, and the use of his motor vehicles. Whilst master of Bonsella, I was also given membership of The Mombasa Club, a lovely old colonial-style club, where I could socialise and eat between voyages.

I had no formal agreement with Arie. His shipping agent was responsible for collecting freight and settling port dues, etc., and was available to advise and assist me. I was free to book cargoes as I liked. In the event, all cargoes I booked were similar to those experienced during handover. By liaising with shippers between voyages, I kept Bonsella more or less fully employed. As sea passages weren't long, I was the only bridge watch-keeping officer, with the head crewman or engineer officer providing an occasional relief. Bonsella kept closer to the mainland than larger vessels and rarely met any others. There were some ex Bonsella deck and engineer officers in Mombasa who could be called upon, if required, to supplement officer manning.

Manning of Bonsella comprised of one engineer officer, a cook and a dozen seamen - all Kenyan-born. The majority of seamen were also experienced cattlemen. The head crewman, Saidi, originated from Lamu and had served in dhows from boyhood. He had worked for Arie for about twenty years, was wholly reliable and totally dedicated to Bonsella. In Mombasa, when we needed extra labour to fit or remove cattle pens and the tween deck, Saidi made the arrangements. At 0800 hours each morning, the required men, maybe 10 or 20, were lined up on the quay, ready for me to record their names. At midday we provided them with a good lunch. At 1700 hours, they would again line up on the quay, and I paid them each a day's wages, in cash. Arie had a reputation for treating his employees well, so extra men were always available, many of them seeking to join Bonsella's regular crew.



*Captain Arie Van de Gevel and Saidi*

Saidi, couldn't read or write, but knew every inch of the coast and could be trusted to watch-keep alone for short periods on a straight bit of coast. If the bridge radar was pre-set with distance ring(s) on, he could, without touching the radar, adjust course and maintain a given distance off the shore. Usually, Saidi would relieve me for a couple of hours once or twice during each sea passage. The master's night cabin had an excellent (the only) air-conditioning unit, enabling me to rest well, but had one disadvantage. With cattle on board, the air-conditioning intake was very close to the nearest cow!



*East African dry dock.*

*Saidi, front left, and other crew employed on maintenance work*

In Mombasa, the crew all went home at night and, if there wasn't an early morning start, I slept ashore in Arie's apartment. Mombasa had an excellent 'mtatu' (small van) service, crisscrossing the town, which enabled crew members to be on board at any given time. Bonsella, at her slaughterhouse berth, had KMC security. The vessel's engineer repeatedly warned me against sleeping on board alone. As Arie slept on board alone prior to early sailings, I did the same. Not long after I left Bonsella, KMC was raided at night and Arie was tied up and left on the quay till morning. Staying on board at night did have one benefit. Bonsella had no Bond, so wasn't troubled by officials seeking cigarettes or whisky. Amusingly, when I slept on board, the Customs launch occasionally visited at night, offering me whisky at reasonable prices. In the past I had often wondered what Customs officers did with all the whisky they got so-called given!



The only problem I encountered was in loading cattle in Tana River. Saidi was always helmsman entering port, and in the river kept me informed of unmarked shallow patches to avoid. Half an hour before arriving at the jetty we blew the whistle to alert shippers' herdsman on shore. There were no buildings in sight on that side of the river, and the cattle were kept waiting for the ship in scrubland nearby. By the time we berthed, cattle had already started to appear at the jetty, with herdsman jostling each other, each hoping to get their consignment on board first. A crewman, using a hand-held counter, counted the cattle as they boarded, stopping at the number I had previously agreed with KMC. Often some cattle were left behind. The herdsman of such remaining cattle - all tall dignified-looking men - tried to argue their case, for me to load more.

Once the cattle were on board, Arie had a system of putting their wellbeing first. If no port official appeared by boat from Lamu, he sailed without clearance papers. On arrival at Mombasa with cattle, Bonsella anchored in Old Port, and I was rowed ashore to report our arrival at Customs House. Sometimes I arrived from Tana River without clearance papers, facing a potentially serious offence, with the head of Customs. The problem was mainly a matter of African and European sense of time being so different. Fortunately, we soon saw eye to eye and came to a suitable arrangement.

At the slaughterhouse, occasionally a cow was too weak to walk off the vessel. Using the vessel's crane, we lifted it ashore, with a sling round its horns, from which it didn't appear to suffer. Such cows were usually then transported straight into the slaughterhouse for dispatch, ahead of other cattle. I experienced no deaths of cattle at sea. In view of my job, I had a conducted tour of the slaughterhouse, but that was definitely not my scene.



*Liberty boat for an American aircraft carrier at anchor off Mombasa.*

While watch-keeping at sea, I typed regular reports. Knowing Arie was constantly on the move in Europe, these had to be addressed c/o his bank in Holland. My expected six weeks stint soon passed, without word from him. It was another few weeks before he returned, and I left Bonsella. For me, managing Bonsella had been an interesting and well worthwhile holiday experience.



*Troop carrier, or still a cattle boat?*

In April 1991, Arie sold Bonsella. She continued to trade on the East African coast, but apparently capsized twice, each time being raised and got back into service.

Reportedly, in September 1994, Bonsella was hijacked by 26 Somali pirates off the north-eastern tip of Somalia. The pirates attacked her from a dhow, which the master afterwards said he had allowed to come too close. After firing two mortar rounds, eleven heavily-armed men leapt aboard and identified themselves as Somali Coast Guards. They took charge of the vessel and held the crew for a terrifying five days, as they hunted other ships in the area. They failed to board other ships because Bonsella was too slow, so her cargo of first aid medicine was taken along with everything else that could be stripped. Subsequently, in a statement, the master reported that as the pirates were leaving, they said, "Give us \$2000 before we go", to which the master replied, "I don't have any money." The General of the Somali Coastguard cocked his pistol and pointed it at his head. "Captain," he said, "no ship travels without money. Do you really want to lose your life just as I am about to set your ship free?" They went down to the cabin, rummaged through all the drawers, and took whatever money and things they could find. Then they left.

In 2009, Bonsella was thought to be still trading in East Africa, but under a different name.