

Consul Robert Skinner' s article about his formal diplomatic mission to Ethiopia



Robert P. Skinner in later years

Blogger's Note: This is the second article related to discussion which started on facebook about Baron de Jarlsburg's assertion in November 7, 1909 issue of New York Times that "Emperor Minilik II of Ethiopia was an accomplished linguist, [and] speaks French, English, and Italian fluently". I thought one way of affirming or disproving the assertion is to present what foreign visitors who had met the Emperor said about their encounter with the Emperor. In October 1903, Robert Peet Skinner, along with Horatio Wales and Dr. Abraham Pease, accompanied by a complement of 30 U.S. Marines, set sail from Naples, Italy, to Djibouti, Africa, and made a 22-day camel-back trek to Addis Ababa, to have an audience with Emperor Menelik. The following is description of their travel and the final encounter with Emperor Menelik. It was first published as an article in February 1905 issue of *The World's Work*. Part of this article was reprinted in 2005 E.C. edition of *'Ethiopian Calendar with Primary Source Materials'*.

Making a Treaty with King Menelik of Abyssinia

By Robert P Skinner

When the President's intention of sending an official mission to Ethiopia was announced in the summer of 1903, vague and curious views of its purpose prevailed everywhere. It should have



occasioned no surprise, either in America or in Abyssinia. The United States has maintained friendly official relations with a number of small powers with which we have no commerce, but has had none with Ethiopia, where for years we had profited by a flourishing trade. In the main, however, comment was friendly and encouraging, though when I found myself on the Red Sea coast, as chief of the mission, directed to establish official relations there my errand took on mysterious importance. And as I persisted in talking about cottons, tariffs and plain facts interesting only to plain people, the American mission became more incomprehensible than ever. But whatever

people may have thought, politeness surrounded us from the 17th of November, when we landed at Djibouti, the capital of the French Somaliland coast, until we said good-by and began our journey homeward.

Necessity for a coaling station created Djibouti. With the public works came the French merchant, the railroad and a "boom." When the railroad had pushed its winding length 125 miles across the desert, Djibouti resumed its status as a port of call for numerous African steamer lines, and waited, as it is still waiting, for the great expected development of Ethiopia. When that development comes, the French capital will be Abyssinia's natural point of contact with the modern world. It was this expectation of a future for Ethiopia, and the partial completion of the railroad to it, that took me to Africa. Hitherto, trade in general, and American trade in particular, had drifted to Aden, thence across to any one of half a dozen points, where camels took it up and plodded into the interior. The railroad meant evolution and revolution. It was time for a watchful people like ours to be up and doing.

Our two days in Djibouti passed quickly. Our experiences there ended in a blaze of glory at the "Government," where we were most gracefully and hospitably feted. The next morning, when the sun rose out of the Indian Ocean, we set forth by rail for Ethiopia in a train of French-made cars, with double roofs as a protection against the sun.



The Ethiopian frontier was crossed some time before we reached Dire-Douah - a boom city, created within a twelvemonth - but there we first encountered in outward and visible sign the orderly administration of him who signs himself "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has Conquered! Menelik II, by the Grace of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia." The Somali railroad guards were drawn up at attention to receive us. Across the street from the new railroad station was the new hotel, and thither we walked between two rows of undressed, amiable savages.

The next day, the task of organizing our party began in earnest. Our expedition was remarkable in that it had started off in a ship of state to visit a country without a seaport, and, aside from the staff, I was accompanied by a party of but twenty-four marines and bluejackets. These were immediately mounted upon mules. The mules had been well selected in

advance, but when the sailors took their first lesson in riding there was excitement in Dire-Douah. The Issas and Gourgouras poured out of their native village to see the sight, squatting on their haunches in the sun, and impassively brushing their teeth with the ends of green twigs.

When the mules had been distributed, and the saddles adjusted, we received applications for service from an army of native youths, who were eager for employment at only twice the normal rate of pay. A tent boy and a mule boy were necessary for each officer, and there had to be a considerable number of boys to perform miscellaneous duties for the enlisted men. When our party finally disbanded, some of our servants were employing servants of their own, and I suppose that if we had remained in Ethiopia long enough, these servants of servants would have been hiring other servants still.

Atto Manaye, one of King Menelik's soldiers



I had already found an interpreter at Djibouti, young Oualdo, Son of Mikael. He spoke French fluently and half a dozen of the local languages. He was an excellent horseman and a good shot, and whether he wore his fresh khaki suit and riding leggings, as he did in the European settlements, or his flowing snow-white "chamma," as at the capital, he made a smart appearance. I also employed one Gabro Tadick, or, in English, "The Slave of the Holy Ghost." He was of wistful countenance, wore a pair of blue overalls, a huge hat, and a red-bordered white "chamma." He also carried a gun to indicate his superiority over the other servants.

Modern Abyssinia consists mainly of the unified and organized kingdoms of Godjam Tigre, Amhara, and Choa. These are the mountainous highlands that have been ruled over successively in our time by the three great emperors, Theodore, John and Menelik. The race occupying these provinces is vastly superior to any other in Ethiopia, having descended from the natives and the Jews who, according to tradition, followed the Queen of Sheba back after her visit to Solomon.

The flux which before our day had driven the Ethiopians back into these four kingdoms was succeeded under Menelik by a reflux which carried the boundaries of the Empire beyond the limits of Harar and the Galla country, beyond numerous vaguely defined provinces to the west and south, and gave it effective control over the barbarians of the lowlands and the desert, as far as the borders of the European coast colonies. Thus the modern Empire consists of a vast extent of territory, including not merely the conquered tribes, but whole nations not yet assimilated, and in some cases almost impossible of assimilation.

The shortest, and in some respects the best, route from Dire-Douah to the capital, Addis Ababa, follows along the base of the mountains, across Mt. Assabot, usually in sight of the great desert, yet never quite upon it. Following this route, we expected to move on after some delay. The camp-stove was promptly put into commission the first night, and the aroma of bacon and other homely American things floated over the Ethiopian desert. A ring of tents upon the poles of which appeared the historic words, "Santiago, Cuba," was formed around the stove. The camels were brought within the circle after they had eaten their fill of mimosa twigs. Among the animals the Arabs and Danakils constructed huts of our boxed effects, thatching them with their straw packsaddle mats. A crescent moon rose over our camp, and after "taps" had been sounded by the bugler the post guards called out the hours. Then only the howling of the hyenas broke the stillness.

Emperor Menelik's picturesque soldiery



On the march our caravan spread its thin length along a short mile. It was quite impracticable for us to keep together, and we determined after our second day to detail a rear-guard to follow the camels, and to send the main body of

the escort and the servants, as rapidly as they could travel, to each day's rendezvous. The halting points were fixed naturally by the condition of the water-supply. By following the base of the mountains, we came occasionally to small streams, or wells; farther to the north these same streams lost themselves in the sand.

The sixth and seventh days of our journey were across arid, stony plains; and then for two days over rich prairie land. Our ninth night found us near Mt. Assabot. After three days more of varied country, we got our first glimpse of the telephone poles which mark the way to the capital of Abyssinia. Five minutes later we were upon the king's highway, out of the desert, and in Menelik's hereditary kingdom of Choa. From this point we traveled along the main road in Abyssinia, and encountered frequent caravans laden with hides, coffee, and ivory. We had left the savages behind and were in a realm of law. We had proceeded not more than five miles in Choa when we passed beneath a tree from which was still suspended a headrest and gourd which had been placed there with the body of some unfortunate malefactor who had been hanged for his sins.

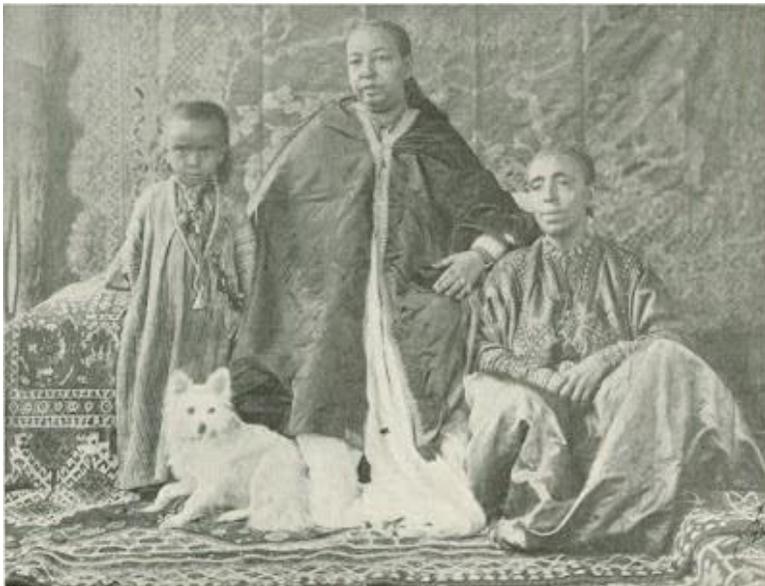
There was now before us the longest and most trying stage of the journey. The Hawash plain and the Fantelle range have an evil reputation in Ethiopia. The long stretch before the Kassan River is reached is without water except such as may sometimes be found in the crevices of certain rocks. The sun beats down mercilessly upon an unshaded trail. Even the dark-blue spectacles we wore failed to do more than temper the blinding white sunlight. As there was no longer any occasion in prudence for the party to remain together, we now rode in groups, as fancy might dictate. The only rule of the road seemed to be that one of our Somali policemen should lead the advance party, and that one should bring up the rear with Oualdo, Son of Mikael, whose powers as an interpreter were required to settle small difficulties that might arise.

We were now crossing a level plain, and were in the richest game country between the coast and the capital. We saw gazelles and antelopes, not one at a time, but frequently in groups of from four to a dozen. When we returned two months later, we saw whole regiments of antelopes, some of them containing two hundred beasts. To the right of our route lay the huge mountain range, in the rocky fastnesses of which is hidden the ancient city of Ankober. Numerous caravans of apparently interminable length crept

toward us across the Ankober trail. Farther on, we found a herd of from five to six thousand female camels grazing under the supervision of herdsmen.

After leaving the Hawash River we began to climb gradually. Now it became very cold as soon as the sun had set. There was little or no wood for fires around which our servants could sleep, and how they stood the low temperatures is incomprehensible. They wore nothing but cotton garments, and although most of them had blankets, many had preferred to retain their blanket money, and to keep warm as best they could. Somehow, they managed to huddle together in their "chammas," and turned out in the morning after an apparently refreshing and warm night's slumber.

Empress Taitu of
Ethiopia



On our second day in the kingdom of Choa we were visited by Atto Paulos, Governor of Baltchi, who informed us that we were now the guests of the Emperor, and that orders had been issued to all the chiefs to receive us with "the traditional hospitality of the kingdom." This meant that the right of "durgo" had been extended in our favor - in

other words, that we might legally demand supplies of the inhabitants, who later, as a return for their gifts, would obtain some slight concessions from the tax-gatherers.

The daily arrival of the "hospitality" was an event of much solemnity, and the occasion of great rejoicings among the servants, who gorged themselves on food which we were utterly unable to consume. In the rich agricultural provinces a procession of perhaps forty people would arrive toward sundown leading steers, sheep, and goats, and carrying baskets of eggs, bread, barley, and jars of hydromel - the native champagne - curdled milk, and beer. Elsewhere the "Choum," or headman, would bring a sheep or a

goat, with a thousand apologies for his inability to do more. It was to no purpose that we sometimes protested against receiving this largess. The grave and polite "Choum" invariably said that the law enjoined the delivery of food to the nation's guests, and the law must be obeyed. A scarcely less inexorable law imposed upon the stranger the necessity of recognizing the gift. Later, when we left Addis Ababa upon the completion of our errand, we had ten steers and fifty sheep and goats that we had not needed. Ultimately, we were obliged to give them away. Our compound at the capital during our stay bore some faint resemblance at all times to the Chicago stock-yards.

On entering the fertile and magnificent province of Mindjar we crossed vast expanses of well-cultivated fields yielding two and three crops a year. There were fine cattle and prosperous-looking villages everywhere. Some of the threshing scenes were most picturesque. In some cases the straw was strewn about a small area and beaten with flails; but the usual process seemed to be to drive cattle round and round over it in a circle.

In one of the first of these villages we passed the first church that we had seen since the beginning of our journey. It looked something like the pictures of the Chinese pagoda upon a willow-pattern plate. It was round, as are all the Abyssinian churches, which tradition says are copied after Solomon's temple. All of our Abyssinian servants bowed reverently when we passed the church, some of them kissing the soil or the wooden gateway.

At length, on December 18th - twenty days after leaving Dire-Douah - we saw in the far distance the shining roofs of Addis Ababa. High mountains were on both sides and ahead of us, and we marched across fields of waving grain. We halted, after two hours, at a spot called Shola, to receive M. Chefneux, the Emperor's Counselor of State, who had promised to come to escort us into the city.

We mounted our mules at two o'clock, and moved slowly in the direction of Addis Ababa. Soon we discerned in the distance an entire division of troops coming toward us. When the two forces met, the Dedjazmatch, or General in Command of the Abyssinians, dismounted. Introductions followed. The escorting troops then wheeled, and moved on in advance. Their numbers increased so rapidly as we approached the city that we were finally preceded by 3,000 men.

King Menelik and his grandchild

Surrounding their chiefs, the warriors marched in most extraordinary confusion, sometimes performing evolutions, sometimes walking their horses, and sometimes galloping. It was a beautiful spectacle. No two costumes were alike. Saddles and bridles were decorated with gold and silver fringe. Bucklers of burnished gold were carried by the soldiers, and from their shoulders flew mantles of leopard and lion skins, of silk, satin



and velvet. They were picked men riding well, their "chammas" flowing in the wind. Only the bright rifle-barrels marked the difference between these Ethiopians and the army of their forbears who followed the Queen of Sheba when she went down into Judea. We were spellbound by the moving mass of color, across which floated the weird music of a band of shawm players - playing as they had played when Jericho fell. With the probable emotion of the Yankee at the Court his legs crossed and his arms supported on two cushions. He wore a red velvet mantle, barely disclosing the snowy-white undergarments. Around his head a white handkerchief was closely bound. He also wore diamond ear-drops, and several rings upon both hands. His face was full of intelligence, and his manners those of a gentleman as well as of a king. Distinctly, the first impression was agreeable.

After a short formal address, I presented my commission from the President. This the Emperor scrutinized with polite indifference, laying it aside at once, and replying in a few words. He spoke in the Amharic language. All the other conversation and translations were in French. The officers of the mission were then presented, and were asked to take chairs. The Emperor told us of the arrangements made for our comfort, and we

separated with his promise to fix in writing an hour for a first private audience on the next day. As we left the "Aderach" the captured cannon roared out twenty-one guns, and the band of native musicians played "Hail Columbia."

The same immense escort which had led us into the city headed by the shawm players, now augmented by the artillery men and the Emperor's band, led us down the mountainside to our temporary home. The generals, judges and colonels entered with the officers, and together we inspected the quarters of the Ras Oualdo Georgis.

The Ras Oualdo Georgis, a nephew of Menelik and ruler of a province, had erected this palace for his own comfort on his visits to the capital. It stood in a large park which was subdivided into compounds. It was oval, probably one hundred feet long by eighty wide, one story high, and divided into two rooms. There were several large doors and two windows in each room: the latter had solid wooden shutters, but no glass. Upon the floor were numerous oriental rugs, and in the front room was a divan, or throne, a long table, and many chairs.

After the departure of our visitors, the tired sailors and marines had to make a camp. The tents were put up in front of the palace, and the flag was raised over "Camp Roosevelt." A large number of spectators had found their way within the grounds, and the soldiers' labors were beguiled by the music of the Emperor's band.

The second day at the capital was almost as strenuous as the first. The Emperor had given me an appointment at ten o'clock. A divan in a small chamber awaited his Majesty. He entered quietly and promptly, accompanied by a number of important personages. They disappeared at a given signal, and to the Emperor's amazement I handed him a copy of a treaty, written in his own language by Professor Littmann of Princeton University. This enabled him to grasp our intentions immediately' without the intervention of an interpreter. After this meeting, either business interviews with the Emperor himself, or exchanges of views with his responsible ministers, took place daily.

The role of the various legations in Addis Ababa is purely political. America has been the first country to establish diplomatic relations for the avowed purpose of protecting and extending commerce, without having a political issue to discuss.

Our trade with Abyssinia grew under shadowy political arrangements, when the Abyssinians claimed an outlet upon the sea which the Egyptians contested with them by force of arms. In our time the Abyssinians were forced back until they were land-locked, with Italy, France and England standing guard upon the Red Sea. Later came the active occupation of the French possession by keen-witted Frenchmen, the creation of the port of Djibouti, and the building of the railroad to the Ethiopian frontier. After many delays and political intrigues, the line was finally put into operation in the summer of 1903. It has recently been announced that all preliminary questions have been satisfactorily settled, and that the railroad will now be completed from Dire-Douah to the capital. It will require three or four years to connect Addis Ababa with the line already built, but when this great enterprise is accomplished Ethiopia will be in a position to convert her vast treasures of natural wealth into money and to join her sister trading nations of the world.

The present foreign trade of Ethiopia is not great. Exports and imports together amount to \$2,316,000, of which the share of the United States amounts to \$1,389,600 – large in proportion to the trade of other countries, but hardly important. American cottons account for \$579,000. As imports we receive, from Abyssinia and Somaliland together, skins and hides to the value of \$675,000, and \$135,000 worth of coffee. We naturally look to the future to develop a commerce of really important volume. The two great obstacles to the increase of American trade at present are: 1. The absence of American navigation lines assuring rapid, direct, and cheap transportation. 2. The absence of American business firms in Ethiopia capable of representing our interests.

There are gems and gold in Ethiopia. The gems we saw were found scattered over the desert wastes, washed down from the mountains above. Gold is hidden away in the mountains in quantities which can be estimated by no existing data. Even now the annual production of gold by methods as old as Moses amounts probably to \$500,000. As for copper, iron and the ordinary metals, their extraction is merely a question of finding facilities for shipment and, probably more important still, a market capable of absorbing them. Petroleum has been discovered in large quantities, but the Emperor is currently believed to regard as the most important of Abyssinian activities the cultivation of his fertile table-lands.

The hope of the country does depend upon agriculture. A bountiful Providence has given Abyssinia a climate and a soil which produce two, and even three, crops a year. On the table-lands of Ethiopia nearly every grain can be grown that will grow anywhere. Here is the original home of the coffee plant, and cotton has been successfully grown here for many years. This fact has inspired half a dozen French cultivators to undertake cotton-growing upon a large scale. They have had such success that others are about to copy them, and there will probably be systematic efforts to make Ethiopia an important cotton-exporting region. But stock-raising, including beef, sheep and goats, is now by far the most important industry of the empire.

King Menelik and his suite entering Aderach

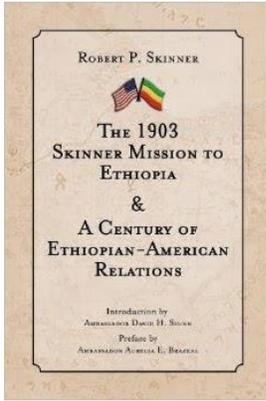


A visit paid to the American encampment by the Emperor was the certain signal that our serious business discussions were practically over and that we might prepare for our homeward journey. The final audience with h his Majesty was arranged for Sunday afternoon, December 27th. He received us in the small audience chamber. The serious business of the hour was to affix the official seals to the treaty, which had previously been

drafted in the Amharic and French languages.

As the actual comparison of the two copies of the treaty had preceded the audience, nothing remained to be done except to affix the signatures and the official seals. The Emperor never signs any documents, attaching instead to his letters his seal, impressed with black ink, and to formal documents the great seal of state. A white-robed secretary appeared with the instrument by which this is imposed, and, placing it on the floor, stamped the lion of Ethiopia under the sign manual of the President's Commissioner. We all shook hands and exchanged congratulations. Our soldiers presented arms and retired. Then the officers bowed low and followed.

The World's Work. February 1905.



Marines celebrating their last day in AddisAbaba