

In Memoriam

Japie Jackson

20/08/1931 – 26/04/2023



Jakobus Johannes (Japie) Jackson was born on 20 August 1931 on the farm Riverton in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

The second child of his parents, he and his older brother, Oswald, became children of the veld. His mother (maiden name Naude) died unexpectedly when he was only 13 years old. Thereafter he completed his school career as a boarder.

Japie matriculated from Chaplin School in Gwelo (now Gweru) in 1948 with distinctions in six of the seven subjects in the Cambridge School Certificate examinations. Determined to become a farmer, he enrolled at Pretoria University for a degree in agriculture (BSc. Agric).

However, shortly after he had completed the first-year examinations in November 1949, Oswald prevailed on him to apply for admission to Onderstepoort in order to obtain a veterinary degree. Early in 1950, Japie was informed that he had been selected as one of only 15 students for the second-year course at Onderstepoort and

admission to the hostel situated on the campus. Although he had completed his schooling in English, his mother spoke Afrikaans. Consequently, he had no problem following those lectures that were presented in Afrikaans. Japie was popular with his classmates, and close friendships were formed, as almost all the students were boarders, Onderstepoort being situated about 20 km from the city centre and bicycles being the only means of personal transport for the majority of students.

Japie was a serious student and never hesitated to ask penetrating questions or express a well-reasoned opinion.

This was less popular with some lecturers and may well have been responsible for the additional six months he had to spend at the faculty. The result was that he qualified for BVSc in the middle of 1954 instead of at the end of 1953. However, he never complained, stressing the valuable additional knowledge he consequently attained.

Japie selected his future wife, Hannalah Muller, on noticing her at a DRC church service in Pretoria North in 1950 during his first year at Onderstepoort and was introduced to her shortly thereafter by a few of his classmates. He loved her intensely, and she played a crucial role in his life.

They were married in 1954 and had six children, four boys and two girls. When she died unexpectedly on 15 October 2015, Japie was inconsolable. Thereafter hardly a day went by that he did not, in his own words, 'shed tears for her'.

Another outstanding feature in Japie's life was his unshakeable Christian faith. Japie argued that, as The Bible was God's word, it could not be faulted or criticised in any way. Darwinian evolution was, therefore, completely unacceptable to him. Hannalah shared this devotion. Their entire lives together were therefore ruled by their faith.

Japie's veterinary career started with employment on Liebig's ranch in Southern Rhodesia, with its some 60 000 head of cattle in 1954. He had four main tasks:

- Immunisation of young calves against heartwater. It was a blood vaccine that was not available in Southern Rhodesia. Japie, therefore, had to produce it himself in heartwater-susceptible Merino sheep purchased in disease-free parts of South Africa. The laborious process of obtaining infective blood from these sheep was done on the farm, and some 10000 calves were immunised in the first season.

- All of the ranch cows with semen obtained from Brahman bulls imported from Texas. As the bulls would not mount in oestrous cows, he successfully improvised an electro-ejaculator. Some 1000 cows were inseminated annually, and the success rate was approximately 50%.
- Pregnancy diagnoses (PDs) on some 15000 breeding cows occupied much of his time. As he became more and more proficient, Japie reached a record of 2689 head in one day on Nuanetsi Ranch, where he also worked from time to time.
- The high mortality levels on some sections of the farm deserved intensive research. Theileriosis (buffalo-associated) caused massive losses – they lost some 600 head in one year – on certain parts of the ranch, and the problem was only solved by removing the cattle from there. He also encountered unusual deaths in young cattle due to hookworm infection and discovered that it was associated with a particular dam where a big salt block had been placed close to a spot where all the animals concentrated to drink. The problem was solved by removing the block and drinking at one spot prevented by covering the area with branches from thorn trees. Malignant bovine catarrh occurred from time to time, as could be expected in the presence of blue wildebeest, and tuberculosis was in the process of eradication. Facial paralysis caused by a small abscess pressing on the facial nerve associated with slight injury by a faulty neck clamp was another unusual problem affecting several animals that he had to unravel and solve.

In 1957 Japie resigned from Liebig's and accepted a position as a veterinary officer in the government's veterinary department. After initial stints at the Salisbury (now Harare) laboratory and FMD duties, he was posted to Gwelo and then to Enkeldoorn. He resigned after three years to farm the acquired family farm but was soon reappointed in the same government post, and he started farming on a part-time basis. In 1964, at the age of only 33 years, Japie was promoted to Assistant Principle Veterinary Officer and transferred to Bulawayo. Five years later (1969), he was transferred to Fort Victoria (now Masvingo) to be close to his farm.

His home was a house on Netridge farm close to Fort Victoria. FMD was particularly prevalent in the district, and outbreaks were handled like an outbreak of war. Working hours became non-existent at such times with the examination of cattle on adjacent properties for signs of FMD infection, the establishment of defence-line cordons, collection and dispatch of suitable specimens for typing of strains and sometimes even the erection of fences. In 1975, in light of the deteriorating security situation, Japie reluctantly resigned from government service to concentrate on his farming activities and eventually (1979) moved to his farm in the Gutu district.

With his farming activities prospering and augmented by income from his private practice, which included a lot of PD work (a total of 1,6 million by 2018), Japie systematically acquired more land. By the early 1980s, he owned four title deeds, his total cattle herd - consisting mostly of Mashona cattle - numbering just under 2000 head. Finally Japie, together with a daughter and son-in-law, acquired just over 12000 ha portion of Liebig's Ranch that was offering lots for sale.

However, with the looming government restriction on ownership of farmland, Japie and Hannalah decided to give some of the farms to two of their children, who were already involved in the farming venture. In 2002 all the farms were systematically confiscated by President Robert Mugabe's followers, and, despite trying his best to negotiate with the invaders, the Jackson clan was forced to leave all the farms they had acquired and developed into well-managed, productive enterprises.

Japie reluctantly moved to Bulawayo, henceforth conducting a private practice with PDs as his main activity, thus totalling an astounding 70 years of work as a veterinarian, the last PDs being conducted shortly before his April visit to New Zealand.

Japie's love of the veld was infectious, and he preached what he learnt in practice on his various farms. Through close observation and study from fairly early childhood, he had acquired an impressive knowledge of the veld and its composition of grasses and bushveld trees.

He loved watching cattle grazing, thereby getting to know their grazing habits and preferences of the available natural fodder. On the sour highveld, he advocated keeping the grasses very short in their early highly nutritious state as long as possible by applying various managemental strategies, such as veld burning and continuous utilisation by grazing cattle.

However, for the sweet veld, with its much lower rainfall and hot climate, he advised short interval grazing and long rests during the growing season to enable the much more nutritious perennial grasses to recover from grazing and assert themselves. Conception rates (established by PD) served as a measurement of the level of management on his own farms and those of his clients.

His views on veld management – based on the observations and research done on his own farms – and some of the difficult veterinary problems that he had to face and solve are dealt with in detail in one of his books. This was the only book that he offered for sale.

Japie was indeed a prolific writer, publishing more than 20 books, mostly in short format, at his own expense. The majority dealt with various aspects of his unwavering Christian faith and were based on his remarkable knowledge of The Bible. Evolution was invariably refuted based on his ceaseless research on the contents of The Bible.

The book he referred to most frequently in conversations, however, dealt with his beloved Hannalah. She was and remained the shining light in his life, also after her death.

An extensive book with personal and professional anecdotes as well as comprehensive expressions of opinion on a variety of subjects, including an analysis of the deteriorating political situation in his fatherland, was published in 2022.

It is not written chronologically and can, therefore, not be regarded as an autobiography. However, it makes fascinating reading. It includes information on the many visits Japie, and Hannalah made to other countries, especially to New Zealand, which became the new motherland of most of their many descendants. Japie was also a talented poet, one of his books being a volume of verse. Only one book was in Afrikaans, the others in English.

It stands to reason that Japie was highly rated by organised agriculture and scientific organisations. He received the following awards in Zimbabwe:

- In 1997 a silver medal from the Zimbabwean Society for Animal Production.
- In 2001 a Meritorious Award from the Zimbabwe Animal and Grassland Society.
- In 2003 The Farming Oscar from the 'Commercial Farmers Union'.

Japie and Hannalah lost two of their sons in Zimbabwe before she died in 2015. Their eldest son Alfred, a medical doctor, died in 2008 and their second youngest son, Martin, a farmer, in 1996. Their second son, James, is a practising veterinarian in South Africa, and their youngest child, Jacob (fondly known as Kiewiet), is a computer boffin, also in South Africa. The daughters, Annalie and Carolie and their families eventually emigrated to New Zealand, where they flourished.

Despite being unwell, Japie decided to visit the now burgeoning family there in April this year to enjoy the pleasant company of his multitudinous descendants, which included a growing number of great-grandchildren, the entire extended family, including those residing in southern Africa, totalling an impressive 40 individuals. However, he somehow contracted pneumonia and, despite excellent care, died on 26 April 2023 at the age of 91.

Japie was not only an excellent veterinarian but also an exceptional person. His sincerity, loyalty, charming personality, and genuine friendliness. With a disarming smile, he ensured that he made many friends. The four survivors of the Class of 1953 (Rudolph Bigalke, Jean du Plessis, Margaret Rose and Johan Schutte) will miss him very much. So will his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

May they be consoled by the fact that they had a beloved father, grandfather and great-grandfather who was so special and unique that his memory, like his writings, will live on in their lives.

Rudolph Bigalke, James Jackson, Jacob Jackson

