



Cutting the celebratory cake at 100

Ethiopia's highland sheep, currently numbered at about 20 million, provide the raw material universally considered best for fine gloving and garment leather because of the smooth grain and great strength at light weights. It is speculated locally that the combination of high altitude (upwards of 8,000 feet/2,440 metres), and consistent, moderate climate have combined over the centuries to develop these characteristics that are duplicated nowhere in the world.

The capacity of the more than 20 companies processing sheepskins and goatskins for export is said to exceed 32 million skins a year, far more than the available supply. In 2000, a survey by CSA found that only 66% of processing capacity was being utilised. So buying competition is intense, making the industry ripe for attrition and keeping prices high. There is a race on among the tanners to move beyond pickled skins to crust and finished leather and those who first succeed will probably be the survivors as the Ethiopian government logically moves towards taxing or prohibiting the export of pickled skins.

This is the story of one such firm, Hafde, and its founder who celebrated his 100th birthday during the recent Meet in Africa 2004. At a celebration in the courtyard of his rapidly expanding tannery Haji Feyissa Degaga ceremoniously and diplomatically cut several birthday cakes, each together with a favoured customer, as his extended family and close friends looked on proudly.

Longevity in the family genes

Hafde is an acronym for his name, and in the long-ago days when he traded skins it was his cable address. But nothing is old about the tannery his sons have built and are expanding now. Complimented on his age, Feyissa smiled, "That was nothing." His father, he claimed, had lived to 120.

How Feyissa Degaga entered the leather business more than 85 years ago is an industry legend. Under the feudal system that still survived in rural Ethiopia in 1918, his father had been a wealthy man, the "Balabat", headman of a large family group and elder in a village far from Addis Ababa. But the family was poor by the time Feyissa was 14. Old enough to contribute to the family's upkeep, he had saved just enough from odd jobs to buy a single sheepskin in the village market, with the plan of becoming a trader. In those days air dried skins were purchased at bi-weekly markets in the villages by travelling traders who sold the best to exporters in Addis and resold the poorer ones for local use. In 1918 the raw skins were poorly prepared, crudely flayed, and dried in

the sun on the ground or on ropes. Some were crudely processed with castor bean extract. It was a risky business. There was one tannery, ASCO (but only for hides) and none processing sheep until 1927, when Awash (now Elico) was established. The skin exporters were all foreigners: Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Yemeni, Arabs and British, but no Ethiopians.

Learning the hard way

Feyissa took his skin across the village square and proudly offered it at a small profit to another trader who laughed and said: "That skin is worthless, it's smoke cured!"

Feyissa raced back to the first trader and demanded his money back. The cynical answer: "Why would I buy that skin, it's worthless!" The realities of the 'skin business' had been abruptly learnt. Heartsick, Feyissa returned home and hung the skin over his cot so that he would see it the last thing as he fell asleep and the first thing when he awoke. He vowed never to be cheated again.

This was in the time of the Emperor Menelik and the most prestigious jobs were in Addis working for the government. Feyissa's father sent him there and arranged a job. But Feyissa hated the city and confinement to an office and longed to be trading skins. Returning to his village in disgrace he was put to work by his angry father as a serf, endlessly ploughing fields. Another lesson learned, he returned to Addis, but not to an office. He started at the bottom of the industry he loved, as a skin carrier for the traders. Feyissa is very tall and thin, and with a three foot stack of dried skins on his head was an imposing figure striding through the crowded streets. ➤





Haji Feyissa Degaga's son Mr Hussein Feyssa.

A natural leader, he soon attracted followers and formed a transport network, his first enterprise. With profits from this he finally realised his dream and became a skin trader. Before he was 40 he had founded Haji Feyissa Degaga Import and Export Enterprise and was on his way. "Haji" was added to his name, an honorary title allowed to Muslims who have visited Mecca.

Resilience: the key to success

There were many ups and downs on Haji's road to the successful business his family owns today. In the late 1930s, when the occupying Italians left Ethiopia, he invested all his money in five trucks that were left behind. These seemed a great bargain until he found, that by burning expensive gasoline instead of diesel fuel, they were uncompetitive and worthless. The sinking of a ship carrying the cargo of a major creditor might have also sunk the spirits of a less indomitable businessman. By the 1950s Haji had rebuilt a large trading business supplying exporters, but when the skin market collapsed again he lost everything. He had recovered by the time of the Dergue (1974-1991). The line of emperors that had begun in Old Testament times with the first Menelik, son of Solomon and Sheba, ended with the overthrow of Haile Selassie and most industry was nationalised by the left wing military government. Suddenly he found himself forced to sell his skins to the government at prices they dictated.

An expanding business

Then things changed and Haji's fortunes steadied with the support of his many sons (who started learning the business as children, much as he had). Today five of them are active with him in a business that has expanded into real estate, the distribution of chemicals, automobile-related products and building materials as well as the core business of tanning. From a disaster with a single skin 85 years ago Haji Feyissa Degaga has persisted against all odds to build a company now processing 6,000 skins and 250 hides a day and with plans to move upstream in the 21st Century into making finished leather. He dream's someday of reaching backward into sheep farming and forward into finished leather products.

These dreams may be fulfilled by yet another generation now learning and waiting in the wings.

When asked, on reaching the age of 100, if he planned to retire Haji replied: "What, and become a pet to the ladies?"