

**ACTIVITY:** Crossing river on a raft  
**CASE:** GSAF ND-0084  
**DATE:** Before January 3, 1967  
**LOCATION:** The incident took place at the mouth of the Keiskamma River, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. 33°17,5'S, 27°29'E



**NAME:** Sinsa  
**DESCRIPTION:** He was a black male.

### BACKGROUND

**ENVIROMENT:** The Keiskamma River is usually open to the sea and has a tidal estuary rich in birdlife and bait organisms. The crescent-shaped beach is adjacent to an area of rocks and reefs long regarded as an angler's paradise. Several sharks had been seen in the vicinity in the days preceding the incident.

**NARRATIVE:** "An African named Sinsa built a raft which he used to propel across the river by treading water with his feet," writes Whitaker. "One day, while about six of us were fishing, we saw Sinsa crossing the river with his raft. We warned him about the sharks, saying: 'Look out, they will get you one day.' But he said: 'No bass, they don't like black men, only white.'" A few days later Whitaker and his friends were watching Sinsa cross the river when they saw him suddenly slip from his raft. "At the same time we saw the fin and tail of a shark appear. We rushed towards the raft. Sinsa emerged and, grasping the raft he threw himself on to it. We got him into the boat to find that his leg had been bitten off high in the thigh"

**INJURY:** Fatal. The description of the injury suggests that the man's femoral artery may have been severed.

**FIRST AID:** The party got the injured man to shore, stopped the bleeding as best they could and telephoned for a doctor. "But shortly before the doctor arrived, Sinsa regained consciousness and murmured: 'Baas, I'm finished'. He died soon afterwards."

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Unknown. After Sinsa's death, Whitaker ordered a huge shark hook from Mr. Burgess, the blacksmith in King William's Town. "It was as big and round as a soup plate, on to which was welded bulldog chain. I attached it to about 25 feet of fencing wire, which in turn was fixed to 70 yards of cotton-line rope, and 70 yards of hemp rope." On his next trip to the Keiskamma mouth, Whitaker camped in his wagon "under the big fig tree" - apparently a favourite spot in those days - with several farmers from the area. "It was not long before we saw a shark, its fins and tail appearing above the water. So I got my shark outfit ready. I tied the one end to a big shrope tree, and coiled the rest in a heap with a stone on it." Using a small line, Whitaker soon caught a sand shark about two feet in length which he hooked by the tail and threw in as far as he could, which was about five yards. "It swam into deep water and about 20 minutes later there was a terrific splash in the mouth of the river. The old shrope tree was swaying to and fro for all it was worth. By the time we got to the shark line it was as taut as a telegraph wire, and we grabbed hold of it. Suddenly the shark turned away and we went like nine-pins thrown into the air. We

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managed to get hold of the line again and, digging our heels in the sand, we pulled the shark closer. When we got in near the shore we sent for a gun and shot the shark in the head. The shark was 13½ feet long and had 14 rows of teeth. A man could sit inside its mouth when the jaws were open." Whitaker records that he gave the jaws of the shark to a Dr. Eagan of King William's Town.

**SOURCE:** Undated press clipping from the archives of the Port Elizabeth Museum

# The story of the first fatal shark attack

**I** HAVE just finished reading what was probably the first-recorded fatal shark attack on our coastline. It happened many years ago in the mouth of the Keiskama River.

The account comes from an old newspaper clipping in which a Mr. Whitaker describes how he witnessed the attack — and later caught a huge shark in retaliation.

Mr. Whitaker tells of how an African named Sinsa built a raft which he used to propel across the river by treading water with his feet.

"One day, while about six of us were fishing, we saw Sinsa crossing the river with his raft.

"We warned him about the sharks, saying: 'Look out, they will get you one day.' But he said: 'No baas, they don't like Black men, only White.'"

Mr. Whitaker writes that he and his friends were watching Sinsa cross the river a few days later when they saw him suddenly slip from his raft.

## HUGE MOUTH

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"We got him into the boat to find that his leg had been bitten off high in the thigh.

"The party got the injured man to shore, stopped the bleeding as best they could and telephoned for a doctor.

"But shortly before the doctor arrived, Sinsa regained consciousness and murmured: 'Baas, I'm finished.' He died soon afterwards."

Determined to avenge the death of a "good and faithful servant," Mr. Whitaker decided to go shark-fishing.

He ordered a huge shark hook from Mr. Burgess, the blacksmith in King William's Town.

"It was as big and round as a soup plate, on to which was welded a bulldog chain. I attached it to about 25 feet of fencing wire, which in turn was fixed to 70 yards of cotton-line rope, and 70 yards of hemp rope."

On his next trip to the Keiskama Mouth, Mr. Whitaker camped in his wagon under "the big fig tree" — apparently a favourite spot in those days — with several farmers from the area.

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"Suddenly the shark turned away and we all went like ninepins thrown into the air. We managed to get hold of the line again and, digging our heels in the sand, we pulled the shark closer. When we got it near the shore we sent for a gun and shot the shark in the head.

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