



# My Peace Corps Days in Cameroon

*By Paul J. Hamel, former Peace Corps Volunteer, 1969-73*

Sometimes people ask me what it was like serving in the Peace Corps in Africa in the 1960s and 70s. I usually reply that it was a life-changing experience that influenced me greatly. I am happy that it happened early in my life. It was my introduction to travel, adventure, community service, and a career in education. I am grateful for this extraordinary experience, and I still continue to appreciate more than ever such basics as a comfortable bed, running water, and electric power. After forty years I still find moments when I stop myself and appreciate the sight of a simple light switch or a faucet. Looking back, life as a volunteer was hard, but very satisfying. Luckily I was young, strong, and healthy. If I had to put up with the same conditions again today, I'm not sure I would be able to. My dream is to rejoin the Peace Corps family as a Country Director.

## Getting to Bafia, my new home



*Ginger and me in 1970*

The day had finally arrived. I was about to begin the trip to my new home in Bafia for the next two years. Bafia was then a town of a few thousand inhabitants and the capital of the Department of the Mbam in central Cameroon in West Africa.

After the many months of training, first in Quebec, Canada, then in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, I was ready to embark on my long-anticipated journey. I felt nervous, numb, and anxious to get to my destination. I didn't know anything about Bafia, and I had no idea when I was going to arrive or where I was going to stay. Luckily I was not alone.

Carl Koivunemi, another Peace Corps volunteer assigned to the same school, and I traveled to Bafia together.



*The "bac" (ferry) on the Mbam River in 1969*

On the day we left Yaoundé, we got up early and took a taxi to the "mammy wagon" station not far from the American Embassy and the Hotel National where volunteers stayed before being sent to their assignments. Carl and I dragged our baggage through a dusty lot with scores of "mammy wagons," mini-buses that connect the outlying villages, towns, and cities. The scene was a riot of color, sound and smell. Women wore brightly colored outfits and the men wore "boubous," pullover shirts with embroidery around the collar and sleeves. Everyone was in a hurry;

they were jostling in and out of the crowded mini-buses, taxis, and cars. The horns, motors, and exhaust added to the chaos.

Carl and I found a mammy wagon heading for Bafia, but it was already full so the driver forced the occupants of the front seat out and told Carl and me to take their seats. We looked at each other and said nothing. We knew that we were getting VIP treatment and felt bad and a bit guilty for taking the front seat. The rest of the passengers rode in the back of the mini-bus where they were crammed in like sardines. The group was so tightly packed that no one could possibly move. Any available space was taken up with children, baggage, and small animals. The 85-mile ride from Yaoundé to Bafia took eight exhausting hours. The only relief from the constant bumps and curves were the stops at the Sanaga and Mbam Rivers. Both rivers had to be crossed by motorized “bac,” a sort of ferry attached to a cable, which guided the bac across the swiftly moving water. The Sanaga bac could

handle about six cars, a few trucks, and scores of passengers. The Mbam ferry was smaller. Unpredictability was the norm. Sometimes travelers had to spend up to three days to get across one of the rivers, depending on the weather, the speed of the current, the ferry motor, and the cable. One of the few food items that could be purchased and safely eaten was a can of sardines.



*Paul Hamel with motorbike at the Mbam River*

When we arrived in Bafia, our house was not ready so we were directed to a small room behind the official government guest house, which was reserved for VIPs such as the

prime minister or president. Carl and I shared the back room for a few weeks before our new home was ready. The room was furnished with a double bed, a table and two chairs. There was no kitchen or bathroom. Every morning a grounds worker delivered a bucket of water for washing. We used the area in back of the building to wash and shower. We quickly experienced the effects of the local food, a tarantula in our room, and the theft of some of our personal items: a pair of prescription glasses, a radio, a tape recorder, and a few pieces of clothing. We ate mostly chicken or chunks of beef or goat in peanut or some tomato-based sauce over rice. We drank only bottled drinks such as warm beer, Coke, and flavored bottled soda water. Bottled water was not available then. When we finally moved we were joined by Michel Guen, a Frenchman, who would be teaching math at the same school. There we were, plopped down in the middle of an exotic place where we had to learn to live new lives. I was young and adaptable so the transitioning from an urban American culture to the remoteness of the African bush went relatively smoothly. I would



*My home in Bafia was the left half of the building.  
My bedroom was the third window from the left.*

up living in a new house with my own room and bathroom and a comfortable bed. It didn't take me long to develop a daily routine.

## An Average Day



*Our front yard*

At dawn the crows began to caw and the kid goats' hungry cry sounded like they were being tortured. Another day was beginning in Bafia. I pulled the mosquito net to one side of my bed, looked on the floor for any bugs, crawled out of bed, and put on my socks. Then, I made my way to my "modern" bathroom and relieved myself in a real toilet, but there was no water to flush. In fact, there was no running water or electricity in the whole town of Bafia. To flush I used a metal pail of water that was kept nearby. And the smell! There was never enough water to flush completely. I had to live with it. There were places throughout the house for light switches, but they had never been used; there was no electricity available. My new home was the newest construction in town built by Mr. Bidias, the country's finance minister, who was from Bafia.

The building was a triplex occupied by new teachers. The structure was long, narrow, and spacious with many windows with iron bars, tiled floors, and an aluminum roof. It even had a garage.



*Carl Koivunemi (right) and a visiting PCV, Verle, in our living room in Bafia*

My neighborhood was the administrative center of town where the Prefecture (county seat), guest house, parade grounds, courts, police station, prison, and post office were located. The location was where the Germans had built the original government structures when Cameroon was a German territory from 1884 until the end of the First World War. After the war Cameroon was partitioned between France and Great Britain until it gained independence in 1960.

From my bathroom window I could hear the sputtering of my motorbike's noisy engine approaching. It was Luc, the cook, one of our "boys," who had kept the motorbike overnight. The other "boy" was Richard, who did the shopping and the laundry, came a little later in the morning. Being a young American having witnessed the civil rights struggle in my own country, I felt uncomfortable referring to Luc and Richard as "boys." But,



*The German-build Prefecture building dates back to before World War I*

this is what they wanted to be called. To them it was a prestigious title in French. Luc was a thin and lanky, thirty-something-year old, single, with bucked teeth and an infectious smile. Richard was older than Luc: about 40 years old, married, and not very talkative. Luc and Richard worked six days a week, except on Sundays. They got along, but did not seem close. They were serious. There was no joking or laughter between them.

The motorbike's raucous approach to the house scattered the goats and crows. The motor sputtered to a stop and Luc leaned the motorbike against the wall of the open garage. He unlocked the kitchen and placed a freshly-baked, aromatic French baguette on the kitchen counter. I followed the smell of the fresh baguette to the kitchen where I greeted Luc as I did every morning. While Luc set out to fetch well water, I made breakfast. I emptied the small water purification containers that filtered water



*Breakfast with Michel Guien and neighbors, Serge and Pamala Canadas*

overnight. I poured the filtered water into an aluminum kettle and placed it on a burner of the gas stove. I then opened a small kerosene-run refrigerator and pulled out a stick of butter. I split the warm aromatic crusty baguette in two and spread some sweet butter on the warm white bread. Then, I took a jar of Nestlé's Arabica coffee from the screened cupboard and placed a heaping spoonful in a cup. When the kettle began whistling, I added boiling water and two lumps of sugar or maybe some sweetened condensed milk. That was breakfast: coffee, a baguette with butter and sometimes a little

jam, and some fruit—usually pineapple. Better continental breakfasts could not be found in all of France. Though isolated by a hundred miles from the nearest city, Bafia had a bakery that produced outstanding French bread—a treat in the midst of “la brousse”—the bush. We could even get wine and cheese from the two general store merchants who were from Lebanon and Cyprus.

I usually carried my breakfast to the front porch where I could view my neighbors beginning their day. From a distance I could see the neighbor's children brushing their teeth, combing their hair, and getting ready for school; children and adults walking along the road; and the town's prisoners cutting grass across the dusty red road. I turned on my battery-powered short wave radio—my only contact with the outside world except from the occasional Time or Newsweek magazines and newspaper clippings from home. With great care, I turned the dial to tune in a radio signal. Sometimes I could get Voice of America and a few French stations. Some days I could even pick up the BBC and stations from as far away as Angola.

Luc appeared from behind the house with a large wash basin balanced on his head and, at the same time, carrying a plastic bucket filled with water from the nearby well. While I was finishing my breakfast and reviewing my lesson plans for



*Students standing in front of the lycée classrooms*

my classes, Luc was heating water for my morning shower. Luc filled the shower bucket in my bathroom with regular well water. Then, he poured one hot kettle of water into the shower bucket to make it tepid. The pail had holes at the bottom and a cord that controlled the flow of water. A small portion of the hot water was reserved for shaving. A somewhat tepid shower was another little treat that made life in the middle of tropical Africa bearable. This was my shower routine every day and some days twice a day, especially during the dry seasons.

My typical wardrobe consisted of long pants and a colorful African shirt called a “boubou.” It was airy and comfortable. Shorts were not in fashion, and I always wore closed leather shoes outside.



*Girl students playing on the soccer field*

Then I was off to school. I was a secondary school teacher teaching English as a Foreign Language. After three months of a grueling “stage” (training) in Quebec, Canada, I was stationed at a public government secondary school called a “lycée.” I taught four classes per day: three in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Some days I would walk a kilometer (about a half mile) to school so that Luc or Richard could use my motorbike for shopping and running errands in the commercial center in the other part of town.

Occasionally my dog, Ginger, accompanied me to school. Ginger became a novelty both in the community and at school. At school, children usually giggled, pointed at her, and made a fuss over her. Ginger was a great oddity: a pure bred dachshund—a large wiener dog--in the middle of the African bush. I first heard about Ginger from Mary Ann, the Peace Corps doctor, who visited me twice a year for a physical and shots. Apparently Ginger was left behind by an embassy family who was returning to the States. I immediately volunteered to take her in. Upon arriving at school, Ginger, attracted attention, then after the bell rang, quietly curled up by the door of my classroom until the end of the lesson.

On my way to school I walked along a dusty, unpaved, red-colored main road bordered by tall palms and high grass. We first passed by the home of the Chief of Police whose compound was to the left and made up of a dozen small structures that housed his many wives and children. Then, I moved pass the local prison, the old Post Office, the German-built Prefecture building, parade grounds, flag



*Lycée students*

pole, and the Prefect's residents on the right. It took ten or fifteen minutes to get to school. The morning walk was usually pleasant especially in the coolness of the morning. It was much less pleasant in the mid-day sun or when it rained and there was lots of mud.

The lycée was somewhat equivalent to high school--something like 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 13<sup>th</sup>. The physical compound was a collection of three cinder block buildings that housed about 300 students in a dozen classrooms. During the second year, three new buildings were constructed. The classrooms were stark and mostly bare except for rows of long, rough wooden desks, low benches, and a simple teacher's desk with no draw or accompanying chair. The floor was earthen and uneven; the walls were unfinished and unpainted; the window openings were covered with wire mesh; and the roof was constructed of aluminum sheets positioned on a skeletal wooden frame. On rainy days, there was little else to do except let the students work in silence since no one could speak above the noise of the rain on the aluminum roof.



*Lycée students marching in Independence Day parade*

The students were made up of specially-selected and carefully-screened, local high-school-aged children. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the applicants were able to attend due to the limited number of spaces and a rigorous entrance exam in French, one of the official languages. English is also an official national language, but it mostly used in English-speaking West Cameroon. The local languages such as Bafia and Bulu were not taught at the lycée. Only the “crème de la crème” of the applicants were admitted. Of course, there were exceptions made for those with “special connections.” All

students wore uniforms; the boys wore grey pants with matching shirts, and the girls wore simple blue dresses. The boys had short hair and the girls showed off corn-row hair in a variety of styles. Some, but not all students wore shoes, and some of those who did could be seen carrying them on their head to and from school so that they would not wear out. The dress code was strict; students were sent home if they did not wear their uniform.

As I entered the classroom, everyone raced to their places, stood to attention and shouted out, “Bonjour Monsieur.” Being an American only twenty-four years old, I was not used to this formal title of respect. In time I learned that not being addressed with “Monsieur” meant disrespect. The chalkboard was a mostly rough, thin painted, horizontal concrete slab that seemed to eat a whole stick of chalk for every stroke made. The only other teaching tool was an English-teaching textbook and an occasional paper handout produced by a complicated process involving a stencil machine that was kept in the office. On several occasions I had been warned that I was requesting too many handouts. This was frowned upon by the school secretary, who constantly pointed out how much paper and ink were being consumed. As a new teacher I spent many home hours drawing pictures,

writing grammar rules, and etching grafts on large sheets of paper with crayons to get my teaching points across.

At the beginning of a lesson I waited and gazed at my students as they were quieting down, and the students waited for my command to sit. As I motioned to the students to sit, there was one thunderous sound of creaking furniture as these youngsters settled onto their hard wooden benches and placed their books and notebooks on their desks. Then, there was silence and the lesson began. First, there was homework correction, then the presentation of new vocabulary illustrated on the board or with my amateurish illustrations on white sheets of paper, or by acting out the meaning of a word or phrase. Then the students took turns reading from a selection from the textbook. This was followed by oral and written drills. Finally, there was the usual homework assignment.



*Michel, Darleen, and me wearing a boubou*



*Students watching a game at the lycée*

The morning session ended just before noon and the students and teachers took a long afternoon break. I went home for lunch, which was the most substantial meal of the day. I, Carl, and Michel usually ate together. Lunch was followed by a quick afternoon nap before returning to school at 2 p.m.

The school library consisted of a locked room where no one was permitted to enter for fear that the books would disappear. The school's policy was that it was better to keep the books safe under lock and key rather than risking the loss of some by having the students borrow them. This

changed when my sister, Darleen, became a volunteer librarian. Darleen was a student at the University of California, Berkley and stayed with me in Bafia for the last six months of my second year. Darleen and I solicited books from the American Embassy, which supplied us with about two hundred books—the "LIFE" picture book series, novels, history books, reference books, and even a class set of Dr. Seuss' "Cat in a Hat." Students could read the books at school, but were still not allowed to take them home.

One day, I had a special surprise for my students; I was going to teach them how to play baseball with a bat and ball that I discovered in the basement of the American Embassy in Yaoundé. After explaining the game on the chalkboard, I invited my students to join me after school for a game on the soccer field where I set up bases. The lesson was a huge success. Occasionally, I found ways to teach English by doing interesting and creative activities. Being a new teacher under difficult circumstances was challenging and sometimes the lessons didn't work. On this occasion, my lesson was a great success. The day of the baseball lesson, about a dozen boys met on the soccer field for the promised game of baseball after school and a group of girls stood by to observe the event. After

an hour or so, the game ended and the children scattered. I felt satisfaction at how well my student picked up the game while practicing their English skills. This was a good day for me, and everyone had fun. It was time to return home before sunset. It only took fifteen minutes to get because of the locality of the equator especially during a new moon.

During late afternoon and at dusk, I usually sat on my porch correcting papers and preparing lessons for the following day. Luc had cleaned up after the midday meal and Richard had put away the laundry. Just before leaving for the evening, Luc usually prepared a light evening meal. Richard occupied himself with attaching the silk mesh in the Coleman lamp in the living room, placing a small hurricane lamp in the kitchen, and setting down a candle on a metal dish in the bedroom hallway. As night approached, both Luc and Richard sped away on my bike.



*Sunset was always around 6 pm*



*Luc and Richard starting a garden next to our house*

After a light meal usually made up of leftovers from lunch and a plate of cheese and fruit, I spent the evening on the front porch with Carl, Michel and Ginger until the mosquitoes and other swarming bugs were too numerous to brush away. We listened to a Beatle's *Abby Road* or some classical music from the collection that Michel brought from France on the battery-powered turntable. The music often stopped because the batteries quickly ran out. Inside the house the Coleman lamp did not provide enough light to read comfortably so evenings were spent relaxing and chatting about everything and anything over a beer, a cigarette, or a soda. Around nine o'clock we all went to bed and waited for the next day to begin.

Despite a general daily routine, everyday was full of different challenges--big and small. There was always something that would go wrong: running out of natural gas for the stove or kerosene for the refrigerator and lamps; forgetting to filter and boil enough water; getting a flat tire on the motorbike; or finding snakes, mice, spiders, scorpions, or bugs in the house. Staying healthy was a major challenge. It seemed that I was sick every day I was in Bafia. There were bouts with malaria, diarrhea, stings, rashes, and fungus growth to name a few. We had to take an anti-malaria pill daily, cook everything well, not eat any raw vegetables or salads, and drink only boiled and filtered water. Not having running water or electricity added enormously to these challenges.



*Richard, his wife, and daughter Christine*

Notwithstanding these challenges, life took on a slower pace. Nothing was hurried. The weather was always hot—either it was very humid or very dry. There were two wet and two dry seasons per year. Although life was unhurried, there was little free time. There was always something to take care of and the stress dealing with it. Once a routine was established, our lives flowed, but sometimes too slowly. Little by little I could feel myself losing contact with the outside world. There was no daily newspaper, weekly magazines, or TV. The only contact with the “outside” was a short wave radio and the occasional letters from home. Reading for pleasure was rare except during weekends of summer breaks. Little reading was done at night except when there was a full moon. I couldn’t read for very long with a candle or a flickering lantern.

Luc and Richard’s work day began early and there was always the unexpected. The typical routine for Luc was to pick up the baguette at the bakery and store and race to the house on the motorbike



*Richard, Darleen, and Luc cooking a goat for a “mishwi” party*

that I let him use overnight. Just before I took off for school, Richard would arrive laden with bundles of fresh fruit, vegetables and the occasional piece of beef, a live chicken, or a young goat from the bi-weekly outdoor market. Richard delivered the bundles to Luc in the kitchen then started to do the laundry. He washed our clothes outside in large concrete sinks and ironed them on the dining room table with a charcoal iron.

man. Luc was about 30 years old, had buck teeth, acted shy and behaved submissive. He got the job as cook because there weren’t many candidates. He was illiterate, but was eager to learn. I taught him to bake a cake using drawings. Instead of writing the recipe, I drew pictures of each of the steps. It was one of my first attempts to teach someone who was illiterate. I found that it was better to begin



*Paul with his dog, Ginger; cat, Baltazar; and baby baboon, Julette*

I never knew Luc or Richard’s last name. They worked for us as a cook and laundry man. He worked with pictures first. It worked. At least he had something to refer to. I did the same thing for other dishes. With regret, I was never able to spend enough free time with Luc to teach him to read and write.

As soldiers have “war stories,” Peace Corps volunteers have “horror stories.” There are too many to mention here. On one day, Luc encountered a pack of stray dogs while riding my motorbike. Trying to maneuver around the pack, a dog managed to bite him on his right leg. Luc didn’t stop and continued the short distance to my house. When he arrived, Luc examined the wound and thought it was nothing so serious that he needed to see a doctor. The wound throbbed, but not enough to go to the

clinic. After a little cleaning, he thought it would be fine. After a few days the wound got infected and he had to see a doctor. He ended up having to get a series of painful rabies shots.



*Our baby baboon,  
Julette*

One day Luc developed a hernia and had to get it taken care of. After Carl left to go live with a few of his students and Michel went back to France for the summer, I arranged for Luc to go to Donenken, the local American Presbyterian Missionary Hospital, to have surgery for his hernia. He was in the hospital for about four days. Every day I visited him and brought him food because I found out that Luc had no family in the area to take care of him. At Donenken, family members usually brought food and took care of their family member while they were in the hospital. The hospital provided treatment, medicine, and a bed. Food was only provided if others shared theirs.

Then there was the time I was hospitalized and unconscious for three days with malaria. Fortunately, Dr. Sandilands, an American missionary doctor, was nearby to take care of me.

There were fun days, too. One day I got a care package from home that contained popcorn. I told Luc that he knew magic and that he could make the corn explode. When I showed him, he was totally “blown away.” He wanted some to show his family. I also received a Betty Crocker cake mix, which spilled on route and covered everything in the box with chocolate flour mix. To have anything from home was cherished. Luckily, there was enough flour to make a small cake.

Occasionally students would show up at our front door with baby animals that they wanted to sell. Over time we took in a baby baboon, a cat, and a potti (a tiny large-eyed marsupial).

Nights were mostly quiet with occasional prowlers who were chased away by our night watchman, Johnny, a one-legged older man who kept watch throughout the night.

## **The Town of Bafia**

The town of Bafia had very few white people except for two American missionaries at the American Presbyterian Hospital; the Lebanese commercial traders; French brothers, nuns, missionaries; and a few teachers at the lycée from France, a female language teacher from Germany, and two Peace Corps volunteers, I being one of them. The prefecture building was an imposing structure, built by the Germans at the beginning of the 1900's. In 1969 there were still people who spoke German. Once I visited the outdoor market and witnessed the volunteer German teacher from the lycée, negotiating the cost of some tomatoes.



*The road from the administrative center to the commercial center of Bafia*



*The road toward Donenken during the dry season*

The town was divided into two main sections: the administrative area where government buildings were situated: the prefecture, the prefect's residence, the lycée, the post office, the court house, the police station, and the jail.

The other part of town was the commercial center about a 15-minute walk from the administrative area. This is where a few families of Lebanese, Cypriot, and Greek merchants lived. There were two general stores, which looked like something you'd imagine seeing in the Old West. I could get anything there—canned goods, cheese, salted

fish, beer, soft drinks, bedding, cloth, motorbikes, and all kinds of building materials—you name it, they had it. If they didn't, they could get it. We had a charge account that Luc and Richard could use to buy supplies. The only places in town that had electricity were the Greek and Lebanon merchants. They had generators to preserve fish and other perishable goods. We used their refrigerator to store some partridge-like birds Michel shot near the seldom-used air strip. Although there were other whites in town, we rarely socialized with them. The Greeks and Lebanese families stayed to themselves as did the French Catholic nuns and brothers. The only other white people I saw were Dr. and Mrs. Sandilands, who would check up on me once in a while. Most people stayed home a lot and rarely went out after dark.

There was also a small gas station and a bakery on the main commercial street. Other shops included tailors, barbers, and other small shops. Stores were built along both sides of an unpaved street along one block—just like in the old western movies. The streets were always full of people, mammy-



*Carl Kovunemi in Bafia's commercial center*

wagons and trucks filled with foul smelling coco beans. Further on toward the direction of Bokito was the slaughter area and market place where Luc or Richard used to buy meat twice a week. I rarely went to the market during the week because I had to be at school. We depended on Luc and Richard to take care of all our household needs. It was interesting having two servants to help at me at the tender age of 24 years old. I was not used to others doing things for me. Eventually, I got used to it. There was no way around it. Without Luc and Richard, life would have been too tough.

When the first winds and rains came after the dry season, everyone celebrated. We gathered every type of container we could find to collect water. We even took turns taking cold showers in back of the house where the two roof sections came together providing a perfect showering spot. What a treat after several months of the dry season.

Today Bafia is a city of about 68,000 inhabitants with running water, electricity, several lycées, and a paved highway that stretches across two bridges over the Sanaga and Mbam Rivers to Yaoundé. A trip that once took eight hours has been reduced to only two.



*The weekly market in Bafia*

### Summer Break



*The mission hospital in Donenken*

During my first summer, I was mostly alone. I was without Michel, Carl, and Luc. It was a peaceful time when I could regroup my thoughts and relax. This was the time I learned to feel comfortable being alone. I was not lonely. I enjoyed time reading, cooking, playing with my dog, rewriting lesson plans, sprucing up the house, taking long naps, and doing whatever I pleased. It was like a vacation at home. Richard, the other “house boy” was still around to help me, but I mostly took care of myself. Richard got the water, did the laundry and the shopping, and I did my own cooking. One of the books I used a lot was the *Fanny Farmer Cookbook*,

which I still have today. Its cover is torn, the pages are yellow from age, and I still use it.

I also found time to volunteer at the American Presbyterian Hospital Mission at Donenken, six kilometers away. I organized the construction of a school building with two classrooms, a library, and a small office. I raised the funds, drew up the plans, arranged for the permits, procured the building materials, and arranged for their delivery to the site. The structure was made of cinder blocks, a cement floor, mesh windows, and an aluminum roof. My aunt, Sister Alice Landry, a professor at Thomas Moore College in Covington, Kentucky, and her students helped me raise \$1,000 for this project. Another \$1,000 was provided by the students from Gloucester Elementary School in Massachusetts as part of the U.S. School Partnership Program. Volunteers from the mission were responsible for making the cinder blocks and the actual



*The Sandiland's home in Donenken*

construction. After about five months the school was dedicated in 1971 and named after Dr. Martin Luther King.

I also took part in a grueling three-day medical safari to a village near Yoko to inoculate the population against diseases. In the evenings villagers treated us to local food and we were given a place to sleep. On the way back to the mission Dr. Sandilands, a Cameroonian doctor, a local guide, and I went hunting for game that could be brought back to the hospital kitchen. This was one way to provide some meat for the patients at the hospital at Donenken. The game included monkeys, birds, and whatever else there was. We only saw one large antelope during our trip. By the late nineteen sixties, most of the big game had already been killed off. Lions, elephants and other big animals were long gone. During my two years in Bafia, I only heard of one hippo that was killed in a local river.



*The Sandilands vacationing in Kribi*

The only large animals I saw were at the Yaoundé Zoo, a pathetic and depressing place. Although the medical safari was a thrilling adventure, my worse memories included the constant cloud of gnats around my head and drinking water with iodine tablets. The experience was exhausting.



*The new school building at Donenken was named for Martin Luther King*

At the end of the summer, Doctor and Mrs. Sandilands invited me to spend a week with them in Kribi, a coastal town in southwest Cameroun. We traveled by Range Rover and stayed at a mission guest house, went swimming, visited the famous coastal waterfall, and toured the hardwood exporting town of Kribi. On the way back to Bafia we searched for bunches of a red fruit (I forgot the name.) being sold at the side of the road. Mrs. Sandilands used



*Dr. Sandilands hunting for game on the way back from a medical safari*

them for making the most wonderful jam. We even encountered a gorilla crossing the road near Sangmelima.

Soon afterwards Michel returned from France and two more Frenchmen joined the household: Jean Pierre and Claude. The summer came to an end and the new school year began and my daily routine continued.

During my second year in Bafia, life got easier. With additional housemates, I benefitted by being able to use a stove with an oven, a refrigerator, and a car. Michel bought a car, which allowed us to explore other parts of the Cameroon such as Bokito, Bangante, Bafoussam, Bafussam, Foubam and English-speaking, Victoria, now renamed Limbe in English-speaking West Cameroon.

At the end of my second year, my sister and I left Bafia. I went back to visit my parents in California before returning for a third year in Yaoundé. My sister, Darleen, went to France where she married my roommate, Michel Guien. Over the next twenty-five years they lived in France and had three children: Raphael, Daniel, and Aurelie.

The third year I taught technical English at the University of Cameroon in Yaoundé. I lived in a small but comfortable house just out of town on the way to the airport. I lived alone in an industrial section of town. A beer brewery was across the street from my house. I felt isolated and I wished I had stayed in Bafia. I also began to feel lonely. I was far from the center of town. Most of my Peace Corps friends had gone home after their two years. The new ones only visited Yaoundé when they needed to. Other teachers and professors, both Cameroonian and foreign, at the University were generally much older than I, and did not socialize much. The only other friends I made were a few American aide workers who worked at the embassy.

My monthly allowance did not cover the cost of living. Living in Yaoundé was expensive and I never had enough money to take care of my basic needs. I couldn't even use the embassy commissary. Yaoundé was a city where there were few city buses so I had to take taxis to work, shopping, and the city center. When I asked for more money, I was refused. My isolation continued and my dissatisfaction with living and working in Yaoundé grew. Finally, I decided not to finish my third year. I returned home in March a few months short of three years. Looking back, I can remember the "last straw that broke the camel's back." It was not being able to sleep well at night because of a straw mattress that I had to sleep on. I didn't have enough money to buy a new one.



*My home in Lumbumbashi,  
Congo in 1974*

In September, 1972 I started a masters degree program in Teaching English as a Second Language at UCLA. Immediately after graduation in 1974, I went back to Africa—this time to Zaire (now renamed the "Republic of the Congo"). I was a member of a team of a handful of English-language teachers sent to the city of Lumbumbasi to teach in a three-month intensive language course for university administrators and professors from all over Zaire.

Shortly after arriving back in the United States I got a job at Jewish Vocational Service in Los Angeles coordinating an intensive English-language program for Russian Jewish refugees. I also taught at Santa Monica College and UCLA Extension during that time. In 1974 I began teaching at Fairfax Adult School where I was a teacher and coordinator. In 1984 I earned a second masters in educational administration from California State University, Los Angeles, and became an assistant



*I'm holding a dead monkey from our hunting trip.  
Dr. Sandilands is next to me with a bird.*

principal at El Camino Adult School and then a principal at Fairfax Adult School in 1994. During this time I also published an ESL textbook series, *Better English Every Day* as well as six other language books. (They are still in publication today.) After a decade and a half as principal of Westside Community Adult School (formerly Fairfax Adult School), I retired from Los Angeles Unified School District in June, 2009.

## Keeping Connected

Bafia has always been with me in my thoughts and dreams. I often dream of going back to visit “my old town.” Forty years after returning home I reconnected with my old school in 2007 through a Peace Corps volunteer, Kelly McPherson, who was stationed in Bafia. We met on the internet and she kept me informed about all the progress and changes that have occurred in Bafia. She told me that Bafia had just gotten electricity and the new Lycée Technique had just received some computers. She offered to organize a summer school class to train 100 students on how to use the Internet and e-mails, and I volunteered to raise money for this project. Over three months I raised \$1,400 from



*Kelly McPherson (center) was a PCV in Bafia in 2007*



*Lyceé students learning about e-mail and the Internet in 2007*

friends, teachers and students at Fairfax High School and Westside Community Adult School in Los Angeles. I sent the money to Kelly.

During my ongoing correspondence with Kelly, I discovered that the director of the lycée turned out to be one of my former students. When the director and the students got their individual e-mail accounts, they e-mailed and thanked me. As an additional benefit of this partnership, students in Bafia were able to become e-mail pen-pals with students at Fairfax High School.

Providing computer training to the one hundred students was truly a very satisfying experience. It shows that I, an old Peace Corps volunteer, could indeed continue to make a difference by continuing to work with my former community long after I had left.

Another unique connection is with my former Peace Corps volunteer friends around the world. For the last forty years about half of our original group has sent an annual update letter to one of us who published them into a yearly booklet and distributed them to all of us. It is called “*From Each to Each.*” This would make a great group longitudinal study.

My wish before I get too old is to visit the new Bafia and my new friends at the lycée.

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