

The Peace Corps, Sierra Leone, and Me

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Introduction

This is the story of a naive nineteen-year-old kid from Michigan who joined the Peace Corps in 1964. Enthused by the challenge from President John F. Kennedy for international service, I applied to the Peace Corps in 1963 and accepted a placement the next year for a Rural Development Program in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Questions inherent from the beginning were many: Would I complete the two-year tour? Would I get sick or have an accident? Would I be involved with successful projects?

Throughout my two-year tour I kept a diary of daily activities, occasionally expanding comments into personal reflections on my role in this unfamiliar culture. Reading the diary served as a reminder of the many challenging, but ultimately rewarding, experiences I had that gradually changed me and my entire perspective on life. During those two years there was little contact with the States. I tried to write a letter to my parents every week or so, and would receive one in return regularly, but less often. This was an era with an unreliable phone at the local post office, no cell phone coverage and no Internet, so there was much more of a disconnect to home than for current Volunteers.

The following pages represent my daily thoughts as a young man who had little knowledge of, but great curiosity about, the world outside the borders of Michigan. Diary entries are quite regular in the first year, and become less frequent during the second year, when much of the newness of things had worn off; they have been abridged to better keep the reader's interest. Interspersed are sections from letters home to Mom and Dad (Norma and Charles Tyler). The letters were thoughtfully preserved by them and given to me upon my return to Michigan. Also included in the narrative are "sidebars" describing in more detail relevant information; they provide context for the diary entries. Most of the photos are my own. Others are credited to Mike Bradbury, my Volunteer housemate for the two years. Images may be poor quality by today's standards, since some of the film deteriorated in the tropical climate, but enough detail remains to give a satisfactory visual image of our experiences.

I lived in the town of Kenema, upcountry in eastern Sierra Leone. For most of that time I lived with fellow Volunteers Mike Bradbury and Joe Sharp. After reviewing the diary entries, I found the great preponderance of the narrative was about projects for which I had primary responsibility, rather than other volunteers; it will be left to them to tell their own stories. Although our relationships as housemates were sometimes strained during our two years, as would be expected under the stress of living in such a foreign environment, I have continued to keep a friendship with Mike and have had occasional contact with Joe over the past fifty years.

When I decided in 2015 to convert the handwritten diary entries to digital format, it was the first time I had read the pages since leaving Sierra Leone. I originally intended to record this manuscript as a memoir for my wife, Ilene, our two sons and daughter-in-law, and other close relatives. However, readers who reviewed it as a manuscript encouraged its publication, since they

indicated my experiences in those two years were both revealing and entertaining, and would be of interest to a larger audience.

It is difficult to underestimate the influence the Peace Corps experience had in my life. It was largely responsible for changing me into a lifelong community activist. The experience afforded motivation to work on community issues and, in a typical 1960s kind of way, change the world for the better. I continued to participate directly with the agency for a number of years, first as a trainer for new Peace Corps Volunteers, next serving with my new wife, Ilene, as VISTA program volunteers in Baltimore, followed by a period of recruiting new volunteers for Peace Corps and VISTA. As described in the Epilogue, the two of us have stayed involved as community advocates wherever we have lived and worked over five decades. But the root of this involvement was in 1964, when I received the acceptance letter inviting me to become a Peace Corps Volunteer.