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A Peace Corps Dossier

Abstract

Name: Tom Weller

SSN: XXX-XX-XXXX

Age: 23

Country of Service: Chad

Position: Rural Water and Sanitation Extension Agent

Keywords

Peace Corps, French, Chad, water



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A Peace Corps Dossier

by Tom Weller

Name: Tom Weller

SSN: XXX-XX-XXXX

Age: 23

Country of Service: Chad

Position: Rural Water and Sanitation Extension Agent

Summary of Qualifications:

- **Three years of high school French**

Only the first year should really count. After that, I discovered the answers to all of the class exercises in the back of the textbook. From the fall of 1985 to the spring of 1987, I never got higher than a D on a French test, but I managed to keep a low B in the class by acing all of the homework. Test anxiety, I'd explain to Madame Doering, shaking my head slightly to emphasize how troubling I found my handicap. "En français," Madame Doering would say.

- **One semester of college Spanish.**

This one shouldn't count at all. I only survived because a substantial percentage of every test grade was based on writing a dialogue. The night before any exam, I memorized ten insults in Spanish, or at least things that sounded like insults to me. Things like, you have a big head, you are weak like a tortilla, you dance the tango with your mother. No matter what scenario the professor provided on the test—a man approaching a stranger to ask for directions, conversation at a holiday family gathering—every one of my dialogues started with an exchange of greetings and quickly degenerated into a passionate shouting match. They usually ended with a man named José screaming, “Tú es el nino del Diablo.”

- **A bachelors of arts degree from Adrian College, a small, Methodist, liberal arts school in Southeastern Michigan.**

Majors? Creative writing and political science. I planned to become a socialist hobo folk poet.

- **Eighteen months of skilled manual labor experience.**

For six straight summers, while in high school and college, I worked as a janitor at Holy Cross Elementary School. I did occasionally assist in the building of a wall or a closet, learned how to tear apart a faucet to change washers and such, but my regular duties focused on cutting lawns, stripping and waxing classroom floors, shampooing carpets, and exterminating pigeons with a pellet gun.

- **Twelve months of industrial experience.**

Immediately after graduating from college, I spent a year temping in factories for Manpower. For most of that time, I was a “stacker” at Universal Forest Products, Granger, Indiana’s finest maker of roofing trusses and fencing. For eight hours a day, I stood on the left side of the end of a conveyor belt watching two young men fresh out of high school load eighteen-foot two-by-fours into a giant saw. I’d watch the saw cut the boards in half, watch the now nine-foot two-by-fours chug down the belt toward my waiting hands. I’d then grab one end of a board, while Ira, who stood across from me on the right side of the conveyer belt, grabbed the other end. Together we’d give the boards a gentle toss onto a cart, the boards slapping against each other and banging against the metal frame of the cart creating a background rhythm for our work. The steadiness of that rhythm was largely determined by what time Ira had gotten up, as Ira was

so dedicated to his drinking that he often woke up in the middle of the night just so he would have time to get a proper buzz going before work started at 7:00 a.m.

▪ **A two-day Peace Corps orientation in Chicago.**

I sat in a hotel meeting room and listened to presentations on Chad and the Peace Corps with twenty-nine other new volunteers. I got per diem for the first time in my life. I ate Thai food for the first time. I spent a night hanging out in a blues bar.

The woman who ran the orientation ended the whole program by reading Dr. Seuss's Oh the Places You'll Go to the group of future Peace Corps volunteers. She was so touched by her own choice of dramatic device that she broke down two thirds of the way through the story. She choked and sobbed her way through Seuss's rhymes, apparently crumbling under the weight of parting with thirty people she had known for almost forty-eight hours.

▪ **Three months of Peace Corps in-country training, which included the following elements:**

200 hours of French

The one French class that really stood out for me was the time Anthony, a Chadian, who taught French, asked the five members of my novice class, "Why do Americans keep killing the Kennedys?" We spent the next hour trying to unravel this mystery for Anthony using our most sophisticated French, which included three verb tenses, simple nouns that might be useful in a Chadian village, and some technical vocabulary related to water-point management.

Mr. Weller received a Foreign Service Institute French score of o+ at the start of training *(During the first days of in-country training, I took an oral French exam. I sat under a baobab tree with the head language trainer, a Chadian, and did my best to carry on a conversation in French. I spent most of the time trying to explain why I liked using the drive through at fast food restaurants. How I got on this topic, I don't remember. Perhaps I was asked what I liked to do on the weekends. Or perhaps I had been asked what I liked to eat, and when I groped for food words all I managed to*

conjure up was the image of Madame Doering, my high school French teacher. Perhaps I saw her horned-rimmed glasses hanging from the chain around her neck as she floated around the room, pointing at objects, rattling through a series of nouns: “Le bureau, the desk, le bureau. La fenêtre, the window, la fenêtre.” Yes, good, the window, go with that, I might have thought) **and a score of 2+ upon completion of training** (Trés bien, Thomas!).

10 hours of Ngumbaye

I learned how to ask people how they were and how to say I was fine, I learned how to count to ten, and I learned one sentence to explain my existence in Chad. I remembered it phonetically: Mau da kula man. Translation: I work water.

5 hours of Chadian Arabic

Though I only learned about fifteen words, I liked throwing around the little Chadian Arabic I knew, mostly because of the way God seemed an omnipresent character in the language, a party to every conversation. When discussing even mundane topics, like the weather, one’s health, Chadian Arabic speakers peppered their speech liberally with Alhamdulillah, an expression that means something like hallelujah or “Thank God.” It’s cool this morning. Thank God. I feel fine. Thank God. When discussing future events, it was important to always weave in the phrase Inshallah, meaning, roughly, God willing. I will go to the market. God willing. I will see you later. God willing.

30 hours of cross-cultural training

We spent one afternoon role playing traveling by Chadian market truck. All thirty of the trainees stood in the bed of a pickup that drove up and down the clay road that ran to the training center. Periodically, one of our Chadian language trainers would pop up along the side of the road and flag down the truck. Many wore simple costumes, a ball cap we had never seen them in before, a new pair of sunglasses, as if to say, remember, this isn’t really me. They’d climb in the truck and engage in slapstick versions of the annoying behaviors typical of Chadian travelers. One insisted that the driver stop every few minutes so the Muslims could get off of the truck and pray. Another made us take turns holding a live goat he was “traveling” with.

15 hours of personal health training.

Did you know a condom can easily be converted into a swell dental dam?

200 hours of technical training including community development, health education, pump repair and installation, and water and sanitation techniques.

All six of us in the water and sanitation program were required to devise and implement small projects during the training. I and Matt, the trainee I roomed with, decided we would show the Chadian family we stayed with how to make a water filter using locally available materials—sand, gravel, charcoal, and a large clay jar. We spent hours using the awl of a Swiss army knife to drill a hole in the bottom of the clay jar.

While twenty or thirty Chadians looked on, Matt and I filled the jar with layers of sand and gravel and charcoal. We congratulated ourselves as David, the father of the family we stayed with, set the jar in a stand he had constructed out of tree branches and poured murky brown water into the wide mouth at the top of the jar. We all held our breath and waited just seconds before water began to rush out of the hole we had so painstakingly bored. Matt and I shared our first real taste of the nature of much development work as we watched water that had been the color of greasy dishwater come to us transformed. Now the water was grey with charcoal residue and gritty with sand.

Summary of Duties:

Mr. Weller will be posted in Beinamar, a small town in southern Chad, to serve in the Water Supply and Sanitation Education Project. He will be responsible for implementing pump repair and maintenance strategies outlined by the National Chadian Water Authority. His major tasks will include working with a local pump repair person to identify pump maintenance problems, develop strategies to alleviate these problems, and organize and train the twenty-two local water committees in his work sector to maintain their pumps.

Translation: Mau da kula man. Inshallah.

Tom Weller lives in Greencastle, Indiana, and teaches at Indiana State University. His fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared most recently in Trachodon, Grasslands Review, and Silk Road. He served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Beinamar, Chad, from 1993 to 1995.

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