



PEACE CORPS volunteers join in the merriment during a welcoming party after their arrival last month in Oyem, Gabon, Africa.

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/AMY WEST

Volunteer's Peace Corps journey begins

Natives' welcoming smiles erase dark, bleak images of Africa

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, a 23-year-old Durango resident, traveled July 4 to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She will be sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis.)

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

With anxieties as high as Mount Everest, I boarded the long-awaited flight that would take me hundreds of miles away from my family, friends, security and chiseled-out life in the states. I was going into the Peace Corps. And, I was going to Africa.



West

Horrorific pictures of every disease waiting for me as I stepped off the plane filled

decision to volunteer two years of my life to the Peace Corps.

For one, I knew I had the flexibility, courage and open mind to explore the unknown. I had experienced many frustrations, and met many obstacles while attending college 3,000 miles away from home in the Caribbean: Racial tension; lack of amenities and resources like those in the states; three hurricanes that left me without a home, school, job and contact to the mainland for several months; four "lemon" vehicles; and limited places to live were just some of the negative things I encountered. Regardless, I never came home, and an overall positive image remains painted in my mind of my experience abroad. Most importantly, it taught me how to battle adversity, and it exposed what I was made of.

Secondly, I have an overwhelm-



HERALD/LISA SNIDER

INTERLOC (registration and introduction) for two days. It was there that 16 of us met each other for the first time: Marcos, Jill, Kevin, Stacy, Jennifer, Bob, Joel, Tara, Rick, Troy, Roy, Julie, Kristen, Jim and Jake.

training. Carl Rosenberg, our director for pisciculture (fish aquaculture), and Juan Wabo, our French language coordinator, were to lead us in the next 12 weeks of intensive cross-culture, fish farm and French language training. Our situation together had forced quick and strong bonds within the group. And then to finalize our transition six days later, we were swept away from our last remaining securities: electricity and each other.

Now was our move to village homestays. Atong-Ville (35 kilometers away) was my destination where I was to completely immerse myself in an African family and their culture. It also would give me an image of what my post will be like (once training ended) and force me to speak French all the time every day.

It was here that I had French lessons every day and it was where I found my first basket of water for



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my head. Name the diseases and they're in Africa - shistosomiasis, cholera, dengue, malaria, Ebola, meningitis, typhoid, and filaria were just some that created a dark and bleak image.

Oh, and Africa had some of the most poisonous snakes in all of the world (i.e., black and green mambas), and unfortunately snakes were not high on my list of friends. In fact, they were the biggest fear I had ever recalled.

So off to face my apprehensions and test the extent of my mental and physical capabilities, I packed quietly. Throwing my two bags of the next two years of my life onto the plane, I never questioned my decision, but I certainly didn't feel overly ecstatic. In fact, I felt entirely numb to any kind of emotion.

I stepped off the plane almost a day later, and the images of horror finally ended. As I stepped off the plane in Gabon, Africa, I was met with the most intense green rain forest, an array of brilliant African colors, and the most genuine smile of any people I'd ever encountered. Those were the smiles of the Gabonese people.

A big decision

Several events had led up to my

big passion to travel, seeing new places in the world is as necessary for me as it is for humans to breathe. I've tried to intertwine my studies while traveling to Australia, Canada, Mexico, lesser and greater Antilles, Greece, and now Africa. Wanderlust is my driving force.

Finally, it's a goal I've had written down since ninth grade. Now I was qualified to instruct how to build fish farms in an area of people who needed to rely on self-sufficiency. Between undergraduate and graduate school was the ideal time for me, because it gave me space to concentrate on my focus for grad school. It also showed graduate schools what constituted Amy West. Plus it gives me more stories to tell. And I'm sure this is the beginning of a very long, but rewarding, journey.

Off to Africa

Peace Corps flew all 16 of us July 4 to Libreville, Gabon, from Washington, D.C., where we attended

the discussion applications we had for our project. It was then that I could pinpoint the Peace Corps personality — one which I understood so well; one who is ready to be challenged, possess high energy, a strong wanderlust, and an optimistic belief, one who is a little crazed and daring and ready to give unconditionally to a good cause. It was also in Washington

where we felt our last blast of air-conditioning, TV and contact with family and friends.

In Libreville, Gabon, there were a few days of inoculations and preparation for our move to Oyem. We also met Peace Corps volunteers already stationed here who gave us essential advice for our adjustment to Gabon. Then we were whisked away from our last running water and modern toilets.

Oyem, Gabon, was where the fish farm model lay to facilitate our

cooking, bathing and drinking. It was where I experienced the greatest challenge I'd ever faced — knowing what I wanted to say to these people, but not being able to speak their language.

Suddenly, all the mental preparation I'd had flew out the window and reality replaced all my dreams of this place. And nothing else mattered, but the present moment because if thought went past that, an overwhelming sense of isolation would set in — a sinking realization of the decision I made to move away to Africa.

And so if ever an uncertain moment, all I have to do is remember what drove me here in the first place. As Jill Welch, a Peace Corps trainee with me, said, "The moment I saw the Peace Corps application, I knew I had to do it."

And I didn't turn back then, and I won't turn back now. Otherwise I would have no story to tell.

"Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime."

To finalize our transition six days later, we were swept away from our last remaining securities: electricity and each other.



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Met by shadows and stares in Africa

Peace Corps volunteer misses comfort of movies, buttered popcorn

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, the 23-year-old daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, traveled July 4, 1997, to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She will be sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis. Her first piece appeared Aug. 10, 1997. Subsequent attempts to deliver articles to the Durango Herald fell victim to the African postal system. Accounts of her experiences finally arrived this month when she sent them with a friend who was returning to the United States.)

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

I remember my first thoughts when I arrived at Atong-ville, my village for three months of Peace Corps training: "I'd rather be anywhere else but here."

In fact, the thought of curling up on a couch watching a movie and munching on popcorn flew through my head once or twice. Every day so far had been leading up to this day, and unfortunately, I feared it, as exciting as it was. My sole comfort was the two other volunteers with me, Tara and Roy, and of course our French facilitator, Theirno, who I'd known at least for a week. Regardless of how long I'd known them, they felt now like my best friends in the whole world.

All of us were met by a few children, a few old men, and a few dogs. We descended from the bush taxi (the sole transport between the villages is crammed full of 16-20 people, food, baggage, tools and dead animals), and walked across something resembling the Wild, Wild West. As we did this, more and more children and women appeared from amongst clay and mud homes and followed us.

Strangely enough, we found ourselves gathered in the chef's house (chief of the village), seated on green velvet couches.

"Well," I thought, "here is the first part of my dream - all I need now is a good movie and some buttered popcorn." Instead, though, they served us fresh pineapple and we accepted graciously, for it meant we didn't have to speak if our mouths were full of food.

And as I was eating this pineapple and being stared at from every corner, behind every door and window by children, I realized the last part of my wish coming true. It was the movie, only I was actually the movie. I can't really describe what it feels like to be stared at by several pairs of eyes and only knowing enough words to say "hello" and "thank you." It was something like being deaf in a room full of only blind people.

And so we sat and stared and sat and stared, and discovered that the chef, Papa Lucienne, was going to be Tara's father. Her room was immense, with a private shower area, and best of all she had this fantastic living room with the green sofa. Roy disappeared with his father, Papa Pierre. Mine, Papa Michel, arrived shortly after. Luckily (and I'm still not sure how) he asked if we were vegetarians. This is



COURTESY AMY WEST

PEACE CORPS volunteer Amy West settles in to life with her family in Africa's Atong-ville.

not a common village word, but this initial question saved me many times from eating gazelle, elephant and monkey.

I traveled through the Wild Wild West to my house, only to be met with one narrow corridor and one wooden table. The key to my room had been lost, which I thought meant I could stay with Tara and speak English, but I noticed the disappointment on Papa Michel's face.

The Peace Corps arrived two hours later with our baggage and a new lock. The key eventually worked (Gabonese locks aren't exactly constant working devices) and I entered my room. It was big enough for me, a bed, a lock box, and a small table, and walls that were as tall as my outstretched body. I did have a brand-new cement floor since the Peace Corps required certain features for each host family's house. They built a W.C. (outhouse), cemented the floor, gave us a water filter, bed, mosquito net, lock box and a bag of food to give the family. So while I had no green sofa, I had a cement floor that looked peculiar since the rest of the house had a dirt floor.

Now I just wanted to hide in this tiny 10-foot-by-10-foot room and unpack and find solace in rediscovering what I'd packed for my two years in Africa. But I needed to get water and eat, and foremostly, I needed to learn French because how does one say, "close the door and stop staring at me while I unpack!"

I gave up, walked outside past

500 other stares and grabbed Tara to go look for Roy. Roy's bedroom was half the size of mine, and yet he was perfectly content - or at least he didn't show otherwise.

And so it went on like this for the first week, attending French class from 8 to 5. This kept it from being an all-day staring contest and reduced it to just a night thing. I watched the African women work on the plantations, wash the children and cook for the whole family.

I attempted to integrate myself as culturally as I could (the point of our homestays), and still tried to make time for myself so as not to feel overwhelmed by the foreign environment.

Yet I needed to study French, write my parents, write an article for the *Herald*, write reports for pisciculture, wash my clothes, find water and make food if I couldn't eat theirs. After French class it was all I could do to look up a few words of French, let alone integrate myself culturally.

The Peace Corps wasn't joking when it said it would be intensive training. And not having the knowledge of French that I needed made it difficult to block the image of curling up on that couch with a movie and popcorn.

I had shadows everywhere I went, and these shadows spoke only Fang (a local tribal language), except my sister and brother. Carine, 16, and Landry, 9, turned out to be the biggest help in my transition to life in the village. However, I still looked forward to the trip back to Oyem on the weekend for

technical training, as it was still difficult to feel entirely comfortable in a foreign village. Oyem was where I hoped to receive news from home or maybe place a call to the states.

I tried not to place too much thought into an American existence, because if I thought about home, I couldn't make it here. There are just too many wonderful things back home (like popcorn), and putting energy into imagining it is like, as Peace Corps volunteer Stacy Jupiter said, "carrying extra luggage." Don't need it.

One night after my African mom, Philomene, placed a dish in front of me yelling, "riz-riz" (rice), something I already knew, I could no longer take the gap in communication. I'd never experienced this type of frustration in explaining myself in French, or what a difficult transition this was for me, and what homesickness meant. Whatever the case, everything snowballed and I started crying. With 10 people sitting around me, looking at me like I was the strangest creature they'd ever seen, the situation felt even more irremediable.

But in the end, I think that was the final barrier. Maybe my tears told these people I was just as human as them. And with this came the realization that differences would always exist as well as miscommunication.

Yet the village still had an unconditional acceptance of this foreigner, as I should have of them. It took a while, but I eventually looked forward to returning to my new home and family. Of course this was after I discovered that some of Oyem's stores sold popcorn.

Now all I needed was a VCR and TV.

(Amy West invites people to write to her in Africa. The address is Amy West, B.P. 23, Medouneu, Gabon, Africa.)



HERALD/LISA SNIDER

• Calendar of Events

Southwest Life

Section
D



VILLAGE CHILDREN, right, play with a local mandrill monkey named Kiki.

*Story
and photos
by Amy West*



WATER IS collected, below, by a local village girl.





BREAD is sold by a village girl, above, and Amy, center, poses with her dog, Nepal, along with local village children.



From Durango to Gabon

Peace Corps touches life of local volunteer

EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, 24, is a Durango High School graduate and the daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango. She began two years in the Peace Corps in July 1997 and is sharing accounts of her experiences from time to time.

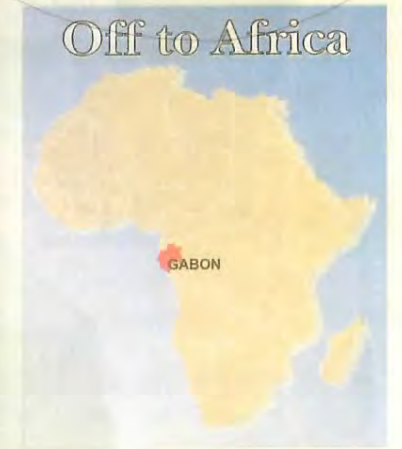
ATONG-VILLE, Gabon – The first meal I had when my feet touched America was a bag of Sun chips and a glass of water (with ice).

The lady behind the bar thought me such a simpleton for savoring each Sun chip and making them last until my plane boarded. She had *no* idea how long it had been and how amazing these chips tasted.

Perhaps it was just my adventure on Air Afrique, which caused me to pay this homage to these chips and to this woman. Air Afrique had decided to tour half of West Africa before it got me to the U.S. Passing. A night in the Ivory Coast had its perks, but Air Afrique wasn't an airline known for being punctual.

Which is why I was only in New York with another night to pass in St. Louis before flying to Albuquerque, where I faced a 3½-hour car ride between the Land of Enchantment and chez moi. I would have kissed the ground in New York if it hadn't been covered with ice.

My first observations of America: Choices were plentiful, smells were magnificent, colors were intense and people were really white. And when I opened my bedroom closet, I saw something resembling a small



A LOCAL girl, left, washes off manioc – an edible, starchy root – in a pond.

boutique – abundance and extravagance.

"Wow. Everything is so clean and so nice. Things sparkle and shine and feel rich. I have 10 ... 11 ... 12 pairs of shoes. Why?!"

I promptly decided I'd go through my closet and give half of everything to Goodwill, but ended up taking only a little back with me (due to a baggage limit) to give right to the source itself.

Home was a blur. Fifteen appointments, one presentation, 45 people to meet with – relatives from all over – graduate school arrangements and the reorganization of my life I had put on hold for a few years.

What kind of vacation was this? Where was my simple life: Wake up, eat and wait for something to come along? My biggest worry had been trying to get the last remaining bit of toothpaste to last another week until I could find another tube. Now it was, "How am I going to get my camera lens sent off to be repaired with an expired warranty and no money?"

My head was full, overstimulated, constantly whirling, and my visions of curling up in front of a movie never happened. My dreams of snowboarding

everyday ended in one expensive day at Purgatory, where I spent half the day on the lift (coincidentally, they have *no* discount for Peace Corps volunteers). I forgot how essential money was to exist here. I felt rather displaced, for home didn't feel so homey, and I wasn't looking forward to returning to a country that had just suddenly lost its excitement.

The night I arrived in Durango, we received a disturbing phone call from a Peace Corps mom. I had been in Durango for only four hours, and I was met with news that a fellow volunteer, Karen Phillips, had been murdered in Oyem (where we did our training). If I had not been in Durango, I would have been in Oyem at that time, attending a fish seminar for the Peace Corps. Now I was miles removed from the mourning, the chaos, the anger, the helplessness, the low spirits. But I still felt it, and my elation at seeing my family after all this time was unfortunately masked by my emotions, still connected to Gabon.

And when I spoke to people of my last year and a half (that I've absolutely cherished), I don't think I

impressed my experience upon them with the same enthusiasm I had once felt. My mind was elsewhere while trying to adjust to these new sights of home and compensate for what I was really feeling.

I returned to Gabon – sure of my decision, but unsure of how I would adapt to the new dynamics of our Peace Corps family. However, the support of the volunteers and Peace Corps extended to each other and Karen's family was incredible. She held an esteemed spot among Peace Corps volunteers, and if each one could have embraced Karen's parents with their genuine sorrow – they would have.

All the volunteers from that province, except Medouneu, were evacuated indefinitely to Libreville. Yet Libreville had turned into a city full of student riots and strikes surrounded by a cloud of negativity (Gabon just had its elections). Now my eyes moved everywhere. I sensed malice behind every helping hand, sincere words sounded insincere, and I became guarded. Our sense of security had been taken with Karen. I had insomnia for several weeks. Was the Peace Corps worth feeling this fear?

The anxiety diminished, however, and eventually faded once I settled back home in the middle of the rain forest. Things felt soothing, home felt comfortable, and I was even able to ignore the sixth break-in



Courtesy Amy West

A SCHOOL that was built by Peace Corps volunteers in Gabon. Volunteers worked for 2 1/2 years on the project.

Gabon: Peace Corps touches life of woman from Durango

Continued from Page 1D

of my house. Take what you want. I don't need it anyway. Just leave me my safety.



He clutched the hat close to his chest with an affectionate grip I had never seen before. It moved me, and I felt tears. I watched the rest of them and their reactions to Steven's presents. Each worker clutched his present close to his heart accompanied with solid, yet drunken, attempts to express their thanks. They always regressed into Fang, for the words just couldn't be found in French. They wanted to express their gratitude for the "cadeau" (gift) Steven left them - a school. A cadeau most volunteers could never say they left, nor could they match. This was a tangible item that he gave them.

I listened to Steven's response to all the praise between bites of grilled fish and duty-free tequila. He and his Gabonese workers had built a school - a school that was already functioning in its fifth day - and two-and-a-half years later, each worker was receiving a personal "souvenir" from Steven.

For the worker who was always cold - Steven's sweatshirt. For the worker who always asked for change - his billfold. For the worker who worked with vigor and ambition - his tool belt. And for the worker who had a different hat each day - Steven's hat.

I felt Steven's silent tears as he witnessed the chef's (chief of the village) happiness. The chef held onto that hat like a dying son, for it

was the most important thing he could be asked for from a volunteer who put more than his share into the project. I understood the chef's appreciation in his quiet eyes and his unspoken thoughts. I wish I could have translated.

This was Steven's good-bye party to them - full of praising and thanking, eating and drinking. His work was done. He was headed home. I tried to picture the last of my volunteer days - the emotions or the apprehensions. I couldn't just yet - I only witnessed Steven's, and what the school and chantier (work site) meant to him and the roots he'd grown here.

Cleanup after the party was easy; everyone shuffled out quietly. Within minutes of their departure came the distant rumbling of pattering rain on the banana trees. It hit our roof soon after, and no voice or sound was audible above the hail-like rain pounding on the tin roof two feet above our heads.

Steven pulled me outside into this crazy rain. Our clothes were soaked in seconds, but I felt nothing except an exchange of warm energy.

"I'm saying good-bye to the rain forest," he whispered.

And as if to answer him and mimic my understanding, the breeze blew harder and the rain strengthened. With no distinction between tears and raindrops, the lightning lit up what he was silently staring at - his school, outlined in his sunset colors and the space he had brought to life. He had

given his heart and soul, and he was leaving.

Without any warning something metal started moving. There was no breeze but a movement of what? A gutter? A bar? There *weren't* just scraps of metal lying around. I flinched, but he remained silent. I knew what had happened.

"The chantier spoke to me," he said in a thrilled, yet choked, voice. It had - in a way more powerful than I can describe in these written words. In the morning, there was nothing to be found outside - just the forest, earth and grass - not a piece of metal anywhere in sight.



That night renewed my energy here. I had never been woken up by the rain forest, but that was the loudest night of my life sleeping among the trees I thought once silent. It was as if we'd been swallowed into the center of the jungle and all the birds, crickets, hyrax, monkeys and frogs all said one last good-bye.

I lay there for a complete hour awed at the sound they produced - an "ensemble." If I questioned my purpose and thought I was leaving nothing behind, then I was taking that much more home. I had the appreciation of this land and its people. I would have never met people like Steven, and I would have never been able to feel the energy of an area that so many people write about and so many more never see.

I would take home the stories of a culture and one type of people and bring to life this part of Africa

to those who were ignorant to its existence. Since they (we) all desire to be heard and understood, then I'm giving them the biggest gift that they will ever know. And maybe a gift that they will one day appreciate.

So yeah - you go through this weird sacrifice for two years, sometimes exposing yourself to disease, robbery, assault, difficult choices and overall hardship; anything you could encounter anywhere. And you question it - is it worth it?

At this point, I'd say yes. I get to see the flip side, and it's not always a happy picture. You don't think about the craziness swirling around you until you leave it and go home to recount the tales and watch people's eyes bug out. I just did that, and it was hard to be home and also bring Gabon home with me. Judging by people's reactions, I must have sounded like a liar. But I'm not. I just spoke of a reality that most would refuse to live in.

However, I can not erase the image of that chef's happiness. It was real. And the flip side has its perks, but only in hindsight - can they be realized.



Karen M Phillips died Dec. 17, 1998. I hope friends and family remember what she did and not what she did not get to do. Donations can be made to CARE, an organization to which she donated five years of her life: CARE, Attn: Fundraising/Marketing, 151 Ellis Street, Atlanta, GA 30303. Fax: (404) 577-9418.

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• Calendar of Events

Southwest Life

Section
D

All in a **W**Week's Work

EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, the 24-year-old daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, traveled July 4, 1997, to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She will be sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis. Amy has return to Durango for a visit and will be here until Jan. 10.

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

EDOUM, Gabon – There is nothing that is certain about my days here in this central African country – the people, the cars, the weather or the food.

Each moment is a surprise and each day a new world, and every month a new lesson in how to live simply. The best thing about living without expectations is encountering a new, radically different word, trail, custom or sight every day.

Sure, there is the daily "get up, wash face, scream at the kids, trek to the W.C., feed the dog and look for food" routine. But the tiny events that take place outside of my routine each day scream with comedy as I try to recount them later in a letter or my journal – although my words never do the funny situations justice.

It's hard to burn the days here, especially when they fly like wind-whipped leaves and feel like months. Perhaps that's just because the insight gained at home comes slower and here it happens daily, where my one year in Gabon feels like two.

I'm not certain what mark I've left, or what I should have assembled as Peace Corps successes, but as I recount the random week I've just had, there were tiny little moments of accomplishments laced throughout. This may not seem like much to those abroad, but for me, they were more than I could ask for, considering the role I supposedly fill in the minds of friends and family at home. It's just not like that. Saving the world never enters my mind except before joining, for it's all you can do to get *yourself* through a day here sometimes.

However, in my time spent here, I believe I've gained some basic wisdom – first and foremost being that the world is full of rumors. This goes also for anything you hear within the Peace Corps volunteer's world. One particular rumor (not yet disputed) stated a previous uncertainty on what the Peace Corps motto should have been.

At one time it was suggested to be what the Army's motto is now: "Be all you can be," and the Army's should have been "The toughest job



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
1) Facilitator Monizi Bambi Bela gives surrounding fish farmers a lesson in fish anatomy during a Peace Corps seminar in Gabon. Bela is a Peace Corps volunteer from the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire.
2) Peace Corps volunteers pose for a photo at the equator in Gabon, on the road between Libreville and Ndjole. From left are Karen Li, of Taiwan; Michael Ball, of Michigan; Kristen Bebout, of New Jersey; Amy West, of Durango; and Morgan Case, of Michigan.
3) West's house in Edoum, Gabon is shown with what turned out to be a severe rainstorm approaching. A bamboo shack, called a "Corps de Garde," is shown in the background. It's the place where the men of the village gather to drink and talk. The dirt road at left, hedged by tropical rainforest, is the road from Edoum to Medouneu.
4) Three muddy children from the village Alen-Essong, near Oyem, are covered with mud. They were painting...

you'll ever love."

I really don't know which is more appropriate. Judge for yourself:

Lundi (Monday): Stacy and I had just completed a farmer seminar in Oyem which in itself, was a big ordeal for both parties involved – 10 farmers and us. Arranging lodging, food, transport, speakers and lessons ran me ragged enough to question why I was doing it in the first place. But we did it, and the farmers' faces lit up as they walked down the road to the model fish farm (we're aquaculturists).

"Oh, so this is what you were talking about," they'd say. Now they had a visual example of what we'd been describing with hand motions and feeble diagrams. They could see how a pond system worked, what I meant by an alimentation canal and that the green color of the pond surface was not just some magic explosion of color.

We explained composting, had a fish harvest, presented marketing techniques, had a fish anatomy lesson and visited a model fish farmer. Of course they were even wowed by all the beer they could drink and all the meals they could eat, but who knew if they absorbed any information or if they could apply what we showed them to what they were doing in the village?

So when I got back, one farmer, Misso Jean Baptiste, who I had wanted most to come and had missed the seminar, approached me with the enthusiasm of a 2-year-old. He explained how he could let the water drain from his pond, and without stepping inside it (which causes mud holes for the fish to hide in), catch the fish on the other side of the pipe. Funny ... I could have sworn I'd told him that technique a million times, *deja*.

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Mardi (Tuesday): Today I started out early – me, my dog, a borrowed wheelbarrow and five cans of paint. I picked up a few other stragglers along the way, as I walked to the next village of Nkinen, ready to start my secondary project. I got 300 meters and felt my right shoulder slowly tearing off. Alain Ntoutoume took over, claiming he was a Gabonese man and therefore stronger. I quickly reclaimed the wheelbarrow.

Three of us had applied for outside funds to help us paint a mural on a school in need of a fresh coat of paint. It had been a long process of paperwork, transport and waiting. But we finally got the paint and fulfilled the promise we'd made to the villagers weeks before. Today we painted the wall white.



SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/AMY WEST



SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/AMY WEST



SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/AMY WEST

Nothing much, just a background for more to come, but you would of thought we'd come close to performing some Michaelangelonian work of art. The children took turns with the rollers, and I hoisted one youth on my shoulders to get where his skinny, little legs wouldn't take him. After he finished, I was covered in white dots of paint, in fact, so were nearly all the children.

I said, "Regardez, vous-etes les blancs comme nous." (Look, you're all white like us.)

So we continued the trend and painted their stomachs and their bamboo cars and my dog. Then they learned how to sing "Bingo" in English.

The day evaporated into a dusk, and we walked back to Edoum, and this time I gladly let Alain push the wheelbarrow, since I could no longer feel my shoulder. Success No. 2

Mercredi (Wednesday): After 10 months of headaches and futile attempts to get the kids to help me compost, one of my farmers, M'Begha

themselves with the mud before they offered to help push a Peace Corps truck out of the mud.



SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/AMY WEST

Joseph showed me his prized possession – a metal sheet full of chicken poop. Yeah, Joseph. Now all you need is a pond to put that in. So we went "en brousse" to three potential sites and with problems at every one.

"Don't worry," he told me, "I'm going to work hard and find a perfect site – so we can get a pond done before you leave Gabon." Then he sent me home with a bag of local eggplants.

I ran into Alain again and tried to hide my wounded shoulder. "Come here, I want to see you," he spoke in English, and I responded in French, which is the national language. Then I said something in Fang – the local language – to which he responded in French.

When he spoke in English again, "I want to drink with you later," I responded in Spanish. I made the mistake of recounting of a time when I'd drunk six of the local 24 ounce beers, called Regab, in one night. He took that as a bet and next thing I knew the boutique was

■ See PEACE CORPS, Page 6D

you'll ever love."

I really don't know which is more appropriate. Judge for yourself:

Lundi (Monday): Stacy and I had just completed a farmer seminar in Oyem which in itself, was a big ordeal for both parties involved - 10 farmers and us. Arranging lodging, food, transport, speakers and lessons ran me ragged enough to question why I was doing it in the first place. But we did it, and the farmers' faces lit up as they walked down the road to the model fish farm (we're aquaculturists).

"Oh, so this is what you were talking about," they'd say. Now they had a visual example of what we'd been describing with hand motions and feeble diagrams. They could see how a pond system worked, what I meant by an alimentation canal and that the green color of the pond surface was not just some magic explosion of color.

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■ See PEACE CORPS, Page 6D

Gabon's wildlife offers magic – and terror

EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, 25, the daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, recently completed a two-year stint in the Peace Corps. This is the next-to-last of her accounts of her experiences.

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

MEDOUNEU, Gabon – I walked methodically into the dark alcove of my kitchen. To find the box of matches, I needed to crack open the wooden window to lighten up the room.

For some reason, I was a bit more alert than usual this morning, and I noticed something different about the kitchen as I approached the window. Lots of dark things – like a thick black line like a shadow – like a ... "what the? oh no-way – not in my house. Not in my kitchen – not in my pots. How would I eat?!"

Army ants.

I ran screaming next door. My neighbor, Pierette, came to my rescue and calmly opened the window where the ants' port of attack started. Now I could see more clearly this unbelievable phenomenon: a bridge formed by thousands of ants starting from somewhere in the forest – and ending at my stove.

There were guard ants on both sides of the line, every few inches. The troops marched in the middle to my pot and back to their little colony of stolen food. Problem was, I had left nothing in my pot but a spoonful of mashed potatoes. They had traveled from the forest, up my wall, down the wall, across the floor, and up my stove. What if they decided to explore outside of my stove?

Families here can be driven out of their houses for the night if the house falls in a line of marching ants. With their great numbers, the ants can occupy an area indefinitely. And they will leave their pincers in you (they're also known as suture ants).

We mixed kerosene and water and splashed it around. I jumped from foot to foot, nervous that the stragglers would find me. Pierette threw utensil by utensil out the win-



Author Amy West holds a 3-month-old baby chimp.



SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/Amy West



Monkeys are a source of food for Gabonese residents. Left, Village children hold Kiki, a baby mandrill monkey. Top photo: A man holds the head of a freshly killed mandrill monkey.

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD/Amy West

Dinner is served: Army ants invade



dow, until the ants had nothing left to attack. Eight minutes later the commander ant had declared a retreat and had moved his troops out, silently and still, in perfect order. When I dared to retrieve my pots hours later, they were spotless.

That week was full of ant sightings. Some monstrous red and black ants attacked my bag in my room, right next to my bed. My Peace Corps post mate had seen ants make a bridge of themselves to cross a small stream. Army ants were a constant sight on the road — their sharp, black line unmistakable. Once, annoyingly, they took over the area by my water closet (outhouse).

But the finale to an ant-ridden week was not something I would ever wish on anyone.

I had made a 7 a.m. date with a farmer in an attempt to settle a dispute over two ponds. Since I had had numerous encounters with the farmer, a man named Jean Baptiste, I thought my attempts at mediation would be ineffective. They were. His obstinacy outraged me, and I proceeded to head back to the village, my dog at my side. At the intersection of the trails, a mother yelled out something in Fang about "fourmis" (ants).

I climbed the steep hill and let my dog lead. Before I knew what was happening, my dog had shot up far ahead — which signaled trouble. All I knew was to follow, run, and not stop until I had reached the top. I had missed seeing the ants because they had not been in their orderly lines but lining the trail, the fences, and the bushes. I stopped to look at my pant legs. Ants had already reached my sweater, and were still climbing — fast. I felt a horrible panic.

Whoosh — the sweater was off in a second. Overalls were stripped in two seconds, boots in three. I heard my dog. Later, when I put the clothes back on, I felt an occasional sting. I couldn't fully relax; I jumped about. The ants had weaved themselves into my sweater, and I didn't dare pick it up for several hours. Before I went to bed, I found a lone ant still stuck in the tongue of my shoe.

Not all African fauna encounters are so painful. In fact, some are magical. Four times while biking on the empty roads, I have encountered huge commotions in the trees. Monkeys are easy to spot — sure targets for hunters, since they can't keep still and travel in packs. To see them swinging naturally

See GABON, Page 6D

the kitchen of Amy West's house in Gabon. Center photo: A freshly killed crocodile, left. Hunting has caused some crocodile species to become endangered.



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WOMEN'S HEALTH



by Leanne E. Jordan, M.D., F.A.C.O.G.

WEIGHT GAIN AND PREGNANCY

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that a pregnant woman gain between 25 and 35 pounds (35 to 45 pounds for twins) if her weight was normal prior to becoming pregnant. When asking the obstetrician about weight gain, pregnant women are encouraged to raise any concerns they might have surrounding such issues as being overweight or being a vegetarian. This is particularly important if there is any experience of eating disorders. If so, the obstetrician stands ready to provide a referral to a nutritionist in an effort to help the pregnant woman understand the dietary needs of both mother and child. If need be psychological counseling may also be called into play to help ensure health and safety.

Pregnancy weight gain can be a difficult issue for many women. Having spent years watching one's waist line, it can be alarming to see a once slim figure begin to resemble a teapot! Some pregnant women gain pounds at a startling rate, while others find that nausea presents an almost insurmountable barrier to fulfilling their dietary needs. For concerned, professional prenatal care in your area, call **FOUR CORNERS WOMEN'S SPECIALISTS** at 382-8800 to schedule a consultation with a board certified physician. Our offices are located at 375 E. Park Avenue, Suite 3-C.

P.S. It is safe to exercise within reasonable limits during pregnancy. Check with your doctor.

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To settle a tangle of disputes over Central Arizona Project water, the board that oversees CAP is proposing the federal government be given water in addition to the \$1.65 billion the state would repay for canal construction.

The federal government, in turn, would use the water to settle separate claims by Indian tribes who believe they were cheated when the government dammed waterways upstream from reservations.

To free up CAP water to give to tribes, farmers and irrigation districts will have to sacrifice their long-term contracts and settle for excess water. Excess water is water that is under contract to cities, Indian tribes or other entities but which goes unused.

Under the proposal, the federal government would get an extra

200,000 acre-feet – enough to serve 200,000 families of four for a year – to settle tribal claims.

The agriculture industry says it is eager to see the claims resolved, but officials say they are disturbed that they are the ones being asked to sacrifice.

William Baker, who represents two central Arizona irrigation districts, said the 330-mile canal system that channels water from the Colorado River "is ag's birthright."

"Thirty-two years ago, this started as an agriculture rescue project," Baker said. Yet since the federal government began settling Indian water claims in 1983, every settlement has involved taking water from the agricultural pool, he said.

Jim Klinker, director of govern-

ment they will have to give up their firm water contracts to help settle the disputes, but they want concessions in return.

They are seeking the excess water at lower rates, and they want help repaying loans they took out to pay for their irrigation systems, he said.

Larry Dozier, deputy CAP general manager, said negotiators have met with irrigation district officials and farmers.

He said CAP believes there will be enough excess water to serve the farmers for the next 30 years. He also said officials plan to forge a deal over farmers' water rates and debt repayment after the larger deal is reached with the federal government.

CAP officials hope that federal government deal comes sometime next month.



A barbed-wire fence stands above the edge of the Central Arizona Project Canal in Avra Valley, Ari

Gabon: Magic and terror

Continued from Page 5D

from a tree that wasn't part of zoo display was a treat. Baby monkeys are often found in villagers' "kitchens" (kitchens). The mother has usually been killed and eaten, so the babies tame quickly, but also die quickly without maternal attention. In one particular "cuisine," I found a baby chimpanzee – frightened and half starved. I held it, and it screamed when it had to be pried off.

The weirdest thing? Seeing a two-headed snake.

Once, while riding in a car, I said to the other passengers, "I sure would like to see an elephant." We were on the main thoroughfare from Miizic to Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Seeing huge logging or road-construction trucks was common on this road, but seeing wildlife was not.

A few seconds later, I saw something out of place among the green flora. I yelled to the driver to stop. Stacy, my post mate, kept repeating an incredulous, "No way, Amy – no way." But there, in a clearing some 300 feet away, was a wild forest elephant with her child.

It is rare to see wild elephants in Gabon except in a reserve. The elephant meandered back to her forest before I could get to my camera.

Gabon is rich in flora and fauna, along with oil, manganese and timber. The country's resources are over-exploited and under-appreciated, although the World Wildlife Fund has a strong presence here.

Logging and animal protection laws are not wholly followed. But when you live among people who need protein, you can see they have few alternatives but to hunt. The key is to do it in moderation.

And the government's campaign to increase Gabon's population (there are fewer than two million people in a country the size of Colorado) invites more pressure on forests and animals.

It is a big, vicious circle: trying to improve food improves health conditions, which leads to a population increase, which requires more food, which increases pressure on the natural surroundings.

Perhaps Gabon can maintain equilibrium. I hope so. This is one of the only parts of the remaining Central African rain forest that's not in a war zone.

The animals and plants of Gabon are precious. I'd hate to look back years from now and think I had seen the last days of one of this planet's untouched areas.

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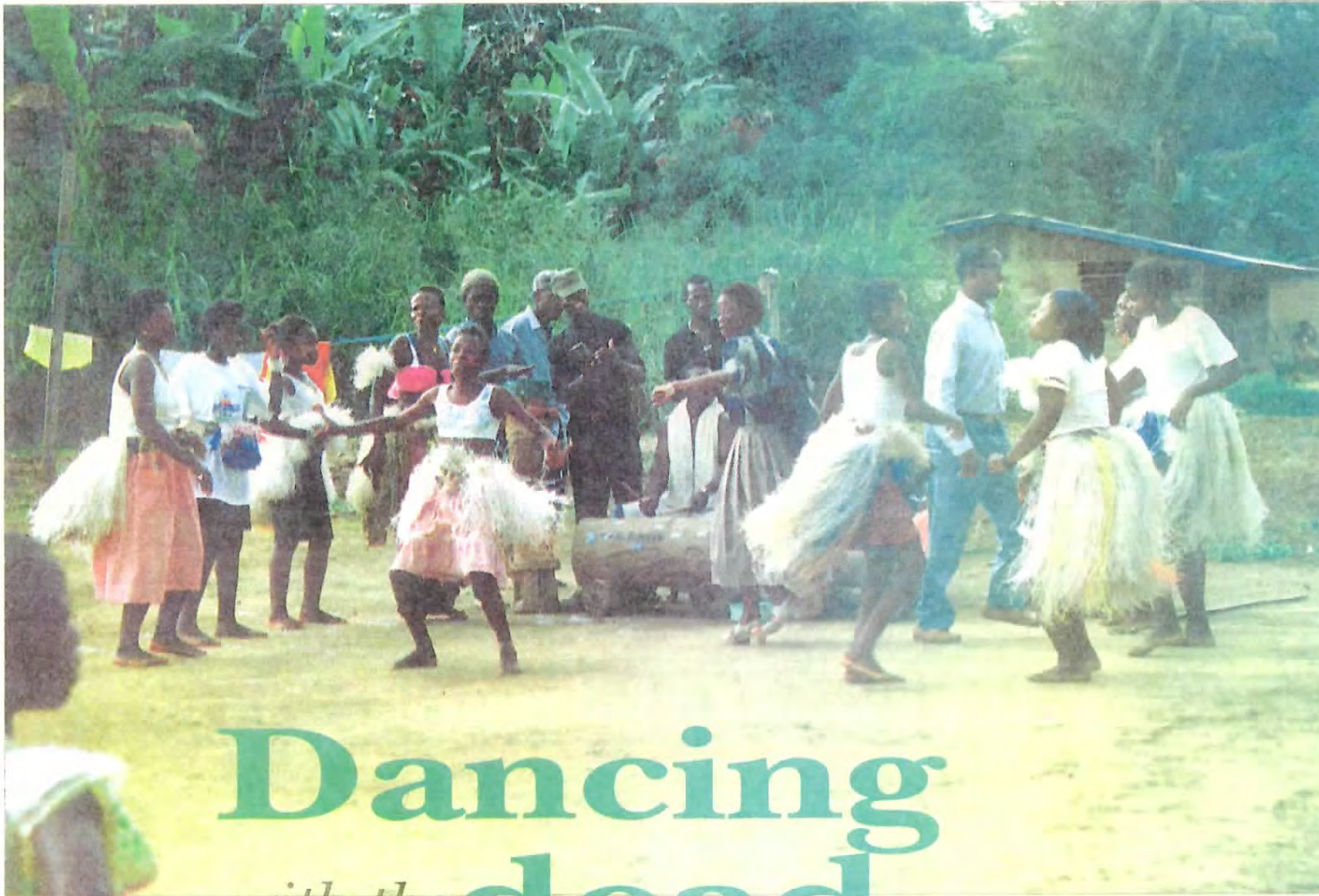


HOME

• Calendar of Events

Southwest Life

Section
D



Dancing *with the* dead

VILLAGERS dance during the Retraite de Devile (Celebration of the Dead) festivities near the border of Equatorial Guinea.

AMY WEST

Durangoan initiated



EDITOR'S NOTE Amy West, the 25-year-old daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, traveled July 4, 1997, to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She is sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis.

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

I could hear the music of the drums as soon as I stepped off the bush taxi. The sound of music also explained why the village seemed deserted.



West

This was a village that was always teeming with children screaming "M Bolo" (fang for hello), yet today was quieter.

This was Atong-Ville, my home for the last month that was finally beginning to feel like home. And on this day I actually felt like part of the village and not the spotlight of the village.

On this day, villagers were celebrating a festival called La Tontine. My African family greeted me with the sweet smell of palm wine on their breath and explained to me, in French, what all the festivities meant.

As always, I didn't understand what Papa Michele was saying, and I thought the party was for a lady named Tontine. It was explained to me later, but for the moment of delusion, I grabbed my camera and took photos of something one would normally see in *National Geographic*.

Children, babies and adults of all ages danced and sang in front of me, begging me to take their picture. Somehow, the most celebrated man organized all the children together to sit in one place — an extremely rare sight. I snapped the photo hurriedly and made an excuse that my film had finished or I would have had to take one of each person in five different poses.

I joined the fête, or party, which was 10 feet from my window, for I certainly wasn't going to be able to sleep now. I still couldn't figure out why Tontine was throwing this party, but it didn't matter because I was pulled to dance and I no longer cared.

It was a strange pattern of dancing: hold on to the person in front of you and go around and around in an endless circle. My African sister, Carmine, commanded the procession, so I followed her lead. She could move — they all could — even the 7-year-old girl behind me, making me

realize how fortunate it was that they completely accepted this foreign American and her funny dance antics in their ritual. It felt good, and I relaxed and just danced.

To my surprise, I was told "Tu dance bien" (You dance well), and coming from the Gabonese, I took it as a compliment.

Escape from the dance circle came as the old man came to reclaim his tam tam (drum). I was still spinning in my bed, dizzy from the dance, when I tried to fall asleep and realized I had never asked this Tontine lady about her party. Oh well, tomorrow.

My French facilitator, LaMine, explained the reason for the party, where apparently no one named Tontine had existed. La Tontine is a monthly ritual lasting four days, organized by age groups in each village. There is usually a separate tontine for the younger ones (0-18) that occurs once a year. At the end of the month, each person in that age level, or whoever is able to afford it, donates 1,500 CFA (about \$3) to a pool and another 1,500 CFA for the party. One person wins the pot and throws a party while keeping the rest for whatever is needed in the family: house repairs, food, clothes, etc.

Unfortunately, there is a drawback, for there is a tendency to drop out of the group once the pot is won. This leaves the last person to win with only a few unselfish people still donating money.

However, since it was the month for ceremonies, everyone got their share of fêtes.

A week later, I witnessed another celebration — La Retraite de Devile (Celebration of the Dead). This usually takes place in August (vacation for most), and a year after the honored had died. It lasted from Thursday through Sunday and was four full days of drinking, eating and dancing lasting until the wee hours of the night.

So, when the children asked me if I had done "la dance de la lune," I figured it meant dancing with the moon. Since I couldn't last past 8 p.m., I replied "no." But I found out later it was actually the name of the dance I'd participated in for La Retraite de Devile and La Tontine. Their constant uncertain looks made me wonder how many times I'd said no to questions that called for yes responses.

When they told me later they had named me in their language, I figured it was something that meant "confused American girl." My new name was Etom Zom, which meant, to my surprise, a gift from God.

(Amy West invites readers to write to her in Africa. The address is Amy West, B.P. 23, Medounou, Gabon, Africa.)



AMY WEST

A CARLOAD of villagers makes its way to the site of the annual Retraite de Devile ritual.



AMY WEST

A CHILD finds a quiet moment to eat during the Retraite de Devile celebration.



From here to eternity: A taxi ride through Africa

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, the 23-year-old daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, traveled July 4, 1997, to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She will be sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis.)

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

Libreville was a big city, and I felt like a lost dog.

Traffic, sounds, smells, bodies and food overwhelmed me. I just wanted to escape the town and click my heels together to get home to Edoum, my little village in the rainforest with nature as my neighbor.



West

With a little guidance, Stacy (my postmate) and I found a taxi bus to the gare routiere (central taxi station). This was where more than 500 vendors and vehicles waited to grab passengers and money. It was a mixture of New York, Greece and the Caribbean — fast-paced, pushy and colorful. I felt sick.

We were warned that finding a car to Medouneu was difficult if not rare. But somehow I stepped in front of a driver I recognized who passed through my village twice a week. I felt fortunate, but not certain that he would wait for us while we returned to the house to retrieve our baggage. By catching two more taxis, we finagled our way back, and little did we know how different it would be once we

hours later, I'd eaten two meals, drank two beers, finished three postcards and read the rest of my book. The driver returned with 18 boxes of produce and just enough space for five of us with luggage. There were 14 of us and just as many bags.

Of course it's now dark and to top it off the driver wants us to pay ahead of time. If we did that, Stacy and I would have exactly 1,500 CFA (about \$3) left over for food and water. However since the wife was threatening to kick everybody off if we didn't pay, we handed over the money silently.

Nine kilometers down the road, we passed our first gendarme stop (border patrol). Only then did I realize two things: why the driver had taken our money beforehand and why only eight of us were now in the back of the truck. Nobody had their papers and the driver had previously committed a similar traffic violation — no papers and transporting illegal aliens. As I watched the gendarme grab one lady by the neck and lock her up with the driver, I felt cursed to remain in Libreville.

The police only wanted money (a bribe to pay for beer), but three hours passed before the driver finally handed over the 16,000 CFA (about \$30). This was just as his wife decided to leave her two children with the police as collateral in exchange for her husband. The driver handed me the money through a tiny hole, big enough for a hand, and I felt a tinge of pity for him. I couldn't tell if he was lacking luck or intelligence.

But after 40 kilometers down the road, as we ran out of gas, I realized

nightmare and went back to sleep, indifferent to my conditions.

The sun rose with us, we were barely halfway home, and the worst of the mud holes — big enough to swallow small Land Cruisers — were ahead. And the mud holes did — three times. There were 17 of them, 10 of which forced us to descend from the truck.

I started writing this story once the driver took a puddle instead of going around it. It was evident he was going for a world record in time here. To top it off, his wife started screaming at him, and with my French level I understood 95 percent of what she said, which posed an even greater story at the time. She couldn't believe the time it was taking or what he was doing with the truck, she wondered where he'd been all day and then blatantly accused him of sleeping around. It was such a circus scene: 12 people piled on top of baggage and each other, mud everywhere, while the driver threw water on his smoking brakes as his wife ranted and raved.

Even though the driver may have lacked intelligence and possibly loyalty in a marriage, he managed to drive the truck through holes I thought were not passable (I'd never seen a truck swing that way and not roll over). We all applauded his performance, including the lady who thought the truck was jinxed by some sort of sorcery.

When they decided to rearrange the truck for the second time, all patience left Stacy and me, and we started walking. It was 2 p.m.

We found a river to swim in and gladly munched on Mott's chunky



THE TAXI gets stuck in the mud on the way from Libreville to Medouneu.

AMY WEST

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and colorful. I felt sick.

We were warned that finding a car to Medouneu was difficult if not rare. But somehow I stepped in front of a driver I recognized who passed through my village twice a week. I felt fortunate, but not certain that he would wait for us while we returned to the house to retrieve our baggage. By catching two more taxis, we finagled our way back, and little did we know how different it would be once we arrived with baggage.

Our taxi pulled up by the Elf gas station. Within seconds our car was surrounded by five men screaming different destinations. "Lambarne!" "Najole!" Unfortunately, our windows were rolled down, which gave them access to grab our bags and us. For some strange reason they didn't understand "No!"

After we pushed to escape the mad throw of hands, we were met with more still outside the car. Having my bag pulled one way while I wanted to go another along with being physically harassed spurred thoughts of trying a turner kick to this man's head. Even after some one said we were with the Peace Corps the idea of kicking dissolved into punching to get this man away from us. The others just laughed, which sent me into more of a rage, since my punches meant nothing to him.

But I was in the Peace Corps. So Stacy and I pushed our way through the crowd. The truck to Medouneu was nowhere to be found, but a small group of people that I recognized from my village were. So we sat with them and waited and waited. It was 11 a.m. Seven

hours to pay for beer), but three hours passed before the driver finally handed over the 16,000 CFA (about \$30). This was just as his wife decided to leave her two children with the police as collateral in exchange for her husband. The driver handed me the money through a tiny hole, big enough for a hand, and I felt a tinge of pity for him. I couldn't tell if he was lacking luck or intelligence.

But after 40 kilometers down the road, as we ran out of gas, I realized it was intelligence. How could you forget to fill up a truck headed on the worst road in Gabon when there is no gas for miles? Not only that, but the four people who were missing before somehow walked past the gendarmes and met up with us. That was fortunate since we had to push the truck to the next town of N'Toum. It was 11:30 p.m.

Finally we were on the road again and approaching the dirt road marked for Medouneu. I had no idea what to expect. The moon was full, the road was wide. Why did everyone say this road was awful?

An hour later, I was standing up, holding on for dear life. Being on top of everything that swung from side to side more than the truck itself left me prepared to jump at anytime to avoid getting crushed in a rollover.

Around 4 a.m. the baggage started falling, probably due to the death grip we had on the rubber holding the baggage. So while they arranged it, Stacy and I and others lay on the dirt road and fell asleep. I woke up to some sort of hammering and saw that the driver had taken off the back tire and the entire brake system. I knew it was a

day in a marriage, he managed to drive the truck through holes I thought were not passable (I'd never seen a truck swing that way and not roll over). We all applauded his performance, including the lady who thought the truck was jinxed by some sort of sorcery.

When they decided to rearrange the truck for the second time, all patience left Stacy and me, and we started walking. It was 2 p.m.

We found a river to swim in and gladly munched on Mott's chunky applesauce that my parents so thoughtfully sent me. Hunger was intense, but all we could think of was going home to our beds still more than 50 kilometers away.

There was one last gendarme control 12 kilometers before my village. I knew well that we'd be hassled for money and papers, but instead I hassled the gendarmes to let us pass since Stacy was sick and needed to get to a hospital. Why not create a sense of urgency? Here that meant 30 minutes.

I arrived in my village at 4 p.m. and decided the chauffeur could easily take another hour to go the final 25 kilometers to the town of Medouneu where I needed to buy food. I couldn't take one more minute in the smoking jalopy, so I decided to bike it, feeling somehow that would be safer and faster.

It took almost 24 hours to go 200 kilometers, so when I descended from the truck I asked the name of the driver. Since fatigue and hunger had marred my memory, I forgot the name almost immediately. I didn't realize the irony of his name until I read it on the side of his truck a few weeks later.

It read "Eternal."

THE TAXI gets stuck in the mud on the way from Libreville to Medouneu.

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VILLAGERS TAKE part in Bwiti, a ceremony that lasts four days and is about connecting the materialistic world with the spiritual world.

AMY WEST

Ceremony connects two worlds

Durangoan has mixed feelings of respect, disbelief for African ritual

EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, the 24-year-old daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, traveled July 4, 1997, to Africa to begin her two years in the Peace Corps. She will be sharing accounts of her experiences on a periodic basis.

By Amy West
Special to the Herald

The moment I entered the makeshift temple I knew it was going to be a night adhered to memory. I also knew that I'd wish I'd brought someone from home to see this. I really couldn't believe I was here anyway, and a witness would have helped.

The temple was laced with



me to seek shelter on another log, situated next to the sitar player, which gave me a better view of the altar area and the people. The "preacher" and all the other men sat under a picture of Mary and wore something like wool stocking caps on their head like I would wear snowboarding. Caught down a dark alley, they would have been mistaken for gangsters.

The altar had some odd items that seemed to have been randomly collected for useless decoration. An old doll with open-and-shut eyes, propped up by a ball, lay next to a candle and a fake vase of flowers. This sat in front of the sitar player (who I'd just ate dinner with a few hours before) who was

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lanterns and dried fruit palm fronds. They had even converted Nescafe cans into little lamps that would burn all night. That was needed because this ceremony lasts until the sun rises. It was barely 11 p.m. now. I'd seen these types of ceremonies on postcards and in books: the classic African picture of painted faces, fire, music and trances. Tonight was another Bwiti initiation and I'd finally managed to find the will to stay up past 8 p.m. to be a part of it.

The first thing that took me off guard was the powdered faces. The black faces that I'd become so accustomed to were now an eerie white. I sat along the wooden log next to a couple of boys who said they were there to hear the sitar. I felt a tinge nervous with my camera because even though I'd already asked about taking pictures, I still felt like it might be rude to interrupt the ritual with a blinding flash of light. The boys assured me it was fine; one even forewarned the sitar player and drummers that I would be blinding them shortly. I couldn't help feeling once again on assignment for *National Geographic*, but my shortage of film (I had two photos left) told me otherwise.

Bwiti is the traditional Fang ceremony lasting four days. It is about connecting the materialistic world with that of the spiritual world. Initiation involves several days of fasting, weeks in solitude and no control of what to eat or when to sleep, all accompanied by psychedelic, drug-induced visions. This four-day



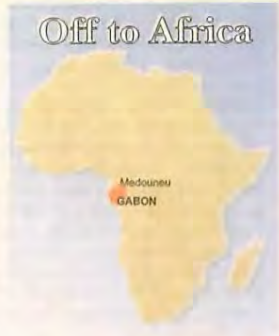
COURTESY AMY WEST
AMY WEST, right, and Virginia pose for a photo during the Bwiti ceremony.

ceremony is the end of the process. Since it's all spoken in Fang, and not every action is understood by a newcomer, I still have several questions. Regardless, my feelings on the ceremony are a mixture of respect and disbelief - respect for the endurance it takes, but disbelief in what it involves.

My first ceremony was such a novel experience that they could have just sat there and played the sitar for 12 hours and I'd have felt overwhelmed. So I took careful note mentally of what did happen, storing it as my first impression of Gabon's traditional rituals, and ultimately of tradition vs. modernization.

There was constant movement of the nearly 15 attendees, and their actions sometimes seemed to reflect only one rehearsal. I took especially to the old mama who sat in her chair (throne?) and corrected everyone's position and walk - a constant comical interruption.

Despite being spoken in the tribal language, I recognized a few words and motions. It was similar to the Catholic act of taking communion while in front of a priest. This is where I saw the obvious influence of the Western world and missionary work. It was certainly different in that the man was unpriestlike with his ghost face, and he fed them all anything but bread. It was



HERALD/LISA SNIDER ATCHISON

iboga - a psychedelic and sacred bark used in the ceremonies and ingested in great quantities to induce visions of ancestors. Too much induces vomiting but that means more can be ingested. Taken in moderation, it simply has the effects of No-Doze: a caffeine buzz. Although it's a big part of the ceremony, I was still surprised to see children and babies eating it.

Another strange part of the "tradition" was drinking boxed wine, which isn't so foreign considering wine is drunk in Catholic churches. But perhaps it was just the whole presentation of pouring glasses of wine from a box (the only kind found in the village).

The rain and leaking roof sent

pressed the strangest. The sitar carried a Spanish sound so he was appropriately dressed in what seemed like a cotton sombrero. He had a scarf with Mexican colors around him and his face was the whitest. Playing the sitar nonstop, he set the atmosphere for the ceremony, which was peaceful and dreamy.

But to reflect further on the haphazard events, he suddenly flew up (later in the night) to fill his mouth with kerosene and blew into the fire for a huge exploding effect, then continued blowing fireballs until he abruptly sat back down and continued to play.

The colors of clothing were either red, white or both. Papa Michele was dressed in flannel PJs like my dad would wear to bed, while his son jumped around leading the procession in a red outfit with matching crown. He'd dip into a trance and throw sparks everywhere from his burning palm branches, then sit down calmly.

The dancing got intense. I was told to follow, and all I could think of was not to fall as the women were spun and spun in dizzy circles and not one stumbled. Fortunately I didn't have to spin and I sat down welcoming the opportunity to hold a dancer's baby. She had the bravest eyes I'd ever seen and the face of an adult. She didn't cry at the sight of my white face. She was wide awake, her face reflecting the opposite of mine. It was 4 a.m.

■ See CEREMONY, Page 9C

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"Does that mean I need to get into gambling?" Cheryl asked her grandfather.

CEREMONY

Continued from Page 10C

I had to sleep, vowing that I'd last all night next time. I fell asleep feeling elated and fortunate that I'd participated in a ceremony that only a collect few will ever see.



My second ceremonious experience involved a 9 kilometer walk to the next village, Nzarbourgh, to stay with one of my farmers. I thought the ceremonies would be the same, but in organization this one was extremely different. The movement was smooth and rehearsed. The temple was decorated in crosses, and this time the participants dressed me in one of their white dresses and dusted my face with white powder.

I danced and took photos, recorded songs and tried to keep my puppy (my shadow, Nepal) from being underfoot every time I stood up. They took meticulous care in dressing the sitars as well as the sitar player himself. One sitar had a female head of Mary, the other a male head of Jesus. We sat in a private room to watch the adornment while being sprayed

with cheap perfume and given grenadine syrup to drink. The constant fiddling with the clothing and instruments kept my attention while I suppressed my laughter.

But alas, fatigue got the best of me, and I crashed at my usual time of 4 a.m. However, I woke up at 7 a.m. and went down to the second temple where one lady was still in a trance and people were nearly asleep or crazed from lack of it. Unfortunately, Nepal crossed some sort of sacred boundary in the temple and the entranced lady became immediately upset, emitting an obvious disgust for me and my dog. She walked by, or floated it seemed, touching everyone while holding two infants who made no sound or movement.

She rolled her eyes when she approached me, but when she went into a trance to speak to requested ancestors, I was asked to come up. I don't know if it was her energy or my excitement, but my heart immediately sped up with her touch. I just sat there, not knowing who I'd want to speak to anyway. I went back with shaky legs, given vin de palme (palm wine), a beer for

breakfast, then I walked the 9 kilometers back home flooded in curiosity as to what the other three days of this ceremony were like.

On my third attempt, I took my postmate, Dan, with me. This time it was the last night of a ceremony and I had to see the finale. Once again, I was donned in ceremonial gear and powdered white. Wearing head gear (a cap of some sort) was strictly enforced.

This was the weirdest night of them all. To start off, we were asked what we preferred to drink, the local beer or San Miguel that comes across the border. Iboga tea, sugar cane wine, boxed wine, whiskey and beer seemed to be provided every few hours. There were 30 people and we all moved from temple to temple listening to monologues in Fang.

We danced to keep ourselves awake and before we knew it, 12 hours later the sun was coming up just as someone was coming out of a trance. Apparently the "seen" ancestor had been white, signaling some good omen for all. With this, laughter erupted and the men and women divided themselves inside

the temple and started playing soccer! Mainly they tried to loft the ball over the team's head to acquire points. I saw they had no intention of stopping anytime soon, and before it got any weirder, Dan and I left with the early morning no-seesums to bike 12 kilometers back home. For me, four days nonstop like this would induce a trance naturally.

When I first got to post, a parting volunteer, Jenny Martin, had just been initiated with five weeks of isolation. Now I'm constantly asked, half jokingly I think, if I'm going to get initiated, too. I don't even know what it's all about nor do I feel strongly about it. Really, if I can't even last one night, how could I do it for several days.

They can ask me again, when I stay awake for the ceremony for all four days, but by then I'll probably be loony enough to say yes. However, I'm perfectly content in watching ceremonies like this, which most only know through books.

Amy West invites readers to write to her in Africa. The address is Amy West, B.P. 23, Medouneu, Gabon, Africa.

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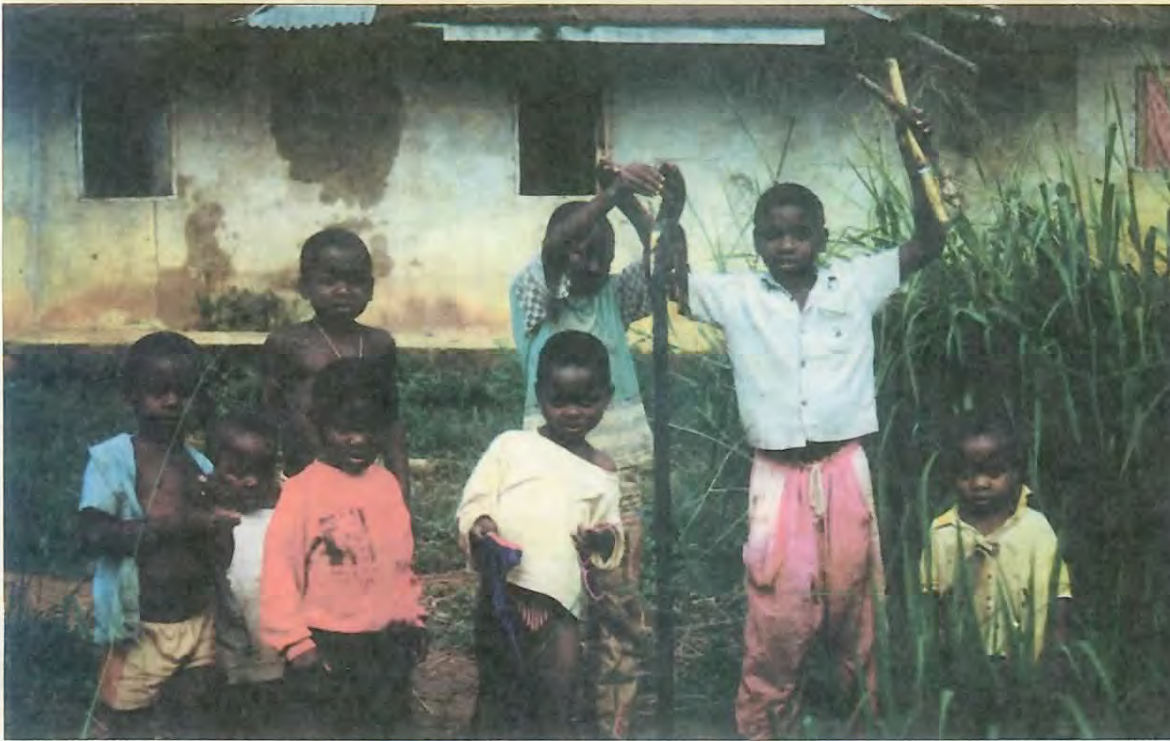
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Peace Corps: A week's work is a full agenda in the Corps

Continued from Page 1D

full of several men, each trying to buy me a beer. I'd forgotten to mention that I had drunk the six beers in a several hour period and not in one sitting.

So sure enough, after they got three beers into me in less than an hour and before I got too cross-eyed, I assumed the typical drunken stork cartoon character (who delivers the baby to the wrong parents), unable to talk between hiccupps. Alain gave me a match stick to cure them and I stuck it near my forehead (sulfur end down), and slid it up the part in my head. My hiccupps stopped immediately.

Success No. 3.

Jeudi (Thursday): I biked the 15 miles into town to see Guy's site. Stacy, my other postmate, met me at Guy's house to survey his work as well. This involved a brief trip to the dike, a few words of advice and a nod of his head that he understood. We went back to his cuisine where his aunt had left for her plantation to bring us back food (we'd never met her before). Three hours later she came back and informed us we were to help prepare.

"Phwap, phwap - whack whack," we pounded the feuilles de manioc - which are a type of leaves - as she boiled the tubercule and made fun of our Fang language skills (apparently the word I thought meant "child" was actually a bad word in Fang).

It took two Americans to do the

job in twice the amount of time it took her alone. Two hours later, the food was ready. We ate like ravenous vultures, as did my dog who was given a plate of food as well.

I didn't have the energy to bike home on the muddy roads and luck arrived on the hardest hill. Monsieur Marc, who is a pharmacist, flew by in his truck and picked up me, my dog, my bag and my bike. But we had to stop and drink two boxes of wine with some fellow neighbors. I "had" to drink since I was no longer biking and he "had" to drink since he was still driving. I erased the danger of the situation from my head and questioned the origin of this man's Megadeth T-shirt. An hour later, I arrived safely home. Success No. 4.

Vendredi (Friday): Ugh ... couldn't get up ... felt sore and feverish - couldn't eat - couldn't move. Must have been the food Thursday or random arbovirus No. 42. My fever was only 101 degrees Fahrenheit - not too serious. Should I do a malaria slide or go back to bed? I couldn't move without deep head rushes even though I needed to go work on Thomas' pond today. I ignored all the children's knocks at the door, except one. It was Nguema Michele bringing me a papaya because I was sick. The Gabonese grapevine once again proves itself.

Success No. 5.

Samedi (Saturday): Still felt a bit weak, but I was able to get up and move around. My Gabonese

sister Ondo Pierette came over and chatted. The chat turned into a full-fledged discussion stretching my store of French vocabulary.

She asked if the world was round and why there's no winter in Africa, so I explained with models. She complained of the difficulty in raising one child, so I explained other methods of birth control. She questioned the existence of S.I.D.A. (A.I.D.S.), so I explained the biology and "severity" (since no one ever sees someone die of a disease called S.I.D.A., they thought it didn't exist).

But she understood - her final spoken thought was, "Well, with the lifestyle here, doesn't that mean sooner or later everyone will be infected?" Viola. Exactement.

That night was a N'ganga (witch doctor) ceremony to rid the village of all the vampires that cause all the disease and death. Superstition loomed in my mind - but there wasn't one there who didn't believe in vampires.

Luckily I'd had the conversation about A.I.D.S. and disease with Pierette earlier, for I didn't see her at the ceremony.

Success No. 6.

Dimanche (Sunday): It started raining at about 3 a.m. and didn't stop until 7 p.m. the next day. Welcome to another rainy season. I watched as water on the road, which was now a small river,

washed a small child downstream for a while before he was picked up.

The house was leaking, I was cold, and there was absolutely nothing to do but read and curl up with the Sunday programs on the B.B.C. short-wave.

I climbed back under my mosquito net with my book and sleeping bag. I finished *Malaria Dreams* by Stuart Stevens. Ah yes ... Success No. 7.

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my postmate, Stacy, lived. So I made the unwise choice of jumping into the truck of a drunken gendarme whose car was not in much better shape.

During the ride we argued about why I wouldn't marry him, and tried to arrange the price of my dowry, while stopping every five kilometers to talk to the chiefs of the village. The only consolation came after the gendarme stopped hassling me because he lost control of the truck and drove off the side of the road.

Luckily, the truck wasn't going fast, and the bushes were thick enough to keep us from rolling over.

As soon as we reached the next village, I jumped out, not caring if he was going farther. I would walk. Thinking that Stacy's village was not far, I set out on foot with my bag for six miles. I arrived in Bendola just as the sun set, and I quickly realized I was nowhere near Stacy's and two minutes from total exhaustion. I got to the middle of the village, announced my plight, and plopped down in the middle of the road - unmoving. The chief approached me and asked me incredulously what I was doing. "Of course you can stay here," he said, and took me promptly to his house, fed me and gave me a bed.

dition to open homes to strangers. I always feel obliged to do something grand to repay them, since it seems like they are going out of their way and a stranger does not merit such kindness. But by observing the monotonous days that pass here, it is understandable why a stranger's visit would be welcome. Plus, I was met with, "Well wouldn't you do the same for me?" Well ... hmmm. "I guess so, perhaps I'd offer some food, but well ... it's just not the same chez moi. Strangers arouse suspicion, and our doors just aren't as open as yours." But I wish they were.

On a trip from Gabon to West Africa, I encountered, I think, the most gracious sort of people. The hospitality began with our French teacher in Gabon, who gave us the numbers and addresses of all his family members in Benin. His brother in Cotonou, Benin, gave us a chauffeur for the day. We would not have been able to see that country - the site of the original slave port and origin of voodoo - if not for him. After a quick jaunt up north, I stayed with a Peace Corps volunteer, Mandi Eggleston - a fellow 1992 Durango High School graduate. I was extended the same type of generosity. Our two worlds had finally collided. She gave us names of Peace Corps volunteers

to a cluster of huts. I was not familiar with the residents' language, their tribe (they were Somba), or how they could live under this Saharan sun. I was looking for shade - any sort of shade. A tree limb would have sufficed. But the moment I walked into this unusual village setup, I was given a mat and a place to sit out of the sun. We spoke the same language: "The sun is very hot." The mama of the group sent her son off to fill my Nalgene bottle. Who knows how far that was, but I already owed him half my life for saving me from dehydration. Then the family served us some sort of yam and butter sauce, and now I owed them the other half of my life. I couldn't even begin to say thanks except with lots of head bowing and hand clasping. We'd been there for seven hours.

Our goal was Burkina's capital, Ouagadougou, where a film festival was already in full swing. It attracted lots of international attention and celebrities, we found out later, as Danny Glover was there to introduce his film, "Beloved." The city was teeming with foreigners. West Africa, specifically Ouaga, threw me off a little by the amount of begging and expected payment for favors.

There were instances when someone went out of his or her way to help you, and then expected money

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Author bids difficult 'adieu' from Gabon

EDITOR'S NOTE: Amy West, 25, the daughter of John and Bonnie West of Durango, recently completed a two-year stint in the Peace Corps. This is the last of a series of accounts of her experiences.

Photos and story by Amy West
Special to the Herald

MEDOUNEU, Gabon - Her breath smelled of sweet sugar cane wine.

She had pulled me into her tiny mud-walled room where jugs of the alcohol were stored. She was the guardian of the wine, but she secretly consumed much more than she guarded. She had pulled me aside to tell me a story. Behind us, drums beat, people sang, and the earth pulsed.

This was the third night of the family's "retraite de deuil" (ceremony to celebrate the deceased). The lady who had died, "Yaya," had not just been a wife, but had raised and looked after two generations of children. And H el ene wanted to tell me now why they were spending so much time and money on this ceremony (almost 2,000 U.S. dollars). H el ene's words slurred a bit, but I pieced together most of the story, which



HERALD/Lisa Snider Atchison

weaves a strange family history.

Yaya was married to Antoine, but unfortunately they were unable to have any children, so after a few years, Yaya looked for her replacement. She found her - H el ene. Only H el ene was 4 years old at the time, and Yaya was some 25 years older. So she raised H el ene herself, only to have her marry her own husband!

Together H el ene and Antoine had six children, after which Antoine lost interest in H el ene, and let her go her own way; with two marriages dead, he looked elsewhere and found an Equatorial Guinean woman. She, too,

■ See GABON, Page 3D



Author Amy West dances in a "retraite de deuil" ceremony.



Mama Helene, left, prepares manioc, a sweet sugar cane wine. Dancers, below, perform the omiass, a traditional tribal dance, consisting of women in white skirts and a lot of segregated body movements.





Amy's finished pond, above. A villager, left, carries a tam-tam, a type of a drum, to a ceremony.

Gabon: Author bids difficult 'adieu' to Africa

Continued from Page 2D

could have no children, so Hélène gave her their youngest boy to raise. For eight years this woman raised him across the border in Guinea, then tragically passed away. Only six months later, probably due to heartbreak, Antoine died.

Yaya raised Hélène and Antoine's children while Hélène then found another husband and had three children by him. Now Hélène's eldest is 30 years. Yaya managed to be a mother, grandmother, teacher, and friend to everyone, while never being related. But they celebrated her spirit like royalty – seven days of song, food and dance. The movement stopped only for a few hours of the night, except the last night which lasted nearly 24 hours.

This ceremony was a bit different from the others I'd seen because this time I was involved. This was my boyfriend Alain's family (one of the sons of Hélène), and I had finally gathered enough courage to participate in the dance I had often admired in the last two years – "Omass."

"Omass," a traditional Fang dance (the tribe), consisted of women in white skirts made from strips of flour sacks, animal pelts, seed shells, and a lot of segregated body movements that I have got to master. Luckily I scored points for just trying, which is hard to realize when people are making "Look at the white girl!" sounds in the crowd. But these weren't evil comments. These were appreciative comments. It sounded like, "Ah-Keeee ay!"

There had been no practice the week before due to another death in the village, so I clambered up the hill the day before the dance just to get some pointers. I was shown a few, quick hip thrusts and torso snaps which made me feel like a jelly-O chicken. Everyone laughed, but I'd grown used to that and said I'd watch tonight and dance tomorrow. The next day I had to prepare. By drinking three beers, I had just enough for courage, and not too much for falling.

It worked, I caught on, and by the time the moon rolled up, the

old mamas gathered around to watch. And scream. Mama Hélène came running out between drum sessions with the "Ah-Keeee ay!" and pasted a mille franc on my head. Then another came out, and another, and pretty soon I had nearly hugged the entire female population. Not to mention I made almost as much money as the Peace Corps pays me daily. It was exhilarating gaining a few points of respect from the older women whom I could never talk to since I didn't know enough Fang. But I understood "Ah-Keeee ay!"

Ten hours of dancing and a 6 a.m. wake-up call to continue and to accompany everyone barefoot to the cemetery left me hazed. Everyone else danced with the same energy. I felt like a stringless puppet. Too much sugar cane wine and not enough sleep made me happy that it was over. Life would return to normal.

But not exactly, because that marked the one month I had left in the village before leaving indefinitely. I had to finish our pond, which we accomplished, and move out of the house and organize my going-away party. Yup, that's how it works here. If it's your birthday, you give away presents and if you're leaving, you throw the party. Thanks to my Fang-speaking boyfriend, and his mom, Hélène, I managed to pull off something not otherwise possible: how to make 150 people happy.

First Alain and I wrapped nearly 100 presents (all my belongings) to give away in a raffle. To my surprise I sold nearly all the raffle tickets (25 cents) which bought the drinks, and threw presents to the hungry people who were present. Then my farmer gave a speech (another surprise) and I gave a heartfelt one, half in practiced Fang. They presented me with handmade gifts that had been carved in Equatorial Guinea.

The highlight of the event was seeing some of my games in action – three-legged races and water balloon toss. I've never seen such delighted faces at being soaked. Seeing half-drunk villagers trying to race with a strip of rubber attach-

ing them was amusing – but within minutes it was over, and it was time to feed everyone.

Fortunately I had a good staff of volunteers who'd helped cook while we'd gone around to each house to ask the families to donate anything – wood, cassava, beer, meat, etc. ... It kind of worked and kept my expenses down. After nearly an hour of serving people, the drinks came out – carefully guarded. But I had to guard the guardians. Alcohol disappears faster than money.

Finally, to finish the night, we started the generator, and I showed all my slides of them and the village that I'd taken over the past two years. "Oh so that's what she meant when she said diapositives (slides)," they thought. Finally I could uphold my promise – there were their faces on the big screen – er – well – a big sheet.

Five days later, I said goodbye to my dog, my house, and the few people who were still around. The goodbyes had already been exchanged since I had sat around for 12 hours with eight bags the day before waiting for a car. I hadn't had time to realize the void I might feel later. At this point I was as numb as the day I first got to Africa.

I was OK until Nepal, my dog, jumped up on the moving truck to go with me. Then I couldn't speak, and the permanence of my abandonment kicked in.

It's OK, I thought. I'd be back. Heck, I might get married here. And the first thing I'd hear would be those happy old mamas and their, "Ah Keeee ay!..."



I left Gabon Sept. 18 and headed around the world. I spent a month in Nepal on a trek to see Mount Everest, then onto New Zealand. I'm working on organic farms until graduate school starts in February at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. You can reach me at bamermaid@yahoo.com.

I'd like to sincerely thank the staff at the *Herald*, my friends, all those who wrote me, and my very supportive parents. Thanks for letting me tell my story.