

I don't remember the plane ride into Columbia, or the grass runway. My first memory is arriving at the barracks at the U. of Missouri campus edge, then wife & I finding our room in a hubbub of others doing the same. A knock on the door, and Dennis, an RPCV helping run the training, came in with his clipboard, checking people in. Ola! What a surprise—Ginny & Dennis went to the same high school! Dennis was a class ahead & friend of her older brother, himself an early PC volunteer (to Columbia). The small world principle had kicked in!

Not yet known at the time, but a small world was also growing inside her. We slipped away for a doctor's visit at some point, more or less mid to late in the Missouri training, confirming an early pregnancy. We took Dennis into our confidence as someone we could trust to give us his best advice, which was "Don't say anything until after you're established where posted. Then it should be fine." Apparently his group there just before had babies born to their group, with a supportive doctor & regional director in Calcutta.

The official PC policy at the time was not to send volunteers with children or expecting—but leaving it up to the regional doctor & director to decide what to do with pregnancy while there. Both needed to approve an arrangement or volunteers would be sent home.

In our case, Virginia's program was all about child-care! Lo & behold, a revolutionary idea—to have some actual experience in what you were expecting to teach! This wasn't a widespread practice at the time. As pointed out on the "Sixties" page, few of the arriving 100 or so trainees in our agricultural program, teaching Indian farmers how to improve their rice growing, had grown anything (at least anything legal)—and none had ever grown a single grain of rice. Our training in Missouri autumn would not change this.

Lack of experience was considered part of "the Peace Corps spirit" back in those days, as well as part of the cultural divide with the "experts" in organizations like AID, who tended to look with some disdain on the long-haired no-littles who thought they could help even so. For many PCVs, however, the fact that they knew about the job description in advance was a distraction. You learned what you could in advance, and then went on learning all the more (& fast) while improvising.

Most of the time, what was on paper was not yet tuned to what the situation on the ground required. It was not primarily about knowledge, least of all a one-sided expert arriving to tell ignorant natives what to do & how. It was a mutual learning, persons to persons, identifying what would be most useful. The mantra was more or less, "Do good. Help where you can. Stay cool where you can't. Everything depends on what the situation is, what people need, how you can help. Then you learn the rest of what you need to bring that about."

Indeed, a case can be made that the PC itself knew all too little about what it was doing, including how it was training. It may even have gone backwards in this learning by trying to institutionalize the agency, to impose bureaucratic policies, and to focus its contribution on serving national interests. Our program itself could be seen as a reflection of its use as a tool of foreign policy. AS discussed on the "Sixties" page,

India's Prime Minister had been very critical of American policies in Southeast Asia, in response to which Americans withdrew some foreign aid funds in a carrot-&-stick approach that took away with one hand & gave something back with the other, in this case a very large number of Peace Corps agricultural experts who did not exist. Thus, the trainees who showed up eager & ready to go had little or no agricultural experience.

To emphasize how one hand might not know what the other is doing, there were two other dramatic illustrations. Apparently every staff member had recommended at the last PC training held there, "Don't try to hold training here during the school year." Our program began the first week of the fall term. Then there was the fact that program planners hadn't yet realized that accepting married couples (5 in our case) meant that there would be women trainees—without a program to train for.

They quickly concluded that the women couldn't work in the agricultural framework aimed at the men (whether in the fields or government offices). This was, it turned out, a real blessing to the women involved. By having no abstractly planned curriculum, they got to consider what objectives & skills might serve them best, relating to the female part of the population. They designed a program around all the useful aspects of child care, therefore, including some experience with actual births.

The of the program actually planned was more mixed. Never mind the rough facilities—adequate. Many of the cultural contributions were especially fine, I believe, especially those offered by our native Bengali staff members, a talented, educated and creative group. The adventurous spirit brought to the party by returned volunteers was also rich in experience, as when we were dropped off in remote locations with no equipment, no money, no contacts.

Encouraged to improvise, make friends, if possible, make do, and endure in any case, I was not at all gung ho with the idea, especially being separated from my wife for the first time since our wedding more than a year before. Nevertheless, almost off the bat, I made a connection at the local general store. Unless people in the area had been secretly recruited, a possibility, the farmer I met had even been to that part of the world during or just after the war, and his family welcomed me to share dinner, the night, and tour of their domain.

This also points out one of my failures, however, for despite considering myself a writer, I have no record of the specific place or the family name—though they deserved more than an initial postcard. It seems we were always moving on in those days, and not often enough staying in touch with where we'd been.

In the training as a whole, the Bengali staff & the RPCV's were the key elements from our perspective, while appreciating various others for technical guidance & orientation. The program was so hastily thrown together that it had no language-director in place at first, which encouraged our Bengali teachers to improvise, for which they had a gift. Problems developed—and the whole training started to break down—as soon a language director arrived, an "expert" from the northeast who lacked knowledge of Bengali, but

supposedly knew about teaching language in general. The Bengalis went on strike and threatened to leave. I'm not sure I ever really understood what the arguments were about, but I did know we needed these Bengalis most of all—various individuals among which remain the clearest in my fond memory almost 50 years later.

Young as Virginia & I were at the time, 24, 23), we were older than most of our colleagues, and had even held full time teaching jobs, helping run a small boarding school, including having to improvise our own courses. We felt very much in synch with our instructors—& they appreciated the trainees they were trying to help, which must've helped moderate their beef, as the language program & training as a whole kept on.
Khub bhalo.

The training had various main components—language; methods of community development; history/culture of the area; and agriculture, the technical skills we were supposedly equipped with. I vaguely remember slogging out along the county road to the agricultural field at some point, but recall very little of the time out there, especially sleeping arrangement or doing actual work. (I probably shirked that area as much as possible, never having bought into the inconceivable idea that I was going to teach Indian farmers how to grow better rice.)

Ironically, I may've camped by the Three Rivers Conservation area some of this land became later sometime in the 1990s, doing ground research on “words & music of the Santa Fe Trail,” a radio series I helped stitch together. I vaguely recall taking wandering detours around Boone County trying to see what memories might be triggered—whether of Peace Corps time or the 1821-1880 period. I half expected to meet the same farm family somewhere out in the unidentified boonies, thirty years later (& that twenty back from here), yet in my mind, only I having aged.

Some reunion volunteers, like Barry Stevens, seem to have a much clearer idea where they spent their drop-off, and many other details of time at the farm. He also mentions that of the more than 100 trainees at the start, he thought about 60 made it to India.

Ironically, the person we've had the most contact with over the decades since was one who dropped out well into the training, yet has spent most of his adult life in India since! (Michael Zelnick came to visit us in the northwest after our return in 1968, and lives in Auroville now, near Pondicherry, practicing homeopathy.) Other friends from the training period who visited us the year we were in Seattle caretaking Ginny's parents' place while they spent a sabbatical year in the wilderness (near the northwest tip of Vancouver Island) were the Dons—Gray & Davy.

Like Michael, it turned out our interest in India went far beyond our involvement with the Peace Corps. In Michael's case, he had discovered a medical condition that would keep him from being drafted, no longer needing the Peace Corps to do that for him. But lack of interest in the Peace Corps as an organization didn't end his interest in India. The draft was something that hung over most at this time, as something you had to consider. Although it was before the song “Alice's Restaurant,” the issue was already in the air.

Arlo, not yet 18 I think, appeared himself one weekend night at a local Columbia watering hole, and a small group of us trainees went. At that point, he was not yet public figure, and, in fact, completely unknown. He would become one of the icons of our generation, without losing touch with his folk roots. The picture below was taken about 30 years later, sometime in the 1990s in Las Vegas, New Mexico, when he recalled Columbia being one of his very first gigs. Apparently he had filled in for Rambling Jack Elliot. so maybe that's who we thought we'd be hearing.



Here's looking at you, kid!

That boy certainly gets around. On this particular visit, my son Gus & I met his son Gabe, who may have been near Arlo's age in 1966, our ours then, part of Arlo's "Rolling Blunder" tour. That night at the local college, Arlo looked at all the old timers & revived "Alice's Restaurant," the first time in many years, with new tweaks, soon after out on a new album. He claimed the original was the same length as the "18-minute gap" in the famous Nixon tape," as if that's what might have been erased.

What a large, if unconscious, role he'd played in American history, he joked. but in fact he did just that, articulating in that talking blues the shared experience of the generation. His song addresses the draft quite directly—not as an abstraction, anthem of principle, or elevated protest, but as an informally told personal story from the point of view of an ordinary fellow at the required "physical," there to be classified. The narrator—facing prospects of Vietnam or jail—escapes by being put in the "criminal class," thanks to Alice's restaurant (where you can get anything you want," even without realizing it), following the long thread of the story as it unravels.

If I recall right, being a PC volunteer did not guarantee deferment—nor was it an alternative way to satisfy the required military service, but in practice, it usually accomplished both. Draft boards left PCVs in place, and by the time service was over, either put them at the back of the line or into the group classed as "over the age" (26 for me), though exact criteria kept changing as ever larger numbers were "needed." In my personal case, I'd tried & dropped out of ROTC my freshman year. I even left school for a year without the draft becoming an issue, in 1962, before the JFK assassination & increasingly massive escalation in Vietnam. Draft status & personal response to the war became increasingly important factors to everyone in the age range. In my case, being married & teaching full time kept the call away pre-PC. Now we had the prospect of adding a child to the equation....

This prospect took a major jump en route to India. After Missouri and the subsequent home leave, we'd met up with the rest of our group at the airport in NYC, flying first to London, then Beirut, and finally on toward India. On Air India, high above the high mountains, in the post-midnight darkness of what was my 24th birthday, our little one quickened, his first kicks. That brought our situation home in a more tangible way. (Later, I sent my draft board a note on his birth, with information that we were traveling and had no forwarding address. If they ever sent me anything after, I never got it.)

Meanwhile, we were following Dennis' advice about when to let the administrative side know, so had said nothing to anyone during our orientation in New Delhi, nor at our next training facility, a Japanese-run rice-farm in rural West Bengal, a place called Ranaghat, where we saw rice fields for the first time. Virginia had a glow the village children picked up on, gazing at her in awe, and following along the lanes and road when out walking.

What neither we nor Dennis foresaw, however, was that we'd be greeted in West Bengal by a brand new regional director & totally green doctor, both seemingly out of their element & perhaps suffering from culture shock. The doctor's orientation lecture included the warning that married couples had better practice careful birth-control as pregnancy would get them sent home, due to the lack of adequate care facilities and the regional office's unwillingness to assume the associated risk!

Dennis had believed that, even when the delayed timing of our revelation become obvious, the supportive director and doctor he knew well would be sympathetic, and even appreciate the advice he'd given all the more so with Virginia's assignment focused on "child-care." People differ considerably in the amount of importance they bring Dennis into the picture now for the first time, knowing the statute of limitation give to "official policy," the letter of the regulations, and how much to the original purpose, the objective such policies were meant to serve.

What a shock this was to us! In a sense, this illustrates both a general principle of historical events that was also a key aspect of the Peace Corps idea—namely, that effectiveness requires a nimble attention able to respond flexibly to what is, to improvise solutions to problems you won't know in advance, even with the most informed planning. Dennis knew the actual people and situation, including the fact that India had some experience with childbirth. He did not foresee that two individuals would change,



and thus the whole equation.

While still digesting the doctor's new information, thinking a little more time in country might change this perspective, the new director took us aside. Before indicating what we were told, I should mention that don't have much sense of what he was like, except that I felt no more at ease with him than with the new doctor.

In retrospect, it seems to me the original Peace Corps had been meant to be a different kind of organization than the usual government institution. To preserve the host country trust, to take one example, there had been a firm injunction against being used as a cover for CIA or other agencies. (Remember the Kennedy history with CIA?) It was also meant to work primarily *people to people*, at the grass roots level, and while in practice that usually meant working through or in conjunction with local government structures, volunteers were expected to be non-political, at least as much as possible.

While these principles may not have changed, the administrative level of the institution may have reflected something of Washington culture, which certainly had started to. I suspect the political dimension had increased, for example, along with an emphasis on more formulaic measures in decision-making. West Bengal itself was undergoing major political changes, with a lively potential for turmoil. Just before we arrived, the people had elected a communist Chief Minister to head the West Bengal government.

Flashback: It turns out that someone had made a note about our diplomatic efforts when our training threatened to derail, just trying (along with various other trainees) to do whatever we could to hold the fragmenting pieces together. Our motives were selfish—we wanted & needed our Bengali teachers. We also needed the institution, thus had to work with its duly authorized “powers-that-be.” Presumably the main challenge in such a situation is to moderate the hotheads & placate the idiots.

Now we were told that the new Chief Minister was prone to meddling, micro-managing, especially in his home turf, where local ag extension officers tended to have a short tenure, either because they asked for transfer or the Chief Minister so directed. Because of our experience in the training, we were being posted to there, in a delicate situation. This sounded highly suspect from the start. If accurate, the posting was probably untenable, and very temporary, plus not in our skill-set—at least mine. (It's harder to dislike Virginia.) If we were being put there to ingratiate the Peace Corp[s] with the Chief Minister, it would certainly be a losing proposition all around.

In any case, if indeed it was so “delicate,” then perhaps the director (& thus the doctor) ought to have all the information we had—in case they felt it would better to adjust their postings, whether for political or medical reasons. It also seemed that, if pregnancy were going to get us tossed, it might as well be before posting, not just after. It did. We were given train tickets to Delhi, where “termination” would be completed. That was the last we saw of India 37 as a group. In Delhi, however, the Peace Corps director for India as a whole had a quite different perspective on the situation, close in spirit to our own. He had children, and saw value in keeping us. He couldn't over-rule the regional office, but he helped us stay in India, e.g., separating there rather than in the States.

The Delhi office arranged air tickets & return shipping for whenever we wanted. The director also put us in contact with the Peace Corps doctor in Bangalore, someone much more like the one Dennis had known in Bengal. This doctor in turn put us together with an Australian woman, Yvette Zervas, running a rural children's clinic outside the island village of Srirangapatna, a bus-ride from Mysore City. Yvette invited us to Scott's Bungalow, where I cleaned up a one-room "priest's hole" for us to live in on the banks of the Kauvery River, separated from the main house and clinic building only by a few mango & jackfruit trees—and an occasional cobra & krait—, while Virginia worked with Yvette & Marge at the clinic.

Marge's husband—Laz (for Lazarus) in his Christian persona, Krishna in his Hindu—took care of the gardens, while their 5 children & Yvette's two young boys rounded out the residents. Not counting the monkeys, snakes, hoopoes, sunbirds, crocs, flame trees, dogs, water buffalo, helpers from the village, or stream of visitors.

Occasionally, we helped drive children in serious condition to the mission hospital in Mysore, as the clinic served up mainly diagnosis, treatments for more minor conditions, family-care guidance, and CARE-provided enhanced nutrition. We considered the Mysore hospital for our own delivery, but found instead a wonderful, American-trained obstetrician in Bangalore & hospital (St. Martha's) that would allow me to be present.

With Bangalore too far away to wait until the last minute, Marge's daughter Rackni saw us off at the train station. It turned out we were nearly a month early, staying a short while in an Italian guest house, then, for the bulk of the time, in a cheap room that looked out on a tombstone chiseller's work-yard, where the chip-chip-chipping went on all day every day on one side, while on the other, a woman and her lovely, dirt-smudged daughter, both street beggars, lived under a tree, our friends.

Here we waited for the monsoon as the heat built, with some memorable adventures, mostly beyond the scope of a Peace Corps account, although perhaps not untypical of volunteer experiences. Our "Extraordinary Encounters" file overflows the framework of this chapter, each leading to others. Maybe I'll try to choose a few to follow by way of examples, but will end this chapter with the closest & most extraordinary for us.

Gustav Rabindranath was born at 8 A.M. on the morning of June 5, 1967 at St. Martha's Hospital in Bangalore, healthy, with no complications. The three of us stayed at St. Martha's together—was it really 10 days?!—catching our breath. Our time in India was just beginning—all over again. Though we'd been traveling together for about nine months, now we became both a true threesome *and* a single unit.... There was nothing one did &/or experienced that was not affected by &/or affecting the other two.

[—I'll try to scan a few photos from the period ASAP. Some may indeed be worth more than the proverbial thousand words.]