Bogou, late October 1986

As I begin this newsletter, it's nearly the end of October, and Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Instead of crispy cold fall weather it's hot and muggy, and it hasn't rained for nearly a month. But there are pumpkins turning orange in the fields, and even the leaves are a fairly convincing shade of fallish yellow-brown. We wake up early to a vivid blue morning sky, and the landscape, thick with ripening corn and millet and cotton, stands in sharp relief, like a portrait, with no shadows. As the day wears on, the thermometer climbing, a light haze creeps in almost unnoticed, until by evening the landscape is pale and haggard, like an expanse of carpet faded by the sun. Nights are delightfully cool, and almost free of mosquitoes. The last of our garden hangs on resolutely: bright, glossy peppers, pungent basil, heavy clumps of green tomatoes with a promising blush of red. Summer has come and gone, we're gearing up for another work season, and suddenly it's been a whole year since we arrived here in Bogou!

We took most of our allotted vacation time this summer, and had a chance to sample some other parts of west Africa. After spending most of July in Ghana, we headed north in late September to spend nearly 4 weeks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Ghana, although English-speaking, is very much like Togo, with similar landscapes, food, people, and lifestyles. We went there mostly to visit some volunteers we'd trained with in Colorado, and also because we'd heard about Ghana's "tourist quality" coastline and miles of sandy beaches. The rumors were true, and when I think of our trip to Ghana I recall a handful of lazy days on a gently sloping strip of sandy beach, reading books, drinking cold beers, and eating lots of fresh fish and lobster. A wattle-and-daub fishing village nearby occassionally reminded us we were in Africa!

But Ghana's "tourist quality" coast was also once the focus of most of the new world slave trade, and before that the Portuguese came in their caravels searching for gold. A dozen stone castles still dot Ghana's coast, reminders of some unappealing periods in history. El Mina castle, built in 1482, is perhaps the most infamous of these coastal citadels. A large percentage of the slaves shipped to America for nearly 200 years were first held in the dungeons of El Mina, often for months at a time. A tour through the well-preserved maze of dark, airless cells and narrow stone passageways is a sobering, creepy experience.

Leaving the coast behind, we flew north in a small plane from Accra, Ghana's sprawling, suburban, energetic capitol, avoiding several days' travel on a tortuous, unfinished road. Through breaks in the puffy, sun-lit clouds below the plane we caught glimpses of Lake Volta, a vast expanse of glittering, man-made blue. In Bolgatanga, a thriving market town in the north, we bought armloads of crafts and colorful woven goods. From there an easy day in a "bush taxi" (a beat-up old pickup truck with bench seats and a wooden canopy) brought us back to Dapaong in late July.

The months of August and September were spent in Bogou and Dapaong, testing a visual aids package being developed to help expand the stoves program in Togo. This year we'll be training government extension agents to organize village stove building sessions using these new materials. In addition, we'll be experimenting with different models of low-cost rain catchment cisterns, since lack of water is a big problem in much of northern Togo.

Then in late September, a volunteer named Dave joined Mike and me for a trip into the sahel regions of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Our main gaal was a 700 km. boat trip down the Niger River between the Malian towns of Mopti and Gao. From its headwaters in eastern Guinea the Niger River flows north, then east, spending almost 1500 of its 4200 kms. in Mali, before turning south and flowing through Niger and Nigeria on its way back to the ocean, not far from where it began. Along the way, this 3rd longest river in Africa has been the setting for some of the richest legends in African history. Here lies the legendary city of Timbuktu, once a center of Islamic learning, where in the 16th century books were reputedly worth more than any other merchandise. Here three of Africa's greatest empires rose and fell between the 6th and 16th centuries. And here began, in the 4th century AD, the thriving trade in salt and gold between black west Africa and the desert dwellers of the north. Huge quantities of gold from the tropical forests of the sub-sahel made their way up the Niger River to be traded for slabs of valuable salt from the rim of the desert. Thus the River served as the link between these varied peoples, and the catalyst for the legendary prosperity created by their trading. One tale tells of a famous Malian king, Mansa Moussa, who embarked on a lavish pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. His entourage included 100 camels laden with gold, and while in Cairo he was so generous with his gifts of gold that the market price of the metal plummeted, disrupting the economy for years afterward! It's estimated that 2/3 of all the gold that entered Europe and north Africa for 10 centuries passed through the sahel via the Niger River.

So a trip through Mali, along the Niger River, is in many ways a trip back in time. Berbers and Tuaregs, dressed much as their ancestors of 500 years ago, still sell huge, marble-like slabs of coarse salt along the banks of the river. Peuhl, or Fulani, women, draped in layers of rich cloths and jewelry, still sell curdled milk out of giant guord bowls. Many Tuareg nomads still wear home-dyed indigo cloth that turns their light skin an eerie shade of blue, earning them the nickname "blue men of the desert". Traders still travel in caravans of camels, 8 yards of net-like cloth wound into turbans around their heads, and voluminous, light-colored robes covering every inch of exposed skin.

But the caravans of gold have vanished, and the ancient cities of Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, once thriving centers of wealth, learning, and trade, are now dusty, subdued skeletons of their former selves. Modern cement buildings, cars, and electric lights are common evidence that the 20th century has reached even this remote corner of the world. But within this mix of ancient and modern, Mali is still exotic and mysterious, and very different. In Djenne, said to be the oldest city in west Africa, the closely-packed 2-story houses are made entirely of mud, including the roofs. The city is a maze of narrow alleyways and quiet courtyards, except one large, open expanse at its center, where an enormous mosque stands, also made of mud. Inside are 100 earthen pillars, each a meter square, soaring 40 feet into the air to support a vast expanse of flat, mud roof. Unlike Togo's simple, functional earthen huts, the buildings here are decorated with ornate balustrades, turrets, and parapets, all sculpted in mud. As the elaborate mosque attests, Djenne is a community of devout, wealthy muslims. Men and women alike dress in flowing robes of expensive cloth, elaborately embroidered, and at prayer time the open square around the mosque is a sea of men in colorful robes and cylindrical caps, flowing piously toward their place of worship.

Mopti, 100 kms. downstream, is a much larger town than Djenne, with an entirely different flavor. Set along the Niger River, it's a thriving port city, and a center of trade and commerce. Tuareg traders arriving from the desert "park" their camels just outside the city limits, and roam the crowded streets selling leather boxes, swords, and daggers. Canoes poled by men of the Bozo, or"boat people" tribe ply the waterfront, laden with people and goods. Larger, motorized "canoes" transport grain and passengers up and down Mali's 1200 navigable kms of the Niger River. The government also runs a weekly ferry service up and down the river. Two-storied and flat-roofed, the boats are reminiscent of Mississippi paddle-wheelers. We rented a 2nd class cabin, which entitled us to 2 meals a day as well, and boarded one of these boats in Mopti for the 3 1/2 day trip to Gao, 700 kms. downstream.

From Mopti to Timbuktu the boat was as crowded as a New York subway at rush hour. People and baggage were crammed into every available space, so that it was often impossible to move from one end of the boat to the other. The cabins were also overbooked, so we spent the first 2 nights sleeping amidst a sea of bodies on the dining room floor! But at Timbuktu most of the passengers got off, and for the next two days we had our own cabin, and a lot of peace and quiet to enjoy the spectacular scenery.

As for Timbuktu, Mike and Dave got to spend all of 2 minutes there! The boat docked 13 kms. away, for noone knew how long, but they took a chance and scrounged their way to the city and back, just to say they'd been there. It was high noon, the hottest part of the day, and a strong wind had kicked up a scorching pall of sand and dust. On shore, a cluster of low, grass "tents" huddled desolately, as piles of off-loaded cargo grew beside them, to await transport to Timbuktu. Meanwhile, Mike and Dave set off on foot through the dust storm, eventually catching a truck ride into the legendary city. But nervous about missing the boat, they took a quick glance around and hopped on the next available truck! Their brief impressions? Reddish clay buildings, their bases buried in drifts of sand, and hardly a soul in sight. (In an attempt to revive tourism, however, the city now boasts a posh, 5-star, high-rise hotel).

As it was, they arrived back at the boat with nearly an hour to spare, so we went wandering amongst the tents on shore. We were invited into one of them by a Tuareg trader with an eye for a sale. We removed our shoes and crawled inside, then sat on grass mats while he served us tiny glasses of the traditional sweet, black tea. Low and quonset-shaped, the tent was perhaps 10 ft. square, and not quite high enough to stand up in. Made of bent branches and woven grass mats, it's easily dismantled and moved from place to place. Inside it was cool and dark, protected from the sun and the hot, sandy wind. In one corner sat a young woman draped in black cloth, a tiny newborn sleeping beside her. An older man, a blacksmith, sat amidst his tools and anvil and tiny charcoal fire. The pipes, daggers, and amulets he fabricates are sold to boat passengers by the persuasive young man who served us tea. Suddenly we heard a shout, and scrambled out of the tent to see the gangplank lifting and the boat pulling away from shore. Amidst a chorus of delighted hooting and hollering we dove into a tiny canoe and managed to reach the boat and clamber aboard, dropping a generous tip into the canoe poler's hands!

Although they're still an important part of desert life, camels are becoming less common. During the entire boat trip we only saw 2 of them, and we never got a chance to ride one. It seems that many of them died during the most recent drought, but rich Arabs from north Africa are buying them up as well, at high prices too tempting for a poor Tuareg to turn down.

The boat ride ends in Gao, a town just north of the Niger border. The dusty terminus of one of the two major trans-saharan routes, it's a regional center, and has received huge amounts of famine aid money in the past few years. It's now a disparate mix of run-down market, suburb-like clusters of neat, new buildings nearby, and beyond these a sea of domed, grass refugee tents. From here we boarded a large desert bus for the 30 hour trip to Niamey, Niger's capitol city. With a clearance of 4 or 5 feet, enormous tires, and a set of impressively low gears, the 60-passenger bus ground its way through sand, cobbles, and streambeds at an average rate of several miles per hour. A kidney belt would have been appreciated!

We arrived in Niamey coincident with an American community softball tourney weekend, and spent several days enjoying the swimming pools and barbeques, before heading south to Dapaong. And now as I finally wrap up this newsletter it's somehow already mid-December, and this time it's Christmas that's just around the corner. I had meant to get this to you by then... The harvests are in now, and the landscape is again brown and flat and open, as the millet stocks tumble and the brush fires begin. Harmattan season is upon us, with a fog-like haze of dust blown down from the desert, and cold nights requiring blankets! The hot season is a few short months down the road, and then the rains begin, and soon after that it will be time to leave. Although we're enjoying this chance to live and work in Africa, we will be very happy when it's time to come home. Hope all of you had a wonderful Christmas!
Until next time,

Lots of Love, Karen & Mike

B.P. 104
Dapaong Togo