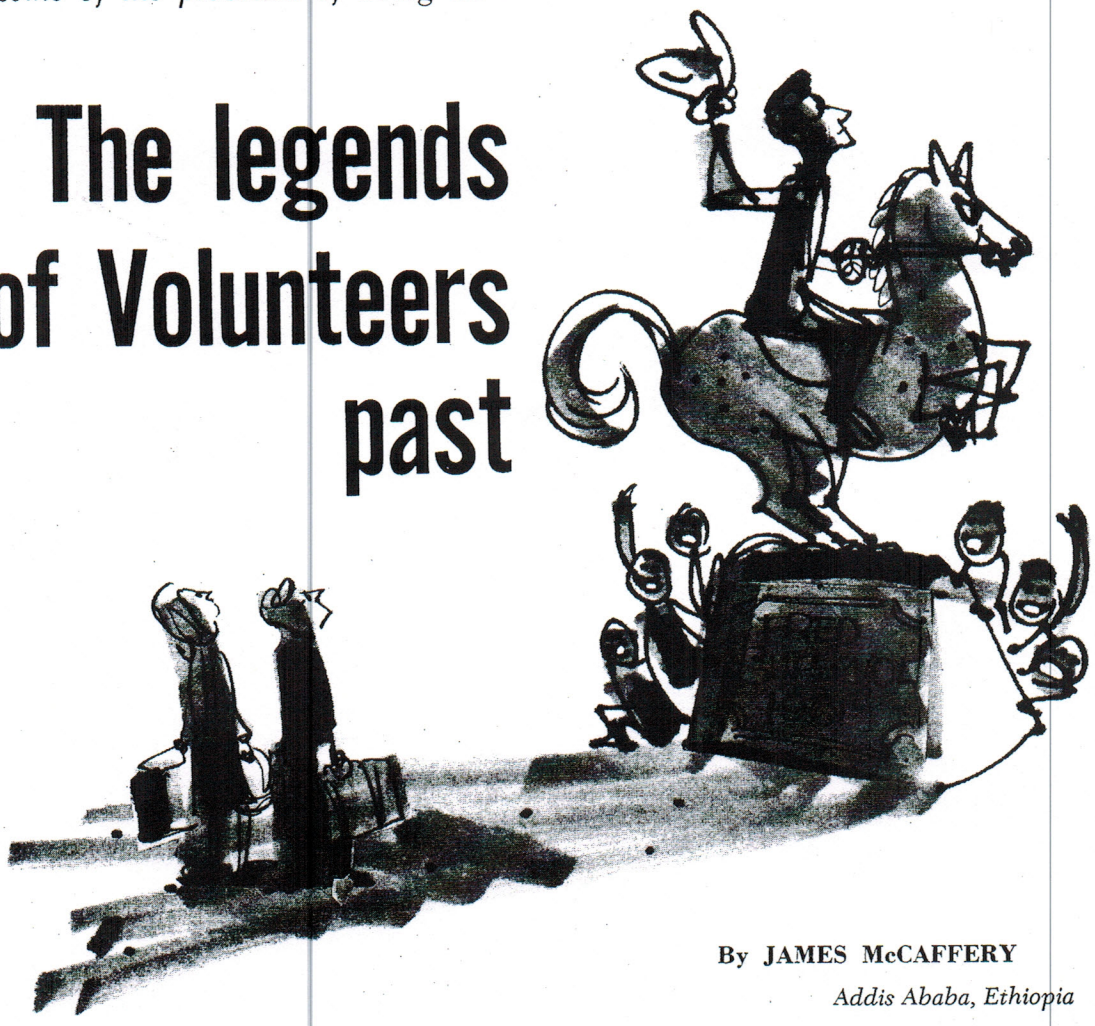
A present-day Volunteer discusses some of the problems of living with

The legends of Volunteers past



By JAMES McCAFFERY

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

A small, searing, white dot hanging high in an otherwise flawless azure sky, the noonday sun never moved, just stayed in one place, motionless, smothering everything with its penetrating heat. Sitting by the dusty gravel road, we kept looking hopefully for a car or a truck or a mule—anything—to take us out of this inferno and up the road to our destination. A slight movement far down the road attracted our attention but, much to our chagrin, we realized that it was only a man, ambling slowly towards us, blurred slightly by the silent, shimmering heat waves. After a time, the tiny figure became a larger figure and soon arrived at our little station on the road. We had been waiting for three hours, trying to hitch a ride to Bahar Dar and this was the first moving thing to pass us during that time.

Only he didn't pass us.

He stopped, a young man of about 23 years, and stared at us, leaning lazily on his walking stick. Then, perhaps noticing our dusty, beaten up clothes or my friend's telephoto lens or understanding implicitly that only Peace Corps Volunteers would be insane enough to attempt hitching a ride on this road, he blurted out, "You are Peace Corps."

We didn't ask him how he knew. Everybody knows, even though we don't wear a uniform. Or do we?

"Yes," I replied through baked lips, "we are at that."

"The Peace Corps," he began, "is a great thing for Ethiopia. When I went to secondary school back in 1962, the time when the first Volunteers were here, I knew all the Peace Corps Volunteers who taught in the town."

"Oh?", my friend groaned, both of us cringing at what we knew was coming.

"Yes," he continued enthusiastically, "one Volunteer supported eight

students both years he was here. A great fellow. Another paid for two students, enabling them to study in Addis Ababa. But the best Volunteer was that one who took his student with him when he returned to the States."

And, as he continued, I managed to shut him out of my mind. Here it was again, in the middle of a scorching day on a dry, dusty road in Gojjam province. Inescapable. Ubiquitous.

The Legacy.

The thing which all Peace Corps Volunteers who came after the first group had to learn to live with and which all Volunteers in the future will have to cope with.

The legends of Volunteers Past.

At first it was interesting, even fun, to hear stories of old Volunteers. Then, after hearing the stories a couple of times, it grew boring. After that, when we realized that we were expected to live up (or down, as the case may be) to long gone Volunteers, it became irritating. Finally, it grew maddening, especially when it became apparent that some of the things which they did and about which we had heard so much were at the root of some of our present problems.

Since the Peace Corps is no longer a pioneering venture and because most people who enter the Peace Corps today will follow in the footsteps of other Peace Corps Volunteers, it is pertinent to examine some of the problems of being a "second generation" Volunteer. Because of the limitations of space, this is not meant to be an exhaustive report, delineating all problems of this nature faced by today's Peace Corps Volunteer, but only a brief examination of what are, hopefully, representative examples—student support and language—and their importance to Volunteers past and present.

Anxious greetings

One of the first sights which the new Volunteer teacher sees when he enters his town for the first time is a group of eager, nervous looking students, each desperately grasping a crumpled piece of paper. On the piece of paper, the Volunteer soon finds out, is a plea for help, invoking everyone from God to the old Volunteer (not necessarily in that order).

With some of the more aggressive students the plea approaches something a bit stronger than a request:

"You must support me. Mr. Smerdely supported me last year. He said a new Peace Corps Volunteer would come to take his place and help me. Therefore you must help me."

Or sometimes it is more polite:

"Hello, how are you? I am fine. You will support me this year?"

Once in a while, it comes in the form of a note directly from one of those legendary figures of the past:

Dear New Volunteer,

I hope you will be able to support this fine student. I am certain that you will find him honest, loyal, poor, etc.

Yours,
Frederick Supervol

If the Volunteer resists the initial wave of students and refrains from agreeing to support the whole ninth grade, the more ingenious student will show up later and very subtley imply that the Peace Corps Volunteer doesn't quite measure up to the Volunteers of the past because he isn't supporting enough students. Since it is very difficult to figure out something worthwhile to do outside of school, it is very easy to accept the proposition that supporting students is one of those "extra responsibilities" of the Peace Corps Volunteer. It is also comfortable, because past Volunteers always did it, and painless, since it requires little effort other than reaching into one's pocket once a week.

However, among the Volunteers who have come during the past year or two, there has been a general reappraisal of this unspoken custom. Some of the inequities have become apparent. For instance, if there are a thousand students in a school, why pick one or two when most are about equal in poverty? More important, how does one know who is really poor and deserving of help?

Moreover, some of the hazards also began to be discussed. Many Volunteers had money or things stolen from their houses by their students. Some Volunteers learned that they were supporting incorrigible cheaters or students who had almost as much money as the Volunteer. (For example, after school had closed one year, one Volunteer came home to find that his student had hired several men and a horse-drawn

cart to carry his baggage to the bus station. This made the Volunteer suspect that his help wasn't quite crucial for the welfare of this student.)

Then there were the more subtle hazards, which the first groups of Volunteers could not have possibly foreseen. For instance, what happens after the Volunteer leaves? The student has become accustomed to living in a certain manner and finds it hard to adjust. So he asks future Volunteers for support—and if he can't get help, he sometimes uses it as a convenient excuse for quitting school or for decrying the Volunteers who refused to help him. More important, how does living with an American, a creature with completely different cultural and moral habits, influence the young, impressionable student? Does it make him better equipped to cope with his own society? Or does it frustrate him by showing him what he thinks may be a better way of life without offering any hope of living such a life?

Underemployment

Many Volunteers gave their students little work to do or, because they supported so many students, couldn't find work for them all. This had two effects. First, it reinforced the student's attitude that manual labor is bad and that if one is a student one should never have to work. (This is one of the major problems of most underdeveloped countries.) Second, it gave the Peace Corps a reputation as a "soft touch" for students who wanted money but weren't overly industrious.

Another more general attitude engendered by student support was one where students seemed to judge Peace Corps Volunteers as being valuable according to the number of students they supported and how much money they doled out to these students.

A second example of the Legacy concerns language. In many Peace Corps countries, especially those with teaching projects, language was not emphasized. For example, during that traumatic first day of training when we were being informed of the program in store for us, the project director said that language was very important, but not crucial, to our success in Ethiopia.

Not crucial?

Click.

Immediately nine-tenths of the people turned off on language. In a condensed program, that which was not crucial simply had to be forgotten. This attitude was reinforced by former Volunteers who told us confidently that they hardly ever used the language when they were in the country.

"Everybody speaks English," they said repeatedly.

Of course, they didn't add that most of them couldn't have used the language even had they wanted to. But it was a comforting thought, knowing that language wasn't important, especially because it was so damn hard. Furthermore, there were so many other important things to do, like running 2,000 laps around the P.E. field every day or slapping plastic wounds on the foreheads of other trainees (first aid training).

In the past, this language deficiency has proved, because of the very limited command of English which most Ethiopians have, especially in the provinces, to be a distinct barrier to communication. (It goes without saying that the uneducated can speak no English at all.) Furthermore, many Volunteers complained that after two years in the

country they had never really gotten to know an Ethiopian, implying, at the same time, that it was the fault of the latter. In reality, however, it was most likely caused by the Volunteer's inability to speak Amharic and his unwillingness to struggle with broken English. In addition, ignorance of the indigenous language was, and is, one of the main reasons for the closed "Peace Corps community" prevalent in so many towns. When the Volunteer can only speak English he tends, after the initial surge of enthusiasm wears down, to talk mainly with other Volunteers. It is still somewhat puzzling that Peace Corps could purport to be a "people to people" organization, yet devote so little effort to the language of the host country.

Support changing

However, within the last year, both of these situations have begun to undergo considerable change. The idea of student support is altering. Peace Corps Volunteers are now searching for methods of help which will reach a greater number of students and which will be more effective and lasting than simple monetary support—a method which will enable the student to help himself so that, when the Peace Corps Volunteer leaves, the student will be able to continue his studies even if a new Peace Corps Volunteer doesn't come. The present generation of Volunteers (perhaps partly as a result of the decreased living allowance) is much more strict with its money for students, much more stringent in its demands for student work if they do support students, and much less likely to support an excessive number of students. This has changed the atmosphere in Peace Corps towns so much that now, when new Volunteers arrive, they are no longer inundated by hordes of students, all claiming previous Peace Corps support and, in effect, begging for more.

Language is now being emphasized, both in training and in the host country. Last summer's training program, for example, had, for the first time in the history of Peace Corps Ethiopia, a minimum FSI score which all Volunteers had to attain or face de-selection. Although it is still difficult for many Volunteers to learn the language, at least attitudes have changed enough so that many Volunteers study the language after arriving in the country. This was very rare in the past. There is also a language officer now, someone to provide the Volunteers with language materials and to organize language conferences at various times throughout the year. Although it will take time to reverse the inertial flow of hundreds of Volunteers who passed through the country without learning the language, and who then justified this by insisting it wasn't important, at least a start has been made.

In general, many things are changing today—present-day Volunteers are just beginning to overturn some of the misdirected actions of earlier Peace Corps Volunteers. The first Volunteers were successful in great part because of the "Peace Corps Idea" and the novelty of it and not because of their actual performance. For example, the original Peace Corps Volunteer did not have to know the language; it was enough to smile at a host country national and mutter a few garbled words to him. It was amazing enough having a foreigner out in the bush somewhere.

But that is not enough now.

Today, the Peace Corps Volunteer has to be able to speak the language. Otherwise, in the eyes of the students and townspeople, he will acquire the image of an expatriate teacher, living within his own community and venturing out of his house only to make his way to school. Also, it will help to make it possible for Volunteers to have more meaningful relationships with people in the community. This might then eliminate some of the cynicism like that of the Volunteer who felt that after two years he had never made any friends except with other Peace Corps Volunteers. It might also serve as a release for the pressures caused by the close contact between the Volunteers in one town.

As another example, the first generation of Volunteers couldn't possibly have seen the effects of its student support. The present generation, cognizant of the effects of this type of support, is working to change them, to get rid of the image of the "soft touch" and to help students by other means—by good teaching, for example, or by directing students in methods of working their way through school within the context of the indigenous culture and by using resources which will always be available to them, not just those provided temporarily by the Peace Corps Volunteer.

It is not the contention here to prove that the first Volunteers were failures for, to fail, there must be some standard of success and when they came there was obviously no such standard (and probably never will be). It necessarily takes a certain amount of time for a new program, especially one like the Peace Corps, to iron out its problems and ascertain what things work best. With five years of experience to draw upon, the Peace Corps is simply gaining a much better sense of direction than it was even possible to have before.

The first Volunteers probably had a wilder and, perhaps, a more interesting time and were accepted immediately because of the Peace Corps "Idea," whereas present Volunteers have to prove themselves by their deeds, not by their novelty value. (The "bland Volunteer" charge may stem from this change in in-country conditions rather than from any major change in the types of Volunteers that are now joining the Peace Corps.)

New direction

It seems that we are beginning, only beginning, to prove ourselves, and the Volunteers who come after us in the next years will have even a better chance to improve upon this general trend. Hopefully our legacy will provide future Volunteers with a bit better direction than the one left us by the first generation. If it doesn't, if actual experience in the field and the resulting feedback does not provide better direction, it would seem to indicate that the Peace Corps is a colossal failure and that the American is not perceptive enough, or perhaps not really willing, to live in another culture and understand the problems and perplexities of that culture.

As a member of Group VII in Ethiopia, James McCaffery arrived in-country four years after the first Volunteers went there, and during the past one and a half years he has been a "second generation" Volunteer in both rural and urban sites. He is now an English teacher in Addis Ababa, and a correspondent for THE VOLUNTEER. *He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin.*