

Books

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

The Peace Corps as History and Remembrance

A Peace Corps veteran and fine journalist casts his eye over the first 50 years of Peace Corps

[When The World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and Its First Fifty Years](#)

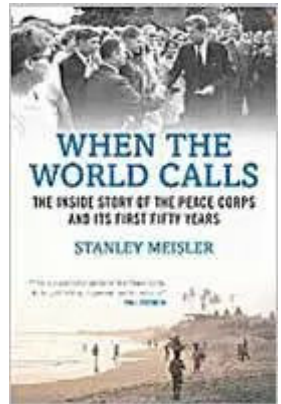
By Stanley Meisler

Beacon Press 2011

\$26.95

Reviewed by John Coyne (Addis Ababa 62-65)

ETHIOPIA RPCVs WILL BE SURPRISED and delighted to know that Stanley Meisler's concise and thoroughly informative history of the first 50 years of the Peace Corps, devotes a full chapter to the Peace Corps Volunteers of the old Empire. This chapter entitled "The Fall of the Lion of Judah" begins with this ominous paragraph:



For better or worse, no country has ever felt the impact of the Peace Corps as much as Ethiopia did in the 1960s and 1970s. A generation of educated Ethiopians grew up in which every member had been taught in high school by at least one Peace Corps Volunteer, and probably many more. These educated Ethiopians spoke English better than any generation that came before or afterward and pondered modern and democratic ideas that were both exciting and subversive in the hoary empire of Haile Selassie I. A case can be made that the Volunteers contributed to the revolution that brought down the emperor. But the Peace Corps has never boasted about this.

Stan Meisler, a reporter with long experience with the AP and the Los Angeles Times, came late to the Peace Corps. "I was not there at the madcap, exciting, glorious beginning. I started my work at Peace Corps headquarters just after the election of Lyndon B. Johnson to a full term as president, a year after the assassination of President Kennedy."

Stan had misgivings about working for the government, as any reporter might, but the Peace Corps was different. "It was," he writes, "an oasis of idealism and goodness in the vast Washington bureaucracy. Everyone, even Washington correspondents, loved the Peace Corps."

In his tour, he would make a half dozen lengthy — a month or longer — trips to evaluate Peace Corps programs: twice to Ethiopia, twice to Cameroon, and once each to Tanzania, Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, India, and Iran. After the Peace Corps, and for three decades, he was a foreign and diplomatic correspondent for the Los Angeles Times. Knowing Stan

from his tours to Ethiopia and at Peace Corps Headquarters, I'd say if anyone is capable of writing about the agency, it's Stanley Meisler.

His history of the first 50 years of the agency follows two paths. One path is the work of PCVs overseas based mostly on his own evaluations and exhaustive research over the last two years; the second path follows the policy and political maneuverings in Washington, D.C. with its various power struggles, political appointments, and wily decision making. These back room and background stories come from persons with firsthand knowledge of how it all happened.

Stan is at his best when discerning what he observed during his evaluation tours and later saw from afar when he was working for three decades as a foreign correspondent in Africa and Latin America. Not much gets by this guy. Like any good reporter, Stan has done his homework and it shows. His history of the Peace Corps, *When The World Calls*, is full of nuggets of information which he develops into interesting and insightful stories. As someone who has made a passion, a hobby (some might call it an obsession) out of the agency, I was surprised by what I didn't know about the Peace Corps, the back stories, let's call them, of what really happened at HQ. Meisler has gotten to a lot of folks who are still around to tell tales of the good (and not so good) old days.

Meisler tracks the agency over these five decades, beginning with Shriver. He ends his book with Aaron Williams, the current Director, a former PCV in the Dominican Republic. But Stan focuses his history mostly on themes, flash points, the worth of the PCV overseas, and what RPCVs have accomplished, then and now, in their host country and here at home.

The titles of his chapters show where Meisler is going and what interests him.

Sarge's Peace Corps (Chapter 2)
Americans Invade Dominican Republic (Chapter 6)
The Militant Sam Brown (Chapter 11)
The Rich Lady in Her First Job for Pay (Chapter 13)
200,000 Stories (Chapter 14)
The Quiet Bush Years (Chapter 17)
Does the Peace Corps Do Any Good? (Afterward)

For obvious reasons I zoned in Chapter 14, as the telling of Peace Corps tales has been the focus of my Peace Corps interest for some twenty-five years. With Marian Haley Beil (Debre Berhan 62-64) we have been tracking Peace Corps writers as if we were the Emperor's long ago palace cheetahs. Stan is kind enough to recognize our efforts (thank you, Stan!) and single out three fine memoirs by RPCVs: Mike Tidwell (Zaire 1985-86); Ellen Urbani (Guatemala 1992-94); and Barbara E. Joe (Honduras 2000-04) to show the range of experiences, the range of hardships and triumphs, and the range of age of Volunteers. These memoirs show us old Ethiopian PCVs, as well as the rest of the world, where the Peace Corps is today.

These memoirs, he sums up, "reflected a changing Peace Corps. By the 1980s, the Peace Corps had become an elite institution of Americans working in remote sites, often alone, coping with poverty and inertia, doing the best they could to change what little they could . . . All in all, based on the evidence in these memoirs, the most recent Volunteers struck an old evaluator like myself as a heroic band."

Thanks, Stan, for telling us how it was and how it is and for bringing our stories home.

John Coyne (Addis 62-64) is the editor of www.peacecorpsworld.org and the Manager of Communications for The College of New Rochelle. His next novel, *The Caddie Who Won the Masters*, will be published in the spring of 2011.

Adventures in two worlds

An Ethiopian-American writes a powerful and touchy narrative of a father's odyssey and a son's journey of discovery

[How to Read the Air](#)

by Dinaw Mengestu

Riverhead Books 2010

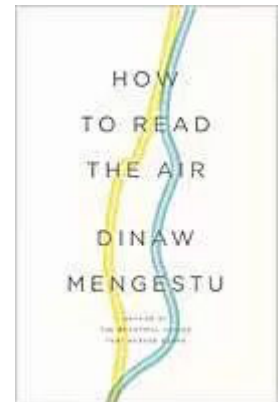
\$25.95

Reviewed by Janet (Danzl) Lee (Endeber 74-76)

EACH DAY AS I WALKED to and from the Segenat Children and Youth Library in Mekelle, where I recently spent five months volunteering during a sabbatical from my job as a librarian in Denver, I passed by Sefra Jeganu, the Heroes' Residence. The compound housed wounded resistance fighters who were instrumental in the struggle for democracy and self-determination that ultimately led to the toppling of the Derg, the military government that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. The compound was a complex maze of family units built from chiseled rocks. Although the wheel-chair bound men — and some women — were guarded and cautious about me, a ferengi, the children welcomed me into their modest homes and spoke openly about their fathers' injuries and their daily lives. Sefra Jeganu was just one of many daily reminders that I witnessed of Ethiopia's war-torn recent past.

As a PCV during the time of the overthrow of Haile Sellasie and the first two years of the Derg, I was aware, albeit naively, of the terror that surrounded me. Now many years later, I am only beginning to understand the depth of that terror. And so I welcome the fresh voices of young writers such as Dinaw Mengestu who are telling the tales long ignored outside of Ethiopia. Dinaw's new book, "How to Read the Air," is not by any means a war novel, but aspects of war and struggle permeate the story as the narrator, Jonas Woldemariam, an American of Ethiopian ancestry attempts to work through issues of his failed marriage by reconstructing the last road trip that his parents made together from Peoria, Illinois, to Nashville, Tennessee, prior to the dissolution of their own marriage. Like many of the Ethiopian Diaspora, Jonas' father, Yosef, fled Ethiopia during the Red Terror and ultimately found his way to the United States, leaving his young bride, Mariam, to follow several years later. Their courtship had been brief and dramatic occurring "under a backdrop of fiery speeches and frequent gunfire in the last days of the monarchy." This separation contributed to the distance the couple felt between them, as did the difficulties of reuniting in a foreign land with a new language and unusual customs. One can safely assume that the addition the baggage of the war itself, which divided countrymen from each other based on politics and lineage, further disconnected the couple.

In reality, Jonas knows little of his father, a man who along with dozens of other men and boys was imprisoned in a cell outside of Addis after the Derg took power. He was released with no explanation. Over the course of two months he was transported to a port city in Sudan in a small truck and eventually fled Sudan tucked into a box on a ship. It is no wonder that Yosef had dreams of boxes until the last days of his life. And it is no wonder that Jonas felt a void that his absent father left behind, unspoken gaps of personal history that haunted his own sense of who he was and his relationships with others.



Dinaw seamlessly weaves the original journey taken by Jonas' parents thirty years earlier with the ongoing journey Jonas takes immediately after his father's death. Jonas has become a masterful storyteller, first retelling personal stories of refugees and immigrants as a clerk in a legal aid office, later as an English teacher at a prep school. It is at the legal aid office that he meets Angela, his future wife. She has her own share of issues and inadequacies, compounded by the stories and half-truths that they tell each other. Throughout it becomes difficult even for Jonas to tell where the truth ends and the fiction begins, the illusion become so much a part of his being.

The recounting, or more accurately the fabricating, of Yosef's exodus from war-torn Ethiopia through Sudan to the U.S. is the book's strength. After the death of his father, Jonas explains his absence from class to his prep school students by telling his father's story. But this is not just his father's story. It is the story of so many Ethiopians who fled the peril of a brutal dictatorship. The students are enthralled and the story becomes urban legend, exaggerated in each subsequent retelling.

This is a complex, yet beautifully written, book, uniquely African and uniquely American. Copies of "How to Read the Air" will join "The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears" on the shelves in the Book Club room of the Segenat Children and Youth Library, in Mekelle, Ethiopia. An eager generation of young readers awaits.

Janet (Danzl) Lee recently joined Yohannes Gebregeorgis for five months in setting up the Segenat Children and Youth Library in Mekelle, Ethiopia. Her frequent blogs have been posted on the following facebook page:

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Segenat-Children-and-Youth-Library/161388783881687>

Books by Friends

Three of our colleagues have recently written books of considerable interest: two about Ethiopia and the other not

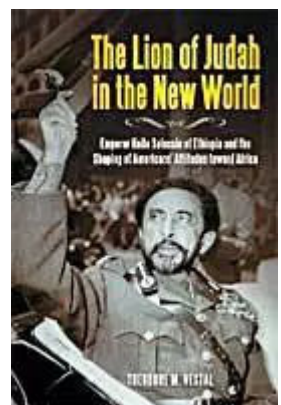
[The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans' Attitudes toward Africa](#)

By Theodore M. Vestal

Praeger 2011

\$44.95

TED VESTAL WAS ON PEACE CORPS/ETHIOPIA staff from 1964 to 1968 and then went on to a career as a professor of political science at Oklahoma State University where Ethiopia remained the center of his studies and his writing. His latest book, which comes out this month, traces the legacy of Haile Selassie in forming attitudes in the United States towards Africa. As Sergeant Shriver travelled Africa in the early '60s in search of countries which might be interested in accepting Peace Corps Volunteers, most of the leaders he met with were newly minted and largely unknown Presidents and Prime ministers who not too many years earlier had been independence fighters struggling in the bush. The exception was Haille Selassie who for many Americans was the face of Africa. In his book Ted traces how Haille Selassie used his fame and prestige to forge an important alliance with America. He also discusses American relations with Ethiopia. It's all studded with fascinating vignettes — Chief Justice Earl Warren offering Haille Selassie lunch at the Supreme Court, for example — which always makes Ted's books so intriguing.



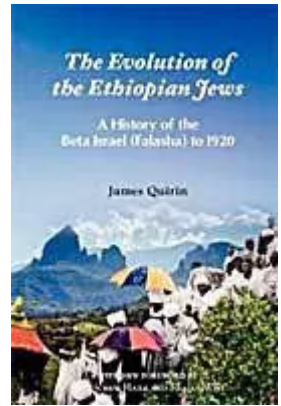
[The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel \(Falasha\) to 1920](#)

by James Quirin (Bati 65-67)

Tsehai Publishers 2010

\$29.95

THIS SCHOLARLY AND VERY THOROUGH book first came out in hardback in 1992, but has been updated and is now available in paperback via Amazon. For those of us interested in the history of the people we used to call the Falashas and are now called the Beta Israel, this study traces them from their origins in the shadows of history to the early 20th century.



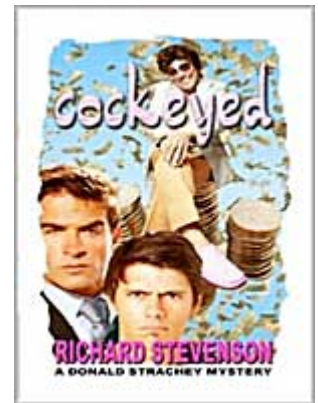
[Cockeyed](#)

by Richard Stevenson, aka Richard Lipez (Debre Marcos 62-64)

MLR Press 2010

\$14.99

RICHARD LIPEZ HAS HAD a long and successful career as a writer including the great success of his Donald Strachey mystery series that were written under the name of Richard Stevenson. Strachey is a gay private detective who, as all good fictional PIs, gets entangled in engaging characters who make the book worth reading. Dick Lipez's book is more than just worth reading, it is, as Tony D'Souza (Ivory Coast 2000-02, Madagascar 2002-03) writes in his wonderful **review** found on that essential Peace Corps web site, PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org, "a precious and glittering page turner." So much so, says D'Souza, "I'm still trying to shake the glitter off of my page turning fingers." But the book is more than pure entertainment. D'Souza cleverly links Lipez's work with Christopher Isherwood's The Berlin Stories. They both have important points hidden away under that glitter. So do [read D'Souza's review](#), then order the book.



More Books about Ethiopia and Eritrea

In the last few months Ethiopia and Eritrea have generated more of books than we can review in the HERALD. Here is a list of some of the more interesting ones.

[Famine & Foreigners: Ethiopia Since Live Aid](#)

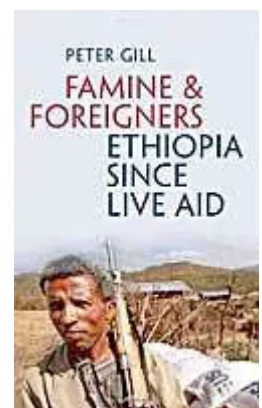
By Peter Gill

Oxford 2010

\$27.95

Steve Chesebrough (Asmara 62-64) sent us an email alerting us to a book review of *Famine & Foreigners* by Peter Gill which appeared in the Wall Street Journal in September last year. We love when readers help us. Wrote Steve of the book:

This read to me like an interesting case of Telling It Like It Is. I was wondering if you thought commentary like this would be of interest to the readers of The HERALD? Possibly it will seem too controversial to discuss or publicize.



Well, we don't want to run the full review here, but you can check out the review "[The Hazards of Doing Good](#)" at the WSJ site.

Steve declined our offer to review the book for the HERALD: “Gee whiz – I think the last time I did a book report, I was in the 8th grade!” But he sure was on to something. We read the book. The book is an excellent recounting of the struggles over aid to Ethiopia, and raises the wider issue of whether humanitarian aid throughout Africa and the developing world has done very much good. The book has been widely reviewed and produced articles arguing the merits and demerits of aid. See, for example, the review [“How little changes: Foreign aid, a hostage to fortune”](#) in the Economist; as well as an extensive review, [“Abused by Hope,”](#) in the New Republic. Or better yet, buy the book and review it.

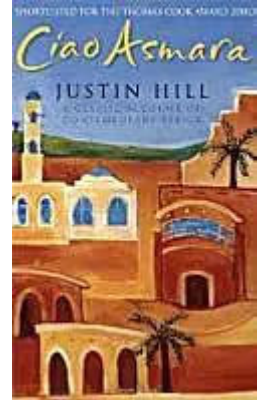
[Ciao Asmara: A Classic Account of Contemporary Africa](#)

by Justin Hill

Abacus 2002

\$16.25

Several friends, including a former student from Eritrea, called this book to our attention. It was published nearly ten years ago, but is still in print in paperback and available from Amazon. It is the story of a young aid worker who takes up a offer to teach in newly independent Eritrea in 1996. The book is described as a bittersweet love letter to a country Hill grew to admire during this period of transition. As one reader put it: “All tragically believable. Scarcely a vapor of hope for so many.” Considering how little comes out of Eritrea today, it’s worth the price.



[Eritrea](#)

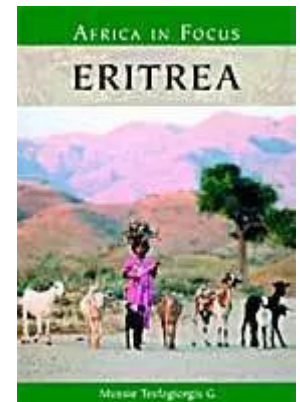
An Africa in Focus Book

by [Mussie Tesfagiorgis](#)

ABC-CLIO 2010

\$85.00

This book runs more than 400 pages and provides sources documents and commentary on the history and culture of Eritrea. A bit academic, but for those interested in studies of Eritrea, this is the (expensive) book to buy.



[Click on the book cover or the bold book title to order from Amazon and Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs, an Amazon Associate, will receive a small remittance](#)

Posted in [Reviewed: Books, movies, etc.](#)

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Historical Notes

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [2 comments](#)

Picture Puzzle

The death of Sargent Shriver in January jogged loose memories — and old pictures. And we all know old pictures can be puzzling



Name the PCVs, left to right, at the mystery location.

THE DAUGHTER OF **Joe Kaufmann**, Peace Corps/Washington's first Director of Training, has been in touch with **Ted Vestal** (Staff 64-66) recently about some Peace Corps celebrations she's been involved with. She sent Ted a photo that was taken in Addis Ababa in October 1962. That's her father in the center. Sarge is unmistakable on the right. But is that young **Harris Wofford** second from left? She asked Ted if he could identify the PCVs in the picture. He can't, nor could he figure out where it was taken. Does anyone recognize the young men or the locale? The picture must have been taken during the Shriver visit that included his famous dinner with Haile Selassie when he petted the Emperor's pet lion, Tojo. If anyone can help, we'll forward the info to Kaufmann's daughter, Marcia Krasnow, who lives in the Boston area.

Posted in [Historical Notes](#)

2 Comments

Fiftieth Anniversary I

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [3 comments](#)

Seven months and counting down to the 50th Anniversary Celebrations in Washington

Lots of work has been done. More is awaiting. And it all adds up to a promise of a great time in Washington

Planning for the 50th anniversary of Peace Corps continues. Big events will be taking place in Washington the weekend of September 22th through 24th. For those wanting to come to Washington to join with RPCVs from all over the country who served in many nations, reservations are still available for rooms at the Crystal City Marriott for our

group. This is the Marriott (and, as we said before, be careful because there are many other Marriotts in the Washington area) that will be the headquarters hotel for Ethiopia&Eritrea RPCVs. For details on how to get reservations see: <https://eandeherald.com/2010/12/15/fiftieth-anniversary-2/>

Please notify us that you are coming

If you are planning to come in September and want to join in the Ethiopia/Eritrea festivities — and who wouldn't? — do send an email to **C.J. Smith Castagnaro** (Harar; Debre Zeit; Addis 65-66) telling her of your plans so that we can make our plans. She has received about 70 R.S.V.P.'s so far. She is acting as registrar for our events. When the time comes she will collect the fees necessary to get the programs going. That probably makes her Registrar/Treasurer. Her email is: cjsmithc@verison.net She's waiting to hear from you so she can put your name on the list to make sure you included in all the interesting (and fun!) events.

Other colleagues, under the direction of E&E RPCV President **Marian Beil** (Debre Berhan 62-65), are hard at work planning events for the meeting. **Nancy Horn** (Addis Ababa 66-68), program chair, is working with **Shlomo Bachrach** (Staff 65 to 67) to plan the grand Saturday Morning Program which will be held at the Marriott. At this program some speakers will bring us up-to-date on Ethiopia and Eritrea. We'll have other talks and presentations about Peace Corps and our RPCVs. Nancy has looked at the suggestions made in the comments section of the last issue of the HERALD. She and Shlomo are eager to hear more suggestions about what sort of presentations you would like to have that morning. Music, Art, readings? Please send a message with your ideas to Nancy at Horn.N@worldnet.att.net or post them as a comment on this story. She is eager to hear from you.

Programming for hospitality room presentations

We are looking of a volunteer to help organize some programs for the Hospitality Room. Lots of people would like to give talks, make presentations, show slides, and who knows what else. There will not be time for them all during the Saturday Morning Program, but some of these can be made in the Hospitality room at other times. If you want to help organize this, please send a message to Marian Beil at: marian@haleybeil.com

Help with the dinner

Judy Smith (Asmara 63-65) is working on organizing a dinner for us at the Ethiopian Embassy on Friday night. She could use some volunteers to help out as the event gets closer and, of course, will need assistance the night of the dinner. Please contact her at smarmayor@aol.com

Training Group Reunions

Planning is also proceeding on reunions for individual Training Groups during the 50th Anniversary weekend. For example, **Don Schlenger** (Waldia 66-68) is interested in getting his group — Group VII Utah 1966-1968 — together that weekend. Recently he received an email list of members of Group VII from Marian to help him with organizing the reunion. She is happy to share email lists with the contact information we have for RPCVs from the training groups with anyone interested in organizing a Training Group reunion. Please contact her for those.

Also if anyone is planning a Training Group reunion, please let us at the HERALD know and we would be delighted to share that information with everyone. Ultimately we will publish a schedule of events and would want to include a list of the Training Group reunions.

Based on the scheduling so far by us, the Peace Corps and the NPCA, we are strongly recommending that all training group reunions be scheduled for Saturday afternoon — September 24th.

Fiftieth Anniversary II

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [1 comment](#)

Memories of Eritrea

The U.S. Embassy in Asmara is looking for RPCVs to record some recollections of their time in Eritrea

The HERALD recently heard from Scott Rasmussen, the Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Asmara. He would like to put together a project which would record the recollections of PCVs who served in Eritrea. Says Scott:

As you may know, the current relationship between Eritrea and the United States is stressed. Despite this, of course, many everyday Eritreans still like the U.S. So the purpose behind this project is to show that the relationship between the people of the United States and the people of Eritrea runs long and deep. Many Eritreans I've met still speak fondly about their great memories of PCVs. My hope is that by showing PCVs talking about their experiences here we can show that the feeling is mutual.



Asmara: as we remember it



Eritrean roads: a driving thrill

Scott is not entirely clear about how he would do this project. He says that he thought about “somehow having the RPCVs record a short video, perhaps 3-5 minutes long, of themselves describing their time in Eritrea: what they remember, what they enjoyed, people who were important to them, projects they thought were particularly important, etc.” Perhaps RPCVs could find some old pictures to illustrate their memories and they could be used in the video. Scott would show the videos in Eritrea and even perhaps provide copies to people who would be interested. Think of it as a version of YouTube. If you are interested in the project, contact Scott directly at: rasmussensr@state.gov and he will take it from there.

Posted in [Fiftieth Anniversary](#)

1 Comment

Fiftieth Anniversary III

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Two Anniversary Events in March

UCLA and the University of Wisconsin will host discussions, music, dance, parties, all as part of the 50th Anniversary celebrations

LOTS OF ANNIVERSARY EVENTS AND PROJECTS are already underway in cities across the U.S. Many of these events are being planned by local RPCV groups, such as the one in Seattle. Everybody wants to celebrate even if they can't get to Washington. And it seems some folks are not even willing to wait for September to celebrate. They are partying now.

Two very notable events are taking place in March.

On March 2-5, UCLA will be sponsoring a commemoration of Peace Corps' 50th anniversary. UCLA trained a number of Peace Corps groups including a fair number of groups that went to Ethiopia. The commemoration will include a panel discussion mc-ed by MSNBC host and former PCV Chris Mathews who served in Swaziland from 1968 to 1970. There will be exhibitions, films, and other festivities as well. For more information check out:

<http://www.facebook.com/UCLAPEACECORPS50th>. Or send an email to Kate Kuykendall at kkuykendall@peacecorps.gov



Chris Mathews

On March 24 to 26 the African Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison is hosting an event to honor Wisconsin's 50-year involvement in Peace Corps. UW has put together a very impressive three-day program that will bring musicians, artists, story-tellers and thinkers to campus to celebrate and reflect on the legacy of Peace Corps in Africa. Several fascinating panel discussion programs are scheduled. Both former Volunteers from all over the country and a wide spectrum of participants with ties to Africa are scheduled to attend. Events will include panels, discussions, StoryCorps interviews, art exhibits, dance and a keynote speech by current Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams (Dominican Republic 1967-70). Check out the ambitious schedule on [their web site](#). This looks like a winning event. You can find that information and register to attend

at: <http://africa.wisc.edu/peacecorps/registration.html>



Peace Corps
Director Aaron
Williams

Posted in [Fiftieth Anniversary](#)

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Fiftieth Anniversary IV

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

A Sound Project

A broadcaster is looking for some sound bytes. The more obscure and exotic the better. This may be for Public Radio after all

RECENTLY WE HEARD FROM AMY MAYER, the daughter of a PCV who served in what was then Ceylon from 1962 to 1964. Amy is a freelance public radio producer and writer who is convinced that there exists a treasure trove of audio recorded by PCVs in a variety of countries over the past 50 years. She writes that "in honor of the milestone

anniversary in 2011, I am seeking RPCVs with audio who would be interested in sharing their recordings. I'd like to produce a documentary that presents the Peace Corps through those recordings you made, and interviews I conduct with you."

Recordings can be in any format (she will digitizing them) from any country, any time period and in any language. Local music, festivals, celebrations and other events would be perfect sounds for this project. If you would have recordings you'd like to share with Amy, contact her via email (amy@amymayerwrites.com) or call her at 413-773-8904. She asks that you include in your email your country and dates of service, where you currently live, the format of your recordings (cassette, microcassette, reel-to-reel, digital, etc.) and, to the best of your memory, approximately what might be on your recordings.



Posted in [Fiftieth Anniversary](#)

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Friends

Posted on [February 8, 2011](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [2 comments](#)

Doro Wat with a side of mash?

Teff may be the Ethiopian staple food, but potatoes offer tremendous nutritional advantages. An RPCV tells how American expertise and technology are helping Ethiopia's potato farmers raise better spuds

by **Charlie Higgins (Haik 69-71)**

When my wife, Judy, and I were Volunteers in Haik in 1969, potato yields were less than 50 hundred-weight-per-acre [cwt/acre]. In the 40 years since, the population of Ethiopia has grown from 20 million to 80 million, but sadly the potato yields per acre are the same. Small farmers with only three or four acres in the high mountains have only potatoes to feed their children after the grain is used up and before the next harvest comes in. But because Ethiopian farmers use ground storage — or even store a few potatoes under the bed — upwards of a half of their crop can be lost to insect damage. This is a disaster in a country where forty percent of the children do not receive enough calories. Because potatoes produce more food per square yard than any other crop that can be grown at altitudes up to 12,000 feet, increasing potato production could alleviate some of the hunger and malnutrition problems in Ethiopia. This has already been done in China and India. The green revolution has come to Ethiopia for grain crops but not for potatoes.



Higgins in 1969
Peace Corps
facebook

Increasing potato production

Four years ago, while I was on a USAID Farmer to Farmer visit to Ethiopia, I saw an empty potato tissue lab used for

the propagation of seed potatoes that had been built with USAID funds — your tax dollars. Construction was incomplete and they did not have clean clones to start production.



Bechard, right, sharing coffee with farmer and Ministry of Agriculture officials in Asfew

Over the past four years, I have seen improvement come to Ethiopia little by little thanks to the hard work of a team of people from the University of Wisconsin, Heartland Farms, Walther Farms of Michigan, Michigan State University and North Dakota State University along with Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture Potato Researchers. They all jumped at the opportunity to help Ethiopia potato farmers. We were able to help get clean clones for the lab, and Ermias Abate, the tissue lab manager, received training in the U.S. with Dr. Amy Chirkowski at the University of Wisconsin — who also made a trip to Ethiopia in March to provide advance training to Ermias. The University of Wisconsin and Michigan State University have provided Ermias with germ plasm of late blight tolerant clones that can be tested and crossed with Ethiopian high yield varieties of potatoes. Dr. Gary Secor and the disease and tissue labs at North Dakota State University

taught Ermias how to clean diseases from field tubers to produce clean clones. Drs. Chirkowski, Russell Groves, Felix Navarro, Jiuan Palta and many others at the University of Wisconsin provided critical training in lab management and screen house production. Now the lab is producing, and the screen house is full of clean seed production, and the Ethiopian potato research team now has email support from the best minds in the U.S.



Potato farming in Gojam: basic cultivation, superior varieties, great yields

AND SO, WITH GREAT PLEASURE, last November I watched an Ethiopian farmer harvest a crop of a new high-yield variety of potatoes with a team of oxen. These new varieties were selected by the Ministry of Agriculture Potato Researchers from true seeds from the International Potato Center (known by its Spanish acronym, CIP) in Peru and developed for sustainable farming in developing countries. The new potato varieties made by Ethiopian researchers CIP true seeds can yield 300 cwt/acre compared to less than 50 cwt/acre from the local varieties.

Solving the storage problem

As I mentioned earlier many farmers lose as much as half of their crop each year during ground storage. To reduce

this loss, on-farm potato storage is being designed and built with assistance from this project as well. The storage can be built by the farmers with locally available materials.

Ethiopia has a wealth of sunshine. There are nine or ten months of sun and then it rains about 40 to 50 inches in two or three months during the rainy season. Many farmers are replacing their thatch roofs with tin, and the tin roofs with some black cloth and clear plastic can become excellent potato and other vegetable dehydrators — a system that **Steve Schewe** (Gambella, Addis 69-71) helped design. The U.S. team is supporting the on-farm development of these solar dehydrators, and is encouraging Ethiopian nutritionists to develop recipes with dehydrated potatoes that can be made into nutritious soups by adding boiling water. The dehydrated potatoes can be made from damaged potatoes, and be can be stored for years. If the rainy season fails to arrive, dehydrated potatoes could add to the food security for these small farm families.

Next on the to-do list

The next step will require the development of a micro-loan program so farmers in Ethiopia can contract for clean seed potatoes, fertilizer and pesticides. The micro-loans would be repaid with cash, dehydrated potatoes or potatoes for the local school breakfast program.

The ultimate purpose

In remote mountain villages children of migrant workers are left with relatives for months at a time while the parents search for work. The director of one school told us that some of her students, children of migrant workers, get only one meal per day and only attended school two to three days per week. Jason Walther and Nancy Poynter of Walther Farms are funding a school breakfast program to help these children more directly.



Do it for the kids: potatoes give children a head-start

In the U.S. test scores increase significantly if children have breakfast available at school. With the aid of **Fred Bechard** (Dessie 69-71), now a retired superintendent of schools in Maine, and other RPCVs of the XII group (1969 to 1971) a pilot school breakfast program will be tried in a small school in Gumet near Secala in Gojam.

The local farmers have volunteered to support the school breakfast program with donated potatoes to pay back micro loans for clean seed potatoes of improved varieties. Richard Pavelski of Heartland Farms, who has helped fund of the Ethiopian projects, advised in setting up the tax deductible [Ethiopian Sustainable Food Project](#) at the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin to manage the funds.

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