

## RECOLLECTIONS OF AFGHANISTAN 1969-71- DONALD MAGINNIS PCV ARCHITECT

*"yak dist du tarbuza na mesha"*

*"you can't hold two melons in one hand"*

After military high school in Sewanee Tennessee in 1962 I spent six plus years completing a normal five year architecture curriculum, plus fraternity parties, and graduated from Tulane Architecture School in summer 1968. I was working for an architect in New Orleans and had applied for the Peace Corps with a recruiter at Tulane. In late 1968 I got an invitation to join the Afghanistan program as an architect. My draft status was 1-A. I read *Caravans* and went to a training site in a bible camp near Estes Park Colorado the day the Jets beat the Colts in the Super Bowl, and there was snow on the ground. Two month later there was still snowing, and after learning some Farsi I was not "deselected". Those of the group who were "selected" were sent to Kabul for one more month of training and we lived in the Metropole Hotel. I started work in the Central Authority for Housing and Town Planning with other architects, planners and surveyors, some from the previous group. After the in-country training about half of the original group decided to not continue or were "deselected".

The first day in Kabul I went to the money bazaar to exchange dollars for afghanis. The money shop was run by two Jewish ("Yahoods") Afghan brothers known as "Heckle and Jeckel". There was a telephone between their desks which rang repeatedly with calls from the Kabul Bank to get the daily exchange rates for dollars, pounds, rupees, francs, yen, etc. The first night there I found the American staff house where I bought my first on many chit books with my changed money. I had beers and a burger with fries. I drank my first beer and started to crush the can as I had done at many a fraternity party. The Afghan bartender snatched the empty from my hands. He probably sold all empties in the bazaar to be made into a jerry can or to patch a fender on a lorry. Nothing went to waste there.



Kabul-Tomb and mountain housing

Afghanistan was a thirsty country and many Afghans drank liquor. A shop in Share I Nau sold a lot of alcohol. One asked the owner if he had any "medicine" (*"dewa doren"* ?). The response was usually what medicine ? (*chi dewa car doren ? wodka, escotch, jin, whiskey jak daniel ?*) Russian vodka was cheapest but gave bad headaches. Whiskey was preferred. Later some Italians opened a winery near the airport using good Afghan grapes. There were reds, whites, roses and even sparkling wines that were inexpensive and passable, if nothing else was available. Empty bottles always ended up in the bazaar. Nothing went to waste there.

Most of my remaining group of about 45 volunteers were in TEFEL, or teaching English. After 3 months about half of the group got hepatitis. We all later got amoebic dysentery. After the Metropole Hotel I rented a house near the Peace Corps (PC) office and Shar I Nau Park and Cinema. The Afghans loved the old Elvis films, especially when he sang and danced with Anne Margret. I had studied no foreign languages in military and architectural school and enjoyed learning Farsi. I had a tutor and learned to write and read some of the Arabic script. I still speak some when I visit with other returned Peace Corps Volunteers Afghanistan (RPCAs).

The P C office was on a corner in the fruit bazaar. We received our mail there, met with staff and medical personnel and received our monthly living expenses. There was a weekly delivery at the start of the week of one page printed newsletters from both the U S and British embassies that gave us the world news in English.

Frequently on the way home one stopped at the fruit bazaar to buy melons, raisins and almonds ("*badams*") and pistachios ("*pistas*"). Paper or plastic bags were almost nonexistent. The vendors fashioned conical paper envelopes to hold the nuts. Usually the cones were the weeks' excess of newsletters which the P C office servants had given to the shopkeepers. After I ate all the nuts my cook used the paper to light kindling for my wood burning heater. Nothing went to waste there.

On a nearby street was the fowl bazaar where mostly live chickens, and some ducks and turkeys, were sold live and slaughtered at the gutter. A PCV hydrologist, Bob Miller had an apartment on the street. From his window one could always see a chicken being killed by having his throat slowly cut pointed towards Mecca and bled to death.

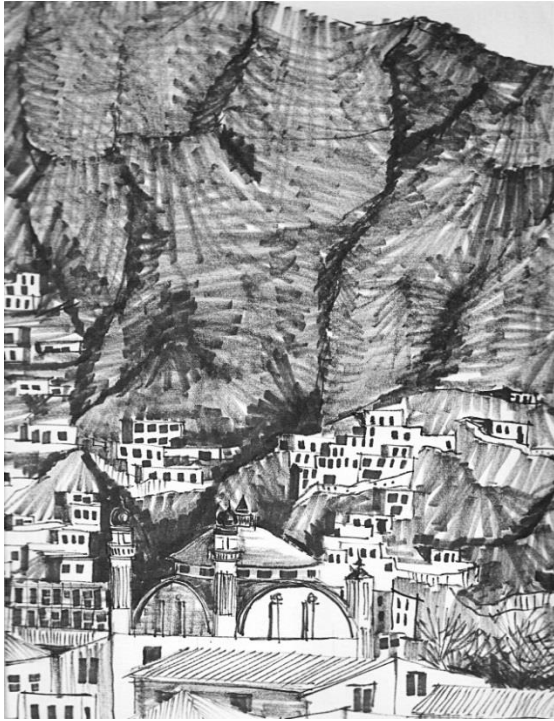
In Shar I Nau there were many cultural centers and language schools from foreign countries. USAID and the British centers had excellent libraries to be used. The German Goethe Center had a beer garden. One evening we were invited by some German volunteers to attend an Oktoberfest event. We had to pay for the good German beer and sausage but enjoyed visiting with the volunteers who spoke both English and Farsi well. Unfortunately the fest lasted only one or two nights in lieu of one month.

Near my house there was the Circle Francaise where I went 4 days a week after work to learn French. I still speak it at the Alliance Francaise in N O. I made friends with some of the French community who invited me to drinks, wine and cheese, dinners and Bastille Day parties. They always had plenty of French wine and Lebanese arak to drink. They loved to have big dinners, but with Arab couscous in lieu of rice. I even took some road trips with them in their Citrone car around the country on long weekends.



Bazaar Kabul

I sketched some and photographed a lot. I also read a lot, mostly British authors like Grame Green, Evelyn Waugh, Ian Fleming, Paul Scott, John Masters plus Arthur Conan Doyle. I also read a lot of history of the area of which I was very ignorant. The P C had an extensive library near the office in Shar I Nau. I was going there once for new books to read and the building caught fire. I manned a garden hose to fight the flames. I trained it on a window which immediately broke with the heat flaming outward towards me. A truck from the Kabul F D arrived and did a good job putting the fire out. Some people claimed they looked like the Kerystone Cops but they were very well trained and efficient. The building and most of the books were saved.



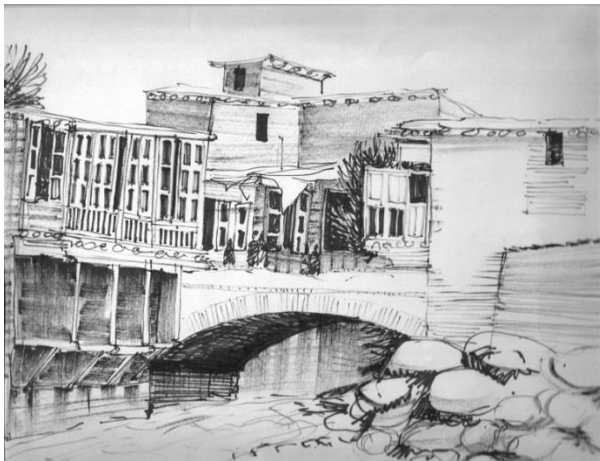
Kabul – Mosque and houses

I was one of the few PCVs from the South. Russ Dupree an architect was from Texas. Idavonne Rosa (rip) was in the office and Jim and Betty Farrer were all from Arkansas. Most were from the East or West Coasts or somewhere in the Midwest like Nebraska. After a year an old Tulane acquaintance named Bobby Barnwell showed up to teach in Jalalabab. He was from a family of cotton farmers in Greenwood Mississippi and was a semi-alcoholic. I took him to the staff house the first night he was there and met up with him again years later in N O. I was also one of the few Catholics. We had mass with P C staff Al and Patty Perrin and some embassy and USAID staff on Friday evenings. There was usually food and drink (besides the communion wine) after mass.

At work we wore coats and ties except in the field and on construction sites. During the winter we kept on our coats, and sometimes our overcoats in the office while working at our drafting tables. The Authority was in a 4 story apartment building built of pre-cast concrete by the Russians. It was used as offices but had little heat in the cold Kabul winters. We and some of our Afghan co-workers were picked up and driven to the office in either British Land Rovers, V W Micro-busses or very uncomfortable Russian jeeps. They returned us to the P C office at noon and again at the end of the day.

We worked with a multi-national U N team (Indian, Argentine, Australian, British, Japanese etc) all architects and engineers. There was also a separate group of Bulgar workers who all spoke English and Farsi and who we got along well with. We worked on projects such as housing ("*khanas*"), mosques ("*masjids*"), baths ("*hamams*") etc. Some of the buildings we designed were built but may have not survived the Soviets or Taliban. All rooves were flat because of the lack of rain and all drawings were done in metric in lieu of English measurements. Foundations were stone and concrete and some walls mud, concrete or stone, but never wood which was very scarce. Millwork like doors and windows were wood and usually well designed and made.

When I started work Russ Dupree and I did construction supervision in a housing project, Khair Khana just north of Kabul. We designed precast concrete mini-domes for the rooves in lieu of wood members. I also later took trips to the provinces with engineers to survey villages for new roads and public buildings. We were usually accompanied by the local parliamentary representative, governor or village leaders who stopped on the road to buy us fruit so we would not be sad ("*shuma deck na mesha*") on the trip. The department head of the Authority admitted that most of the trips were political to show the good will and presence of the Afghan government. We were always well fed and received even in the most remote villages



Bridge at Charikar

In the Authority office we also taught Afghan co-workers drafting and model building. Nepotism and bribery ("*bakseesh*") was very prevalent there. Well dressed and educated Afghans with connections got better positions and pay than those less connected. Some could not even operate a T square but showed up every day to drink tea and then collect their salary. Some PCVs were shocked, but as I had grown up in Louisiana and Mississippi observing historically corrupt Democrat politicians I accepted it as an unfortunate cultural difference and way of life. To not help one's relatives and not practice nepotism was considered bad form.

My office group included Robert von Zumbusch architect and Pat Scanlon, Fred Cournoyer and Alan Kirios all economists. Also Ross Taylor a surveyor and David Finley another surveyor who got sent home early for too little work and too much hash and hanging around with hippie world travelers. Also from the most previous group were architect Russ Dupree and Larry Lea (rip) a planner and surveyors Russ Gamage and Brad Child.

Other PC architects in different sites were Randy Trudell and Bob Hull (rip) who had a very notable practice later on the West Coast. John Berryhill another architect married a PCV, Linda. The water supply in their apartment went out so Linda showered and got dressed for their wedding in my house across the street. Also Bob Hicks an architect got married to Betsy Bauer another PCV. Office volunteers I remembered were Idavonne Rosa (rip), Linda, Beverly, and Karen Ritter and others.



Butcher shop and woman in chadri

Afghans being strict Moslems did not let men speak to or see their covered women, so male doctors could not examine or treat females, especially in the provinces. Therefore, there were a large number of PCV nurses in hospitals, including Lorie Fisher (rip) in Kabul and others in Charikar. Natalie (Tallie) Firnhaber and Monica Walcott were in Pul I Kumrie. I was once in the bazaar in Pul I Kumrie with Tallie and she approached a shop keeper about his wife who she had recently examined. She advised him to take her to see the Afghan doctor at the local hospital. He said he would not ever let any male doctor even see her bare hand much less examiner her. Tallie replied in Farsi: *"Chi dewana gap !"* or *"What crazy talk !"*.

There was also a group of female vaccinators who traveled the provinces inoculating Afghans, including women and girls against cholera, small pox, malaria and other diseases which were rampant. When not traveling and vaccinating they stayed in a large house in Kandahar and an apartment in Kabul.

I remember going to receptions at the American ambassador's house in Shar I Nau near the park and P C office. I liked to go to holiday parties there and read the Christmas cards from well known governmental people. I saw cards from Nixon, Agnew, LBJ, Ted Kennedy, Avril Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge and others. The Ambassador, Robert Newman was from a Jewish family that had survived the holocaust . There were many Jewish PVCs, USAIDs, embassy workers, tourists and others. David (*Daoud*) Bragman a graphic artist also lived in Sha I Nau and was Jewish and Denise Behar in our group was an Egyptian American and a Sephardic Jew and spoke many languages. Unlike the Arabs and many Moslems now, the Afghans, Pakistanis, and Iranians I met had no issues with Israel or the Jewish race at that time.

## PART 2 RECOLLECTIONS OF AFGHANISTAN 1969-71

However, the Afghans did discriminate against the Hazaras, who were a Mongol descended Shia minority at the very lowest rung of the social economic ladder. No Hazaras worked in our ministry, even as drivers or servants. They were the poorest of the poor and did most of the manual labor. Some literally shoveled shit from the out houses (*"tashnabs"*) to use for fertilizer. Nothing went to waste there. My Sunni landlord Musa Khan, an officer in the army treated them like animals. He claimed that at night they turned out the lights and the men and boys practiced incest with all the women in their families, including their grandmothers. I once asked an educated Afghan about the issue of Hazaras and he replied in English:

*"In Amerika you have two peoples, white peoples black peoples. In Afghanistan we have two peoples, Afghan and Hazara."*

The Afghan author Khaled Hosseini was once in N O and had a reading and book signing of his second novel about Afghanistan, *"And The Mountains Roared"*. He had lived in Shar I Nau when I was there and his father was a diplomat. They were in Paris when the Soviets invaded and he ended up in California writing. During the later questions I asked him in Farsi about the plight of the poor Hazaras. He responded in English and recalled the past discrimination, but noted that there was one Hazara in the Afghan parliament at that time, and things were changing for them. His first novel, *"The Kite Runner of Kabul"* was about a Hazara boy who was raped, so he had written about the discrimination. He signed my copy of his book in Farsi script *"Tashakor Donald"*.

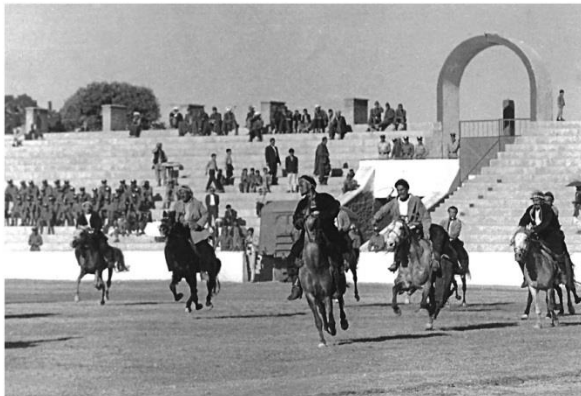


Horse, donkeys and a lorry

Horses were a large part of life in Afghanistan. Buzkashi was the national sport and I always tried to attend and photograph matches. I have ridden many horses both before and since my time there, but I was never crazy enough to mount any Afghan horse, especially for buskashi. I always brought my camera and largest telephoto lens to shoot the horsemen and their wild horses. I could never figure out the teams, rules or scoring system if any existed. Matches in Kabul were held at two separate venues.

Outside of the city was a very large flat field where most matches were played. The field was surrounded by colorfully painted lorries on three sides and a ditch on the other side where most spectators stayed. In the middle of the perimeter was a large tent for the king and royal family. At one match the movie "The Horsemen" was being filmed by a Hollywood production company. During a break in the action I got tired of standing, crossed the ditch and approached the tent. No members of the royal family were present so I struck up a conversation with some of the officials who invited me to watch the match in the tent. I got a good seat, which was not the royal throne, and saw the rest of the action. The only request was that I stop photographing because of the filming. I have seen the movie twice but have never seen me or close ups of the tent.

I also attended matches in a smaller field in a soccer stadium near the Authority offices. The playing area was separated from the seating by a one meter high concrete fence. At each end of the stadium there was a large concrete vaulted arch on the top tier of seats. During the time of the Taliban I was watching a program about the plight of Afghans who did not follow sharia laws. Reportedly men were prosecuted for not having long beards and women were prosecuted for being uncovered (not wearing "*chadris*"), or for allegedly committing adultery. Trials with public punishments and executions were widely reported. The program showed that the site of the enforcement of the sentences (stoning or beheading) was the very stadium where the buzkashi had been played. On television I recognized the concrete arches that still appear in my old photographs.



Stadium and buzkashi

The final buzkashi experience I had was at Kunduz when I was on a trip to the North with some USAID workers. We had heard that there was a match outside of the village and drove out to attend. The field was not flat but a series of rolling hills that were defined loosely only by the crowds of Afghans standing or sitting around the perimeter. No lorries, ditches or walls confined the field of play. I had my camera ready but could not get any close up shots because of the size of the field, plus the horses would occasionally disappear over the hills. I got frustrated and ventured out from the crowd about 10 meters to look for the action. I saw none through my telephoto lens but felt the ground begin to shake. It was not a typical Central Asian seismic tremor, but the horses coming over a nearby hill. Lead by the horseman with the headless goat they were not slowing down but heading directly for me. I sprinted back to the crowd much to the amusement of the Afghan spectators. "*Horiji dewana ! Chi makena? Burra bahai !*" "*What are you doing you crazy foreigner ? Run !*"

After a year in Shar I Nau I moved to a hill house above the Pul I Attan bridge. Some friends, the Grants had lived there and became staff and got a good apartment with a real toilet and a kitchen with running water. Russ Dupree took my old house. The hill house had a wonderful view of the city and the Bala Hissar and the noon gun. At the foot of the bridge was a women's hospital. About once a week I unhappily observed an Afghan man leaving the hospital carrying a very small object wrapped in cloth. He was heading down river for a nearby cemetery to bury a probably still born or miscarried baby. Neo-natal care was non-existent there and unfortunately probably still is.

The hill house had a large garden ("*bagh*") with an out-house ("*tashnab*") with a dovecote above. There was a large flock of pigeons which we would force out to fly about the city hopefully trying to attract other pigeons and increase the flock. The sport locally was known as pigeon racing. When the flock got too large my cook, Syed Mamoud would prepare some served with rice. Nothing went to waste there. During the pigeon games we also observed many kite contests. Afghan boys would fly kites with broken glass glued to the kite strings and cut their opponents strings and try to retrieve the fallen kites, thus inspiring Hosseini's title "*The Kite Runner of Kabul*".



Hill side housing

There was no running water but the house had electricity and a real telephone. Bobby Barnwell would come from Jalalabad and stay with some PCV friends John and Betsy Tobias. They would visit the bazaar for some medicine "*dewa*" and come by the house and eat and drink. Bobby would try to phone his family and friends in the Mississippi Delta and New Orleans. He also called New York to his cousin Craig Claiborne (rip) who was the food critic at the N Y Times, and also to Dick Cavett to speak and gossip with Dick's lovely actress wife Carrie Nye McGoey (rip) who was Bobby's very close friend and confidant when they were growing up together in Greenwood. Syed Mamoud kept us well fed and also occasionally used the phone to call his brothers. Being unfamiliar with modern telecommunication equipment they always thought it necessary to shout out all their conversations into the phone receiver.



Once we went to an American style wedding in Kabul when a PCV physical education teacher in my group married a Mormon girl whose parents were working with USAID on agriculture projects. There were many such Mormon families there doing their missionary commitment, and they were all very nice. However, they drank less liquor than the Moslems, as in none at all. They did not even drink tea, coffee, beer, coke, or 7-UP. Knowing what was not being served Robert von Zumbusch and I stopped by the staff house on the way to the wedding to get fortified. We greatly enjoyed the American food and wedding cake, all served with non-alcoholic fruit punch.

I also went to two Afghan weddings, both very different. One was in Kabul at the Metropole Hotel where a relation of Col. Musa Khan was getting married. I went with him and his family and all the men wore suits and ties and the women wore dresses. The groom and bride sat in throne like chairs on a raised platform and the guests at surrounding tables. There was Afghan food and music and it was very civilized.



Hills at Kunduz

The other wedding was less Western and was in a mud village about a ½ day's drive south of Kabul. The groom, an engineer in our office invited Robert von Zumbusch and I and we wore coats and ties as the only foreign "*feringees*" there. We rode in a V W Microbus from the Authority. However some other guests from Kabul rode in a Russian jeep with the village headman who challenged our driver to a race. The jeep got stuck in a ditch on the way and we all had to get out and push. The groom to be commented "*shetour car dorum*". Meaning they should have taken a camel instead of the terrible Russian jeep. Our driver had enough sense to let the headman's jeep win the race to the village.

Since there was no large room in the little village the wedding was held outdoors under a giant tent with an Afghan band. The ground was covered with carpets and pillows and the men, most of who were armed with shotguns and rifles wore typical Afghan clothes and turbans and sat on the cushions and carpets. Huge plates of rice and mutton was served with tea and some of the men smoked water pipes ("*chelams*").

We never met the bride or any other women. However, we did see the entertainment which was a pretty dancing boy ("*bacha bazi*") with long hair and eye makeup who twirled and danced to drums ("*tablas*") and fiddles ("*do tars*"). When he came to the climax of his dance routine the men all discharged their weapons in the air and through the tent roof. The Afghan next to me had an Uzzi and when he pulled the trigger all the empty shell casings landed on my head.

After the reception we spent the night on mattresses (*"tushacks"*) on the floor of one of the mud houses. The next morning a group of the men led a procession to the bride's house dancing to the Attan (Afghan national dance) with wild drumming. We returned to Kabul later in the day.



Ruins Lashkagar

I took two month long vacations during my tour, one West to the Middle East and one West to India, Pakistan and Nepal. When my 2 ½ year tour was over I drew my mustering out pay and went to India again for a month passing through the famous Khyber Pass. I returned to Kabul for 2 weeks to send home the carpets and other Afghan objects that I had collected and turned my hill house over to a new incoming PCV. I went overland by buses and trains to Istanbul, and a boat to Israel and back to Turkey. I then passed through North Africa and went home to N O. At each stop I found the local P C office and usually was invited to stay with volunteers, some of which were also architects in their host country.



Mazar I Sharif 1970

Donald Maginnis May 1, 2020 New Orleans, La.