

The Gospel According to Timothy and James:

Chronicles by Ron Dizon©2013

The summer heat of 1972 was about hottest on record in Ghor Province, Afghanistan. Combined with the three year-drought and famine, Chaghcharan was the last place on earth one wanted to be assigned to as a Peace Corps Volunteer, but someone had to do it. It was there I spent the summer with Tim McCormack and Jim Mathewson, aka the M&M Construction Company, and known to the Afghan Department of Rural Development as Daftari Peace Corps' Fay Fay Wow Office (FFW – Food for Work).



Flying the 350 miles to Chaghcharan from Kabul on Bakhtar Airline's Red and Black Streamline Twin Propeller-driven plane was only a prologue to the expectation of an adventure I would experience with the M& M Construction Company (Mathewson & McCormack). Floating through the 14,000 ft. mountain passes of the Hindu Kush in the Himalayas at 10,000 ft invoked a great respect for the laws physics that kept the craft airborne. For most of the Afghan passengers, chanting the mantra of "Allah Akbar" (God is Great) was their reverential instrument in the event a stairway to heaven became an option.



It was mid-afternoon when we landed at Chaghcharan. Four hours late, but late was better than never.

From the air, the town of Chaghcharan was camouflaged on an alluvial plain with the Hari River's D'Nealian signature defining the township boundaries. The town had, at most, forty adobe brick compounds, one Whitewashed Hotel and/or Government House and assorted ducons (shops) in a desolate bazaar. As the twin prop started its descent, nothing resembling a runway manifested itself. The only hint of a landing strip at the Chaghcharan International Airport (CIA) came on our 11 with a pair of flying tambons (Afghan pants) serving as a windsock denoting a westerly head-wind.

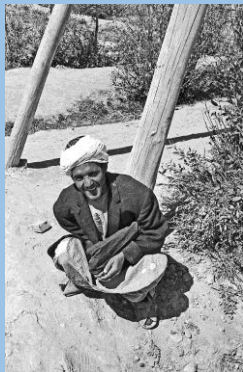


Goats and other assorted livestock were first to deplane, given that they were not assigned seats, and chose to corral themselves by the exits. I could see from my window/aisle seat a blue International Peace Corps truck parking parallel to the ramp and hoped that my new partners, McCormack and Mathewson would be there with a welcome wagon of local musicians and some local dignitaries for what I was carrying with me was a gift more precious than frankincense: Mail from Home! What I wasn't expecting was the unwanted greeter, the famous whirligig of the Hari River alley. Before I could take my first step off the plane, it slammed against me

swirling debris and dung and drying the sweat on my face into a **Shiseido** mask and coating my tusks with the sweet taste of Chagcharan.

From my vantage point at the top of the stairs, I could see my two new partners sitting sheltered in the security of the blue International Peace Corp Truck reveling in what must have made their day, but to them I was the New Guy, an anointed Mr. Katchaloo from the East.

As quickly as it hit, the whirligig was gone leaving only a damaged ego in its wake and a good story for the USAID Staff House in Kabul as told in McCormack's fables. There was no local band, no local dignitaries, only Tim & Jim's Gentlemen's Gentleman, Ibrahim, who picked up my sheet metal cargo box containing all my worldly belongings and heaved it into the bed of the truck. I was glad my cameras were safely housed in my padded Sierra Design backpack next to the highly prized staple of provincial Peace Corps life...a jar of Pakistani peanut butter.



It had been four months since I last saw Tim McCormack and from what I understood he spend two weeks in the U.S. Embassy Infirmary recuperating from a virulent bout of bacillary dysentery and giardia. I didn't know Jim Mathewson very well only that his first assignment was Chaghcharan and he was a geologist from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. Tim's degree in history from Rockhurst College in Kansas City complemented the brain trust and both of their academic disciplines qualified them as Provincial Disaster Relief Directors. My credentials as an Education/Psychology graduate with a specialty in photography definitely created the needed balance in the very slow-moving business of Food for Work. Tim's linguistic "skill" in Dari with his high-scale extrovert temperament and Jim's prowess in the politics of Chaghcharan left me with the only responsibility of the office: recording their exploits in writing and on film.

Having roomed at the Sylvania Hotel with Mr. Tim during the Peace Corps Pre-Invitational Staging in Philadelphia, I was surprised to see the he'd lost a considerable amount of weight. According to Tim, he was down 50 lbs from his bout with dysentery but the scarcity of food in Chaghcharan also served as a contributing factor to his lean physique.

Jim, as I had come learn, was a mild-manner geologist. Everything he did was planned, calculated and measured, a quality of character that added great value to the trio and one asset I wished I had possessed. He was the anchor of the group, where Tim and I provided the nightly entertainment.



My orientation started with cursory exploration of the town where the fallout of famine and drought was unmistakable: the expression of famine etched in the faces of its children and inhabitants. Other families who migrated from other villages around Ghor Province were relegated to living in the caves carved out by the currents of the Hari River. It was rudimentary living, but it did provide shelter from the unrelenting heat of the Afghan high desert and the threat of wolf attacks.

Tim pointed out that there were 2 Belgian nuns living at the Chaghcharan Hotel who were buying bread in the local market and feeding and caring for those whose lives were betrayed by Mother Nature. According to Jim, the nuns' resources were limited and soon they too would have to depart, leaving no safety net for those left behind. But as one opportunity faded, The M&M Construction Company of Mathewson & McCormack pitched another plan utilizing the wheat stored in the Provincial Warehouse, aka the Gudome.



The Gudome was located across the road from the FFW Office/House with the women of Chaghcharan surrounding the facility daily, hoping the Governor would sell to them the stored wheat. The only problem was wheat was selling at 85 Afghanis per seer; a price too dear even for those who afford the cost.



But, by the grace of Allah, call it consequence, call it destiny, one of the letters I brought from Kabul was addressed to Jim from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. In it was a note from the Charged Affaires regarding a story in the New York Times by James Sterba. Included in the envelope was \$400 in Afghanis donated by the People of the United States to the People of Chaghcharan.

It was an unbelievable detour in chance that gave this new trinity of Peace

reason to believe. But as Epistle from the Embassy, began across the road at The police had already set and used their batons as a storming the Gudome.



Corps Volunteers a Jim read the food riots the Gudome. up barricades deterrent to

It was Tim who negotiated a temporary solution with the police that allowed us to buy wheat for the bakers in Chaghcharan Bazaar and to distribute the bread for free to the hungry. We solicited the Belgian nuns to assist in the distribution which answered their prayers. We all knew at the time that the solution was only transitory, and the thought of a Hindu Kush winter would be the messenger of a devastating consequence.



That was my introduction to Chaghcharan with only sixty days until the brutal winter would force the closure of our Food for Work office.



The FFW Office was located in a compound on the main road east of town. It housed a two story adobe structure with two main rooms on the first floor. The roof served as our main sleeping accommodation. The compound was absent of any vegetation, offering no shelter from the blistering 115 degree heat. The outhouse was located adjacent to the first floor main dining room/office window serving as main road to relief. Tim often referred to this corridor as the TashKnob (toilet) Road, one of his

most notable Food for Work projects.

Although the accommodation was less than Spartan, it was a home for the three of us for two months in the summer of 1972. The Peace Corps Post, known to USAID as "Alpha Alpha 1", was also equipped with a USAID radio which we used to communicate to USAID the famine/drought conditions in Chaghcharan, Maimina, and Qual-i-Now. Broadcasting Rolling Stones songs on the "Good Morning Afghanistan Show" offered some comic relief to our depressing reports about the provinces. Although it drew the ire of USAID Communications Officers, they understood the respite of levity with the resulting consequence of camaraderie.

Very few Food for Work projects were started or completed in July due to, in large part, to the exodus of the male population of Chaghcharan and outlying villages. The departure of the men was reminiscent of the Dirty Thirties in the United States, the only difference being in Afghanistan, the Public Works Program was an unfunded mandate in the Great Afghan Depression. The viability of The Food for Work Projects was directly proportional to the labor force in the area, a fact understood by the Afghan Rural Development Department after their year and half demonstration period. No men to work for food meant no Food for Work Projects. It was this epiphany that recalled all the Peace Corps Food for Work Volunteers to Kabul in August of 1972, ending the FFW program and initiating The United States Agency for International Development's new project called Operation Help. At that time, the Peace Corps Director was reluctant to use the seasoned FFW volunteers, but at the insistence of the U.S. Ambassador with counsel from the Operation Help Project Manager and encouragement of the King of Afghanistan, the Operation Help

project moved expeditiously to feed the innocent victims of drought before assault of the unforgiving winter of the Hindu Kush.

The jump-off distribution point for the Operation Help Program was Chaghcharan and who best to host the first convocation of Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers, but Jim Mathewson and Tim McCormack. Because the window of opportunity for food distribution was closing rapidly, volunteers were flown in from Kabul, Herat and Kandahar. The only aircraft that could fly into Chaghcharan was **Bakhtar's Canadian DeHaviland Twin Otter**. Because the flight schedules were so erratic due to weather and pilot issues, Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers would come in **either** on the morning flight **or** the afternoon flight, and sometimes not at all that day, but always leaving Tim and Jim jilted at the airport altar. Leaving Chaghcharan to other distribution points was also an **Either Or** situation. It was Tim McCormack and Jim Mathewson who named the volunteers coming into Chaghcharan as **The Either Or Otter Corps (EOOC)**.



Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers who worked in the Operation Help Program adopted the name at the Operation Help Party at Abe and Betty Ashcanase's Kabul home in December of 1972. What began as Food for Work demonstration project ended in a victory in the War on Hunger. For the members of the Either Or Otter Corps, knowing that their unselfish commitment saved countless lives and forged life-long bonds of friendships was well worth the tour of duty in a country called Afghanistan.



This ended the account of Peace Corps' **The Either Or Otter Corps**.

This is the **Gospel according to Timothy and James**.