

Canton to Samburu

Notes from a Mgeni's* Journal

By Patti McGill Peterson

Christmas Message, December 15, 1988, Canton, New York

Dear Friends,

We are headed to Nairobi and points beyond for the holidays. Our travels will take us from the Maasai Mara to Kisumu and then on to Samburu, but ours will not be the typical tourist's itinerary.

St. Lawrence has had a study Program in Kenya for 14 years. It offers students a unique opportunity to spend a semester in East Africa and, in turn, we bring two Kenyans on full scholarship to St. Lawrence annually. They return to play an important role in their country's development and represent a growing number of alumni.

We will be moving about the countryside to say thank you to the families who have opened their homes and hearts to our students and to greet Kenyan Laurentians. From a visit to the site of our biological field course on the Mara to a gathering with our rural homestay families in Western Kenya, our experiences should be rich and varied.

Armed (it felt more like disarmed) by our inoculations, Lars, Lute and I will shortly be en route. As I think about the meaning of Christmas and its promise of peace on earth, I am very drawn to the idea of being in Africa at Christmastime. Stretching ourselves beyond that which we find comfortably familiar is a rudiment of international understanding and important to our prospects for world



peace. On that note of hope we bid you all peace and happiness wherever the holidays may find you

Christmas Morning, December 25, 1988, Frankfurt, West Germany

Fröhliche Weihnachten! The view from the window reveals neither trace nor prospect of snow. A dense fog is lifting off the Main and a light rain drizzles upon the rooftops of the city. If there is a color named Teutonic grey, this is it.

Strains of Bach's Christmas Oratorio along with enticing aromas waft from the dining room and inside, spread before us, a delectable *deutsches Weihnachtsfrühstück*. As we are enveloped by these symbols of Western tradition, I hear Japanese spoken at the table to the right and Arabic at the table to the left. East and West meet over yule streudel.

At midday we are bound for Africa. The plane breaks through a thick bank of clouds to dazzling sunshine, a good omen for the safari ahead.

Along the way we pass over Greece and there is a clear view of Olympus. If the gods are at home, they are snow-covered. I envision Zeus with an icicle on his nose and recall my favorite Greek myths. At an early age I was taught to value Greece as the heart of ancient civilization. Now I fly toward an even more ancient civilization, one about which my classmates and I learned very little.

Thoughts on descending into Africa: there is evidence to suggest that the entire modern human population is descended from a single woman who lived in Africa 200,000 years ago. Political, spiritual and social unity are all sound and inviting concepts, but how much more fundamental and compelling is the possibility of a single genetic source as a wellspring that unites us all.

December 26, St. Lawrence Center, Nairobi, Kenya

Morning — Children's voices steal into my consciousness. The sound of Kiswahili tells me I am awakening to a new day in Africa. I soon discover that the children are part of the extended family of the St. Lawrence Study Center. They accompany their mothers who work at the Center and help make the atmosphere here bright and lively.

The suburb of Nairobi where our Center is located is named after Karen

*Mgeni — A Swahili word meaning stranger, visitor, newcomer or foreigner.



The St. Lawrence Study Center in Nairobi.

Blixen, whose house is just down the road. Our surroundings are verdant with bougainvillea climbing over the fences, filling the air with its fragrance. Students must find this compound a welcoming place so far away from home. The crest of St. Lawrence which graces the entrance of the dormitory building reminds them that they are here to fulfill an important aspect of their education.

Paul Robinson and Howard Brown, director and associate director of our Kenya Semester Program, live here with their families as well. They have been responsible for making the Kenya Semester Program the best of its kind.

Afternoon — We take off in a small plane for the Mara. The view of the Ngong Hills, the escarpments, the Rift Valley and finally the Maasai Mara is spectacular. The plane lands on a small rocky strip and the wildlife is there waiting for us. Stepping onto the wing, I see Cape buffalo, ostrich and Thompson gazelles.

Michael and Judy Rainy, our hosts on the Mara, arrive in an old Mercedes lorrie. We throw our gear in the back and head for the horizon, which seems endless, looking for all the world like part of the Rommel Corps.

December 27-30, At Camp on the Maasai Mara

First night around the campfire . . . we watch elephant and giraffe silhouetted on the hillside as the sun is setting and enjoy a Tusker beer with our hosts. The Rainys have already begun to talk about their fieldwork with our students. Their deep commitment to Kenya, its human and

animal inhabitants, is readily apparent. Among other things, they have undertaken a complete census of the animal populations on the Mara. The results of this project are significant and being shared with the Kenyan government.

The glow of lantern light fills the dining tent, creating the aura of a bygone era where big game hunters would puff on their cigars after dinner and recount man's conquest of the animals. But not in this tent where, after dinner, the canvas can be drawn up on one side to reveal multicolored maps and data-filled charts. Preservation, not the extinction of wildlife, is the objective now.

Crossing the Mara with the Rainys is a lesson in biology, zoology, ecology and more. On our first day out we find five cheetah cubs and later watch their mother finish her morning meal under a thorn tree. Our "civilized sensibilities" are confronted by a harsh form of Darwinism at work on the Mara. However, there is also a strict economy in the use of resources here. Nothing goes to waste. When the cheetah finishes, the hyenas come,

then the vultures, and after them the ants. Unlike human populations, animals in their natural habitats do not engage in useless and senseless killing. This point, I am certain, does not escape our students.

Up at the break of day to begin our trek across the Mara, our efforts toward an early start are rewarded with an abundance of animal sightings, including an encounter with the pack of wild dogs the Rainys have been studying with the help of students.

When we return, William, the camp's cook, asks if I have seen lion. Yes, I reply, we have seen lots of lion, a pride of 19. At nightfall we follow them as they stalk a herd of zebra. I learn how to stand up through the opening on the top of a Land Rover moving over rough terrain, with Lars holding onto my feet so that I don't fall out and become fast food for simba. The objective is to hold an image intensifier (a fancy piece of infra-red equipment) steady enough to follow the lead lioness and tell the driver where to steer because darkness surrounds us. The rides at Disney pale by comparison.

Elephants, giraffes, cheetahs, lions and zebras are among the African wildlife St. Lawrence students help to preserve.



The attempted ambush of the zebra is unsuccessful. We bring the Rover to a halt and as we sit on the Mara under the stars, the lions reassemble. They surround the vehicle and are communicating vocally with one another. Their deep rumbling sounds fill the night air. A young lion comes up to the old lioness who led the hunt, nuzzles her and pats a paw on her face as if to say, "that's okay, we'll have another chance." If I can experience this in only one night with the lions, I envy what our students must be seeing and learning over the length of their stay.

It is not just animals who live on the Mara . . . the Maasai are its principal human inhabitants. The Rainys, who are well liked by their Maasai neighbors, take us for a visit one afternoon. The first wife of the man whom we wish to visit is on top of her hut repairing its roof. She tells Michael Rainy, who speaks Maa, that her husband is in another hut sleeping. She laughs and says he is sleepy



With her family, Professor Luther Peterson and Lars Peterson, the president dines with an elder.

MTV watch. I may think I am stepping back a thousand years, but he has come forward to the 20th century for his watch. I was subsequently informed that the watch was offered as a token of friendship by a St. Lawrence student.

December 30-31, At Home with the Luya, Western Kenya

Departing the Mara, we go to Kisumu on the shore of Lake Victoria and then, crossing the equator along the way, motor to Western Province where we will meet our rural homestay families. Roads are a challenge. The condition of one bridge prompts Paul to walk across to assure that it will support the weight of the vehicle.

We enter the mission church where everyone has gathered. As we start down the aisle the Luya stand and begin to sing a warm and spirited welcome. At the altar we are seated in places of honor and the ceremonies commence. Each district has representatives who present greetings in the form of speeches, gifts, songs and sometimes a dance . . . all offered in celebration of St. Lawrence and the students who come to live with them. It is very clear that they cherish their relationship with our students.

When my turn to speak comes, I deliver a few well-practiced and much appreciated phrases in Luya. The rest of my speech is very impromptu from the heart and the message is simple. I tell them that as president of St. Lawrence I value them as teachers and that I have heard students say how much they learn in Western Kenya. Their willingness to open their homes and

their way of life to our students provides experience and insight that we cannot duplicate in classrooms in Canton or Nairobi.

One of the families has invited us to visit their home and to share a meal with them at a traditional Luya homestead. Judith and Humphry Nganyl, our hosts, live with their eight children, Humphry's parents, his brothers and their families in a compound of thatched roof dwellings. There is an expression, "You cannot outgive a Luya," and these wonderful people prove it beyond any doubt.

The children entertain with songs and recitations, including a poem in honor of our coming written and recited in English by the eldest daughter. Gifts, including live chickens for Paul and Howard, are presented. The meal turns out to be a feast and the table is laden with food.

After dinner, photos of students who have stayed with the family are brought out and Judith talks about how much she looks forward to having a student with them and how much the children learn when a student comes. St. Lawrence University is appreciated beyond measure in this household.

We spend New Year's Eve with the Shipiris who help coordinate our rural homestay program. It seems that many of their relatives are expecting to meet us and so we go house to house to say hello. Everyone wishes us safe and happy passage into the new year which tiptoes in quietly out here on the western border near Uganda. We seem a very long way from the noise of Times Square tonight.



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because he was visiting a neighbor and they were drinking some honey wine. When we step into the dark interior of the hut, it is like stepping back one thousand years. Only what is necessary is here, a fire for warmth, a mat for sleep, and a milk- or yogurt-filled gourd for food. The awakened elder is pleased to see his friends and seems happy to meet their guests. He is fascinated with Lars' watch that is marked for 24 hours. I soon realize he is comparing it to his own. A close look reveals, much to our surprise in this home of bare necessities, that the Maasai elder is wearing a fairly flashy



January 1, 1989, New Year's Day with the Samburu

Time is pressing upon us and so we charter a plane to go to Samburu in a more remote section of northwestern



Zippy says that her student interns help her put their ideas in writing and that the work of the project continues because funds have been obtained through the proposals they have written. These students are more than helpers, they are friends, and gifts of God, she says.

Kenya. By land the trip would take a day, providing you don't get stuck in the mud, but by air we can be there in about an hour. It is an important part of the itinerary because it is the site of the most unique aspect of the Kenya Semester Program, a field experience with the warriors of the Samburu.

The warriors of the Samburu greet a new friend.

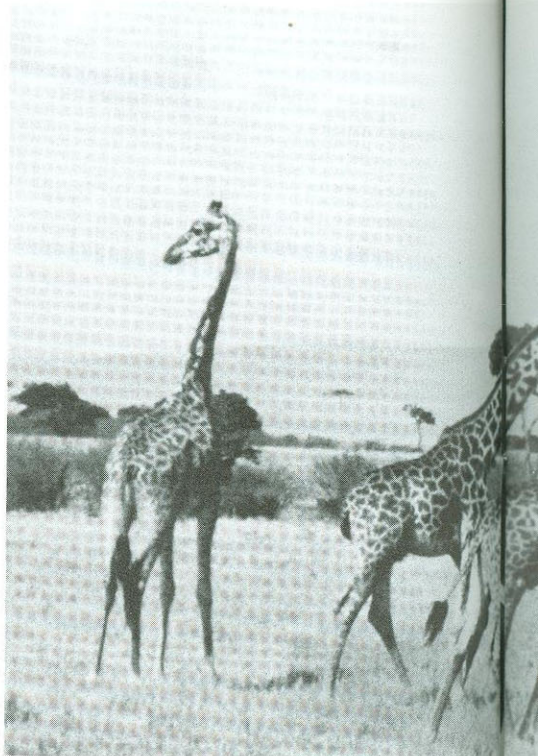


Brightly clad, they are waiting for us at the end of the air strip. Two of their number, Fenno and Pakuo, come forward to greet us. Like the watch on the Maasai elder, I am surprised by the Boston Red Sox cap on Fenno's head, another gift from a St. Lawrence student.

First we visit Fenno's compound, which is called a *manyatta* and consists of several small huts made of a mixture of mud and dung, not unlike those of the Maasai. The houses are surrounded by the limbs of trees and thorn bushes, which form a fence so that all the animals can be brought into the compound at night. Over a cup of *chai*, sweet tea with milk, we learn about Fenno and his family. He says he is a lucky man because his herds are healthy and prospering as are his wives and children.

Leaving Fenno's *manyatta*, we go across the highlands to Pakuo's home. When we arrive, it is clear that something special is afoot. Junior and senior elders have gathered and they are beautiful to behold. Spears in hand, they are resplendent in brightly colored cloth with intricate beadwork at their necks and wrists.

Inside Pakuo's hut, we are invited to share food with his family and we feel honored to be asked to do so. As my eyes are adjusting to the dark interior, I am startled to be greeted in



English. Much to my astonishment, a St. Lawrence student is sitting inside with Pakuo's wife. The Semester Program is over, but Vera MacDonald so loved Samburu and its people that she has come back to stay with them before she returns to the states.

Outside again, we are asked to join the warriors as a senior elder leads them in prayer. It is directed to those things that are fundamental in the lives of the Samburu. "God give you life from the hilly places . . . God give you good tongues, sharp eyes, hearing ears, strong legs and thinking brains . . . God protect you from the spears of the enemies . . . God bless you so you can become old to bless your children . . . To all this, God, say yes!"

Another senior elder stands and speaks of the wisdom of respect. It must be basic to all relationships if there is to be good will. Respect between young and old, black and white, he says, must always be present if we are to have a good community. He tells me that this is what they teach the students who come.

I thank the senior elders for sharing their wisdom with us and for teaching our students the beliefs and ways of the Samburu. Their wisdom, I say, must spread to other lands so that it may be the wisdom of all people. For the new year I wish them two things that will sustain them, adequate rainfall and healthy animals. This brings an enthusiastic cheer from the warriors.



Words of wisdom exchanged, we turn to fun. The warriors gather with spears raised and begin to chant and dance. Soon the women appear and begin to laugh and sway. Prancing and strutting warriors beckon the women to dance. Everyone is bobbing up and down; the motion is contagious. Soon, with a nudge from Paul Robinson, we are all dancing.

The dancing done and the day ending, we must leave this wonderful place to return to Nairobi. I now know why Vera MacDonald was so compelled to return.

January 2-5, In the Capital City

Upon our return to Nairobi, the schedule reasserts its preeminence. I race to get everything done — a luncheon with faculty from the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University who serve as our adjunct professors, appointments with a series of government officials about the Program's clearances, a courtesy call upon the U.S. Ambassador, a visit to the National Museum and a meeting with Richard Leakey, a tour of Nairobi Game Park with Paul Chabeda, senior ecologist for the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife and the father of a Kenyan student at St. Lawrence, and a picnic at the Center for our urban homestay families.

In the midst of the whirlwind of meetings, Paul and Howard suggest that I make time to visit the Ngong

Churches Huruma Project. Under the heat of the midday sun we drive toward the hills to the west of Nairobi. Karen Blixen, writing under the name Isak Dinesen, begins *Out of Africa* with the passage, "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills." The view this time is not the idyllic one that she had. At the foot of the Ngong Hills there is now a ramshackle settlement. Many of the makeshift buildings are saloons scattered among a few dry goods stores and food stands. Shacks squeeze in on

St. Lawrence students assist "Zippy" (at right) as she helps the women and children of the foothills of the Ngong Hills.



"the commercial district," there is one water source for everyone and no adequate sewage disposal. Poverty, disease and discouragement are powerful sources in this community.

We discover an oasis of optimism under the capable management of a remarkable woman. Her card reads "Ziporah Wanjiku, Manager." Friends call her "Zippy." She is devoting her life to the women and children of the village. Zippy wants to help those gain an education, an occupation and, in the process, their dignity as well. She and her co-workers help take care of the children while their mothers are learning a vocation, and they crowd around us as Zippy describes her work.

This is the site of one of the Kenya Semester Program's internships where students can make a significant contribution to Kenyan society. Zippy says that her student interns help her put their ideas in writing and that the work of the project continues because funds have been obtained through the proposals they have written. These students are more than helpers, they are friends, and gifts of God, she says.

January 5, 1989, Departing

To the traveler the Kenyans say, *nenda salama*, go in peace. Not only do I go in peace, I go with the satisfaction that St. Lawrence's Program in Kenya is all that I hoped it would be. *Fides et Veritas.*

Patti McGill Peterson is the first St. Lawrence president to visit the University's program in Kenya.