

In Africa . . .

St. Lawrence, I Presume

By Jane C. Hansmann '73

There were four more months, an examination and a dissertation before my graduate year in African studies would be complete. But the concern over a job had already surfaced. I wondered what I would be doing next year. The answer came that day in April, 1974, with a blessing from the good St. Lawrence. The letter read:

"The concept of an interterm in Kenya is outdated. Costs are prohibitively high for a three-week study program. Furthermore, I have had a brainstorm. The Kenya interterm can be expanded into a semester program, offering students the opportunity to live, work and study in Africa for not just three weeks, but for three months. Most everything has been arranged, but what I need is a director. Why don't you apply for the job?"

The letter and brainstorm came from Dr. Peter L. French, associate professor of government at St. Lawrence and the individual responsible for my own interest in Africa. I had participated in his first interterm in Kenya in January 1972 and did not need convincing that such an experience would be of immeasurable value.

Three weeks in Kenya had changed my life; I was excited about what a three-month experience would do for others. It was a challenge that could not be refused and an experience that could not be denied. I then reflected on my alma mater. Yes, I would presume St. Lawrence University to be the place, now and in the future, to present students with such innovative programs of education.

Thus, a St. Lawrence tribe of 24 students departed for Kenya, East Africa in late January 1975 with excited

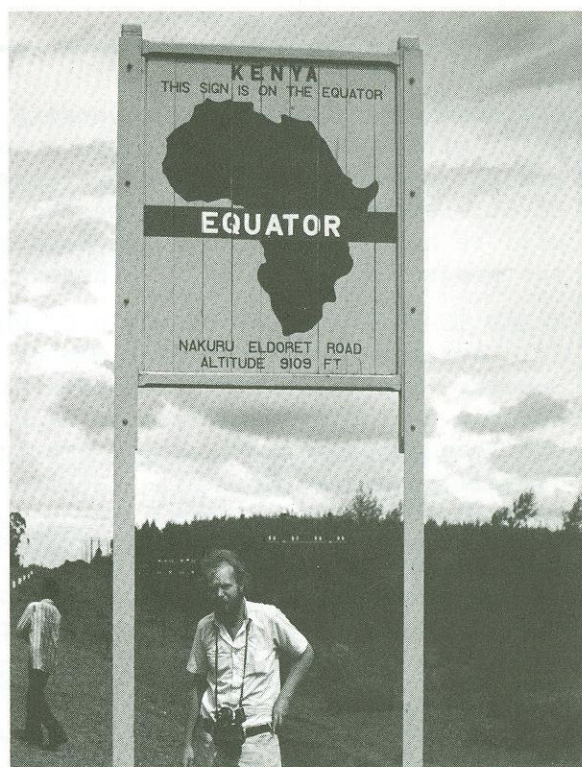
anticipation of their immediate future. The participants were drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines, including English, history, government, economics, geology, psychology, biology and chemistry. There were sophomores, juniors and seniors, men and women, blacks and whites. This diversity made for a dynamic group and a variety of approaches to the program's interdisciplinary theme, the "process of development."

What now can this group tell you about the "process?" I really can speak only for myself, but in many ways I feel the conclusions belong to all. We can tell you that we found no answers to the problems of development in a country like Kenya. More correctly, our preconceived "answers" and "truths" were consistently chipped away by the realities of our experiences. In their place, along with the frustration of realizing there were no answers, emerged, hopefully, a greater awareness of the complexities and interrelated nature of all life's processes in development. No, we can claim no answers, but the more important awarenesses that are the

substance of analysis and decision-making were ours for the taking.

There was also the process of personal development. The bombardment upon one's sensibilities of all Kenya has to offer leaves no one unaffected. Remember the clouds, the rich red earth, the smoke through thatched roofs, the greeting of "Jambo" from children, the simplicity of rural life, the increasing confusion of city life, the beggars, the disillusion, the Mercedes, the Hilton. . . . The images never end, nor do their effect upon siblings of a technologically "developed" society. The challenge for us was to justify the ambivalence of these images and to integrate them into a new approach to our personal lives.

Each personal life was challenged immediately upon arrival in Kenya. The first experience was a homestay with a Kenyan family living in a rural area. For three days each student, separated from the safety and familiarity of the group, experienced a changed lifestyle in a new and different home and family. Some homes were mud, some were wood and some were brick.



John P. McKean '75

The bombardment upon one's senses of all Kenya offers leaves no one unaffected.

There were families with only a small plot for a garden while others had acres for farming.

Some members of the families spoke English, but those who didn't managed to communicate in other ways. There was ugali and irio to eat and sweet tea or perhaps Tusker moto (warm beer) to drink. There were walks on the land and talks to understand. There was evidence of family love and the acceptance of a foreigner into that bond. And for many it was a bond that was perpetuated throughout the three-and-a-half months. There was always a family and the quiet peace and simplicity of a rural shamba to escape to.

Where, you may wonder with concern, would a student need to escape from? In Kenya, it was only from the familiarity and luxury of life in Nairobi, the capital city. The modern luxury of running water and electricity, the convenience of transportation, the contemporary buildings, the European food, the curio shops and the night clubs, to many, now lacked the value that the simplest African family held for them. Yet, even in such a seemingly "westernized" city the astute and curious can find much of what is Kenyan. In these discoveries there was much to be learned.

We settled in Nairobi for the majority of our stay. For most, home was a sprawling hotel with luxuriant gardens located within walking distance of the city. For some, at least for the first month, home was a real home with an urban Kenyan family. These were families whose members worked in Nairobi, whether for the university, in business or for the government. Thus, again the opportunity to experience Kenya as a resident and family member presented itself.

Such experiential learning is clearly the value of any off-campus, out-of-classroom situation. However, experiences are enhanced and enriched through academic learning. While in Nairobi, students in the program made use of the city as an academic center. The objective of the Nairobi semester was to attempt to offer students three

standard academic courses: Public Administration, East African Societies, and Problems of Development. The first two courses were taught by Kenyans and the third by myself.

The idea of including Kenyan academics in our program is a healthy one which shall be more fully developed. The opportunity to learn from non-Americans may help us recognize our own ethnocentricity and better accept differing viewpoints. Furthermore, it provides a chance for an open and uninhibited exchange of international ideas and cultural understanding. It is hoped that academic offerings will broaden as the program becomes more established in Kenya. For next semester two courses taught by Kenyan academics have been added: East African History and Survey of African Literature. Also to be expanded is a guest lecture program, which included this semester such well-known Kenyans as the novelist James Ngugi.

The students' fourth credit is a unique aspect of the semester program. Each student is placed as an intern in a Kenyan or international organization. For two days a week, the intern is an observer/participant in the day-to-day function of his host organization. The objective is to place a student in an organization of his major interest or career objective, thus offering a work-study experience to enhance academic qualification.

For example, a biology major was placed with the Nairobi National Park Animal Orphanage. Geology majors were working with the Kenyan Geological Survey. One government major did a nutrition survey for UNICEF. Two sociology majors gained exposure to community and world population considerations at Family Planning of Kenya and International Planned Parenthood Federation. One student interested in business interned with IBM, and another student with an interest in communications worked through the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting at the Voice of Kenya. One psychology major did psychological testing at Mathare Mental Hospital. This partial list ex-

emplifies the kind of opportunities that I anticipate will continue to expand for future participants.

Besides participation in family home-stays, work with academics and internships, the group, together and as individuals, travelled Kenya extensively. The program provided two planned excursions. The first was a safari to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. A day's journey into Tanzania took us through Amboseli Game Park where we shot (with cameras) elephant, giraffe, gazelle and other wild animals. Then for five days we climbed, three days to the peak and two days down. I can't begin to draw the image (not even Hemingway could!) of the sun rising through drifts of clouds below us, as we stood in new fallen snow on top of a continent.

Our second group safari was a trip to Mombasa and Malindi, where we lived in grass-roofed huts on the beach, cooked fresh fish and lobsters for dinner and watched exotic marine life through snorkels. We visited the 14th century Portuguese Fort Jesus. The ruins of the old Arab town of Gedi were explored. The strong Arab influence of the Kenyan coast was felt as dhows tugged anchor off shore. To say the least, all was an enjoyable education.

I have tried to describe some of the things we learned and some of the things we experienced. But alas, although I have tried, I have given but a skeleton, a semester in Nairobi program on paper. The people to talk to are 24 St. Lawrence students who have the memories. It is they who will tell you about the East African Safari, the Uplands Pig Works Factory, an honored goat slaughter, a traditional wedding, Tumbos, a real hunting safari, dinner with the U.S. Ambassador, giving inoculations to Masai tribesmen, hitchhiking around Western Province, climbing Mt. Kenya and Mt. Elgon, a political murder, the Habari Club, curry dinners, a crippled child, a sociological experience with Kenyan prostitutes, a shower with a chicken, "fire ugali," a love for a family, and an experience.

Ah yes, St. Lawrence, I presume.