

MORIBA KANTE

by

Thomas Mowbray

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INTRODUCTION

Parents instinctively take pride in the achievements of their children, but there is of course a need for caution on the part of every pride-filled parent in order to avoid attempts to somehow live vicariously through the lives of their children. Nevertheless, there are times when a parent's effort to preserve an experience is justified, and my son's experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa was indeed such a time.

From August of 2001 to March of 2004, my son, L. Allen Mowbray, served with the Peace Corps in the Kayes Region of Mali, West Africa. I clearly recall the day he flew out of the airport in Waterloo, Iowa. Allen had traveled quite a bit. At the age of nine he flew by himself to visit his grandparents in New Jersey for several weeks during the summer. While in high school he participated in a youth exchange program, spending the summer in France. During his college years he traveled throughout the USA. He studied in Rome during his senior year of college and traveled extensively. But this adventure was different.

Allen graduated from the College of Design at Iowa State University in 2000 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. The following fall semester he entered graduate school and was a teaching assistant in the College of Design. His output of major art projects was stunning. But this formative period in his life seemed to be filled with an inner turmoil or searching and it was reflected in his art. He had looked into the Peace Corps and soon applied for an assignment. He finished his first semester as a graduate student with honors, but then accepted a position with Evergreen Painting Studios of New York City to work on the restoration of the artwork in the Orpheum Theater in Sioux City, Iowa, as part of an \$8 million restoration and historic preservation project. He was one of four artists in charge of restoring the ornate ceiling of the elaborate, Baroque/French Renaissance style entertainment palace. Soon he received notice from the Peace Corps that he was accepted for an assignment in Mali, West Africa, and was to begin the following August. This allowed him enough time between the completion of the Orpheum project and his Peace Corps assignment to work one more summer as a counselor at Brant Lake Camp in the Adirondacks, where he had enjoyed being a counselor for several summers.

As soon as Allen was on his way to Africa, I designed a Peace Corps page for him on our family website and planned to keep a journal there for him. This proved to be a very interesting project for our family and for his many friends, and provided an ongoing communication link for Allen that bridged the long periods he spent working in his remote village far away from telephones, computers, post offices and indoor plumbing.

This book is an attempt to refine the journal that awkwardly took shape from letters, e-mails and Internet chat, taking the gold of the joyful life Allen selflessly shared with others and using it to frame the gems of his wisdom and insight. The format of the original journal remains, with extensive quotes from Allen's writings interspersed with my personal comments and summaries.

Thomas L. Mowbray

A PEACE CORPS JOURNAL

Postcard.

Sent: 23 August 2001. Received: 04 September 2001.

Wow! I'm here and I'm still alive. It's our first full day at Tubani So; that's a camp just for Peace Corps, outside Bamako. There are 52 volunteers in this training group. About 20 locals and other Peace Corps people are here also to teach our classes and maintain the camp. The buildings are a mix of thatch huts and poured concrete buildings with electricity. Our sleeping quarters has a ceiling fan that helps a ton. It's not really that hot. Supposedly it's the rainy season, but it hasn't rained yet. Humid as hell! Probably about 90 [degrees F]. Plane rides were smooth. Forgot how complicated the Paris airport was. The bugs aren't too bad. It's like being at camp.

Love you both, Al



Outdoor classroom at Tubani So.

Digest of Letter.

Sent: 24 August 2001. Received: 05 September 2001.

Wow! The past 3 days have been so amazing. Everybody split up and went to visit a village where another volunteer was working already. We finally got to experience what life will be like (sort of) for us after training: a look at the local culture, customs, etc.

[Al then describes his trip to Africa and his arrival in Bamako. Peace Corps reps and other volunteers met them at the airport and took them by bus to Tubani So, the Peace

Corps training center outside Bamako. Their first lesson was in personal hygiene, “and how to take a bucket-bath, which I found to be surprisingly effective and refreshing.”]

We had a few days of demonstrations like eating with hands and the huge event of making tea, interspersed with a few shots, which we still aren’t done with.... I’m feeling fine.

[They all signed up to go to different places with at least one roommate. Allen and his roommate went to Ticasarabougou, about 26 K outside Segou. They stayed with a volunteer who has been there a year and a half.]

We took a bus to Segou with a bunch of others from our Stage [Staging Group] and met with the Segou PCVs [Peace Corps Volunteers] at the Segou Stage House, which is basically a clubhouse for the PCVs when they come into the city. It has toilets and showers with running water, electricity, and is right next to a German restaurant.

[They were going to ride bikes the 26 miles to the village, but Allen’s roommate got a flat tire about one fourth of the way, so they took a bus taxi the rest of the way. Allen says the PCV who lives there rides her bike the 26 miles a few times a week.]

We got there at dark but still made the rounds to say hello. Her house has four rooms, a nice outside Nyegan [bathroom], a wall around her yard, and a garden. She has a dog and raises chickens. We had tea that night and a few times the next day, and I got a chance to make it myself. The villagers thought I did an all right job.



Malian brass teapot on charcoal stove.

[The next day people came to the PCV's house to say hello. "The greetings and goodbyes here take forever." They learned some of the local language, because very few people speak French.]

Bambara is a beautiful, fun language, and the people are always laughing and smiling.

We went to visit the local wood carver and the drummer, two people each village has. I'm going to befriend the woodcarver and drummer in my village, also the medicine man. I've heard stories and I'm sure he's a good person to know.



The drummer in Ticasarabougou.

[A village family brought food to all three of them.]

I had tigadigana, which is like unsweetened peanut butter sauce with fish and chili peppers over rice, and it was really good. That and the steak and banana sandwich with mayo I had for lunch today were the best things I've eaten since I've been here. (But the food at Tubani So is also OK.) [Al describes other foods.] I'm not too fond of the millet, but everything else is good. Before we ate it, we helped some women pound the millet. They spend all day preparing their meal for the evening.

[Al describes the Malian family and their home. The village has about 300 people. The town people aren't too interested in having electricity, but they do want clean water. The cities, Bamako and Segou, have many Western conveniences.

Al's postscript was interesting. He noted that the best way to write to him is by using the post-paid, Via Airmail/Par Avion letters. But, he added, if anyone sends him a note in a regular envelope, there should be room to include a zip-lock plastic bag ("always useful"), and "a few squares of toilet paper." If anyone wants to splurge on postage, other requested inclusions are AA batteries and 110 film, sent in padded envelopes.]

Digest of Letter.

Sent: 30 August 2001. Received: 06 September 2001.

I had a wonderful adventure this weekend. Classes are going well: long and repetitive, but I'm learning. Sunday was a much-needed break.

We walked from our host family village, which I haven't told you about yet, so I guess I'll do that later. We walked the 1-½ miles to Tubani So, and a little further through the high grass near the Niger to a farmer's hut, where someone found that he would give us a ride across [the Niger River]. There was a rumor that on the other side was a bar that many a Peace Corps Trainee has stumbled across.



Tall grass on the banks of the Niger River.

Well, we managed to find it. Amazing! It's a hotel/restaurant run by a Canadian couple. It is straight out of Architectural Digest. Again! Amazing!!

The couple that ran the place was really glad to see the new PCT [Peace Corp Training] group had found them, and gave us a discount on the already insanely low prices, as long as we [would agree to] bring more people the next time.

On the way back, our boat sprang a leak, and I had to do some bailing, but [it was] well worth the effort, for a boat ride across the Niger.

Samanko is a great little village. The first time we all went to the village to meet our families, our busses were met with all the children of the town piling around us, and the

local drummers playing up a storm for the villagers to dance to. I didn't get pictures because it started to rain—my cause for not having pictures of a lot of things, since it rains a lot and I don't carry my camera in the rain.

Victor and I are rooming in the Lakitae families concession. I've been going by Ali because Malians can't really pronounce the "l" in Al. (It sounds more like "ow.") And the tailor in Segou named me Ali, but we are all getting new Malian names. I'm Moudika Tabitae....

The family is really nice....

A Malian greeting takes a while. Seriously, without exaggerating, a typical "hello" consists of, "Hello. How's it going? How's your family? Your Mom? Your Dad? Your health? How was your night? Your day? How are the people of Samanko? (Or America...) And all the answers are, "Fine, fine, fine, not bad, fine, not bad, fine...."

Everyone is really nice to us Twobobs [foreigners], and [they] try to teach us, even if we just don't get it. It's a beautiful language, simple, but difficult in its complexities at the same time.

"N ba" means "my mother," "I agree," "Yes, I acknowledge [that] you are speaking to me." (But only for a man.) And "OK." It all depends on the context. If all else fails, just say, "N ba...."

Wednesday we're going on a drive-thru of Bamako; they're going to show us where stuff is so we can go there on our own from Samanko. Saturday we're going to the Bamako museum to get a little culture and a history lesson, and Sunday a few of us are going to attempt a journey to the nearby river bluffs....

I hope my stuff is making it there. I'm exhausted and going to crash for tonight.
Love ya,
Al

Telephone Call: 12 September 2001.

[We received a telephone call from the sister of a PCV in Allen's group, who was part of a calling tree. She received an e-mail from her sister in Mali. The Peace Corps Bureau called all Peace Corps Volunteers in Mali back from their assignments to be informed about the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. and to be able to watch the news coverage on TV. From the information available, we did not know whether they were called back to Tubani So, or to the Peace Corps Bureau in Bamako, or to the U.S. Embassy in Bamako. The basic news is that all PCVs are safe and the U.S. Embassy in Mali is secure.]

Telephone Call: 13 September 2001.

[I had a longer conversation with the PCV's sister this morning. Evidently her sister in Mali has access to a computer, and has been able to send e-mail messages to her sister in Rochester, New York. The PCV group is still together. I still do not know where they went, but everyone is fine. They may be returning to their assignments very soon. The people of Mali have expressed their concern and sympathy to the Americans in Mali. Both Christian churches and Islamic mosques have been offering prayer services on a regular basis for the American victims of terrorism, and their loved ones, and for the American people, and for peace.]

Letter and Drawings

Mailed: 09 September 2001. Received: 27 September 2001.

[We were certainly glad to know that airmail between the USA and Mali had been re-established for it had been halted after the 9/11 attacks.]

Right now I'm chillin' in the yard with my host family. Victor [Allen's PCV partner] and I were supposed to work in the fields today with our brothers, but I'm also supposed to learn how to weave grass mats today, so we're working in the fields next weekend.

Yesterday we found out where our sites will be for the two years. I got the site I wanted near the dam in Manatali. I hear there are wild troops of baboons that roam the hills there, and a wildlife refuge with lions and tigers and stuff.

In our technical classes we're learning hydrogeology in its most simplified form, and we've been making trips to a nearby village to repair some of their wells. We poured some concrete foundations for anchoring the bricks to fix the rest of the shaft. Really interesting how we're learning the super-simplified techniques so we can easily teach them to natives at-site.

Next week we all go on our first site visit to check out our village, house, [and] see what projects the previous volunteer has going. I'm replacing an Ag [Agriculture] Volunteer. There was a Water San [Clean Water/Sanitation] Volunteer a few towns down that is being replaced by an Ag PCV from our Stage. The wells in the other village are partly good; the previous PCV fixed them up so there isn't a lot for a Water San to do there. I'm going [where] there was a pump to bring water from the nearby river (very clean for a Malian river, because of the dam - my village is below the dam), but the pump broke, so the women walk to the river each day for water. The town dug a well, too, but for some reason it pulls up saltwater. I'm going to check it out and try to decide whether to fix the pump or dig another well. I'm definitely going to get a quick test in what I'm learning.

A lot of people are having crazy dreams and feeling side effects from the anti-malaria medication, but I'm doing pretty well. Most of the crazy dreams are really neat! I think a lot of it is just psychological effects from being in another country and hearing horror stories about Mefloquin [Lariam – mefloquin hydrochloride, a drug to prevent malaria]. I've been pretty lucky.... [Allen then tells more about PCV health problems, but that he has managed to stay healthy. He closed with a request for us to send back some of the photos from the film he sent home.]

Telephone Call: 30 September 2001.

[We were so happy to have our first telephone conversation with Allen, in Africa, this morning. About 9:30 AM, another PCV parent called us to report that the PCVs were in Tubani So this weekend, and, if we wanted to talk to Allen, we should call a certain telephone number within the next 15-20 minutes. When we called, Allen answered, and we had a very cheerful conversation.

Allen has been assigned to a small village across the river from Manatali. He will be moving there as soon as his house is ready.]

E-Mail: 03 January 2002.

[The following is an excerpt from a short e-mail message. Al included a telephone number where we could reach him that evening.]

OK, I hope this works - try No. 3 today - the computers are crashing and the power is getting cut off.

I'm in Bamako for a few days, checking on a few work things, after heading out to Mopti for New Years Eve. I'm keeping this short. Love to you all. I'm staying at the Bamako stage house.

Telephone Conversation: 03 January 2002.

[Al sounded great. His host family has worked with him to finish his house, building a new door, and window screens and shutters. The name of his village is Dialakoto. It is across the river from Manatali, which is located just below a large dam that will be used to generate electricity. The nearest city to Dialakoto and Manatali is Kita, west of Bamako. His work there is going well. He said that he had mailed a few letters since Thanksgiving. I told him we had received nothing since the letter he mailed on 9 September.

One of his most interesting descriptions was about fasting for Ramadan with his family and villagers. He described Mopti as a very attractive and progressive city. Traveling to Mopti to meet other PCVs for New Years was not easy; it took him 13 hours to get there from Dialakoto. He then journeyed all the way back to Bamako where he will spend several days before he returns to Dialakoto. Allen noted that when he returns to Dialakoto, he will probably not have access to a computer or telephone for another two or three months, but he should be able to receive mail that is sent to his new address:

PCV: L. Allen Mowbray (Moriba Kante)
Corps de la Paix
B. P. 19
Manatali, Mali
West Africa

This remained Allen's permanent address throughout his volunteer experience. He usually received mail from us in about two weeks, and everything we sent arrived in good condition.]

Letter No. 1 of 2.

Posted: 03 December 2001. Received: 07 January 2002.

I'm writing this letter to you while sitting in a hammock I made with string and two pieces of wood with holes drilled with a hand drill. I'm pretty happy with it. It's kind of difficult to write in, though....

We've been in country for well over two months now. The language is going slow, and the days at Tubani So are slowly coming to an end. Two weeks and we'll be on our way to our sites!

I just got back from two weeks of Field Based Training [FBT] at Manatali. A group of five of us went out there to work on a soak pit/washing area next to a communal water cistern. We also trained a Malian well team how to make covers for wells out of concrete with a metal hatch, so stuff doesn't fall in the well. We had some meetings with villagers to teach them the importance of using these things, as well as some radio shows on a local radio station (in very broken Bambara) about basic sanitation.

I had a good reality check—I found out that the people here have only been using Nyegans for about five years! Near Bamako, where things are more developed, they've been using them for maybe 10-15 years. This is the first generation of people here using bathrooms!

Different people went different places for the FBT—I was a lucky one who got to go to my own site, which was doubly good because Manatali is the best place in Mali. The five

of us Water/San volunteers met up with five SED (Small Enterprise Development) and five Health volunteers for the last few days in the Manatali Stage House. We got a tour of the dam facility, and the turbines and power plant, and went swimming in the reservoir—absolutely wonderful: my first time being submerged in water after being in 90-105 degree plus temperatures for two months straight.

We spent a few days with a family in Tokely, near Manatali, where the volunteer San lives, who was hosting FBT. Our first night there, we had a meeting with the village chief, or dugatigi in Bambara, and he offered us a goat. He asked if we wanted to eat it while we were in the village, or take it back to Bamako with us. We told them it would be better to eat it in the village, so the kids held it down and a guy slit its throat right there in front of us. Then they skinned it, right there in front of us. Then they managed to make it last for four meals, split between us and the dugatigi's family (about 30 people all together) over two days, without a refrigerator. Animals last a lot longer when you serve all the internal organs and the head along with the meat and bones.

Well, I was debating whether or not to include the next part of the story, but since I have a picture or two of it, I might as well explain it.

Victor and I were feeling very carnivorous after the whole lamb [goat] thing, and were talking about getting some meat for dinner our last night at the Stage House. The meat from the market is a little iffy—no telling when it was killed, or even if it died from natural causes, disease, or an ax, so we decided to buy two live chickens. One of the volunteers knew how to gut the chickens, and said she'd teach me how to do it as long as she didn't have to kill it or pluck it. Well... Victor got the chickens. I did the killing, trying to do my best to do it in true Malian tradition by saying a prayer to Allah, and slitting its throat—and we both did the plucking. The gutting was pretty easy, and the big bar-b-q pit was perfect for grilling. It was quite the experience.

I'm thinking I'm going to try to make a chicken coup and raise them in my concession—for eggs and meat. Protein is kind of difficult to come by here, and a lot of volunteers lose weight because of a lack of protein. The Malian diet is 99% starches: millet, rice, corn, and bread.

There are a few vegetarians in our group. It's really hard for them to get enough nutrients because there's not an abundance of vegetarian-specific food like in the US. I think it's just difficult in general to eat a well-balanced meal.

The vegetarians were a little disgusted by the whole chicken-killing thing, except for Joe—the only vegetarian who not only watched the killing, but cheered it on and made us give the chickens names before we lopped off their heads. (We named them Martyr and Dinner.)

The ride back was interesting. With our language professors there were twenty of us. We rented a van, but it broke down, and the driver was trying to fix the axle with a big rubber band, but that didn't work, so we hitch-hiked on a dump truck from the dam company—

all twenty of us, with luggage, five mattresses, and five bikes the other half of the way..., then took a bus—really another dump truck fitted with seats and a roof, to Bamako.



The ride back to Bamako.

It was a great trip, and I can't wait to move out there.

Love,
Al

Letter No. 2 of 2.

Posted: 03 December 2001. Received: 07 January 2002. Dated: 25 November 2001.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING & MERRY CHRISTMAS!

I'm sorry I haven't written lately. I don't know where to begin this letter. It's three days after Thanksgiving, and this is the first moment I've had to actually stop and think since I've been installed. I'm sitting at the Stage House [in Manatali] on the porch, looking out over the river. I can see the mountains and the smoke rising from the burning fields. It's so quiet.



View of the Baffing River from the Manatali Stage House.

Everyone left this morning. There have been people coming and going for the past week, with about 20 people here for Thanksgiving: some from my Stage, some with a year left, others whom I probably won't see again because they're leaving soon. We've been swimming at the lake, playing volleyball with the South Africans, and cooling a ton. Last night was a deep-fried buffet, with French fries, onion rings, and fried chicken. Thanksgiving dinner was turkey imported from Bamako, beef stew, scalloped potatoes—so good!!

It was great to have a big bunch of people here, but I guess it was this morning as everybody was leaving that I really felt thankful for the past few days, the past few months, the people I've met, the chances I've had, not just here in Mali—Everywhere. Everyone.

I love my host family in Dialakoto. My brother and I have been digging the pit for my own private latrine. Right now I'm using the family's. After my Nyegan is finished, we're going to build a "gwa" (covered porch area) next to my house, and a screen for my door.

When I first got there, I had four walls and the roof, and holes for the door and window. Musa, my dad, built my door by cutting a log into boards and nailing them together, putting hinges on to connect it to the frame, and attaching the frame with mud. My window is screen attached to a frame, with re-bar running through it for reinforcement, then a squared-off piece of car hood for closing when it rains. Except for the roof, my entire house is made of dirt, wood, and spare parts.



Dialakoto, with Allen's house at right.

A few days ago I watched Musa pound a worn out wood file into a knife after heating it up in the fire. That was his afternoon—beating the piss out of a piece of metal.

I've gone to work in the fields with my brothers. The hike out to the field is more effort than most people in the U.S. put out over the course of a day, but they walk a few miles out to the field, cut millet by hand all day, and then walk home.

I was supposed to go hunting with a friend of the family one day, but he didn't come by in the morning to get me. He didn't think I'd make it. But that was before I went to the fields and showed them that I actually could do things.

Haramadi (the hunter) said he'd take me sometime, but not until after Ramadan. The family asked me if I was going to participate in the fasting. I told them I'd give it a try. So I've been getting up at 5:00 a.m., eating, drinking tons of water, and going back to bed, then spending the day trying to do as little as possible, then cramming [i.e. stuffing himself] at night. I eat and drink enough at night that I haven't felt dehydrated, and only a little hungry. Most nights, people go for twelve hours without eating or drinking. Fasting just turns that into twelve hours of daylight instead. But I don't want to go hungry in the sun, walking all over all day while doing it.

I hope you both had a good Thanksgiving. [Al then writes about one of the volunteers going back to the U.S. for surgery. He is to return with his parents for Christmas, and his village is planning a party for them. Allen said all the Manatali volunteers would probably go to the party.]

For New Years I'm thinking about going out to Mopti. That's where the big New Years party usually is, and I'd like to see some of my friends from Stage. That will mean going through Bamako, which I don't really want to do for two reasons. One, I don't like Bamako. It's my least favorite place in Mali, and, Two, we're not supposed to leave our region for the first three months. But another reason I want to go to Mopti is that I haven't gotten my bicycle yet, and I heard it got accidentally shipped to Mopti. I might go up to [?] this week to find out if they know anything about it at the office there. For now, I have a bike from the Stage House to use.

I haven't said anything about work-related things because my first "job" is learning the language. The only people who speak French in my village are the kids, because they learn it in school, and I can't use them as a translator because the older men won't listen to a kid. Not that my French is that great anyway.

I've had many conversations with the Dam workers [in Manatali] about development in Mali and self-sustaining projects. The South Africans [who work at the dam] are especially pessimistic about Malians being able to keep anything going after the white people set it up and hand it over. In one way they're right, I guess. There are countless buildings along the train route that were built by the French and now lay in ruins, not taken care of at all. But then, why should the Malians keep them up? Why bother? Most Malians in small villages are primarily concerned with cutting millet and harvesting peanuts, and building houses out of dirt and wood. In the U.S. it's impossible to live without money. Here you just build your own house and grow your own food on some of the empty land. They don't need big cement buildings, or trains, or cars, or money.

So, my job is water-sanitation. I'm supposed to help people get cleaner, safer drinking water. The people here are perfectly happy with their pit latrines next to their traditional wells. I can tell them that's not good, and that the Nyegan should be 15 meters from the nearest well, but then they have to dig a new well. Then I have to explain to them that they should do it for their health, and I don't have any money to pay them for their work. Then they tell me that germs don't exist. Some people don't believe that AIDS is a real disease. So then I try to convince them that they should wash their hands with soap. Then they have to pay for soap.

So finally people do wash with soap, and drink clean water, and live longer, healthier lives. Then because people live longer and less babies die, the population goes up. Then more land gets turned into farmland to feed all the people. Then the two lions left in Mali have nowhere else to go. The trees disappear for firewood, and Mali slowly begins to look like Iowa.

So how do I change people's attitudes toward health without "Westernizing?" The problem is really complex, and I've thought about it a lot.

People here have a different understanding of life—of what is good. In most languages the direction "right" and being right (correct) are synonymous. In Italian, "left" is "sinistra," which can be translated into "sinister." But in Malinke, left is "numunfe," which means, "the good side." I guess there are two sides to everything.

I haven't written this all in one sitting. I'm back in Dialakoto now, hanging out with my Malian dad. Today he's fixing a gun for a hunter in the village. This morning we moved all the bricks to my Nyegan, and tomorrow we'll start building the wall. Dad saw me writing and asked what I was doing. I told him I was writing a letter to my American parents. He asked if, when I was done, I would help him write a letter to the first volunteer that was here, Fatimata. She left almost two years ago. I don't even know her American name, but I guess I'll write a little something, and send it off. They have her address in Vermont. Life just keeps getting more bizarre.

[In Al's closing remarks, he noted that his name in Dialakoto is Moriba Kante.]

Love you,
Al

Letter

Posted: 13 December 2001. Received: 10 January 2002. Dated: 12 December 2001.

How is it December already?

I've been in Dialakoto for more than a month now, and I'm just getting to the point where I can talk to my family in their language. I did my first actual WORK today. I went and measured the depth of the hand-dug ... wells in the village. The deepest is 7 ½ meters. In the dry season (which is beginning now and lasts until July) the wells dry up and the people go to the river for water (about 75 yards from the nearest houses on the North/East side of the village).

This is the third place Dialakoto has been located. First, it was on the other side of the dam. They moved about 10-15 km down stream, close to where they are now. But some dumb ass settled them on the floodplain (Mali looks more like Iowa every day.), and floods don't go well with mud-brick houses. All the houses collapsed within two years, and they moved to a little higher ground, where they are now (again, about 75 yards).

But when they got moved to Dialakoto II, USAID built them a pump and a deep well (13 m.), lined with cement. The pump is useless (Due to a freak of geology, it pulls up salt water.), and sits rusted and broken. The well water was good, but a goat fell in it. Nobody pulled the body out, and now the water is rancid. Plus, the lid is crap—thin cement with

exposed re-bar that is rusted, leaving the cap weak and ready to collapse. Dad told me about another well in a different village that collapsed, killing five people (not a surprise if five people were standing on it), and my moms (Dad has two wives, and asked me if I could find him a third American wife) said that some people died from the goat-water.



Supposedly (says my brother), the people know well water is better than river water, and if the well (USAID well) water was good, they would go there instead. I said we could bleach the well and pull all the [junk] out of it, and the water can be good again, but convincing the people that killer-goat water can be made safe again is going to take a while.

Plus, they'll only go to that well in the dry season. My best bet might be to get some people together and dig one of the village wells deeper. It won't be as clean as the USAID well, but the people here are used to the well water—they don't get sick very often from it. They get sick more often from untreated wounds—not washing their hands with soap, etc.

I could possibly get money (a grant called SPA Fund) from USAID to pay for brick for lining the well, and possibly to pay the people who do the work. But this area has some money, and when villages get moved, they get a lot of money and stuff. They have a big stereotype of white people being gift-givers. I think if I can convince the people to do this for their own health, without getting paid, it will go beyond simple clean water and teach them to do things because they need to, and not because they're getting paid. Plus, if the

whole community is involved, they will be more likely to take care of what they do. That's why a lot of the pumps here are broken—nobody cares enough to fix them.

Anyway, the work on my house is going slow. Nobody wants to do much of anything during Ramadan, even people who aren't fasting. Dad has to finish a few other projects before he makes my screen door. I watched him hollow out a log for a drum yesterday. Today he's carving a piece for a rifle—the piece you put against your shoulder.

[Allen then writes about his new address in Manatali, and asks us to send a few things to him.]

Love ye,
Al

Letter

Posted 27 December 2001. Received: 14 January 2002.

[Allen sent a wonderful hand-drawn map of the Manatali area, which clarified a great deal of what he has described in his letters. Lake Manatali is on the Bafing River (also spelled Baffing).]

This is a map of the Baffing area. I keep telling about people and places here (and will be for two years), and you probably won't be finding a map of the area on the Internet. So, this is so the letters make a little more sense, without a lot of further explanation.

The film is all (yes, all three rolls) from the Ramadan festival, the Monday before Christmas Eve. It was crazy. Everybody in the village wanted a picture, so I said I'd take a family photo of each family. Bringing out the camera in the village will become a rare occurrence after that deal.

So tonight is Christmas Eve--my first Christmas away from home. With temperatures in the 90s, it doesn't really feel like Christmas, although a couple of days have been cloudy/hazy, like an Iowa winter.

I think the kids in the village got the best Christmas present ever today: Polio vaccinations. A doctor from the city came and gave free vaccinations to all the children-- a good Christmas for a Muslim country.

Tonight, Sam's [Sam is a PVC in the nearby village of Dioheli.] parents will be here visiting. We're having Christmas dinner here, and tomorrow there is a party in Dioheli, so we're all heading out there. Sam arranged the party for his parents.

When I left the village this morning, my brother, Numonke, said he was leaving tonight. He said he's going to find work in the city somewhere. I think he's got a good chance; he worked for the Spanish when they had control of the dam, and he's been to visit his

brother in Kayes. He said his “head will go bad” if he stays in Dialakoto. He feels like he needs a change. I can’t blame him; I came here because I felt that way. I just hope his parents don’t blame me, or think I took him somewhere, since we’re both leaving on the same day (I’m heading up to Mopti after Christmas, hitching a ride with Sam and his parents in their rental car, going back to Dialakoto in a week or two.).

I think I have a good family photo on one of the rolls. It’s with me, Dad (Musa), Mom and Mom (older = Kany, younger = Simbali). Numonke (he’s my age), Bourama (younger brother), Banko (sister), and I think Santahine missed that picture, but he’s about four, the littlest (they had another little one, about two years old, that died a week or two before I was installed).

Anyway, more to come....

Love you..., hug Toby –

Al



Allen with his family, Ramadan, 2001.

Letter

Mailed: 14 February 2002. Received: 05 March 2002.

[This was primarily a personal letter, and much of it is therefore summarized. Allen opens with a description of Musa's "thank you" to Allen for a few small gift items we mailed to Allen for Musa. Musa is Allen's "Jatigi," or host father, more exactly translated as "lodger."]

He and his wives greet you, and his children. This is a formal thing I'll explain later. He says that you raised a good kid, namely me, and he thanks you for sending me here to help his village. He also says both of you are very generous, good people. He understands white people more now, after knowing the volunteers [Peace Corps Volunteers] here.

[Allen explained the form of formal greetings.] As I told you before, greetings here are long. The more formal it is, the longer [it is], and the longer, the more important and sincere.

So, he wanted to thank you ... and he recited a bunch of greetings and benedictions. I think he might be the nicest, kindest person who ever lived. For example: Here I am, a shining white guy whom they know has money, but he won't let me pay for the fence around my house, because he's so happy that I came to help his village and live with his family that he has to pay, even though he doesn't have the cash to pay for a sack of rice to feed his family right now.

But, I helped him find some dam workers [i.e. South Africans who are constructing the hydroelectric plant at the dam in Manatali] to buy some [of the] stuff he makes, to help him get some cash. He sold a Jimbe [?] for 25,000 CFA, about \$30.00 US—not bad, considering the average income here is \$300.00/year.

It works out pretty well, because he helps me a ton, so I want to help him out—hook him up with some cash, but if I start giving money away, everyone will want some [Allen has some money available to him for certain projects, but he is very careful about how the money is used.]. This way he gets paid well for his work--work that no one else in the village does, and I can pay him back without looking like a charity giver.

[Allen described the first batch of photographs we had developed for him. He mailed the film to us, and we sent a set of pictures back to him. He reports that he managed to repair the pump on the deep well in Dialakoto. This was quite an accomplishment. RE: the story about the killer-goat water, above.]

I'll use the pump to get the bad water out of the big well, then bleach the water that comes back [into the well], then take that water out, then hopefully the water will be drinkable.

Anyway, I'm excited about the pump. It's been here for years, and no one's fixed it, not that they tried.

[He continued to describe his photos, and told about the villagers burning their farm fields at the beginning of the dry season, to clear the fields. Then Allen explained his Malian name: Moriba Kante.]

...Moriba means “big Muslim [or big Moor].” “ba” added to the end of a word means “big” or “a lot” or “very,” depending on the word it modifies. “Kolonba” means “big well,” while “che koroba” means “really old man.” And Kante is spelled with the funky e [the French acute accent mark over the e], because they [the Malian people] didn’t write until the French came, and that’s how the French spelled it. It can also be written Kanté [The final “e” looks like a backwards 3. Allen continued writing about the culture and language of the Manatali area, and the differences between Bambara and Malinke [or Malinké], the language of the Malinke cultural group in the area.] I do a lot better at pronouncing Bambara properly.

Kante is the traditional blacksmith family name. Now, the caste system is ending, and not all kids follow [in] their fathers’ footsteps, but everyone still says I’m a blacksmith (numu) when I tell them my name. I think the name fits me well, because I fixed the well today!

[Allen added a few closing remarks, and ended by saying that he might go to Bamako soon, where he has access to an online computer. His mother and I were so happy to receive this warm letter from The Big Muslim Blacksmith.]

Greet the people (kan bu fo).
Love, Al

E-mail: 24 March 2002.
FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Allen’s mailing list.

Hey! Well, I’m back in Bamako for a few days. I’m going to try to be here to email for the next few days in a row - been at the training center planning the things everyone will teach to the next group of recruits that comes in. I can’t believe that soon it will be time to teach the things I was taught only a short while ago - seems like I just got here!
So, let me know what’s up with y’all!
Talk to you tomorrow,
Al

E-mail: 24 March 2002.
FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

Well, I'm still alive. I didn't want to come in for this training thing because I've got so much going on in Manatali.

My pump project is on hold for the moment (it fell into the well) but it's going pretty well (great pun!) except for that. My eventual goal is to teach the blacksmiths in the market how to make a hand pump using a few new parts (like pipe and re-bar) but making the rest out of scrap metal and spare parts: it will be very low cost so that villagers around the area can afford them. It's fun working on the design and trying to make it work.

It's starting to get really hot. It's still not as hot as in the city of Kayes, but here in Bamako it's really humid. It even rained last night, surprising most of us and soaking everything I brought in to Bamako with me, because I was planning on sleeping on the roof and left all my stuff there before we went out for a friend's birthday. It was a long crazy night dancing in the rain outside the bar.

People are already starting to take vacations! I feel like I just got here, but I have been doing some thinking about vacation routes. I'm thinking I'm going to stay in Africa for the whole two years, though. It seems like a lot of people that go back to the States for vacation get used to all the comforts of home again, then quit when they get back to Mali and the life here. And, what better chance to see the rest of the continent, which I might not ever go back to?

So, I'm thinking about a trip to Morocco, maybe the Canary Islands, and Senegal and possibly the Gambia, but that will be later. There is a bunch of people going to Ghana in May, and I might go with them, if Allah wills it.

I'm also thinking about South Africa, because I know a lot of people there who work at the dam and might even be able to get a flight with them (they have a plane at the little air strip near Manatali).

Anyway, I'll write more tomorrow. Love ya both,
Al

Telephone Call: 11 May 2002.

[We were very happy to receive a call from another PCV parent in the morning, saying that we could reach Allen in Bamako if we called right away. The connection worked, and we had a wonderful conversation. Al was in good spirits. He has been at Tubani So most of the week for more advanced language training. He sent a brief e-mail message yesterday, saying to call him at the Stage House, because he was there for the day, but no one was home here in Nashua, Iowa to read his e-mail on 10 May until it was too late to call him in Bamako. Therefore, we were really happy to reach him the next morning. He is taking a trip to Kita with several PCVs by train, and staying there several days before he returns to Manatali and Dialakoto. One of the PCVs in his Stage Group has an

assignment near Kita. They were to leave together early this morning, but after they purchased their tickets and sat on the train for about an hour, the conductor announced that the train would not be leaving for Kita until evening. As Allen explained with West African understanding, they tried to get to Kita this morning, “but God did not will it.” So, Allen and the others returned to the Stage House in Bamako for the day and began a calling tree, which was great for us, because Allen explained that he might not get back to Bamako until the beginning of July, when he plans a trip to Mopti and to other areas of Mali. We briefly discussed the possibility of meeting him in Europe next winter for the holidays, and all three of us are excited about that.]

Letter

Mailed: 25 April 2002. Received: 15 May 2002.

FROM: Allen in Manatali. TO: Mom and Dad.

Oh, I seem to go through cycles of mailing and not mailing. I just got back to Manatali. I went to visit a friend in Koutchiala who was teaching some of her villagers how to build pumps. It went pretty well, and then I passed through Bamako, just in time for the swear-in party for the new volunteers. I saw Mary, or Fatimata, the new volunteer in Koroukundy, the closest volunteer to me now. I went to Kita for the artisan fair a friend of mine organized there for local artisans to sell some stuff. They were hoping some Twobobs from Manatali would show up with their dam money [i.e. South Africans who are constructing the power plant at the dam], but they never came, so I found an alternative transport for getting back. I found a guy who was coming here to the city and he gave me a free lift. Public transport from here to Kita sucks, and it’s expensive for us poor PCVs.

Mary just got installed today. We all went out to her village with her to greet her family and give some support until that moment came when we all drove away in the PC car, and there she was, alone in village, officially the “newbie,” at the same place I was six months ago. Wow, it was cool seeing it from the other side. Being the one who can at least pretend to know what’s going on.

[Allen continued with some personal matters and tentative plans for us to meet him in Europe during the coming Christmas holiday season. He also asked about churches and other organizations here in the USA sponsoring--i.e. providing financial support for--small projects around Manatali, such as well covers made of cement and metal.]

Other regions have big companies that volunteers can turn to for some assistance, but the only thing in Manatali is the dam, and that’s in a state of chaos right now. Companies are coming and going, and no one is really in a position to help out right now.

So, what I was thinking was—

The village would provide all the stuff plus the labor plus a little of the cost, maybe ¼. I'd take photos and write something for the church members to see where it [their money] is going. The church would put up the rest of the cash—I'm talking less than \$100.00 US, which is nothing for a congregation, but a lot for a village where people make \$300.00 US a year and a bag of cement costs \$9.00 US. But I can't do any religious or political stuff.

Anyway—I might be getting a soak-pit project going in my village, which is a way to get rid of pools of dirty wash water from bathing areas into a hole filled with rocks to let the water seep into the soil, but covered with wood and mud so mosquitoes don't breed in there. I'm also helping out Sam with a soak-pit in his village, making the bricks (or rather training the well team there) so it's all ready to go when he gets back from vacation. He just left today for South Africa, which was a vacation plan before the work-plan came up.

All right—that's all for now—love you all, take care, and talk to you soon.

Love, Al

Letter

Mailed: 30 May 2002. Received: 20 June 2002.

FROM: Allen in Karya (near Kita). TO: Mom and Dad.

I'm in Josh's village – Karya – next to Kita. We're doing a formation called P.A.C.A. (Participatory Analysis for Community Action). We've got six PCVs, four language professors, and two Peace Corps officials here running the show with Karya [i.e. the people of Karya]. P.A.C.A. is a well thought out, theoretically great idea that in reality goes to [pot] when you show flip charts to 500 people who can't read.

But we're having a fun time, except for Josh, who is beyond stressed out, trying to be a good host to a meeting held in a language we don't speak that well. But the villagers love, if nothing else, that a bunch of white people (and a bunch of city-living Malians) came to visit their humble little city. Most Americans come here thinking Peace Corps is about work. Maybe that is true in theory, but in reality, in the heads of Malians, and in what we actually do in villages, 99.9% of Peace Corps is cultural exchange. Any work that gets done, any ideas that get across, are from hanging out and talking to people.

The villagers love talking about me being a blacksmith. They've been asking me to make them cultivation [farming] tools, half joking as always. I told them I would, but my tools aren't here. I can't carve without my tools. It will be really funny if someone shows up with carving tools today. [Musa, Allen's Malian "father," is a "blacksmith," thus, Allen's family name of Kante. Although his village knows him well, other villages have difficulty understanding his Malian name.]

Oh, so - vacation plans! I just realized that in other places in the world it gets cold in winter. I can't cope with winter in London. I think I might die. I'm going to vote for Italy: a warm-up for you, and a cool-down for me.

[Allen then discussed travel plans at some length, and where and when we might meet him during the Christmas holidays.]

The next time I'll be in Bamako is after Fourth of July. I [and other PCVs] are going out to hike through Dogon country.... It seems far away, but the month of June is going to fly by. I have to get everything together for the Fourth of July party. Still have some home improvements to do. I wonder if the gwa [the covered porch on Allen's house in Dialakota] will still be standing when I get back to Manatali?

I finally did a soak pit for my family. They were very appreciative. I don't know if they'll make another one after I'm gone and that one fills up with dirt, but my attitude towards sustainability has changed since I got here. The biggest sustainable thing this country needs is [the understanding] that they CAN do things for themselves, if they want it bad enough. I think it's the same problem we have in the U.S., only on a way bigger scale [in the USA]. In the U.S., we could end homelessness, poverty, crime, etc., if everybody would stop complaining and actually DO something. I think human nature is to be lazy and have discontent with most things, to find faults. But it's also to find what's good in something and stick with it – even if it causes more problems than it's worth. Malians like to change their ways as much as Americans do; we [in the USA] just have more to start with. The problem with technology is it grows exponentially. How many years is Mali really behind? Bamako might be (in some parts) where Italy was ten years ago. Open sewers, cell phones, garbage in the streets, Internet cafes – they're all there. The “aid” money goes there [i.e. to the cities], not to the small villages. If the people in the villages would [produce a surplus] of food, which they could sell to the cities, aid money wouldn't need [to be used] to import food from other countries. The villagers would have more money to buy things – like cement for wells, pumps for irrigation, and the aid money could maybe go to pave some roads in this country.

Oh, I'll get off my soapbox now.

So, I want to change my approach in my village. I've been trying to figure out what my village needs. I've realized that my thoughts and their thoughts on that subject are very different. So, I want to start a “health committee.” A very formal title for finding a few people I can sit and hang out with to do some troubleshooting. Maybe I could convince them to convince others of a few things – like I don't have to give them a big wad of cash for them to do something for themselves – and maybe we could find some common projects we can both agree how to do.

I've volunteered to do the Field Based Training for the next Water/San [sanitation] group of Stagairs [members of a new Stage Group] [“Stage” in French means “training course,” i.e. a Stage Group is a training group. “Stagairs” are PCVs in training for a particular task or project.] – well, at least five of them. I'm supposed to do soak pits and well top repair

[repairing wells to keep contaminants out, and build well covers]. I thought it would be easy at first, but I don't know how it will work now. I don't want it to be a big gift to the village, since it's coming from Peace Corps. I want to do a soak pit project in a village behind the dam, but it might be hard for Stagairs. Getting food and health stuff for them might be difficult.

I almost forgot – I started taking Judo lessons – yes, Judo! – It's great! One of the big shots at the dam [in Manatali] put the cash into starting it up, but he left, and now Malians run it all. Most of the other students are the kids of rich dam workers, none of whom speak Malinke, but they do speak French and most speak Bambara. Mary and I are the only Twobobs in the class. It's taught in typical Malian style – the teacher is a macho Malian guy who yells at the kids and slaps them around a bit. He ends each class by having the more advanced students attack him, and then promptly slams them down to the mat. I figure that if I can learn Judo from these jokers, I can learn anything anywhere.

So, for the Fourth of July party, we want to do some Bar-B-Q-ing.... I think we're going to buy a sheep, maybe a cow if we get ambitious and can find a meat grinder. There should be a lot of people. I'm going to try to arrange transport for everybody from Bamako. Anyway, keep the Ramen noodles comin' – they rule! [Allen continued with a wish list of things to put in a "care" package.]

So – Love you – See you soon....

E-mail Message: 19 July 2002.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

[Allen was online during the late afternoon, but we were unable to use MSN Messenger. After supper we received a reply from him to an e-mail message I had sent earlier.]

I'm only in Bamako for a day. Going on vacation in Dogon country near Mopti - cliff villages, lots of hiking and camping. I'll be back in Bamako in about a week. I'll e-mail then.... We had an awesome party [the Fourth of July] with about 30 PCVs. They came from all over Mali to Manatali. We had a baseball game with bats I carved myself out of tree limbs...."

[We looked forward to contacting Allen when he returned to Bamako from Mopti the following week. This is the short vacation trip he had been looking forward to for some time.]

E-Mail and Chat: July 28-31, 2002.

Allen in Bamako with Mom and Dad.

[We were online with Allen July 28, 30 and 31, and were able to call him at the Bamako Stage House on the 29th. This gave us a great opportunity to catch up on the news from both continents. Allen had an enjoyable trip to Mopti and the surrounding area with a group of PCVs. He then returned to Bamako for a few days before making his way back to Manatali. Parts of his itinerary in Bamako were medical and dental checkups. We both enjoyed our extended online chats with Al, and our telephone conversation. On the 31st Allen's grandmother and grandfather in New Jersey joined us in a three-way chat. Allen was also in the process of chatting with a couple of his friends. The whole thing finally stopped working, but we all enjoyed it while it lasted. Allen has been receiving the packages we have sent to him. We spent some time discussing travel plans at Christmas, and we are, thus far, planning to meet him in Rome for the holidays.]

E-Mail: 01 September 2002.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

Hey! What's up?

OK! I'm in Bamako tonight, then going out to Tubani So for the week - learning some pump stuff to teach to the pump repairmen out in Manatali....

I'm heading back to the house tonight. If you get this, give me a call. I'll be there after PM evening here time.

Love ya,
Al

[Most of Al's note was about his wisdom teeth and the decision not to take them out at this time. Later in the day, and again in the evening, Allen was online and we had extended chats both times, the second chat with Allen's grandparents joining in. We were very happy to have the chats, because we were unable to get a telephone call through to Mali.]

[In the first chat we discussed wisdom teeth only briefly and then spent time on our plans to meet Allen in Rome during the Christmas holidays. As we discussed accommodations in Rome, Allen replied: "I live in a mud hut. I can stay anywhere." We were then cut off, and Allen remained offline. After our dinner hour, Allen was back online without interruptions for about 90 minutes and we had a wonderful dialogue. The new Stage Group is about 50 people, with about 10 training for the Kayes region that Allen is in. He will help train the Water/Sanitation group. The training will take place at Tubani So. One of Allen's most interesting offerings was his commentary on Malian proverbs. Another interesting bit of information was about the people who raise herds of beef cattle in Mauritania: the cowboys of Mauritania. They migrate with their herds between the seasons to the coast and then back inland, seeking pasture. Allen purchased some African beef for the Fourth of July picnic he hosted in Manatali. Of course, he had to grind it

himself, and he said it was difficult to find a meat grinder that could grind the stuff, because it is so tough. “Nothing in Mali has any fat on it,” he commented.]

[We looked forward to hearing from Allen again before he returned to Manatali and to his village. He was in good spirits and enjoying everything he is doing, even though he is very busy. Allen’s birthday is 13 September, and we signed off with happy birthday wishes.]

04 September 2002
Chat on MSN Messenger

[Allen is going back and forth between the Bamako Stage House and Tubani So. Not only are the new PCVs there for training, but, also, the PC is having a camp program this week for Malian youth. Allen has been assisting with the transportation of the youth to and from the camp. They will soon be having village visits for the new volunteers, and Allen will be hosting new volunteers in Manatali. He also reflected a bit more on Malian proverbs, and here is a clip from our chat:]

Tom Mowbray says:

Will you give me the donkey proverb again, and also in Bambara. I lost it the last time, because the board blipped out before I could save it.

Allen says:

OK

Allen says:

When the donkey dies, the farting will stop [In the previous chat, Allen noted that donkeys emit a lot of gas.]

Allen says:

Kofe fali sa ra, bo ci be ke ban.

Tom Mowbray says:

And how about the other one.

Allen says:

One finger can’t pick up anything. [Allen noted that this proverb is usually used in the context of, “Two heads are better than one.”]

Allen says:

Bolondio kelen te se ka foi taa.

Tom Mowbray says:

Great. Now I can put them in your journal.

Allen says:

Cool!

Tom Mowbray says:

I guess you should explain them again.... Do you have any more proverbs for today?

Allen says:

Well, OK. The farting donkey proverb is about people who talk too much. Here's a good proverb: A piece of wood [or a log, or a canoe made from a log] can sit in the water many years, but it won't become a crocodile.

Allen says:

Yiri be se ka sigi ji kono san chaman, nka a te se ka be ke bama ye.

Tom Mowbray says:

How is that used?

Allen says:

It is used for instance, to describe us volunteers. We can stay here a long time, but we will still be white [i.e. not Africans, not Malians].

E-mail: 20 October 2002.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad

[Today we tried to reach Allen at the Stage House by telephone, but never got a call through. We did send an e-mail.]

Hey! Good to hear from you. I think I'll be around the stage house this afternoon, but might go to Tubani So tonight for some rest. The bus leaves usually around six in the evening. I'm going to make my way there slowly after emailing.

I'll pay for my ticket this week with my visa card, if God wills it. If not I'll have to make another trip in to Bamako between now and then with my travelers' checks. This is coming up so fast. I'm going to fast for Ramadan again, so I don't want to do any traveling during that. It starts at the new moon in two weeks and goes for thirty days, one moon, so into Dec. Fasting isn't that hard when you can just sit most of the day, but traveling and getting dehydrated makes it not a good idea. I wanted to just stay at site for that whole time, minus Thanksgiving, but if I have to come in [to Bamako] I will.

I hope to get my reservations at the hostel for the first few nights I'm in Rome. It's fourteen Euros per night, not bad at all.... Anyway, enough for now.

Love ya,
Al

E-mail and Chats: September-October 2002.

[From 28 Sept. through Oct. we had several short e-mail messages from Allen, and I found him online a couple of times to have chats with him on MSN Messenger. Most of the traffic was about housekeeping matters concerning our rendezvous in Italy for Christmas.

Allen was in Bamako between several training sessions at Tubani So. He was also purchasing some things for the Stage House in Manatali. His big news was about a trip to Tombuktou [Timbuktu] before returning to his village for Ramadan.

The following excerpts are taken from a chat on 28 October while Allen's grandparents were visiting us in Iowa.]

Allen says:

...and I'm going to Tombuktou next week.

Tom Mowbray says:

Tombuktou! Awesome. Will you go with a group?

Allen says:

A small one - my friend from Kita that I went to Dogon Country with. It was supposed to be three of us, but now its just two. We're going on the bus to Mopti, then by boat to Tombuktou. Marcy wanted to take the big boat. I thought we were taking the little cheap one. She has a friend that runs the hotel there.

Tom Mowbray says:

I should think a big boat with tourists, etc. would be a better/safer way to travel.

Allen says:

The boat is safe - It's how the locals go. All the horror stories from tourists are because they don't want to use local transportation.

Tom Mowbray says:

I hear there are a lot of thieves along the land route.

Allen says:

Yeah! ... So, I'm going out to Tubani So tonight.

Tom Mowbray says:

Are you at the Stage House computer now...?

Allen says:

I'm at an Internet café in Bamako. The Bureau computer is packed as always; it's just easier to email here. There are a bunch of Internet cafes popping up all over the big cities, but the people in the villages still can't read or write....

Tom Mowbray says:

We still love to get your letters. I need more material for your Journal.

Allen says:

I just checked it out a few days ago. It's great! I don't dare try to look at the pictures though.

Tom Mowbray says:

Why? Don't they load?

Allen says:

Malian computers have enough trouble with text....

Allen says:

This might be the last time I talk to you before I see you [in Rome]. I will try to send a quick note on my way back to Manatali, but I won't be in [Bamako] again until like the fifteenth of Dec. My return ticket is the 6th [of January].... I'm fasting for Rhamadan, except on Thanksgiving....

Tom Mowbray says:

Rhamadon: Please eat enough to have energy for your trip.

Allen says:

Last year I gained weight during Rhamadon. I sat all day and didn't do anything, then ate like a hog morning and night. Nobody does anything during Rhamadon.... I'll be fine. If I get sick I'll stop. I'm not that dedicated.... OK, so I've got about ten minutes until I go. I'll meet you at the airport in Rome on the 23rd. I wrote down what time and the flight number. I'll send a note when I come back through and before I leave for Italy on like the 17th, and I'll be in Rome early enough to send you a note when I get there. Ni Allah son na. God willing. OK, that's about all the time I got. The bus leaves in half an hour and I have to walk to the bus.

Tom Mowbray says:

We all send our love. God bless you.

Allen says:

I love all of you. Best health! Everyone from my village greets you....

Tom Mowbray says:

Please tell them we all greet them from Iowa

Allen says:

They will hear it.

E-mail: 07 November 2002.

Subject: The End of the World.

FROM: Allen in Timbuktu. TO: Family and Friends.

Hello from Timbuctou, the supposed end of the world, where after a three day boat ride through swamps and sand dunes you drive in the city to find a Shell station, post office and Internet cafe next to the guy selling camel rides.

My friend Marcy and I did a three day camel trek through the desert, where I learned how to tie a turban to my head and experienced the coldest nights yet in the year I've spent in Mali.



The trip by camel from Timbuktu.

This is the first place I've gone in Mali that the people don't speak Bambara. I've gotten used to being able to walk down the street and greet everybody in the traditional Malian fashion, which takes about five minutes, but no one speaks Bambara here. Their entire culture is different. The Bambaras are farmers, but the Tuareg - the people of Timbuctou - are nomads - you can't grow anything in sand - and make their living trading salt, rice and camels across the desert. Most of the Bambaras I've met have never left their region of Mali, but most Tuaregs here have gone to Morocco and Niger etc.

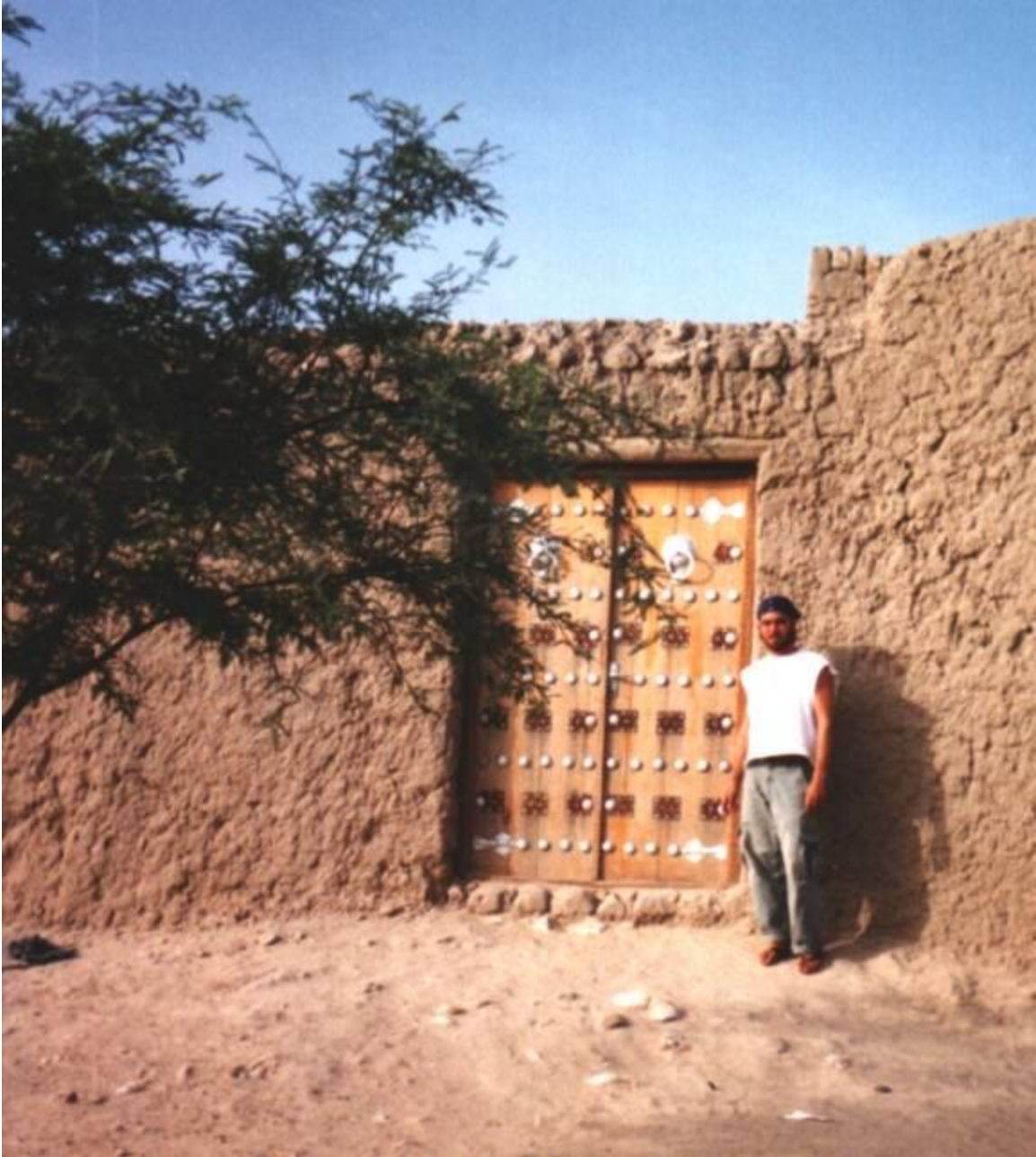
So, tomorrow I'm leaving the end of the world to go back to my village where there isn't even electricity, let alone Internet. Strange how that works, but it will probably be about a five day trip.

I'm looking forward to Christmas, when I'll meet my parents in Rome for the holidays.

Yes, I actually do work here once in a while, too. I think I could put in for a transfer to work here in Timbuctou. They need a water sanitation volunteer. This town is actually named after the well built by the first family to live here. "Tim" is the Tuareg word for well, and "Buctou" is the name of the old lady whose family owned it. When caravans came across the desert, they came looking for Buctou's well - a little piece of trivia to tell your friends.

Best of luck, and take care....

Al



Allen in Timbuktu.

E-mail: 10 November 2002.

TO: Mom and Dad. FROM: Allen in Bamako.

Hey! I'm on my way back to village tomorrow. We lucked out with getting a Peace Corps ride from Mopti to Bamako with the car doing the installations of the new volunteers. Worked out great. I wanted to talk to people at the Bureau on Monday but that can wait till I get back in for vacation. I want to get back to site; I told my family I'd

be back before Rhamadon started, which was four days ago. But it was definitely worth the extra few days in Tomboctou. [Allen uses several spellings for Timbuktu.]

I think I'm coming into Bamako on the 15th [Dec.], something like that, to make sure I have time to get ready before I fly out [to Rome]. I'm getting really excited, but leaving Mali is making me anxious.

There was a big group of stupid American tourists in Tomboctou, topped off by this idiot wearing really short shorts and his twenty-inch zoom lens, carrying a bottle of beer around the streets of the oldest Islamic learning center in the world on the first day of Rhamadon. Jesus! And he probably thinks he's a great world traveler because he's been to Tomboctou and back. This group was ridiculous, and made me wonder just how much Peace Corps has changed me, or if they really were all just ignorant. They even had an Arabic guide, and he didn't discourage the guy with the beer. Anyway, it gave me apprehension about dealing with Twobobs again. But I'm ready to go [to Rome at Christmas], trying to find an Italy guide, because I'm sure I don't remember my way around Rome as well as I think I do.

Anyway, love ya and take care,
Al

10 Nov. 2002. Chat on MSN Messenger.

[The following are excerpts from a long and often delayed chat with Allen in the morning. He was at the Peace Corps Bureau in Bamako, and planned to stay at the Stage House that night and head back to Manatali by bus in the morning, because he could not find a ride.]

I don't really like taking the train. It's slow and cramped. I like taking the cargo train. That's cheap and fun. The people are great and there's lots of space, even if there's not a seat, but the passenger train is cramped and stops randomly. With the bus you can at least yell at the driver to get going, but it is dusty, actually they both are. There is dust everywhere now, and they are probably burning the fields in the Kayes region now, which means tons of ash in the air. I don't mind going alone to Manatali, really. I always meet fun people....

I've been doing a lot of woodworking - functional stuff. I learned how to make drums, mortars for pounding millet, hand plows, and axes. Everything here is functional. But I'm realizing a new art form. The art is in the making of the tool, not the final product - the care that goes into it, the process of bringing the form out of the wood.

In art we use metaphors to get points across, but in Bambara, everything is a metaphor.

[Allen then reflected on future plans, which might include more work with the Peace Corps and other work in Third World countries.]

The longer I'm here, the more I distinguish and separate Peace Corps and other Twobob organizations....

I learned a new proverb: If you travel with donkeys for many years, you won't be able to speak like a donkey, but you will know all their paths. Again, this sounds better in Bambara: Ni i sigi fali fe san cyaman, i te se ka fali kan fo, nga i be na fali tamisira don.

Tom Mowbray says:

How is that used?

Allen says:

I won't become Malian, but I can learn their way of life. Some people have even said to me, after I say that, that the canoe has become a crocodile [referring to the proverb above].

Tom Mowbray says:

"Donkey" seems to be used in a kind way - not as in "jackass."

Allen says:

Yeah!

Tom Mowbray says:

If the canoe has become a crocodile, then I assume that is a very nice compliment to you.

Allen says:

Yeah! I love these people. I think the biggest compliment I ever got here was when my little brother, the 14 year old, came into the house with a piece of wood. He was going to make a new handle for his plow. Dad said he (the brother) didn't know what he was doing, and he should give it to Moriba to do....

But there are still people that just refuse to understand that I speak Bambara. I'll be having a really interesting conversation with somebody, and someone else will arrive, and see the Twobob speaking Bambara. Then he asks me something totally random that I don't understand because he has no teeth or talks really fast, and he immediately decides that I don't speak Bambara at all - mostly just refusing to believe that a Twobob can speak his language.

Many people have told me how many years they studied English in school and [they] can't speak [English] at all. But then, they don't live in America. If they heard English every day they would learn it faster. Many of the English teachers here don't speak English themselves.

I remember how you said once that in Icelandic, all the big words were just a lot of little words put together, like "airport" being the place where the big metal bird lands. That's so in Bambara. The real Bambara word for airplane, before the French "avion," is the big metal boat/canoe in the sky.

Tom Mowbray says:

When you write Bambara, do you "spell" words as such, or are you just writing the words phonetically?

Allen says:

Well, it's becoming a written language, but there are sounds that we don't have in English or French, and Malinke is even more so - like most of the "e"s in Bambara are like the French "e" with the accent on top, which for the phonetic alphabet is written like a backwards 3. And then there's the funky "n," like for "nyegan." If you use the funky "n" and the backwards 3, its just "negan," like the "ny" of onion. And there's another funny "n" that I can't really pronounce differently than a regular "n," but they swear that it's different. They also say that there are different accents on the word "ba" to distinguish between goat, mom, river, and big, but I just go by context. I can't hear it. Then the Malinke use, instead of "k," a sound more like that of one clearing his throat, which is a contributing factor to why I speak more Bambara than Malinke. I love the sound of Bambara. I speak it as much as I can with other volunteers.

[We wrote a little about computer keyboards in Mali.]

Allen says:

This is an Ameriki keyboard, but the ones at the Internet cafes are Frenchy ones. They have different keys.

[Allen wrote a bit about other volunteers. We wrapped things up with a few more details for our Christmas trip and where we will travel after Christmas Day.]

Tom Mowbray says:

This was great. Have a good trip back to your village. We all greet your family, etc.

Allen says:

They will hear it....

E-mail: 20 December 2002.

TO: Mom and Dad. FROM: Allen in Rome, Italy.

Hey! I'm here!!!!!! It's great to be back and remember where everything is. I found Brenda [one of Allen's professors at ISU] and Matt and the studio is still in the same place. The only thing that changed in this city in three years is the Dunkin Donuts by the Trevi fountain is gone, but there is a Burger King not far from it. And the Italian pizza is ridiculously great.

See ya soon,

Al

CHRISTMAS TRIP TO ITALY. 21 December 2002 – 01 January 2003.

[On 21 Dec. we began our journey to Italy to rendezvous with Allen in Rome for the holidays. Allen departed Mali 17 Dec. and arrived in Rome 19 Dec. He stayed with friends from Iowa State University who were there for the Rome studies program until we arrived the morning of 23 Dec. We had a wonderful visit in “The Eternal City” with balmy Spring-like weather, and the food was marvelous. Allen presented us with a beautiful gift made for us by his Malian “dad,” Musa – a pair of carved wooden doors for a cabinet, covered with images of Malian creatures. We were back in Iowa on New Years Day, and Allen returned to Mali on 06 Jan.]



Allen with his father in Rome, Christmas 2002.

[Allen gave us some Christmas letters to mail to former PCVs when we returned home. The following is a sketch that Allen drew of Team Manatali for the Christmas Letter.]



E-mail: 08 January 2003.

From: Allen in Bamako. To: parents in Iowa.

Hey:

I made it back to Mali. I'm still alive after Air Algeria. That is probably the nicest airline I've ever flown on. We had a two-hour delay leaving Rome, and they gave us all free vouchers for the airport restaurant. The people are so nice. It's great to be back in Mali. I'm definitely ready to get back to my mud hut. It was interesting talking to all the people at the hostel, people from all over the world. Seeing their views on the U.S., development, all kinds of stuff. The rest of the time in Rome was good. I made it out to Tivoli and Bomarzo with the Eurail pass that couple gave me. No problems at all. Tivoli is absolutely beautiful.

I talked more with Brenda about me and a graduate program in Rome....

Anyway, I'm going to write a letter to [Mrs. McMullen]... to thank her and the kids for the money... and I'll tell them some specific project plans and give some details of stuff, and I might even capitalize and punctuate, but I'll write again before I leave, I think tomorrow night. There is only a night train now.

Love ya,
Al

[In December of 2002, the students of Mrs. McMullen's 5th grade class, Blackhawk School, Waterloo, Iowa, collected money to help children in Mali, West Africa have cleaner water and better sanitary conditions. The money was targeted to be used by Allen for special water projects to help the children in the Manatali region and in the village of Dialakoto.]

E-mail: 31 January 2003.

FROM: Allen in Kita. TO: Mom and Dad.

Hey:

I'm in Kita. Had hamburgers yesterday and eggs benedict with corn bread for breakfast. They built a mud stove at the Stage House here and we're breaking it in. All of Team Manatali is here, and today the rest of Team Kita is coming in. It's fun. We're on our way to Bamako, too, now. We're going to talk to the big boss man. He's the new country director - just got here a few weeks ago. I have some concerns to talk to him about, and we have lots of stuff to plan with the head of water sanitation. Lots of projects going on right now. Nice to have a break to hang out with friends for a few days in between....

I'll write again soon.

Later,
Al

E-mail: 19 March 2003.

From: Allen in Kita. To: Mom and Dad.

A quick hello from Kita:

I just left Josh's village to come back to Kita so that I can go to Manatali tomorrow. We were doing - are still doing - field based training for the new volunteers (or more commonly called "FBT for the kids"). We're doing one this week in Kita, and Josh's village, Karya, then on to Manatali for the second week. We just finished the large soak pit connected to a pump in Karya, and then we'll do two small latrine soak pits in my village and a well cleanup in my teammate Molly's village, Diokeli. This is going well so far and I hope to get back to Manatali and find everything in perfect order for the next week. I should know better than that by now, but I'm an optimist....

[Allen added a number of comments about his colleagues and their work, and work in a new site in the village of Jakaba. Allen then signed off abruptly, noting that he thought the Internet was crashing. Well, it didn't, because we got his note.]

[On 20 March 2003, Allen's uncle, Donald Mowbray, died suddenly. The following is a note Allen wrote to me while I was in New Jersey with my family to attend Donald's funeral. I had written a letter to Allen about Donald's death, because Allen had told us that he would not be on the Internet for several months.]

E-mail: 14 April 2003.

FROM: Allen in Kita. TO: Thomas Mowbray in New Jersey.

Dad:

I got your letter on Wednesday. I'm so sorry to hear about Uncle Don! Allah ka ne ma. Allah ka da yoro sumaya. These are Bambara benedictions for a good resting place. My Malian family said a lot of benedictions for all of you and Uncle Don, and they greet you and send their sympathies. Like I said, I got your letter on Wednesday. I was debating whether or not to go to Bamako anyway, because of the swearing in party [for new volunteers] and people I haven't seen in a while are in there..., but I decided that I had work and shouldn't go. Then Wednesday night the boss of the dam [in Manatali] showed up and offered a ride to Bamako, and I still decided to stay, because Bamako really wasn't necessary and the work in my village was planned, and we got a really good rice here today. So, this all will work hopefully.

There is chat here on MSN [at the Stage House in Kita]. I'm going out to Josh's village tonight to say hi to him. I'll be back first thing tomorrow morning, and will be on for chat tomorrow afternoon. I will be here at three in the afternoon Mali time tomorrow. Whoever gets this, please let the rest of the family know I'm here and will be on tomorrow. I need to leave again on Wednesday morning to return to Manatali; our new volunteers are arriving then.

Dad:

Are you in New Jersey or Iowa? Send me a note with a recap of what's happening. Love you all. My thoughts are with you.

Al

Chat: 15 April 2003.

[The following are excerpts from a chat on MSN Messenger between Allen in Kita and his father in New Jersey with Allen's grandparents, as Allen had suggested in his e-mail of the day before.]

I guess I could have come earlier. I've just been relaxing most of the day, but that's good, because it's like 172 degrees here right now.

[Our connection kept failing, but it came back. Allen explained that he went to Kita just to get in touch with family because of my letter about my brother's death. I asked Allen for the translations of the blessings in his e-mail.]

Allah ka ne ma, means "May Allah cool him." Allah ka da yoro sumaya, means "May Allah cool his resting place." It's really hot here, so they hope things cool off afterwards.

[Allen chatted more about the climate and weather.]

The rains end in October. They start in June. But actually, it did rain here twice lately, one night for a good few hours solid. I had to sleep in my leaky house, and it was still ridiculously hot.

[Allen explained that although his roof was repaired with plastic sheeting and lasted through the rainy season, the intense heat of the dry season destroyed the plastic. The roof will be repaired before the rains start again.]

This time the repair will be a little more permanent. The plastic will still be on top, so the water doesn't just pool as it leaks through the metal, but we'll put a layer or two of mud on top. It will hold down the plastic and protect it from the sun, and provide some more insulation so I won't be living in an Easy Bake Oven.

I finally covered the well in my village. We made the cover. When I get back we'll put the cover on. I took pictures of my dad making the doors [the doors in the well cover]. I will take pictures of us putting on the well cover. I was planning on taking pictures of us mixing the cement, but there was some debate on how we should do it and I forgot about the camera. I wanted to make sure it got done right so it won't collapse again. I'll send that camera with a detailed "how we did it" report for the kids to see. I want to get a picture of the class [in Waterloo, Iowa] to show my villagers so they know where the money came from. I've told them, but I'm the face on the money right now and I don't want it to stay like that.

[I told Allen he could easily print the picture of the class from the website photo. We talked about my brother's funeral service, and that I would be returning to Iowa the Tuesday after Easter. We then discussed Allen's extension plans. He was planning to extend 6 months.]

I definitely have enough work to keep me here that long. I think I'll be ready to go by March. I wrote a letter to my boss to officially announce my plan to extend. Six months

doesn't give me a free trip home. We are going on a little, cheap vacation in June to Ghana - Kita and Manatali volunteers. I need to get back to the states to figure out what I want to do next....

[We chatted about my visit in New Jersey, about some of Allen's friends in Iowa, about Allen's car, exchanged happy Easter wishes, and said good bye.]

E-mail: 03 June 2003.

[We received a very brief e-mail message from Allen stating that he was in Bamako getting ready for a trip to Ghana. Everything is going great, but he has been working very hard in Manatali and is ready for a break.]

E-mail: 22 June 2003.

FROM: Allen. TO: Mom and Dad.

So, I'm back from Ghana, back in Mali, back where there is no beach, no seafood, but at least I don't have to listen to any more horrible Ghanaian English. I hope I don't sound that bad when I speak Bambara....

[Allen continued with some family chat and correspondence details and then mentioned that he would be staying in Bamako for a routine medical checkup.]

E-mail: 25 June 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

So, I just got back from the dentist. No cavities, and I can go back to drinking large quantities of sugared tea all day. Mid-service stuff is almost done, maybe. I don't have TB. That was good to know....

[Again, Al's note was rather brief. He noted that he was going to see about getting his wisdom teeth out and he might go to Senegal for that. His Stage Group was to have meetings on the weekend in Bamako and then they were all heading to Manatali to prepare for the Fourth of July party at the Manatali Stage House.]

E-mail: 27 July 2003.

FROM: Allen. TO: Friends and Family.

Hey y'all!

I just got in to Bamako after a hellish ride from Kita. Will be here till next Sat. or so.... Everything is good. Going out to see Dogon Country again after the conference is over. Will write again soon.

E-mail: 02 August 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Family.

Hey:

I just got done with our conference (close of service). Got to stay at one of the nice hotels in town and talk about going back to the states with everybody from my group. Unfortunately, I'm not leaving right now so most of the conference was completely pointless to me, but it was good to see everybody again one last time and pay our respects to a volunteer that died here last month. Maybe you heard about it there in the states. A volunteer in the Segou region committed suicide the beginning of July. He was in our group... It's the first suicide in a long time in Peace Corps and I think the first volunteer death in Mali. There was just a memorial service today.

We were supposed to go to Mopti for starting our trek to Dogon Country today, but the busses were all full, so we're off tomorrow. I'm going with Mary, Molly, and another volunteer friend near Bamako and a friend visiting her from the states. I think we will just do the hiking ourselves without a guide since I've done the trail before and the guides are expensive. Anyway, it's late, and I'm out of here to get some sleep.

Love you all,

Al

E-mail: 09 August 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

I'm back for a day or two. I saw Dogon Country again. It was more beautiful than last time. We got stuck in the rain one day, and it was amazing to see the entire cliff face turn into a waterfall. The hiking group was me, Mary, Molly, a volunteer from the Bamako area named Ellie and her friend Eric. Then we went back to Djenne. There is a volunteer there now and we visited him. It was a hell of a ride back here. We came with some French tourists who encountered some car problems, climaxing with the police stopping us just outside of Bamako for not having any headlights after dark. The battery was dead and we had to push start the car every time [we stopped].

I'm thinking about a long trip when I complete my service (COS). My extension is confirmed, so I won't be leaving here until March 2004....

[Allen wrote more about his travel plans, and closed by saying he was very tired from driving all day. They just got into Bamako a few hours before he wrote this letter very late in the evening.]

Love you. Talk to you soon.
Al

Chat: 10 August 2003.

[Allen was in Bamako and had just returned from a trip to Dogon Country with several PCVs.]

Dogon was great. We hiked for three days and got stuck in the rain a few times. It was beautiful. We did take a guide. They don't really let you do it without one. We got a good price. Our first guide hurt his foot and had to pass us off to another guide. Then he got sick and almost couldn't take us the rest of the way. On our last night, the guy we arranged the trip through showed up on top of the cliff waiting for us with a bottle of gin – gin and tonics on the cliff face at sunset.

[Allen chatted a bit about future plans. He is ready to leave Africa after his extension. He is looking forward to returning to his village and he will head back to Manatali on Tuesday (August 12).]

[We chatted about the seeds we sent to Allen.]

Things need to be planted during the end of the rainy season. Most people don't have time to garden during the rainy season, so they plant gardens after planting and cultivating their crops, and before harvest. The rains end in October, but there is plenty of water in the wells. That is the beginning of the "cold" season, which means like summer in the states. Most people still cover tomatoes during the heat of midday, because the sun just cooks them as they grow.

[Allen requested more seeds for cucumbers, squash and pumpkins.]

The hot weather stuff available in the states would be good in the cold season here.

[I told Allen I had sent Musa some tools in the mail and to watch for them.]

Moussa [Musa] will appreciate anything given and will be eternally grateful. I'm surprising him by bringing his son back from Bamako with me. Moussa doesn't think he is coming back, because Moussa didn't have any money to send with me to pay for the ticket.... My brother is finishing high school. He has one more year left. He's about twenty, but that's how it goes in this country. My teammate's brother, Kate's brother, is twenty-one and just finished eighth grade. It's a strange situation. It seems like a lot of

people go to school, even college, and then go become a peanut farmer. There is nowhere to use an education here. People go to school to learn languages that take you out of Mali to a place where you can make money. It's a huge problem in this country, because everybody who is educated either leaves or uses their knowledge to swindle money out of whomever they work for.

[We chatted about crops. Allen is growing coffee in his backyard. He wrote that most of the world's chocolate comes from the Ivory Coast, but most Africans don't have the money to buy it, and they don't really like chocolate. In Allen's area of Mali they grow mostly peanuts, along with millet, corn and rice. Cotton is a cash crop, but the market system is corrupt and is backfiring. People are going back to sustenance farming. Then Allen gave a recipe for tigadigana, a peanut sauce for rice that he loves.]

Roast the peanuts and grind them in a meat grinder to make a peanut butter, or buy all natural peanut butter with no salt or hydrogenated fat added. Boil a small amount of water and add some bouillon cubes. Add tomato paste, sautéed chopped onion, and a chopped hot pepper. When that is cooked, add a big blob of peanut butter. I love it really thick.

You can also make nuguna. Na means "sauce" and nugu means "leaves." Use soybean leaves. Don't use lettuce or spinach. This is served on couscous or rice. Nuguna on couscous is fantastic. Use the same recipe as tigadigana, and add the leaves. Boil the water and cook the leaves first, then add the other stuff, and the peanut butter last.

[Allen wrote more about Dogon Country and how beautiful it is there. He noted that the PCV annual Fourth of July barbecue was great. "We were running out of food, but we had plenty of beer." Allen wants to have a PCV reunion barbecue at home in Nashua, Iowa next year, and we think that is a wonderful idea. We closed with a bit of news from home and plans to try to have another chat tomorrow morning.]

E-mail: 12 August 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Family and Friends.

So, I'm heading back to Manatali tomorrow. My host brother was studying here in Bamako, and will be returning with me. I think Mary and Molly will stick around for a day to try to get a free plane ride with the [Manatali] dam workers. I'll probably be in [Bamako] again at the beginning of September for a meeting. I'm going to try to not be here [in Bamako] for a while since I've been away from Manatali for too long.... I'm trying to be frugal and save for one last little vacation, to Senegal with Mary and probably her sister, who is coming to visit in December.

Take care and see you next time.

Al

E-mail: 20 September 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Friends and Family.

I didn't think we would actually make it here. The rainy season is in full swing and is systematically destroying all roads in the Kayes region. My girlfriend, Mary, was already here in Bamako, and my teammate Molly and I were supposed to come in to celebrate our birthdays and to see Mary before she goes back to the states for a vacation. Molly and I waited for 15 hours for a ride last Thursday, and not a single vehicle was going to Bamako. The next day the Peace Corps land cruiser showed up and was able to give us, along with my host brother, who was returning to Bamako to start his last year of high-school, a ride in yesterday. The road was ridiculously bad. We passed a big mud pit with a dump truck stuck in it that had been there for three days. I think if we hadn't come in the Peace Corps car, we would still be sleeping on the road tonight trying to get here. I hope Allah helps me get a ride back, because I don't have the money to stay here very long. Mary is going back to the states for a month. I'm so used to her being around, I'm going to have to try to keep myself busy. I'm supposed to be organizing a training [program] for five pump repairmen, but the guy I'm supposed to be working with hasn't gotten here yet because of the road. So, last night we went out for dinner and dancing at the Byblos nightclub. They have Lebanese food and American music. Good times! We got in to town an hour before we were supposed to be there for dinner. Just made it.

Hope everyone is doing well. Take care,
Al

Chat: 23 September 2003.

Allen in Bamako. Allen's father in Iowa.

[Allen was at the PC Bureau in Bamako. He took Mary to the airport the night before and is preparing to return to Manantali tomorrow. Mary will be on vacation in the states for a month. They all had a good time in Bamako.]

We went dancing for Molly's birthday. It seems like I've been in town forever already, but it's only been since Friday night.

[We chatted at length about Allen's gardening projects. Mary is an Agriculture Volunteer. The coffee is growing well.]

We are going to have enough coffee to keep Mary hyper for a couple of months.

[Allen has planted some of the seeds we sent to him. Allen, Mary and Allen's host brothers cleared brush and planted a peanut field about half the size of a football field.]

I got somebody with a cow-plow to dig it up. I didn't get to do much of the planting, because I had an infection in my leg for a week or so. It's better now. Don't worry – a mosquito bite gone horribly wrong. It just got infected, but it's all better now.

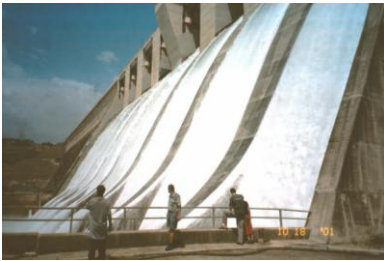
[Allen's attention turned toward plans for his last months in Mali and travel plans when he and Mary leave Mali in March.]

We both want to come back to the states from the west coast, not the east coast, and go through Australia, New Zealand, Bali and Hawaii. I have friends from camp [in these places] and Mary has friends in Hawaii we can stay with.

[Our chat turned toward plans for after the Peace Corps and then returned to PC work in Stage Manantali.]

We've gone through another rotation now, [and have] a few different people. The rest of my group is about to leave. The super-seniors will be me, Josh, and a girl in Sikasso. Mary is about to become a Senior when the rest of my group leaves. She got here right after I did.

[We chatted about the dam in Manantali. An engineer and professor of geology and former PCV wrote to Allen with questions about the dam.]



There is power [being generated]. I think all five generators are working, but there are only three going at a time: one for Mali, one for Senegal, and one for Mauritania. The others are backup. They actually cut the power to Bamako a few weeks ago, because the power company wasn't paying the dam for the power they were buying. They are like \$7 million American dollars in debt to the dam and the dam is billions in debt to the investors. The crappie thing about it is that the Malians [who are] paying their electric bills are eventually supposed to pay off the debts from building the dam, including the costs of all the ridiculous salaries they have to pay westerners to live here in a "hardship country," plus pay back all the money that was stolen along the way. We call it "bouffing," from the French – the same word for eating off a buffet – skimming off the top. Like the engineer said, the money for the generators was "bouffed," so they didn't get built in the original contract, along with a road to connect Manantali to Bamako. So, the generators are on another loan and Malian people are supposed to pay it all back. The only reason the western world gives a damn about building power generation facilities in a poor country like Mali is so they can build industry here and take advantage of the average annual salary of \$300 a year. That beats paying a factory worker in the states

\$20,000 a year. I can't even talk to the dam workers anymore. They have a totally opposite view of what development is.



[We chatted about a number of things concerning Allen's village and family, more about Mary's trip home, and about the traditional Stage Manantali Thanksgiving dinner.]

I think Mary is going to bring a bunch of stuff back for Thanksgiving. Some old volunteers from 1995 came back to visit. We almost cancelled the Manantali Thanksgiving [celebration], but their stories made us feel obliged to keep the tradition alive.

[I asked Allen about the correct spelling of Manatali/Manantali, since he now spells it Manantali.]

Well, the language isn't a written one. There are about ten different ways of spelling Mary's village, Kouroukunding. But we decided to make it Manantali. "Manan" means cliff. ("Mana" means plastic/rubber.) "Ta" means "fire." "Li" is a signal for a duration of time. So, "Manantali" means "the fire on the cliff that is always burning." Well, it used to. The old people say there used to be a light every night shining on top of the cliff that the dam is built out of. Even if there was a light up there now, you'd never know it from all the lights on the dam, lighting up the bridge, road, power grid, and everything. It's kind of symbolic of the light of this culture getting snuffed out by the western culture. The original "mananta" was just a fire, perhaps lit by genies or spirits, or brush fires. I don't know. There is a similar story about a pillar of rock in Dogon Country. That light doesn't shine at night anymore either. There are no believers left to see it.

After the rainy season, when everything dries out, the grass fires do get out of control. Every night there is a glow on the horizon in some direction. It can be beautiful, watching the fire come over the cliff and snake down the little trails of grass, like giant Zorro marks.

[I was fascinated with Allen's descriptions and very grateful for the chat we had, but he soon told me that he had to leave the Bureau to see about a ride tomorrow. He plans to be in Kita in a day or two, and to be on e-mail there.]

Hug Mom for me. Bye.

[The problems with the dam in Manantali are legion. One article available on the Internet was very revealing:

Summer 2001:

The existing dam at Manatali in Mali's Kayes region (in the west) has resulted in depleted aquifers, 12,000 displaced people, and an increased incidence of diseases such as malaria and schistosomiasis. Plans to simulate flooding for downstream farmers and fishers evaporated as upstream needs took precedence over downstream demands. The Manatali dam met none of its original goals and objectives and has had a significant detrimental effect on downstream farmers.]

Telephone Call: Sunday, 19 October 2003.
FROM: Allen's parents in Iowa. TO: Allen in Kita.

[Allen and other PCVs were meeting at the Stage House in Kita and put together a piggyback calling tree to their parents in the States. We were so happy to talk to him. He has been quite busy planning new projects and training new volunteers. He noted, however, that very few new projects have been started, because villagers were still in the fields, and with Ramadan starting next week, not much work on water projects will take place until December. He will be traveling to Bamako now and should be there by Wednesday, 22 Oct., to meet Mary at the airport, and promised to catch up on news via e-mail while he is in Bamako. Allen will stay in Bamako to meet the new volunteers and attend their swearing in ceremony before returning to Manantali.]

E-mail: 22 October 2003.
FROM: Allen in Bamako

This is to start detailing projects done with funds from Mrs. McMullen's class.
Photographs will follow.

First we did a latrine slab formation. The well team that Molly and I work with wanted to expand their horizons and find things they could do all year round as a source of income. The word for latrine in Bambara is "nyegan." The nyegan slabs provide a solid, waterproof surface to place on top of a pit latrine. The traditional way to cover a nyegan is with wood, then leaves and packed dirt, with a hole in the middle. They are usually left uncovered and can easily erode, especially in the rainy season, and become muddy and very messy. If the erosion is severe enough, the cover can collapse.

The nyegan slabs [that we build] are made out of cement [concrete], and they are domed to drain water away from the hole. They are much stronger than wooden covers and

prevent erosion. They can be easily covered [with a roof and walls] to reduce the amount of flying insects and to reduce the smell.

Each nyegan slab requires:

2 bags of cement: $6000 \times 2 = 12000$

1 wooden shaping arm: 2500

1 piece of metal for the form: 1000

[1000 francs = \$1.80 - The name of the Malian currency is Communauté Financière Africaine Francs BCEAO.]

The village contributed the sand and gravel for the covers, and dug the holes for the nyegans. They also provided food for the well team while they were working, and helped find other things necessary to build the covers.

First, the metal is cut into a strip 10 cm high and made into a circle with a diameter of 1.5 meters. Then a small layer of sand is laid down to cover the bottom, with a mound of sand in the middle. The wooden shaping arm has a hole in the middle and is mounted on a piece of metal on which it can spin in the center of the circle. Its length is also 1.5 meters, and it is arched when it is spun around. The axis shapes the sand into a dome. The arm is then removed and the sand is smoothed. On top of this, in the center of the mound, a form is placed that will shape the hole for the nyegan slab. It should be 4 cm tall. The shaping arm is again attached in the center of this form. Cement is added, and shaped by the arm, to make a slab 4 cm thick in all places [with a hole in the center]. While still wet, the form for the hole should be removed, but the exterior metal form remains. During drying, cement should be watered morning and night, to ensure that it doesn't dry too quickly and crack in Mali's hot sun. If the first slab is made in the morning, it should be watered that evening, and again the next morning. Then you can begin another slab. On top of the first slab, the wooden arm is used to shape another layer of sand, then another slab is shaped on top of that. The process can be repeated up to 8-10 slabs high. As the pile gets too high for the metal form for the edge, it is simply slid up a few centimeters to create the 4 cm thickness of the slab.

The dome shape directs the water away from the slab, and also helps support the weight of a person better than a flat slab can. For this reason, metal reinforcement is not necessary. When we make a well cover, metal reinforcement is used.

One bag of cement will make one nyegan slab. We made 2 slabs during the formation, and the 2 families helping with the work and providing the community contribution, received the completed nyegan slabs.

Hopefully other villagers will see the slabs and be interested in purchasing one from the well team for their own nyegan. The well team can make these slabs all year round, a few at a time, to make extra money, and it will improve the sanitary conditions of their

village. One nyegan slab should last up to 10 years. The well team plans on selling them for 10,000 each.

OK. I'll write more later about the other projects.

Al

E-mail: 25 October 2003.

FROM: Allen in Bamako.

[This is a report for Mrs. McMullen's class on a well cover for the large, deep well in Dialakoto.]

There is a large well 100 m from my village that was built when the village was displaced in 1986 for the building of the dam. It is lined with cement. There is also a cement slab surrounding it and a brick wall surrounds most of it. The well is 13 m deep, so it has plenty of water and does not go dry in the hot season, when the 7 m traditional wells (just a hole dug in the dirt) are dry. The old cover for the well was very thin, and cracked due to people climbing on top to pull water. The door in the cover is right in the center, and the top of the well is raised, so it is difficult to pull water without standing on top. When the old cover cracked, people stopped going there because they were afraid of falling in. In April, we began work making a new cover. First we removed the old cover. To make the new one we needed:

2 bags of cement: $6000 \times 2 = 12000$

Reinforcement bar: $2000 \times 4 = 8000$

Angle irons for the doorframe: 6000

Sheet metal for the doors: 5000

Welding fee: 5000

Total: 36,000

I don't have a calculator to put this all into dollars but its about \$60. We started by digging a hole in the ground about 10 cm deep and 2 m across (the diameter of the exterior of the well). We left 2 rectangles, one on each side, where the doors would be. With the doors on the sides, people can stand beside the well and not have to reach far to pull water, so they wont have to stand on top of the well. Next we made the reinforcement grid: one circle of re-bar just smaller than the diameter of the cover, then a criss-cross of bar inside of that, leaving open spaces around the doors. The pieces are all tied together with bailing wire, so they don't shift while we pour the cement. The doorframes were cut and welded by a welder in Manantali, and then my host father cut and attached the doors himself. The cement was mixed with sand and gravel delivered by the village, with a crew of the village men doing the work. A thin layer of sand is laid first in the mold, so that the cement won't stick to the dirt underneath. Then a layer of cement is laid down, followed by the reinforcement grid, and sandwiched by more cement. If done properly, the grid should sit 1/3 of the total thickness from the bottom.

The doorframes were laid in place and more cement to hold them in place. The total thickness was about 8 cm. The mix of the cement was fairly strong: 1 bucket of cement to 2 buckets of sand to 3 buckets of gravel (it can be mixed with more sand and gravel when strength isn't as important, or less when more strength is needed.). When it was finished we watered the cement every day for a week to make sure it cured well, then gathered a bunch of men and lifted it onto the well.

Near the large well was an old broken pump for a borehole well. It also was built during the displacement. The hole was dug too deep and reached a sulfur deposit, making the water in the pump undrinkable and even unusable for washing clothes and irrigation. We removed the pump from the borehole, and used some parts to make a pump in the big well with the new cover. We removed one of the doors of the cover, and built a wooden frame that would sit in the doorframe to support the weight of the pump. All the metal parts and the weight of the water being lifted can be very heavy. We cleaned all the pump parts, which were caked with sulfur deposits from sitting unused for so many years. We had to replace the leather seals (coupelles):

2 large coupelles: $2550 \times 2 = 5100$

2 seals: $1250 \times 2 = 2500$

The local pump repairman did the work free of charge in exchange for learning how to do this kind of pump-in-a-well assembly. We lowered the pipes into the well, and attached the pump to the base we had built. My host father cut a wooden lever arm to pump the water, finishing the project.

This well is not used much in the rainy season because of the high grass and standing water between it and the village, but in the hot season it provides drinking water for a large part of the village.

OK. I think that covers the whole thing. I'm going to try to get out of here soon [out of Bamako and back to Manantali], but I'm going to try to attach some illustrations to this. [Unfortunately, the attachment could not be opened.]

Al

E-mail: 31 December 2003.

FROM: Allen in Kayes. TO: Mom and Dad.

I've just been reading all my holiday mail and my hour is almost up. I'll be in Bomako from the 14th-16th, so I'll be on free email then and will write more. Christmas was great; we were on the beach, eating shrimp in Senegal. Getting there was a trip: 36 hours each way on multiple busses and bush taxis, but worth it. Now we're back in Kayes for New Years, then back to Manantali - maybe even tomorrow. I'm helping Mary with a project in her village on the fifth, then to Bomako for Mary's end of service conference.

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Happy Hanukkah! May Allah make tabaski great!
Please greet the relatives for me, and I'll talk to you soon.

Love you,
Al

Telephone Call: 01 January 2004.
FROM: Mom and Dad. TO: Allen in Kayes.

[The PCVs arranged a piggyback telephone calling tree for parents and we were delighted to receive a call from Mary's father in Oregon, saying that Allen was waiting by the phone at the Stage House in Kayes. We had to call several times before the call went through, but what a great way to start the New Year. Allen sounded very upbeat. The PCVs had a good time celebrating the New Year together, and Allen would be heading back to Manantali very soon. In addition to the plans he outlined in his last e-mail, he shared some tentative plans for traveling after his End of Service. He will be done by about the fifteenth of March, but said he would probably not leave Mali until about the twentieth. He is starting to get some things ready to ship home. Traveling plans include Brussels and France to visit with friends, and possibly going to Greece. We will look forward to hearing more from Bamako in about two weeks.]

E-mail: 17 January 2004.
FROM: Allen in Bamako. TO: Mom and Dad.

Well, I hope you don't freak out. Don't worry. I'm fine, but I had a freak accident yesterday involving synchronized swimming and needed a few stitches in my lip. I'm fine. Actually, you should be happy because it means I'm going to be around Bamako for another week until I get the stitches out - so you'll hear more from me.

[Allen wrote about a number of matters concerning his end of service and about his travel plans. The first leg of his journey might be to Morocco, then to Europe. He can fly rather inexpensively from Morocco to Rome if he stays a few days in London. He said we could call him at the Stage House that night, but our calls did not go through.]

Chat: 18 January 2004.
Allen in Bamako. Mom and Dad.

[We enjoyed a long chat with Allen on Sunday. The discussion included the Democratic candidates and American politics.]

Maliens might be the most misinformed people in the world, and the most blindly pro-American, but they still all know that Bush likes war too much.

[Allen offered an explanation of his swimming accident, which in spite of his misfortune was rather humorous. We chatted more about travel plans. Because he needed to stay in Bamako until he got his stitches out, he had time to check out quite a few things of interest. He noted that he was not planning many new projects for his last days in Mali.]

We only have like a month and a half.... I'm doing a few formations (well and latrine covers) – not much – winding down and saying goodbye.

[Allen had found his grandparents online the day before and had a chat with them, and a chance to wish his grandfather a happy birthday.]

Chat: 23 January 2004.
Allen in Bamako, and Dad.

[I received a call from Allen's friend in Ames, Iowa, who said that Allen was online and would like to chat. We spent a while discussing banking matters and the best arrangements for his travels. Later in the day I called Allen's bank and arranged the changes in his accounts as we had discussed them. These are times to celebrate the convenience of Internet communications.]

Chat: 24 January 2004.
Allen in Bamako. Mom and Dad.

[I was getting ready to send Allen an e-mail message when he came online. We continued our discussion of the day before. Everything seems to be going together. He is planning to return to Manantali tomorrow, but will probably stay in Kita a few days. Allen does not like Bamako and noted that he had been there way too long. He described Kita as "small compared to Bamako, but big compared to Manantali."]

It's like a small, big town. No traffic, and no traveling salesmen.

[Allen noted that he might be online later today and we could look for him. There were other people who wanted to use the Stage House computer for a while.]

Chat: 14 March 2004.
Allen in Bamako. Parents in Iowa.

[Allen and Mary arrived in Bamako after a two-day ride from Manantali, “for the last time.” Allen noted that his goodbyes went well. His family and village put on a huge going away party for Allen and Mary in the form of a Malian wedding.]

There were a bunch of people (PCVs) that came down ... and people from Manantali and Molly’s village.

[They are working on travel plans for their long trip home. They might skip Morocco and go first to France to visit friends there. The Stage House computer was in demand by others so Al soon excused himself and told us to look for him online later. He will be in Bamako all week and will be in touch with us.]

16 March 2004

E-mail plus Chat on MSN Messenger.

[Allen purchased his plane ticket to France and will be staying with friends there for several weeks before traveling to Italy and Greece. The ticket to France was half the cost of flying to Morocco. He noted that he had received the last package we sent to him in Manantali that contained small gifts from us to his host family. He is still working on how best to ship some of his “stuff” home. Mailing it costs about \$10 per kilogram. Allen has some heavy wooden items. He and Mary are looking into sharing a small shipping container.]

I think we can [do this], but it might not get there in my lifetime. I know there is no hurry, but I’ve heard shipping by sea is not reliable.

[He noted that most PCVs ship by air, but his heavy stuff would be quite expensive to ship that way.]

Chat: March 2004.

Allen in Bamako. Parents in Iowa.

[Allen and Mary will fly out of Bamako on Sunday night, 21 March. They will stay with friends in France for about a week before proceeding on their “long journey home.” Most of the 23 or so PCVs in Mary’s group have already left Mali, some last week and seven today. A few will leave next week or a little later. They all have enjoyed a few good nights out to say goodbye.]

[We had] one last night out just now [tonight]. I was taking it easy, because I got one last parting gift of giardia.... I got it one last time, so I’m taking medication. So, I couldn’t drink one last beer with the group. [Giardia is a malady caused by a parasite.] We have a bunch of PC medication.... We take the Mefloquin for another month. Then the last two

weeks of that we take another thing [drug] that kills any larvae that might be hiding in our livers. It's all very healthy – probably about as healthy as the art restoration [work I did after graduate studies] with the lead-based paint.

[Allen noted that both he and Mary were able to ship some things back to the States with their group to the address of a PCV in San Francisco who was going directly home. They will need to pick it up there when they arrive on the West Coast. He noted a few additional COS arrangements and details. He has received 1/3 of his readjustment allowance and the rest will be sent within 6-8 weeks. We discussed his allowance and how far he might get to travel on it.]

Well, I hope it gets me back to the US, or you might not see me for a while. I'll be working in a Nike factory in Thailand, trying to pay [for] my way home.... We are thinking that we will probably be broke sometime in June, making it the best time to return home....

[Allen did indicate that he might try to get to Iowa by the Fourth of July. We have two family celebrations at that time: Allen's parent's thirtieth anniversary and his grandmother's eighty-fourth birthday. Allen noted that it was midnight there and we noted it was our dinner hour, so we closed down our joyful chat.]

Tom Mowbray says:

We are having barbecued pork shoulder, the first corn-on-the-cob of the season, and fresh asparagus. Wish you were here.

Allen says:

Sounds good. Can't wait to get out of here and get some real food. I'm going to miss my village peanut sauce, but wine and cheese and pizza in Europe are calling my name.

Chat: 20 March 2004.

Allen in Bamako. Parents in Iowa. Grandparents in New Jersey.

[We all coincidentally came online at about the same time. Allen has everything ready for departing Mali tomorrow, and reported that he has recovered completely from the giardia problem.]

I'm all better – got my appetite back – ready for cheese and wine. We even got a ride to the airport tomorrow, which saves us about \$20.

[Allen chatted at some length with his grandparents, and told his grandmother that he was going to try to get back home in time to celebrate her eighty-fourth birthday.]

We're going from near 40° C to around 40° F.... I've got all my cold [weather] clothes, the same stuff I had in Italy. I was fine there in December.

[We continued our chat together until about 7:00 PM CST, 8:00 EST, 1:00 AM Allen's time, when Allen called it a day. He noted that if he were not online on Sunday before they left for France, he would send a message when they arrived at his friend's house near Lyon. Our blessings and good wishes to Allen and Mary for a pleasant and safe journey stretched out the chat a bit further - our last such chat with Moriba Kante of Dialakoto.

Thus begins the end of Allen's two and one half year adventure as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Kayes Region of Mali, West Africa. As Musa (Moussa) informed Allen a number of moons ago, the floating log has become a crocodile, and the traveler now knows all the donkey paths.

Dear Allen: The world is a better place today because of what you and your Peace Corps colleagues have shared with others. *Allah ka balo di ya kosebe*. Love, Dad]

MALIAN PROVERBS AND SAYINGS In English and Bambara

A piece of wood [a log][a wood canoe made from a log] can sit in the water many years, but it won't become a crocodile.

Yiri be se ka sigi ji kono san chaman, nka a te se ka be ke bama ye.

This is often used to describe Peace Corps Volunteers. They can stay in Mali a long time, but they will not become Malian.

One finger can't pick up anything.

Bolondio kelen te se ka foi taa.

This is used in the context of "two heads are better than one."

When the donkey dies, the farting will stop.

Kofe fali sa ra, bo ci be ke ban.

This is used to describe people who talk too much.

If you travel with donkeys for many years, you won't be able to speak like a donkey, but you will know all their paths.

Ni i sigi fali fe san cyaman, i te se ka fali kan fo, nga i be na fali tamisira don.

Allen uses this to say that he knows he won't be able to become a Malian, but he can learn their way of life.

EXPRESSIONS

Ni Allah son na.
God willing [if God wills it][if Allah so wills it].

Basi te.
No problem.

Aw ni sogoma!
Good morning!

Aw ka kene?
How are all of you?

Aw ni che, Aw ni barra ji!
Thank you for your generosity!

Allah ka balo di ya kosebe.
May God reward you with long life.

Kan bu fo.
Greet the people.

BENEDICTIONS for the DEAD

Allah ka ne ma.
May Allah cool him.

Allah ka da yoro sumaya.
May Allah cool his resting place.

[Because Mali is so hot, the Malians hope things cool off in the afterlife.]

WORDS English-Bambara

aardvark: timba
bird: kono
crocodile: bamba
dog: wulu
donkey: fali
elephant: sama, or sogoba (“big meat”)
frog: toto
lion: wara

monkey: gon
porcupine: bala
scorpion: jonkonkon
snake: sa
wild boar: lei

dugatigi: village chief
gwa: covered porch
jatigi: host father
nyegan: bathroom
numu: blacksmith