

**Tennie Bickham Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Creator:** Tennie Bickham  
**Interviewer:** Paul Kinsley  
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**Biographical Note**

Tennie Bickham served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia from 1967 to 1969 as a high school teacher.

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Tennie Bickham

April 6, 2010  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Paul Kinsley

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

KINSLEY: [00:00:04] Today is April 6th, 2010. This is Paul Kinsley and I'm interviewing with Tennie Bickham, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia from 2-67 to 12-68 as a high school teacher. Uh, I guess to start out, if you can kind of describe your present family, work, residence, and interests. Just some things about what you're doing now.

BICKHAM: [00:00:43] I retired after 30 years of teaching kindergarten, and right now my main interests are my grandchildren.

KINSLEY: [00:00:53] Um, kind of think back to like the year before you joined the Peace Corps and talk about life then. You know, you can include childhood, education, other experiences, you know, relevant to becoming a volunteer.

BICKHAM: [00:01:11] Well, I came from a family who never, ever traveled. So I remember watching a program on television called Operation Crossroads,

which was like a precursor to the Peace Corps, and it showed some young Americans in Africa and that just, that really, I remember that vividly. And then I was obviously a big fan of President Kennedy. So when the Peace Corps was established and I was in college, I already set my mind that as soon as I graduated from college, I was going to join the Peace Corps. And when I did graduate, I hadn't heard yet from the Peace Corps. And my father was very upset that I hadn't made a real conscious effort to get a job because I kept saying, no, I'm going to go into the Peace Corps, I'm going to go into Peace Corps. And I just went back to doing the work I did every summer, as my summer job. And I finally heard on July 10th, I got a telegram that I was going. And I was just very, very excited.

KINSLEY: [00:02:13] So what, I guess you kind of hinted on this. You know, what made you decide to apply, seeing that?

BICKHAM: [00:02:20] It was seeing that ad, and I always just loved learning about other countries. And I always thought that when I grew up, I would travel. And this just looked like an opportunity to do that pretty much at the government's expense.

KINSLEY: [00:02:35] When you applied, did you have a specific country or a project in mind?

BICKHAM: [00:02:40] No. I went to school to be a teacher, so I was pretty sure I would probably be in education, because that was the majority of the Peace Corps volunteers were in education at that time. But no, I remember the question was, where would you like to go? And I put anywhere.

KINSLEY: [00:02:57] Oh, so even though the Crossroads thing had to do with Africa.

BICKHAM: [00:03:01] No.

KINSLEY: [00:03:01] You didn't specifically request Africa or anything. You just got. You know, with me, I didn't, when I heard Turkey, I didn't even know where it was. I had to look on a globe or something. What were your

friends' and family's reactions when you were accepted? Were there any hesitation, reservations, either on your part or their part or?

BICKHAM: [00:03:27] I think most people fell in two groups. Either they really didn't understand it, and after the initial, you're doing what? Oh, what are you going to do? How long? And then there was, that was the end of the conversation. Or there were a few people that were just totally into it and asked a lot of questions. And there were also the people who wrote to me through the time I was there and always supported me. My mother and father I know were, had to have been very, very frightened, their first child going so far away. But I was too oblivious to realize how much of a shock it was to them.

KINSLEY: [00:04:05] Yeah.

BICKHAM: [00:04:05] I just was very excited about going. And they were, outwardly, they were always very supportive.

KINSLEY: [00:04:11] What, what project were you invited to join?

BICKHAM: [00:04:17] It was Liberia IX. It was the ninth group to go to Liberia, and it was to train to be a teacher. So all of the whole group were going into education.

KINSLEY: [00:04:26] Had you had any previous education?

BICKHAM: [00:04:29] I was an education major.

KINSLEY: [00:04:31] You were?

BICKHAM: [00:04:31] Yes. So it was right up my field.

KINSLEY: [00:04:34] Oh, okay. Um, how did you prepare yourself and others for, you know, going away two years? Did you have any special preparations or anything that you had to do for?

BICKHAM: [00:04:47] I didn't really, because I had just graduated from college, so I didn't like I had a home or I had a job or anything like that. And I just, the Peace Corps sent you a big pamphlet of what you're supposed to do. And I just followed what they told me to do.

KINSLEY: [00:05:02] Okay. Now, if you want to talk about your training, where it was, the faculty, the syllabus, technical studies, reaction to other trainees, language?

BICKHAM: [00:05:15] We were trained in, by the San Francisco State College faculty and staff. At that time, Peace Corps contracted it out. And so in early October, I was flown to San Francisco. And, um, the training was a, they were very long days. We were, we stayed at an old army base that was outside the city limits. And we were on campus by 5:30 every morning and had two hours of physical education by the PE department of the college. And then we had.

KINSLEY: [00:05:57] Two hours a day?

BICKHAM: [00:05:58] Every day, Monday through Friday. Four hours of language training, and then four hours of, it had an acronym. But it was West African studies and politics and history and that kind of stuff. And then four hours of education training. So usually we got back to the fort around 11:00 at night.

KINSLEY: [00:06:24] Wow.

BICKHAM: [00:06:25] It was very long days. And it was all staffed by either San Francisco State staff or some Liberians that the Peace Corps had recruited and some former volunteers.

KINSLEY: [00:06:38] And how long did this last?

BICKHAM: [00:06:40] It was eight weeks.

KINSLEY: [00:06:41] Eight weeks. Okay. Now, what about the selection process? Were there surprises, disappointments, enjoyments?

BICKHAM: [00:06:50] I've never quite figured out what they used as a criteria because throughout the whole eight weeks in San Francisco and then the six weeks we had in Key West where we had our student teaching, people were being deselected all, all, all along that time. And I never, there were people who were deselected that I thought would have made great volunteers. There were people who ended up going that I never thought would make it. So I don't know what their criteria really was. They, I know they, they asked our feedback a lot. Who, would questions like, who would you like to? Who do you think would make a good volunteer? Who do you think would not? Who would you like to be stationed with? Who would you not like to be stationed with? And I guess they took some of those answers into account. But throughout the whole process, people were deselected, and in some cases it was very secretive. All of a sudden somebody was just gone.

KINSLEY: [00:07:45] Did you have a heavy psychological thing? Because we did in our group.

BICKHAM: [00:07:50] Yes, yes.

KINSLEY: [00:07:50] We had these groups and then if you messed up in the group, they hit you over the head with an individual session.

BICKHAM: [00:07:57] Yeah, once a week we had to see with a psychologist. And they had towards the end of that eight weeks, we, they had what they called sensitivity weekend. And we went up into the mountains of Santa Rosa, and we were with a group of about 12 to 15 people who had been seeing the same psychologist. And from Friday night until Sunday afternoon, we were stuck in a room and we did all kind of manipulative games to get you to find better who you are and where your fears were and where your strengths were and where your weaknesses were. So they had a lot of manipulation where you kind of broke down your, uh, protection that you've had for years and years.

BICKHAM: [00:08:38] And then some people, some of the people really had a hard time with it. I was always kind of a private person anyways. I don't

remember being too overwhelmed by the process, but some of the people who appeared to be like the leaders of the group and the strongest people of the group, when they had a lot of their protection and barriers broken down, they had a hard time. So it was very interesting. But that was very big in the, in the '60s, that sensitivity sessions.

KINSLEY: [00:09:08] I remember once we got over there, they said. We had two months over there and they said, who would you least likely to, would not want to stay with? And of course that was who became my roommate over there. That's, so they, they, they played a lot of, a lot of games. In hindsight, do you think the training prepared you and was it useful to your service?

BICKHAM: [00:09:38] Well, that when I think about it, it's interesting because the whole purpose of the training was to prepare you. I don't think a sentence ever started through those, those weeks with, that didn't start, well, when you were overseas. Well, when you're in Liberia, ba ba ba. And yet, it was a very important event in my life, training, and even if I had never gone overseas, I would have found it a very valuable, worthwhile, entertaining, and fun time of my life.

BICKHAM: [00:10:09] Um, the language was no help at all because we were, we did not know what our assignments would be. And there are like 27 different tribal languages. And so we just got a smattering of all the, you know, what, Manos and the Gio and the Bassa and all these. So we really, we just were trained in semantics and linguistics. So there was a culture shock. But I don't think they could have done any different. I ended up living with Manos and the Gios and the Mandingos, so I don't know if they could have given me a crash course in Mano or Gio or Arabic, you know?

KINSLEY: [00:10:47] Well, did, did you teach in English?

BICKHAM: [00:10:50] Yes.

KINSLEY: [00:10:50] Oh, yeah, so you could have got by without.

BICKHAM: [00:10:54] I did. I did, yes. And they did do a lot with the pidgin English. And that was helpful when you got there. And of course, just with time you learned it. But I guess the training was helpful. I don't know. I did, I didn't have anything trouble adjusting.

KINSLEY: [00:11:12] Okay. What about your initial entry into the country and your reaction to the country? Maybe you can talk about the project, the staff, impression of local people, physical environment.

BICKHAM: [00:11:26] Well, it was so long ago, but I do vividly, vividly remember the plane touching down in Africa and realizing I was in Africa. And we took a bus from Robertsport, the airport, into Monrovia, and it went through the jungle area. And, and I just remember looking out the window and all the colors. The blue, blue sky and everything was so green. And the soil in Liberia is very, very red. And all the women that were walking along the paths and walking along the road with their bright colored clothes and their babies on their back and the big pots on their heads and. And I just, that feeling of just. I do remember that.

BICKHAM: [00:12:21] Uh, the heat. I remember the heat and the humidity being. I just was, I knew it was coming, but still it was overwhelming to have that heat and humidity. We didn't stay too long once we arrived. We were only in the capital for probably 4 or 5 days. And then we were given our assignments and we headed out.

KINSLEY: [00:12:46] So was your initial assignment what you ended up doing? Or did you have like a trial period?

BICKHAM: [00:12:54] No, I was assigned to a high school teacher in Sanniquellie, and that was my assignment. I do remember Liberia only, it has one city, Monrovia, and then it has one road that heads out of the city and about ten miles out of the city it becomes a dirt road. And that's the only road in the hinterland. It, it splits into three different roads and heads then towards the, the different borders. So the first group that left were the people who were going to be on the coast and they had to fly. So that, so you became very attached to your group. So I had those 80 people that I was with.

BICKHAM: [00:13:32] And we saw that first group go off in the airplane and then the rest of us were in like a whole convoy of busses. And we started out on the road and we would drop people off along the way. And then the road split. And then by the time when the road split and then I was only like four people within my group that went with me up the road towards Guinea. And then we dropped off the last one and there was only two of, the two of us left at the end of the road. And it just, I remember vividly thinking about, oh, my friends are gone and I'm going to be by myself.

BICKHAM: [00:14:08] But I was delighted with my assignment once I got there. I was in Sanniquellie, which was a pretty big town, and a lot of interesting people because it was the seat of the national government. It was the seat of the tribal government. It was the center for commerce. It had the big market there. There were several like Lebanese general stores. So I don't know whether it maybe had 2,000 people or something like that. So there was a Catholic mission that was run by a Ghanaian father and some sisters who were from Belgium. And there was a small little hospital that was World Health Organization that had an Israeli doctor and an English doctor. So I felt very happy with my assignment because of all the interesting people that was in my town.

KINSLEY: [00:15:03] So you were the only one?

BICKHAM: [00:15:06] No. The other thing that was good about it was most, almost all the staff of the, of the government high school was Peace Corps. So during my time there, we had between 4 to 6 volunteers in Sanniquellie. So, no, I was never alone.

KINSLEY: [00:15:23] Okay. Now, you said there were, were there 80 in your total group or just in your particular group?

BICKHAM: [00:15:29] In my group, yeah. We all were going into education, so it was all one group. The only difference was there was a small group of around 16 lawyers and they, they took some different classes because they were going to stay at Monrovia and start the law school at the University of Monrovia. But basically we were all going into education and the group was one.

KINSLEY: [00:15:55] What about like your typical day and your relations with the people of the country?

BICKHAM: [00:16:03] Well, morning was, was always the best time of day for me. I loved it. I, um. My house. The main room of the house was really almost like a screened porch. Two sides of it were screened and it looked up. It was up on a hill and it looked down over a rice field. And then the village was past that. And the road that was in front of my house was the main road to the high school and was the road to the river. So I woke up every morning to the sound of the birds and the monkeys and all that.

BICKHAM: [00:16:41] But then watching the, the village come to life, I always loved that. I always sat and had my tea and heard the, what woke me up every morning was the caller from the mosque waking, telling the Mandingos to pray. So that always woke me up. I never needed an alarm clock. I heard him calling. And then soon after that the women would be going down to the river to wash clothes. So I'd hear them giggling and they're chatting as they're walking past my house. And then soon after that the little kids would be walking by to go to the river to fish. So just watching my village wake up every morning was wonderful.

KINSLEY: [00:17:20] Was Islam the main?

BICKHAM: [00:17:22] For the Mandingos.

KINSLEY: [00:17:24] For the Mandingos.

BICKHAM: [00:17:25] Right. But the Mano and the Gio tribes, they, well, some of them, I think, I guess were Christian, but most of them were not.

KINSLEY: [00:17:37] Okay. What about some people that you encountered either, you know, people from Liberia or other PCVs, PC staff? And the role of language?

BICKHAM: [00:17:53] Well, I guess the important people to me were my students, and most of those students had come from small villages outside of

Sanniquellie, and they really didn't, they weren't with their families. They stayed in huts that their, that their chief owned and used when he came in to, had when there was big chief meetings. My neighbors were always very nice to me and I had a lot of fun with them. And I guess you first met the kids, like it is everywhere. The kids come up and look in your windows and talk to you, and then you meet the rest of them. And, um, I just, I enjoyed all my, all the people of Sanniquellie.

BICKHAM: [00:18:40] And there were lots of interesting foreigners. Like I think I mentioned there was Father Francis who was from Ghana, was very nice. And the Belgian sisters, I'd go over there and play volleyball together. They were very nice. And the Israeli doctor and his wife would come over. We'd come over for dinner and I'd go and visit with his family. Whenever we had any visitors, I was, well, all the volunteers, all the Peace Corps volunteers, were kind of included as the important people of the village. So besides all the doctors and the chiefs and the store owners and the principal, we were always part of that. So we always were part of any big groups that came together. So it was kind of nice to be an important person in the village.

KINSLEY: [00:19:32] What about work time versus leisure time, if you could maybe describe those?

BICKHAM: [00:19:39] Well, the high school really ran in the morning. I usually was there at school by 7:00, and then we were done around 1:00. And I taught math and science. And I am not a math and science major. I got my degree in early childhood education. So I, I spent a lot of time preparing for my, my classes. The math wasn't so hard, but the science was very difficult. And the few books that I had really were not relevant. And there really wasn't a curriculum. There was no organization to the, to the school. So you really had to write your own curriculum. You had to keep track of what students really should be there and what students shouldn't. Every time I went into school, there would be some strange faced person that I'd never met before.

BICKHAM: [00:20:32] They were almost all men and they were almost, they were my age. They were not young kids. Most of them had started going to mission

schools when they were maybe 9 or 10, and then they had left home to come to high school. So it was a difficult job because I didn't have any equipment and I had to write my own curriculum and also because most of the men had a hard time looking at me as the authority. The male Peace Corps volunteers did not have as much hassles as I had. I had a lot of hassles. And so I spent a lot of time in my afternoons preparing. And I went to the mining company and I got and learned a lot about the rocks of Liberia. I went to U.S. Information Service and had to get all kinds of information about the climate and why the weather is like it is. And I just did a lot of research from all my classes.

BICKHAM: [00:21:27] And a lot of my teaching really took place in the afternoon. Sometimes my, the 45 minute classes at school was a loss because I'd have some kids, some men, who just did not. They just came to give me a hard time and I didn't get any teaching done. And we ended up having a big resource library in my house. And people, the people who were really interested in teaching and learning often came in the afternoon. So I usually had open tutoring and I had students in my house all, all day until it got dark.

KINSLEY: [00:22:01] Wow. So, um. Let's see, what was I going to say? Oh, yeah. Were there other women teaching with you or?

BICKHAM: [00:22:16] No. I was the only Peace, all the other Peace Corps volunteers that were teaching at the high school were men. And the only other woman was. Professor Char, who was an Indian, who was our, who the United Nations paid to be the principal. And he was the principal and the physics teacher, and his wife was there and she was the geography teacher. And Professor Char would have no problem flogging any kids on Friday afternoon or students if they gave anybody a hard time. So they did not mess with Mrs. Char. It was only me.

KINSLEY: [00:22:57] And what about, what about coordinating with other teachers? Or did you do this curriculum pretty much on your own?

BICKHAM: [00:23:08] Yes, we had two of the male volunteers that were with me. They were both, one was a biology major and one was a chemistry major.

So I picked their brains all the time. And they taught the chemistry and the physics to the sophomore, junior, senior. And I had the. [phone rings]

KINSLEY: [00:23:26] Uh, I guess if you could kind of compare your work time versus your leisure time and how life and work changed over the first few months.

BICKHAM: [00:23:41] Well, mornings I taught. In the afternoons, I usually did the tutoring. Um, and I spent a lot of time walking through town and visiting with people. I think when I did want to get away on a weekend, I was very fortunate that there was a mining company about an hour taxi ride up country that was run by Bethlehem Steel and Ginsburg Steel from Sweden, and they had a little town or city for their employees that was modern. It had paved roads, it had, they had beautiful homes. They had plumbing, they had a swimming pool, tennis courts, nice schools for the workers, and a supermarket. So I would, when I needed to really get away, I had that luxury. And probably 3 or 4 times a year, I would go, go up there.

BICKHAM: [00:24:41] And what I be, who I became friends with the most up there was a Catholic father whose name was Father Love. He was from Ireland, and he'd been in Liberia since the, um, the early '30s. And he started doing his mission work on the coast. And he just gradually worked on up. He never built a church because he said, you can celebrate mass anywhere. He built schools all the way up. And I just thought he was a wonderful person. And he had a great house with hot water and everything. And he had this French chef that would make beautiful food. So I would go visit him when I wanted to get away and have a hot shower and have a good meal.

KINSLEY: [00:25:21] Now, how far away was that?

BICKHAM: [00:25:22] It was probably about an hour. It's hard to tell because if you travel from one village to another on the road and you, you take a, what they call a taxi, just a car that somebody decides that they're going to drive up and down the road and make money. And the time, the distance is based on money. So they say it's \$2 up the road. And the taxi drivers have a life of their own. They may get started and then decide that they're going

to have a meal in a little village nearby, or they are going to go visit with some friends. So it could take anywhere between, you know, an hour to three hours.

KINSLEY: [00:26:04] Oh, okay.

BICKHAM: [00:26:04] Depending on the will of the taxi driver. But it was like a two hour ride up up there. It wasn't very long and it was nice to get up there. And I would then usually go to the supermarket and treat myself to some chocolate, chocolate from Switzerland and then maybe cheese too. And then I just I had that and just hoard it for the next few months.

KINSLEY: [00:26:29] For me, the Catholic Church was a refuge too. There was a Catholic church in the big city that was near us and we went in about once a month and we, we were able to, myself and the other volunteer that I was with, we were able to stay at the, I guess it was a monastery or whatever. The brothers were there. And in exchange for the room and board, basically, we conducted Catholic Church services on Sunday because there was an American airbase there, but none of the brothers knew English. So in order to have an English service, they needed somebody to conduct it. And my father's a minister, so.

BICKHAM: [00:27:11] Mm hmm.

KINSLEY: [00:27:12] So I just got up there and read the scripture and sang the hymns in return for room and board so.

BICKHAM: [00:27:17] I never got tired of hearing what Father Love's stories about first coming there. And the people, the people loved him.

KINSLEY: [00:27:28] How did your life and work change over the first, you know, few months or?

BICKHAM: [00:27:38] I still just taught for the two years and I didn't, um, have a lot of projects. I guess the biggest thing was I got more confident in trying to encourage the women to go to, come to high school. I think the first year I was there, I really didn't try to, um, push any kind of philosophies or

whatever on anybody. And so the majority of the, the vast majority of the high school students were men. And most of the women in my village, by 13 they were taken as a wife, and then their life was set that way. And I think the second year I really had a woman's club where I tried to get the young girls to, to come. And we could talk about things and try to encourage them to go to high school. It was hard for them to, the few of them that went because they were ridiculed and then those that did stick it out and did learn and went on. That was, that was worthwhile.

KINSLEY: [00:28:42] Try to kind of, uh, encapsulate the, the end of your first year. You know, your joys and woes, unexpected things that happened, relationships, health problems.

BICKHAM: [00:28:59] I, I really can't delineate one year to the next year. I just think gradually every month I just became more acclimated to everything.

KINSLEY: [00:29:14] Mm hmm.

BICKHAM: [00:29:14] I'm sure the first six months I did a lot of watching, I didn't. I taught, of course, but, and I asked questions. But I really stayed back a little bit and just tried to get used to things. And I never tried to force my own ideas or opinions on anybody. And I think just, just became more acclimated to things and more willing to give your ideas and differ with people. And even the things like just telling a joke. I would never have, just what, what makes, you know, in a certain community or a certain culture, some things are funny and some things aren't funny. I was well into my second year when I actually made a joke that the, that my students laughed at. I mean, they always were laughing at me, but believe me, it wasn't any, you know.

KINSLEY: [00:30:03] It was you and not your jokes.

BICKHAM: [00:30:05] Yes, exactly. You know, so it just sort of a gradual osmosis into the, into the culture.

KINSLEY: [00:30:16] Were there, did you have any unexpected things happen or great joys or low points or high points? Or any health problems?

BICKHAM: [00:30:29] Well, of course, I got malaria and I always had mild cases, but I had several bouts with malaria, even taking my little two pills every Sunday. Um, outside of that. Oh, the other thing, I guess. One of my trips into the, the, into the bush, I accidentally stepped on the devil ants and they, they really bit me and I had, and I get, I got all infected in my ankle. Um, but yeah, I survived that. So health wise it was only that. When I first got, the first three months that I was in my house, there were around eight snakes discovered in and around my house. And I, obviously I do not like snakes.

KINSLEY: [00:31:16] Discovered by somebody else?

BICKHAM: [00:31:18] They were discovered by other people, yeah. I think I just tried to take a blind eye. I mean, one time, I, uh. One of my students came over to my house and he found a snake and it was wound up right under my bed. Lord knows how long it had been there, but they got it out. Um, so. I didn't even want to go home. At one. [tape break]

BICKHAM: [00:31:45] Just told me about the snake society where the zoos, the special medicine men, would know about taking care of snakes. So the head of the snake society came to my house and he put some kind of paste or something around, around the outside of my house and said some words. And I never had any more snakes.

KINSLEY: [00:32:09] Uh, what, did you have a regular Peace Corps doctor or where did you go for, like with the ants? Did you have to go anywhere to get?

BICKHAM: [00:32:19] Well, I was able, no, I never had to. I think we had, every six months we had to go down to Monrovia and get checked out and have a gamma globulin shot and that. But when I had the trouble with, um, the infection in my ankle, I just went to the Israeli doctor that we had from the World Health Organization, and he just gave me some medication. And, but there was a Peace Corps doctor, and I think he was stationed, um, in a town that was probably three hours or so away from me. There was one obviously in Monrovia, but there was also one upcountry. But I never needed to go to him.

KINSLEY: [00:33:02] Okay. What about vacation and travel?

BICKHAM: [00:33:08] We had a wonderful vacation. The school, since we were all teaching, we all had the same time off. And we had January and the first few weeks of February, that was their summer vacation. And some of the, the people in my group were very industrious. They ended up chartering a plane and we went to East Africa and we landed in Nairobi. And then we had, I think like three weeks. And I went to, uh, throughout Kenya. And I went to Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania. I went to a lot of the game preserves. Went to Olduvai Gorge, where Dr. Leakey found Early Man. I went to Ngorongoro Crater, which is like in Tanzania, which is one of my favorite places where you descend into the crater and you see all kinds of wild animals in their natural habitat.

BICKHAM: [00:34:08] Went up to Ethiopia and Addis Ababa and saw a totally different kind of culture up there. Went to Lake Victoria. We went to, we went all the way down to Mombasa and saw the Indian Ocean, and we stayed at a really nice resort. It was right on the ocean and there was swimming and it was wonderful. Wonderful.

KINSLEY: [00:34:28] Was Haile Selassie still emperor then or not?

BICKHAM: [00:34:32] I think he was. I think he was because they still, like his palace, there were actual lions that roamed all around.

KINSLEY: [00:34:44] Okay. I guess kind of looking over the, at the end of your tour, what was your sense of achievement as opposed to failure and pluses and minuses and relations to work, with the people, regrets, satisfactions?

BICKHAM: [00:35:05] Well, I guess I really looked upon the time as an experience for myself and finding that I was, uh, had some great experiences and I was a better person and had a lot more knowledge. I didn't really think an awful lot about what good I did for somebody. I went, what I did in Liberia for Liberians. But I do. I guess we think that because you actually were living with the people and you made jokes with the people and you felt when they, when they lost somebody or whatever, that when anybody who has

ever been around a Peace Corps volunteer will have another look when they hear the name United States of America. They're just not going to think about our military.

BICKHAM: [00:35:52] We were deep into Vietnam at this time. And especially with the Arab world, there was, it was beginning to be a lot of animosity with the wars that were going on in Israel and their, and their neighbors. And I guess I just felt that these people thought about, thought about United States and they put a face to that. A face to people who were not toting guns and out to get you. They were just there sharing their world. And I think we, we did that.

KINSLEY: [00:36:29] Uh, let's see. While you were over there, did you have any plans for the future at all, or did you have any idea what you might want to do when you got back?

BICKHAM: [00:36:40] Well, I definitely always thought that I would travel more, and I thought that I would come back to Liberia. I guess I don't think I could have ever left if I didn't think I was going to come back, because that was like one of the hardest things I ever did in my life. I was so excited to see my family. I was very ready to get back to America and television and movies and, and hot showers. I mean, I, it wasn't that, but just it was still a very, very hard thing to do, to leave. To leave where you've been for the two years and it's been your life. And I had every intention that I would. I did not. I have not traveled the way I thought I would. I have not been back to Liberia, but part of that is because of the civil war.

KINSLEY: [00:37:21] Now, let's see. Did you explain your, your living situation? You, I guess.

BICKHAM: [00:37:29] No.

KINSLEY: [00:37:29] Can you tell me a little bit more about where you lived?

BICKHAM: [00:37:32] At that time, Peace Corps had some rules about where volunteers lived. We didn't live with families. We usually had a Peace Corps house and one or two Peace Corps volunteers could live together.

So I had a roommate. I had two roommates. My first roommate who had already arrived, and she, she was there the first, my first year. And she was from Baytown, Texas. And she worked in the hospital. And then my second roommate was from Rochester, Minnesota. Colleen. And she ended up working at the, at the hospital, too, and also working at the Catholic high school, rather than the public high school where I was. Um.

BICKHAM: [00:38:16] But the rules. Peace Corps wanted you to have a cement floor, not a dirt floor. They wanted you to have screens and they wanted you not to have a thatched roof because of fire. So I had a traditional house like the Liberians with the dry mud and clay walls, but I had cement floor and I had screens. And I had a zinc roof on my house, which was comparable to living in a drum during the rainy season. And we, it was probably a little bit bigger than most of the Liberian houses because they usually do everything, they just sleep in their house.

BICKHAM: [00:38:52] But we had a main room, which I had mentioned was two, two walls were screened. And we each had a bedroom. And we had a room that we used as a kitchen and we had our filter that we had to boil the water from the well for 20 minutes and then put it through the the filter. And it was like a reservoir for us and we could just take the water from the spigot that was in the, the filter. And we had a two burner stove that was fueled by kerosene and we had a small kerosene refrigerator. And the nicest thing I had was I had a room that was attached to my house that I used as, that we used as the outhouse. So I didn't have to go outside at night.

KINSLEY: [00:39:33] Oh.

BICKHAM: [00:39:33] It didn't have any plumbing, but it had a toilet that looked like anybody, any toilet here in America. But then we had to keep, we had to put special stuff in it and we had to flush it with buckets of water after, after it started to stink.

KINSLEY: [00:39:49] Was there a big hole that it went into it?

BICKHAM: [00:39:52] Yes, yes. Lord only knows what happened.

KINSLEY: [00:39:54] Yeah.

BICKHAM: [00:39:56] Under the whole house stank.

KINSLEY: [00:39:57] Yeah, but in most of the houses you'd have to go out?

BICKHAM: [00:40:01] Mm hmm. Or in any time I left or went out.

KINSLEY: [00:40:04] And so you were basically in the same place the whole time?

BICKHAM: [00:40:07] Mm hmm. I was.

KINSLEY: [00:40:07] Yeah.

BICKHAM: [00:40:08] The same home.

KINSLEY: [00:40:09] Okay. Uh. Anything else about, that you might want to say about the, the volunteers or the Peace Corps staff or anything like that?

BICKHAM: [00:40:21] No, I still, my group still stays in contact with each other. And we've had several reunions and they're, even though years may go by, when you do see them, there's a bond there. All, and many of the direct, the director and the assistant director and the medical staff, many of them participate in our reunions and they were always very supportive. I always felt that I had their support, but they didn't push it on me. When I, when I was dropped off in Sanniquellie, there was nobody that called me or talked to me for months and months and months. But I knew that the Peace Corps jeep came once a week with my mail and stuff, that if I needed something that, that John, who was the driver, would get things to them. I've always felt I had their support, but I also felt like they put me out there and do your own thing.

KINSLEY: [00:41:19] So all the Peace Corps mail came into a central place?

BICKHAM: [00:41:23] Yeah.

KINSLEY: [00:41:23] And then they, they actually had a truck that delivered it?

BICKHAM: [00:41:28] Yes, there was a Liberian man and it was his job. His name was John, and it was an old Army jeep. And it came, usually it was a Tuesday, and he came with our mail.

KINSLEY: [00:41:39] So you couldn't get mail through the regular mail system?

BICKHAM: [00:41:43] There wasn't any mail.

KINSLEY: [00:41:44] Oh, there wasn't any?

BICKHAM: [00:41:45] There was nothing.

KINSLEY: [00:41:45] What about telephone?

BICKHAM: [00:41:47] There was no telephone.

KINSLEY: [00:41:47] No telephone. Okay.

BICKHAM: [00:41:51] And no email. There was nothing like that, you know?

KINSLEY: [00:41:56] Uh, let's see. I guess, do you have any big regrets or anything that was an outstanding satisfaction to you that you'd like to talk about?

BICKHAM: [00:42:07] I think I might have been a better Peace Corps volunteer, and I certainly would have paid better attention, if I had been older. I think I mentioned to you that when you're young, I was 22, and there was so much about the culture that I just didn't bother to pay attention to. I didn't keep, uh, any kind of a journal, which was very foolish on my part. I didn't record the music that I heard. I didn't try to get, I brought very few artifacts home, and when I did, it was like. I said, I realized, oh my God, I'm leaving in a couple of weeks. I've got to get some things. And just, I just didn't take advantage, I think, like I could have.

KINSLEY: [00:42:47] Did you write home regularly or is there any record of your writing?

BICKHAM: [00:42:52] My mother did keep all of my, my, um, all of my letters.

KINSLEY: [00:42:57] Because that's often something to build on.

BICKHAM: [00:42:59] That's what she said, you know? And I never, I think I did read them about ten years after I came home, but I have them somewhere. I still do have them.

KINSLEY: [00:43:07] That would be a good thing to, uh, to get into. I know I sent letters all along and it's, you know, it really is. You know, it's how you were feeling at the time and what you did and.

BICKHAM: [00:43:19] Yeah, and a matter of fact, the letters really, they were to my mother and father. But I grew up in a very close neighborhood where all the, we all knew each other. And so when the mailman brought my mail, which was one of those air letters, so they knew it. You know, he'd always say, you know, Stella, we got a letter, we got a letter. And all the neighborhood came and sat down and she had to read it out loud. So I had to be careful what I said sometimes because it was news for the whole, the whole area. The mailman even waited and had to hear the story, too.

KINSLEY: [00:43:52] Okay, um. Let's see. Did you mention what you planned to do when you got back, or did you make any plans there at all?

BICKHAM: [00:44:02] No, I didn't make any plans there.

KINSLEY: [00:44:04] Okay. I guess now I'm going to have you kind of evaluate your service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. The first one is to provide technical assistance where requested. How do you feel you did in that area?

BICKHAM: [00:44:20] Well, being a person who's been in education 30 years, I think that's, that's the start of any kind of society. So, um, I think we were successful there.

KINSLEY: [00:44:34] And so you taught like high school, but when you came back, you, you went back to early childhood? Is there any reason for that or?

BICKHAM: [00:44:44] I came back in the middle of the school year, and that was the job opening. I really didn't think I was going to. I thought when I finished my Peace Corps, I planned to go and get my master's in history and social studies. And I really saw myself as being a history teacher at the high school and like running model UN and taking the students overseas. You know, that was what I planned to do. And I came back in the middle of the school year and a friend of mine from high school knew that there was a job opening in this one district at kindergarten. And I said, well, I'll just take it to get working and get my foot in the door and then move on up. And lo and behold, I never did.

KINSLEY: [00:45:30] Okay. The second goal is to provide a better understanding of the United States, you know, for the country that you are in. How do you think you did in that?

BICKHAM: [00:45:41] Like I said before, I guess it's just a matter of them looking, not looking at this big country, but as individuals that make up that country.

KINSLEY: [00:45:54] Okay. And the third goal is to promote a better understanding of other peoples by Americans. So I don't know if you want to, you know, that's probably been done, you know, after you've come back. But did you do anything to, you know, talks or anything with Americans to help them understand your experience OR?

BICKHAM: [00:46:21] In my early years of teaching, I would always do, um, show my slides and stuff to all the, all the grade levels throughout the year and give a presentation about Liberia. And very often kindergartners, it's, you know, Africa is not in the kindergarten curriculum.

KINSLEY: [00:46:44] Right.

BICKHAM: [00:46:44] But I would, I often would flip flop and have like the fifth grade teacher, because the fifth grade is where they do the world, and do units

with them. And then somebody would take over my class. I did that for years and then I just stopped doing it. Uh.

KINSLEY: [00:47:04] Okay. Through the years, have you continued any kind of involvement with your country of service or contact with people from that country?

BICKHAM: [00:47:16] Well, for years I did hear from my students when, um, when there were Peace Corps volunteers that could get the mail out.

KINSLEY: [00:47:28] Mm hmm.

BICKHAM: [00:47:28] But then in 1980, they had the civil war and everything broke down. And then I never heard from anybody anymore. And I haven't had any contact with any Liberians. I do hear here in the United States there are some, you know, some. I find out my sister, Molly Jo, has some Liberian children in her school. And I make a point of going over there and meeting them and sharing stories and that. But the one situation that I, that I have, and it's been fairly recent, I guess Peace Corps has a way for people from other countries to get in touch with former volunteers if they're interested. And I had a student, John, who through Peace Corps got my email address. And, well, they gave me his email address and I wrote him and then he wrote back.

BICKHAM: [00:48:25] And he had been one of my students. And that's a long time ago. And he now is an engineer. And I wrote, when I sent him an email back and we shared what he was doing and what I was doing and what our life's been like, I asked him, you know, why did he, um, why was he interested in me? Because we had had, like I told you, they were all, they were all volunteers teaching at Sanniquellie High School. And he said that I made the beginning impact on him in science and math. And then he went on and he wanted me to know that he now was an engineer. And it was just, it was just like the greatest thing that anybody ever could have done for me.

KINSLEY: [00:49:03] Even though science and math weren't really what you were. But you inspired him somehow.

BICKHAM: [00:49:09] Yes. And the fact that he wanted to let me know. And we do now send, I get emails from him, from them.

KINSLEY: [00:49:16] Okay. What about any continuing Peace Corps involvement? I guess you can mention your work in the.

BICKHAM: [00:49:22] Well, since I moved here to Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Peace Corps Association is very active and I have been active with that. And I think we do a lot. We do a lot to try to educate Milwaukee about the rest of the world. And we try to raise money for partnership programs. And we participated in folk fairs and pushing teaching about Peace Corps and teaching about our interests. So yeah, this has given us a lot of opportunities.

KINSLEY: [00:49:54] Do you want to say anything about your specific work with the calendars at all or?

BICKHAM: [00:50:00] No.

KINSLEY: [00:50:00] Okay. Uh. Are there any, what are some other third goal activities that you've been involved in? Or was your involvement with the Peace Corps returned group only started in Milwaukee or?

BICKHAM: [00:50:13] Yeah, there was nothing like that in the Rochester area or even western New York doesn't have anything.

KINSLEY: [00:50:20] Oh, they don't. And when did you come here?

BICKHAM: [00:50:22] 2000.

KINSLEY: [00:50:24] 2000. Okay. Well, I think that's pretty much it, unless you want to. Well, what about the effect that your Peace Corps service had on you, either an immediate effect or did it change you or did it contribute to your career plans, things like that?

BICKHAM: [00:50:44] I never take a hot shower for granted. I still adore it. I just think I, I'm a better person for having that experience. I have, in many ways, I have a greater appreciation for the United States of America. And I'm very happy that I'm an American and I live here. But sometimes when you're taking, when you step away, then you can see better about some of our faults and some of our, we're misguided in some ways. And I don't think anybody can, unless you really live in another culture, you can't always evaluate your own culture very well.

KINSLEY: [00:51:27] Right.

BICKHAM: [00:51:27] You don't have that frame of reference. And I just think that having that opportunity to actually live in another culture helps you appreciate and understand your own culture better.

KINSLEY: [00:51:43] That's a good thought. Do you have any like words of wisdom or anything you'd like to impart to people who may be listening to this in years to come?

BICKHAM: [00:51:52] Well, I just that I had, I think I mentioned it. I just don't think I took as much advantage of my opportunities as I could have. And the recording, you think you'll always remember something, but you don't remember it, so you really do need to document your feelings and the experiences you've had and. Because you do forget.

KINSLEY: [00:52:13] What's that expression? Youth? Youth is wasted on the youth.

BICKHAM: [00:52:16] Exactly. Yes. Because I, I think about that when I see Zidra. I'm thinking, man, if I went, was in that situation a little bit older, I might have even. I would have just had a more, a more of an appreciation for what I had or what I experienced.

KINSLEY: [00:52:36] Is there any chance that you think you'll ever go back to Liberia?

BICKHAM: [00:52:42] Well, something I've been thinking about recently, because they do, it has opened back up. And there is a program now for volunteers who

have previously been in Liberia to go and work with the teachers. And it's a, and I have thought about it. I'm just not quite sure my health is ready for it and can do it.

KINSLEY: [00:53:10] You know, I've been back a couple of times, and to me it's really rewarding. You know, the people really express how much you meant, even though they didn't at the time, you know?

BICKHAM: [00:53:20] I think Liberia is sort of unique in the sense that it really took, you know, 100 steps backwards. And we. We realized that when the Peace Corps first entered Liberia, the whole education system was Peace Corps volunteers. And just shortly before the, the crisis and preceding 1980, most of the Peace Corps volunteers were in other fields or they were just working as resource people for the teachers. So we were, we had made it a point where now they were their own teachers and they were staffing their own schools and they were expanding. But then with the, with the war, everything was destroyed and every, and all the, the gains were lost. And then now there's so much hatred in between the, the tribes. And it's going to take so long before people trust again.

BICKHAM: [00:54:20] So it isn't just the infrastructure that's totally has to change, but it's also that feeling of, of unity, of Liberians that's been totally destroyed. And part of that, the whole reason that that whole happened, was because of Peace Corps and people coming in and making people realize that the world is different and maybe we're not happy with the way we are. Not that we caused it, but we set the seed so.

KINSLEY: [00:54:51] Okay. I think that's pretty much it unless, like I say, you have any other words of wisdom that you want to impart. Thank you very much. It's been a very interesting interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]