

An Unlikely Return

Written by Steve Garber / Photos by Peggy Garber



Mist in the oil palms at dawn - 2010

Early Saturday I walk out my old front door in Sahn Malen to greet the dawn. It's the beginning of rainy season, so it is mostly cloudy. Across an open field on the eastern horizon above the oil palms the sun rises between layers of clouds, a fiery red ball just like anywhere and just like always. The oil palms are shrouded in mist at this early hour, but that will soon burn off.

We'd slept, in fact and to our great surprise, once again in our same Peace Corps house as 42 years before. How can that be possible, that the house

would still exist, that it would now be vacant, that it would be a guest house in a remote village where there is no apparent reason for there to be a guest house?

Standing outside, the scene before me is much the same. Other houses in the village look as we remember, some mud and thatch, some concrete and metal roofs, although there is more thatch now than before. The village is surrounded with bush, like always, and just like every village in all the lowland areas of Sierra Leone. Short oil palm trees in my memory have now become tall trees. There is still thigh high grass in the field in the foreground where animals sometimes graze. We remember from long ago seeing just incredible spider webs in this grass in the early morning, light refracting through the dewdrops.

Yet there are differences. In the field in front of us about 30 meters out there now stands a well, a metal pump on a concrete platform like you see in many parts of the third world. There was no well in the village 42 years ago. Then, after the rainy season during which we caught water which ran off our roof into a rain barrel, we paid the school fees for a boy to carry water to us through the dry season from the river clear across the village. Today there are no less than seven wells in Sahn. They provide safer water, contrasted to river water contaminated by waste from upstream. Wells change lives, even if you still have to carry the water on your head from there to your home. We see that the wells in Sahn get a lot of use.



A spider web in front of our house - 1968

There are other differences. While decades ago the village was most hospitable to us during our stay, we were pretty much on our own then. This time there is room service, at least for this one day. Last evening Chief Kebbie sent over bread and jam, hot water in a thermos, coffee and tea and fruit juice in cans. Actually there is Heineken beer too, but we pass on that for breakfast.



Our house - 1968

Still other differences catch our attention. Ours is a first rate tropical house: concrete block walls, metal roof, concrete floors, screens on the windows. Although neither plumbed nor wired then, it was practically new, and quite acceptable. Today, however, there are a few lights and plugs with electricity provided by a small but very noisy generator out back. If you have electricity, you can have fans. Fans in the tropics like anywhere else can be the difference between still air and moving air, but often in the tropics also seem like the difference between slow suffocation and some real quality of life. So you start up the generator and you sacrifice your ears (and your neighbors' peace and quiet) for the benefit of your

pores, and the trade seems worthwhile, at least for the moment.

There is within these walls another even more basic difference. There is now an indoor porcelain fixture. It is plumbed outbound, but has no freshwater supply to fill the tank. A convenient bucket of water alongside deals with that shortcoming. It is definitely more luxurious than the pit toilet of old a few dozen steps out back toward the bush. That was always an adventure to visit those many years ago, especially in the middle of the night. Your flashlight's beam never quit moving. Now with indoor plumbing it hardly seems worthwhile for the army ants we worried about then to come through your property to eat all the bugs in the latrine. We considered that a benefit 42 years ago: a thorough cleaning by carnivorous army ants that left your latrine critter free for about two days. And you only had to put up with the ants for a couple of hours. We were visited by relentless columns of these ants four separate times back then, twice at night. On the scale from tedium to high drama, a nighttime home invasion by army ants — who can really bite — was definitely on the high drama end.



Our house - 2010

But, back to the present, enough of this soft life. We are due at 9 Saturday morning with Chief at the junior secondary school across the river and just down the road toward Pujehun. We will need to start early, for there will be many people to meet and greet and talk to and tell our name to and learn their name and tell them how we are and how our family is — but that's the extent

of our conversation, as we have at that point rather exhausted our minimal memories of Mende. What we can't tell them, and what they are too polite to ask, is What exactly are we doing here?

We had thought about coming back for decades, but they were just thoughts. Longings. Concern about people we knew and cared about. The current Chief's father, also Chief Kebbie, seemed like an old man to us when we were in our early 20s. He might have been 50. In fact, we learned this trip that our Chief Kebbie died just 10 years after we lived in the village. But we didn't know of his passing, and at some indefinite time a decade or more ago it seemed likely to us that he would no longer be alive, and without him to visit, we were probably better off just with our memories. We've traveled widely and enthusiastically, including to some number of third world countries, but never back to West Africa.

Then we met Cindy.

Cindy served nearly 20 years after us as a Peace Corps volunteer at Masanga Leprosy Hospital in the north part of Sierra Leone. Cindy returned in 2004, just two years after the end of the terrible 10 years long civil war that engulfed the country, where she encountered a coworker from long ago who took Cindy to his nearby village and pled, "Can you help us rebuild our school?" Well, that was certainly daunting, but not impossible for a physical therapist working for Seattle Schools with a four year old boy – if that person was Cindy. She said, "I will try." How could she not?

Many twists and turns later, the organization she started in 2004, Schools for Salone, is now building school #13.

Peggy is Secretary/Treasurer of Schools for Salone as well as a photographer and videographer of considerable ability. Schools for Salone is co-sponsoring another remarkable effort, also started around 2004, to do teacher training in country. Would Peggy video the conference and make from that a training documentary?



Teacher training conference - Bo - 2010

There have been crazier ideas. Surely there must have been. But shooting video in a hot climate at unpredictable and uncontrollable venues in a country with uncertain electricity frankly doesn't compare in difficulty to building schools deep in the West African bush, and last spring the possibility of this undertaking slowly consumed us.

But if we are going back to Sierra Leone (a trip which doesn't appear anywhere on our list of the next 20 countries we hope and plan to visit), it is really unthinkable not to go back to our village.



Koribundu - 19 miles south of Bo

So on my 66th birthday, I go with my much younger (not even 65 year old) wife south out of Bo on the paved highway — there's something there was nothing of 42 years ago: pavement. We go to Koribundu, then on to Bandajuma where the pavement ends. After that, it's another hour plus toward Pujehun over occasionally a gravel road but often more like a slalom courses over a daunting, deeply rutted and bone jarring red clay track. We are headed toward Sahn Malen, where the present Chief Kebbie awaits us as we had arranged. We're

taking the long way around. Why today did I have to choose the scenic route?

If you are going to meet a Paramount Chief who is also a Member of Parliament — that's our Chief Kebbie — you should surely be on time. But probably not early.

As the day works out, we can't pay a morning visit to the Islamic school in the village of Buma on our way down as we planned because it is Friday. How unworldly of us not to have figured that out in advance. As a result we get to Pujehun about an hour and a half early. Before starting the last one hour leg to Sahn, we find an outdoor café of a sort, and settle in with a Coke (mine) and a Fanta (Peggy's). And hang out. Next to a group of guys conversing in Krio. This is about the only Krio I actually understand a fair portion of these two weeks we are in country, since nearly all they talk about is the World Cup which is currently taking place in South Africa.

An ag worker rides up and joins them. I know what he is by the sticker on his motorcycle which refers to the Sierra Leonean Agriculture Rehabilitation program. So, while waiting, I chat up the ag worker. What is he working on? Trying to get farmers away from slash and burn upland rice which deforests the country and toward swamp rice which is far more sustainable; developing cash crops to take the country from a subsistence economy to a market economy; yada, yada, yada. Bless his heart, good for him, all success, but I've seen this movie before. 42 years before, that essentially was our assignment. Let's just say that the plot of this movie can take an extremely long time to develop. But this ag worker is on a nice motorcycle and has decent boots and a helmet, while my ag co-worker in our village decades ago, a man called Pa William, was on foot and in flip flops. So some things have changed.

About this time, a college age black guy walks into the courtyard where we're sitting who looks like a local, but not exactly. He's somehow just too upscale. With him is a European coed of similar age who looks nothing like a local. David and Sarah, it turns out, are co-workers in some NGO endeavor. He in fact is a local, albeit one — surely the only one — just out of Harvard and headed for MIT for grad school in engineering. She's finished with her second year at the University of New Hampshire and is on a summer project. I mean old Peace Corps retreads coming back for a look see is one thing, but these two are way off my chart of likely fellow

travelers. I don't know how David got to Harvard or why he's back here, but this summer the two of them are going to every village in our Malen chiefdom on foot and surveying every sleeping space in every house with the goal of supplying the entire chiefdom (which would be the first in the country with 100% coverage) with treated anti-malarial sleeping nets. We see a large room in the clinic about a hundred meters from our guest house with nets piled up floor to ceiling, so I guess I'm buying this story.

If I may digress, this is an opportunity to wonder in passing what happened to all the mosquitoes in this country. Why in my day, sonny, the mosquitoes could sting you through a pair of Levis. They were so big and slow you could pluck them out of the air with your thumb and forefinger. You'd wake up in the morning (or in the middle of the night) and swat the resident swarm off your mosquito net as you scrambled to cover your tender parts hopefully before they reassembled into attack formation. Those were mosquitoes. There are now fewer. They are smaller. We have fewer bites (but some). Malaria is still a serious problem in this country, but something has changed. Make note: must inquire about wimpy mosquitoes.



Sahn approaching from Pujehun - 1968

Back to David and Sarah. They too are headed to Sahn Malen. They are intending to rent a motor bike to get there (public transportation being slim to nonexistent at this hour of the mid-afternoon, apparently). But we could take them in the back of our van, they would know the way, and, perhaps best of all, they would know when they were actually in Sahn Malen. Why is this last a virtue? (1) There are very close to no signs in this country, and certainly none pointing to a village or telling you the name of the village you might be arriving in. (2) Did I mention about the war? We know the war was very intense and long lasting in the south. We didn't know what our village might look like, or indeed until a week ago whether our

village still even existed. (3) It has been 42 years. Memories fade. Things change. Easy conclusion: David and Sarah are welcome companions.

The last 14 miles from Pujehun to Sahn takes less than an hour, so you know the road is pretty good. We have to slow to a crawl to cross the five or six palm log bridges (typically seven to ten logs wide) across creeks of various widths. It would all be more exciting in the rain, but such is not our fate this day. Eventually we come to a familiar vista from distant memory, down a hill, across a small river (via a concrete bridge!), and up another hill into yet one more Sierra Leonean village that looks like a hundred others – except it is ours. We know



Sahn approaching from Pujehun - 2010

it is. If home is where the heart is, at least as to a piece of our hearts, we are home.

But where is Chief's compound? It was behind a fence just at the top of the hill on the left. Now all that's there is a burned out concrete shell filling with weeds. David tells us that Chief's current home is now up the road a bit on the left. A few hundred feet beyond, we know we are at the right place because there is a new, blue Chinese tractor alongside a covered shelter, and Chief is the only person in these parts who would be likely to own either of these things. The tractor and shelter both lay just off from a very modest house (although that does sound like a pretty big generator out back). And, to be fair, Chief's principal home is in Freetown as a Member of Parliament, and we are not sure how much time he actually spends in the chiefdom — think your Congressman who lives mostly in Washington.

We alight. Chief Kebbie, whom we met with three days ago in Freetown when he sought us out after our initial phone contact, treats us like we're just old neighbors who happen to drop in. Indeed, he's nowhere to be seen. The major feeling out and sounding out happened in Freetown. There, four days previously, we initiated a call to Chief Kebbie at his residence in Freetown telling him we would like to visit Sahn. Three days ago there was a knock on our apartment door at our Freetown host Joseph's just after we arose from a late afternoon, combination jet lag/tropical heat induced nap. Chief apparently didn't become Chief without personally checking out unusual goings on concerning his chiefdom. While he was completely gracious, we concluded he was part doing a little due diligence and part just plain curious why these Americans were dropping out of the sky into his chiefdom.



Peggy, the older Chief Suliman Kebbie, Steve,
the future Chief Sidi Kebbie - 1968

Over the next hour, we discovered that Chief, Peggy and I all share this body of knowledge about one particular small chiefdom well upcountry. Our perspectives are different, but to a significant extent it is a shared experience. It is perhaps a half hour into our meeting in Freetown when we figure out who the current Chief actually is. When we lived in the chiefdom, the then Chief had one son at university in London, and a second at university in Moscow (because it was the 1960s, and you couldn't be sure who would ultimately prevail in Sub-Saharan Africa). We figure it is naturally one of these older sons we'd never met who is now chief. But at one point the current Chief talks about his name — Brymar Viktor Sidi Kebbie — and how it has the same initials as his father, and in fact the same

name except that his father was Suliman rather than Sidi. And it strikes us. What we heard 42 years ago was C.D., as in "Come here, C.D."; "Do this, C.D." Our Chief was talking to his oldest son in the home — Sidi. The current Chief we remember very well as a 12 year old boy, the obvious apple of his father's eye. It is no surprise to us that this Viktor Kebbie is now Chief. But that he was Sidi? We had never seen it written. Who knew?

An unlikely Return

Steve & Peggy Garber

One older brother is today a doctor and the other a lawyer, both here in country. And Sidi has been Chief for 32 years now (which makes us feel even older than usual) and is in his third term in Parliament. He doesn't feel to us to have the gravitas of his father, but that's surely a generational thing, for while we never felt like peers with his father, with Sidi, a pretty easy going guy, we can have a very relaxed relationship.

Back in Sahn, since Chief doesn't put in an immediate appearance when we pull in, I start working the crowd.

They are mostly younger than us.

We don't find anyone, other than Chief, who we remember or who remembers us. They remember the teachers better. To kids back then, I was just some ag guy wandering around the chieftdom — not anyone of interest to them. But I tell people the names of those whom I worked with and about the man who had the little store where I bought Coke and Fanta (which you could do even in 1968), and some older people remember them. It really was a long time ago. Only a few remember or even know that there was once an oil palm nursery here that was the focus of my work. The decades take their toll.



The oil palm nursery Steve partially salvaged in 1968 - mulching the young trees before transplanting



Peggy, Steve and Chief Kebbie - 2010

Every village has a meeting place, a structure with low walls, a slightly raised usually concrete floor, and a roof, either thatch or metal. In Sahn's there is a table and chairs for honored guests and honorable hosts.

A cooler comes out indistinguishable from your basic Sunday picnic model, and there is bottled water, juice and beer all around. We're pretty careful with alcohol in the tropics, desiring to remain standing or at least sitting for appropriately long intervals, and I can't remember any beer in the village 42 years ago, but, hey, times change and Peggy and I share a cold Carlsberg. Tastes good. Darn good.

After an extended exchange of pleasantries, we are allowed to repair to the chieftdom guest house, which as I said is our old Peace Corps house, then as now the last house in town on the road that leads on through the oil palm grove going west to the even smaller outlying village of Kpombo.

An unlikely Return

Steve & Peggy Garber

Walking up the road with Chief, our house looks virtually unchanged. For all that's happened, somehow this house is undamaged and has either been lightly used or carefully cared for or both. It is really shocking. I personally am certainly not in as good a condition as I was 42 years ago. What's with this house in such good repair? But here it is, a concrete block house with a metal roof, a central room the full depth of the house, then four rooms, two off to either side that would be bedrooms or storerooms or kitchen or dining rooms. Maybe 24' deep by 45' wide, about 1,100 sq. ft. More room certainly than we needed back then, but it was nice to have a guest bedroom.



The central room of our house - 2010



The clinic (and the cows) - 1968

After Chief is assured that we are safely ensconced, we agree to dinner at 7 back by his house. That gives us over an hour to go for a walk, something we are anxious to do. For just across the field out our front door is the reason Peggy came to Sahn Malen those many decades ago: the clinic. There was a new clinic building in our village when we first came, with concrete floors and blocks walls and – well, that's about all. No doors, obviously no finishes or furnishings or equipment or any of that. And certainly no staff. The clinic never opened during our stay. That was fine with the visiting cows, who found the clinic most suitable to their needs. We would watch the cows wander in and out of the clinic.

But not now is not necessarily not ever, and today the clinic is finished, functioning and the nicest building in these parts. Moreover, between the clinic and our house, living accommodations have been built for four nurses who staff the clinic. This is truly progress because obviously a clinic without staff is of no more value than a school without teachers.

One of the clinic's primary efforts is to get pregnant women to deliver in the clinic rather than in the bush. The mother and infant mortality rate here of bush births is dreadful, and clinic births probably make the greatest difference in the health of the village as there can be. Our recollection from the '60s is that the survival rate of children past age 5 was about 50%. The permanent damage to some of



The nurses' quarters and the clinic beyond - 2010

those who survived due to malnutrition was an additional toll. Although a Danish medical student doing outreach at Masanga we met a few days ago told us that child malnutrition is still a significant problem in Sierra Leone, we simply aren't seeing the obviously malnourished children – the distended stomachs and the red hair indicating kwashiorkor – that we did before.

So we have a clinic with staff quarters. That's wonderful! What else is there? We walk from our house on the west edge of the village down a path through a small grove of oil palms to a new if modest school on the north edge of town. This is the SLMB school, the Sierra Leone Muslim Brotherhood school, or simply the Muslim school.



Sahn Primary school - 1968

It is Friday. We are now up to speed that there is no school at the Muslim school of Fridays, so there is no one to talk to, but this would presumably serve at least 100 children, perhaps rather more. Which seems like progress.

Our walk next brings us to the main road which leads north out of town back toward Bo. We, however, turn south heading back into the village. Next up on both sides of the road is what we come to realize is the replacement for the primary school that existed when we were here. What was one building then is now three buildings. It's past six o'clock, so there's no school in session, but there are children around on the playfield.

There is no equipment on the playfield, but it's an open space, sort of a natural kid magnet. This school, nominally Roman Catholic, although we think the connection, now as then, is probably pretty light. There are two Roman Catholic secondary schools in nearby Pujehun with which this primary school is affiliated. But we never saw a priest or nun in Sahn back then, and none are evident this day. (By contrast, I have chatted up imams in a handful of villages we've visited.)

From the primary school, it is only past a dozen or so houses back down to Chief's compound. It is just coming up seven, and the evening's festivities are about to begin. We are seated in the middle of the head table, David and Sarah on one side, the assistant chief and various elders on the other, Chief across. A cooler is brought out, and it's beer, water and soft drinks all around again. Chief puts a bottle of scotch down between us.

OK, I didn't see that one coming.

The scotch remains capped.



Sahn primary school - 2010



Chief Kebbie, other village leaders, Steve, Peggy, Sarah, David - 2010

A huge vessel of rice appears, and another of sauce. It was a privilege to eat with Chief decades ago, and we would never decline an opportunity, but the chilies were fierce. Your lips would burn, your throat would burn, even your tongue would burn. We couldn't tell if water brought relief or just spread the damage as with a grease fire, but it was the only hope we had, and we drank our precious water then in hopes of deliverance from our self-inflicted injuries. Our clear recollection is the relief was only partial and grievously slow in coming.

40 years later, the chilies are just a hint. I understand that strong spice is the easiest way to mask not such good food, but, really, this food is pretty darn good (if not hugely varied), but only if you can actually taste it. We eat well, talk about the village and the chieftom, about then and now, and are thoroughly nostalgic.

Chief asks if I remember the little village in his chieftom called Hogai down where the coastal swamps begin.

I reply, "I remember going to a village on a river where much salted fish was available."

"Exactly," states the Chief.

"And," I continue, "I remember that the village had much locally made gara cloth for sale."

"Exactly." Chief likes the word exactly.

"Then I remember getting into a dugout canoe to go for a ride through the estuary, and, being unused to riding in such a thing, fidgeting around trying to get comfortable. That, of course, made the canoe rock, but I didn't think dangerously. But soon the man paddling the canoe said to me, 'You do know there are crocodiles in this water.' I immediately and for the duration of my time in that canoe sat extremely still. I think only my eyes moved from that point forward."

"Good thinking," the Chief concludes.

The memory of that day in the canoe in Malen chieftom long ago will always be with me. How unexpected to have this chance to revisit it, to hear it validated.

Chief had promised entertainment, and soon they arrive, three women and two men. The two men have two different homemade drums, one out of a large cardboard box, the other out of a somewhat differently shaped box, both vented to cause the boxes to act as an acoustic chamber. Two of the women are backup singers, and the third, the lead singer, has a gourd enclosed within rings of shells, all of which is in turn wrapped in a net. This she shakes to provide a rhythmic high accent to the beat of the two lower box drums. She is definitely the leader of the band, an animated singer and dancer who leads the call and response style that all of their songs feature.



The entertainment - 2010

After a few minutes, Chief is up dancing with the band. After a few more minutes, so are we. And then Peggy and I dance (and we hear “oohs” from the crowd when I spin her around), then Peggy dances with Chief, and this all goes on for a wonderfully long time.

A few songs later, Chief asks if I would like a scotch.

There are things you do in this world because you have to do them. It’s your job at work, or your obligation as a parent, or your duty in the community.

There are things you do because you want to do them. They’re optional, but enjoyable, and we all look forward to those.

Then there are those things, counterintuitive though they may be, you realize that if you look back and know you had the chance and didn’t do it, it would just seem a terrible missed opportunity.

I have a scotch with Chief.

I consider that scotch to be even less predictable than the unlikely saga of David and Sarah and the treated nets.

It is, I judge, the least likely event of our entire trip.

I can’t remember the brand. (Hmmm.) It doesn’t matter. I had a scotch with Chief.

As the band plays on, and the talk and the drinks continue, I realized that there has to be a protocol for how this evening will end, but I don’t have any idea what it is. Just because there are protocols doesn’t mean everyone stands on formality, that you can’t ask. It isn’t a mystery that we’re not from these parts, and understandable that we might not know what to do. So I simply lean over and asked Chief, “Do you leave first, or do we leave first? How does this work?”

An unlikely Return

Steve & Peggy Garber

Chief replies, "You leave, in five minutes I will have them all out of here."

The guy's not Chief for nothin'.

Eventually, we take our leave. And walk through the village back to our old house by flashlight, just like we did after visiting old Chief Kebbie 42 years ago.



The oil palm plantation just beyond our house - 1968. Short trees. On the left is a termite mound.

breakfast. We wander around outside, just taking in the morning. I walk a few hundred feet into the adjacent oil palm grove keeping an eye out for snakes and army ants, just like before. (Saw both during our trip, but not this morning.)

When I return to the house, a goat is chewing on our doormat. Ours is almost certainly the only doormat in the village, and only for this one day. Goats are goats everywhere. I rescue the doormat and make ready to go to the school.

In due time, having visited with all the neighbors, we are down to Chief's house where he joins us to walk south out of town to the secondary school. On this walk, the light hearted and celebratory nature of our visit takes an unexpectedly serious turn.

Back in our house, we each take a cold water bucket bath (beggars not able to be choosers), and this is only because Chief was kind enough to have someone carry water to us. We prepare for the night, settling in under a mosquito net in the dark just as before. It is hot, but not unbearably. It is dark, but not completely. It's not a problem being ready to go to sleep hours earlier than we would at home. We're plenty worn out.

We are up by 6:30 the next morning. That water splashed on our faces might be a few degrees cooler than the night before, but icy would still be a term off by at least 40 degrees. We eat our room service



The same oil palm plantation from the same place - 2010. Tall trees.



Assistant Chief, Steve and Chief Kebbie in front of old burned out chief's compound - 2010

First we walk by the old chief's compound, as I noted before a concrete shell without a roof and filling with weeds. Chief talks about the rebel army's occupation of his village for six years, from 1992, the year the war started, to 1998. We know about the war generally, but now we're hearing specifics. The war sort of leaked over from Liberia next door which had been in turmoil some years before the troubles in Sierra Leone. Much of Sierra Leone's border, other than the Atlantic Ocean, is with Guinea, another troubled country, but not to its neighbors. But some of the border is with Liberia, and it is the Southern

Province where we are that borders Liberia. Liberia is only 40 miles from Sahn Malen, although the trip would take some hours. It is my sense the war was bad in much of the country, but the war was more long lasting, which is to say the rebel occupation was longer, in the south. When the rebels left, they burned and looted. Today, only the scorched concrete walls of what had been the sturdiest structures around town remain.

Chief had told us in Freetown that he and his family had been taken hostage at one point for 15 days, but when the rebels' attention had wandered, they had made their escape. The price the rebels exact for that escape, we now learn, is to find seven men Chief describes as his uncles and kill them all in retribution. But that isn't all.

Walking past the old compound and down the hill toward the river running along the south and east sides of the village, Chief says softly and simply, pointing to the side of the road, "And here is where there is a mass grave." He goes on to describe another incident after he had escaped, fleeing to Freetown. Chief relays in a quiet, solemn voice that there came a time when the rebels lined people of the village up in two columns on this road, then opened fire. They shot about 70. All are buried in this mass grave between the road and the river.

Our hearts break. They nearly stop at this unexpected revelation.

Chief says only one person escaped. Though shot, he managed to run off into the bush, and got away.

Just one.

What can you say?

It then becomes clear to us that another reason so few people remember us is that so many were killed or fled. Chief says the village is bigger today because people from smaller outlying villages whom we never really knew have moved into Sahn in hopes the larger village will be safer.

I finally find a little bit of my voice and whisper that I am glad at least he, Chief, is not among them here by the river. It seems an almost silly thing to say, wholly inadequate to the moment. It is all I can think of.

Deep breath, heads back up, and then we step onto the bridge, cross the river, and proceed another few dozen meters before turning off up to the junior secondary school on the hillside where about a hundred students and their teachers await us on this Saturday morning.



Sahn Malen Junior Secondary
School (grades 7-9) - 2010

We meet and greet the teachers. This is a school assembly. There are speeches. The headmaster speaks. Chief speaks. I speak. The assistant chief speaks. Peggy speaks.

There is an issue of terminology. The headmaster first refers to Peggy and me as their parents. I allow from my seat that to these junior high age students we are older than that. He concludes that we are their grandparents. He announces that we had lived in Sahn Malen 42 years ago. This revelation earns a collective gasp from the students, I think indicating a general

unawareness that there was life on earth quite that long ago.

Chief tells the students that we are not just visitors but returning members of their community. It is such a gracious thing for him to say. Not that I had ever felt anything but acceptance from this village, but I am genuinely moved to hear him say this.

I tell them that we were so worried about them during the war, we didn't know if they'd still be here, we are so relieved to find them, we are so pleased to find that Sahn now has not one but two primary schools and a junior secondary school. I say the obvious, that they are fortunate to attend, they should study hard, and all that. Then I tell them that all that Peggy and I have accomplished in our lives is based on having obtained a good education, that with a good education much is possible.



Steve addressing the students at Sahn JSS –
2010 - Headmaster standing to the left.



Peggy addressing the students at Sahn JSS - 2010

Peggy speaks briefly but pointedly about the importance of girls going to school, that when you educate girls, you educate the whole family and the whole village, and that better times will not lie ahead without the intentional and widespread education of girls.

I think this is the only speech interrupted by applause.

By the girls.

We take photos, like always, of the kids and of the school.

- We examine the termite damage to the schools doors and door jambs, which is extensive, resulting in some number of rooms that cannot be locked. Not a good situation.
- Some of the classroom floors have gouges like shallow potholes which are attributed to not using appropriate sand in the concrete mix. Our driver Abu says this can be patched.
- There are no latrines.
- There is a well, but the pump was stolen before it was installed, and no replacement seems within the village's means.

I read American history about how hard it was to live on the frontier rather over a century ago without money, what a problem and a frustration it was, and how difficult it was to rise above a very rudimentary existence without a cash economy. Think of the whole William Jennings Bryan crusade.

This village has very little cash. It's a subsistence economy. It's not they don't have the will or the knowledge or awareness about how to better themselves. It's not that they make bad choices. Their lives, in a financial sense, are practically devoid of choice. Even if there are no school fees (the answer seems to be technically no, but there are other expenses, like for school uniforms), the dollar or two equivalent it costs to go to school for a term, maybe \$5 for the year (and that for each child), is simply beyond many families' means.

There are no latrines. Who builds schools for junior high age girls without latrines? And expects them to come. We're basically only talking a three hole outhouse here: one cubicle for boys, one for girls, and one for staff is the usual. It seems incomprehensible that there are no latrines at Malen Chieftdom Junior Secondary School. But there aren't.

For all those basic education nitwits in the U.S. who think all school should consist of is reading 'riting and 'rithmetic, they would be comfortable in Sierra Leone. Education is extremely basic. But even the simple opportunity to read is so circumscribed. By the junior secondary school level, a library often becomes the bridge to some real breadth and depth of student learning. Here in Sahn, this would be a better school with a library.

We end our session at the school and the four of us, Chief, Assistant Chief, Peggy and I, walk back into town. Peggy and I express an interest to visit the old chief's compound. Chief is readily agreeable. We conclude that the concrete structure that had been burned by the rebels in the 90s was actually built after we were here in the '60s. The original structure, which was stick and mud but with a metal roof, lay just to the west, and the veranda which is so central in our memories where we always met with Chief lay yet west of that. Indeed, the concrete posts in the corners of the old veranda, and the old raised concrete slab are still there. In addition, the three concrete block toilet rooms, which Peggy remembers most vividly down to the diameters of the critters living therein, are still there, albeit also full of weeds and without roofs. And without critters, at least any that we noticed.



Old chief's burned out compound
with court barrie to the left

Our Chief Kebbie, who died over a decade before the war started, is buried under the floor of the now burned out living quarters. We enter that room with his son, the current Chief, and stand there silently as we remember with great affection this man who was, as Peggy notes to Chief, like a father to us when we were here. We were lucky to know him, and to be in his care.

In due course, we move on past the court barrie which dates from 1948 (an inscription on its wall says) which has been restored since it was damaged by the rebels, and past another handful of newer houses until we are back to Chief's current house, where we are greeted with another hearty meal. Last night was rice and chicken. Today is rice and cassava leaf. It's very good. More beer is available, but we have a fairly bumpy ride ahead of us, at least up to Koribundu, and did I mention it's about 10 in the morning? Water works.

The meal concluded, I ask Chief if we might talk. We four adjourn from the shelter with the table to his front room a couple of dozen steps away.

As we enter Chief's front room, we are struck again by something we'd already realized. We know Chief has another home in Freetown, but this chieftdom has built or rebuilt three schools and residential quarters for its clinic staff. And while Chief's new home is concrete block, not stick and mud, it is not very big and certainly not very fancy.

Peggy and I are Schools for Salone. We build schools. The village already has three schools but has yet to rebuild the Chief's compound, demonstrating their commitment to education. What might we do?



Peggy, Chief Kebbie, Steve wearing clothes given us by the Chief - June 25, 2010

The consensus is a library for the secondary school. This is a comfortable notion to us in part because just the previous day we visited the library Schools for Salone recently built at Jaiama Bongor junior secondary school in a village northwest of Koribundu. A library is something we hopefully can finance mostly if not completely by ourselves. And we like libraries.

The door jambs, the concrete and the pump pose a different problem: Ought the village and the chiefdom take any responsibility for ongoing maintenance and replacements? This doesn't seem quite the right time to make this point.

While it isn't discussed at the "OK, what are we actually going to try to do" meeting, we would really also like to do the latrines.

Our meeting and our visit conclude on this high note, this anticipation of action, of tangible change we are all enthusiastic about. We are inspired. We prepare to leave.

To be here in Sahn Malen not once but twice. How unlikely.

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Life is a journey. In this journey there are speed bumps, detours and sometimes dead ends. But there are also breathtaking vistas, unanticipated revelations, incredible sights and sounds, amazing people and places, situations that seem impossible and inconceivable, and we experience it all.

Sometimes we get a second chance, an opportunity to revisit, to reevaluate, what once seemed to us worthwhile and even critical. While we are not surprised, we are certainly gratified to validate that as hard and frustrating as Peace Corps might have once been, it was also our brush with nobility, and for us an important part of living a fulfilled life.

As we leave Sahn Malen, we realize we might even have one more trip back to West Africa left in us. One where we will return to celebrate the opening of a new library. In a small, upcountry village. In a country far away. With our friends and neighbors. At our old home.

How could we not?