

Historical Reflections

by Genna Stead Wangsness (Shiraz/Tehran, 1965-71)

"Historical Reflections" is a new column that looks at the years when Peace Corps was in Iran through stories and events that may have gone unrecorded. Although researched and written 50+ years after the fact, accuracy is of utmost importance. I am pursuing the following stories: volunteers who served alongside or lived with European PCVs; those who served in Iran after serving in other countries, such as Pakistan or Libya; those who volunteered later in life; and volunteers who worked in highly specialized fields. Contact me if you fit into any of these categories; I welcome your participation. And send me your ideas about any aspect of Peace Corps service in Iran you would like researched for historical purposes and possible articles.

Many thanks to Jack Huxtable, Barbara Tobias, John Lorentz, Jeffrey Gritzner, and many others for providing inspiration, valuable documents, lists, background stories, and words for this inaugural column. Contact me at genna@peacecorpsiran.org.

Peace Corps Iran 1

Peace Corps sent its first volunteers to Iran in 1962. In the early days of the Peace Corps, contracts were assigned to help the Peace Corps get programs off the ground. Since they had been in Iran since 1946, the Near East Foundation (NEF) was chosen to work with the Peace Corps in establishing its first program and preparing for the arrival of Iran 1. From 1962-64 William Fuller served as the NEF contract representative for a Peace Corps-Near East Foundation contract in Iran. In addition to providing training in Utah, the NEF sent another representative, Paul Dawson, from Washington to Iran to help inform everyone about the coming of the Peace Corps and to tell them about its first director, Dr. William Cousins.

When William Cousins arrived as Peace Corps representative in September 1962, the NEF gave him a small second-story office on Soraya Street (near Villa Street), across from the NEF office. While working with the NEF under its two-year contract, Dr. Cousins established the infrastructure for an independent Peace Corps. Eventually, he and his staff found a house with a wall and small gardens at #65, Takht-e Jamshid Avenue. By early 1965, that office was up and running, remaining the Peace Corps' home until its closing in 1976.

In addition to Dr. Cousins, early Peace Corps' staff included Jack Frankel, Dr. Robert Campbell, Hossein Moftakhar, Larissa Simonian, Gertrude Nye-Dorry (who along with Dr. Abbas Ekrami of the NEF instructed volunteers on teaching English as a second language), as well as drivers, janitors, gardeners and other support staff. During the two-year start-up period, Dr. Cousins was responsible for the infrastructure for the Peace Corps office, while NEF provided volunteer placement, transportation, reimbursement, liaison with Iranian government officers and other responsibilities.

Iran 1 Arrives

The first volunteers arrived on September 6, 1962, just a few days after an earthquake in northwest Qazvin Province registered seven on the Richter Scale, with deaths reported at 20,000. After orientation, the volunteers went to many parts of Iran to work in

agriculture, physical education and English teaching. These adventuresome young people – 6 women and 37 men – paved the way for all volunteers who followed in their footsteps and often to their cities, towns and villages – names unfamiliar to so many back then -- Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfahan, Ahwaz, Kerman, Rasht, Qazvin, Karaj, Kermanshah, Mollasani, Sari, Rezaiyeh, Borujerd, Mamazan, Bushehr.

In the November 1964 issue of *Peace Corps Volunteer*, Field Officer Jay Crook wrote, “As was the case in most other first projects, there was hard experience to be gained – both by staff and volunteers.... [but] Iran 1 volunteers departed amid a torrent of Iranian farewells, presents, and tears.” Five decades after they first went to Iran, Iran 1 volunteers, staff and their families remain in touch, thanks to **Jack Huxtable** (Rezaiyeh) who keeps their contact information up to date. Over the years, they have held reunions, including the most recent one in 2012.

Iran 1 and the Era of the Sixties

When the Peace Corps went to Iran in 1962, the turmoil of the Sixties in the U.S. – civil rights, war, social unrest – had already begun. The Peace Corps was not immune from the controversies of change, and many volunteers have stories to tell of how the Sixties affected their lives. **Barbara** and **Herb Tobias** (Tehran, Kermanshah), met in Utah during Iran 1 training, and continued their relationship in Iran. When they inquired about the possibility of working in Iran as a married couple, things became complicated. They were an interracial couple in an era of racial segregation, and not all approved of their relationship. A decision was made in Washington to reassign them to a Peace Corps program accepting married couples. Before leaving for a new assignment in Afghanistan, they married in Washington, D.C. Barbara recalls, “We never married to prove a political point. We met. We were intrigued by each other. We followed our feelings at the time. I never married him because he was black, and he never married me because I was white.... I recognize in hindsight that our willingness to follow our own muse... did in a small way contribute to the social changes that ensued....”

We were all changed by our Peace Corps service, by following our “muse.” In 1963, Iran 1’s **Robert Burkhardt** (Rasht) wrote “Perhaps 20 years from now we’ll look back and realize to some extent the real value of living in a foreign culture, of being exposed to a completely different way of life. When the revelation comes, as I feel it will, things will fall into place and we will know the decision to spend these years in this way was the right one. I realize that this view may seem optimistic, but I wouldn’t be in the Peace Corps if I were a pessimist.” And as Barbara and Herb’s experiences remind us, we didn’t always recognize how we and the world were changing. While our experiences in another land, another culture, broadened our outlooks and connected us intimately to the peoples of that distant land, so too did they connect us in a special way to those with whom we served. As Peace Corps Iran Association looks back and reflects on its past, let us continue to tell our stories to each other and all those who will listen.

See Robert’s story and one by Patricia Walsh at <http://tinyurl.com/kvej5ju>.

Peace Corps Iran 1 is the cover story of *Peace Corps Volunteer* at <http://tinyurl.com/lqbxlcf>.