

Marking a Peace Corps anniversary with service

By Tony Ends

What was it like back in Senegal – 40 years after your first volunteer service there?

I woke up the first day, wondering if I was in West Africa or Wisconsin. A rooster crowed. Sheep bleated. Goats cried to be fed or milked. Even my dear wife Dela was beside me.

Was I at Scotch Hill Farm in Brodhead, Wis., or the Hotel Sogui in Senegal's Matam region?

A scorching reflection of early sun hit my eyes. I followed its reflection to towers of a mosque a block away. Yes, I was 61 years old. Yes, I was back where my journey in adult life started at 20, just out of college. I was in Africa; I was in Senegal.

Many things about where I was the first two weeks in September 2015 as a Farmer to Farmer volunteer were the same as I first saw as a Peace Corps volunteer in September 1975. People here are still kind. People here are still generous. People here still thirst to learn practices that will improve their quality of life, help them cope with hardships of life on the edge of a desert as big as the United States.

I didn't realize when I went to Senegal the first time that I'd been preparing for years in college to teach English as a second language in a rural public school. I didn't realize after 20 years of working very hard with my family to establish a self-sufficient farm in Wisconsin, that I was preparing to go back to teach in Africa again.

It was a shock to see the population had more than doubled. It was a shock to see so many more young people in need.

Is West African agriculture the same as you remember it from the 1970s?

I understand farming on the edge of the Sarah Desert better today than I did as a young

man from the central United States. I understand food production and hunger better than I did as a young man on my first teaching venture abroad.

Picture a little boy with a flock of sheep, or a herd of cattle or goats. They are moving across an arid plane of scrub trees. Nowhere in sight, in any direction, is there a structure or dwelling of any kind. The ground is mostly clay and sand. The green on the ground is spare, only around occasional muddy pools, even in this rainy season. It must be 100 degrees. The heat is relentless.

Where is that boy going? How is he making it out here alone? How can those animals survive?

And this isn't one child, really. This isn't one strange or unusual scene. It's not, something at all abnormal. The picture is repeated over and over on any trip I made from where I was based with my wife Dela in eastern Senegal earlier this month.

Livestock agriculture is surviving here in Senegal today. It's surviving despite the debilitating impact of more than 100 years of colonial rule. Those European powers forced cash production of single crops on this region along the Senegal River. They cut down a native forest. They upset the pastoral balance. And more and more, as long as they were here, they leached out, wore out the thin soils with chemical fertilizers.

Even more than 50 years now since nations in Africa like Senegal won independence, they can't easily undo what was done to their land. Just 2 successive years of planting peanuts robbed Senegal's soil of almost one third its organic matter.

Organic matter is what feeds soil life. Soil life returns the nutrients that crops take from the soil. Cash cropping pea-



Dela Ends teaching plant families with seeds.

Courtesy photo

nuts, cotton, corn – have been bankrupting soil in Senegal for more than 100 years.

Yet a herding Toucouleur culture in eastern Senegal – thousands years older than European descendants in the United States keeps surviving miraculously, tenaciously. And desire

to grow vegetables, rice, food crops – without chemicals, by natural practices – is profound.

How did the volunteer work with Dela – teaching organic vegetable crop production and solar food drying – succeed during your recent trip?

We visited some amazing

cooperative gardens of perhaps 5 acres or more in size, being tended and dike irrigated along the Senegal River. We visited some very successful compost making and beautiful personal village gardens, too.

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Dela and Tony Ends share joy with Senegalese carpenters, after finishing a solar food dryer, made from recycled wood, aluminum cans painted black and all local materials in the Matam region, September 2015.

Courtesy photo