

Letter From Kabul, Afghanistan, 1959

While going through correspondence of Elsie Andersen, a long-time Colebrook resident who died in 1979, and whose home she left to me, I uncovered an interesting letter that she had received the first week of January, 1959 from a Mr. Henry Ray, that is quite interesting, given the daily reports that are coming from that Asian state. Afghanistan never seems to change, at least from a western perspective, as the British, Russians and Americans have attempted to establish a military and political presence there with notoriously poor results. I wrote an article entitled “The Middle East, Then and Now”, which outlined the British efforts of the 1840s and compared it with the present situation in exactly the same piece of real estate, which some of the readers may recall. This 1959 letter, written by an educator and former colleague of Miss Andersen’s, was sent by diplomatic pouch from the American Embassy in Kabul to the U.S. State Department in Washington, from whence it was delivered to Miss Andersen. At the time this letter was written, Henry Ray was on a mission for the State Department that took him through Europe, Southern Asia and the Far East.

The first paragraph deals with personal recollections between the two, followed by the main text:

“We must have lunch in N.Y. after I return. My career here has been a really terrific experience - especially the dysentery I contracted early in July – and the flu that took me by storm on the afternoon of Dec. 23rd. I spent most of Christmas quietly in bed reading ‘The Young Lions’ – a very sexy book for an old man like me way over this-a-way. Feeling so much recovered, I’m attending an American movie at the Embassy library tonight – what rollicking good fun! We did have a walloping gay party night before last, I played piano, and I got thoroughly chilled and had a relapse, but it ‘was worth it’, as they say in that soft-spoken Southern way!

This is truly the land of camels, donkeys, dogs and veiled women – (a curse if ever one was invented!) – these are a white race, and the few I’ve seen unveiled are quite ‘un’.

I’ve been through the Khyber Pass and most of the Middle and Southern ‘East’, and have plans for the Far East on my homeward journey. Never in my wildest dreams, when we were working together a few years ago, could I have imagined being sent on a journey like this. My work is simple – to develop materials for education at all levels, and I’m on my own to come and go and plan my work as I please; highly flexible, I’ve been pretty well over Southern Asia studying materials and schools – even got to visit a fantastic ghost city about 450 miles south of here where Alexander the Great once held out; several square miles of city, hundreds of years old, but they had running water and bath tubs and other conveniences. It must have been a fantastic city in its heyday. I’ve been through the Khyber Pass twice, and expect to go again in a couple of weeks to pick up a Volkswagen in Peshawar, Pakistan that has been shipped to me from Germany. There are no railways in Afghanistan, and most of the highways are only a camel trail or a creek bed. The Russians have paved a lot of streets in Kabul. Kabul is quite an extensive city – several miles from one end to the other; it follows a river, hence the need for a car.

The schools would give you the chills – I mean it both literally and figuratively; unheated buildings, they sit outside in the sun in cool weather, and with mud floors – no maintenance and lacking about everything we associate with a school: sanitary facilities, lights, blackboards, bulletin boards, decent furniture, maps, globes, charts and even books, it's a pretty meager situation and I'm here to try to do something about it. With the resources available, it doesn't offer any spectacular possibilities. I have gained much personally from living so closely to a culture so different from our own, but I feel I am benefitting the people here far less than I am enriching my own experiences and knowledge.

My journey across Europe was most interesting; to finally live in London, Brussels, Paris and Rome for a few days each was most rewarding; my homeward journey will focus particularly on Bangkok, Hong Kong and Tokyo, with stops in India and perhaps Manila.

I do get the New York Sunday Times, which helps me to keep in touch with the world. The issue of October 19 reached me yesterday [Dec. 29, 1958]. I enjoy it as much as if it were fresh off the press! I eat very little native food; that long bout with dysentery has made me most skeptical of both food and water. I buy canned goods in the American commissary. It is a wonderful experience and I'm really very grateful for this opportunity. Haven't told you more than a 'smidgeon'; it's hard to write about.

Very happy indeed to hear from my favorite TC Team research member; hope you do find time to write before I return (Nov. 25, 1959, leave here). Thanks again for the news clippings – have fun – love and a kiss, Hank.”

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg

