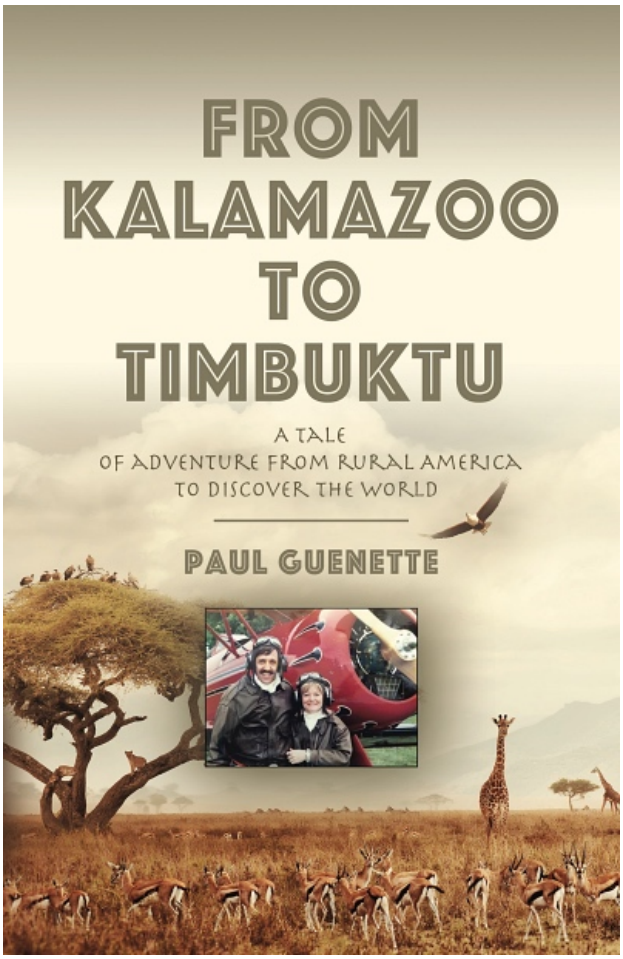


A boy waves at passing cars on a rural road and dreams of the world. He moves to Africa among the world's poorest people who teach him generosity. He finds love and discovers a career, visiting 90 countries to make the world a better place.

From Kalamazoo to Timbuktu:

A tale of adventure from rural America to discover the world

By Paul Guenette

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11928.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood or online bookstore.

FROM KALAMAZOO TO TIMBUKTU

A TALE
OF ADVENTURE FROM RURAL AMERICA
TO DISCOVER THE WORLD

PAUL GUENETTE

Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-696-7
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-697-4

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2021

Contents

The Ore Freighter and the Mental Hospital

"Oh the places you'll go."
– Dr. Seuss

Summer jobs back in 1970's were standard money-earning opportunities for college students. I spent a high school summer working on the tourist-draw Mackinac (Pronounced "Mack-i-naw") Island as a busboy/dishwasher at a low-budget restaurant. It was my first working summer at the age of 16, and my parents bought me a Greyhound bus ticket for the 3-hour drive. But it was the wrong ticket. I talked my way onto the correct bus with the wrong ticket and arrived about 3 am, spending the rest of the night sitting on my suitcase near the bus stop until the Island ferries began running at dawn.

That first working summer, I had an Oliver Twist boarding house experience sleeping with three other boys on two bunkbeds in a room with a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, a small window showed the alley. The second-story collection of five rooms, had 20 boys sharing one bathroom at the end of the hall. I recall that while sitting on the single toilet, you could look through a hole in the floor onto a table in the greasy spoon restaurant below. It's a view that you don't easily forget.

For after-hours fun, we drank alcohol and explored, sometimes sneaking into the swimming pool at the Grand Hotel late at night. While exploring the wealthy mansion and estate section of the island on a night stroll, I swear that I heard Donovan playing guitar on a balcony and rehearsing his hit-to-be "Season of the Witch." At the beach that summer, I joined, and for a short while I led, the *National Stone Skipping and Kerplunking Contest*.

After my Freshman year at college, my buddy Steve and I went back to the island looking to earn some money. Since now I was an "experienced" busboy, I landed the busboy position at a ritzy

restaurant, and Steve got a job there as a dishwasher. We both got free housing in the staff house, guys in the basement, girls upstairs. Excellent living conditions and good people. No Oliver Twist tale here. I was moving up!

Evenings were relaxed after most tourists (referred to as “Fudgies”) had left the island. A typical evening was spent on the beach around a campfire, drinking beer and looking out at the lights of the great Mackinac Bridge (Yes, pronounced “Mack-i-naw”). When we saw headlights approaching, it meant that the police were coming – they and the fire department were the only motorized vehicles on the island. So, we’d walk the beer crate a few steps into the water and sit back down by the fire to greet the cops. No arrests were made.

I turned 18 while working there that summer as the Viet Nam war raged and I was anxious to learn my draft lottery number. The draw results were supposedly out and one of our cooks was also trying to learn his possible life-changing status. I politely asked a gentleman in the restaurant with his newspaper to help us out. He asked me for our birthdays. Then he told me that the chef was lottery #4. And that I was #12. These low numbers meant that we would be drafted the following January! I was fortunate, however, to be allowed by the Selective Service to retain my college deferment to continue my education. Those a year younger were not so fortunate, were to be drafted out of college. War sucks.

One of my housemates had a ship reference book to look up the different ore boats travelling the Mackinac Straits as they passed by in the channel. You could look them up by chimney patterns, names, etc. When Steve acquired a 2-man inflatable life raft, he and I decided to take his girlfriend, Kay, on a paddling voyage across the channel from the house, to a lighthouse on the point opposite us. Everything was going swimmingly until we spotted an ore ship on the horizon.

We thought that it was so far away, and we were so close to the island lighthouse, that we had nothing to worry about. Except the ship was moving faster than we thought. And the shipping deep channel as it turns out is very near the island and lighthouse. Pretty soon they were right over us. We could hear crewmen swearing at us in Canadian French from the bow as the ship suddenly turned – toward the island! Yikes. We reversed course away from the island, paddling furiously, while girlfriend Kay (ballast) in the center of the raft began to splash her hands on both sides of the raft while screaming at us “Paddle, you fuckers!”

We were concerned about being sucked into the ship’s wake, and ultimately concerned about being picked up and arrested by the Coast Guard. After the ship passed, we hurried onto the island and hid ourselves and the raft in the bushes. Kay swore that Steve and I would have to paddle back alone and retrieve her with a helicopter since there was no way she was going to “raft” back with us. We calmed her and when the coast was waaay clear, we “paddled like fuckers” back to our island paradise.

That’s when the ship reference book came into play. Our housemates had watched the drama unfold from the front porch. They informed us that our close-encounter freighter was a 600-foot Canadian iron ore carrier.

I wanted to reach the fabled East Coast of the U.S. and in my sophomore year Kalamazoo College offered a career service opportunity during Spring Quarter. The most exciting job in the catalog responding to my wanderlust was working in a public mental hospital (Please Paul, they are called “residential treatment centers”) in New Jersey administering a behavior modification program on the adolescent ward. I claimed a Psychology major in my application and won the position. So off I went to intern at a residential treatment center in Cedar Grove, New Jersey.

The massive red brick complex operated two adolescent wards of about 20 patients each, one for the behavior problem youth, another for the withdrawn and quiet kids. Like all wards they were always locked. I was assigned to the outburst and unruly ward where I got to know the staff and management team, and our young residents. Only once did I do a double shift to fill in for someone on the quiet ward. The heartbreaking atmosphere there made me appreciate my loud and in-your-face ward.

The hospital was a county facility which outside of the adolescent wards was not pretty. The adult wards that I visited on a rare errand were dark and scary, with a few large attendants monitoring the behavior of a few hundred patents. I happily kept to the well-staffed adolescent wards.

It was a rarefied environment that comfortably led to close relationships among the team. I stayed with my fellow college student counselors in an employee dormitory on hospital grounds where I was quickly introduced to cheap beer in cans. I ate some bad institutional food on ward shifts because it was free. On group excursions to the Big Apple, I saw my first NYC’s transvestites, drank Singapore Slings, and attended Yankee and Mets' ball games. Classic East Coast!

Over a long weekend, I hitchhiked back to visit friends in Kalamazoo. The hitchhike on the return trip back to New Jersey took longer than expected. Trucks with loaded trailers take a long time to make it over the great divide ridge. I hitchhiked directly back to the mental hospital, just in time for my day shift.

Work was challenging. I was once physically attacked by a troubled kid, until the big guys on duty restrained him and locked him in the ward’s padded cell for a shot of Thorazine. His face popped up in the barred window, red and screaming that he was going to kill me when he got out. I was not seriously hurt, but was granted a few days off to rest and be lazy. When I rejoined the

team, Jack was more settled. There was no killing. I decided not to major in Psychology.

Getting a Job from a Stranger's Living Room Floor

"…and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world."
– Mary Oliver

By the time my Peace Corps tour in Dakar finished, I had spent nearly four years in Senegal (early-1975 to late 1978) and learned to speak French well enough that for the rest of my life, the French would think I'm Canadian. And Canadians think I'm French!

As a kid I learned English as if it's the only language in the world. In high school I had studied Latin for two scary years because it was a *Catholic high school*, duh. Then at Kalamazoo College, three units of a foreign language was obligatory, so I studied French. Equally scary. You had to learn each word, one at a time. And then tenses, cases, possessives, etc. Not fun. Foreign study in Aix-en-Provence helped me limp to the required third unit of a foreign language. At that point I was happy to accept my fate as one of those people to whom languages just don't come easily. Life plays tricks. And communicators got to communicate.

I made some life-long friends in the Peace Corps. I added new circles of friends from the representatives of regionally based businesses. As my Peace Corps service came to its end, I realized that there was an industry that could support my continued international life adventure AND impact change on the world's neediest countries.

Almost by default, I headed back to my parents' house in Escanaba, where they were kind enough to let me move back into a spare room off the garage. Bouncing around back in the U.S. had me itching to go back overseas, but I wasn't sure how to make that happen.

I made a trip downstate to visit my buddy, the other Bill, at his folks' house in St. Joe's. We decided to head to his apartment in Kalamazoo for a fun weekend. While there we went out to a party at yet another friend's house…where late at night someone lent me a pillow and blanket to sleep on the stranger's living room floor.

Too early the next morning the phone rang, someone answered it and called out "Is there a Paul Guenette here?"

A prospective employer had called my home in Escanaba, where they were directed to call Bill's parents in St. Joe, Michigan. Bill's parents told them to call Bill's apartment in Kalamazoo, where Bill then instructed them to call the house where I'd spent the night. They were looking for me – and they were getting tired of hunting. They were obviously a lot more awake than I was at this point.

But the call led to an interview at their offices in Washington D.C. where an important consideration was my speaking French. Before I knew it, I had a job as a project administrator on a rural development project in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

The company hired me in January 1979, and I began to receive paychecks every two weeks, but procedural approval delays in Mauritania meant that they weren't yet ready to receive the overseas team. Sweet. I had a new job and with a regular paycheck coming in. I was enjoying my hometown - and I was staying with my folks until I'd be greenlighted to fly back to Africa.

I stocked up on a case of canned soup and another of peanut butter for my sea freight shipment. In March I bought the only new car of my life, a VW Rabbit, shipped it to Nouakchott, Mauritania. And in April I followed it over.

Mauritania is on the Atlantic coast of West Africa just north of Senegal, but it's even more in the Sahara Desert. It is the Islamic

Republic of Mauritania, less formally known then as the land of slaves and clitorectomies.

The street where I lived in Nouakchott was sand. The connecting streets were sand. A short two-lane paved road constituted the downtown main drag. The very fine sand blew into my house at K-112 through window cracks and underneath doors. The beige powder got into your eyes, mouth, nose and ears. A turban, as it turns out, is a really good idea in places like this. There was no functioning traffic light or elevator in the capital city where I lived, or in the entire country for that matter. The city had a few run-down hotels, very few restaurants, and several shady bars catering to foreigners.

The desert itself began just outside of town and stretched eastward for thousands of miles. Visually striking contrasts of deep blue skies, and softly shaded light brown sand dunes impressed us. There were “live” dunes that slowly changed shape and moved, many times onto the single two-lane paved road running due east. The road had several fatal accidents each year – usually at night, when drivers didn’t see the sand drift on the road in time and unexpectedly drove into a finger of solid dune. Or drove into a parked truck with no lights. We were careful to <u>not</u> drive at night.

On the southern side of Nouakchott is a huge area known as the *cinquième arrondissement*, an immense tent city, housing tens of thousands of poor souls. Many relied on a single family member working at a salaried position in the city. *Le cinquième* as we called it, made a National Geographic cover and photo spread as a special world capital that was sprawling, sandy, and sad.

I learned the basics of double-entry bookkeeping and accounting on the job from my boss and mentor, creating hardcopy systems to track expenses, and managing local and foreign currency bank accounts. I somehow managed employment records for the

project's 200 employees working on agriculture development and range management programs.

On several trips to visit the project site, 600 kms to the southeast, we routinely drank hot water from plastic canteens stained brown by Iodine purification tablets, or from a goatskin strapped to the front of the car. Only once did I drink from a mud puddle. I learned to drive a Land Rover 4-wheel drive through loose desert sand, throwing the steering wheel to the left and right. Using sand ladders when necessary.

On one trip to Selibaby, a friend asked me to please take their horse out for a ride; they had bought a stallion but weren't able to visit frequently enough to exercise the horse. I promised to ride it while in Selibaby. I discovered a large black stallion which had been locked in a small stall for waaaay too long. Using local saddle and bridle, I got aboard. As soon as the pen gate was opened, this horse took off at a full gallop leaving the village. He tried to lose me several times, galloping just under low-hanging branches of a thorn tree, or scrapping near a tree trunk without slowing from full gallop. I grabbed two fistfuls of that stallion's mane and hung on for dear life. Eventually the horse tired and I made it back to the village in one piece, but I never tried that again. Ever.

The beach was just outside of town, a short drive away. And it was empty white sand as far as you could see looking north or south. This is where the Sahara Desert meets the Atlantic Ocean. And Mauritanians didn't feel like hanging out in the sun on the beach, so it was pretty much ours to enjoy. When my boss visited the capital, I drove him down to the beach to show off my sand driving skills. And ran out of gas. With the tide coming in. I left him with the car and set off running for gas. By the time I returned with a jerry can of fuel, he had pushed the car several meters up the sand to avoid the incoming tide. I never ran out of gas again. Ever.

My buddy Bill earned the nickname “Roll-em” when the Land Rover that he was driving on the beach slipped off a crusty sand berm and gently turned onto its side on the sand beach. We passengers rolled slowly too, saved the beer cooler, then righted the Rover and successfully executed our “rescue” mission of the Embassy guy stuck somewhere in the beach dunes.

Arriving at the Nouakchott Airport you must complete a form declaring all your foreign currency in detail, so that they can check you on departure to ensure you only converted to their worthless Ouguiya at official banks. This airport was where I was also “studied” by an officer, whose glance at my face alternated with glances reading my passport. He was holding my passport upside down. Then, walking to my plane I noticed a bunch of small light green papers blowing across the runway – airport copies of those currency forms.

A visit to Senegal, the country to the south, was always eventful. One such weekend trip to the big city was as part of the Mauritania-based softball team when we joined the West Africa Invitational Softball Tournament (WAIST), an annual contest that drew players from nearby countries who played recreational softball and drank beer. These were my people.

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Dakar I had played second base for the Senegal WAIST team in Bamako, Mali wearing traditional *chaia* pants that were made from four yards of fabric and when my legs were spread, they provided an insurance net for wayward ground balls. Senegal won that tournament.

The Mauritanian team that visited Dakar for this tournament had two objectives: win an opening game for honor, then lose to free us up for social time in the big city. Our Philippine players arranged a hearty reception for the team at the Philippine Embassy in Dakar. We did get our opening game win, then lost. A good time was had by all.

Love Found Me in the Sahara Desert

"When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."
– Film: When Harry Met Sally

Love found me in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania - at Christmastime. Sure, it was a surprise, a most superlative Sahara Desert surprise. There I was, living the next chapter of my adventure and getting paid to support a rural development project. I had a house with a hot shower, a VW, and a houseboy to keep me rested, clean, mobile, and fed. Nouakchott was an outpost city with not too many expatriates, really on the edge of civilization. The diplomatic and official segments of the foreigners usually were either on their first tour (low rank = last choice) or their final (high post differential payments bolster government retirement allowance). I was a contractor and carried a regular passport.

We made our own fun in this desert outpost, playing on the empty beach, organizing softball on the laterite field outside the city, giving and receiving dinner parties. I learned that the most challenging overseas posts generate the strongest communities.

Bill, my good buddy (and ex-Senegal Peace Corps Volunteer), was living nearby. Together, we made life better for everyone, organizing Christmas parties, Thanksgiving parties, regular parties, pick-up softball games, and party outings to the beach. It was challenging but we weren't suffering. Bill and I became unofficial Peace Corps Volunteer "sponsors" opened our houses to visiting volunteers in from the bush. We offered free beer, food, showers and bedrooms. I came to know all the expats living in Nouakchott – and made many Mauritanian friends.

Since I knew virtually all the Americans, at the Ambassador's Christmas Party poolside at the Embassy, I wondered aloud to Bill "Who's that gorgeous blonde in the red dress?" When he replied

that he didn't know, I pointed out that "she's standing next to Rosemary Jones, and I'm going to find out." Rosemary introduced me to her daughter, Debbie, an action for which I am forever in her debt.

A few days later, when Debbie asked her parents if the "young people" weren't doing something for New Year's. Deb's mom suggested that Paul would know what was happening. Further, since they didn't have a phone, she drove Deb over to my house to ask me.

Phyllis answered the door, and when Deb asked after me, she replied "Sure, I'll get him. He's in the bedroom." Deb couldn't very well drop and run at this point. I came out & quickly introduced Phyllis as a Peace Corps Volunteer guest at my house WITH HER BOYFRIEND, TOPPER.

And yes, I knew what was going on for New Year's Eve. I'd pick Debbie up at 8:00. Our second party of our first date was dancing under the stars on the rooftop of the USAID Director's house sharing a champagne flute from the open champagne bar.

Deb and I had a whirlwind romance. She was only visiting her parents for the Christmas holiday, right? And then she returned to her job at Georgetown University.

My boss had a business trip to Washington DC in January 1980, so I asked him to contact her "to tell her to quit her job and come back." That I'd buy her a ticket. When she asked him if <u>he</u> thought Paul would mind if she came back, he replied "No, I don't think Paul would mind that." So much for getting mushy.

By March, nonetheless, it became clear to this brave woman that she should quit her job at Georgetown University and move back to Nouakchott, ostensibly to visit her parents some more.

In Nouakchott in May we got engaged to be married, in July, in Georgetown University's romantic Dahlgren Chapel. All the full-blown wedding planning telescoped into two months. We didn't argue over anything – there wasn't time! Invitation choice, fine. Band selection, fine. Deb's mom still had the wedding dress that she and her sister had worn when they got married. Done. A set of bridesmaid dresses from a canceled wedding were available at "Woody's" Department Store. Woody's also had a French wedding photographer for us who had once visited Mauritania himself! A caterer and food were chosen. A friend suggested a good band.

We still needed a priest for the wedding. A family friend and wonderful man, Father John, agreed to do the ceremony, and he also fit the requisite pre-Canaan classes into a visit in his office and another over beer at the Tombs in Georgetown. We put lots of "love" themes into our ceremony script, called our friends and family. Georgetown University where Deb had worked, offered Dahlgren Chapel, the best place in the world to get married. The woman's club usually booked 18 months in advance, had finished renovations early and had an open Saturday.

Before the wedding there was one good opportunity for Debbie to meet the collective Guenettes – the family reunion over the 4th of July weekend. We flew into Escanaba and I had jokingly asked for some "fireworks" to greet my bride-to-be but was disappointed to find only my parents to greet us at the airport. Mom explained that everyone was enjoying themselves at the beach.

I had a bit of a long face until halfway to their house, my uncle pulled out in front of us on the highway and cruised at what could only be described as “parade” speed, with his emergency lights flashing. When we turned into my folks’ driveway which wound through the woods a bit, the scene resembled Beirut during the troubles. Smoke and sparks greeted us, my brother and cousin were lighting fireworks on both sides of us, until we pulled into the yard under a “Welcome Debbie” banner stretched over the driveway. My stately grandma was wearing a Press tag on her sunhat. An aunt greeted us with cowboy hats. It was the appropriate Guenette welcome.

The family reunion was held at a rod and gun club. Our extended family reached nearly 200 Guenettes including over a dozen Aunts and Uncles, each of whom seemed to have had five or more children, my cousins. And many cousins were already growing their families. The event was largely a potluck affair and Debbie met very many Guenettes while feasting on an impressive array of Jell-O molds involving canned fruit and swirls of cream. One cousin had a keg of beer in the back of his truck. Another had brought homemade venison sausage.

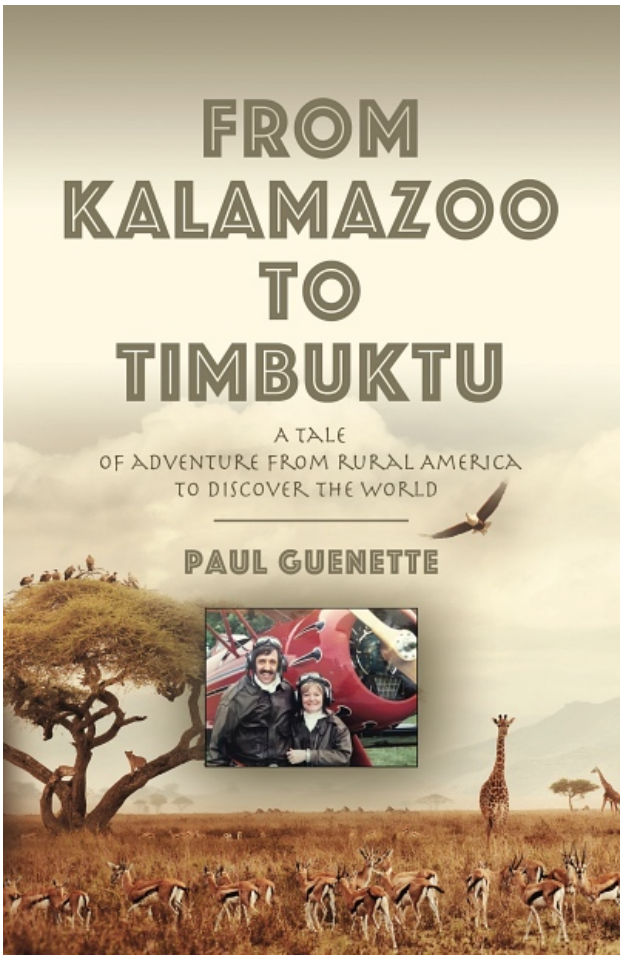
One highlight at <u>all</u> our family reunions was the boys vs. girls tug of war. Daddy brought the 2-inch manila rope from his trunk and lined up the “boys” on one end, the “girls” on the other. Debbie of course joined in despite her spike heels and positioned herself between two of my girl cousins who could have started on the offensive line for the Green Bay Packers. Daddy shouted Go” and the rope stretched taut. Both teams groaned and refused to give ground. Then the rope snapped, right in the middle, and everyone fell backwards laughing. Debbie slightly twisted her ankle in the crash so I carried her over to the clubhouse and set her on the porch where roughly 200 Guenettes paid homage in waves and begged forgiveness, wishing her a quick recovery.

Two of my aunts, Sisters of St. Joseph, travelled to the reunion from their Motherhouse in Kansas. There was an auction to raise funds for their travel cost involving mostly religious statues and framed images of a smiling Jesus, but mostly I recall the great joy we cousins had, “raising” the limp arm of a drunk uncle to bid on items. One of the sisters was celebrating her golden jubilee for 50 years as a nun, a bride of Christ. Fittingly, dessert at the end of the picnic was a large white wedding cake topped by, of course, a nun in full black and white habit.

We got married and never looked back. Our honeymoon was first in Annapolis, MD and then in Dakar, Senegal - where I picked up my VW and drove us north back to Mauritania. Best thing that ever happened to me, meeting and then marrying the love of my life. Neither of us had even a minute of doubt!

Our newlywed status in this tiny expat community in Nouakchott, Mauritania 1980-1983 meant that our constant public displays of affection became a “thing.” Several romances in the expat community happened and led to more marriages in the following couple of years than I’m sure otherwise would have happened in that dusty, hot city by the sea.

In Africa, we learned patience and that where we live is home.



A boy waves at passing cars on a rural road and dreams of the world. He moves to Africa among the world's poorest people who teach him generosity. He finds love and discovers a career, visiting 90 countries to make the world a better place.

From Kalamazoo to Timbuktu:

A tale of adventure from rural America to discover the world

By Paul Guenette

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11928.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood or online bookstore.