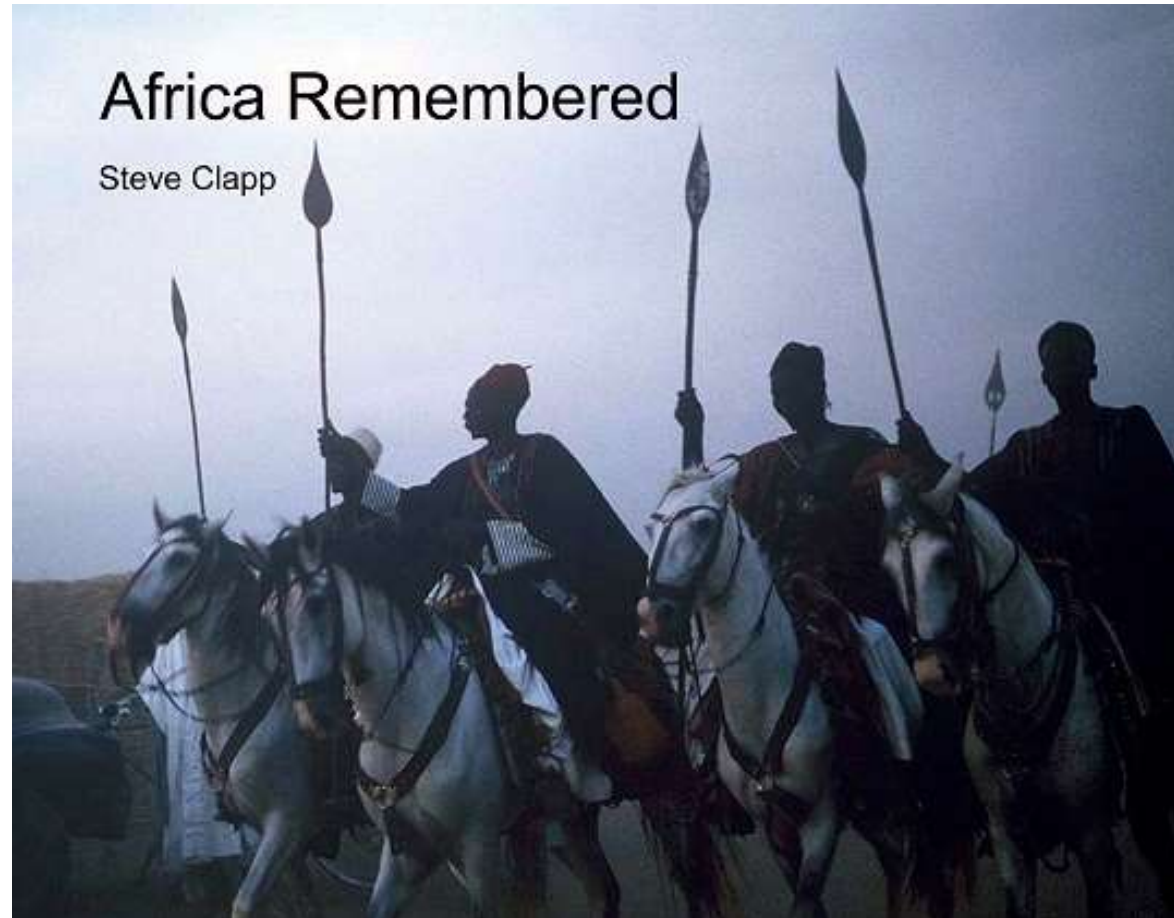


An Accidental Volunteer

by Steve Clapp

I have a lot of Peace Corps stories to tell, and they're in my book, [Africa Remembered](#), which can be accessed on [WikiFON](#) or on my website.



But for today I decided to describe my serendipitous path to Nigeria.

I think of myself as an accidental Peace Corps volunteer. If any of my dreams in college came true, I wouldn't have served in Nigeria. How could this be?

In my senior year, in 1960, most of my classmates were applying to graduate school, medical school or law school. I was admitted to Harvard Law School, and my parents offered to foot the bill. However, I decided I didn't want to go there, at least not right away. I've never regretted that decision. I think I would have hated law school.

What I really wanted to do was see the world. One afternoon a former colleague of mine on the college newspaper showed up in the newsroom in a full dress military uniform, and he sang the praises of U.S. Army Intelligence. I was so impressed I went down to the recruiting station and signed up. After I took the entrance exam, the recruiter said, "You did real well. We might be able to get you into the CIA." The C.I.A.? What's that?

Then I went for the Army physical. As we recruits marched buck naked from station to station, my blood pressure shot through the roof, and they were ready to reject me for that alone. When they found out I had been hospitalized for an emotional breakdown in my junior year, the verdict was, "Thanks but no thanks -- and best of luck in your future endeavors."

I spent the next year working on small-town newspapers in New England and then took a job as a copyboy on the New York Post. It was the lowest rung in big-city journalism, and I was impatient waiting two years for a trial as a reporter.

More than ever, foreign films in art houses fueled my desire to see the world. My minister father suggested I become a missionary. To please him, I made an appointment with the United Church of Christ Board of Missions.

The interviewer offered me several opportunities he said could lead to a career as a “Christian journalist,” whatever that might be. After I turned down all his offers, he said casually, “You might want to look into this new Peace Corps.” Those may have been the magic words.

Obviously, I did apply for the Peace Corps, but my emotional breakdown in college was an obstacle. Unlike the military, the Peace Corps didn't reject me outright, but the recruiter warned that I was a test case. I probably fit the category of "high risk/high gain." During our training at Columbia Teachers College, I was reminded that I was a test case, but I wasn't "selected out," as happened to many others.

I ended up teaching at a boys' boarding school in Yola. By today's standards, my Peace Corps buddies and I did all the wrong things. We lived in faculty housing on the school compound and hired servants to cook and clean. We spent our spare time playing tennis and snooker at the Yola Club, a hangout for former colonial civil servants and other expatriates. I was club treasurer when Nigerians took over leadership; I wrote up that episode for a story published in the Washingtonian magazine, "Black Power Takes Over the Yola Club."

I have no regrets. One of our schoolboys, Atiku Abubakar, became the vice president of Nigeria. With the help of American University in Washington, D.C., he founded the new American University of Nigeria in Yola. I'm proudly wearing my AUN polo shirt today.

I wouldn't trade my Peace Corps experience for the world. It broadened my horizons and gave me a fresh perspective on my own country when I returned. It was the defining experience of my life, as many of us would say. But I would add that sometimes setbacks, rejections and disappointment can be a blessing in disguise.

The Benue in the Dry Season



Loading Lorry



Lorry Sign



Downtown Jimeta



Bar in Jimeta



Salt Seller



Girl with kola nuts



Children dancing



Children pounding flour in mortars



School Inspection



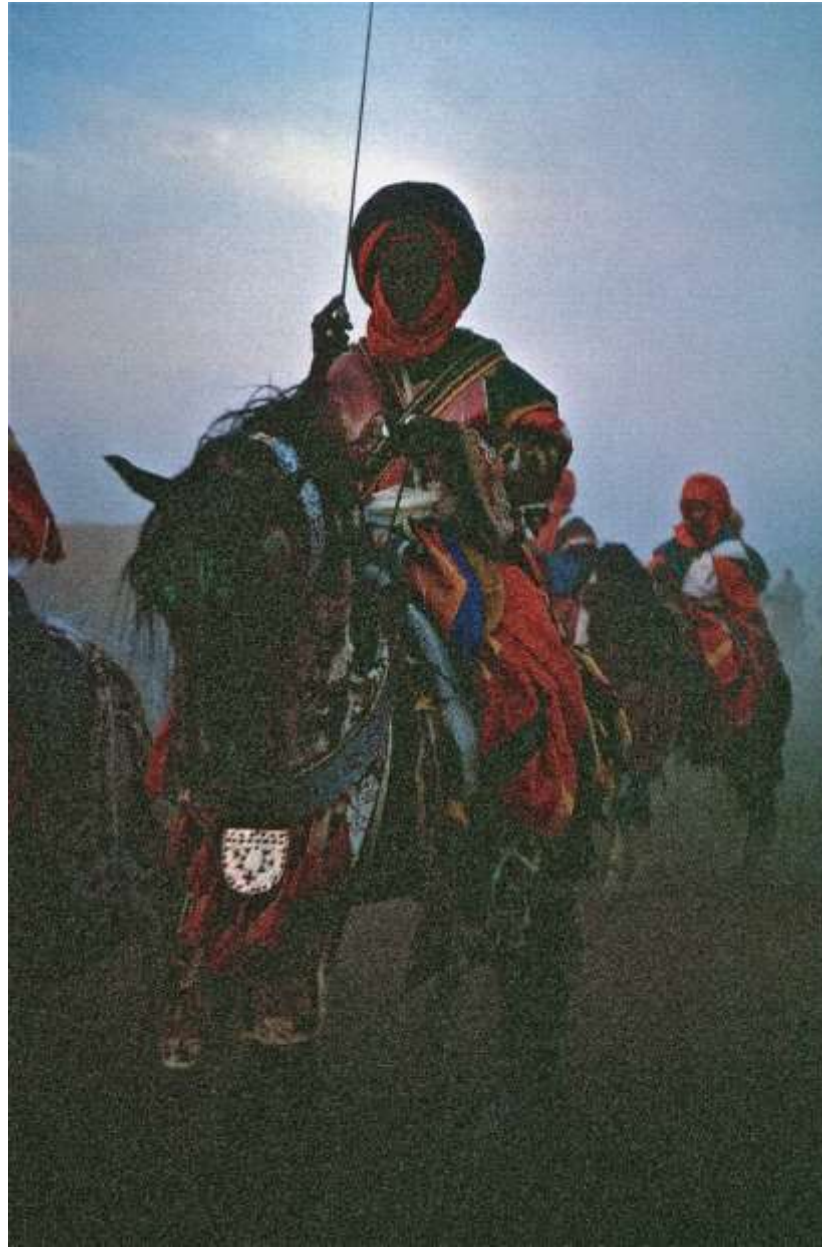
Students at Dusk



Drummer on Horseback



Fulani Horseman



Biu da Sisi



Carriers rest loads



Mai Samari



Christmas Musicians



Trail to Gembu



Cow Fulani Woman



Mandara Hills



Rhumsiki Moonscape



Pagan Market



Rocks and Huts



The Benue during the rainy season

