INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KWC-16

c/o American Institute of
Yemeni Studies
P.O. Box 2658
Sana'a, YAR
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Last Visit to Bayt al Rabu'i;
Powers of the Sheikh

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
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Hanover, N.H. 03755

Dear Peter;

I suspended my weekly visits to Bayt al Rabu'i at the end of January, for reasons narrated in KWC-14. Subsequently, I made three visits to the village -- on March 1 and 16, and again on April 14 -- and stayed overnight in the Mudahar family mafraj (the Yemeni version of a living room) each time.

I did not pick up a great deal of additional material during these visits. I could not improve too much on the description I presented in KWC-13.

But I have plugged a few minor holes. For example, I now know the name of the second daughter in the family -- Randa. She is married to a man named Ahmed. He is the man at the extreme left in the photo on p. 5 of KWC-13. The small boy in the photo, Samir, is the couple's son. The girl I called ''Layla'' on p. 30 of that report is actually Qafla, Ahmed and Randa's daughter. I had wondered why she came over to the Mudahar house so often.

It seems that the family does intend for Yahya, the youngest son, to further his education. Next year, Yahya will attend preparatory school -- the Yemeni version of our junior high -- in Sana'a. He will live with his khali (uncle) Salih. Salih is the father of Hussein, the Yemeni-Ethiopian man who introduced me to his relatives in Bayt al Rabu'i.

I seem to have made some mistakes in naming agricultural implements.

On p. 5 of KWC-13, I refer to a small sickle as a mahshash. Later, when I went over this again with Yahya, he didn't know what I was talking about. He was emphatic about the sickle being called a shari'.

On p. 11, I have a photo of something I call a maharr. No. According to Yahya, that's really a mashaburr. The maharr is a similar device except that it does not have any metal pegs underneath the board.

The following two stories should fill in the rest of the gaps.

1. Last Visit to Bayt al Rabu'i

My last visit to the village began, as did most of the others, at a taxi stop on the northern outskirts of Sana'a. Some 20 taxis can be found parked near the intersection of the Sana'a-Sa'da

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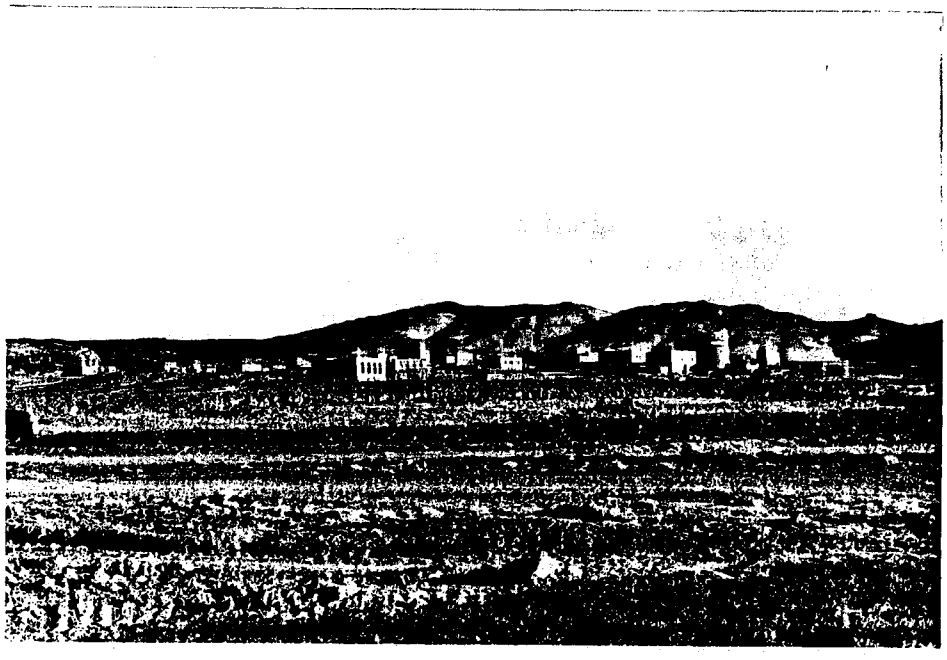


Yemen is noted for its scenic mountain villages overlooking breathtaking vistas. Bayt al Rabu'i is not one of those. Situated along the edge of a plain, the village sits on a slope of rather slight elevation. Although the plain itself is marked by green and yellow patches, representing cultivated fields, the rocky slope and the houses situated on it could be painted using varying shades of gray only.

road and the road leading to the airport.

As soon as you approach the taxis, the drivers call out the names of their destinations -- Amran, Raydah, Sa'da, etc. I tell them ''Raydah'' and am immediately hustled into a Peugeot 504 -- the standard taxi in the Arab world.

Abdullah Mudahar, patriarch of the family, at left; his son Ali in the middle; and a friend of the family.

Sometimes, I have had to wait as long as an hour for the taxi to fill up. The driver usually insists on cramming at least eight persons into the vehicle, sometimes more.

This time, the driver managed to pack 10 people in, including two women, but we were off within 15 minutes. I was successful in securing a window seat and spent the next hour and a half observing the scenery. But having seen this bit of landscape so many times before -- dusty plains and rocky slopes -- my mind wandered along other, distant avenues.

The driver let me off just south of Raydah at the sign announcing the West German al Boun Agricultural Project. A dirt road about 1½ kilometers long leads to the station. I followed the road for a kilometer and then veered to the south. I know the twisting dirt tracks leading to Bayt al Rabu'i by heart now.

It was after 1 p.m. when I began the walk. The sun, the dust, and the dryness of the afternoon quickly affected me. I was much relieved when a young Yemeni man in a white Datsun pickup stopped to give me a lift.

But a price had to be paid. The young man pestered me

Yahya, the Mudahar family's youngest son, at left. In the middle, his mother Hassina. At right, Ali. Hassina is a vigorous woman with a strong personality. She is a powerful force within the family. I often had the impression she could get her way if something was really important to her. To me, she was unfailingly polite and friendly.

with questions about where I was going, who I was going to visit, what my job was, and other things of that sort. He also tried to lure me into a conversation about Amrika and Falestine but, as usual, I just played dumb.

The young man let me off near his house, which was only about a kilometer from Bayt al Rabu'i. I went the rest of the way on foot.

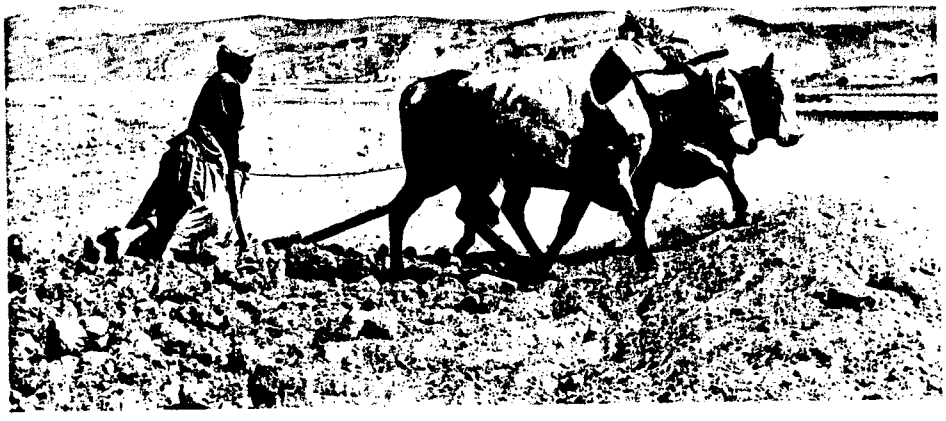
I was feeling rather nervous about seeing the Mudahar family again. It had been a month since my last visit. They would surely have wondered at my absence.

But I was armed with a letter a friend had written for me in Arabic. The letter explained that I had finished my work in Yemen and would be leaving soon for Cairo. I figured once they had read the letter, the confusion would be cleared up.

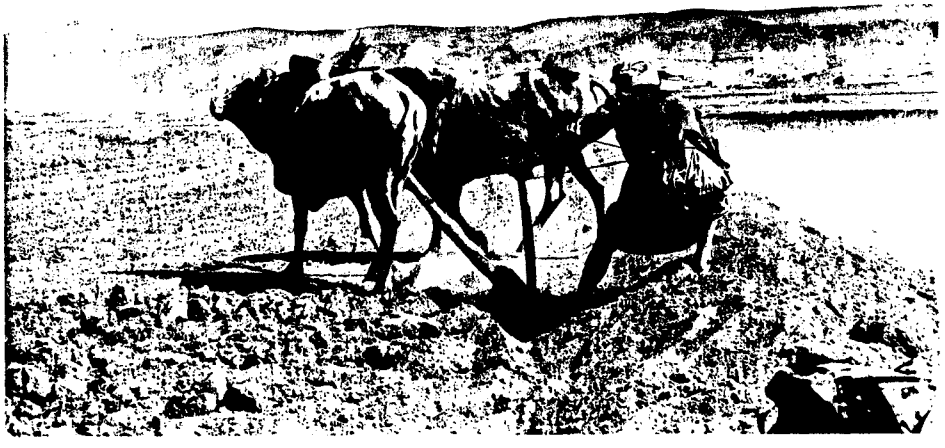
As I approached the village, I noticed the fields were a lot greener than had been the case during my last visit. The first of Yemen's two rainy seasons lasts from April to May. So far, this had amounted to only a few brief showers. But this additional moisture had clearly had an effect in the Qa'al Bawn, the agricultural valley in which Bayt al Rabu'i is located. The ripening wheat and the berseem or animal fodder was looking good.

At the Mudahar family's well pump, I found Abdullah Mudahar, the patriarch of the clan. He greeted me with extraordinary warmth. I had never known him to be so effusive. Generally, he is polite but restrained.

I made some appreciative comments about his nearby



Plowing with oxen is hard work. This friend of the Mudahar family -- the same one pictured on p. 3 -- had to strive mightily to control the powerful animals.



wheat field, he eagerly took me over there for a closer look. Breaking the heads off some of the stalks, he talked about the differences between the various varieties. My Arabic wasn't good enough to follow this in detail, but I do know that he has both high-yield and local wheat in the field.

Then we walked up the hill to his house. Most of the family was there. I was greeted by Mohamed and Ali, two of the family's five sons. They had just returned from a trip in the family's Toyota Land Cruiser truck to the suq, or market, in Amran.

Yahya, the youngest son, greeted me with particular friendliness. I had spent several months teaching him the English alphabet and we had developed a close rapport.

Of the family women, Hassina, the mother, and Amina, one of the two daughters, were present. One notable absentee was Mohamed's wife. She was probably off visiting at her family's house.

I have noticed that Amina and Mohamed's wife often visited back and forth between their husband's family and that of their own parents. They seem to take turns helping Hassina. If Mohamed's wife is not at the Mudahar house, Amina usually is, and vice versa.

Mohamed's wife had given birth to a daughter a couple of months ago. During the advanced stages of her pregnancy, I never saw her at the Mudahar house. I suppose she was staying with her parents. I didn't start seeing her again until after the baby was born. During my last visit, she had been very eager for me to take photos of the baby. I had brought the developed photos with me for this visit.

They had named the child Najwa. This shows the influence television is having in Yemeni villages. ''Najwa'' is a common Egyptian name and appears frequently in Egyptian television dramas -- which provide the highest quality entertainment on North Yemeni television. Before television came to Bayt al Rabu'i, nobody named their daughter ''Najwa.'' Now, many little Najwas are toddling around.

Before lunch, I distributed the color photos I had taken of Najwa.

I also handed out some photos of my own family.

This was a bit of carefully-thought-out strategy on my part. Too bad I hadn't thought it out sooner.

During the six months I had been visiting the Mudahar family, I had taken an extensive array of photos of them. I had given many of the developed pictures back to them.

But it recently occurred to me that this was still a one-sided relationship. I was taking pictures or images from them, but not giving any of my own family in return. What better way to demonstrate my trust in them -- as they had shown their trust in me -- than by giving them photos of my family?

My sister-in-law had a baby about a year ago. I included pictures of her and the baby in those I gave the Mudahars.

I realized that they might me a bit shocked to see photos of an unveiled young woman. But on the other hand, I figured they would be able to accept this difference in cultures. And I knew that the Mudahar women would be much intrigued to see what an American woman and her baby looked like.

This turned out to be the case. Amina spent a long time looking at these photos. She was clearly excited.

Yahya strikes a pose with his 11-year-old friend Mohamed Sa'd. Yahya was carrying the sword in case he encountered a tha'ab -- a small fox that inhabits the Qa'al Bawn. He had seen one the previous afternoon and had run after it, weaponless. This time, he was going to be ready. But alas, no fox this day.

I knew for sure I had done the right thing when Hassina later approached me and gave me photos of Ahmed and Mudahar, her two sons working in Saudi Arabia. I felt it was an important gesture on her part.

Not all my inspirations turn out to be happy ones, though.

It had been my custom over the past few months to bring Yahya Arabic comic books. He was particularly partial to Superman (the American comic translated into Arabic). But I also tried to include comics of a more "educational" nature.

In the United States, we have a comic book house known as Classics Illustrated. As the name suggests, this company produces comic book versions of western classic tales.

A Lebanese publisher translates these comics into

Arabic. The issue I brought Yahya during this visit contained James Fennimore Cooper's The Red Corsair; Around the World in 80 Days by Jules Verne; and a Scottish romance by Sir Walter Scott. I think stories like this teach Yahya a little bit about western history and culture and thus help to broaden his world view.

But it is a sad fact that he usually just glances at this material and goes right back to Superman.

I had also brought Yahya an Arabic translation of Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. I felt sure that a story about pirates and buried treasure would appeal to him. The book contained many dramatic illustrations from the English edition. Surely a book like that would appeal to a boy in any culture.

When I handed the book to him, I made a point of saying hatha muntaz (this is very, very good).

Yahya leafed through it and came to an illustration of a pirate, probably Long John Silver, sitting at a table with a bottle in his hand. Haram, hatha haram (forbidden, this is forbidden) Yahya exclaimed, throwing in something about the nabi (Prophet) for good measure. Handing the book back to me with a somewhat offended air, he went back to reading Superman.

I was crushed. What a stupid blunder. Then came anger at the cramped and intolerant culture that could produce such a reaction. And then practicality stepped in. If Yahya didn't want the book, maybe I could find someone who did.

I told him I hadn't seen the picture and would take the book back with me to Sana'a. He nodded agreement and kept on reading Superman.

Win some; lose some.

After lunch (the usual -- asitt; or wheat porridge; helba, or fenugreek sauce, with bread; boiled chicken; and a special treat straight from the garden, white radishes), Yahya and I had retired to the mafraj. When Abdullah came into the room, I told him I had a risala (letter) for him. Min man (from who)? he asked. Minee (from me), I said.

He left the room and came back with a tray of glasses and a thermos of tea. After pouring me a glass, he asked Yahya to read the letter (Abdullah actually does know the Arabic alphabet and can read simple words).

When Yahya began reading it, Hassina and Amina appeared and listened in.

The letter said I would be flying to Cairo later in the week and it thanked the family for their kind hospitality towards me. I reviewed my efforts to get the village a water tank and expressed the hope that this would arrive within the next few months. Both Abdullah and Hassina uttered a fervent Incha'allah (God willing) at that.

Hassina knelt in front of me, put her hand on my arm, and told me how much they appreciated my efforts in the matter of the water tank. This was kind of embarrassing because actually I had done very little.

Abdullah told me that I must bring my family to visit them someday.

Then Hassina asked me if Mohamed had paid me the miyyatein (200 YR).

A word of explanation. A couple of months ago, I had

accompanied Mohamed, the family's eldest son, to Sana'a to talk to an official of the American-owned TransCentury Corp. about getting the village a water tank. TransCentury builds water projects for the Yemeni Ministry of Public Works.

One of Mohamed's friends dropped us off near the West German Al Boun Agricultural Project sign on the road to Sana'a. There, we planned to flag down a bus or taxi.

We were sitting by the side of the road when Mohamed fumbled through his coat pockets and announced that all his filus (money) was fi'l bayt (at the house). I knew Mohamed would spend the night in Sana'a and would need taxi money to get back home, so I lent him 200 YR (about $40).

I never explicitly told him this was a loan. For one thing, I don't know the Arabic word for "loan." And secondly, it would have been a gross violation of the rules of politeness to make a point of it. Certain things are understood.

Or so I thought. Mohamed never said another word to me about the 200 YR.

The family knew about it though. On at least two occasions during the next month or so, Hassina approached me and inquired in a hushed voice if Mohamed had repaid me the 200 YR. I had to say no. She would look embarrassed and walk away.

Then a couple of months passed with no mention of the money.

I had written it off as a loss, or business expense, if you will. I certainly never volunteered a single remark about it. While in Egypt, I had learned an important lesson, which was: when in the Arab World, never engage in unseemly disputes about money. The culture admires generosity, and despises the lack of it.

Now, here was Hassina bringing the dead issue back to life. Once again, I had to tell her no, he hasn't repaid me. Hassina and Abdullah both looked quite disgusted at that.

The next morning, as I was getting ready to leave the house, Abdullah and Hassina approached me once more. Had Mohamed paid me the 200 YR? I hemmed and hawed, but finally said no.

To my supreme embarrassment and dismay, Abdullah pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket and began peeling off some 50 YR notes. La, la (no, no), I said, ma'alesh (it doesn't matter) and mush mushkila (no problem).

Hassina took the bills from her husband and pressed them firmly into my hand. Ayb (shame), she said, almost hissing with vehemence.

So I took the money. Unquestionably a downer note on which to end the visit.

We had this conversation while standing in the doorway of the house. Mohamed was standing outside in the front yard. He must have heard what was going on. When I walked into the yard, he busied himself with putting a blanket on a donkey and preparing to feed the cow.

A bit of confusion seemed to ensue. From the conversation going on between Abdullah, Hassina, Ali, and Mohamed, I had the impression that Mohamed was going to drive me to Amran. But Mohamed began feeding sorghum stalks wrapped with berseem to the cow. It was Ali who started up the Toyota.

Then a most curious thing happened. Mohamed came up

to me and started talking about the water tank again. He said something about his visiting me in Sana'a the coming Saturday so we could make another trip to TransCentury.

Good lord. I had said in my letter that I would be leaving for Cairo on Friday. Was it possible that his parents had not told him that? So I told him.

Mohamed looked quite surprised. Obviously nobody in the family had said a word to him.

I had noticed this phenomenon before in small matters. Once, I brought some photos to the house. I showed them to everybody except Mohamed, who was not present at the time.

Later, when Mohamed returned home, I happened to mention to him that I had brought some photos. He was surprised. Where were they? I had seen Abdullah place them on one of the shelves running along the top of the mafraj wall so I pointed up there.

Even though Abdullah was in the room at the time, Mohamed did not ask his father where he had put the pictures. Instead, he began rummaging among the shelves looking for them. To no avail. Finally, with obvious reluctance and exasperation, he had to ask Abdullah where they were.

Perhaps it is a cultural misunderstanding on my part. But I have the strong impression that Mohamed, for a variety of reasons, is the odd man out in the Mudahar household.

The episode of the 200 YR simply confirmed what had been obvious to me for quite a while -- something had gone amiss in my relations with Mohamed. When you can't communicate verbally with people, or only in a very limited way, you have to rely on your instincts and feelings. I had long felt something false lay behind Mohamed's surface politeness.

I never felt this with any of the other family members. From Abdullah, Hassina, Ali, and Yahya I felt varying degrees of affection, or at least reserved friendliness.

My last visit to the Mudahar house, in fact, ended pleasantly.

During the evening, the family gathered in the mafraj to watch television. Hassina and Amina brought in some delicious foul (a kind of bean stew) and freshly-baked bread. In this relaxed atmosphere, I felt quite at home. After Abdullah turned off the television at 10 p.m., I slept very soundly in the mafraj with Abdullah, Ali, and Yahya.

The next morning, Ali and Abdullah drove me to Amran where I picked up the taxi to Sana'a. Driving past the family's fields, Abdullah pointed out various things of agricultural interest.

Ali stopped the truck at one point, and Abdullah went into a field to pick some athar (peas). He brought them back to the truck and we munched on them while driving into Amran.

Abdullah got out of the truck to accomplish some errands before we reached the taxi stop. So I said my last ma'a alamma (goodbye) to Ali.

Just before he waved and drove off, he made a writing motion with his hand and said something about a risala (letter).

Aywa (yes), I said, and waved back.

2. The Powers of the Sheikh

Tribalism, as it functions in North Yemen, can be described as a system of social relations where a group of families claims descent from a common ancestor and inhabits a clearly defined group of villages. Tribes jealously guard their own territory and have little interaction with other tribes, although everyone is linked by trading networks.

Tribes remain strong in the northern and eastern parts of the country -- the most remote areas -- but have little influence in the south or in the coastal Tihama. In areas where commercial activities have long been important -- the south traded with the British port of Aden and the Tihama looked upon the world through its ports of Mocha, Loheya, and Hodeidah -- tribalism tends to decline.

In the tribal political system, the sheikh, or tribal leader, commands primary alleigance. This is a big problem for the weak and unstable North Yemeni government.

As often seems to be the case in Arab political systems, the Yemeni sheikh holds a position that theoretically should be filled by democratic means -- an election by male members of the tribe. In practice, the office tends to be inherited by members of one family over several generations. This is true of the position of omda (mayor) in Egyptian villages.

But the Yemeni sheikh has limited powers over his fellow tribesmen. He mediates village disputes, interprets the customary law, and represents his tribesmen in dealings with other groups or political authorities. But he cannot impose punishments or enforce decisions.

If he oversteps his authority, the tribesmen can depose him and elect someone else in his place.

This happened in Bayt al Rabu'i.

Up until two years ago, a man named Ali Mussin was sheikh of Bayt al Rabu'i. He mishandled an important problem and the villagers decided they didn't want him as sheikh anymore.

They assigned the job to one Hussein al Muhan. But Mohamed Mudahar told me that this man has failed to do a good job. He either interferes in conflicts, or isolates himself if he can't reconcile them.

Hussein al Muhan has become a sheikh in name only. When Bayt al Rabu'i residents have a really thorny problem, they turn to Sheikh Salih Mohamed Firas. This man is an important figure in the 'Iyal Surayh tribe, to which Bayt al Rabu'i belongs. He lives in the large village of Theyfan, about six kilometers east of Bayt al Rabu'i.

My general impression is that tribal alleigances are less important in Bayt al Rabu'i than they once were. Whether this is true of the rest of the Qa'al Bawm as well, I do not know.

I once asked Mohamed, through his English-speaking relative Hussein, whether the sheikhs are still important.

Mohamed claimed that, before the 1962 Revolution, sheikhs had the power to imprison people or send them to a higher court. This contradicts scholars who describe the sheikhs' powers as being more limited. Perhaps Mohamed is exaggerating.

But his description of the present situation in Yemen rings true.

''You can say 'no' to the sheikh, but you can't say 'no' to the government,'' he said. ''

During the civil war, a lot of Bayt al Rabu'i residents favored the imam's (Yemen's traditional ruler overthrown in 1962) cause, Mohamed said. After the war, ''they understood that the republic can do many things for people,'' he said.

Mohamed gave as an example the fact that the village was able to apply to the government for a water tank. Before the Revolution, the government did not interest itself in public services.

This business of the water tank, or khazan, provided me with a glimpse at how a modern Yemeni sheikh maintains his influence.

In November, Mohamed asked me to help the village get a water tank. He knew that the Americans built water projects in Yemen and he wanted me to ask the American embassy to give Bayt al Rabu'i a water tank.

I checked around in Sana'a and found that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-owned TransCentury Corp. would be the people to talk to. At the beginning of January, Mohamed and I traveled to Sana'a from Bayt al Rabu'i and talked with a TransCentury official.

The official, a Yemeni man working for the Americans, told Mohamed he would have to prepare a petition, have all the villagers sign it, and submit it to the Ministry of Public Works.

Within a few weeks, Mohamed had accomplished all of that.

On February 18, Mohamed came to see me in Sana'a. Together, we went to visit the TransCentury official to check on the progress of the water tank petition. We had an unpleasant surprise.

According to the official, someone in the ministry had misplaced the waraqa (petition). Until TransCentury received the waraqa from the ministry, it could not place Bayt al Rabu'i on its list of water projects.

Mohamed became angry and more assertive than usual. He even stood up next to the official's desk to make his point. He seemed to disbelieve the official's story.

After we left the man's office, Mohamed marched down the hall to the Deputy Director's office, but that official was not in.

As we left the building, Mohamed explained to me that he and Sheikh Salih Mohamed Firas had personally delivered the waraqa to TransCentury about the first week in February. That was the first indication I had that the sheikh had become personally involved in this matter.

This explained something that had been puzzling me. I knew that Mohamed had not followed correct procedures in preparing his petition. I had been surprised that the ministry accepted it. Apparently, the sheikh's influence had been at work there.

I talked to Mohamed again on March 1. He said that he and Sheikh Firas had gone to the ministry, collected the precious waraqa, and taken it to TransCentury. So it seems that the ministry actually had misplaced the petition. It is interesting that the waraqa is suddenly ''found'' again when the sheikh turns up.

When I visited Bayt al Rabu'i on March 16, Mohamed

seemed confident the village would get the water tank. When? I asked. Ba'ad shahr (after a month), he replied.

But nothing in Yemen is that simple.

When I visited Bayt al Rabu'i for the last time on April 14, Mohamed said TransCentury's engineer had gone to Amrika (probably an American taking a vacation). He didn't know when he would return to Yemen.

Mashakl, mashakl (problems, problems), I said.

Mohamed agreed heartily with that.

And that's where the water tank business rests. Bayt al Rabu'i is on the list of TransCentury projects. But it's anybody's guess when the tank will actually be built. The TransCentury official told me at one point that the company had a long backlog of projects.

But with an influential sheikh working for them, Mohamed and his fellow villagers should have a better shot at getting their water tank than would otherwise be the case.

A personal note.

I have never formally met Sheikh Firas. But I have seen him from a distance.

One afternoon, Yahya drove me to the West German agricultural project in the family's Toyota Land Cruiser. As is usually the case when he is behind the wheel, Yahya was feeling high-spirited.

He spied another Land Cruiser ahead of us. Gunning his engine, Yahya raced to catch up with it. Coming to a wide, flat area, he made his move, darting around the other vehicle to get ahead of it.

As we passed the other Toyota, Yahya identified the driver as Sheikh Firas. I looked over to see a short, dark-bearded man behind the wheel.

Yahya now had the sheikh at his mercy. Great, billowing clouds of dust wafted back from our wheels to envelope the sheikh in a whitish fog. If the sheikh tried to veer away to avoid it, Yahya manuevered his vehicle in such a way as to direct this smokescreen back at him, chuckling gleefully all the while.

Yahya was having a great time. But I wonder what his father, or brother Mohamed, would have said had they known about his little prank.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Received in Hanover 4/27/84