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West African LandscapesOuagadougou, Haute-Volta
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Travelers in a hurry miss much of the diversity and variety of Africa. When my husband, LeRoy Duvall, and I recently traveled from Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, we decided to take the train. Although a slow trip, it permitted us to get an overview of how the landscape changes from semi-arid savanna to humid lowland rainforest, and some of the social impacts of these changes.

Ouagadougou is located in the middle of the Mossi Plateau, a flat plateau in the north-central region of Upper Volta. It is very densely populated and heavily cultivated. The area is a fairly arid and sparse savanna -- grassland with scattered trees and shrubs. To the north of Ouagadougou lies the more arid savanna region known as the Sahel. In Arabic, "sahel" means "border": the Sahel is that region which borders on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert.

As the rainfall increases from very minimal levels in the northern Sahelian regions to the southern coastal regions, the vegetation becomes much more lush as one travels south from Ouagadougou -- through progressively more dense savanna, into woodland, and finally the lush and dense vegetation typical of lowland rainforest. Abidjan, located on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea (the Atlantic Ocean), is noticeably more humid than inland Ouagadougou.

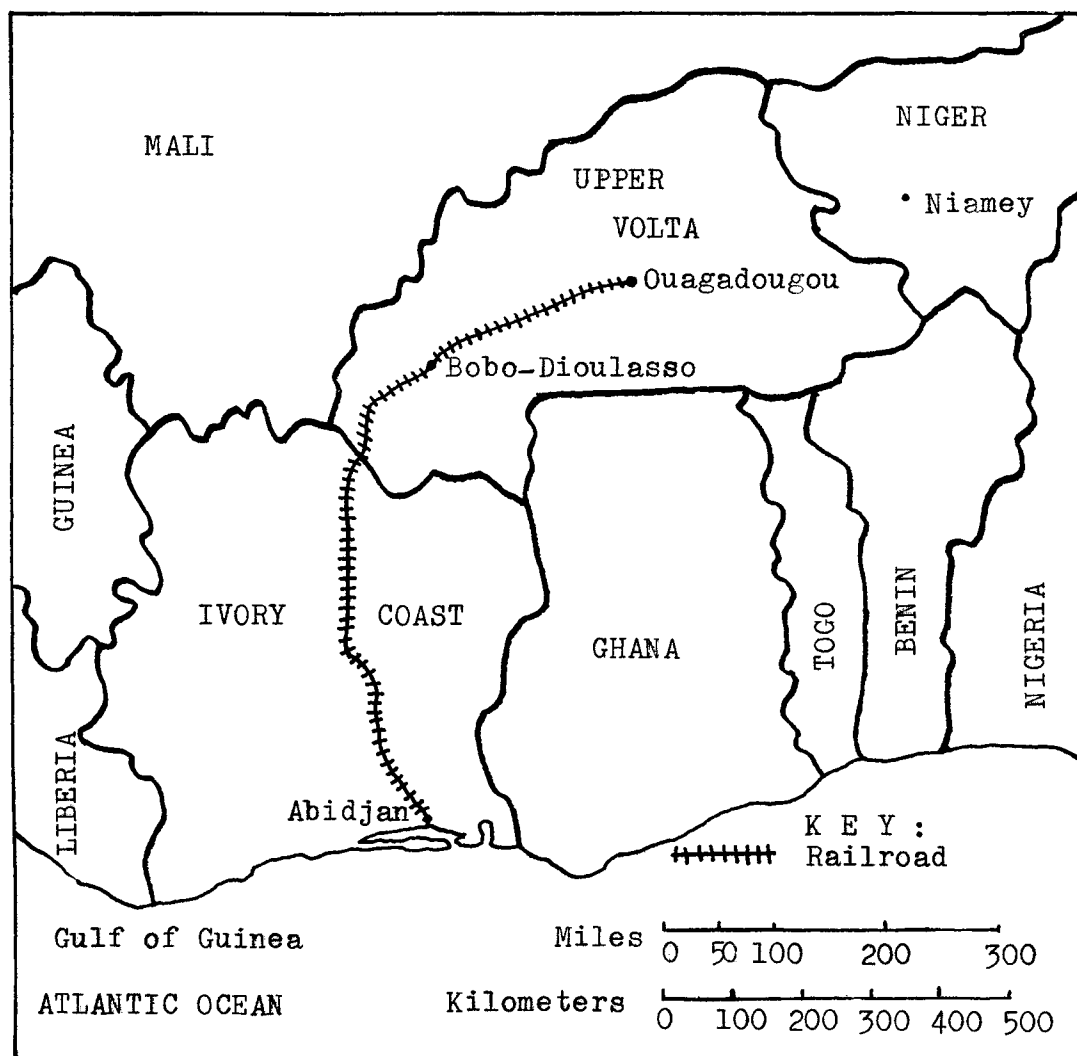
The train that runs from Ouagadougou to Abidjan is operated by the Regie Abidjan-Niger(RAN), a state-owned corporation. Although the railroad has always been called the Abidjan-Niamey railroad, the trains only go as far as Ouagadougou. The line was started in the Ivory Coast at the turn of the century, reached Bobo-Dioulasso, Upper Volta, in 1934, and Ouagadougou in 1954. Work is underway, however, to extend the tracks to Niamey from Ouagadougou.

The train is an important link between Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast. Many Voltaics use the train to get to the Ivory Coast, where they find employment working in coffee, cocoa, and

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

fruit plantations, working in logging camps, or working as laborers or domestic servants. It is estimated that half a million Voltaics -- out of a national population of 6.7 million -- work outside the country. A good proportion of these work in the Ivory Coast. As is true elsewhere in Africa, the migrant workers are primarily young men.

The train also carries imported goods from the port city of Abidjan up to Ouagadougou. Due primarily to transportation costs, many European goods command twice the price in Ouagadougou that they do in Abidjan. Voltaic and Ivorian goods are also transported back and forth, so it is common to find Ivorian pineapples in Ouagadougou and Voltaic handi-crafts in Abidjan.



Map showing the train line from Ouagadougou to Abidjan.

(Map adapted from Bartholomew World Travel Map of Africa, scale 1:10 000 000. Edinburgh, Scotland: John Bartholomew & Son Ltd., n.d.).

There are two trains each day from Ouagadougou to Abidjan. The faster of the two, the Gazelle, was introduced in 1967. Currently it is scheduled to take 22 hours for the 1145-kilometer (711-mile) run, while the slower train, the Express, is scheduled to take 27 hours. The Gazelle is the newer train and is air-conditioned. The Gazelle we took consisted of only four cars, three passenger cars and one dining car. The first-class car had seats which converted to sleeping berths, but the second-class cars had seats only.

We departed Ouagadougou promptly at 5:15 PM on a Monday afternoon. As we pulled out of Ouagadougou, we passed through the industrial section of the city and by the sports stadium. Quickly we were into the countryside. As the rainy season had ended last September, the landscape is already a fairly brown one -- the grass dried and yellow, scattered individual trees with dull green leaves, massive dark trunks of baobab trees without any leaves, clusters of round mud huts with their distinctively pointed thatch roofs. We saw people bicycling or walking down dirt roads, often with loads of firewood, grass, or other materials. Near the tracks many people stopped to watch the train go past. Some, particularly young children, waved as we went by.

The daylight lasted only for an hour or so. In the tropics, night descends rapidly and there are no lingering sunsets. Instead, it seems like someone just pulls out the plug. So viewing the scenery was suspended until the next morning...

The train ride was surprisingly bouncy. I don't know if it was due to the condition of the track, the type of cars, the speed of the train, or being at the back of the train, but our car kept bouncing up and down. It was rather tricky to walk into the next car, the dining car, as the overlapping metal plates which serve as a walkway between the cars were rapidly bouncing up and down, a foot or so apart. Once in the dining car, I was reminded of eating when sailing on a rough sea. I had a difficult time trying to pour beer from a bottle into a glass, as the beer and the glass kept going up and down at different rates. The waiter was more skilled than I, in navigating the food from the serving platter to the plates.

In the middle of the night we reached the border. About 1:30 AM a Voltaic customs officier woke us to fill out a form before leaving the country. Then about 3 AM an Ivorian customs officier came through the car with other customs forms and checked passports. At 3:30 AM a Voltaic customs officier came by, asking if we had anything to declare in our baggage, followed by an Ivorian customs officier asking the same question. I waited for a while to see if anyone else would come by, but finally fell asleep again.



The northern Ivorian savanna.

Around 6:30 AM it grew light again. The northern Ivorian landscape was markedly different from the Mossi Plateau. While still savanna, the vegetation was much more dense, with clumps of trees and shrubs underneath. In some areas, the trees were charred from fire and new shoots of green grass were growing up amidst the burnt grass. There were numerous termite mounds near the tracks, some three or four feet tall.

Deciding I could appreciate the scenery better after a cup of coffee, I maneuvered my way to the dining car. The train was bouncing even more than the night before. As I entered the car, I saw a train conductor sitting at the end table, trying to eat his breakfast. The coffee kept shooting up out of his cup, like the spouting of a volcano, splashing all over the front of his uniform. As he tried to pick up the cup to drink his coffee, it would just start shooting out again. After two or three unsuccessful attempts, he finally got so disgusted that he picked up his tray of coffee and bread and walked to the other end of the dining car. The other end of the car was a bit less rough, so I managed to drink my coffee there without mishap.

From the window I could see tall grey cylinders periodically spaced out among the trees. They looked like huge cigar ashes. At first I wondered if they might be a local equivalent to the totem poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast Indians, but gradually I realized that they were trunks of palm trees, without their leafy green tops. Some seem to have been killed by fire. Later it occurred to me that they might have been oil palms, as the fronds of oil palms are often cut in harvesting the palm nuts.

As the train proceeded southward, the number of palms and papayas increased. Green agricultural fields became more common, occasionally with a simple lean-to of poles and thatch -- probably used as shelter for people working in the fields, during their midday break, or at night, guarding their crops near harvest time from birds and animals.

The Ivorian houses were noticeably larger than the Voltaic homes, with fewer buildings to a household compound. The houses were constructed with rectangular mud walls and flat thatch roofs -- farther south, concrete walls and corrugated metal roofs were typical.

The closer we got to Abidjan, the more paved roads and electric lines we saw. Cars became more numerous, bicycles and motorcycles less. Although there were more trees, the poles for the power lines were, as they are in Upper Volta, metal posts. Similarly, the railroad ties were made of either metal or concrete. Presumably either wood is too valuable to use for these purposes, or else susceptible to termite or other problems.

In the southern part of the Ivory Coast there were numerous banana plantations. Rows and rows of trees were heavily weighed down with bunches of fruit. Many trees were supported by two or three bamboo poles, so they wouldn't fall over from the weight of the fruit. Many of the bunches of fruit were wrapped in clear or blue plastic bags, while still on the tree. In some places cut bunches of bananas were hanging from poles under thatch roofs. Occasionally we passed pineapple plantations under irrigation.

The train passed through a few sections of dense rainforest, with quite tall trees forming a closed canopy, stands of bamboo, hanging vines -- what I would envision as "African jungle". They were small areas, however, surrounded by agricultural lands. My fleeting glimpse of the rainforest didn't reveal any monkeys or other wildlife.

En route, we passed through a number of towns and cities. There were many new or still-being-constructed train stations in some of the smaller Ivorian stops. Whenever the train stopped, local vendors approached to sell their wares to the passengers -- fruit, nuts, baskets, sunglasses, bottles of water, clay pots. The produce sold at the various train stops reflects, in part, what was seasonally and locally available. In the Ivory Coast we saw lots of women selling bananas, pineapples, and orange-red, black-tipped palm nuts. In Upper Volta, mangoes and papayas were more common, and purple-and-white kola nuts and peanuts.

Approaching Abidjan, the density of dwellings near the tracks increased. In one area people were laying out cloths near the tracks to dry. There were groups of twenty to thirty pieces of cloth in similar colors and designs, such as green with repeated white geometric shapes, or blue and purple batiks. Large barrels and small pots nearby, and blue-purple streaked dirt indicated that the fabric was probably being dyed on the spot.

Finally Abidjan itself came into view. In the distance, a large mushroom-shaped watertower. Then gradually, as the train swung around the bend, we could see the high-rise downtown business section known as the Plateau. The train made a brief stop at the Plateau Station, then continued across the bridge spanning the Ebrié Lagoon, and arrived at the end of

the line -- the Treichville station. It was almost 5 PM, close to a full twenty-four hours after we had departed Ouagadougou: our "fast" trip had averaged less than 48 kilometers (30 miles) per hour.

Relieved to be finally done with our bouncing ride, we gathered up our luggage and got off the train. George Jones, a former fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, was waiting there to meet us. I apologized for the train being two hours late. George assured me that he had come to the station well-prepared with reading material.

George had been an Institute fellow in the early 1970s, looking at health care systems in Kenya and Tanzania. Now he is working as a Project Officer, planning development projects for the Regional Economic Development Service Office for West-Central Africa (REDSO/WCA) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S. AID). The REDSO staff work on development projects for the twenty-four countries in this region which have U.S. AID missions. George's wife, Carole, works in the health field and is keeping herself busy these days with consulting work.

George and Carole had invited us down for a visit. They were wonderful hosts, showing us the city, introducing us to some of their friends, and helping us take care of some business matters while we were there for a few days. It was fun getting to know them and hearing their tales of fellowship days.

We also had a chance to become acquainted with the newest member of their family, Wawa. Wawa is a young grey parrot, whom they had acquired three weeks before our arrival. George and Carole are hoping to be able to tame Wawa in the next year or so, and teach her to talk in English and French. So far, Wawa only growls and is busy trying to chew her way out of her large bamboo cage.

Our visit gave us a chance to see how Abidjan is coping with its current electricity shortage. The country gets much of its electrical energy from hydropower. Due to lower-than-normal rainfall last summer, there has been insufficient power since December. To deal with the shortfall, electricity is provided to different sections of the city at different times of the day. When we arrived, there was supposed to be electricity in the residential districts from 6 to 8 AM, and then again from 6 PM until midnight or so. George and Carole explained that sometimes the electricity would remain on longer than scheduled, often less -- and it was quite unpredictable. Towards the end of our stay, the hours were cut back, to only four in the evening, from 6 to 10 PM.

The shortage of electricity is predicted to continue until March, when it is hoped that the rains will arrive and solve the problem. Meanwhile, some of Abidjan's businesses are buying generators to continue to function, while others are folding up. Africa's only ice-skating rink is empty, as there is not electricity to make the ice. Traffic patterns are messed up,

as the traffic signals often do not function: nighttime street lights have not been lit for months. This situation has been crippling for a city of Abidjan's size (around 1 million people). It has also come as quite a shock to those used to the economic prosperity and western amenities of the Ivory Coast.

Abidjan seems to be worlds apart from Ouagadougou, not just a matter of 1145 kilometers. The Ivory Coast is much more economically prosperous than Upper Volta: while the latter has a per capita income of around \$200, one of the lowest in Africa, the former has a per capita income over \$1000, one of the highest on the continent. The downtown business section of Abidjan is marked by paved streets and sidewalks, lots of cars, city buses, and metered orange taxis. In Ouagadougou there are no sidewalks, the roads are covered with dust, most people walk, ride bicycles or motorcycles, as there are few cars and no city buses: the taxis are uniform only insofar as they have taxi signs on top. Although Ouagadougou has a large number of resident expatriates, it is small compared to that evident in Abidjan. Abidjan's sizeable foreign population, in the tens of thousands, is primarily French and Lebanese. Western influences are much more obvious in Abidjan, such as Western dress for women being much more common than it is in Ouagadougou. It was also noticeable how many more women work in businesses, shops, and restaurants in Abidjan: in three-and-a-half months in Upper Volta, I have only seen a few waitresses or women cashiers.

For our return trip to Upper Volta, we had decided to stop for a few days in Bobo-Dioulasso, Upper Volta's second-largest city. We decided to take the slower train, the Express, as it was scheduled to arrive in Bobo-Dioulasso at 8 AM the following morning. (If we had taken the Gazelle, we would have arrived in Bobo-Dioulasso around 1 AM and had to sit in the train station until 5 AM, when the Voltaic curfew ends.) Saturday afternoon we got to the train station around 1:45 PM, half an hour before the train departed. This was a longer train: we were in the first car of ten. This train had no air-conditioning, but fortunately the windows could be opened.

Our ride north was less bouncy than the ride down had been. Due to the slower speed and the open windows, it was also easier to appreciate the scenery and to take photographs. As the train compartments had windows on the left side of the car, we also had a different view heading north -- we got to view the land west of the tracks, whereas heading south, we'd seen the land to the east.

Just north of the Plateau section of Abidjan, there were numerous logs in the harbor, floating in log booms or being loaded on ships, and nearby was a small lumber mill. Timber has been a big export commodity for the Ivory Coast, and along with the coffee, cocoa, and fruit plantations, an important factor in the country's relative prosperity. Currently much of the timber is being cut in the southwestern portion of the country, along the coast near Liberia.



Central Ivory Coast landscape, with corrugated metal roofs visible in the foreground (lower right).

Later in the afternoon, as we passed through the northern-central part of the Ivory Coast, a number of fires were burning in the bush. It was unclear whether the fires had been lit to clear the land for agriculture, to promote growth of grass for livestock, or for some other reason. Some of the fires were burning quite close to the tracks, so a lot of soot and ash floated in the open window and drifted throughout the railroad car.

We arrived at the border at 4:30 AM. This time we were asked to get off the train, so the customs officers could stamp our passports. The train waited at the Voltaic border town of Niangoloko until 8 AM. Then it took off and chugged rapidly up the tracks to Banfora, covering the 45-kilometer distance in an hour, including a couple of brief stops. At Banfora we waited for another hour, while customs officers went through the train and searched luggage. From Banfora to Bobo-Dioulasso it was 85 kilometers and another couple of hours. We arrived around noon, about four hours behind schedule.

I appreciated the delay insofar as it gave us a chance to see the southwestern portion of Upper Volta during the daylight, which we had missed seeing on our way south. It was quite a surprise to see a few agricultural fields under irrigation and some tall fields of sugar cane.

Bobo-Dioulasso is a pleasant city, with broad tree-lined streets. It had been an important center of French colonial administration in West Africa and was the largest city in Upper Volta prior to independence. Due to its past prominence, Bobo-Dioulasso has a number of important research centers, such

as the Center for Economic and Social Studies for West Africa and the Center Muraz for tropical disease research.

Bobo-Dioulasso is a more tranquil city than Ouagadougou, owing to less traffic in the streets. Although there is a large military camp in Bobo-Dioulasso, the military presence throughout the city is less noticeable than that in Ouagadougou. Consequently, people in Bobo are more relaxed about observing the 11 PM curfew than are people in Ouaga: while in Ouaga everyone tends to leave their friends or restaurants around 9 or 9:30 PM, to get home well ahead of curfew, in Bobo people often stay out until 10 or 10:30 PM.

Another major difference between the two cities is the languages spoken. While in Ouagadougou many people speak Mooré, the language of the Mossi, most people in the center of town speak some French. It may not be a lot of French: a lot of the women vegetable sellers, for example, know the French names for the vegetables they sell and can barter the prices, but may not be able to tell you in French where the vegetables come from or who grows them. In Bobo-Dioulasso, in contrast, there seemed to be quite a number of people who could not speak French at all -- only Dioula or Bobo.

A small river runs through the center of Bobo-Dioulasso. For a distance of several blocks alongside the river, there are lush green vegetable gardens, with occasional fruit trees. During the day people come to weed and water their gardens. Women wash their laundry and hang it out over nearby bushes to dry. Older women sometimes sit in the morning sun and tend to other chores, like sorting nuts.

After spending a couple of days in Bobo-Dioulasso, we were finally ready to head home to Ouagadougou. Since we had already spent 46 hours on the train, we weren't keen on another seven-hour ride. A friend suggested a "bush taxi" as a faster alternative -- only a three-and-a-half hour ride.

The bush taxis function as the local equivalent of buses. They don't, however, run on any fixed schedules. When they have enough passengers for one vehicle, it departs.

We had arrived at the station at 8:30 AM, just as a taxi to Ouaga had filled up. We were first in line for the next one. Eyeing the taxi, a Peugeot 504 station wagon, we wondered how many passengers it would take. There were two bucket seats in the front, two large adjoining seats in the middle, and in the back the luggage section had been modified and a bench seat installed. Luggage went into the large roof rack. Our friend who had recommended the bush taxi had said that in Senegal they take five passengers, so we were hopeful.

After an hour we found out how many people can be crammed into a bush taxi. A couple and their three children were assigned the back seat, four adults and one baby got the middle seat, and my husband and I shared the front passenger seat. With the driver, it made for nine adults and four kids.

About a quarter to ten we finally left. The driver tore out of the parking area and drove down the street to a gas station, where he filled the tank. Then he took off, beeping his

horn at people as we wove our way out of town. We stopped on the outskirts of town for a police checkpoint and a customs checkpoint.

Once past these formalities, the driver picked up speed. His speedometer wasn't working, but LeRoy estimated that he was driving 110-120 kilometers (60 miles) an hour. The road was a good asphalt two-lane surface. The driver, however, had to steer his way around the occasional pedestrians, bicyclists, and donkey carts using the same road. He was constantly honking his horn to warn them and to get them to move over to the side of the road. In a few places he had to slow down for cows or goats on the road: in one spot he came to a complete stop while a herd of cattle crossed the road.

Given this speed, we assumed that we might actually make it to Ouaga in three hours. But halfway there, a rear tire blew out. The fifteen-minute stop to change the tires was a welcomed chance to get out and stretch. After we got on our way again, the driver showed a bit more restraint in his speed. We also had five more police stops en route, so it was 1:45 PM when we actually arrived.

The trip gave us a closer view of the Voltaic countryside than we had had from the train, as many of the homes were built quite close to the road. As we first left Bobo-Dioulasso, it was a bit hilly. Heading northeast, the terrain flattened out and the vegetation became sparser. We passed over two branches of the Volta River -- the Black Volta contained olive-green water, while the Red Volta was a dry, dusty riverbed. In several places we saw small reservoirs: in one, three people were sitting on logs -- perhaps trying to fish. There were numerous gardens protected from wandering livestock by fences of woven thatch mats: a variety of crops were being grown, such as lettuce, spinach, carrots, and onions. Some gardens also had a couple of banana or papaya trees. Along the road, between the two cities, were several locations where bundles of firewood had been stacked up, awaiting sale. Some of the wood is sold to passing truck drivers, who then in turn sell it to wood merchants in the cities. We also noticed how the housing styles changed: near Bobo the houses tend to be squarer and their pointed thatch roofs flatter than the Mossi houses.



A cluster of homes southwest of Bobo-Dioulasso, Upper Volta.

When, at last, we arrived in Ouagadougou, we commented on how good it was to be home. After our long ride, we were looking forward to our cold shower. Ouagadougou doesn't have all the creature comforts of Abidjan, but at least it usually has electricity and water.

We got to our apartment, however, and discovered there was no water. Assuming that it was just routine repair work, we waited for the water to be turned on in the late afternoon. Nothing. The next day we found out that the lack of water was related to the major street work being undertaken in our part of town. There had been no water already for five days.

So we bought water from water vendors and hauled it up two flights of stairs. From day to day we noted the progress on the road work -- all manual labor -- and wondered when we would have running water again. Finally today, two weeks later, water pressure has been restored.

When we had seen some of the Voltaic boys we know right after our return, they asked, "How was the trip to Abidjan? Is Abidjan better than Ouaga?" "No," we replied, "just different. Right now Abidjan has electricity problems, while in Ouagadougou we currently have water problems."

Ouagadougou is perhaps the luckier of the two cities, in that the distribution of water is a matter of repairing (and extending) the existing infrastructure, whereas for Abidjan the provision of water is based on a particular infrastructure that has proven to be inadequate. But both Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast, like many of their African neighbors, must still grapple with basic issues -- the provision of water and electricity -- which are fundamental to further development. These issues are ones which Americans have been able to take for granted for many years. How soon these African countries will be able to address these issues -- or how much longer Americans will be able to count on the provision of such amenities -- will be interesting to observe in the years to come.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow

Received in Hanover 3/21/84