

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Greetings from Charikot

To: Readers of Deanna Donovan's newsletters

From: Peter Martin

One of the delights of this past Christmas season was a newsy holiday letter from the Institute's Forest & Man Fellow in Nepal, Deanna Donovan. My wife Lu and I enjoyed it so much, and found that it told us so much about the nonresearch side of a researcher's life in Nepal, that we asked her permission to distribute it as an informal newsletter. She agreed; the result follows:

Charikot  
December 24, 1980

Dear Lu and Peter,

Finally, I have escaped my overflowing and expectant typewriter for a few days holiday in the hills. Two Dutch friends, Joanne and Bert, who are working with the Swiss Integrated Hill Development project in eastern central Nepal, have invited me to celebrate Christmas with them in their mountain home. Cheered by the idea of such a unique Christmas adventure, I have been working doubletime this past week to finish my chores in Kathmandu. With the assistance of my very capable cook, Nirmala, I have prepared a Christmas basket full of special treats, including homemade pate, fruitcake, butter cookies, jam and mustard relish plus dried fruits, nuts and green vegetables to supplement the regular winter hill diet of potatoes, onions and cauliflower. With all these goodies I felt like Santa Claus when I arrived yesterday.

Indeed, I had to rise about as early as Santa Claus to finish the last bit of packing and catch the 7:30 A.M. bus that left from the far side of the valley. Our ride was quite the contrary of an airborne sleigh, however. On this, its inaugural trip, our small bus did an admirable job of dodging stray boulders and fording small streams as it plied the not-yet-completed mountain road. As it has not rained since early October, the dust was terrific; after 5 hours on the road, everyone and everything in the bus was the uniform color of the clay roadbed.

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Ms. Donovan is an Institute Forest and Man Fellow based in Kathmandu, Nepal (P.O. Box 1615). Studying the relationship between social and economic development and forest exploitation, she has focused recently on the use of wood for fuel in Nepal.

We arrived safely and with the help of passersby I found Joanne and Bert's house on the hill overlooking the new bazaar. Though a little surprised at my early arrival, they greeted me warmly and offered me some liquid spirits to revive my own. As I settled with my glass in a comfortable chair on their sunny terrace, their houseboys came down the path with their arms full of flowers, fir boughs and two fat cockerels. It looks as if we have all the ingredients for a very fine Christmas.

My hosts live in a typical Nepali hill house, the interior of which they have modified to suit their needs and preferences. Built in the shape of a rectangle, the house has two-foot-thick walls constructed of local stone (gneiss, I believe), mortared and plastered with mud, which is ultimately white-washed or "painted" with a finer quality of brick red mud. The roof of split shingles is held into place not by scarce iron nails but by large stones strategically placed. The interior of this box-like structure is divided by wooden partitions into three floors of six approximately equal-sized rooms on each floor. The central front column of rooms, however, is given over to an entry hall, stair wells and landings. The interior walls are made of rough-hewn planks and posts of some pale, coniferous timber. The floors, a thick layer of mud over the floor boards, are replastered weekly with a mixture of cow dung, red clay and water. In addition to keeping the dust down this practice gives the floors a lovely sienna coloring.

While Joanne and Bert use the rooms of the first and second floors for their offices, storerooms and guest quarters, the third floor has been converted into a cozy apartment. Decorating with traditional, local materials, such as braided maize-leaf floor mats, matted wool rugs, handwoven hemp and cotton fabrics, plus brass and terracotta utensils, they have created a very attractive and comfortable nest. Lacking electricity, the house is illuminated in the evening by candles and a temperamental kerosene lantern; warmth, too, must come from a kerosene heater. Being rather expensive (the lantern \$30.00 and the heater \$200.00) these conveniences are seldom found in the typical Nepali house.

Most Nepali families in this area would use an open fire or small clay stove for cooking purposes, and often for heat and light as well. In Joanne's kitchen, both kerosene and charcoal are used for cooking. Although there had been a two-hole clay stove in the corner of the kitchen when they moved into the house, Joanne had had it filled in with mud rather than tolerate the soot and smoke which would have permeated the entire apartment. When Joanne learned that I had had some experience building smokeless clay stoves, she began prodding me to build one in her kitchen. As a result of some interest the Swiss aid mission has shown in promoting smokeless stoves, Joanne had in her storeroom the necessary ingredients -- clay stove pipes and scrap metal.

Water supply and sanitation systems are a second feature of modernity that the foreigners have introduced into Charikot. Latrines are now widely promoted by government health officials and black polyvinylchloride pipes are being laid to bring domestic water supplies closer to village consumers. The enterprising foreigners have organized to tap the main line to deliver water directly to their gardens. Lately Bert has been supervising the installation of a solar water heater that will soon provide the household with hot showers, very much appreciated after a long day trekking.

An old fortress town, Charikot is perched on a ridge at an elevation of about 6,500 feet. As far as one can see in any direction, there is no flat place other than what mankind has carved out of the mountain sides. Only a few scattered trees, bamboo thickets, and the gnarled remnants of a religious forest vary the landscape of agricultural terraces and overgrazed hillsides. The once-thick forests have been destroyed, and with constant grazing pressure, the only vegetation that has been successful in establishing itself on the denuded hillsides is the exotic pioneer species of shrub known locally as "banmara," or forest killer. Only sparingly browsed by passing goats, this hearty weed has the sole redeeming feature of being able to colonize particularly harsh sites and thereby has contributed to stabilizing some barren slopes. The King visited here some time ago and, noticing the barren hills, directed that the land be reforested. The token efforts that followed are barely noticeable, certainly not a reversal of the general treeless condition of the area.

The new road being built with Swiss aid into this otherwise remote area will, without a doubt, change the lives of the local people significantly. Already the hub of commercial activity has shifted from the cobblestone streets of the old village to the dusty intersection on the main road. In addition to the several new stores and teashops that have appeared at the crossroads, three inns have sprung up as well. In the absence of a town planning authority, the stabilization of the road shoulders and the construction of adequate drainage systems and footpaths has been ignored as local landlords scramble to construct more shops. As the condition of the new road gradually improves, more and more trucks will find their way to Charikot and increasingly more goods from Kathmandu will find their way into the local market. Although the scanty surplus production of the hill farmers and the newly developed cottage industries will be insufficient to fill the returning trucks, local men and women will gladly pay the 20 rupees each rather than walk to Kathmandu. As parochial as it is, Kathmandu offers sights and sounds that are a world apart from everyday life in most of Nepal. With the possibilities and disappointments so unrelated to the experiences of most hill people, life in Kathmandu is almost unreal. The new road will increase communications as well as the flow of people and merchandise between the small hill village

of Charikot and the outside world. Gradually the physical and cultural differences between life in the capital and in the hinterlands will shrink.

It is quite pleasant sitting here in the winter sun, gazing at the 23,000-(plus)- snow-dusted peaks of the high Himalayas, less than 35 kilometers away, and contemplating how long, if ever, before Nepal becomes the Switzerland of Asia. With the unchaseable chill of the interior of the local mud-stone buildings, everyone moves into the bright (even hot at this altitude) sun as soon as it appears in the clear dawn. Government officials move their tables outside, shopkeepers sit on their doorsteps and businessmen huddle at the edge of the road, all anxious to catch the warming rays of morning. Needs seem so much simpler here.

I, too, look forward to several pleasant hours here on the terrace, basking in the sun in my annual attempt to catch up on my correspondence. As mail service has been very poor of late, I am afraid I have very little news to pass on. Your friends, Pat and Larry Radway (Larry Radway is a professor of government at Dartmouth College--PBM), radiant with energy and enthusiasm, bounced through town last week. After treating me to a delicious lunch, we all went sightseeing in the luxury of an embassy car. They brought glowing reports of Bill Knowland and his betrothed, Amy, whom they had met recently in Kuala Lumpur. Bill writes that the marriage feast will take place on January 24.

I imagine that this holiday season finds you snugly settled before a blazing fire, sipping hot toddies and dreaming of daffodils and sugar peas as the blizzard rages outside. I hope you have a very happy holiday season and enjoy an exciting and prosperous new year.

With sincerest best wishes,

/s/ Deanna

Deanna Donovan