

East meets West

Peace Corps experience in Orient inspires couple

BY ARLENE VANDERLEUN

Jim Alger and his bride Ellen find life in the Orient a tasty cup of tea.

The newly-wed Algeres are fresh from a stint with the Peace Corps in Korea and have squeezed in a few weeks visiting Jim's parents (the William Alger) in Westland before taking off for training that will send them back to the Far East.

Their dream is to apply experience and knowledge of Oriental culture during "the best two years of our lives" to work at an agency that aids underdeveloped nations.

To some persons, their life may seem like a segment from a George Perrot travel show as the couple have become accustomed to new sights, sounds and smells. But adventure aside, Jim and Ellen value most highly the cross-cultural exchange of Eastern and Western customs.

For Ellen, 24, the shift hasn't been quite so radical. Fresh-scrubbed, blue-eyed Ellen was born and raised in Japan by parents employed in missionary work with United Church of Christ. After graduating from McAlester College in Minnesota (her family halls from there), Ellen joined the Peace Corps.

THAT'S WHERE bearded, curly-haired Jim came into her life.

After graduating from Livonia Franklin High in 1968, Jim, formerly a Westland resident, went on to Eastern Michigan University and a bachelor's

degree in psychology.

"That prepared me for absolutely nothing (in terms of employment)," said Jim, now 28. So Jim took electrical training, spent some time in Arizona and entered the Peace Corps in June 1976 after two previous, unsuccessful attempts.

"I had always wanted to join the Peace Corps, but (before) I didn't have a college degree or a skill," said Jim. Guidelines are tightened or relaxed, depending on the philosophy of the Peace Corps director, he added.

Jim met Ellen while attending Peace Corps training sessions in San Francisco. They continued to keep in touch after taking assignments miles away from each other in Korea — Jim as a technical manual translator and Ellen as an English teacher.

"The first thing that hits you is the smell of open air markets where Koreans go every day" to buy fresh vegetables, rice and other food staples, said Jim.

That custom is necessary in a country where refrigeration isn't widespread, added Jim. Jim plunged into several weeks of training, where he learned Korean language and customs. He lived with a family composed of a grandmother who was "tiny and so kind," her grandsons and a maid.

INTENSIVE LANGUAGE training took up four hours a day. While the Peace Corps volunteers learned a few survival phrases, more in-depth in-

struction was taught by the "silent" method which places most of the responsibility on the student.

Under this system, the teacher gives a word of phrase, then students repeat it. Color charts and visual aids provide backup.

If a student says the wrong phrase, the teacher gives a non-verbal response such as a shake of the head. The student is in the position of developing the ability to fend for himself in learning the Korean alphabet, which also uses some Chinese characters.

It was essential for Jim to become fluent, because his job was translating technical and mechanical manuals from English to Korean. The manuals accompanied goods bought from American firms.

Korean cuisine and customs offered other challenges for Jim.

For example, Korean diet staples are rice, soup and vegetables, with pork, fish and an occasional serving of beef. Meat was served a couple of times a month.

"The national dish is Kimchi, which is Chinese cabbage and hot red pepper," said Jim.

Other Korean foodstuffs were more unusual.

For instance, it was customary in the rural community where Jim was living for Korean men to eat dogs — barbecued or in soup — during the hottest

days of August. That custom was to "improve their virility," said Jim.

FOR THAT same reason, men also ate ginseng root, otter penis (very expensive) and snake whiskey. Snake whiskey is snake meat fermented in alcohol for about six months.

"It's very strong, very rancid — it works. Just ask Ellen," said Jim, with a laugh. Korean men drank a rice wine called Makkali on social occasions.

Jim said he ate and drank the same food as his Korean hosts. "I wanted to develop rapport (with them)," he said.

Indoor activities took place near the floor because heat fueled by coal was piped through tubes under the floor.

People sleep on thick floor pads and bundle up with several blankets, including the intricately designed ibol covering. Because of this heating system, Korean schools are closed during the coldest winter months.

"You can't be judgmental about different cultures," said Jim. "You should try to understand them. You don't have to incorporate them."

"Not unless you want to," said Ellen. While Jim was absorbing the local customs, he still found time to visit Ellen, who was nine hours away by bus. Ellen, too, was adjusting to her life as an English teacher.

She grappled with the conflict of an

Oriental society dominated by males. It was a lifestyle where authority flowed from father down through the sons.

IT WAS a well-defined, hierarchical society where everyone knew his or her place.

"Conflicts arise when you try to do things a different way," said Ellen. "Korean men don't take suggestions from a woman."

Korean women don't hold property in their own name, added Ellen. And if there is a divorce, a woman is stricken from the family.

But if there were differences, there also was great satisfaction in bringing together Western and Eastern customs.

"You learn to compromise your position," said Jim. "I can look at things and try to understand."

For instance, Jim is pleased about bringing the American Special Olympics (sports competition for mentally and physically impaired) to Korea, where "handicapped are looked upon as a social burden."

One outgrowth of that has been the establishment of some special training programs for handicapped.

Four months ago, with their Peace Corps stint finished, Jim and Ellen embarked on a new adventure.

Following their marriage in Japan, they traveled to India, Hong Kong and nearby Macao, Bangladesh and Thailand. It was there that Jim swam in the Mekong River almost to the shores of Vietnam.

Along the way, they met with other former Peace Corps volunteer friends and did a lot of shopping.

"WE ALWAYS go to the American embassy and register," said Ellen. "You become their responsibility. Basically, we keep our nose clean and don't get involved in politics."

The newweds brought to America artifacts from their travels. There were lacquered chests inlaid with mother of pearl. There were wooden bowls, chopsticks and Chinese fans. There were tea sets and hand-carved wooden animal pieces.

The future seems bright for Jim and Ellen, as they plan the next six months of training at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt. There, they'll study "global issues," community work and analyze grants funding.

Then, hopefully, the two will take jobs with an overseas relief agency such as CARE. And they will remember life as Peace Corps volunteers.

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