

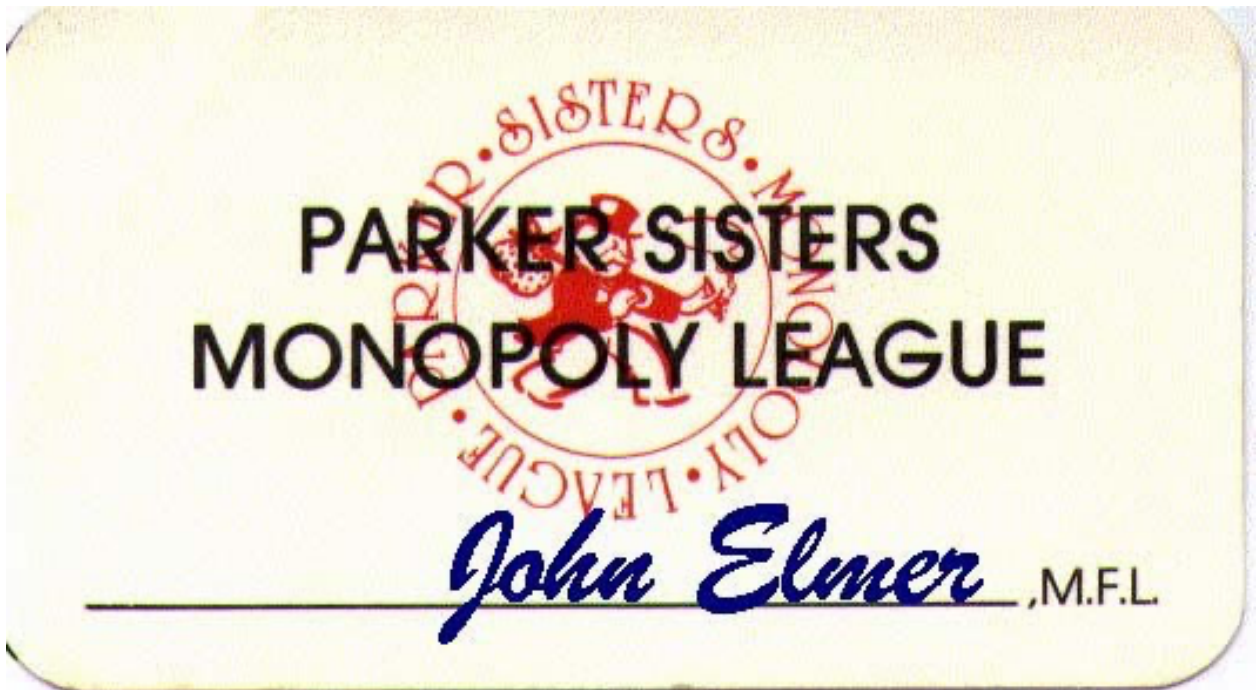
Memories of John Elmer

Contributions in John's memory may be made to St. Vincent's Share Program, Children International, 2000 E. Red Bridge Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64131.

St. Vincent's is a local day-care for underprivileged children financially supported by Children International.

Please use the comment feature to include your memories of John or send thoughts or photos to Paul Locke for inclusion on this page.

[Pictures of John can be found here.](#)



John Elmer - Member For Life

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22 Responses

1.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:02 am](#) said:

BON TRAVAIL

by John Elmer

from *choses*, Thanks to Marek Przewdzieck

I admit it. I was born to travel. Maybe my mom and dad conceived me in the back seat of their roadster during the Fall of '46, must have been September. Anyway, for whatever reason, I am usually happiest when I am moving.

A good friend's 19 year old son called me a few weeks ago, said he had the itch to get out and see the country, and asked if I had any suggestions on how best to do it. We talked and I gave him an idea or two. We both mentioned hitch-hiking, he knows I have some experience in that arena too, but I lamented the fact that in 1994, in this country, there is no way I can recommend to someone else's kid that he throw a backpack and sleeping bag on his back and get his thumb wet, so to speak. My own son, absolutely, I think I still would recommend such an experience, but not somebody else's kid. Too bad, too.

Now it seems like riding interstate buses has almost as bad a reputation. That's a shame also. The memory of my first few stopovers in New York City's Port Authority Terminal are a little fuzzy but it do recall that it was a wee-bit intimidating. A fast way to learn about people, though, all sorts of people. It still is. As recently as two years ago, I took an extended Greyhound trip from KC to Washington, Philly, NYC, Boston, Ithaca and back, and, for the most part, enjoyed it. There's certainly no denying, however, that Greyhound, being the corporate takeover giant that they are, have hurt themselves by pricing themselves right out of the market. Give me a choice between a bus and a plane and then tell me the latter is less expensive and guess which way I will usually go.

Of course, it is incredibly stupid and short-sighted that we as a nation of travellers have also let travel by rail disintegrate to the point that it cannot/will not recover in our lifetime. Luckily, I have spent enough time within the "northeastern corridor" to appreciate train travel in this country but, west of Philadelphia, forget it. And Amtrak is not much to brag about to our European friends either. Hell, I've been in third world countries which have better passenger train systems than the U.S.

But start comparing road systems and highways, compare our access to travel by auto to anybody else's, and we win hands down, even at 55 m.p.h. The frightening aspect of this fact is our ever growing dependency on it as an everyday part of our lives. The car makers, in bed with oil diggers and cartels everywhere, have (pardon the expression) driven us to the brink of some colossal environmental nightmare and, along the way, sucked this economy nearly dry.

I'm not quite as dumb as I look, though, as I learned early on in my travels that if one was truly born to keep movin' on, one better be ready to fly—and like it. The hassles of airplane transportation are many: just getting to some airports can take longer than your ensuing flight will; the lines, the security checks (especially internationally); customs and immigration; and the food (or, now, the lack thereof)! But, most days, it's the only logical way to go.

I am a very happy man when I can get on a plane here in god's country and, a few hours later, be sitting at a bar in Medford, Las Vegas or Boston, let alone Amsterdam, Lome or Bangkok. What a concept. Big planes, little ones, the only ones I have not yet tried are the ones that you see pictures of landing on water. Like in Alaska or somewhere. I want to do that too.

A map of the world hangs on the wall above this desk and the road atlas is just to the right, at my fingertips, as I ponder upcoming trips. A road trip east in September, maybe 3,000 miles or so, followed by three work-related (i.e. paid) trips between October and March to the Philippines, India and Guatemala. On the trip to Calcutta next Spring, which takes me through Bangkok, I also hope to take a personal detour over to Phnom Penh, Cambodia where good buddy Lou O'Brien is currently working.

One of my worst faults is that I still, sometimes, get in a hurry. I smile, though, wondering if one of the reasons that I am in a hurry is that I can't wait for this roadtrip to end so that I can begin planning the next one. There is so much left to see and feel. Hope to see many of you somewhere along the route soon.

Peace.

John Elmer
8/15/94

[Reply](#)



2.

pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:07 am](#) said:

Death & Life

by John Elmer, 11/22/68

I think one has to live his life not expecting it to end suddenly, but fully aware it could. And every moment he's alive he must try & be as much of a total human being he can, making every minute count. There are no man-made laws or rules which determine our eventual fate, only the standards by which we live, & the principles by which we want to be eternally judged for. Man has a soul, and intelligence, and a heart, and a conscience to determine the way he will follow, & the principles of life he desires to rest his fate upon. And in the end, hopefully with the aid & comfort & guidance & love of others, each man will be his own judge, the judge of himself while he lives, but not his own judge after death. Once a loved one is gone, our role is over. It is among us that we must share our lives with him & help him along the narrow path, but when he is taken from us, his fate must rest upon how he used his own gifts & abilities & manhood along with how he learned from those around him, & we can only hope & pray that he lived his life prepared for that judgment.

[Reply](#)

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3.

pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:11 am](#) said:

NO MORE CANNONS

by John Elmer, 2/80

*from the Parker Sisters Monopoly League's Newsletter
(which eventually became known as the St. Charles Record in May 1980)*

At a time when even the Olympics have become a weapon of international diplomacy in our world, it is now imperative that we take a stand on an issue which troubles us greatly. THE PARKER SISTERS MONOPOLY LEAGUE IS URGING ALL LEAGUE MEMBERS TO JOIN IN SUPPORTING A PROTEST TO THE CURRENT REGISTRATION AND DRAFT MOVEMENT AND TO THE EVER INCREASING WAR HYSTERIA IN THE WORLD. TO THIS END, WE ASK THAT YOU VOLUNTARILY REMOVE THE CANNON AS A TOKEN FROM YOUR PERSONAL MONOPOLY GAMES AND TO NOT ALLOW THIS SYMBOL OF WAR AND HATRED TO BE USED IN ANY LEAGUE GAME DURING THE BALANCE OF THIS OUR TENTH SEASON. This decision of our government affects all of us in our own lives, and those of our families, and it most directly concerns the many young men and women in our League born in 1960 and 1961, as well as many more in the years to come. Please show your support of Joel, Frank, Tim, Jenny, Richard, Peggy, Bob, Jeff and the rest of these young people by not using the cannon. NO MORE CANNONS. Tell your friends.

DRAFT BEER NOT MFLs!

[Reply](#)



4.

pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:19 am](#) said:

“Bon Travail”

by John Elmer, (Choses, 2/92)

You know how you'll be walking to the buvette, observe some men alongside the road cutting weeds with a machete, or a woman walking faster than you even though she's carrying half a tree on her head, and you say: "bon travail". Togo PCVs of 1991 have finally translated that delicate phrase, and it actually means: "it sucks to be you." (It can also be directed at you; then it means: "it sucks to be me.")

Amazingly enough, friends, the postal system continues to function, hence I am in receipt of Marek's newsletter idea-letter. It's Friday here, November 8, and I'm sipping a cold one at the Campement in Dapong. The challenge is to gather a few of my half-million thoughts and get this delivered to Rochester by Thanksgiving. And that means right now because in a few hours there is to be a major blowout at the Bar Mississippi for 3 COS-ing volunteers.

Tomorrow I'll be in a taxi to either Kara or Sokodé and back in suburban Pagala-Gare by Sunday. This was "live-on" week we trainers call it "live-in-in-up" week. I couldn't score a PC car for the trip here, though I did on Wednesday, chauffeur included, and was able to do Baga, Niamtougou, Abra's in Pagouda and the Ketao marché. Once in a great while, it pays to be senior trainer.

In Sokodé, there is now a 60 franc pression bar and it's a lot nicer city because of it. In Kara last Monday, I caught the annual brewery tour, then the dozen or so of us adjourned to the "Mini" and put down a hundred or so. In Pya, they are building a new Affaires Sociale complex, bigger than Kara'a. In Niamtougou last week, the Togo airforce pilots went on strike for one day,

demonstrating their displeasure by buzzing the region, dive-bombing cars and forcing the authorities to close the highway.

Up here is where it is “hot” right now and fairly tense. Since it’s not happening in Lomé, I’m not sure if it has made the news on your end. It began in Barkwossi 2 Mondays ago, on their marché day, where a riot broke out between Mobas and Tchokossis, resulting in 70-80 deaths, hundreds hurt, dozens of “concessions” plus the marché itself burned to the ground. Many Mobas have moved their families back to Dapong for protection. One of the most incredibly sad things this has demonstrated is just how many people have armed weapons guns, quoi. And that they work.

I keep telling trainees they are in for an exciting two years, that is if so much shit doesn’t hit the fan between now and next summer’s planned national elections that they won’t be here at all.

Stage itself goes well, with only a few weeks left but perhaps has been the most challenging of the 3 I’ve now done as trainer for the Animal Traction program. For one thing, I haven’t had Marek, or Eric or Mark, or for that matter any second-year volunteers to help me do it. (It sucks to be me.) For another, a total of almost 70 trainees, for four programs, are in Pagala, over 100 in all including us, profs, staff et. al.

AnTrac has, or soon will have taken over the south. Combined with last year’s group who are still there, the next year will have 16 AnTrac PCVs in the south, all but one of those in the Plateau. (The other one is Tabligbo!) We do all the training at Pagala now, using PROPTA oxen and tools. It’s never perfect but I definitely prefer it to Agbassa. The logistics alone make it much more agreeable. Of course I did take the trainees (6 women, 5 men) to the Kara Region for a field trip though and now they all want to be there, not south. And only 4 of 11 will probably have motos. What can I say to them except “bon travail”.

I’ll try to wrap this up. Where is that damn waiter?

The second coming, or “democracy” as they call it here, definitely has its pros and cons. I’m all for it, better sooner than later, it’s sure as hell not an easy transition. There are no more gendarme stops but now there are taxi-syndicate road-blocks. There is really very little authority. Teak trees are falling faster than leaves. The “game parks” are totally open, hence there is no more “game”. I am all for they deciding but it is not easy to predict what exactly will happen.

Someone should write a grant proposal and score a group of us the opportunity/challenge to come over next summer as an election-observer team.

Now to get ready for tonite’s fête. Two pigs, a sheep, and half a cow have given their lives to the cause. Harmattan has also arrived this weekend let me tell you, it is dusty.

I’ll be in Kansas City for Christmas. This is still great beer. Bon travail.

John Elmer 11/8/91

[Reply](#)

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5.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:21 am](#) said:

BON TRAVAIL

by John Elmer

from *choses*, Thanks to Marek Przewdzieck

My congratulations to Marek and Andy for actually getting this thing off the ground. The first issue is already a collector's item in some circles. It is hard to get even the best-intentioned people to respond, to participate in anything that takes just a little extra time. America! Where time really is money, or so people believe.

Richard Truax is right on the mark. Apathy rules and no one gains, especially the unempowered. Marek is correct also about the need for changes in the system but I'm so damn cynical after all these years. (I revisited Woodstock, the movie, recently and realized how close we were then. So close it was scary.) As for Andy's piece in the first "CHOSSES", the best over-the-counter drugs I could lay my hands on while I was reading it were insufficient to see through the fog. "Whatever he said."

There are far too few people making the rules for the rest of us. It doesn't matter whether it is development aid to smaller, poorer nations or what any of us can choose to do with our own bodies. The same fascists who preach less and less government are legislating our private lives right out of existence. Do it their way or don't do it at all. Power is a very dangerous drug itself.

I am no Bill Clinton fan but I'm glad he was smart enough at age 23 to use his wits and avoid military service to this country when such service meant endorsing the war to end all guerrilla wars. Where does anyone get off attacking or questioning that position instead of asking the rest of them why they did serve, why they do go, why they killed on command and when, if ever, does personal conscience come before blind patriotism. Of course, that won't happen nor will Clinton take the high road. He definitely should have inhaled when he had the chance.

I would like to go on the record, then, just in case I am ever running for anything, to say that I am very proud of my actions and decisions from 1967-on concerning war, killing, violence, love, peace and even the evil weed. I'm thankful I did inhale when I had the opportunity.

Overall I find myself more and more in the minority on most issues, on the losing side of most elections, forever paddling up stream and, in a sense, losing ground. Losing ground if it were a race against time. However, it is not that sort of race, an attempt to get somewhere faster than everyone else. I prefer to see it as a race to discover the good and the positive all along the way and so losing ground just means I get to see some of it again. And knowing the way a little better.

That is why, you realize, and I'll give it a rest after this final stray thought, that's why baseball is superior to other team sports like football, basketball, hockey, or even soccer. There is no clock. It takes as long as it takes to declare a winner. And no matter how far behind you get, there is time to come back, at least no clock to say you cannot.

So when and where is Team Togo going to reunite? We could challenge the Royals to a best of seven and make them look bad. I'm talking ugly. Everybody write!

John Elmer
4/27/92

[Reply](#)

6.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:22 am](#) said:

BON TRAVAIL

by John Elmer

from *choses*, Thanks to Marek Przewdzieck

The first time I did it was in 1968. Vote, that is. Back then you had to be 21 to vote but, in many states, only 18 to drink. Funny how things change.

In retrospect, there are those who suggest that I should have held my nose and voted for the Humphrey-dome. Instead, I ordered an absentee ballot from Kansas City and cast my first-ever presidential vote for Dick Gregory. For Senator, I wrote in my dad. To this day I have no regrets about those decisions and the memories of all the events which led up to them remain incredibly vivid.

I felt then, and still feel today, that we were in the midst of a war at the time, one being fought in the streets of America and in the souls of its citizens. In February I had arrived in Fayetteville, Tennessee as a VISTA Volunteer, moving right up to the frontline of battle. We had been invited to come work in the community but it became painfully obvious that not everyone wanted us there. We were quickly branded communists for caring that over half of the adult male population in the county was functionally illiterate. The War-on-Poverty's \$5 as an incentive to convince many of these poor heads-of-household to attend classes, taught by us known radicals, in order to learn to write and read their native language, that small investment was considered by the local power structure to be blatant outside interference in their lives and none of anyone else's business, certainly not the federal government's or ours. In war jargon, we were the enemy and the battle was being fought on their turf.

It was not exactly the age of enlightenment on our side either. There were precious few programs available to assist poor women with similar needs. We were under strict orders from Washington to be non-political. Segregation, for example, was deemed to be a political issue. Public opposition by us to our government's policies and actions going on in southeast Asia was certainly forbidden. The joy, however, for this twenty year old of seeing our students be able to properly endorse that \$5 check from uncle Sam, rather than simply using an "x" as they had always done, that joy was real and also extremely energizing. The larger notion that our work was helping to truly change the ways of the past and make the future a little brighter for people kept driving us to do more and to get more involved. Revolutionary ideals aside, my own eyes were definitely being opened as never before.

The assassination of Martin Luther King that April hit me hard. This event had a radicalizing effect on what was already a very challenging cross-cultural experience. A group of us traveled the 150 miles or so to Memphis a few days later to participate in that city's demonstration by striking sanitation workers and thousands of others in marching for justice. Peace seemed almost out of the question. But people were coming together, good people. It was, at least that day in Memphis, a revolution of hope.

I got turned on by a politician for the first time that year too, Eugene McCarthy. He inspired tremendous energy and a certain faith in the basic goodness of humankind. He said that war didn't make sense, certainly not distant wars on foreign battlefields, fighting, killing other humans because of a military industrial complex that needed its own type of fix. Not when there was a much more important war happening right here in our own corner of the world. One that had to be won, and now was the time.

In my own mind Robert Kennedy seemed to share much of this same vision that Spring but his late entrance into the presidential sweepstakes was disheartening. Suddenly it was party politics, down and dirty. McCarthy was too gentle a man to win at such an ugly game. And then, in June, just to prove how mean, and real, the whole thing was, we lost Bobby. The hope of a couple months earlier was quickly turning into despair.

Later that same week I turned legal voting age.

Playing by the rules was losing its meaning. In August I decided to drive my '61 Chevy north for a meeting of the minds on the streets of Chicago. There was no doubt by then that the Democratic Party was no better than the Republicans as they were about to coronate Hubert, the loyal servant, while somehow forgetting who Gene McCarthy was or what he had been trying to tell us for a year, or what Martin and Bobby had given their lives for. As soon as the power structure had reestablished law and order in our own streets they would take care of those pesky Vietnamese too. Hope had essentially vanished but it was worth one more loud "fuck-you", one that the entire world would hear and see.

Senator McCarthy and his forces were there helping to lead us as was Dick Gregory. I only saw them from a distance but it was important to have them with us. It was a great feeling for me to be but one of a hundred thousand individuals in this mass movement yet share an incredible closeness with all these brothers and sisters. My first taste of tear gas was not pleasant. Chicago police and National Guardsmen fueled a full-blown riot. The word "pigs" took on a new meaning for many of us. But, somehow, I managed to not be arrested (and hence kicked out of VISTA) and headed back to the cotton harvest in Tennessee, back to where my work was. And cashed government checks so that I could eat, wondering more than ever about life's paradoxes.

In October, the requested absentee ballot arrived from Missouri with instructions that it be filled out in the presence of some officer of the law, or the court, and duly witnessed by them in order to be valid. So up to the courthouse I marched, you know the type, the county's tallest building sitting inside the town square, surrounded by aging white men puffing on cigars, watching attentively as people of color used different facilities than they did and waiting to eat lunch at the town's finest cafe, a place where they could sit and eat peacefully while blacks could only order food to go.

Anyhow, up those steps I went to do my patriotic duty for the first time and wound up sitting under the glaring eyes of the local Sheriff as I wrote in Dick Gregory's name for President and John Elmer, Sr.'s name for Missouri's next Senator. I handed it to him and gave him my own glare as he signed it and gave it his official stamp of approval. The law said he had no choice. It was all I could do to not raise a clenched fist in victory.

I am sorry if my vote that year possibly helped to elect Richard Nixon but I am proud that I did what I thought was the only right thing to do at the time. I had voted for someone and for a conviction and a purpose and a reason. It was much more than a protest vote. It counted.

They say you never forget the first time you do it. Vote, that is. I don't ever intend to. Peace!

John Elmer
October 10, 1992

[Reply](#)

REPORT THIS AD

7.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:23 am](#) said:

BON TRAVAIL

by John Elmer

from *choses*, Thanks to Marek Przezdzieck

I routinely keep the most recent CHOSSES in the in-box on my desk until I get around to putting some thoughts on paper again. Today is that day. The last issue I see here is dated March and includes my little essay on travel. Does Marek keep putting me on the front page because I am the first one to submit something for publication each time OR because way back in the fall of 1988 at Agbassa, when he and I worked together and became friends for life, I did something for him which he is still rewarding me for—or punishing me for? Thanks, Mr. Editor, I shall assume the best. And if Marek actually finds someone else to edit the next issue (“early fall”...right), you can put this on any page you want. Like Andy did once. Or, was that Craig? Either way, I hated it.

It is not like I am offering to do one more thankless job, however. I’ve got this great excuse that works for any request more than about one month, or one day sometimes, in advance. I can honestly say that I don’t have any idea of when or where my next paid job is. But if opportunity come a knockin’, I have got to be ready to go. (And it better come soon.) That last work of mine in the Spring, which I wrote the previous August, said that I was headed soon to the Philippines, India and Guatemala. In actuality, it turned out to be the Philippines, Thailand and India for nine weeks, then Ecuador for four more. But that was then and this is now.

While sorting through some old boxes a few days ago, I discovered my two pope pagnas, reminders of that glorious day exactly ten years ago, August 8, 1985, when the pope came to Togo, specifically to Niamtougou, Prefecture de Doufelgou. My mind races immediately to thoughts of Baga, church on Sundays, Harvard Club brunch menus, theme events, final beer runs and, eventually, to that day the pope arrived.

I had been in Togo a little more than two years by then and was mostly into packing, giving shit away and doing the required final tours. Most PCVs of the day were either in Lome or Kara to be a part of those festivities, or they were safely at home since all productive work had stopped and traffic was at a near standstill throughout the country. I have a distinct memory, however, of Brian and Gretchen making their way to my place the evening before, then staying over for the big celebration the next holy day.

That fine day began chez moi with rice, beans, wagassi, coffee and, as I recall, a few ice cold marys. After all, even if it was not a Sunday, we were at church and this would be one bloody, holy day. Later, I am pretty sure that we made our way by back roads to the other side of the airport and, there, we became part of the local welcoming committee. I don’t know about

Yarwood or Pittenger, but I felt a certain sensation when his holiness went by us in his open convertible, and blessed us, then appeared a bit stunned at seeing our three yoyo faces in a crowd of thousands. As soon as that moment of magic had passed, we headed over to Chez Jean's bar and residence, where our friendly proprietor had earlier invited us to his private family fete. No laws against that.

I should say that we gave serious thought to waiting the whole thing out at my place since it only figured that the pope might just have the only church of any real significance on his day's itinerary and we wouldn't want to miss him. After all, just a few weeks earlier, the U.S. ambassador had paid us a visit at my home (Gretchen was there that day too.), so why not the vicar of Christ on earth? In the final analysis, we wisely abandoned that strategy for the more daring task of getting by all the security and into Niamtougou, where we joined the masses. And, besides, the ice had vanished into the noon-time of the day.

Retelling that decade old story congers up one more, an extension of that, which also deserves comment. As I said above, the pope's visit to Togo was one of those many times that normal life came to a stop, and volunteers were literally forced off their motos and into the nearest buvette. It is obvious we would not be working, so much so that Mimi didn't even come up country checking on us. I am thinking now that the pope's visit to Togo, and the subsequent lack of productivity for so many days, probably disturbed her so much that three weeks later, when she and her congressional liaison buddy came pouncing down on us PCVs who were spending our own country's Labor Day playing golf in Wahalla, she was not the Mimi we knew and loved. Yarwood scored the line of the day, which I can nearly quote: "hi, I'm PCV Brian Yarwood, this is Labor Day and I'm not working."

I guess that means this Labor Day is the ten year anniversary of that grand weekend, too. I successfully defended the ugly green coat that Monday morning. I lost it to Duncan four years later in North Carolina but, hey, Duncan is with Robin and their two sons in Ethiopia and I have still got possession of the coat. And you know what they say about possession and the law.

Gretchen is with Paul and their son near Boston and l'homme de Sarakawa is in Vermont, also happily wed and, from what I hear on the street, loving life. The pope is hanging on to his job, still blessing the masses, preaching abstinence and more babies, and declaring again recently, in his infinite and infallible wisdom, that women are equal but they cannot be priests. There is another John Paul, who I like much more than the big guy in Rome, son of Peter and Jackie Nerone of Wahalla – fame, now dwelling just across the river from Cincinnati and already playing a mean second base when I saw him a year ago.

I think it's all coming together. The pope came to Doufelgou, said make more babies, some of us cheered him on with bloody marys while Nerone heard the call, married a Doufelgou woman, made a baby, Mimi got mad and docked us all a day's pay, and here I sit with nothing more to show for it than an ugly green coat and great memories. Is that it?

Happy 10th to all of you who were part of those particular stories, Some days it seems like yesterday, other days it seems very long ago and very far away. I know some of you grow weary of these tales of yesteryear, but write what you will. I think about the future more than the past, but usually the past makes me smile more. DOWRITE, however, and let's continue to communicate with each other, and, thanks to Marek, we have this great medium with which to do so.

CHOSSES should host a whiffle golf tournament and if the pope cannot make it to bless the winner, then maybe Mimi could. I'll be happy to be bartender and, later at night, hear confessions. Everybody's kids can be caddies. Think about it.

John Elmer
7/19/95

[Reply](#)

REPORT THIS AD

8.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:25 am](#) said:

Stuck in Baga with Nowhere to Go

By John Elmer, Baga

from *The Griot*, March 1984

I've spent a lot of time since Christmas wondering why. I've consulted zen, the Tao, I-Ching, Thomas Merton. William Shakespeare, Jesus Christ and my fellow volunteers, not necessarily in that order. And I keep getting the same answer.

It's the identical answer my mom gave me 30 years ago (I didn't say that) when I asked her. "Mom, why can't I have a new bicycle like all the other kids?" It's the very same response my first boss gave me when I asked him why I couldn't have a dollar an hour raise. (You gotta remember John Kennedy was president when I got my first job). It's the same damn thing now if we ask Lome why there isn't \$100 somewhere to buy seeds.

It's a refrain we hear every time there is no good answer, atleast not one we're old enough to understand. When we don't understand, and no one can satisfy us as to why, how it is that some of us live and some of us die. That some among us prosper while others starve. It's the answer of all ages and times; "Because".

My problem is that for me. that's still not enough. There is a void in me because I don't have a better answer. I think it will remain there, like a hollow spot deep in the pit of my chest, until I have a finer response. Maybe it's a convenient way to never forget someone you don't want to forget. If that's what it is, I can live with it. And that, in fact, makes me feel well again. It's how the mind and the heart seem to cope. The best thing of all still would be to understand why and to be able to tell someone else who is asking. This, then, must be the next best thing.

[Reply](#)

9.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:26 am](#) said:

Fore!

By John Elmer (Animal Traction-Baga)

from *The Griot*, September 1984

So, screw it. I came back. 'T'ough based on how tempting it is to hang out in Lome for a few days before heading north (the ole "Farge Syndrome") I'm not really sure I am back. And now I hear both Barney and Pete have already submitted their thoughts on the subject so it becomes a test of style versus content. I'll try to keep it short, however.

It's good to be back. One misses Togo after awhile. There is a certain strength that runs through the people here. They are secure in the knowledge that there probably is a better tomorrow, ahead. Americans are by and large pretty happy being number one and don't mind telling you so. But once you hit a certain peak, it's hard to go anywhere but down.

My buddy Pete has said that we were heroes back in the states; I wouldn't go that far. For one thing my family knows me to well. (Like my mom said to Lynda Mermell on the phone one day recently "nothing John does anymore ever surprises us.") But I do agree Togo seems a bit more on the map to people there and that's probably good. Making people aware is half the battle.

So the beat goes on. Tee times on Sunday mornings in Baga this Fall should be reserved in advance. Now if I can just get my act together enough to get out of Lome, I will have proved once again that one can go back home

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 10, 2010 at 5:02 pm](#) said:

John,

I'm sorry, but you may have missed the implication of these web pages in John Elmer's memory. John died several years ago and we collected some of his writing as it continues to be relevant...

– Paul Locke

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:28 am](#) said:

Hello, Dawn, My Old Friend

By John Elmer (Animal Traction-Baga)

from *The Griot*, Spring 1985

This will be a personal essay on a recent discovery I have made about myself, how that relates to our Peace Corps role in Togo, and, hopefully, why all this makes the concept of dawn patrols very important to my existence. It might get a tad heavy but please remember I'm your brother.

Every morning for twenty or so months now, since arriving here, I have awakened (which is a good start in itself) and on every one of these 600 or so dawns I go to put my shoes of the day on, and without fail, the shoe for my left foot is on the right and the one for the right is, you guessed it, on the left. It eventually came to me that this might be a sign of something. Studying the matter for several days, consulting the I-Ching at least twice, I have discovered that each and every time I go to take off my shoes I cross my legs. Instead of bending straight over and keeping each in its place, right where I want them the next time. We are such obvious creatures of habit that oftentimes it requires major reflection to determine why or why not or why bother at,

During these same 600 days I have had at least a million thoughts on what it is we're doing here and where it is we're headed. Not just "us" but everybody that is here "help." In one way I would like to continue trying but this requires a lot more thought and reflection than a matter so simple and uncritical as how I choose to take off my shoes. Maybe crossed-legs represent crossed-purposes.

We Peace Corps Volunteers find ourselves in a wonderful situation when it comes to cultural exchange, people-to-people awareness building, recognizing our similarities as well as our differences. Simply by living here for two years we are a symbol of hope. My experience is that we are a very positive force on a personal, individual basis. It is also my impression that few among us ever considered doing this for politically-motivated purposes. We just came to help and to learn.

So, naturally, it bothers me that the current trend appears to be forcing volunteers and staff into playing more political games. By tying most available monies and resources to Embassy and U.S.A.I.D. approval, indeed, by encouraging increased usage of such resources, we are made to also buy the economic-political line behind it. Instead of providing a more reasonable modern-day budget to do what Peace Corps has always done best, doing things on a people-to-people basis, while leaving most economic-political strategies to other agencies better designed to do so. Perhaps instead of bragging about how much we're doing "together", one should be wary of increasingly becoming more tools of a particular political philosophy. If a person wants to have that sort of job, she or he can apply for it, there are plenty to choose from. I didn't apply for it and I don't want it.

But, my friends, thank God for dawns. Every one is new and every one brings new hope. If I was ever as radical as I talk I'd have found myself an island or a mountaintop long ago. Lots of ideas but short on concrete results. So each day I just figure I'll keep learning

The thing is that a lot of days I can't wait for the next one either because it holds so much promise or because this one is so good I don't want it to stop. Hence, dawn patrols. Ours here in Togo have been the best. Yve's on New Year's a year ago and Bill and Anne's last July will be the ones I'll always compare others to, knowing the stark realization that sadness goes right alongside gladness and that love makes it all that much harder. And so very much better.

I think I'll bend over now and untie my shoes.

[Reply](#)

11.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:29 am](#) said:

Food For Thought

By John Elmer (Animal Traction-Baga)

from *The Griot*, Summer 1985

For the sake of debate among peers, I would like to submit two suggestions for discussion.

The first is that Peace Corps should be a three year gig instead of two, with a built-in vacation/home leave somewhere in there, and that one year extensions be very much encouraged but without a free home leave as an incentive. Rather, a real desire to stay and do a job for twelve more months.

Undoubtedly, this would cut down on the number of applicants but, hey, then we could also cut staff and overhead, get the dollars out to the field(s) where they belong and go for quality over quantity. Peace Corps should not be a numbers game. Third year PCVs almost universally say that their last year was the best. And every volunteer I know in the past two years who, whether for good reasons or bad ones, took a trip to the States during their service came back refreshed and renewed. Certainly true of me last year.

And, honestly, I wish I was doing a third year in a lot of ways but, I just will not deal with the bullshit required to do so. (And don't even mention changing programs to them, it sends chills through their bodies.) Probably more than any one thing, Togolese have told me that being here only two years is almost a farce. It takes time just to get settled. Real development requires real commitment. And don't hold a home leave, like a carrot on a string, as some reward to be gained for going in circles. Let's keep the revolving, door moving, but just slow it down a little.

I'm less sure about my second idea. I like Peace Corps' various two year rules and five year rules and ten year rules, the concept is right. Keep things fluid, new creative, energetic and move a lot of good people through the system but not for long drawn-out periods of time. So let's take this one step further and consider a reasonable limit on the Peace Corps' stay in any one country. Not that there aren't always things to be done, and improved on, but after too long in one place, organizations, like individuals, get stale. You get accustomed to doing things one way, even if it has been 20 years worth of different volunteers doing it, that old histories become more important than the situation that exists now.

Perhaps such a rule could allow Washington added flexibility in responding to a new need somewhere instead of agonizing over political consequences of pulling out of a country. And nothing says we can't go back, after a certain amount of time for a host country to demonstrate both a continuing need as well as a real commitment on their part to follow through on previous efforts. I don't know where this number lies, between ten and twenty years maybe, but I think there ought to be one.

Just ideas. I've done my two years and that's what I'm thinking right now. (Of course the fine print says it's 27 months, that's something else that needs to be cleaned up, especially if we're going to talk three years instead of two!) What do you think??

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:36 am](#) said:

This email was sent to the Togo Mailing List

Date: Sun, 30 Aug 1998
From: Aaron Barlow
Subject: John Elmer

John was my trainer as an Animal Traction trainee in 1988. He was a lovely person; I am saddened to find him gone.

–Aaron Barlow

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:37 am](#) said:

Date: 98-09-01
From: Charles A. Cogan
Subject: John Elmer

I don't really have anything to add that hasn't already been said, but John Elmer was definitely an exceptionally decent person. I was in training with him from Huntsville, TX to Agbassa to Lome, etc. During all of that time, I never saw him lose his temper or stress out or even show any signs that we were all going through an unfamiliar and uneasy transition. In fact, given the fact that many of the rest of us were going through all kinds of mood swings, elations, depressions, and other inner struggles (not to mention stomach cramps, etc.), it's probably a good thing that John was there to serve as the camp shrink. The amazing thing was that he did so unselfconsciously, people just felt very comfortable talking with him and he was always ready to listen, even if he was having his own stomach cramps. As much as anyone else, he was undoubtedly the glue that kept all of us on good terms during training and for so many years after.

Unlike many others, I haven't been in regular contact with John. In fact, we last met sometime in 1991 at the Cafe des Arts when he was in Togo for a training program. I don't even remember what we talked about, but it was just good to see him. I couldn't help thinking at the time that he must have been an incredibly good person to have running a PC training program. He had that mixture of respect and empathy that seemed to give him a balanced perspective on everything.

I'm sorry to hear that John Elmer is no longer with us in person. As so many others have said, the kind of life that he led is something that we should all try to hold on to and think of when we have difficult decisions to make.

Sincerely,

Charlie Cogan Togo, Antrac, 1983-86

[Reply](#)

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pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:38 am](#) said:

Duncan Earle & Robin Ridley
Hanoi, Vietnam

Fax Message

To: Susan Hogan
From: Duncan Earle
For John-

Father John we called him

For his open spirit that was always willing to listen without judging
For his fantastic positive energy that infected all of his who were around him
For Saturday night “confessions” and “church on Sunday”: the nearly weekly gatherings at John’s house in Baga, Togo which took on greater meaning almost weekly with all we went through together
He was a quiet leader whose humility, tolerance and loving spirit affected a whole generation of Peace Corps volunteers who were fortunate enough to be in Togo when John was in early and mid-80s. Undoubtedly, he left a similar wake of loving friends whose lives he affected when he was a Vista volunteer, and in all his other adventures in life.

He was at once strong and vulnerable as we tried to deal with the tragic deaths of two of our friends, and two of his best friends in Togo, Woody and Jenny. It was John who, through all of his and our pain and loss reminded us that we were fortunate to have known those two great people, and that in spite of our grief we should celebrate their memory, rather than dwell on our loss. We are now challenged to do the same for you John, though I have a hard time forgiving you for leaving us thirty or so years short of what we had planned.

We had so much more to create!

Together, he and I created Bagusta, one of his many contributions to whiffle golf architecture around the world. We held the first Masters of whiffle golf there in April 1984, and he took that Ugly Green Jacket from me in a match play final. Afterwards he told of us of the circuit back in KC where in an afternoon you could play a half dozen crazy courses.

And we played them too, on the first stop of The Tour, that fantasy that John’s energy made a reality that was Robin and my honeymoon, and with Rick, the four of our excellent adventure. Many of you were our hosts or cohorts that great bittersweet baseball summer of 1986 – I am a Red Sox fan.... Touching All Bases, Peace Through Baseball – an idea born in the dusty Togolese countryside as we lay on our backs staring at the African sky and listened to Armed Forces Radio

bringing us ballgames from back home. John came up with the spiraling 14,000 mile route that began in KC and took to us every Major League ballpark. He worked the schedule out while housesitting a boat in dry dock in Maine in winter – where else? – and Rick, Robin and I couldn't resist.

Not just a fan, but a lover of sport, John unashamedly pursued his love of games, almost any: from Parker Sisters Monopoly Tournaments to the Final Four. Many of you must know that he had tickets to the last 8 Cards games to make sure he didn't miss seeing McGwire go Maris one homer or several better. John won't need those tickets, but if life were like the movies, he now has the best seats in the house, and he might just help Mark with a little good karma – he certainly had plenty left to use.

I feel far away today, and I want to be there in KC even if I don't really want to say goodbye. Bob and Jo, Joel and Jeff, and all of you who loved John, please know that there are hundreds more of us around the world who loved John, and more importantly who were fortunate enough to be loved by him. He has left all of us better for having known him.

Hooty hoot Homer, Peace though baseball.

[Reply](#)



15.

pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:39 am](#) said:

David Fargen
September 9, 1998

I've got to admit that the last week has been a bit of an emotional roller-coaster ride. I was very grateful to be able to attend the services for John. I was honored to attend as a representative of all of our Peace Corps famil. Special thanks to Caryn and Paul and Jim Lewis who helped by paying for my plane fare.

Visitation service was on Sunday afternoon. About 250 people attended. John knew so many loving people. Almost all of his fellow seminarian friends were there. At the service, people shared stories of their lives with John. Some of the stories were light, all were touching. I shared by reading the letter from Duncan and Robin. It was a very sad service, even though we try to tell ourselves that John wouldn't like it that way...

It was 5 a.m. I couldn't sleep. The hotel was like being in an empty box. I decided to jump in the car and run down to John's house on South Jefferson St. I pulled up in front of his house on the opposite side of the street and parked the car. It was 75 degrees. Cool but damp, with the promise of a hot and muggy Midwest summer day ahead. I looked at the house, listened to the bugs, and in the quiet of watching the morning stars, I felt peace; I felt quiet; I felt calm. I don't know, but I think John was with me then.

I walked up to his house and picked a handful of flowers from a bush that draped the entire railing of the front porch. The flowers were delicate. Radiant white.

The practical one in me said you'd better go back to the hotel and get prettied-up for the funeral. But the one in me, the one that I don't listen to nearly enough, said I want to stay here.

I found a bakery open at 6 a.m. I walked in and ordered a bagel from a perky, 35-ish guy behind the counter (I think he was a sister). So I smiled at him and made a little small talk even though I felt like my heart wasn't there anymore. I didn't know what I felt. Vulnerable and alone I guess. Then I realized that this is how John passed his love on to us. This incredible guy with an extraordinary loving heart, this special person seemed to go out of his way to care for me and to be nice to me.

At 10:00 a.m. the Mass was said in the family parish in the rolling hills of the Kansas City suburb where John's family lives. The priest (and fellow seminarian) who said the Mass talked about how John always looked after the incoming classes, offering them respect and understanding in those "para-military" days of the mid-1960's. So, whether it was in the seminary in 1965 or in the Peace Corps in 1983, John really did look after us; it's like he traveled the road the night before and was there in the morning for us just to reassure us and, of course, to let us know that we'd all be just fine.

I think he was right. I think we'll all be just fine.

God Bless,
Farge

[Reply](#)

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pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:40 am](#) said:

A confession for Fr. John

John,

I knew you through Paul and Church-on-Sunday. Those Sunday mornings (and into the afternoons) were for pancakes and syrup (real pancake syrup!!) and beer, and lots of talking. I loved just listening to you talk, because you made every one of the words important and joyous. Sometimes you repeated those words, looking at the ground as you did – like you were also convincing yourself of what you had just uttered. It did not hurt that your red smiling cheeks and your thick beard complemented the warmth of what you said. And I enjoyed your seriousness. You do not have much stomach for the way institutions and governments can turn on their own people. You seem to feel pain whenever it is inflicted on others.

That way of sharing that you have! Church-on-Sunday was about sharing, as Church ought to be. I knew you had been in seminary – I knew you didn't like talking about it. But I was going there, too, and I had to know about it. But you taught me all about priesthood on the few Sundays that I made it up to Baga. It's about being with people, about sharing everything with them. And that is why I didn't become a priest – I have a long way to go before I can share as you do.

You remember that night. The night of beer and fondue before Jenny's memorial service, after everyone had left or gone to bed. How is it that someone as far on the periphery of life as I am could have spent that particular night talking with you about a woman we both loved so dearly, whose death we were still refusing to accept? We sat alone outside your house, just the bugs

dinging the lantern as we sat and talked about the most amazing woman either of us has ever known. And we bared our souls to each other. John, this is not something I often do, with anyone. But you have some kind of presence about you. Forgive me – I think of the drawing of Jesus as carpenter – the eyes, the face – inviting you to open yourself up to him. So it is you; and Paul; and Jenny; and Maryanne; and my soulmate, Diane; my son, Jerome; my daughter, Ellen; and my dearest friend, my wife, my wisdom and breath and joy, Kim. You are the ones who have mattered, who have changed my life. Because of this Great Confession the day before we tried to accept Jenny's death, and because of all the Confessions-on-Saturday-Night and all of the Church-on-Sundays, I am the husband and father I am and ought to be, rather than the Franciscan priest I never should have imagined becoming. You are the one who brought us together all those Sundays, John: you celebrate and enrich our humanity in your jokes and your smiling red cheeks, in your delightful laughter over the stupidities of our own narrow-sightedness, and in your resolve to uphold the ineffable value of life; that is to say, you are our priest.

I confess to you that I have not yet learned to bring your joy and your laughter into my life – to my wife, to my children, to my friends. But I tell you that I laugh more now than I used to. I confess that I am still on the periphery of life. But I tell you that I remember your quiet dignity, and your insistence that everyone be treated according to the dignity that we all bear – and I am learning to insist on this, also. I confess that I do not always see relevance in the events of life. But I tell you that I remember how you distilled relevance from authentic friendships with so many people – and I am learning to build up this relevance and authenticity.

John, I miss you. Thank you for being there, in Baga and Niamtougou and Lama-Kara. Thanks for the pancakes. Thanks for Sundays.

Pax et Totum Bonum,
Dans l'amour et la paix de notre Seigneur, Del

Del Freeberg

(Corps de la Paix, Sokode et Tsevie, Togo, 1983-1985
Prof. des Sciences Physiques)

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:41 am](#) said:

Date: 9/18/98 7:10:29 AM
From: John Guzowski
Subject: John Elmer

It is difficult to add much to the words already written recently about John. I laid in bed last night for a long time thinking about John and the relatively few times I was lucky to spend time with him while in Togo. What Tarzan wrote is very true; John embodied the present. The past was important because we had been there, and the future was important because we would be there; but actually, John knew that neither really existed except in the present and that the present is both the past and future at the same time.

What is fantastic is that John has given rise to these thoughts without ever having said such things to me (or perhaps to any of us) directly. As is evident from what we have all written here about him, he spoke to us more through the power of spirit than through words. I believe John was (is) a saint, in much the same way that Ghandi was (is); a spirit conscious of residing in a physical encasement (as opposed to a physical encasement conscious of encasing a spirit). But all this is verbiage rubbish; you expressed it better, Tarz.

I did not have the luck in spending much time with John, but as you all know very well, that did not matter. Meeting John even briefly was enough to make you feel warm inside, secure, peaceful and energetic to bring out the best of yourself...a feeling that did not go away when you weren't with him. His letters (until most recently) were always hand-written; something that John told me he felt very particular about doing. I recently got a hand-written letter from a friend and spent about an hour just holding the paper and 'feeling' the script. It felt good. I wrote back, also by hand. That felt good, too. You are right, John, there's nothing like it.

Before he left Togo, John encouraged me to take over his role as Reverend. I had no pretensions of officially doing so in his stead; however, I suspect he may have encouraged all of us to do so individually. I still think this is relevant to us; to take what we have been given through John's existence with us and make it a part of our lives; but more importantly, to pass it on by touching others with it. The struggle to make the world a better place is still, and will always be, hand-to-hand combat, fought only in the present. Intellectually, we all know this; it's living it that can be difficult at times. John showed us all how, so we can't feign that we don't know.

Thanks for touching my life, John. Now that you've got 'the best seat in the house', I hope you'll send us all a hand-written letter once in a while to remind us that we, too, have the capacity within us to make a positive difference in the lives of those we encounter. That elusive hole-in-one, or home run, is ever only a swing away...and I'm gonna keep swinging, John! Stay with us and keep watching. God bless you. Peace.

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18.



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:42 am](#) said:

Date: 9/14/98 7:27:45 PM
From: Paul Fletcher
Subject: John Elmer

Reflecting on the Life of John Elmer

For the last fortnight or so I have awoken with the strange feeling that something was amiss and each morning I would ruminate on the passing of John Elmer. It has finally dawned on me that for each of the previous fourteen mornings I had awoken much poorer. I am not speaking of the downturn in the stock market nor Clinton's apparent credo of "What this country needs is an intern with a good five cent cigar". No what I speak of is, in this country where role models are usually associated with physical or financial domination, we have lost, in John, a role model who possessed a transcendent humanity and a profound gentleness of spirit. Additionally, as I read and reread the other tributes on Paul and Gretchen's "Bye Elmer" web page, I came to realize that I

did not know John well (though I knew him for 16 years) and more importantly that, oddly, it did not matter.

As I read the tributes and as I spoke to those that knew him more completely, I remember thinking “I didn’t know that, but it makes sense”. For me, John was the only person who did not need a past to make them complete, nor for that matter, a future. As I search my memory, I can never remember asking John about the myriad of questions that one friend asks another 6,000 miles from home, loosed from the constraints family and vocation. I remember contenting myself with the vague rumor that John had sold insurance before he came to Togo (whether that is true, I do not know). Conversely, we also never spoke of the future either. Further, if I remember correctly, if either subject came up, John usually just laughed, no really John would giggle while shaking his head, and somehow the conversation would return to the moment. John was the master of the moment. While the past was to be considered and perhaps the future to be pondered, the present was to be savored, and fully lived. John savored each swing of a softball bat, each swing of a golf club, each round of the Rotisserie League Draft, each sip of a beer or bite of fu-fu, each word he wrote. He also really appeared to love each and every moment he spent with each and every person no matter how obdurate. He brought out the best in people with a smile and laugh. Yet, John also loved competition and miraculously each person John competed against came away the better for having played the game with John. It is not that John let them win; no as I remember John was too good an athlete and too keen a strategic thinker. No, John or John’s team usually won and somehow the competition always smiled.

I think John’s secret was that he could so entirely live in the present and that he was so acutely aware that he was the accumulation of a million such moments. When he spoke of his family, of his friends, of any of the moments of his life, he was thankful for each and every interaction, fully aware how his life had been enriched by each interaction. He – I am convinced John thought himself one of the most fortunate men that ever lived – made wealthy through the love of his family, his friends, and his interactions with mankind. In turn, John tried to do his best to share the source of his wealth with all those he touched. Now, fourteen days after his passing, I have come to realize that I have not woken each morning a little poorer. In fact, each morning I have awoken a richer man, thanks to John. Such a life and such a legacy is one to be celebrated, not one to be mourned

So John, where ever you are, Thank you and Godspeed . . .

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:43 am](#) said:

Date: 10/11/98
From: Steve McCue

Hooty Hoot!

It’s likely someone else from John’s KC family has written you by now to thank you for the kind tributes. As the days push past one another, the reality of his passing becomes clearer. But, for an Irishman prone to high highs and low lows, John’s death is a ready anchor during every moment of even remote sadness.

I've met some of John's Peace Corps family, but far from all of you. It was wonderful that Farge could be at the memorial service to represent you all – and to read Duncan and Robin's tribute.

A few days after the service, I got a thank you note from John's family for being "MC" at the memorial service. This has to be one of the most touching honors of my life. I've never before known of a memorial service with a "Master of Ceremonies". But then I've never before been mentioned (twice, but who's counting?) in anyone's obituary either.

I've started writing this thing several times already. And each time, when I do the read-through, it sounds like it's more about me than about John. Perhaps this can't be helped.

Sometimes friends get to the point of being perversely proud of taking one another for granted. Maybe John and I got to that point so many years ago that we even forgot to notice it anymore.

John and I thought up the Parker Sisters Monopoly League. More than 27 years ago, John thought it his duty as a friend to try to talk me out of getting married. (That pissed me off some; but I knew that he took it as his obligation.) It didn't work. Then we thought up Cornstalk (AKA : "Cornstock", an annual three-day party to celebrate my wedding anniversary at an abandoned farm in central Kansas... that lasted for six years... with two reunions... the last one just this past summer). Katie feels strangely guilty that she and I went to a movie instead of going to John's last barbecue at Jesse Bustamante's the Saturday before John died.

John and I didn't think up wiffle golf together. The Elmer family did that. But John and I did expand upon the idea to include a number of yard golf courses throughout the Kansas City area. And I am proud to have encouraged him to take his yard golf design skills overseas.

We schemed up so many things just for the fun of scheming that I couldn't tell you how many incredible projects we just plain forgot in the rush of more great ideas.

The night John died we were supposed to get together to watch South Park – as we often did on Wednesdays. He phoned me earlier in the day to "dis-invite" me because he'd be at the hospital visiting his father. We made plans to watch the tape and make a night of it on Friday. Didn't happen.

I used to drop by John's twice a week or more. He lived just a few blocks from where I work at Camp Fire. Other folks dropped by too. Especially on Friday afternoons, there was often a gathering on his front porch – Pat McDonnell, Kevin Locke, Tim Rice (Jesse would run by when he could – between heating and air conditioning jobs), brother Joel would often be there, sometimes with daughter Abbie (you probably know that Abbie has never missed attending a World Series in her four years, and that Uncle John was always there too) and every once in awhile brother Jeff would surprise us.

There were others. John was a bit secretive about some of his visitors, some of whom were sons of our high school friends. "Father John" you called him. We just called it happy hour – especially on Fridays.

Jesse, John and I used to celebrate our birthdays for the whole month of June.

Here's another time I got pissed at him.

Last year, during the NBA play-offs, I went to John's to watch a game. Close game, last minute, John switches the channel to check the baseball scores. I howl. He loves it. He says, "This is a baseball house! Live with it!"

I've imagined the words in the dictionary that could have John's face by them:

Stubborn

Generous

Private

Friend

At the memorial service, there was so much talk in the crowd about what a great person he was, I had a fantasy of opening my remarks with a call for reports of miracles — it only takes two, you know (before the sainthood proceedings can begin)!

There were so many remarks about what a peaceful and non-violent man John was.

It's not true that John never lost his temper. (This may be a problem during the campaign for sainthood.)

For example, I remember once during the Carter administration...

...when Cyrus Vance (then Secretary of Defense) did something that really pissed John off.

I don't remember exactly what it was, but it prompted John to get the Parker Sisters (the Board of Directors for the Monopoly League) to ban "the use instruments of war as tokens in the games of the Parker Sisters Monopoly League henceforward." We threw away all the cannons and battleships immediately. I told this story at John's memorial service. As I said then, whatever it was that Cyrus Vance did, I'm confident that I'd never remember him otherwise. I believe that Cyrus Vance earned his place in history the day that he crossed John Elmer.

Until he gave up canoeing, John was my regular partner on all the float trips the ol' gang used to take. John in the bow, me at the helm, so to speak. I'm not even sure how many great floating adventures we had. Till that fateful moment we both leaned the wrong way at the same time. I'm not sure that John ever got in a boat with me again.

Several people told wonderful stories about John at the memorial service. Jesse. Jerry Hurlbert. Farge, of course. Phil Wilson. Did you know that Phil Wilson is the guy who introduced "free hits" into the Parker Sisters' Monopoly League? Later, Phil became a private detective and no one could find him for years and years. At the memorial service, he told a story about how — when they were almost youngsters — John had stepped in front of a gun for him — several times — when they were confronted by a young gang following a professional baseball game. (Go figure. This led to Phil's life-long love of baseball.) Kevin Locke told about how John and he had driven more than three hours to find me on my 50th birthday on a float trip in the Ozarks. Then they turned around and drove home — mission accomplished — through one of the most horrific storms in years.. Larry Ryan talked about how John was always so good to talk to at parties. He was always so interested in what you had to say.

To tell you the truth, I hardly ever even noticed that. I hardly noticed anything. I took him absolutely for granted. And I'm still pretty proud of it.

Here's the song I sang at his memorial service. It's called "The Parting Glass. "

Oh, all the money e'r I had,
I spent it in good company.
And all the harm I've ever done,
alas it was to none but me.
And all I've done for want of wit,
to memory now I can't recall.
So fill to me the parting glass.
Goodnight, and joy be with you all.

Oh, all the comrades e'r I had,
they're sorry for my going away.
And all the sweethearts e'r I had,
they wish me one more day to stay.
But since it falls unto my lot,
that I should rise, and you should not.
I gently rise and softly call,
Goodnight, and joy be with you all.

Goodnight.

Steve McCue
10-11-98

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:46 am](#) said:

This email was sent to the Togo Mailing List

Date: Sat, 29 Aug 1998 10:52:17 -0400
From: Peter Nerone
Subject: John Elmer

Please join me in a moment of reflexion to celebrate the life of John Elmer (Animal Traction, Baga, 1983-86) whodied in his sleep Wednesday night [8/26/98]. Many of you will remember him as Fr.John, Rev., or Homer.

We'll fondly remember the lighter side of John. While stationed in Baga John hosted many Saturday night confessions and Sunday morning breakfasts. He mapped out wiffle golf course at his home, named it Bagausta, and hosted a PC Togo rendition of the Masters tournament on Easter Sunday 1995. The prize being the Ugly Green Jacket, a plaid, top rack special from a Dead Yovo market. Accounts of the first match can be found in an underground newsletter called Pas LeGriot. (Last I heard John still had one of the original seven copies)

John presided over my first wedding one Sunday morning at Baga. (one marriage, now 14 years and counting, but it took three ceremonies to satisfy friends, family, tradition, and the embassy) he also servedas my Chief of Staff during my term in office of the Volunteer Council. I've had the pleasure to meet many of his brothers and sisters and introduce him to mine. We've enjoyed some

memorable baseball games in Chicago and Cincinnati and some priceless weekends at the Howell Living History farm in New Jersey.

John's life was not all fun and games. He worked very hard at making contact with people around the world. He had a gift for putting people at ease and extracting their better side. I've never seen a fight in John's presence. I've never met a person that couldn't shed their emotional armor and let out their inner soul with John. He has touched people's lives on every continent thru his work with the Peace Corps and Children International.

I remember grieving with John the terrible deaths of Jim Woods and Jenny Rubin. Some will say a part of John died with Woody and Jenny, John believed that we all gained parts of Woody and Jenny that lived on thru our own lives. A part of John will live on thru us now. Peace and love, Homer, thanks for sharing your journey and soul with us. We'll meet again.

[Reply](#)



pwl, on [February 22, 2009 at 10:47 am](#) said:

This email was sent to the Togo Mailing List

Date: Mon, 31 Aug 1998
From: Garth Vant- Hul
Subject: John Elmer

John Elmer was one of the truest and kindest souls I've ever known. For a few years following my COS, John was my touchstone to sanity in what seemed like an insane America. And although in the past few years our correspondence was reduced to letters every eight or nine months, his were always the kind of letter than *lasts* for that long (as others who were lucky enough to be on his mailing list know). John took me to a Royals game in early April, 1992, and got out of the way of a foul line drive off of David Segui's bat that then smacked off the heel of my hand and into John's lap. Now John loved his baseball and his little house was full of souvenirs—ticket stubs and such—but you wouldn't have known how much he'd've liked to keep that ball when you saw the way he turned around and gave it to the kid sitting behind us. It's very hard to accept that he's not there. John is (damn, was) the person I'd think of calling were my marriage feeling shaky or my spirit low (or my fantasy baseball team in last place). And the remarkable thing is that I'm pretty sure I'm not alone in feeling that way—I think a lot of us got considerable comfort from knowing he was there.

And now he's not.

(In case John is wired to the web)
Thank you, Homer, we love you.

[Reply](#)

Contributions in John's memory may be made to St. Vincent's Share Program, Children International, 2000 E. Red Bridge Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64131. St. Vincent's is a local day-care for underprivileged children financially supported by Children International.