

Little Peace Corps

Quakers Helped Show the Government How It's Done

By **FREDERICK PILLSBURY**

WHEN the Kennedy Administration started to organize the Peace Corps in the early days of the New Frontier it needed a lot of advice. Naturally, the American Friends Service Committee here in Philadelphia was one of the first organizations it turned to.

For not only did AFSC have years of experience helping people in remote corners of the world but, by the fall of 1960, it already had made quiet plans for a little peace corps of its own.

Today the U. S. Peace Corps, backed by the enormous resources of the Federal Government, has nearly 700 volunteers serving in 11 countries and expects

to have 2,000 overseas by August.

The Friends' program, VISA (for Voluntary International Service Assignments), financed entirely by private contributions, maintains 40 volunteers in nine countries, and hopes to have 60 to 65 overseas by summer.

So in size there is not much comparison between the two organizations.

But VISA volunteers could make one boast: they were first in the field, getting to Africa on July 19, 1961, almost two months before the first corpsmen.

Boasting, however, is something VISA personnel don't do. They are not even particularly anxious to have publicity, since they are afraid it might interfere with their work. And they feel nothing but good will toward the Peace Corps anyway.

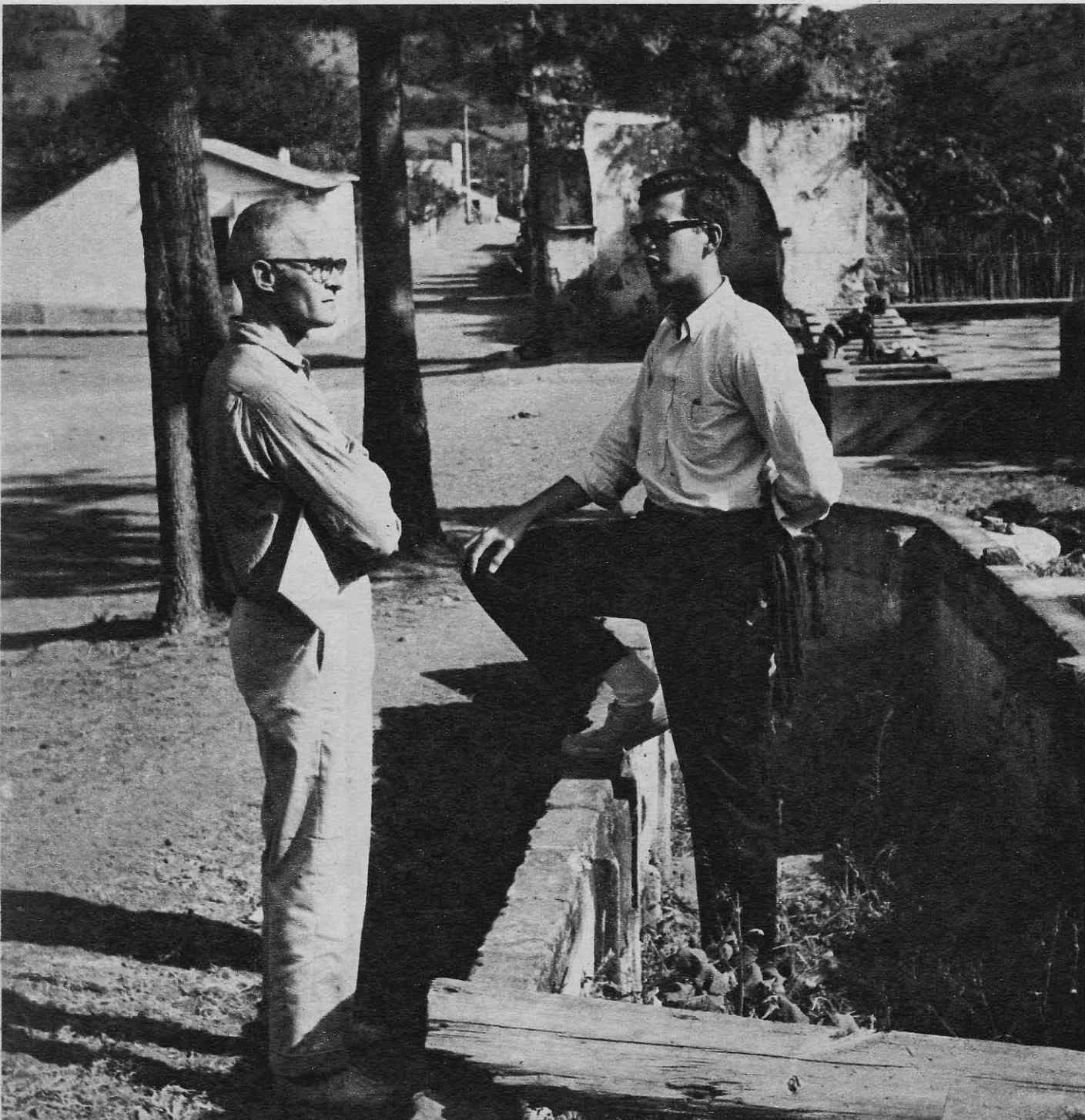
"We wouldn't want anybody to get the idea that we consider ourselves rivals to the Peace Corps," VISA director Eric W. Johnson said recently. "They're good friends of ours; the American Friends Service Committee testified in their favor before Congress. We approve of what they are doing and are entirely ready to make all of our experience available to them."

Johnson, a small, spare, 43-year old schoolteacher and writer (*How to Live Through Junior High School*), is on a year's leave of absence from his regular job as principal of Germantown Friends Junior High School. His office, in the youth section of AFSC headquarters at 150 N. 15th st., is, perhaps, typical of the VISA operation. It is windowless and just large enough to hold a desk, a typewriter and two chairs—functional and frugal.

"We sometimes are asked why, if our missions are similar, we didn't join forces with the Peace Corps," Johnson continued. "In the early days, as a matter of fact, the Peace Corps discussed with us proposals for participation with them, and we said we would consider accepting funds as long as there were no strings attached.

"Inevitably, though, a government program involves restrictions on operation—restrictions such as loyalty oaths, security clearance, congressional approval, and the calculation of what is politically possible. Any appointee of the U. S. Government is in sense a representative of his government. VISA volunteers are not official, and they represent nothing official. They are amateurs—in a sense they are ambassadors of something totally non-governmental."

"Besides, we see a clear task and peculiar job for the voluntary agency. For example, we are both (VISA and the Peace Corps) working in Tanganyika. The Peace Corps has one type of job: helping the country provide itself with roads. We have another job: community development."



VISA director Eric Johnson, visiting in Guatemala, sees volunteer Norris Lyle, Episcopal Academy graduate.



William S. Coward

Getting in shape: Christopher Ward, of Germantown, and Brian Selander, Houston Tex., in Friends warehouse.



Duty overseas comes in many forms. For Garry Thomas, of Newtown, Bucks County, it's a soccer game with youths in Tanganyikan village. Garry works in a community center, organizing activities for young people. He won friends in village by living on equal basis with another VISA worker, a Negro.

A further advantage of being separate from the government program, Johnson said, is that VISA can offer alternative service to conscientious objectors, something the Peace Corps cannot do.

"We now have a number of volunteers who are conscientious objectors," he said. "Some are Quakers and some are not. Some Quakers, you know, are not conscientious objectors, and in fact only nine of our volunteers are Quakers."

Johnson was chary of discussing costs. He did say, though, that a VISA volunteer can be kept in the field for about \$3,000 a year, a remarkably low sum.

It is undoubtedly much less than what the Peace Corps must pay, but there are good reasons for this: VISA depends on much free help, gives its volunteers only \$10 a month allowance, and expects them to contribute at least \$25 to the program when they sign up, and buy their own equipment.

A VISA candidate must be between 21 and 30 and pass a series of fairly rugged academic and physical tests. Applicants (there have been at least five for every opening), come to Philadelphia for two days of interviews with VISA officials, representatives of the Society of Friends, a physician and a psychiatrist.

"They have to show us they want to learn, that they can communicate easily, and have the ability to take up an unusual language—Arabic or Creole or Swahili or Tamil, perhaps," said Johnson.

"They must be highly motivated to serve—you might call it spiritual motivation, although this is by no means a missionary organization. They have to be well-adjusted and resilient, because

what they will be doing and seeing will be very different from anything they have experienced before. They don't have to have special skills or be experts in anything, but they do have to be resourceful and capable of improvising.

"We expect our volunteers to live in the same style as the people they serve—no servants—and they walk places. Naturally we do require adequate health precautions, which usually means that our volunteers do not live at the level of the poorest villagers. There's no point to sending a volunteer to Tanganyika or Haiti only to have him spend his time sick in bed."

JOHNSON said the volunteers themselves, as a matter of policy and preference, have sought the company of natives rather than Europeans. In Haiti, where he visited in November, he found that the five VISA volunteers there were the first non-missionary Americans who lived with the Haitians in their villages. In a place where one can hire servants for a few cents a week, volunteers resolutely do their own cooking and washing. As a result, they are accepted, as wealthier people seldom are.

In Guatemala, where he also visited, Johnson found Richard Forman, a Haverford College graduate and Penn Ph.D., happily residing in a corner of one room of the house of a village school-teacher, amidst a lively family.

"It was like living in a goldfish bowl," Johnson said, "and he was a curiosity everywhere he went. But, because he has lived like the villagers, he has won their respect—and learned to respect them, too."

In Tanganyika, which has the largest VISA delegation (11), two volunteers

became sort of a local legend simply by living in the same house. One, Anthony Henry, from Houston, Texas, is a Negro. The other, Garry Thomas, from Newtown, Pa., is white.

"The villagers assumed at first that Tony was Garry's 'boy' or servant," Johnson said. "When they learned they were equal partners and friends they told them: 'If you can live together as brothers, you can be brothers with us.'"

Men and women who are accepted (both sexes are about equally represented in VISA), undergo six weeks of orientation, most of it in Philadelphia, before going on to their assignments. They live at Pendle Hill, a pleasant, 18-acre Quaker study center at Wallingford. They don't get much time to wander about the grounds, however. They spend much of it taking intensive language courses.

They are required to work with their hands, too. A typical chore is packing clothing at the AFSC warehouse at 23d and Arch sts. Johnson explained:

"One of the reasons we have them work in the warehouse is so we can observe them under conditions of monotony, and give them some insight about intellectually dull work. They will be doing pretty humble jobs, on the whole, and it's important that they be able to take it. We also try to have them work on a Quaker project such as that in an underprivileged area of Harlem where they may do such things as clearing a playground of rubbish.

"While in New York they also spend two or three days talking with people at the United Nations who come from the country they are going to work in. Later they go to Washington for three or four days for briefings by the State Department, their own congressmen and the

Friends Committee on National Legislation.

"They will, of course, be asked a great many questions about America when they go abroad—about race relations, capitalism, and how our government works—and we want them to be informed. We don't give them any formal physical training, as the Peace Corps does, because we haven't found it necessary. Basically, their jobs involve working with people."

The work the volunteers do abroad varies from place to place. Diana Mergentime, from New York, and Anne Fiero, from Brewster, N. Y., are assisting a surgeon in South India who specializes in rehabilitating lepers.

David Preston, of Swarthmore, also is in South India. He teaches at a Ramakrishna (Hindu) mission school. Members of the Haiti group, which includes Paula Gerenbeck, of Bryn Mawr, and Martha Nugent, of Reading, are building rammed-earth buildings and are working with village women on child care, sanitation, health and literacy projects.

And what they do off the job is important, too. Garry Thomas, in Tanganyika, for instance, became a very popular figure when he joined a local soccer team.

Johnson, who has served the AFSC in Portugal, Morocco, Algeria, India and France, said that VISA developed because the Friends wanted to help underdeveloped nations emerge "in a peaceful and constructive way."

"We are not interested in promoting America in a propaganda sense, but we are interested in having people understand each other, and America today is one of the most misunderstood places in the world."