

## Ethiopia Still Haunts Me

Charles J. Krumbein  
March 2023

As a place where I lived for five years and where I began my seven-year UMUC teaching career, Kagnev Station in what was then Ethiopia still lives vividly in my mind, even though I have not physically been there since 1974. I have daily family reminders with a wife of almost fifty-two years who was born there and two sons who are both just over fifty years old who were both born there as well. In addition, my home in Madison is replete with other kinds of “souvenirs” of my time spent there. A crude stringed instrument hangs on a hook in the dining room. A small drum sits atop the entertainment center. A kitchen shelf sports a lineup of a tea pot and matching glasses with Coptic cross designs, next to a clay coffee maker, and a couple of olive-wood items with embedded porcupine quills that would be familiar to anyone who has ever been there. I also have a large clock in my bedroom that was made there using the same olive-wood-with-quills composition as its frame. In my closet stand two heavy carved wooden statues, one of them purchased from a former Marylander colleague, the late Ted Sullinger, who taught a sociology class that I took at Kagnev Station for three of the eighteen credits I earned by taking six courses with UMUC. Traces of my time on the Horn of Africa are still a vital part of my life.

When I showed this memoir title to my son Christopher, he immediately cautioned me about the possible negative connotations of the verb “haunts”. But I assured him that given where this memoir ends up, that that word is indeed exactly the right one. I trust that any readers of this document will ultimately agree with me. However, there are a few intervening steps along the way that must come first. For example, I am a participant in a writing group that does shared letters a couple of times a year and has been doing so since 1975. Sometimes we write updates of what is going on in our lives. On other occasions, one of us will suggest a theme and invite the rest of the group to demonstrate how it is appropriate to each one’s individual life. The group is currently scattered across the whole United States: one in northern California, one in Idaho, one in Salt Lake City, one in Fort Worth, one in Little Rock, myself in Wisconsin, one in Clarksville, Tennessee, one in Virginia, one in Maryland, one in Providence, Rhode Island, and our editor in Oxford, Massachusetts. (By the way, our correspondent in Virginia is Fran Sullinger, who was my ESO at Kagnev Station, who encouraged me to apply to teach for UMUC.) This group originated at Kagnev Station when we got together and created a base literary magazine that ran for a couple of years named “both/and” (my title). We solicited poetry, essays, short stories, artwork and photographs from the base personnel and then edited the magazine and sold it in front of the PX. UMUC’s very own Dr. Julian Jones even contributed an essay entitled “Passau Has Been Neglected” at one point. We also email one another fairly regularly just to stay in touch.

Other connections arise on a more irregular basis, such as when Ethiopia turns up on the nightly news. During the severe famine of the late 1980s and into the 1990s, that seemed to be almost constantly. I also find myself seeking out online news from both there and Eritrea from time to time, only to find less happy information than its hoped-for opposite. My wife Toni still has family there that she calls every once in a while and gives me updates of a more personal sort. Further, on two occasions, I was suddenly swept back to Kagnev Station completely out of the blue. One afternoon, I was sitting in my college office in Iowa and my phone rang. To my surprise, it was a former Kagnev Marylander student of mine, a naval chief petty officer who had taken three classes from me there. He just got curious one day and decided to see if he could track me down. I was glad

that he did. On one more such occasion, I answered my phone and another former student and fellow soldier from Kagnev Station who was living in Oregon was on the line. We talked for half an hour, we hung up flushed with dredging up plenty of pleasant memories, and within six months he passed away from AIDS. I was so glad that I had not missed his call that day or he may have given up trying. That sub-Saharan base has made strong ties that have endured for over fifty years, some only in fleeting memory now.

So eventually I settled into teaching at Clinton Community College in the city of that same name in Iowa for a stint that lasted twenty-five years. I taught everything from composition courses to technical writing, from creative writing to humanities, from film survey courses to many different literature ones. I always began my first day of class in every course by writing my name on the board, reading out the class lists to check attendance, handing out and going over syllabi, cracking open the textbooks (well, the student ones cracked at least), and then saving the final ten minutes to give details of my personal bio to get all of those sorts of questions out of the way once and for all. Such a sequence is likely quite familiar to anyone who has ever stood at the head of a classroom.

All of those steps usually went smoothly, except when I tried to do them without first preparing myself. On one such occasion, I was running late after driving over 100 miles to get to the school on a first day, rushing to my office to drop off my coat, going to the main office to pick up the class lists from my mail box, and then trying to wing it from there. I am pretty capable of deciphering and pronouncing student names, but on this occasion I was caught off-guard by checking off names in a full classroom and doing well until I hit a name near the end of the roster that I shall always remember: a young lady named Teresa Titley. That was a no-win situation. A female teacher may have been better able to handle that, but I defy any male teacher to do so and not break the whole class into laughter directed at said unprepared teacher. The only other time that I became flustered was when the school's admission sadists saddled me with not one, not two, but three sets of identical twins in the same room. Even by the end of the term, I still could not tell one twin from the other because they always moved around the room, something that they had deviously practiced all through elementary and high school to bedevil their teachers, one group of them at a time. Having three sets of twins together probably never happened before, so they took delight in making my eight a.m. composition class a regular challenge from the moment I took attendance (or tried to) through to my having to call on them for responses, or again when they had questions. Perhaps some of my UMUC colleagues had similar fates to endure.

As mentioned, I stayed on that job for over half of my forty plus-year career. During that time, I even created an entirely original course from scratch entitled "Humor and American Popular Culture" and got it passed into the district-wide curriculum. I was most proud of developing and then teaching that class. One of my students in my initial offering of that class in 1992, a woman named Anne, was also the head secretary to the college president. She could take that course as it was being offered one night per week from 6pm to 9pm (and what fond memories of long-ago UMUC evenings that evoked) and so it did not interfere with her day job. When it came time to delivering my usual bio, including my time teaching in Ethiopia for almost five years, she suddenly perked up. At the break halfway through the session, she came up to me and asked if I was free in the next day or so to stop by her office. My curiosity was piqued. When I went to the president's office, she had some old photographs to share. One was of a black man standing in her family kitchen with an apron on and doing the dishes. She said, "He would be very embarrassed by this photo." One more was a family Thanksgiving gathering with this same man smiling at the table. Still another was of him seated on the floor opening Christmas presents, surrounded by her white family. She then went on to tell me

the story behind the photos. Back in 1964, her father was stationed at the Savanna Army Depot, across the Mississippi River in western Illinois, and about twenty-five miles north of Clinton. On the day before Thanksgiving, he was getting ready to come home for the long weekend holiday and noticed this one black man sitting all alone and looking very despondent. He asked the soldier what was wrong and why he was not getting ready to leave the base. It turned out that this man had no place to go for the holiday. Being a fairly liberal lowan, Anne's father invited this black soldier to join him for Thanksgiving. That began a relationship that lasted through the black soldier's time at Savanna.

Anne also informed me that this soldier was her senior prom date in the spring, a situation that must have caused quite a stir at her mostly white high school. She then informed me that this black soldier was from Ethiopia. When she told me his name, I just about collapsed right then and there. Her father's new friend and her prom date was none other than Mengistu Haile Mariam—the country's just deposed dictator in 1991, but whose bloody consolidation of power in 1977 began with the creation of the Ethiopian Red Terror that eliminated by force any foolhardy rivals, and whose later cruel policies as leader of the Russian-and Cuban-supported Dergue had not only brought about the deaths of an estimated two million Ethiopians during the famine of the 1980's, but who also had personally himself been the rumored assassin by strangulation of H.I.M. Haile Selassie II in 1975!

I am not a Rastafarian by any stretch of the imagination, but I had once met their saint and shaken his hand when he came in 1968 to the University of Asmara to award personally all diplomas to my students and then to shake the hands of the faculty at that institution. It is in moments like this, when students I had later, tell me of these unusual connections, that Ethiopia still haunts me. I still sense its shadow looming over me to this day almost fifty years after I last set foot in UMUC's only sub-Saharan base.



Mengistu Haile Mariam