

Letter to US from Charlie Cobb on his trip to Vietnam

Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
March 16, 1967

Dear Ethel,

This letter is really for SNCC staff and for you to use in whatever way you want under AFRAMEERICAN NEWS. It's from the diary I'm keeping.

Julius and I arrived this morning from Paris at 9 A.M. temp. was 80 and getting hotter. We had some trouble with visas because our names had been mis-spelled so we weren't expected----- and because we were "Americans" therefore not to be liked, and certainly not to be trusted and to be given a hard time. We got over the hump by explaining what we were here for and were placed on a bus which carried us into town.

We got a look at the countryside through the bus window. It looks like the Mississippi delta----- it really does, only wetter; but I knew that I had traveled the roads and paths and fields I saw. The houses of course were differently styled but still share cropper shacks in the Mekong Delta.

The people in the countryside have very sad eyes and work very hard. They are also a very brown people--- some almost black. They would look into the bus as it passed with a hard-to-take mixture of deference and hate. On top of the difficulty at the airport, the ugliness of being "American" was driven home.

There is no poverty as ugly and oppressive as urban poverty. Phnom Penh is the capitol city of Cambodia, which is governed by a prince. While I grew up in the urban east of the U.S. which is perhaps the center of urban poverty in the U. S., there is nothing quite like what I've seen this day in Phnom Penh.

Julius was offered a girl before he got out of the bus here in the city. Getting into the hotel was a matter of constantly shaking your head saying no to people approaching you with various hustles and "services".

What cuts most is the children: asleep in alleys, begging in the streets; working in some of the dingiest, dirty places in the city.

The city smells of urine, rotting food, and sweat. There is not enough of anything basic and what there is is ridiculously high. We walked around at midday with camera equipment probably worth more than the yearly income of most of the people we saw. We went back to our room to leave it there.

It is difficult being considered American, which here in Phnom Penh is a very negative thing and language is a major handicap in overcoming it. Tell C. Cox that even in these few days across the water there is absolutely no question in my mind as to the validity and necessity of an international school,---- especially in terms of French which is spoken everywhere.

Our difficulty in handling ourselves stems from lack of nuance, which exists because of the language barriers. We can deal with some basic things like directions or courtesy, or food, through gesture, a smile, a smattering of french. But that's all. The fact of our being in a city ---- a garrish, europeanized city at that---- makes this even more difficult and especially since we are on our own and just passing through for a day or so.

The war seems and is very close. The Cambodian/Vietnam border is only 36 miles away. Just walking through the city I can sense the fact of war, and we are considered (and we are in fact) aggressors. There has been bombing on the Cambodian side of the border, which is a major factor in Cambodian anti-americanism. So, while nobody yet has yelled "Yankee go home", the fact of war can be felt.

Tomorrow we leave for the north. We had hoped to get into the south but a major push taking place there makes that impossible and the whole area is sealed off. We expect to be north for about a month, and you won't be hearing from us while we're there, but will write you as soon as we can.

We will be traveling, looking at the effects of the war; particularly investigating U. S. war crimes. Also will be engaged in extensive dialogue re: parallels of our two (not independent of each other i feel) struggles and generally getting a sense of what the country aspires to be.

Hopefully, if we can dig up the money and or contacts we will travel in Africa during the late Spring.

i want to see if i can arrange for official SNCC delegation to come to the north independent of any other group. Same thing in terms of Africa.... that is if we can hold ourselves together as an organization.

You can send mail to me marked "hold for arrival" c/o Elizabeth Dougherty 3 Rue Jacques Callot, Paris 6 France. It's important that Betty's name appear on it.

I have in my pocket 800 Riels (Cambodian) which is worth all of about \$7. It's frustrating having that much money and no money, except that \$7 is a lot of bread here in Cambodia.

Tell Fay to hang on and maybe i'll get somebody from the NLF to help her out.

Our flite to the north will be 6 hrs., traveling across Laos with one stop in Vietienne (sp.) on an ICC plane.

The French are no good (why is another letter) and i've built up a prejudice that will last a lifetime.

HELLO TO EVERYBODY.

Regards,

Charlie

397-8397