

Africa Trip Report
1/30/12 – 2/11/12
Shawn Graber

What a boring beginning to an exciting tale!

Far, Far away in a land called Ghana, an energetic team bursts into action at the crack of dawn. Well, perhaps “bursting” is the wrong verb. This being Workday 3, (where have YOU been?) the team oozes out of bed to get some breakfast. Today’s menu is oatmeal pancakes, sausage, and fruit. This is prepared by the ladies at 6:15am and served at 6:45am. This time, I’ve successfully managed to open my water bag without squirting water up my nose. Any kind of downside experienced by squirting water bags is easily negated by the upside of the fruit here. I’m a lover of fruit but I fear I’ll never again be able to enjoy bananas, pineapples, and mangos back in the states. The specimens here are approximately 347 times better.

The team meets for devotions after breakfast. A different person is in charge of devotions each morning, and today’s leader is John Horst. He speaks about God’s greatness, as portrayed in Isaiah 40. This is a passage I’ve heard many times, but it’s exactly what I needed to hear today. God continues to provide exactly what I need, when I need it.

At the worksite, the team resumes where we left off yesterday evening: manufacturing and placing rafters on the Crusades for Christ building. The main wood used here is asa, and it is very hard and heavy. There are many hands to move the rafters, so things are going fairly smoothly. Alongside the workers from Pennsylvania and Iowa are several Ghanaian workers. Isaac, Paul and Kofi patiently endure the strange Americans. Nelson Shirk from Pennsylvania lends ready hands to the work, which is helpful since Tim Lapp has left for home. Tim had been here for two weeks prior to our arrival, and he worked with us the first day before taking off.

The work is intense but there are many breaks. There is only one electric saw, so the angle-cut rafters are produced slowly. So the work is 5 minutes of strenuous effort and then 10 minutes of rest, waiting for the next rafter. Pastors Felix, Joseph, and Isaac lend their hands to the work, and the mood is light. The girls are along today to do some painting.

Lunch is served at noon. Today we get tuna sandwiches, plantain chips, Snappy’s (peanut snacks), bananas and apples, brownies, and Fandango, which is a citrus fruit drink in a plastic pouch. We have to wait on some more lumber to arrive, since we’ve depleted the supply we had. While waiting on the lumber, Jeremy Schlabach pulled out a pouch of beef jerky and fed Pastor Isaac some. After cautiously testing it, he began to eat the jerky with great enthusiasm. I asked, “Pastor Isaac, do you like beef jerky?” He replied, “No, I do not like it. I LOVE IT!”

During lunch breaks at the work site, we kick off our shoes and relax. Stories and jokes are shared, Iowans teasing Pennsylvanians and vice versa.

So what brought 9 Pennsylvanians and 2 Iowans to Ghana, Africa? Allow me to fill in a few blanks with some history. I was informed of the opportunity to travel to Ghana shortly after New Year's Day. My pastor announced there was a need for workers to help erect the roof on the Crusades for Christ International Bible Institute (CFCBI) building located near Nsawam, Ghana. The trip was imminent: the group planned to leave January 17th. Although I was unsure, I told my pastor I was interested in going. A few days later, I was told the trip date was changed to January 30th. By now I knew God wanted me to go, but the extra weeks to prepare were a blessing. It was also a blessing for my companion, Jeremy Schlabach. He stated his interest in going along but had no passport. God provided in His sovereign way and Jeremy received his passport and visa in a timely fashion.

Laden with luggage and totes filled with missionary supplies, we drove to the Cedar Rapids airport on January 30th. Customs eyeballed the totes and luggage, but seemed satisfied enough after they confiscated my suntan lotion and Jeremy's aerosol body spray. I dubbed myself "Burnt" and Jeremy "Smelly" and we were on our way.

Jeremy and I (the two handsome Iowans) flew first to Detroit, Michigan, then to JFK International Airport in New York. We met the rest of the team there: Jon Horst, Eric Hershberger, Preston and Kendrick Weaver, Tim and Mike Martin, Annie and Tyler Esh, and Stephanie Greiner. This humorous hodgepodge of helpful humanity hailed from Pennsylvania. From JFK, we flew straight to Accra, Ghana. After a ten-hour flight and a six-hour time zone change, (one hour from IA to NY, five hours from NY to...whatever Ghana's abbreviation is) our team arrived in Africa. Although it was a balmy 53° F in Iowa when we left, nobody was prepared for the waves of heat that assaulted us when we stepped off the plane onto the tarmac. We went through the terminal, collected our mountains of luggage and totes, and were soon on our way.

It is the dry season in Ghana. One of the first things I noticed was a smog-like haze hanging over Accra, thanks to Harmattan. Oh, you've never heard of it? Well neither had I, until I saw it with my very own eyes. Harmattan is the annual event where sand blows from the Sahara Desert and gets suspended in the atmosphere, where it drifts around like an unwelcome relative. Harmattan can last up to three months, and things get very dusty. Ghana has no desert of its own, so it's kind of North Africa to share their desert with us.

Our team was greeted at the airport by Jon & Sara Sauder (a wonderful missionary couple that lives here) and some of their friends. They drove us to their home where most of the team sleeps. The rest of our team was auctioned off and the highest bidders were Ron & Audrey

Bontrager. I was one of those selected (only kidding about the auctioning) to stay at Ron & Audrey's, and SO FAR they are fantastic people. Only time will tell if they can survive eleven days with a pile of Pennsylvanians and still smile. (Heh heh, this is what happens when an Iowan volunteers to record the accounts of the trip and the Pennsylvanians don't object.)

We eat our meals at Jon & Sarah's. Sara, Annie, and Stephanie cook enormous piles of food for us unmannered men. They also pack coolers of food for us to take to the work site for lunches. We may be messy, but we are very thankful.

Despite the dust of Harmattan, Ghana is very humid. Despite the humidity of Ghana, the country is currently in desperate need of rain, as some wells (Including Jon's) are dry. Despite the dry wells, our group showers each day after work and has plenty of drinking water (Thirty 500ml bags of drinking water costs a little over one cedi, which is roughly \$0.75) Despite my teasing of Pennsylvanians, I actually don't mind them and find them to be an enjoyable bunch.

As I had mentioned before, we ran out of wood, not unlike a tribe of industrious beavers. Jon and Kofi fetched more, and while they were gone we worked with what we had. There was cleaning to do, cutting shims for rafter adjustment, and splashing people with water bags. You know, serious stuff.

The wood arrived but before we can use it for rafters it must be coated in creosote, or something like creosote. They mix up a concoction of turpentine, diesel, and other chemicals. They take this mixture and spray it all over the lumber. The end product smells like diesel fuel but it protects against termites. Termites in Ghana are not the teeny, invisible wood-nibblers that Iowa has. Ghana termites are ravenous beasts that devour any and every scrap of wood in their vast domain. Ron mentioned that all light wood and paper is just a snack for these villainous creatures. Now, you may think this is all just a prime example of hyperbole, but if you were to behold a termite hill here, it would not be difficult for you to believe the power of these termites. The termite hills are nothing short of spectacular. These bug mansions, built from the red soil found everywhere, tower out of the ground, sometimes up to 18 feet high. When you break open the mound, the interior is cool and moist with thousands of networks and tunnels. To get to this moist, soft interior, you must first carve through the granite-like exterior with pickaxes. Initially, I had no desire to go near these formidable hills, break them open, and offend the ravenous beasts. Thanks to the healthy dose of curiosity the Lord bestowed upon me, this is exactly what I ended up doing. Several of us men destroyed a very small 3ft hill that was growing behind the CFC building, and took great delight in seeing the millions of termites (about the size of ants) scurry around. The hill was sprayed with chemicals to kill the termites, which tried to escape by attaching to our pant legs. Mennonites are not supposed to dance, but I believe there are certain extenuating circumstances that allow certain dance-like behavior, and this was one of those times. After that victory, we proceeded to an 8ft

termite hill that was just outside the compound wall. We threw our strength into our pickaxe swings, but we did nothing except scratch the surface of the mound, which turned out to be about the hardness of petrified oak. After a few discouraging attempts to crack open the exterior, we abandoned the quest. The only way to deal with those termites would be a crate of dynamite.

Saturday has come and we are headed to Cape Coast for a day of sightseeing. Swinging bridges are on the agenda, as well as time at the beach. We woke up at 6am and were on the road by 6:30. Normally, this is not acceptable behavior for a Saturday, but more time at the beach will be nice. Light traffic in key areas has already shaved an hour off our travel time. For this I am most grateful, because although I love road trips and the scenery is fascinating, this African van was not built for my American-sized body.

Breakfast was eaten in the van, and we had devotions from I Peter 2:9, a verse that encourages us to be different than the world. That's easy enough in Africa, but am I really doing that back at home?

The street vendors clamor around the van at spots where the traffic is slow. They sell food, trinkets, toys, and just about anything else you could imagine, including bolts of cloth. A soccer ball was bought for 12 cedis, and I purchased a giant, glossy map of Ghana for 5 cedis. I have no idea how I'll transport it home, since it is large even when it's rolled up. 😊

After a lengthy drive, we stopped in at Jon & Juanita Groff's farm in Elmina. Now for those of you following along at home, this is the third Jon to enter this account. So let me clear all the confusion. Jon Horst is Jon Groff's brother-in-law, Jon Sauder and Jon Groff live here in Ghana but Jon Horst lives in Pennsylvania. Jon G is Juanita's husband, Jon H is Juanita's brother, Jon S is not related to Juanita in any way, but they are friends. While we were running around the farm, I clumsily backed into Juanita while she was holding a cup of coffee. She spilled some nice hot coffee on my back, which made her feel bad but made me smell better, so it was all good. Our next plan was to traverse some rickety swinging bridges, so when we departed, we left Eric at Jon & Juanita's per his request that he not be included in the upcoming activity.

After another hour or so on the road, we arrived at the Kakum National Park. Thanks to the local Bediwonua trees that grow in this forest, the park has no mosquitoes. The sap in these trees is a natural repellent. At first we were skeptical, but there were truly no mosquitoes in the forest. There were plenty of other evil, biting insects to fill the void, but that's beside the point. A 15-minute hike on a well-worn path brought us to the swinging bridges that the park is famous for. Our male team members attacked the swaying, twisting bridges with zest, while the female members used a more sensible, steady approach. The bridges, attached to the tops of the taller trees, soared above the jungle canopy below. I estimate we were approximately

100ft above the forest floor, which would have allowed for a decently long prayer if one of us were to fall off. I feel very much at home at precarious heights, so I found the entire adventure exhilarating.

On the mountain trail down to the park office and the parking lot, vendors were selling drinks to tourists visiting the canopy bridges. Feeling thirsty, Annie purchased a drink from the vendors. After one sip, Annie realized it was NOT the pineapple drink she had expected. It turned out to be palm wine, which has a fermented apple juice/vinegar taste. We all had a good chuckle at her misfortune, and passed the bizarre drink around for a taste. Just another unique Ghana experience...

From Kakum we headed to the beach. I had been forewarned by my parents that some Ghana beaches are pretty trashy, since beaches aren't really cleaned like they are in Sarasota. We caught glimpses of the Atlantic Ocean as we drove, but it was over an hour before we got to Kiki's, a small resort nestled on a grassy hill overlooking the Atlantic ocean. Kiki's had rooms to rent, which is what a friendly group of Austrian retiree's had already done. We rented a room in order to change into some swimming clothes. The view of the Atlantic from the resort would be breathtaking, would it not be for the obstruction of a tall fence made by wooden logs. Once we opened the gate in the fence, an amazing sight greeted us: the powerful Atlantic surging onto a long stretch of soft, clean sand. This beach is pretty tricky to get to, so it was nearly empty. Without hesitation, I charged into the ocean at full speed and was rewarded with warm water and a mouthful of salt. To my delight, large waves roared toward me. This, along with warm water, is the perfect combination. The Pacific Ocean has large waves, but the water has all the warmth of "a tin toilet seat on the shady side of an iceberg", to use my brother-in-law's phrase. Conversely, the Gulf of Mexico's water does not feel like a freshly-melted iceberg, but it is difficult to find a decent wave. The waves that crashed around me now were nothing special in the eyes of a surfer but they were plenty large for my purposes. Diving in front of a wave and having it scoop you up and plow you towards the shore is an activity I enjoy immensely. After several successful runs, I felt that I had mastered the Atlantic. Sensing my vanity, the Atlantic sent me a particularly large wave. With full confidence, I dove right in front of the wave and waited for it to push me toward land. Instead, the wave scooped me up like a piece of driftwood and slammed me, chin-first, into the sandy ocean floor. Last time I checked, I was not made to be an undersea plow. I was given an impressive red rash on the end of my chin, gulped in some nasty saltwater in my surprise, but otherwise was good to go. I continued to play in the ocean, but it was not the last time a wave got the best of me. The other guys were playing some tackle football on the sand, so I joined in for a while. I was completely soaked so it made it very difficult for the others to grip me, but it also made it very difficult for me to grip the football. After several touchdowns by both teams, we all ran into the ocean for some wave riding.

Supper was on the way, so we were called out of the ocean to get ready. What had once been a dashing group of young men now looked like a various assortment of wrinkly prunes. We washed as much sand and salt off as we could and gathered in a large outdoor pavilion. A local man catered in some fantastic food, and we soon devoured large quantities of chicken or fish,

depending on what we ordered. I ordered the fish and chips, which came with some delicious seasoned vegetables. The chips were fried potato slices, which were excellent as well. Back at home, I eat more than my fair share of French fries, so it was good to experience fries from a different continent. The fish I got was tremendous. They cook the entire thing from head to tail, eyes included. There were many tiny hair-like bones that had to be picked out, but the meat was tender and packed with flavor, so it was worth the work. The whole meal cost 23 cedis, or roughly \$15.

After the stupendous meal, we packed our salty, stuffed, exhausted bodies into the van for the trip back to Jon & Sara's. The traffic seemed just as heavy at night as it was in the day, but with the added peril of vehicles without working taillights. There were also vehicles broken down right in the middle of the lane that nobody bothered to move to the side or leave the lights on. We had to keep our eyes peeled for such obstacles as we whisked along through the night. We arrived safely at Jon's around 10:30pm, minus Jon Horst, who stayed with his sister and her family in Cape Coast.

On Sunday morning, we attended a church service where Pastor Steven gave an excellent message on Matthew 5. Eric had devotions with Steven translating, and there was some rousing praise and worship. The whole service was loud and colorful, and I enjoyed it very much. It is an amazing experience to praise God alongside people from an entirely different culture. Many of the songs were foreign to me but we sang "Lord Prepare Me to be a Sanctuary" which was really special. The whole service, shouted into microphones and blasted out speakers spread through the one-room church, was very loud. During lulls in our service, we could hear other services in the village being bellered through speakers. This is a handy way to have non-church-goers hear the word of God, but also a handy way to deafen church-goers. 😊 Sunday evening we stayed up late into the night playing games and chatting. At around 12:30am finally took over and we went to sleep.

On Monday construction resumed, and we were on the work site by 7:30am. The rafters are complete but need to be leveled. After leveling them, 2x4 purlins need to be affixed horizontally to the rafters every three feet. The roof steel will be screwed to these purlins.

There is a sickness going around, and the members of the team are taking turns being sick. Eric went back to Jon's at lunchtime but recovered well by the next morning. I received the torch from him and was sick all the next day. It doesn't seem to be malaria or yellow fever, but seem to be like food poisoning. We aren't quite sure. The symptoms include nausea, headaches, painful stomach cramps, and diarrhea (in Ghana, this is called "runny tummy"). I laid in bed on Tuesday like a seasick crocodile. By Wednesday I had recovered for the most part and returned to the work site. We worked until noon and then took off for an afternoon of shopping in Accra. We drove through the madness of Central Market but did our shopping at a quieter side

market. The eyes of the vendors widened at the same rate of their smiles as they beheld a vanload of obruni's (white people) piling out in front of them. Many vendors called out "Friend! Friend! Come into my shop!" as we dispersed to look for souvenirs. I purchased some carved elephants, an acrylic tapestry, and a djembe (African drum) with cloth case. You can find generic-looking djembes in music stores for around \$300 in America, but here in Africa I bought an authentic, hand-carved djembe for 60 cedi's, which is approximately \$38. The sound from the djembe is rich and deep. What a blessing! Others bought trinkets and carvings, ceremonial knives with sheaths, a xylophone, etc. Some vendors were very insistent, even holding our arms to keep us from leaving. To these men we had to be very stern, but overall the shopping experience was wonderful.

After shopping we took Eric and Preston to town to put them on a Tro-Tro (public transport van) headed for Cape Coast. They were being sent to help Jon & Juanita with a building project. Eric reported that he and Preston arrived very quickly at their destination; often traveling faster than the Tro-Tro's speedometer could accurately record.

After dropping off Eric and Preston, we went out to eat at a nice restaurant. By Jon's suggestion we all ordered a half-chicken, except for Kendrick, who ordered chicken tenders. We all chose a side of either rice or fries. The chickens were prepared in a massive rotisserie and were wonderfully seasoned. Our meal was complemented with large bottles of Mixed Fruit juice and Mango juice. The chickens are smaller here, but a half-chicken was a decent amount of food. The meat was tender and succulent. "I don't think you can find chicken like this at home. Not for \$7.50 a meal." Jon said. I agree.

While we waited for our food, we watched the Ghana Black Stars soccer team struggle against Zambia's team. Zambia scored a crucial goal and ended Ghana's winning streak and their chances of winning the African Cup of Nations. This major event happens every other year, so many of the Ghanaians were hoping Ghana would win. The restaurant was nearly full during the game, but as soon as Ghana lost, the disheartened fans slowly left. We soon had the restaurant all to ourselves.

We traveled back to Jon & Sara's after the meal and watched some hilarious Christian comedy, followed by some episodes of Modern Marvels. We projected these moving pictures on the living room wall by using a laptop and a projector.

On Thursday we began to wrap things up. We finished the purlins on the roof, painted some fascia boards, shoveled some rock from one spot to another, moved some lumber...mainly used our muscles in various activities. With the installation of the last fascia boards, the roof is complete as far as our group is concerned. There will be steel installed at a later date.

On Friday the team did some final manual labors. For the kicks and the giggles, we men moved a small building by picking it up and carrying it. To our credit, the building was extremely heavy. Not to our credit, we only moved the building five feet. To our credit, that was all it needed to be moved. The men dug a foundation and poured concrete for the small building, which will be used for student dwelling quarters.

After lunch, we left the worksite and did some shopping. We bought some more cutlasses (close in appearance and function to a machete) and some fruit for the journey home. I'm planning on taking some of this fantastic white pineapple with me, so we'll see how it survives the journey. I'm also freezing a case of Blue Sky drinks in preparation for transportation home. I really wish we had these in the states. They are pure fruit drinks made entirely from squeezing the life juices out of pineapple, mango, and passion fruit. No preservatives, no additives, no color, no added sugar. The end result is an incredibly fresh, sweet mix of thirst-quenching delight.

There were many "first-try" foods today, many of which I enjoyed, others I enjoyed solely in the fact that I won't have to try them again. I tried fresh African papaya today, which was far better than any papaya I've had before. Nevertheless, it is still a bizarre taste. I also had an African orange. These are tarter than the American fruit, and are not eaten. Instead, you cut a ring out of the top and squeeze the fruit like a juice pouch. The pulpy orange juice is really refreshing. I also tried fresh African avocado, which receives the same verdict as the papaya. I'd like to try it in a guacamole dip or something to see its true potential. I just ate some raw with a little salt sprinkled on it. Lastly on my "first-try" food list today would be the banku. Banku is fermented maize, mashed into a doughy lump and boiled into a steaming mass. It's eaten with a spicy vegetable sauce that we dipped bites into. The banku has the consistency of playdough and about the same taste. I swallowed a few bites but did not eat the entire serving, which would have sat like a brick of protein in my stomach. The majority of the group took the same route as I did, eating a few bites for the experience but not finishing the lump. This was planned and expected by our hosts, which wanted to give us an authentic food we wouldn't find anywhere in the USA, but had no expectations of us liking it or finishing it.

Tomorrow is our last day here. We will be packing up, cleaning pineapples for the trip home, doing some shopping/sightseeing/swimming/time wasting until our evening flight arrives. Upon learning that the Prime Meridian (vertical equator) runs down through Ghana just a scant 18.1 kilometers East of Accra, I stated my desire to travel to the other side of the line. This will most likely not happen, as I have turned out to be the only nerd that would be enthralled with that activity. ☺ Honestly, I can hardly believe we are about to leave. The first days here dragged by as we adjusted to the sights and smells and heat, but the days soon blurred by to the point that I feel I've only been here for a short while. It has been a fantastic trip, and I will

be looking for opportunities to return. I have asked the team to sum up the trip with a sentence, and I will end this novel with their replies.

“The trip was awesome, especially seeing everyone again.”

–Preston Weaver

“It’s been a great trip, um, the highlight would be the swinging bridges.”

–Tyler Esh

“Yeah, taking the second trip on the bridges was baller.”

–Mike “Wingman” Martin

“Encouraging, exhilarating, exciting, and interesting!”

–Audrey Bontrager

“I can’t give you a sentence. Can you just say it was ‘indescribable’ for me?”

–Kendrick “Kirby” Weaver

“I loved getting to see the culture here in Ghana, spending time with Stephanie and Sara, and everybody else in our group.”

–Annie “Panda” Esh

“C’mon guys. How hard can a sentence be? I just wrote 4,500 words about this trip.”

–Shawn “Ostrich” Graber

“Meeting new people, getting back on a roof, it was a different experience.”

–Jeremy Schlabach

“I learned so many things from this trip, I can’t possibly form it all into one sentence! This culture taught me how many things I take for granted, for example how much water I normally have. I take electricity for granted along with nice roads. This trip will help me be more grateful for the little things.”

–Stephanie “Staff” Greiner

“Exhausting but exhilarating!”

–“Captain” Jon Sauder

“Good times, great food, extraordinary heights. Livin’ the Sauder high life. We were sweatin’ in the dust for Jesus.”

–Eric Hershberger

“Youth and experience were combined to get the work done and have fun along the way.”

–Sara Sauder

“On this trip, it became real to me that this is *real life* for the people over here. The tools I have that make things so much easier for me, the opportunities I have...the people over here don't have those tools, those opportunities.”

–Jon Horst

“Hanging out at Jonny's house, it was awesome.”

–Tim Martin

“I've truly been blessed by God's hand of provision for the willingness of the group, for safety, for the energy, the commitment, and the blessing of relationships and new friendships.”

–Ron Bontrager