Ken Heroy, who helped build cisterns in Africa for the Peace Corps, inspects one of the Acadian cisterns on display at the LSU Rural Life Museum.

Cajun technology blossoms in Africa

BR volunteer helps Kenyans build cisterns

By GEORGE MORRIS
Advocate staff writer

In southeastern Kenya, from the middle of May until late October, it does not rain. Rivers run dry. Dust covers plants. For people to get water, they often have to walk several miles, dig into a riverbed, then carry the water back.

When Peace Corps volunteer Ken Heroy got to Kenya in June 1989, he was given a practical solution to this problem. He was to build cisterns that would collect water during rainy seasons for use when it's dry.

"I thought, 'Oh, this is a great idea! We should do this back in America,'" said Heroy, a Baton Rouge native.

Little did he know the Acadians beat him to the idea more than 200 years ago.

It wasn't until December of 1990, while Heroy was home on vacation from his Peace Corps duties, that he learned his project took an idea the Acadians used extensively when they fled Canada for Louisiana in the mid-18th century. In fact, some of the cypress cisterns can still be found outside older South Louisiana houses, especially in rural areas, and some are still in use.

"I thought that was interesting," Heroy said.

So, too, were Heroy's two years in Africa.

Heroy, 25, never thought of volunteer work in a foreign country until his senior year as a civil engineering major at Louisiana Tech in 1988. The subject only came up when a fraternity brother, unsure of where he'd get a job after graduation, half-jokingly said he might join the Peace Corps.

"I'd heard of the Peace Corps, but I'd never actually heard of anyone actually joining the Peace Corps," Heroy said. "It was kind of one of those things that was done in the '60s."

Villagers, left, work on the floor of the concrete cisterns used to collect water for use during dry seasons. After the roof, above, was complete, a cistern would hold about 12,000 gallons of water.
The thought stuck with Heroy, who liked to travel but had never been overseas. He applied to the Peace Corps in August 1988, completed his degree work the following February and left for Kenya four months later.

"At the end, it boiled down to there was no reason not to," Heroy said. "I was not eager to go out and just start earning money because you can do that at any time, and that's not the most important thing to me. I thought it would be really interesting and fascinating to live in another country and learn another language, see a little bit more of the world."

The part he saw is about 100 miles south of the equator, 100 miles east of Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, and 200 miles west of the Indian Ocean. He was assigned to the Kenyan Ministry of Water to build the cisterns, usually at schoolhouses in the villages surrounding Kitui, a city of about 15,000 people. Kitui has electricity and paved streets, but except for a highway to Nairobi, the surrounding area had neither.

As projects go, it sounds simple enough. Round, covered cisterns about 6% feet high and 16 feet in diameter would be made of reinforced concrete. Up to 12,000 gallons of water could be collected from corrugated steel or tile roofs and funneled by gutters into the cisterns which were built on the ground. Steps were dug into the ground so the water could be taken out from below the cistern, using gravity instead of a pump to make the water flow.

The project gave Heroy a hands-on lesson in the frustrations of dealing in a foreign culture and government bureaucracy. UNICEF provided money, but that didn't prevent red tape from slowing the work. In the first year, Heroy saw only seven cisterns built.

"A lot of people, they don't have our same sense of time," Heroy said. "They're not in a hurry to get anything done. If it doesn't get done next week, we'll do it next week. If it doesn't get done next week, then the next week."

The first few months on the job are the hardest, because you really have to adjust and learn how to get along in their way of doing things, not do it your way but learn how to do it their way. But until you learn to be comfortable doing it their way, it can be very frustrating.

The second year, however, the cistern project joined forces with a Danish development project, and the result was that about 290 cisterns were built.

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Heroy said he was put in charge of the project, supervising about 100 workers in 22 construction teams.

The Danish organization was pulling out of the project about the time he left Africa, and a large number of schools were still without cisterns. There are now numerous Kenyans with the expertise to build the water tanks when money is available, Heroy said.

After his Peace Corps term ended, Heroy spent several months touring India, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam before returning home March 23. One of his biggest surprises came in Vietnam. Rather than showing resentment because of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, Heroy said Vietnamese went out of their way to make him feel welcome.

"As you walked down the street, all the kids are saying, 'Hello! Hello!'" Heroy said. "Most people, if they know English and they see you walk by, they will come up and exhaust all their English vocabulary on you before they'll let you go. They're very friendly, and they're not shy at all."

His experiences overseas gave him a different perspective on his homeland, Heroy said.

"When you go to Africa and Asia, most people seem to have this ideal of America as this perfect country, this paradise," Heroy said. "When you try to tell them it's not, I don't know whether they believe you. Most of them, I'm sure, don't believe you. I think it probably is one of the best countries in the world. I'd rather live here than anywhere else. Certainly, it's a very good country. But it's not perfect like they think."

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