

# *John S. Noffsinger & the Global Impact of the Thomasite Experience\**

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores the life of a remarkable teacher, John S. Noffsinger, who arrived in Manila in either late May or early June 1910, and taught for two years in Bayombong, Nueva Viscaya. Noffsinger was a Thomasite in the extended sense of the word that includes all those teachers who came to the Philippines under the United States government's education program for the new colony. Such a distinction of the term "Thomasite" is necessary because people commonly assume that the Thomasites were only those teachers who arrived in Manila on August 21, 1901 aboard the U.S. Army transport ship the *Thomas*. Although the *Thomas* brought the single greatest batch of teachers to the Philippines, some teachers had arrived shortly before the *Thomas* and many more ships brought hundreds more teachers to Manila for decades afterward. Those teachers who arrived many years later were still thought of as Thomasites, so great was the impact of the first large contingent of teachers who arrived in 1901. Though he came years later, Noffsinger also taught English and helped build the Philippine education system just as had the original Thomasites.

Where Noffsinger differs from so many other Thomasites, whether members of the 1901 group or the many hundreds who came in subsequent years, is that he took his experience home with him, and 40 years later applied that experience to new voluntary organizations that impacted the entire world. Through John Noffsinger the Thomasite program had a much greater impact than any of its founders or participants could ever have imagined.

## **John Noffsinger the Thomasite**

John Noffsinger was born on December 21, 1886 on a farm near Dayton, Ohio. His parents were prosperous farmers whose five sons and two daughters were raised in the warm religious environment of the Church the Brethren. Though deeply religious, Noffsinger was also intellectually curious and early on he seemed destined for a life in education. After graduating from high school, Noffsinger taught at a country grade school for three years until 1906 when he left Ohio to attend Bethany Bible School in Chicago, Illinois. After completing that two-year

course of religious study, he entered a regular baccalaureate program at Mount Morris College in the town of the same name in Illinois. In the fall of 1909, though only in his second year at Mt. Morris, John Noffsinger was attracted to a flyer advertising teaching positions in the Philippines.

The flyer was issued by the US Civil Service administration and announced that examinations would be given at 177 locations around the country on December 29 and 30 for individuals who wished to be placed in the Philippines as either education Assistants, who would be assigned clerical work in administrative offices, or as full-fledged Teachers, whose work was described as supervisory in nature. In addition, the flyer also gave a job description for each position and described the test for both of the jobs. Finally, the flyer gave a brief description of the typical working and living conditions that prospective teachers would experience in the Philippines. That an examination was required of prospective teachers indicates how much the Philippine education program had evolved from its start in 1901 until Noffsinger's time. The special civil service teacher examination had been started in September 1903 in an effort to improve the quality of teachers bound for the Philippines and came as a result of disappointment with some members of the 1901 group. As well, by 1909 the Philippine education program had developed a strong prejudice in favor of male teachers. For example, the 1909 flyer stated quite emphatically that the assistant jobs were only open to men and that women could not be appointed as teachers, "unless they are the wives, immediate relatives, or fiancées," of men who were in the Philippine Service.

It is not clear what attracted the young Noffsinger to this opportunity. After all, he had not yet finished college and he had just become engaged to the lovely Florence Wieand. She was seven years younger than he, and she also had a strong Brethren religious background since her father was a minister in the church and her paternal uncle was the head of the seminary Noffsinger attended before entering Mt. Morris. With his education incomplete and his social life centered on the attractive young woman he would marry, John Noffsinger's decision to accept a teaching position in a country half way around the world seems to make no sense, at least at first glance.

While the record is silent about Noffsinger's reason for seeking a Philippine teaching position, there are a few possibilities that should be considered because they are reflective of his later life. First, the pay level of approximately \$1,200 per year, although less than teaching positions in the United States, was good for someone who had not yet finished his degree and

would support Noffsinger while he gained valuable work experience for a later career in education. As well, the Philippines was an exciting and still little known colony in the American colonial empire and it could very well be that the call of adventure and patriotism stirred his spirit. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Noffsingers were a very religious family and devoted members of the Church of the Brethren. As one of the peace churches (the others being the Mennonites and the Society of Friends, or the Quakers) the Church of the Brethren is pacifist and has a strong ethic of humanitarian/religious service. This ethic of selfless service to others may have appealed to John Noffsinger's thinking and certainly would have been understood and supported by Florence Wieand who agreed to become engaged to Noffsinger shortly before his departure for Manila.

Whatever Noffsinger's rationale, on December 29 and 30 he went to Freeport, Illinois where he sat through the two seven hour sessions of tests that included penmanship, arithmetic, geography, physiology and hygiene, English, the history and civil government of the United States, nature study and drawing, and the science of teaching, and a small thesis on an assigned topic. It was quite a test, but he scored 1640.40 points in this national test placing him eighth among the 51 men who took the exam and thirteenth out of 73 when the 22 female test takers are calculated into the equation. On March 25, William S. Washburn of the US Civil Service Commission notified Colonel Frank McIntyre of the Bureau of Insular Affairs that of the 49 test takers who passed the exam that 21 were selected for Philippine service. John Noffsinger was ranked number six among those who were finally selected.

Noffsinger's ship left the west coast sometime in April and took about one month to reach Hong Kong where the passengers then transferred to a smaller coastal steamer. Noffsinger describes his orientation session when he arrived in Manila as a brief thirty minute affair during which he was given very general directions on how to get to Bayombong, how to put the suggested program of English teaching into operation, and how much money to borrow to last until his first paycheck arrived – it generally took about one to three months, depending on the weather. The following day he took the train to Dagupan, Pangasinan and slept overnight in a cheap second-floor room above a noisy cantina. The next day he went to Tayug, Pangasinan via carabao cart, and then hired two horses for the three day ride into Nueva Viscaya over mountain trails.

Noffsinger's daily schedule was probably very much like other Thomasites before and after him. In the morning he taught a class of students for five hours. Then, in the afternoon he worked with Filipino teachers for about an hour and a half or more. He also held evening classes for adult education three nights a week and was expected to visit surrounding barrios as often as he could. In his second year John Noffsinger's duties increased and he became Bayombong's district superintendent. In his new position he was required to travel around the countryside even more and he was in charge of completing the construction of Bayombong's new central school. As a superintendent, Noffsinger's salary scale was increased to a hefty \$1,800 per year.

Despite his apparent success as a teacher and administrator, Noffsinger did not stay for a second two-year contract. It is not that he did not enjoy Bayombong, he clearly liked his work and his co-workers. Many years later Noffsinger would tell anyone willing to listen to him about riding to classes and outlying barrios on a small Philippine horse which must have been quite a sight since he was a tall man. But, Noffsinger wanted to return to his beloved Florence. Noffsinger departed the Philippines in June 1912 and after a brief stop in Ohio to collect his mother, he went to Florence Wieand's home in Mt. Morris and they were wed in a small family ceremony the day after his return.

### **Noffsinger's "Returned Thomasite" Work Career**

John and Florence Noffsinger had a loving marriage and their lives were filled with their small family, personal accomplishments, religious work, and friends. John Noffsinger returned to Mt. Morris College and completed his bachelor's degree in 1913. His practical Philippine teaching experience clearly proved important because he was appointed superintendent of schools for Ashton, Illinois even before he graduated. Then, in 1915 he returned to Mt. Morris College to serve as its president. At the time, he was the youngest college president in the United States. He remained at Mt. Morris for the next three years during which time he earned a masters degree from the University of Chicago and then went to New York to begin a doctoral program at the Teachers College of Columbia University. He completed his dissertation in 1925 while also holding a part-time pastorate in a Brethren mission in New York's Italian neighborhood of Brooklyn and working full-time for the federal government.

From 1919 until his retirement from full-time regular employment, Noffsinger made a name for himself in the field of education, specifically in vocational education. Over the course

of his long career that ended with his retirement in 1953, Noffsinger held numerous concurrent national positions supervising the National Council of Business Schools, the National Council of Technical Schools, the National Federation of Private Schools Association, and the National Home Study Council. His first position was as the superintendent of Inspection for the Federal Board of Vocational Education, a position he held from 1919 to 1926. For most of this long career in vocational education, he worked very closely with the Carnegie Corporation, first as a member of their adult education staff and later with the corporation's active support of the National Home Study Council for which Noffsinger served as executive director from 1926 to 1953. Noffsinger made a profound impact on this area of American education. His efforts along with the support from Carnegie, led to the closure of a number of unethical schools and the institution of national standards for all others which greatly strengthened this area of the American education.

Though impressive, nothing in Noffsinger's post-Philippine life reflected his youthful overseas experience. On the surface, it would seem that Noffsinger had conveniently compartmentalized his Thomasite days to a distant exotic past that made for interesting after dinner conversation, but did not weigh heavily on his mind. In fact, his busy work life with its challenges and rewards as well as his family obligations and religious activities must have kept him very busy. That all changed in 1953 when retirement freed him to return to active international service work, and it is in his retirement when he was already sixty-seven years old that Noffsinger made some of his greatest contributions.

### **Noffsinger and the International Voluntary Services (IVS)**

IVS was founded in 1953 by the three peace churches (Brethren, Mennonite, and Quaker) in response to the "Point Four" foreign aid program originally enunciated by President Truman and later expanded by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles who encouraged government-private sector cooperation. The three churches saw this program as an opportunity to promote faith inspired humanitarian service and to give their young men a means to perform meaningful alternative service to military conscription. In February 1953, three church representatives met with Dale Clark of the International Cooperation Administration (ICA), the forerunner of today's United States Agency for International Development. Together they wrote up a document of incorporation and the organization was launched on the sixteenth of that month. The IVS ideal

was to recruit technically skilled young Americans for village level “people-to-people” projects in areas such as agriculture and vocational training. Almost immediately, small projects were started in the Middle East and an office was opened in Washington, DC.

Despite this fine start, IVS needed a full-time executive director if it was going to become more than a limited venture with only one or two small programs at a time. Once the decision was made to seek an executive director, a search committee of two, one peace church representative and the ICA’s Dale Clark, were appointed to find a candidate for the new organization. At this point, Brethren representative W. Harold Row recommended that the committee talk to Noffsinger. It seems that Row had worked with Noffsinger on a Brethren committee for overseas projects and he was impressed with the educator’s command of administrative detail and his personal understanding of the problems that the underdeveloped world faced and how change might be introduced. The committee of two met the candidate for lunch and they were so impressed that they offered him the position then and there. Clark notes that the primary reason why Noffsinger impressed them was because of the insights that his Philippine experience had given him. As well, the activities that the IVS founders envisioned for their volunteers was what had been done in the Philippines many decades earlier.

Noffsinger’s appointment was confirmed at an IVS Board of Director’s meeting on January 8, 1954 and he immediately went to work creating IVS in the Thomasite image. Ideally, IVS volunteers would be young single men and women with college educations unless they had specific job skills that did not require a degree. They would be given two year contracts to work in “people-to-people” community development, agriculture, and education projects. They were also expected to learn the culture and language and to live at the same level as their co-workers. IVS paid the volunteers’ transportation costs, basic living expenses, and gave single volunteers a salary of \$60 a month (\$110 for married volunteers). While IVS looked for volunteers with a “Christian character,” it was open to individuals of all denominations. It was, however, strictly opposed to any form of religious proselytizing. Noffsinger wanted to create a truly non-sectarian humanistic service organization similar to the ethic he found in his Thomasite experience.

Though IVS did not become a large organization during Noffsinger’s tenure, it was very successful. From 1953 to 1961 the private voluntary agency launched eleven projects in nine different countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Hundreds of young Americans served in a variety of capacities, mostly agriculture extension and rural development, but there were some

education projects as well. Of the eleven projects eight were funded by the ICA while the other three were supported by contracts with World Neighbors, the Arabian American Oil Company, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. By 1961 five of the projects were still on-going and included agriculture volunteers in Vietnam, teachers and rural development workers in Laos, animal husbandry workers in Cambodia, and elementary teachers in Liberia. Under Noffsinger's guidance IVS had evolved into a highly effective program that delivered technical assistance for well defined programs and was staffed by qualified young people dedicated to serving others. He devoted long hours to making IVS work and he impressed everyone with his physical energy, even though he was already "retired."

### **John S. Noffsinger and the US Peace Corps**

By 1961 John Noffsinger was seventy-four years old. He had held a number of important positions while working for over thirty years in education and he was still serving as the Executive Director of a private voluntary organization he created in the image of his Thomasite experience. These accomplishments would usually be more than enough for most people, but 1961 opened yet another opportunity to promote selfless humanitarian service along the Thomasite model and Noffsinger grasped the opportunity enthusiastically.

In the waning days of that year's US Presidential election, Senator John F. Kennedy took up the call for a government sponsored national service program for young people. This was not his idea. He adopted the concept at the urging of his political advisors who were worried that their handsome young candidate might lose the hotly contested election. When the ballots were counted Kennedy had won the United States' closest election. But just what was this "youth corps" actually going to be? The idea had clearly captured the imagination of the nation's young people, but Kennedy had no clear idea about how to proceed. In lieu of spending his own time on creating this new government sponsored voluntary agency, Kennedy appointed his enthusiastic brother-in-law R. Sargent Shriver to solve that problem and lead the resulting organization.

Noffsinger did not lose a moment. On Monday, February 13, 1961, shortly after Kennedy's inauguration, Noffsinger wrote to Shriver introducing IVS and inviting collaboration. Shriver immediately ordered an aide to make an appointment with the IVS Executive Director which was done on Thursday of the same week. This was the first of what became a series of

meetings. Soon Shriver's attention was matched by that of Senator Hubert Humphrey and Congressman William Reuss whose original bills to create the Peace Corps were modified on the Thomasite-IVS model. As well, IVS began receiving favorable press in such popular publications such as *Life*, *Look*, *This Week*, *Harpers*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain, among others.

The IVS-Peace Corps contact that began with Noffsinger's February 13 letter continued over the following months. Gordon Boyce of the Peace Corps' office of "Private Agency Relations" attended two IVS Executive Committee meetings on March 29 and May 31. This contact was continued by Boyce's successor Alice Gilbert, the Acting Director of the Voluntary Agencies Section of the Peace Corps, who addressed an IVS Board of Director's meeting on July 10. What cannot be overemphasized is how closely Peace Corps actually copied IVS. The new Peace Corps administrators really did not have a clear idea about what the organization was going to look like or how it should be run. In addition to the high level meetings between Noffsinger and Shriver and the visits to IVS by Boyce and Gilbert, there was an active and on-going exchange of basic information from the lofty ideals of the Thomasite-IVS model, down to the most minute of clerical details. In a letter dated May 10, 1961 to Glenn E. Riddell, IVS Program Officer, Noffsinger wrote:

There still seems to be a rather heavy "fog" hanging over their entire program. We are usually invited to sit in some of their conferences or some of their committee come to the IVS office as much as two or three times each week to learn how IVS recruits, screens, etc., gets money out to its people in "the bush," pay and select leaders or Chiefs-of-Party, etc., etc.

Given this early, intimate, and sustained contact, it should come as no surprise that Noffsinger and the Thomasite-IVS model had a heavy influence on the new Peace Corps. Like their Thomasite and IVS predecessors, Peace Corps volunteers were young college graduates with no serious medical problems who made a two-year commitment to live among their co-workers in urban or rural areas, and learn the local language and culture. They were to work on a "people-to-people" basis, whether teaching at various levels of instruction or working in agriculture and community development projects. As well, they were required to refrain from

political or religious proselytizing, received only \$75 a month, and enjoyed no special privileges and did not have PX or commissary rights. And finally, Peace Corps volunteers, in ways that were markedly similar to young Thomasite recruits and IVS volunteers, were specifically advised that they might be sent to areas of the world where living may be very difficult and physical amenities few.

On August 31, 1961 John Noffsinger again “retired” for a second time and left IVS. His departure from IVS had been planned a long time in advance and came as no surprise since in the previous year he had health problems that required him to be absent from work for weeks at a time. But, by 1961 Noffsinger was not in bad health and the very day after ending his tenure as IVS executive director, he started his career as a member of Sargent Shriver’s staff. It seems that since their first meeting, Noffsinger and Shriver had discussed the possibility of the IVS executive director joining the Peace Corps staff. From the beginning Noffsinger wanted to join the Peace Corps staff on a full-time basis, but Shriver was initially concerned about whether the seventy-four year old could handle the schedule. Gordon Boyce was assigned to meet with Noffsinger and work out an agreement. Eventually, an understanding was reached and Noffsinger began working in the Peace Corps’ Office of Public Affairs and was given the special diplomatic rank of “senior counselor.” For the next four years, Noffsinger assisted Shriver in matters such as the Peace Corps’ relationship with private voluntary agencies, especially those of a religious nature, and he pioneered a new area – the recruitment of older American volunteers for Peace Corps service. On March 22, 1965 Shriver sent Noffsinger a very warm letter thanking him for his efforts in the recruitment of seniors.

### **Epilogue**

In 1962 Noffsinger made what would be his final of seven around-the-world trips and on an impulse he decided to revisit Bayombong. The trip took much less time than it had in 1910, and the town had also changed considerably in the 50 years since he left it. Only the tower of the Catholic Church was the same, but in very little time he was able to reconnect with a number of his former students who had gone on in life to become municipal and provincial officials, Catholic and Protestant clergy, nurses, and educators. He wrote that he could not help but think how much had changed in Bayombong, and how much the Thomasite experience had affected his own life. So it was that John Noffsinger had kept the Thomasite legacy alive and passed it

along to both the International Voluntary Services and the Peace Corps. Eventually, it was through the Peace Corps that Noffsinger's legacy came full circle since one of the first countries to receive Peace Corps volunteers was the Philippines and the volunteers in "Philippine Group 1" taught English as a Second Language.

On December 22, 1965 Shriver wrote a final time to his friend, mentor, and staff assistant. This time the correspondence was not a business letter, but a touching "get well" note. Shriver expressed regret at the news of Noffsinger's "sudden and serious illness." He wished his older friend a speedy recovery, and said that he looked forward to his eventual return to work. Shriver closed with, "You have not only done a wonderful job in recruiting the older volunteers, but you have been an inspiration to the entire staff. We miss you." On May 4, 1966 John Noffsinger "retired" from the Peace Corps losing his life to stomach cancer. Two days later, he was buried in the counselor and diplomatic section of the Rock Creek Park Cemetery in Washington, DC.

NOTE: This paper is part of a larger oral and documentary history of the International Voluntary Service (IVS) in Indochina from 1956 to 1975. This study is being undertaken by the present writer and Professor Marc Jason Gilbert of North Georgia College and State University. For this paper the author gratefully acknowledges the support of a research grant from the Georgia Southern University, Faculty Research Committee that facilitated work in the US National Archives and Records Administration for two weeks in the summer of 2001. Acknowledgement should also be given to the Georgia Southern University, Faculty Development Committee for their financial support which made possible participation in the American Studies Association of the Philippines conference "Back to the Future: Perspectives on the Thomasite Legacy to Philippine Education," on August 24-25, 2001, where an earlier draft of this paper was presented in a plenary session.