

A Haitian Village Revisited
Rex Rund, RPCV Haiti, 1985-87

The Haitian village in which I spent over two years of my life is little more than a few small houses clustered along either side of a thin dirt road snaking through the sugar cane fields. It is called Mariani, but there are multiple “Marianis” in Haiti, and I always had to clarify when telling people where I lived: “Not the big Mariani along the national highway, but the tiny one off the main road.” Sugar cane, coconut palms, a few plantain groves, small gardens of yams and manioc, heat and dust, and my neighbors.

There was André, the old farmer who lived right across the “street” (no need for street names or signs; there was only one). André was pure Haitian – humble and proud at the same time, and always willing to come sit with me on my front porch in the evening. Sometimes we’d talk; sometimes we’d just soak up an evening breeze. It was André who was perhaps the most excited in town the day of the first election in Haiti in over 30 years, after Jean-Claude Duvalier had fled the country on February 7, 1986. No one knew just quite how to run an election after so long, and no one was sure how it would all work. Election day dawned with hope, trepidation, and great confusion. In our little village, though, it was cause for great excitement.

André was early to the polls that morning, early enough to beat the deadly violence that erupted at polling places around the country a few hours later, causing the suspension of the vote. He ambled past my house on his return trip, looking particularly satisfied. He joined me on the front porch for a “*ti chita*” (a little sit-down), and I asked him, “So, André, you voted! How did it feel?” His unabashed response: “Ah, it was great! It felt so good, and went back and voted again!”

There was Nathieu, my landlady, who had rented to me two rooms of the house next door to her own little home. Her husband was off working in Martinique, sending money back to build her a house. It was not quite finished, but my rent money helped complete the job. Nathieu and her family were my cooks, laundry staff, house-sitters when I was away, and her daughters were my fashion consultants.

And the children – ah the children. Serge, Carlo, and Mouton, just hitting double digits – my most reliable teachers of Haitian Creole. And the endless train of brothers and sisters who would come to my house in the evenings, sometimes just sitting and watching me read or write letters by kerosene lamp. Apparently I was fascinating!

The hardest thing about my leaving Haiti after nearly three years was my departure from Mariani for what I thought was the last time. So many sad goodbyes, and my last act was to take my one pair of black dress shoes as a parting gift to André, so he could look sharp for the next election.

But 16 years later I returned on a mission trip, and I got the chance to visit Mariani. In a borrowed jeep I bounced down the road from Leogane into the cane fields, and I barely

recognized the lay of the land. I nearly missed the dirt road turnoff for Mariani, but suddenly there it was. Everywhere else I had been in Haiti, I had been dismayed to see a crumbling infrastructure, with roads much worse than they had been in my Peace Corps service, and electricity practically non-existent. But the old road to Mariani was filled with new, bigger houses, and a night club – a night club! I drove right past my old house, not even recognizing it because it had been so enlarged (maybe my rent had been higher than I thought). And there was a power line in town; I couldn't believe it. Mariani had electricity!

When I stepped out of the jeep and walked up to Nathieu's house, the slow spark of recognition grew into a loud cry up and down the street: "Msye Rex! Msye Rex!" (Actually, when my neighbors said my name, it always sounded more like "Wes;" I had gotten used to it.) So marvelous to see them all, but sadness too. Some had died, some had made the long trek to the States or elsewhere to find work; some had never been heard from again.

And then I saw Serge and Mouton – grown men now, but with smiles as wide as ever! Not just that, but they were bulked up like bodybuilders. I couldn't believe it! Malnutrition did not seem to be an issue for them. We traded our stories and got caught up, and then Serge pulled me aside and said, "Come see what we built." He led me around the back of my old house, and there, just about above the pit of where my latrine had been, the boys showed me their pride and joy: a corrugated tin "gym" they had fashioned with their own hands. We went inside to see homemade weight machines and benches, complete with barbells made from salvaged auto axles and brake drums. This was the secret of their bodybuilding success, and I was so proud of them. They had used imagination and ambition to create a positive place to channel their energy, in the midst of a culture where so many, many things go wrong.

Did my Peace Corps service have anything to do with their endeavor? Had my presence there played any role in the improved infrastructure of the town after I left. I'll never know. But I do know that a group of young men in a miniscule Haitian village saw a need in their lives, found a way to fill that need, and somehow, with the grace of God, made it happen. And somehow, the people of Mariani had managed to get an electrical improvement in a country in which infrastructure decay is the order of the day. I left Mariani that day optimistic that my friends and neighbors would be all right.