

SOME THOUGHTS ON MONGOLIA: A VISIT IN 2005

By Clarence A. Crawford

In July 2005, for the first time in our sixty years, Di and I traveled abroad, not to France, not to Italy, but to that magnet of tourism, glamorous Mongolia! The immediate stimulus was to visit daughter Amy, serving in the Peace Corps there since June 2004; but I had been planning to visit there for some time. My friend Heimo Korth had first put that bug in my ear. He said that if he ever gave up on Alaska, that Mongolia was on his short list. I had also heard some good things about Mongolia from some other guides.

The written sources all rave about Mongolia's large size and low population. However, its land area of 604,000 square miles is only slightly larger than Alaska (I have seen figures for Alaska ranging from 592,000 to 600,000 square miles). Alaska has about 606,000 people (1996 figure), Mongolia about 2,000,000. (For comparison: Pennsylvania, area 45,308, pop. 12,052,000; Wisconsin, area 56,153, pop. 5,082,000; Florida, area 58,664, pop. 13,953,000; France, area 210,026, pop. 58,109,000.)

More Mongolians live outside Mongolia, in China, Siberia, and central Asia, than live in Mongolia. The remnants of Genghis Khan's armies left genes and cultural practices that still exist, scattered over the continent 800 years after their conquest of Asia and Eastern Europe. One geneticist claims that a very large portion of modern Asians share Genghis' DNA.

Mongolia is not a section of China, though the Manchus of China conquered Mongolia in the 18th century, completing their conquest in 1732. Chinese rule was initially benign but became increasingly ruthless in the 19th century. The Mongolians became determined to expel the Chinese, and did so with Russian help in 1921. Mongolia then became a Soviet satellite until the collapse of the USSR. In the 1990s Mongolia became the only former Asian Soviet satellite to become a true democracy. However, like Cuba, Mongolia suffered an economic collapse with the withdrawal of Soviet support. Daily life for most people is hand-to-mouth, and the exchange of money represents only a part of the economy. My guess is that the largest part of their material survival depends on non-cash subsistence and personal aid to each other.

The Mongolians detest the Chinese and apparently have mixed emotions about the Russians. One drunk hassled me on the street because he thought I was Russian, the only unpleasant encounter I had.

Mongolia has more than 31,000,000 head of livestock. Two million are horses; the rest are sheep (about half), goats, cattle, yaks, and camels. I saw perhaps six pigs. Vegetables and fruits are in short supply but apparently

Mongolians don't miss them. Their food is meat and dairy, or "white food." White food is fermented mare's milk (airag, tasty and refreshing; don't look into the mug), various cheeses, excellent yogurt. In spite of their love of meat, animal fat, and dairy, they make some of the best bread I have eaten, which surprised me.

These are not just encyclopedia facts; these are the essential facts of Mongolian life. Even though half the population lives in Mongolia's three biggest cities, and at least a third lives in Ulaanbaatar, the countryside supports everything. In Alaska we hear much about subsistence living, but in Mongolia it is *the* basic fact of life. As far as I can see, it is not only the nutritional base of the country, as well as the source of textiles and housing (gers, circular canvas tents, are the universal and eminently practical dwelling), but it is the backbone of the intricate network of social arrangements that makes Mongolia particularly interesting. For the westerner, it is the people and their connections that make Mongolia more than just a tourist destination for backpackers and other flotsam and jetsam.

On the approach to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital and major city, on a clear night, I could see a very few widely scattered lights below. After the airport hustle, in the cab on the way into the city, about midnight, I realized that this city of more than 600,000 people, perhaps nearly a million, was dark. I had never seen a *dark* city before. This was spooky. A few dim lights at businesses, which to my eye were rarely clearly identified as such; a few dim interior bulbs; no street lights; no directional signs or lights; no city skyline. (The "cab" was two young men in a small car, commandeered by Amy. I had brought Amy's bike in a big box, and when we closed door A, door B popped open, and when we closed door B, door A popped open, and so on, until we finally ended that comedy by using more force.)

I later learned that there are no physical addresses in Ulaanbaatar, or, I presume, in Mongolia. I did not see a street sign, though some streets are named. I asked Amy about this; there is no mail delivery? Indeed not. Mongolians don't expect to get mail. In the extremely unlikely event that they get mail, they must go to look for it at the post office. In Amy's town of Tsetserleg, estimated population 20,000, Amy is the last to know when she has mail waiting for her. She finds out from her colleagues or neighbors, who heard it through the grapevine. I pondered this. What percentage of the mail that comes into my home is of any value to me? 10%? 90% of the mail that comes into our house is *literally* garbage! Our postal service is essentially a government sponsored marketing tool, an instrument of waste. I have often wondered if it is possible for me to not

have an address so that I cannot get mail. Mongolians may be on to something. (They are, not incidentally, addicted to their cell phones. Also, one strange way to make a living is to offer streetside phone service. Individuals, mostly women, set themselves up on the sidewalk with phones and sell phone calls. These people are swathed in scarves, eye protection, and face masks against the dust. An eerie sight.)

After arriving in Ulaanbaatar (our party arrived over several days and we all got a little taste of the city) we traveled to Amy's home in Tsetserleg, central Mongolia. I narrate the following as an instructive tale, typical of Mongolian travel. First, Amy, who knows the language, goes to one of several locations where drivers congregate. (To qualify as a professional driver in Mongolia, one merely declares oneself to be one. I don't even know if they have driver's licenses. However, he needs to have the means to obtain a vehicle, and he must be able to make *any* mechanical repair under *any* circumstance. No AAA, no roadside assistance, no wrecker service, no police, no phone outside of urban areas.) After locating a driver who fits her profile: right price, right attitude, right vehicle, she brings him to the guesthouse, and we load up. (This drive, under good conditions, with no breakdowns, takes about ten hours, a bit less if you're lucky, over roads resembling the Alaska Highway in the early 1950s.) The driver runs out of gas at a gas station; we pull in, fill up, pay our trip fee so that he now has a cash flow and can pay for the gas. (Drivers usually don't run with a full tank, usually cutting it as close as possible.) We go to his ger for a spare tire, a tool kit, a cook stove, and his son. We stop at a repair shop to fix the spare. We stop at a shop for water. We stop at a shop for gas for the cook stove. We finally leave, two hours after contracting with the driver. Sometime during this preparation I spotted a man walking a camel by the edge of the road, and when I leaned out to take a photo, rather than being hostile, he smiled; my first view of the Mongolian love of the photograph.

The open road! Where it is paved, the driver, Gantuleg, dodges potholes incessantly. The overloaded Hyundai van has bad tires and broken down suspension. After two hours I hear banging under the floorboards (I'm sitting front right). I study Gantuleg's face and don't find any concern, just a good-natured smile; he breaks into song occasionally. In the early evening we stop for food at a roadside collection of shacks and gers that form a shabby strip along the road; I name it Wasilla. I ask Amy why Gantuleg picked this "restaurant." Answer: this one has food.

We pass a roadside accident late in the evening. Gantuleg picks up one of those passengers to take to Kharkorin (Karakorum, the ancient Mongol

capital) where there is cell phone coverage. We tour the restored temples of Erdene Zuu Khiid late in the evening while Gantuleg delivers the accident victim somewhere; we are ejected from the ruins because it is late; our driver does not return; it is getting dark, about 11:00, when a stranger appears to take us somewhere; the van is broken; we are taken to a junkyard where the old Hyundai is up on jacks, our happy driver working on the front tie rods, one of which has snapped (the right one, under my feet; see above.) It is midnight, the junkyard is repulsive and incredibly dusty. Someone takes us to a ger set up in the junkyard; perhaps they want us to sleep here, the dirtiest ger Amy has ever seen. A man dirtier than the ger tries to act hospitably. My mother, a heroic seventy-eight years old, sits on the bed looking in dismay at the man and his ger; declares that she cannot sleep here. We wonder aloud if there is a tourist camp that can take us in. Three of our party pitch tents in the junkyard; I ponder asking my mother to sleep in our tiny tent in the dirt of the junkyard, then declare that we should find this mythical tourist camp. Gantuleg and his friend disappeared half an hour ago in search of parts with assurances of a quick return. They haven't returned, but miraculously another vehicle appears; our dirty friend, whom I now call "the welder," has roused someone out to take Mom, wife Di, and me to lodging. These strangers are doing this for us, without payment, after midnight. At the ger camp, a hostess thinks absolutely nothing of arranging space for us at 1:00 AM, for this is Mongolia. The Welder has already told us, with great effort, that "Russians want it in an hour, the Americans want it in a minute, but the Mongolians want it whenever it happens." (I paraphrase his instructive homily.)

Our relief at being transported from the junkyard to a clean ger, with running water and toilets nearby, and food available, was enormous.

Next morning, at a large ger that serves as a restaurant for guests, we are served by a waiter in a red jacket who carries a white cloth draped over his left arm. He absolutely never removes or otherwise uses the white cloth; it remains in place, rendering his left arm virtually unusable; I suppose that he was trained to think that they do this in the best hotels. Or, as Di is wont to say, it's just like Paris. The morning music is loud; I notice that when the customers leave the Mongolian pop music gives way to louder Mongolian rap.

At 10:00 AM our driver shows up. He is, of course, happy. The van is fixed. We later learned that his friends at the junkyard helped him all night, until they got too drunk to be of assistance. He got a few hours of sleep, then set off at 6:00 AM in search of a ball joint. At 6:00 AM, he did indeed find, in the village of Kharkoum, central Mongolia, a ball joint for the front

end of a worn out Hyundai van. I thought of this as we caromed over the ruts at 50 km/hr, in our overloaded van, placing enormous torque on the right wheel (over which I sat), which did not collapse.

We had plenty of passengers. Our party of seven was larger than we wanted, but fate made it so. Amy, grandmother, two parents, three friends. (Our luggage was normal by American standards, but burdensome by Mongolian standards. On subsequent trips, I concluded that all a Mongolian needs for travel is a jug of airag and a very small bag. The airag is apt to be in an old antifreeze or fuel container.) But what does the driver do? Asks if we can take The Welder's sister to the next village, Hotont. Can we squeeze her in? Of course! Are we mad at him? Of course not!

At that village, we are treated with the most gracious hospitality, including airag, homemade Mongolian vodka, food, and horseback rides. Naadam, the national summer holiday, is taking place.

Here I pieced out what Mongolian reciprocity is. Amy had contracted with the van driver so that he wouldn't add any paying customers to our load (drivers routinely pack in the maximum number of passengers, regardless of comfort); the van driver was helped out by The Welder and his friends; he paid back these people by giving The Welder's sister a free ride (which we essentially paid for); and we were paid back by being offered hospitality.

(Amy disagrees with my analysis. Based on her three years in the country, her view is that there is no reciprocity at all. One simply does the decent thing. Payback never occurred to Gantuleg.)

Horse racing is an important part of Naadam, and as we approached Tsenkher, the soum (village) nearest Tsetserleg, we saw an assembly of horses with riders and realized that a horse race was about to begin. (Naadam races are about thirty kilometers in length for mature horses, less for two-year-olds.) We stopped the van to watch the start, and when we resumed we realized that the racecourse paralleled the road. So we watched as we drove. Very exciting. The riders could hear us cheer, and responded in kind.

We all had a great time during this epic journey, including the Mongolians, and the driver, and his young son, whom he brought along in spite of Amy buying all the seats. The driver used up every togrog of his profit in van repair, and was apparently destined to return to Ulaanbaatar broke, after two days of driving and one night of repair work, but he was in great spirits. (We later kicked in some funds to cover his costs, and he got some paying customers to take back to Ulaanbaatar.)

I offer this episode as an illustrative example of Mongolian travel; let this stand as the type. Nothing unusual here.

We got to Tsetserleg in time for that city's Naadam. Naadam features the "three manly sports" of archery, wrestling, and horse racing. It is held in an open space that includes a stadium. The nearest thing to it in the States is a county fair.

During the afternoon we sought food in one of the numerous gers set up for that purpose. It was a hot day; as the atmosphere heated, cumulus built, and some very high winds developed. As we ate, the winds hit. For about 40 minutes the area was torn by these winds, gusting more than 50 mph by my estimate. The area was thick with dust. The hastily erected ger where we were eating began to come apart; we helped hold it together while the tempest blew hardest, then left for the stadium. So much for lunch. There we found that the entire roof had been blown off the main viewing stand, which was the part of the stadium reserved for dignitaries. It came off in one piece and landed on the lawn behind the stadium. Two people were critically injured. Volunteers, and then uniformed police and soldiers, appeared to search the wreckage, which had to be disassembled. This was done entirely by hand; I saw no tools in evidence.

Naadam did not miss a beat. The wrestling resumed, and our party went across the hillside to watch the horse races. The final round of archery was also being held. When I wandered home to Amy's ger late in the afternoon, the crew was loading the last of the roof, which had been about 50 yards long, maybe 40 feet wide, on big beams, into trucks. By the end of the day the wreckage was gone.

I learned something here about Mongolians. There was no buzz about the event, no "did you hear about...!?" It was over and done; no big deal. Just one more event to take in stride. In the States such an occurrence at the major event of the year would have led the evening news. Interviews with "eye witnesses," interviews with the mayor, speculation about this and that, lots of heavy breathing. In Mongolia, it was just one more thing to deal with, like fixing a broken tie rod after midnight with a crescent wrench. (Later, friend Frank was in a jaranyos—a Russian jeep—which had a radiator leak. The driver removed the radiator, slit the radiator in the area of the leak, and stuffed the slit full of sheep wool soak in sheep fat. This was a permanent fix.)

Horses. Horses have the most important psychological power in the country. Other animals have more value as nutrition and fiber, but horses are what Mongolians value. A Mongolian is wedded to his horse.

In downtown Tsetserleg, for example, horses are everywhere. There are cars, jeeps, trucks, vans, but the horse is their equal. At a place of business, a horse is likely to be tied to the door jamb as you make your way in. A horse is freedom and power. The Mongolians conquered most of the Eastern Hemisphere, including Korea, most of China, all of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, all of central Asia, Iraq, Iran, the eastern Mediterranean (exclusive of Egypt), Poland, and eastern Hungary, by horseback. The Mongol “hordes” were usually outnumbered by their opponents, but they prevailed by guile and skill nevertheless. The early and major conquests were conducted by Genghis, of course (died 1227). Subsequent conquests in Russia and Europe were led by his sons (and in China, by grandsons Hulegu and the famous Khubilai, who did “A stately pleasure-dome decree:/Where Alph, the sacred river, ran/through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea.” Coleridge.) The only reason that the European campaign did not get to France and the English channel was because they had to return to Kharkoum during the winter of 1241 to hold a conference after the death of an important leader (Ogodei, a son of Genghis); so they called off the war and traveled four thousand miles back to central Mongolia to take care of domestic business. All of Europe was mystified and terrorized by their appearance, and mystified and immensely relieved by their vanishing. The horse, and the canniness of their riders, made this conquest possible. The horses are small and tough, not at all like the lean and fast Arabian; but they conquered the world. Mongolians hold this in the forefront of their minds. Even I, no horse lover, was drawn to this mystique. The steppe seems to be made for the horse; the horse is made for the steppe; and the Mongolian seems made for both. The western Native Americans discovered the same relationship after the horse was reintroduced to North America by the Spanish.

Early one morning in Tsetserleg I took a walk outside Amy’s hasha. Though Tsetserleg is the regional capital, and is relatively large, grazing lands immediately abut the town. Grazing land begins exactly where the last hasha fence stops. I looked across the valley, and boys were herding their horses on the hillside directly below the Buddhist temple. (Mongolia is predominantly Buddhist, with some small Islamic populations in the extreme west.) I heard the boys raise their voices; they were singing as they rode in that early morning sunlight. I fancied that they were singing to their horses, which is entirely plausible.

Their song—all Mongolian song—is extremely melodious and harmonic. I lack the musical terminology to adequately describe it, but it is free of dissonance and seems perfectly to project the harmony of free lives in a

harmonious landscape. These boys' songs completed the beauty of the galloping horses and the morning light. I recalled that Genghis and the old Mongolians worshipped "the blue sky above." Indeed, that overarching dome of blue is a central fact of Mongolian life. I wondered, too, what it is like to live where song is not manufactured for us and sold to us, but rather comes naturally to everyone.

In the States we talk about an economic "safety net." Ours is an abstract institutional and economic contrivance, unevenly applied to our population. In Mongolia, there is also a "safety net," which is concrete and nearly universal. A Mongolian can travel anywhere, except within sections of the larger cities, and will be supplied with food and shelter. Hospitality is *the* primary civic virtue. (I am reminded here of some ancient western cultures, such as the Greeks, for whom hospitality was a primary virtue.) Amy tells me that in Tsetserleg, estimated population 20,000, there is *one* homeless person, a woman, known to everyone, and not liked. She is eccentric, homeless by choice.

The land dictates the distribution of animals, which in turn dictates the distribution of food and fiber; and this is the basis of social relationships. All of Mongolia is based on this foundation. The social relationships are an outgrowth of the way the people connect to the environment. In Mongolia, your feet are on the ground; you know the name of the animal you have just milked. Observing this immediacy of experience, I was frequently reminded of the artificiality of American life. We have only a distant connection to the sources of our food and clothing, and we have built an elaborate network of "shells"—houses and cars, other interior spaces—within which we hunker. These spaces also separate us from other people. It is interesting to me that these nomads, thinly scattered on the land, with easily portable housing, have more relationships, and more intense relationships, than people do in our highly populous country. It is inconceivable that American individualism—which is often merely a form of isolation—could exist in Mongolia. Amy craves solitude on occasion, but if she spends time alone, people wonder about her. This seamless continuum between the environment and the society it nourishes seems to me to be the special genius of the Mongolians.

There are no fences in Mongolia.

Well, that isn't strictly true. I saw one large garden plot that was fenced; the fence was an *exclosure*. Also, there is a strict delineation between the urban and the countryside. (And the delineation is clear. There are no

suburbs. There is city, and there is countryside.) The countryside is unfenced. No one owns it. No one can claim ownership of any piece of it. That is the law. (There are local exceptions, such as areas around hot springs, which may be developed for commercial purposes.) Within the cities, the lots are indeed fenced; again, the fences are enclosures. Animals are *always* nearby—I saw cattle grazing in a drainage ditch in downtown Ulaanbaatar—they are truly free range—and the fences keep the animals *out*. The fences also provide a measure of privacy. The *hasha* (a fenced lot; all are fenced the same, with vertical boards about seven feet high) contains a dwelling, sometimes permanent (stuccoed brick is common), more often a ger. There is room in the *hasha* for an additional ger or two, a shed, an outhouse. The urban populations increase in the winter, because the older people may pitch their ger near their urban children during the cold months, or families with children may settle near a school (literacy is nearly 100%). But there is always a cadre of herders who stay with the flocks and herds on the winter range.

Every *hasha* has a dog. If you think Alaskans, or at least Anchorageites, are crazy about dogs, as I do, (I mean crazy as in mad, insane, irrational), then you would appreciate the peculiar nuttiness of the Mongolians. I have no idea how many *hashas* are in Tsetserleg, but certainly there are thousands. Each has its dog, and during the night the dogs talk to each other incessantly. Waves of barks and howls sweep the city; sometimes the entire population of dogs joins the chorus at once. I have never heard anything like it; it was simultaneously bizarre and comical. (God made earplugs for such occasions; the traveler's salvation.)

A few final thoughts. Looking back to the States from Central Asia, I had a clear sense that Americans are particularly concerned about safety, security, and comfort. I mentioned above how we isolate ourselves within our fortress houses and fortress vehicles. I learned from the Mongolians that life may be uncertain, even hazardous, but it is not to be feared. One must be prepared to deal with all the many problems that are thrust upon one. Realism and flexibility are the keys to life. So, an unexpected wind blows the top off a major building? Clean it up and go on. No self-pity, no whining, no egotism; no screaming headlines, no breathless talking heads on the TV news, no disaster relief. "Catastrophic" events are not catastrophic, and we can't have everything "in a minute."

I felt at home during my entire stay in Mongolia, in spite of our unusual and remote situation. Di says the same thing. This is probably because we spend a large part of our year living in tents, cabins, or small spaces, and we

are used to sleeping on the ground, not having plumbing, eating simple food, and so on. In fact, everyone in our party has that mentality and background; you could say that we too are nomads. We also had the benefit of Amy's guidance, which was invaluable. I never before realized just how difficult it is to span a language barrier. Because of her expertise, we were immediately accepted by the locals no matter where we went. They appreciated the fact that at least one member of the party had taken the trouble to learn their extremely difficult language, and they sensed that we had a genuine interest in their country and their lives. We liked and appreciated them, and they liked us. It was a lot of fun.

When I sat down to write this, I wanted to develop a summary of our trip; to consolidate my memories of impressions and emotions before I lost them, rather than to narrate our experiences, which I did in my journal. But I should mention that we did walk along clearwater streams, and I had modest success fishing (grayling, and two species I did not recognize). We hiked in the mountains, through extraordinary mountain meadows thick with flowers, and flies. (The forests form a fringe atop the hills, above the grazing land, and cover the more remote valleys; the dominant species is larch, mixed with a few pines; some birch survive on open slopes; a number of species of willows, and some cottonwood, grow in riparian corridors.) We birdwatched. We backpacked. We visited the countryside, which means visiting the nomads at home. Amy is well liked, and her many Mongolian friends were genuinely eager to offer hospitality to her family and American friends.

This topic is not exhausted, but it is time to stop.
Bayartai. Sain saikhan bukhniig yorooi!
(Goodbye. Wishing you all good things!)

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