

DEPARTURE FROM INDIA UNLEASHES EMOTIONS

By Joe McGowan

A cable from Associated Press headquarters in New York informed me that my long-awaited transfer from India had been arranged and I would leave in mid-June, 1968 for a new assignment in South America.

Thoughts of the impending transfer unleashed a torrent of emotions, ranging from elation to sadness.

We had developed many friends in India, mostly among the reporters and editors in the Indian press and the expatriate community.

And there had been so many wondrous things to see in India, including the Taj Mahal, the lofty Himalayas, tea estates, and the Vale of Kashmir.

On the other hand, life in India in the 1960s was difficult. Trying to keep one's family healthy was a fulltime job. Obtaining safe foods for a youngster was a challenge. Summers were horrendous.

And, in my case as a journalist, the government had a closed-door policy, which made reporting difficult. And when I reported problems in the government, though true, my work brought threats of deportation.

As foreigners leave India, they hold a yard sale. You don't have to advertise—the word gets around very quickly by word of mouth. On the day of our sale, people were lined up in front of our apartment before we got out of bed.

Wealthy Indians with plenty of cash wanted imported goods they could not

obtain, such as refrigerators, air conditioners, stereos, and clothing. They bid against each other until the winner wound up paying more than the price which had been paid for the item when new.

Amazing to me was that they also wanted items of furniture which we had had built for us in India. This included beds, couches and chairs. The Indians could go to a local craftsman—as we had—and get the same item for less money. But there was an aura about items owned by foreigners.

About once a year, the American Embassy would hold a sale of items and police had to come and control the crowd that gathered. Tires that were nearly threadbare went quickly. Indians would buy two or three non-working air conditioners so they could cannibalize the parts and get one working machine.

The next task was trying to find employment for our Indian cook and nanny. The British-American women's club maintained a list of foreigners looking for household help, so we listed our employees with them.

I moved my wife and young son into the Oberoi Intercontinental Hotel, the best hotel in New Delhi, for our last few days in India. Unfortunately, my son came down with a severe intestinal ailment from the hotel food and had to undergo medical treatment in those days before we flew toward the United States.

My successor was supposed to come in from his post in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia several days before my departure so he could be briefed on news contacts, office operation, etc. But he was delayed and AP told me to go ahead and leave.

My last night in New Delhi, I went to the AP office and went through my file of “story ideas”. There were dozens of stories I had never gotten to. I considered leaving the file for my successor and then realized he would develop his own file. So, reluctantly, I pitched the file into the trash barrel.

The Pan American flight from New Delhi to Rome left at 3 a.m. and even then the temperature was about 90 degrees.

We spent several days in Rome and, oh, it was so wonderful. We ate green salads for the first time in three years. We gorged on pastas, salamis, cheeses and wines. My son tasted Jell-o for the first time in his life.

We ate our way across Europe. There was sauerbraten and wonderful beers in Germany, followed by a tour of restaurants in London. Then it was on to Colorado and Wyoming for reunions with family members. And the tour in South Asia was officially over and only memories remained.

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