

# Four months in

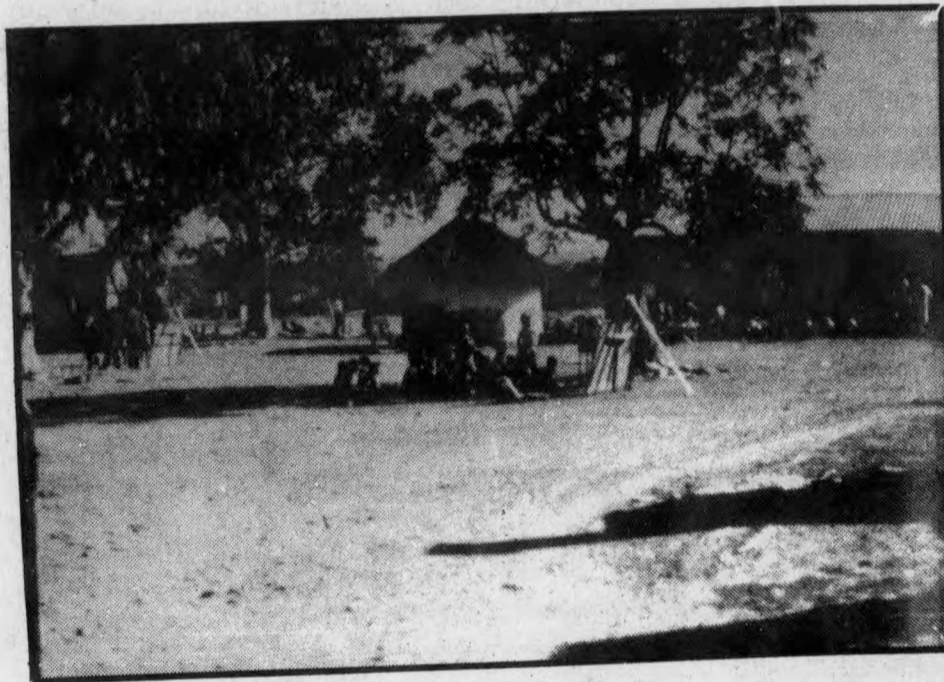
Imagine working in an African country for four months? That's what I said a year ago—but for me that became a reality this past summer.

Canadian Crossroads International, a volunteer short-term overseas program, provides an opportunity for men and women to meet new people, gain work experience and best of all live within another culture. Being accepted on this program gave me the opportunity to go to Botswana. My stay began in May and I returned to Canada in September. Being a volunteer with Crossroads implies that no salary is obtained in one's workplace. Each Crossroader is required to fundraise \$1400 as a partial contribution to the total cost of the placement. However, Crossroads allots a minimal living allowance in accordance with the standard of living of the country which the Crossroader is going to. Entertainment, souvenirs, and extra travel are paid out of the Crossroader's personal funds.

Botswana is in the southern part of Africa, north-west of the South African border. It is a land-locked country making water a very precious commodity. Politically, it is very stable compared to many of the surrounding countries. There is universal civil liberty unlike South Africa's Apartheid laws. It gained its independence from Britain in 1966 with the Botswana Democratic Party being the majority rule. This party continues to provide a stable political atmosphere. Due to this political stability, it is a favorite with foreign donors; presently Botswana is the second ranking recipient of foreign aid after Papua New Guinea.

Botswana's economic growth since independence has consisted primarily of the exploitation of mineral resources, cattle ranching, and the negotiation of a new Customs Agreement with South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland which reduces customs duties between the countries. However, South Africa would receive duty from goods coming in from other countries thus reducing import duties in these neighboring countries. The government is very concerned with narrowing the gap between the rich and poor. They are managing this by creating rural development programs in the rural areas to promote growth in these important parts of the country where much of the population lives. The government is very concerned with raising the level of education, health care, and communications. Government and foreign aid play a large role in the development of the country either through financial and/or trained personnel assistance.

Botswana's standard of living is very different from that of Canada. Even though their currency, 100 thebe equals 1 pula is roughly equivalent to a dollar, a Pula buys much more. I spend approximately P60 a month for food. In the rural areas, most dwellings did not have electricity, toilet facilities, or running water. Some people had to walk one kilometre for water. I was more fortunate; I had a water tap in my compound which was quite a luxury. I lived in a traditional hut, called a ronedavel, which was made of mud with a thatched roof. It is a very solid type of structure which keeps its own temperature control in winter and summer. As Botswana lies from 20° to 28° south of the equator it has distinctive winter and summer seasons. As I was there in the winter (their seasons are reversed) it was quite cool when the sun set but got hot during the day, especially from the hours of 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. During their summer (September to March) it is very hot. The Kalahari desert makes up much of Botswana's territory with the remaining eastern and southern parts of the country being semi-desert and very arid. Fortunately,



ly, it is a dry heat so you never feel muggy. As there has been draught for two to three years, there is not much vegetation remaining, and what is left is being quickly eaten by hungry goats, cows, horses and the occasional dog. People's yards are mainly of dirt with the occasional tree. Grass is a luxury and are unheard of in most areas.

The main food staples are sorghum and mealie meal. People cook the two grains as a mealie meal porridge in the morning but by lunch its consistency has changed to a hard paste. Even though there is a big cattle market, mealie meal is seldom eaten by the majority of people. It is too expensive for the average worker who makes P100 per month in the rural areas. A typical meal would be a big portion of mealie meal with a little sauce and boiled cabbage and onions. A traditional meal is additional meat and perhaps rice or samp (a type of corn) substituted for mealie meal. Fruits are expensive. They are favored for snacks as they are expensive.

The education system is based on the British system. A pupil will go to the Standard grades 1-7 hoping to pass the exams that will enable him or her to go to a "Form" school. Form school consists of grades 8-10. Students sit for exams after Form 3. Then they go to secondary schools. Style exams are given at the end of Form 3. Secondary schools are government operated. Some are private. School fees are levied for all students, private school fees being higher. Government places are at a premium. Uniforms are worn by both boys and girls. Since independence, the government has channelled many funds for education, which they consider one of their most important resources. Many post-secondary institutions have been established, including the University of Botswana, Botswana Agricultural College, National Health Institute, and National Institute of Vocational Training. There are only a few of these. There is even a department for education and Botswana Extension Colleges. These have been set up to help older students who have had a chance when they were young to get an education.

Traditionally Botswana's male workforce from the ages of 20-40 went to South Africa to work in the gold mines. It was hard work, poor living conditions, and they were only allotted a 2-week leave per year. Women would go to South Africa to work as domestic servants, factory workers and other low-paying jobs. Since independence and the decrease in demand for a migrant labor force, many Botswana residents (residents of Botswana) have returned to the local economy. Agriculture still plays a major role in the economy as does cattle husbandry. The government, through their efforts to improve agricultural sufficiency, created many ministries such as Education, Industry, and Commerce, Health, and Social Services, and local tribal administration.

I lived in Molepolole, a large village 50 kilometers from the capital city, Gaborone (pronounced Gaborone). A country representative from Crossroads placed me in a rural development agency. There were three different kinds of units: educational, and commercial. I worked in the educational unit which sold building supplies. I was able for doing the bookkeeping for the store. I had much business experience as I had never worked a manual accounting system before. I was very interested in talking to people who I worked with and about business practices and local customs. I was very pleased to have another placement. In my free time, I made many trips to surrounding villages where there were agricultural fairs on the weekends. The