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Book Review: Voices From the Peace Corps: Fifty Years of Kentucky Volunteers

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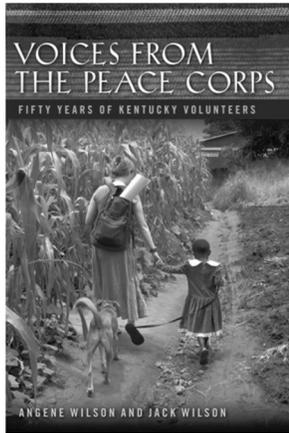
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Wilson, Angene and Wilson, Jack. *Voices From the Peace Corps Fifty Years of Kentucky Volunteers.* Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 373 p. ISBN 9-780-8131-2975-4. \$35.

In *Voices From the Peace Corps Fifty Years of Kentucky Volunteers*, the authors have written a literary celebration of sorts of the all-volunteer organization that was established by President Kennedy in 1961.

The husband-and-wife team of Peace Corps alumni Angene Wilson and Jack Wilson wrote the book as a self-described “retirement project,” focusing on the experiences of returned Kentucky volunteers—interviewing people from each decade the Peace Corps has been in existence.

The Wilsons initially conducted oral histories with 86 interviewees for the book, and used 12 others to present the memories of Kentuckians whose Peace Corps experiences became an important part of their lives.

And though it’s about a good cause written by former Corps volunteers, it leaves the reader wanting to know more about the volunteers the Wilsons write about.

The Peace Corps Act, passed by Congress in 1961, outlined the Corps goals as the following: to help the people of interested countries in meeting its needs for a trained workforce; to help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the people served; and to help promote a better understanding of other people on the part of the American people.

Peace Corps volunteers provide technical assistance in 1 of six fields: education; youth and community development; health; business and information and communications technology; agriculture; and environment.

The authors asked each interviewee why they joined Peace Corps; the process of applying; their living situations in their “host” countries; and the impact on the volunteers’ host country and on their lives since returning from service.

Each chapter focuses on 1 of the major questions listed above—and each question is “answered” repeatedly, but by different volunteers. Each volunteer’s answer lasts about a page or so.

The Wilsons interview only Kentucky residents who served in the Peace Corps, using a list of previous Kentucky volunteers maintained by Peace Corps veteran Jules Delambre, who was the “dedicated keeper and updater of postal and email addresses and a Listserv,” according to the Wilsons. The Wilsons state that Kentucky is the “common thread” that connects the volunteers’ stories and the book itself.

The Wilsons—who got married weeks before they both went to Liberia for a 2-year-stint as Peace Corps volunteers—didn’t end their involvement with the Corps when their tour ended in 1964. Jack also went on

to various administrative positions, eventually becoming Peace Corps director in Fiji in 1970.

The authors state that this book isn't meant to be a history of the Peace Corps as an organization nor is it an analysis of its policies. Rather, it is a collection of anecdotes of former volunteers' service.

The strength of this book lies in examining the volunteers' effect on their temporary neighbors/families. The honesty in which the volunteers recount their experiences is a tribute to the volunteers themselves. It is a very appropriate book for someone considering joining the Peace Corps who

wants to know about first-hand accounts working in the Corps.

But the authors would have written a more compelling text if they had focused on one or two Peace Corps volunteers throughout the entire book—rather than jumping back and forth from one particular volunteer's experience to another one, leaving the reader wanting to know more about the last volunteer written about, just as the Wilsons begin writing about someone else.

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