

INTERVIEW OF WILLIAM M. PECK

by Howard P. Willens and Deanne C. Siemer

February 15, 1997

- Willens: Dr. William Peck is a distinguished physician, poet, and author who has spent some 30 or more years here in Micronesia. He has graciously agreed to tell us something about his life and observations from this part of the world. Dr. Peck, we appreciate your hospitality. Could you please tell us who you are and how you happened to find yourself out here?
- Peck: I am physician. I practiced in the States, usually in an administrative position. In 1958, the U.S. Public Health Service asked me to go to work at the bomb testing site in the Marshalls. Well, it seemed like a good thing to do. I was going to save the world from future wars.
- Willens: Where you living and practicing at the time?
- Peck: In North Carolina.
- Willens: Were you in private practice at the time?
- Peck: No, I have never really done private practice. I have never had anyone pay me for taking care of them.
- Willens: Were you working for the Public Health Service then?
- Peck: Yes.
- Willens: Then you had gone into that Public Health Service after leaving medical school?
- Peck: Well, off and on, sometimes I worked for a university.
- Willens: So you were interested in this invitation?
- Peck: Oh, yes. I accepted it and was sent to Rongelap in the Marshalls. This was the new area that had been irradiated four years before.
- Siemer: In 1954?
- Peck: Yes. So I came in 1958. The Rongelap people had all been taken off, and the island was uninhabited for awhile. But they were returned to their area just a few months before I came. This was the first time that I ever had overseas experience. This was entirely new to me. Then bomb testing was renewed. I had the job working with bomb testing but I was also giving health care to the Rongelap people. There were not very many of them. They were seriously radiated four years before when they had only five bomb tests. This time they had 33 bomb tests, but fortunately the winds did not carry the fallout like it had before so I was not heavily radiated, radiated a little but not much. I doubt if anyone died from it, whereas many of them died from the previous bomb testing. When I got through with that I went to North Carolina and started to work on the job I had before. I was so bored that I decided I couldn't stand this. So I started looking for another overseas job. For one thing, I really admired the Rongelap people. I had never been in contact with people whom I could trust like I did those people. So I started looking over the world at more people like them. And the next place I found was Guam. It was on Guam I became the Director of Public Health for the next four and a half years.
- Willens: That was limited to the Territory of Guam, is that right?

- Peck: Yes. During that time I was subjected to I guess the worst typhoon that has ever come to this area. It was Typhoon Karen and I was in charge of not only public health but of the hospital. After that, I went to Malawi in Africa. I stayed there for three years. This was a wonderful place. My wife and I even thought of retiring in Malawi, we liked it so much. It was savage. The President killed people whenever they were against him and that sort of thing. But I got along well with him.
- Siemer: Was your wife with you at the time?
- Peck: Yes.
- Siemer: What is her name?
- Peck: Barbara Peck.
- Siemer: And what about the rest of your family?
- Peck: Well, in Guam my daughter was with us. I have only one daughter. She didn't go with us to Africa though. She went to the University of Hawaii. Malawi was an exciting place, although it was very barbaric. The President had sent to Israel and got some of their trained boys to come and train the village boys in Malawi as young pioneers. You could hear them out at night searching for people who had offended the Governor and they would beat them to death sometimes. I got photographs of them beating someone to death. But we enjoyed it because we never got beaten. I don't think we were put in very much danger.
- Willens: Were you working for the Government of Malawi in their public health facilities?
- Peck: Yes.
- Willens: What persuaded you to leave and go somewhere else?
- Peck: Oh, I think the reason was that there was another group that I had to compete with. I began to have little problems and I preferred to leave. I went to the Trust Territory. They had just fired the Director of Public Health so I applied for the position.
- Willens: Director of the Public Health Department?
- Peck: Yes, of the Trust Territory. This included the Marshall Islands, Saipan, Rota, Palau and Yap.
- Willens: I see.
- Peck: So they called and I went back. They interviewed me closely. I was amazed. They even had a number of people come from Washington and finally sent me to Washington to be interviewed. The reason they tried so hard was that their Director had been fired and they had been unable to get anyone to apply for the position. After the head had been fired, all of the physicians except one quit because they were so mad about the Director being fired. So that was the reason for the long interview process. They told me the reason that they were going to so much trouble to interview me was that they had been trying for a year and had not been able to recruit a single physician to work in the place. So what they had decided was that they would actually place themselves under the Indian Health Service. This infuriated the local people. "They are going to put us in Indian camps." But the reason they said, "We are hiring you because we think that you can convince people that this is good for them and, therefore, its fine." I said, "I won't do it." So they had several people come back from Washington to try to argue me into it and that failed. I finally told them I will do this only if the Indian Health Service has nothing to do with this. Also, I must be promised that you will have to hire me for at least ten months, and I will prove to

- you that I can hire physicians. Well, they finally decided that they would hire me for two years. At the end of ten months, I had all the positions filled and they were ready to go. So I enjoyed that job very much. It was a hard job. I had to go over three million square miles, I believe it was.
- Siemer: What was your impression back in those days of the competence of the bureaucrats that they sent out to work in the TT government?
- Peck: I didn't think it was any good. My feeling is that you must learn to adapt to local people. People from Washington cannot adapt to local officials. So I thought that was very bad.
- Siemer: Yet, you learned how to do that.
- Peck: From my experience in Guam and the Marshalls, I felt like I knew a little bit. I didn't know enough yet but kind of knew enough to slide in. That was the reason I felt that the patient came before anything else, and I still feel that way.
- Siemer: What effect do you think that had during your time in Saipan—the fact that the TT bureaucrats were not as competent as they should have been?
- Peck: Well, a lot of my activities were trying to increase the training of the local politicians and leaders. I think that had a lot to do with a better government. I would have to go into many details to do this, so I don't think I better try to cover it at this point. But that did become central. I was trying to develop a group who were competent in making decisions and also I tried to stay away from American government physicians. Which I still think is important.
- Willens: Do you remember whether you met Ruth Van Cleve back in Washington when she ran the Office of Territories?
- Peck: I think I did. I did go back to Washington at the very beginning.
- Willens: I just was wondering if you remember who you met with in the course of being interviewed for the job?
- Peck: Not very well. That was so many years ago.
- Willens: Did you come to learn why the person that held your job previously had been fired?
- Peck: No. In fact, the feeling was it was just a nasty personal affair he had with the Director.
- Willens: The High Commissioner?
- Peck: Yes.
- Willens: Who was the High Commissioner that you worked for?
- Peck: I can't remember.
- Willens: Well, there was a Mr. Goding who was there for awhile and then Mr. Norwood came in the 60's.
- Peck: I knew him.
- Willens: What did you think about his performance as High Commissioner?
- Peck: Well, he worked with me well and I can't say that I knew very much about what he was doing outside of my work. But I got along with him well.
- Willens: While you were in that job, the Congress of Micronesia was formed. Did you have any dealings with the leaders of the Congress of Micronesia while you were the head of the Public Health Department?

- Peck: Well, not officially but I often had discussions with individuals. The Trust Territory began to fall apart while I was there. I thought that the health part worked well because the new hospitals were built and I had them well staffed all the time. So I think it had nothing to do with the bad reputation the Trust Territory officials began to get. I finally decided to leave and went to Truk to start a class for Micronesians to work in the health services that I had been trying to develop. So I did that for about three years.
- Willens: Did you remember approximately about how many years you were with the Trust Territory before you went to Truk?
- Peck: Almost six years.
- Willens: So you went to Truk sometimes in the early 1970s or thereabouts. Who was organizing the program there that you wanted to participate in? Was it affiliated with an institution of some kind?
- Peck: Well, yes by this time. When I was working in Saipan, many ideas that I had were in development at that stage. New hospitals were established almost every place and I got the physicians' positions all filled. Coming into Truk was a little bit like continuing this. We brought people from all over the area in for training in public health. I didn't even try for hospitals, but we tried to do this for public health. Well, then finally I quit that and went to Saipan. It was the beginning of my retirement, and I was working pretty much half-time.
- Willens: At the time you came back to Saipan, had the Northern Marianas become a Commonwealth?
- Peck: I think so.
- Siemer: Do you remember Dr. Kaipat?
- Peck: Oh, yes.
- Siemer: Was Dr. Camacho there by that time?
- Peck: Dr. Camacho, do you mean the one that became Governor?
- Siemer: The very same.
- Peck: He became one of my best friends. I wrote most of his speeches for him. He went to New York one time and he took me along since he didn't know where he might be stopped or be asked to speak. So he made a whole lot more speeches there. I have great admiration for him. We got along well together.
- Siemer: But you lost him as a physician when he went into politics, right? He stopped being a doctor when he went into politics?
- Peck: Yes.
- Siemer: That must have been a considerable loss. You didn't have that many Chamorro doctors, did you?
- Peck: No. We had to have State-side physicians for many of those positions.
- Siemer: What do you remember about Dr. Kaipat.
- Peck: I don't remember very well. You must remember you are talking to an old man here, an 86 year old one in fact.
- Willens: I just want to get it on the record that Dr. Peck has written a volume called A Tidy Universe of Islands and it has the date on it of March of 1995. And he is showing us the

- introduction or preface to the book where you are quoting from a distinguished French essayist, Montaigne.
- Peck: Here he was writing an introduction to his essays, that was 1580 A.D. I think. He had some of the same attitudes about this that I have.
- Siemer: I thought that was a wonderful introduction.
- Peck: I think it's good. Then you read some of these subsequent introductions.
- Siemer: Actually we would like to have an opportunity to read your work in its full length. It covers a wonderful collection of subjects. It would be a great advantage to us to read it thoroughly.
- Peck: I will see what I can do about that.
- Siemer: Tell us about your retirement, what you did after you were in Saipan?
- Peck: Now, let me see. Some of the other things that you might like to know. Well, I am interested in poetry. I became interested in it rather late. I'll show you the second poem that I ever wrote. I published it. I sent it off the best magazine (Harpers Magazine) that I know of and they bought it. Here is a beautiful copy of it.
- Willens: Would you mind telling us for the record when you were born?
- Peck: I was born in 1910 in Iowa in Page County. Do you know where that is?
- Siemer: No.
- Peck: It is right on the border of Missouri. My father's property, which didn't amount to much, was right on the border of Missouri. The town was Northboro. I don't think it even has 200 people. I was raised in a very, very rural area. My father ran a hardware store.
- Siemer: Where did you go to school?
- Peck: I went to college to get my pre-med at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. I had two years there. I worked my way through. My parents had enough money to give me so I could rent a room but for food and all I had to work for it. I made good grades so I was able to get into medical school. Then I worked one year and went to school one year. I was able to work somewhere so I could get food. I made straight A's. I did especially well in anatomy, so they asked me to work full-time in anatomy then, which I did for a year. Then I began to want to go on so I worked part-time and went to school part-time. That was almost mostly how I got through medicine. But I did make top grades and I belong to the AOA now. You are elected to that on a scholastic basis. After medical school, I went into the military. I got to San Francisco and that is where I got married. Then I went back to practicing, not private practice but practicing public health in different areas.
- Willens: Let me ask a question about Micronesia, Dr. Peck. You spent time in Guam, Saipan, Truk, and the Marshalls. Did you have any sense at the time as to whether these different people could be a unified in a single political entity?
- Peck: I never really got into politics there. I stayed away from that.
- Willens: Did you see language and cultural differences between those areas that in your judgment were significant?
- Peck: I thought they were significant, and I still do. Truk, when I was there, was a wonderful place. But I wouldn't like to have it combined with Rota.
- Willens: And why not?

- Peck: I feel that these island people over the years have developed cultural traditions that are sound. I see no reason why they should lose their culture, give up the homes of their ancestors, to join someone else.
- Willens: While you were in Saipan I am sure that you became aware that the Saipan people and leaders for many years had been asking to become affiliated with the United States. Did you think that was a wrong decision for them to be making?
- Peck: No, I don't in that the Saipan people are typical island people.
- Willens: Can you elaborate on that?
- Peck: I think the island cultures have been developed to help them over their deficiencies. What I mean, for example, is that on some of these islands they are remote and there's very little local food available. On some islands, they hardly grow anything. They rely mostly on fish and others rely on palm trees and so on. Their whole culture is built up largely from the deficiencies of that area. Saipan is not like that.
- Willens: Did you think that Saipan was different and that it did not suffer from those kinds of deficiencies?
- Peck: No, I think the Americans came in and took over. So I think it represents U.S. culture, more so in Guam as a rule. I wouldn't want to live there for anything anymore. While I was there I liked it, but I lived in an area which is off to one side. Saipan I think has been ruined by our Western system. I really don't like the kind of development that we have in the States. It's reflected in a change of personalities of the people, and I don't like that. I don't try to do anything about it. As I said, you should not come to an island with the idea that you want to change it. But you can sit back and admire the way they're getting around the difficulties that they have. These life styles have developed over centuries to get around these shortages.
- Siemer: When did you come to Rota?
- Peck: In 1982.
- Siemer: Were you retired then?
- Peck: I never worked a day on Rota.
- Siemer: What are the differences that you see here on Rota from what you saw in Saipan?
- Peck: I will have a hard time explaining it, but it is terribly important to me. I think Saipan was like Rota at one time. But it has been influenced by the Americans who want to change it. That's one thing I think that we have harmed. The harm has been done by we Americans who feel that we know better. I think that we should be very careful and we should look at the native way of handling things with almost a religious feeling. I have developed that quite a bit since I have been here.
- Willens: You think the people on Rota have protected their local ways of doing things?
- Peck: So far, though I have no reason for saying that they will continue. I am thinking this way about it. When I lived on Guam, they had their ways of handling problems that don't resolve themselves. Here they will call out the members of different families and come together and argue over what someone has done that is wrong. And decide how they should make amends for them, having property exchanged and things like that. That still happens here to some extent. It used to be very fundamental through this whole area, but now its entirely gone on Guam. In Saipan, I think, it is mostly gone, but not entirely.

Rota, not yet, but maybe in ten years it will be. It is changing. I am glad I won't be living here ten years from now.

Siemer: It is a beautiful place.

Peck: That may not change.

Willens: Dr. Peck, we thank you very much. There are a few chapters of your book that would be helpful for us to read here and maybe we can make arrangements to do that. And we may want to come back and visit with you again. We are going to be on Saipan for a couple months.

Peck: Oh, you are welcome to read it any time. I don't make copies because it isn't published yet.

Willens: Well, thank you very much.