

Amazon Journey: It's a Rainforest Out There – Part 1

Larry R. Moffitt
October, 27 1998
Buenos Aires



Some of the Amazon research group, left to right, Jeong-chul Jeon (Korean UC media), Gi-byung Yoon (Father's assistant), Dong-moon Joo (Washington Times), True Parents, Koo-bae Park (South American business interests), Larry Moffitt (Tiempos del Mundo), Seog-byung Kim (Korean UC media), Alejandro de Souza (Interpreter)

The phone rang. It was the first week of October, 1997. Dong Moon Joo was calling Buenos Aires from Washington to ask if I could recommend a qualified journalist to travel with Father, Mother and a small group of people on a trip from one end of the Amazon River to the other.

He said something about the purpose of the trip being to examine business possibilities, but that was about it. When we hung up I still had no idea as to the itinerary, what we would be doing and how or why, or who would be in the group. The instructions couldn't have been more vague, which according to my back-of-an-envelope-notes were approximately:

*Amazon River tour with True Parents to study environmental, fishing and forestry projects. Have the reporter in Manaus by the morning of October 23. Tell him to bring mosquito repellent.
Thanks.*

If Mr. Joo knew anything more, he wasn't talking.

I don't know which journalist Mr. Joo had in mind – nobody specific most likely – but as I thought about the general qualifications of such a person I considered that, assuming the writer's professional skills were in order, it was probably not an absolute necessity that he or she be a specialized environmental or agribusiness reporter. Most of the issues can be learned without too much difficulty by a good generalist, and besides, my experience told me the nature of the trip could turn out to be more on the order of a God's Providence for the Amazon look-see than a serious sleeves-rolled-up study of proposed projects for fish farming, spiritually oriented multinational communities and the like. Whoever went would have to be comfortable with not knowing exactly what was expected of them and equally sanguine to find out that whatever they started out thinking the trip would be about – this was probably not it at all.

I thought the foremost criteria would be that the journalist have at least a minimal appreciation for the mission of the True Parents. I came up with several journalist candidates including, immodestly, myself. As I was living in the neighborhood of the Amazon, was already emotionally bonded to the continent, interested in environmental matters, and would very much enjoy being with Father and Mother in such an intimate setting, I faxed Mr. Joo a note proposing that I be the accompanying journalist. He accepted and I was in. Later it occurred to me that he may have expected me to do this from the beginning.

Still, one generally assumes that some sort of preparation is necessary before going to the Amazon. Was this going to be a hike through high-canopy forest, camping in tents along the river at night? I spent too much time thinking about irrelevant things, like whether to buy a "jungle knife," a big nasty steel one with

serrated teeth along the back side so I could see my leg off if I was bitten by a water moccasin. Which vaccinations should I get? I turned myself into a minor authority on dengue fever.

No need to bring the laptop computer, I thought. Where would I find electricity in the jungle? In the end I opted not to get the knife, but did buy a small tent, backpack, flashlight, raingear, mosquito repellent, a small metal mirror for shaving in the bush and a few similar survival items – almost none of which was necessary. All I really needed was the bug spray.

I made a few calls to the church headquarters in Brazil and found out most of what I needed to know, including that we would be staying in civilized hotels. Father and Mother would begin earlier somewhere in Colombia, closer to the source of one of the Amazon's tributaries. Myself, Mr. Joo and Vicki Yokota would join the party in Manaus, considered to be the heart of the Amazon. We would all spend a day and night there and fly eastward along the river in Father's corporate jet, stopping a day each in Santarém, Macapá and Belém. At each stop we would tour the river and fish a little before spending the night and heading out again the following morning. From a hardship perspective this was going to be a piece of cake.

I left the survival gear at home. The hardest decision now was whether to go ahead and take the laptop, which I finally decided not to do. Too much weight, too many location changes, probably a packed schedule that would not leave much time to set it up and write. Too many people per hotel room and no place to put anything. Notebooks and pens would be more appropriate it seemed. I turned out to be right on all counts.

I arrived in Manaus in the wee hours of Thursday, October 23. [Throughout this report I will include italicized excerpts from my handwritten notes, made during the trip.]

Miércoles, 22 de octubre de 1997 – (American Express flight lounge at Ezeiza Airport, Buenos Aires) Waiting for Varig 941 to São Paulo and another to Manaus. Keen sense of adventure... The question is why are True Parents undertaking this research themselves? Why is this particular part of the front-line of God's Providence the place he needs to be at this time?... With True Father being 77 years old, the question of where he spends a day takes on added value with each passing month and year.

Jueves, 23 de octubre de 1997 – 9:00 AM arrived at suite 3001 to greet True Parents. Both looked well and Mr. Joo gave his report. Father and Mr. Joo sat quietly by the window while the others sat on the couch and floor nearby. Vicki Yokota took photos.

At some point Father looked in my direction and began speaking Korean, half looking at me and half at Mr. Joo. I knew he was talking about me, so I tried to look alert and waited patiently for the translation. When Father finished speaking, Mr. Joo said, "Larry, after we finish surveying the Amazon and Paraguay Rivers Father wants you to focus your attention on heads of state and diplomats. Work with Ambassador Sanchez to prepare a way for Father to meet all the Latin American heads of state." Then Father spoke to Vicki...

True Father asked Vicki if she was raising her children well. "I'm trying to," she replied. Father gave her a big smile.

And then again to me...

Father asked me what I thought of the river and being here. I replied that it is a great honor and that it fulfills a dream of mine to one day see the Amazon.

He asked about my Spanish and I said, exaggerating slightly (or slightly more than slightly), that my Spanish had improved greatly over the past year. Father said that I must become one with the Spanish culture to the bottom of my soul. I told him that everyone at Tiempos del Mundo corrects my Spanish and this helps me learn. I added that my children learn the language much faster than me.

Father said, "You have been working so hard at Tiempos del Mundo that you have lost weight and become skinny." I thanked him for the opportunity to lose weight and said my wife thanks you as well. Father laughed.

The group included True Parents, Dong Moon Joo, Koo Bae Park, Won Joo McDevitt (assisting Mother), Ki Byung Yoon (Father's spear-carrier and fishing companion), two brothers from Korean UC Film Department (videotaping the tour), Victoria Yokota and me. In addition, Hideo Oyamada and Heung Tae Kim from the Brazilian UC headed separate teams that leapfrogged ahead of us to make arrangements for hotel, cars and boat a day ahead of our arrival in each place. Their organization was superb. They missed nothing and we felt very well taken care of. At each city a group of Japanese sisters prepared meals in the

kitchen that comes with a presidential suite in any good hotel. In Manaus, the table in Father's suite was too small to accommodate everyone for lunch, so Vicki and I and a couple others ate in another room off the main dining area.

After lunch we drove down to the river and boarded a large tour boat, fifty feet long, with two decks and lots of interesting cabins and space to walk around. Usually when I have been fishing with Father, everyone has been in smaller boats. Father much prefers the smaller ones. A boat this size, with air-conditioned rooms and a big airy upper deck, was a pleasant surprise to me.

3:00 PM – It just occurred to me how wonderfully low-tech is a pen and paper. (God this river is beautiful!) We are on the Solimões, probably near Careiro da Várzea or Iranduba, around the bend and upriver from the famous line in the water where the Negro River (darkened by organic matter) merges with the Solimões to form the Amazon. We are anchored next to the shore. Mother is fishing off the upper deck a few feet away, and Father, along with Mr. Joo and Mr. Yoon are farther upriver in an open, unshaded dingy. Most boats on this river have a canopy roof running the length of the boat to protect from the fierce sun.

Our big boat towed a small dingy with an outboard motor. It's mid-afternoon and we are tied up next to the bank. I am watching Father as he sits in the dinghy in shorts and t-shirt, putting sun block on his face before he heads out from our big boat with Mr. Joo and Mr. Yoon to troll around, stopping here and there to drop their lines and drift.

He puts a small amount of sunblock in his hand and goes to work on one leg and uses what's left on the other. Quiet, purposeful, it's obvious his mind is already out there on the river. In his ball cap and what looks like an undershirt, he looks a lot different than the Father of the Belvedere sermons or the Father of the VIP receptions. This Father is older, much older, and mortal. It suddenly strikes me in a way it never has before, how old Father has become. I have always thought of him as indestructible and eternally vigorous. At that moment though, he looked to be every one of his 77 years. I realized in my gut something I heretofore acknowledged only in my mind – Father is physically finite. He will go to the spirit world one day.