

Ha'apaia Pacific Training School in January 1984

as told by Clare and Ken Whitney, 2025

Between 1981 and 1985 four Pacific Training Schools were held in the Kingdom of Tonga, and one Young Farmer's Training Program in 1986. The staff included three Americans, two Phillipinos, a couple of volunteers from England, 9-10 Tongan young adults, and a colleague from Australia. The Training Schools were off-shoots of the training programs done around the world by the Institute of Cultural Affairs and were adapted by the staff for the island nation. They were done in four of the island clusters, Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai, and Eua, one each year on the grounds of the high schools of each island group. It involved every person on the staff and involved hours of training.

This is the story of the Ha'apai Pacific Training School in January 1984.

It began by traveling from Tongatapu to Ha'apai by ferry - an overnight trip. The staff packed up almost everything in the house to take with us – blankets, foam mattresses, a mimeograph machine fitted into its own wooden box with extra parts, ink, and reams of paper and whatever we needed for a three week stay at the school in Ha'apai. We had a box of materials ready for handing out including songbooks with both Tongan and English language songs.

We stowed everything in the belly of the ferry and it was joined by several goats, chickens, and plenty of large amounts of food supplies for the island group, and at least one car! Finally we were ready to go, and we gathered on the deck of the ferry for the long ride.

When we arrived at the dock the next morning, people were waiting for us and helped us get everything to the school and in place. We began with a celebrative meal for the beginning of the school. The next morning we held a brief worship service, breakfast and a conversation together, then divided into small groups to begin to talk about the islands and their gifts and difficulties, and to start the conversation about what they could do to resolve the difficulties. There were about 100 people present, older men - mostly fishermen and farmers, older women who participated with great pleasure amongst the men, a first time for them. There were a number of young people, full of energy and willingness to participate. The staff had its assignments: the Tongans conducting the sessions, while the internationals kept supplies flowing, which often meant walking to the store in town for some item that had been forgotten, or fresh fruit or vegetables; and taking care of the facilities.

Three weeks later, after a big ceremony of ending with lots of singing and dancing, the school was at an end. We packed up everything again, got it to the ferry and returned to the staff house in Tongatapu. One stop on the way back to Nuku'alofa seemed to be in the empty ocean, with no land in sight. Soon we could see small boats swarming around the ferry, and a door on the lower level opened and the training school attendees who lived on that unseen island were picked up by the boats that came for them. It was such an astounding experience of living in another world to me. In Nuku'alofa, we finished the documentation and got it out to the people of Ha'apai. We kept in touch with as many of them as we could to offer support and keep the hope alive. We scheduled several visits to various villages for further conversations. Another Training School was at an end.