Across the Sahara: A modern pilgrimage

Photos and Text
By Bill Tilton

It was an easy border, that between Nigeria and Niger. Only three hours for four searches, then we were off to the north.

At the last minute the soldiers put another passenger in our lorry. He was a Tuareg, a Saharan nomad from northern Niger. He had come south to go to Nigeria, but Nigeria wouldn't let him in. "They say he will end up as a beggar in Lagos," explained another passenger. Now he was being sent back up north.

The lorry was already filled to capacity, so the Tuareg sat at our feet and on our feet. He was armed with a long, red-sheathed sword, but it was useless against the pokes and giggles directed at him by scornful southerners.

At dusk we reached Zinder, the end of the road, a town with more camels than motor vehicles. Ten years ago this was the middle of the Sahel, the semi-fertile corridor south of the desert. Now, after prolonged drought, it has become part of the Sahara Desert itself.

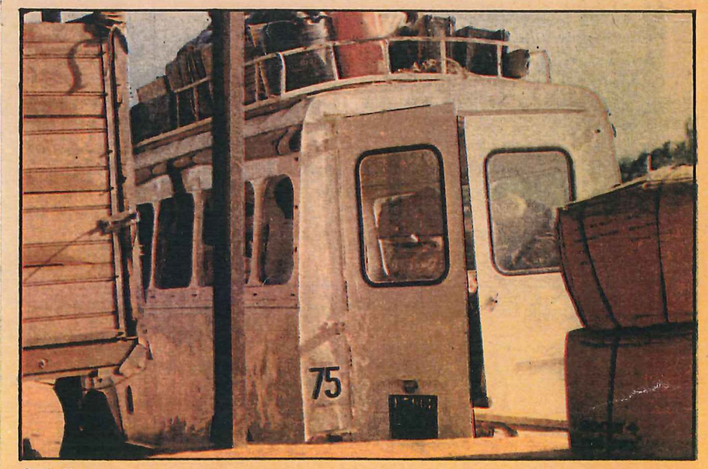
There's a puddle, sort of green and putrid, in the middle of Zinder. There are also a couple of restaurants in town; the menus consist mainly of peas and tough beefsteak. It's a tossup which tastes worse, the beer or the water.

But you can rent a motorbike and tool around. People are pleasant and don't laugh at your lousy French. And there is a cafe where you can hear an electric African version of French rock and roll.

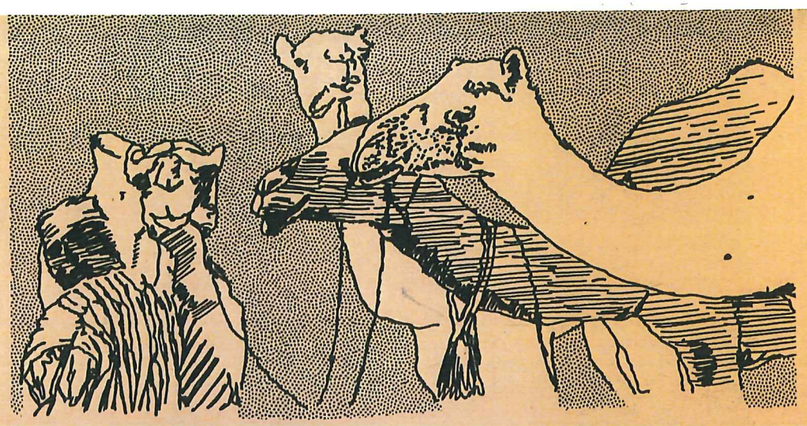
Some of the world's best leatherworkers live in Zinder. The killing drought gave them lots of hides to work with. The drought in Niger has officially ended, but the rains are still inadequate; a virus threatens the groundnut crop, and there are warnings of a locust plague. And in early 1978, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization warned that food shortages threaten "the very lives of some seven million people" in northwest Africa.

The rich countries — east, west, and Arab — are continuing to debate five-year plans for irrigation and reforestation. France has helped its former colonies in West Africa by exchanging food and economic support for control over natural-resource exploitation, so self-sufficiency remains a dream here. And, while U.S. international contributions sag, little countries like Niger are beginning to look to Libya and China for security.

North from Zinder, the next town of any substance is Agadez, 370 kilometers away. If you don't have your own vehicle to go there in, you must hire a ride. There are no buses, and this isn't hitchhiking country. ▶



At left, camels beneath a lone tree on the way to Tamanrasset, Algeria, in the Sahara Desert. A truck heading north stopped here — not to pick up the camels and their owner, as the passengers had assumed, but simply to drop off another camel. Above, a typical bus in the Sahel, heading north from Kano, Nigeria, toward the Sahara.



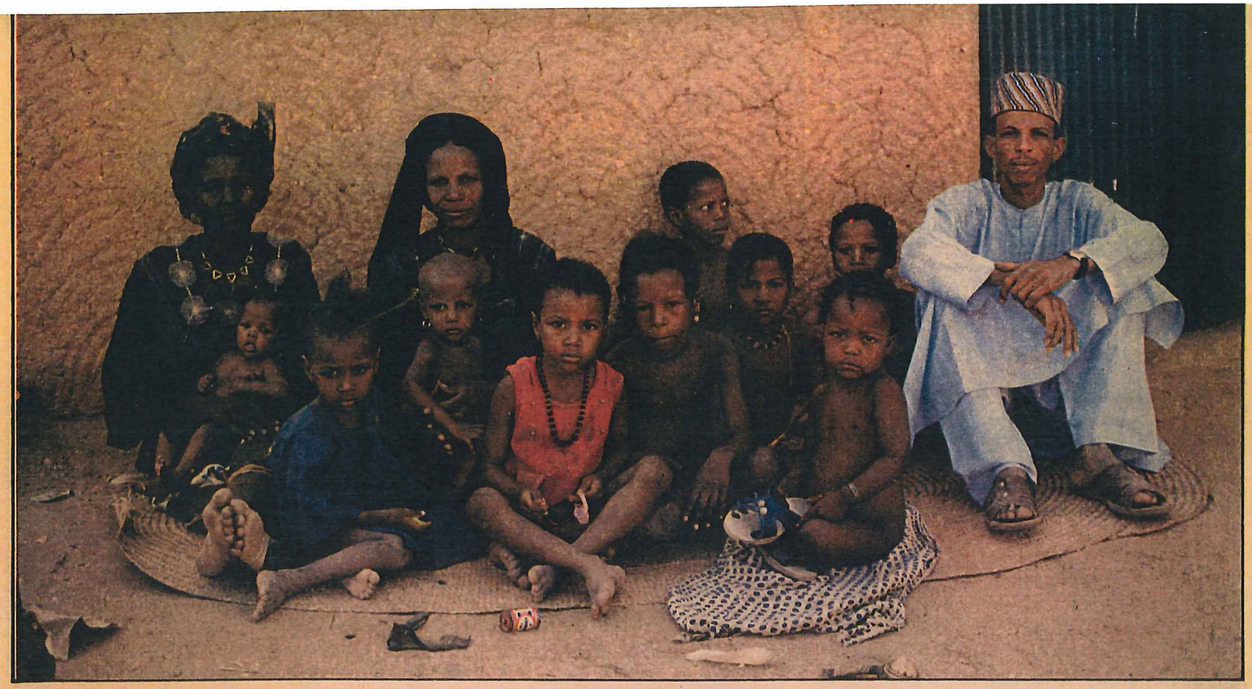
Camels and drover, Zinder, Niger.

Squat, toadish Bedford trucks are loaded in the city center. You can ride atop the load, 15 feet off the ground, for 2,000 CFA (the currency of French West Africa), about eight dollars. The trucks may take two days or two weeks, and the price doesn't include food.

As an alternative, an impatient Nigerian organizes the hire of a Land Rover — 3,000 CFA a head. The vehicle is crowded as usual, but snug seating can sometimes be the best defense in a badly bouncing vehicle, and the seats are padded. The Tuareg from the Nigerian border is a passenger, too. His sword is gone, but he's back in his old element now, and his spirits have lifted considerably.

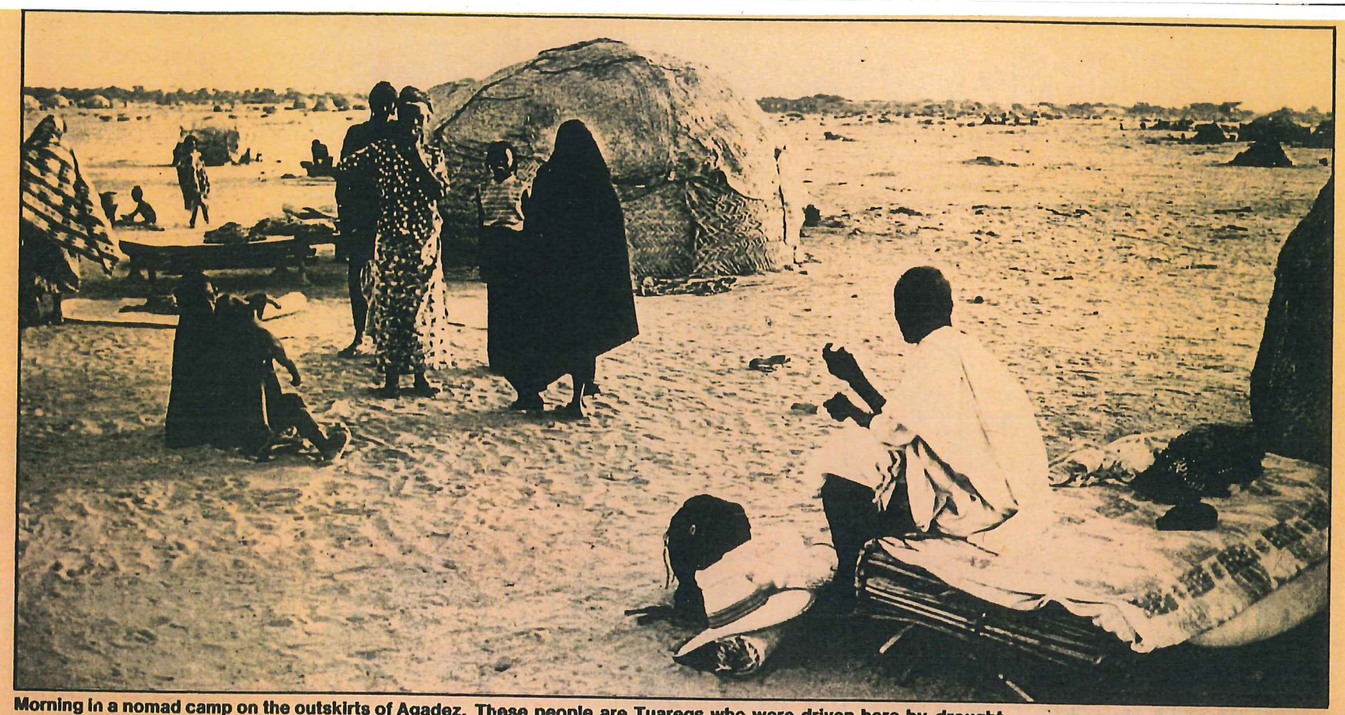
Now comes Tenere, the Land of Fear. The overgrazed, scrubby bushes and tough grasses become thinner and thinner here. The road is little more than the tracks of the last vehicle. The sand is soft, and even Land Rovers with good drivers get stuck. We are skirting the edge of Erg du Tenere, and *erg* means "sea of sand." Things that look like cities on the map sometimes ▶

Street scene, Zinder; camels outnumber cars here.



Mohammed Koumana, a silversmith in Agadez, in northern Niger, with his wives and children.

The mosque in Agadez, Niger. It is made of mud over a framework of latticed wood.



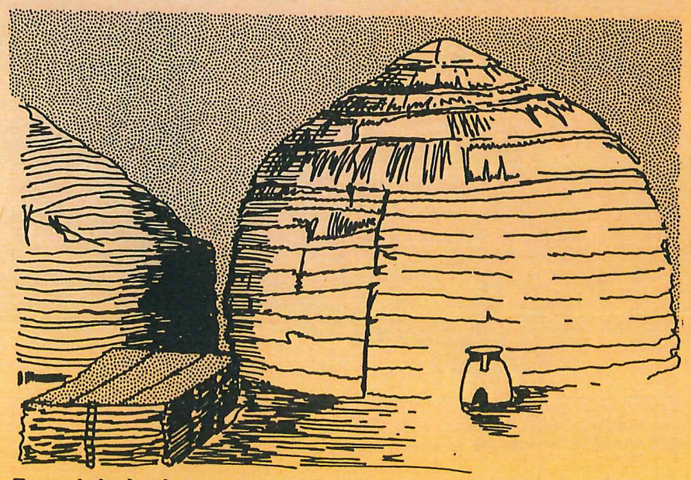
Morning in a nomad camp on the outskirts of Agadez. These people are Tuaregs who were driven here by drought.

turn out to be one earthen building and a well.

Only about 20 percent of the Sahara is sand, so soon the erg changes to *reg*, a continuous plain of gravel and hard dirt. Sometimes the gravel is pebble size, and you drive as if over an irregular parking lot. Sometimes the rock is in big chunks, and you must travel in zig-zag fashion. The terrain is broken mostly by *wadis*, dry riverbeds that have seen flowing water once — maybe — in the last ten years. Everyone's first instinct is to hide from the sun.

Agadez, northern Niger, is Tuareg country. Tuaregs are tall, lanky and hardy. On the street they look you in the eye; but drive by one on his camel in the middle of nowhere, and he might not even turn his head. Tuareg men wear huge indigo turbans, sometimes wound completely around the face, with just a bare slit for the eyes. The women, when you see them at all, go unveiled.

These people are feisty. They resisted Arab invasions in the 7th and 11th centuries and retained control of rich trade in slaves, gold, ivory and salt. They still don't pay much attention to borders. Nomads, they live usually in tents and huts made with easily movable mats.



Tuareg huts, Agadez.

Agadez proper is made out of mud brick, but the town is surrounded by a peppering of Tuareg encampments. These clusters of tents or huts have a nice sense of space, so everyone has a big backyard. The people don't object if you sleep in that back yard and occasionally will even offer breakfast.

Agadez is busy, one of the major towns of the southern Sahara. Most of the people are Tuareg, but even in the slowest months of late summer there is an obvious stream of non-natives: Nigerian, Dutch, French, Cameroon, Arabic and more. One Ghanaian, hanging out at a crude, friendly restaurant about a block from the mosque, says he was an auto mechanic, attracted by oil-rich Libya. But, he says, they turned him back at the border because he couldn't read Arabic.

Libya plays a strange game in this part of the world. Five years ago, after uranium discoveries in the Tibesti mountains, Libya quietly redrew its maps and absorbed 30,000 square kilometers of Chad and smaller portions of Niger and Algeria. Chad, of course, is irate, but Niger and Algeria are silent. In fact, Libya's financial and technical assistance is becoming increasingly significant to Niger's economy. Libyan trucks bring goods to Agadez. And Libya, like everyone else, talks about actually building some roads.

Without too much asking, you can find someone in Agadez willing to rent out a camel and saddle. Look for Mohammed Koumana, an artisan *bij* or silversmith, and ask for his nephew Ahmed. Ahmed is in his late teens; he went to school only for about three years, but he speaks four languages and smatterings of a few others. For not too much money, Ahmed will let you ride with him up a wadi to his parent's hamlet, near some Tuareg graffiti.

The graffiti are a full day's ride from Agadez. A few feet from the twisting, dry riverbed the terrain quickly looks like Tenere. But along the route is a tenacious spicing of bushes and trees. Low spots in the riverbed yield slowly seeping water for the camels at about two and a half feet. The camels hunker down close, stretch out their necks and noisily suck the water from the sand.

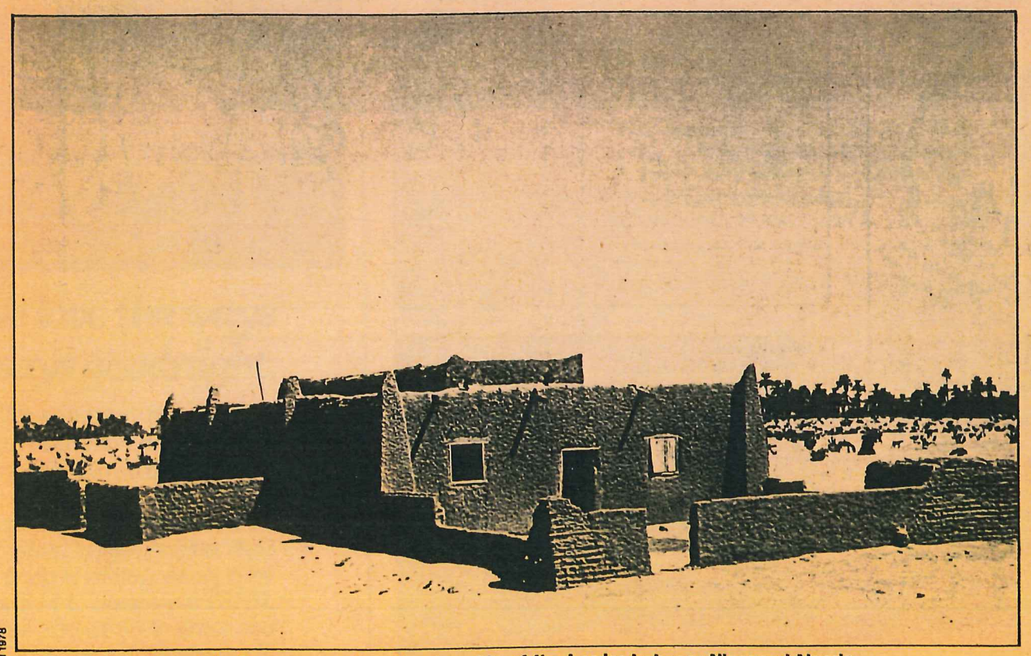
A few wells along the edge of the wadi yield water at 25 feet. The farmers drawing water in leather bags will smile politely and stop for a while to exchange pleasantries or trade some pepper and tomatoes for some tea. The ground isn't too hard, but the hoes are crude, and the place is covered with grasping little burrs.

Tuareg huts are surprisingly cool. The furniture is mostly mats and sleeping platforms. Most people also seem to have a Chinese-made lantern, a simple and efficient kerosene lantern used all over West Africa. People here seem comfortable without constant conversation. Little yellow-green birds fly in and out of the huts without fear.

The universal social ceremony is the ritual of Tuareg tea. Four pinches of tea and a hunk of sugar are boiled up in a small teapot. Then the ingredients are mixed: With muted flourish, the tea is poured and re-poured and re-poured in long, long brown arcs, from amazing distances into a glass. This is especially tricky, since the glasses are nothing but shot glasses; still, few drops are lost. The longer the arcs, the better the tea tastes, for some reason. ▶

Tuareg graffiti scratched on rocks one day's camel ride outside of Agadez. The nomadic Tuaregs developed and still use their own script.

Stone shelter in the desert of southern Algeria, south of Tamanrasset.



The border station at In Guezzam, on the Algerian side of the border between Niger and Algeria.

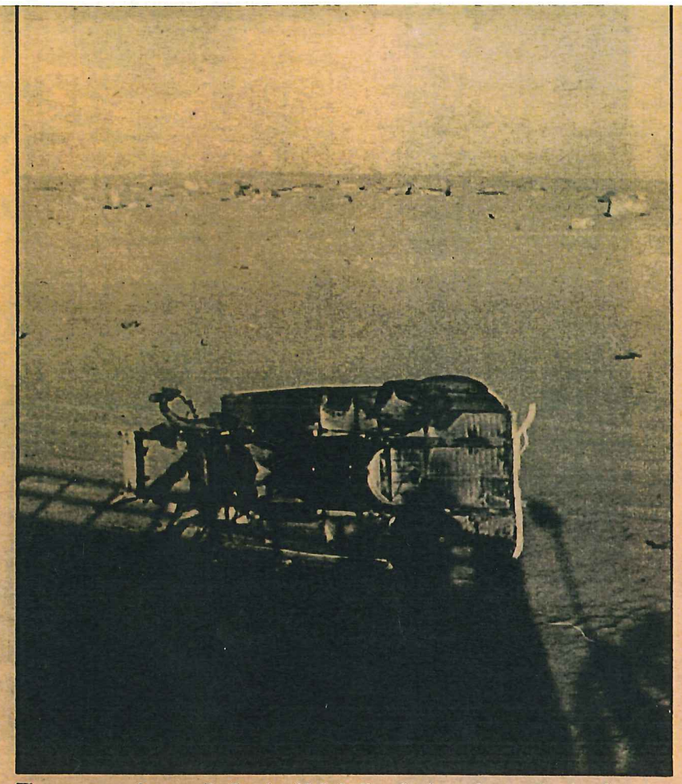
The Algerian border is almost 500 kilometers to the northwest. The Michelin map optimistically lists half a dozen waterholes in that distance. After the border, it's another 400 kilometers to Tamanrasset. The map lists no waterholes in that distance.

The quickest way to get to Tamanrasset overland is on the back of a 20-ton Berliet trailer truck, a flatbed with inserted side railings. In mid-1976 these desert clippers began to feed Nigeria from the north. Nigeria's rapid spending of oil money had clogged its ports with incoming cargo long ago, but just over two years ago a cement-buying spree plugged things so hopelessly that the desert funnel had to be opened.

It's 3,500 kilometers from Algiers to Lagos, 2,400 of them over rough desert trails. These drivers make the trip down in about nine days. Generally their trucks are empty for the return trip, the drivers are anxious to get back north, and impromptu passengers can expect a quick trip.

By the time the trucks arrive in Agadez this time, there has not been a vehicle going north for a week. About a dozen western and African travelers have gathered. The *chef d'convoy* demands 10,000 CFA or 600 dinar apiece. That's about twice the normal $20 fee, but most people pay rather than wait another week.

Assamaka is the last mud hut in Niger, the last customs stop. The water here tastes absolutely terrible. The route to Assamaka has been marked by small piles of



The carcass of a cannibalized vehicle in the shadow of a passing truck.

stones about every quarter — or even half — mile.

Algeria is more efficient. It marks the route with metal poles. Now and then the route is also marked by carcasses . . .vehicle carcasses. Abandoned vehicles are cannibalized, totally stripped of any useful item; the skeleton is left for posterity, perhaps to be found in 6,000 years as elephant bones are found today. The vehicles don't rust in the desert.

Everything to the north is Algeria, that stalwart of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries). Algeria is five-sixths Sahara and militantly socialistic. In July 1977, the U.S. and Algeria again exchanged ambassadors after diplomatic relations had been broken over U.S. support of Israel. Renewed relations were an acknowledgment that U.S. firms already have $6 billion invested here, that we are Algeria's biggest customer for oil and liquid natural gas, and that they are a net importer of food.

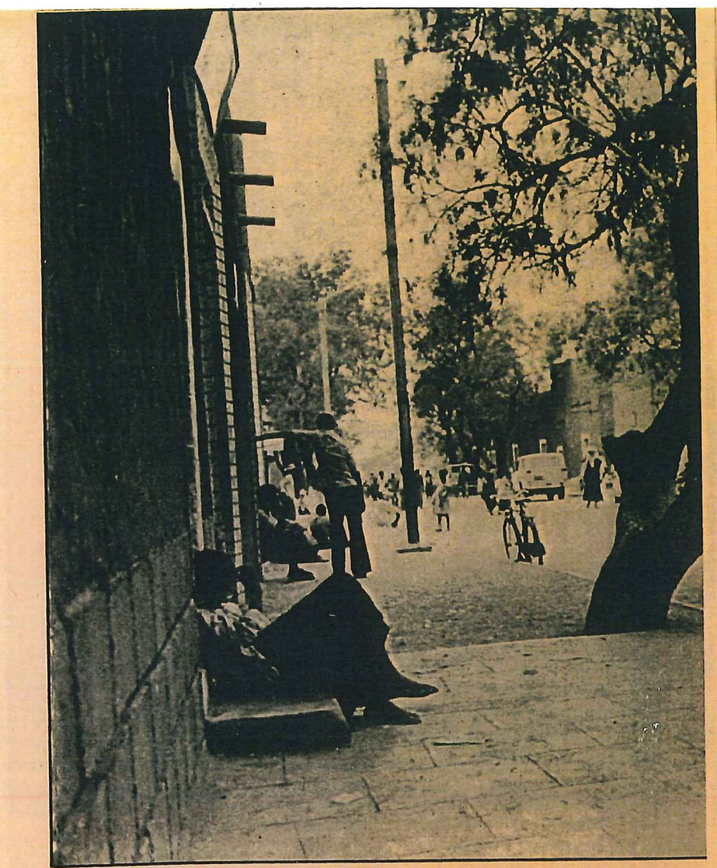
The Algerian border station is In Guezzam. There are several Tuareg families, several buildings and a couple of good-sized mud-walled corrals. The well, or *b'ir*, at In Guezzam looks almost 40 feet deep and is hand-dug. (A similar well in Azawad, Mali, is 300 feet deep, so things are better here.)

It is a long process to fill the plastic jerry cans and the goatskin water bags called *guerbas*. Guerbas are hung on the sides of vehicles, where wind speeds evaporation from the wet leather and cools the water inside. Guerba water always has its own distinctive color and taste, one discovers, and none of the other westerners will drink it. But guerba water *is* cool, a rare treat in this country.

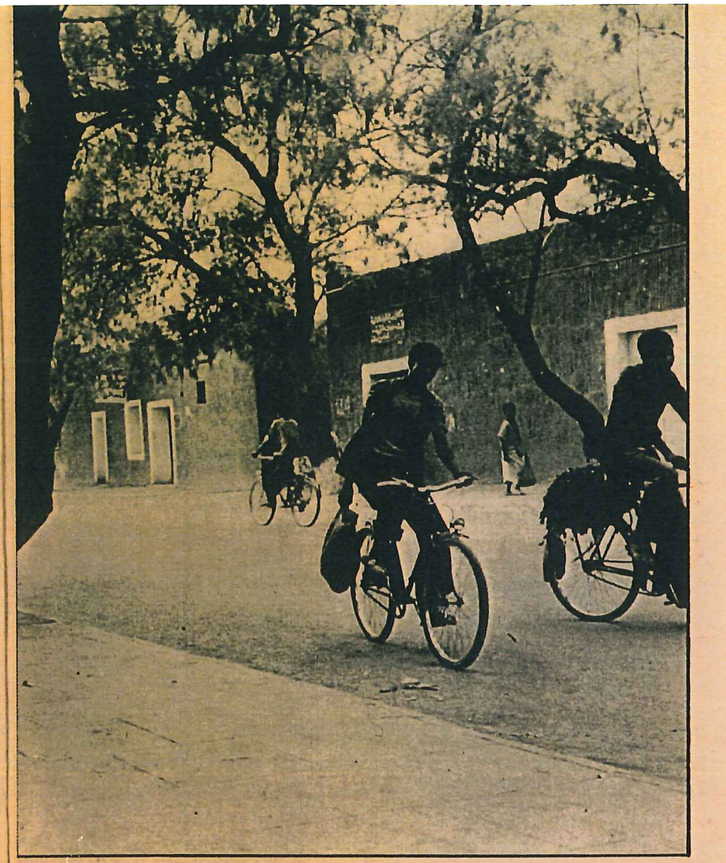
The Sahara is the driest land in the world, so dry that a swallow of water seems to evaporate before it reaches your tonsils. The dryness seems like a moisture vacuum, replacing your sweat and skin oil with a fine veneer of dust. During the day you scurry for cooling shade; but at night the problem is reversed. The air becomes quite cold. In the winter, it can even dip into the 30s. Even in the summer a constant breeze creates a wind chill which can make sleeping downright uncomfortable.

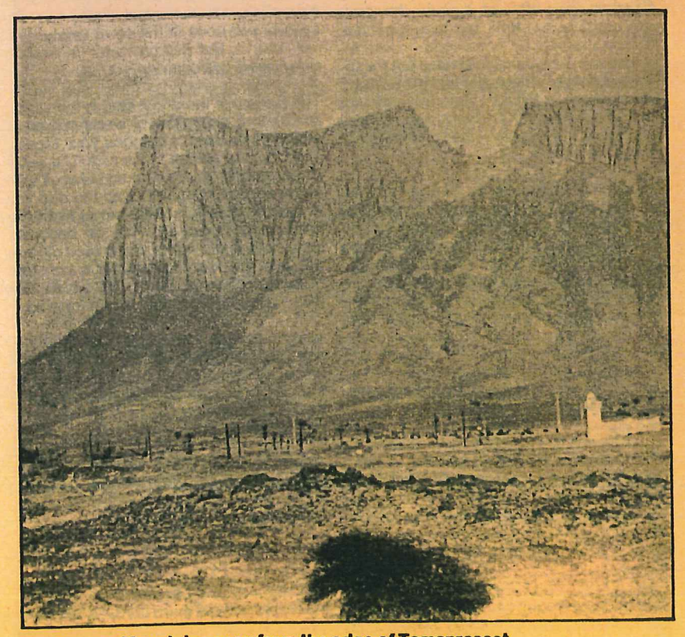
At In Guezzam, some friends of the Algerian customs agent want to go north with a camel and a bunch of goats. It takes more than an hour and about a dozen men to load the camel on the high flatbed. The animal's legs are tied so it must lie down, its weight on its knees; it is dragged aboard, foaming and groaning. The goats are comically gathered by children and unceremoniously hoisted over the railing by a leg or a horn.

A good deal of the route from In Guezzam to Tamanrasset (Tam for short) is *reg*, immensely desolate flat stretches. Here the trucks spread out three abreast, a quarter mile apart, and race magnificently at 50 mph. The ride is painfully bouncy, and the ▶



The main street of Tamanrasset, Algeria.





The Hoggar Mountains seen from the edge of Tamanrasset.

trussed-up camel at the rear of the truck has the worst of it. Very soon its knees are bloodied, but its owner can do little more than help it back up when it tips over. The goats maneuver the bouncing rather well, even finding time to chew on a guerba or their owner's flowing cloak. During the rest stops, the passengers generally sprawl under the trucks to hide from the sun.

In the middle of nowhere, about halfway to Tam, we take a quick turn to the west and head for a big outcropping of rock. Near the rock is an old wadi, a few dry bushes and a single acacia tree. Under the tree is a man with five camels. Another passenger says they haven't been near water for five days. Most of us assume that we are stopping to pick up the man and camels and take them north with us. In that country, it seems the only logical thing to do. But no, we drop off the poor camel from our truck and abruptly bid the man under the tree adieu.

The ground rises as you approach Tamanrasset. Tam is at 1,390 meters in the Ahaggar, or Hoggar, Mountains. As the ground rises, the gravel turns to boulders, which turn to stretches of nothing but crumbling stone. The rock surface is black, oxidized iron and manganese. The last few miles to Tam are cut through it, up and down over uncordial, craggy hills.

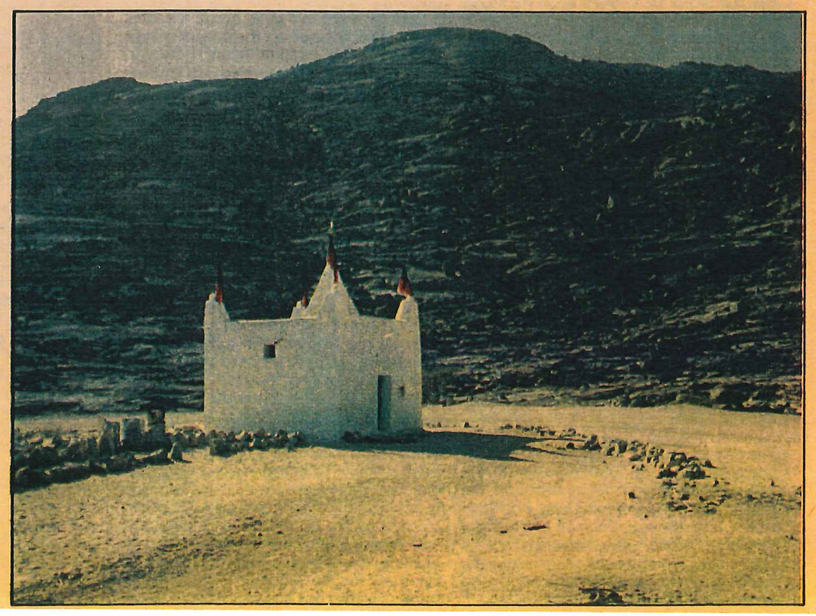
Just outside of town the Tuaregs and goats are dropped off, and the remaining passengers are told to lie down. It seems that if the police see us, the drivers will get in trouble. The customs agent, however, doesn't care how we arrived. He is quick and polite.

Once a thriving market for slaves, gold, civet musk and salt, Tamanrasset remains a hub of Saharan activity. It's even become a tourist city of sorts. Stocky vehicles full of Europeans are almost a daily sight. Some have the name of an expedition painted on their cab doors. Others belong to folks just taking their summer vacation.

Tamanrasset has a few cafes, a hotel, a motel of sorts, and a *hoggam* or Turkish bath. At the hoggam, for 4 dinar a night (about $1), you have a mat to sleep on and a place to leave your things. For another 4 dinar you can bathe. Elsewhere in town a trickle of water is turned on at about 4 p.m.

The market has onions, tomatoes, peppers, millet and a second-hand camel saddle. Along the main street there are nice twisty trees with long soft needles. Most store signs are written in Arabic only. The only thing in English is a poster on a shop's shutter: "POLISARIO. Support the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (the Spanish Saha-▶

Rock crags north of Tamanrasset, on the way to In Salah, "a town of sand."



Above, the interior of a desert bus, "a cross between a school bus and an armadillo," heading north out of Tamanrasset. At right, Marabout Moulay Hassau, the shrine to Hasseni Tessnou, a holy man who died here 300 years ago. All vehicles circle it three times for luck. ▶

ra)." The shops sell canned goods, knick-knacks and Adidas t-shirts, but no cheese or liquor.

Two residents of Tamanrasset are particularly friendly. Mokhtar grew up near Tam and now is a supervisor in the local PTT (post office and telephone). He wears western-style clothes but pours tea with the best of them. He and two others share a room, which is mainly a dresser, wall hangings, a couple of rugs, and a TV.

On TV is a panel discussion on the state of schools in Algiers. There is a filmstrip of deteriorating buildings and a vigorous, though to the traveler incomprehensible, discussion. Algeria is a one-party state, and even old members of the National Liberation Front have been put under house arrest for criticism of the government. But prior to recent elections, criticism of the government was open and widespread. Poor administration and corruption were the major criticisms in vigorous campaigning for the first elections in Algeria's 16 years of independence. President Boumedienne, himself unopposed for election, encouraged the criticism in an attempt to foment a minor cultural revolution.

Taleb is the other particularly friendly resident of Tam. He was an early anti-French resistance fighter. He spent 1956 to 1962 in a French military prison, where he learned to speak and write English. Today he is a public works accountant, the informal supervisor of a group of younger men who live in a mid-town compound.

They are all anxious to talk — about travel, language, alcohol, kief (hashish) and women. Women are rarely evident in Tamanrasset. Many of these guys are from the north, and they are lonely. They are intrigued by the independence of American women.

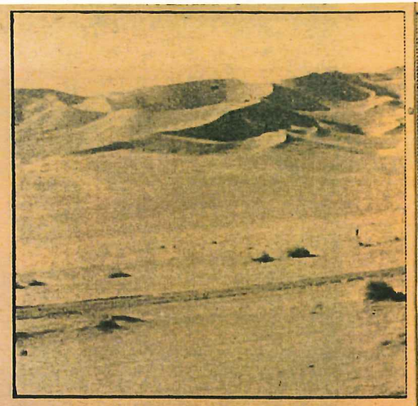
The new Algerian charter has given women equal political and economic rights; Algeria's first lady looks like she shops at Southdale; and 36 of the 783 candidates for parliament were women. But these guys have prejudices typical of this part of the world, and real equality for women is a long way off.

One afternoon there is a vigorous hour-long thunderstorm. Roofs leak everywhere. Rain, of course, is uncommon here, and it can be devastating to desert architecture. In 1922, a freak weather system brought 2½ days of torrential rain to mud-brick Tam. Almost the entire city melted.

Summertime low pressure over the mid-desert pulls the moist monsoon from the southwest, but by now it is late September, and things are turning around. The dry northeast wind is taking over. Called the Harmattan in the south, soon the wind will be carrying heat and dust as far as Senegal and helping pull moist Mediterranean air over the Atlas Mountains in the north of Algeria.

A state-owned bus serves Tamanrasset. It is supposed to run every 10 days, but it broke its tie rod 150 miles out of town on the run from the north, and it is now 15 days late.

Suddenly it appears, unannounced, on a side street. The driver says he is leaving again in 15 minutes. The Mercedes vehicle looks like a cross between a school bus and an armadillo.



The paved road ends just after the small airport on the edge of Tam. Then we average about 20 to 30 kilometers an hour over the erratic terrain. The driver even gets lost once, and it takes him two hours to find the route again. Nighttime travel in this stretch could be suicide.

One day north of Tamanrasset is Marabout Moulay Hassau, the shrine to Haseni Tessnou, a holy man who died here on a pilgrimage 300 years ago. The small white shrine is the only building, except for a reed shelter where two smiling Algerians dispense free coffee. All vehicles circle the shrine three times as insurance against misfortune on the coming journey.

One man says that this also is the route taken by Mansa Musa in 1324 on his way to Mecca. Musa was the emperor of Mali, a vast West African empire, and was accompanied to Mecca by 100 camels laden with gold and 500 slaves with golden staffs.

It is two and one-half days to In Salah. The last 200 kilometers are finally paved, and even this bus makes good time. In Salah is a classic town of sand. The streets are very soft and seem to melt into the mud walls. The walls are patterned and pillared and connected with many arches. At night a constant breeze and occasional vehicle lights make both sound and sight seem muted, eerie, almost surreal.

The bus stops for the night next to a small cafe. It is full of soldiers drinking tea and coffee and playing dominoes and cards. In the morning, three-inch cockroaches are brazenly scouting the room. The water tastes terrible, and the tea isn't much better, but it is the only available breakfast before continuing north.

The route beyond In Salah is hours of barrenness, broken only occasionally by a few dunes or bluffs or shrubs. El Golea makes a brief, beautiful luncheon stop. This oasis supports thousands of date palms, each with several huge bundles of hanging fruit, not yet ripe. Ubiquitous walls guarantee privacy. An unassuming but cheerful restaurant seems like a banquet hall compared to the places of the last 2,600 kilometers. One shop is open at midday — and it sells cheese.

A giant sand dune, called a *draa*, in the northern Sahara. It lies at least half a mile from the road in the foreground. Dunes like this move slowly, only a few inches a year, like glaciers of sand.

About 30 kilometers north of El Golea the bus climbs up the edge of a plateau, and again there are hours ahead without sight of vegetation. Sand dunes are more common now. For a while, the road laces its way between huge mountainous ridges of sand. These ridges are sometimes close and threatening and sometimes barely visible on the horizon. They are called *draas*, rivers of sand which can stretch for miles and reach 1,000 feet in height. These hot glaciers move only an inch or two a year.

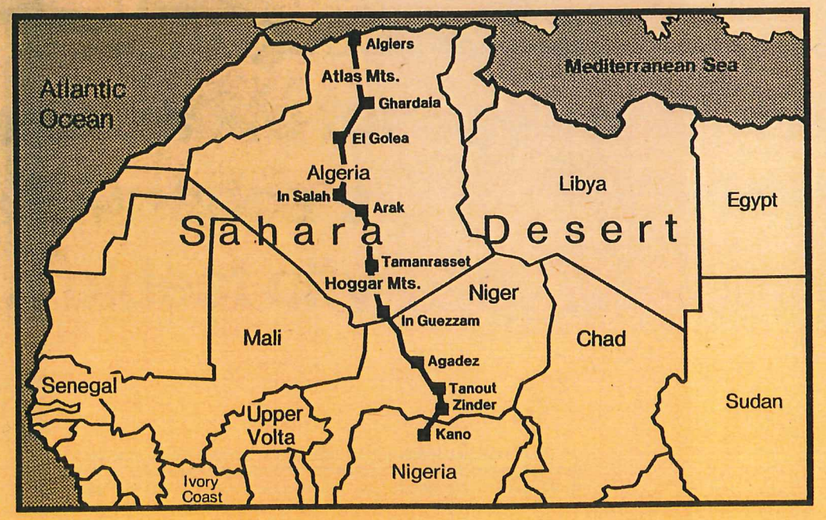
Ghardaia is almost the northern edge of the Sahara. It is a center of the Mzab, a fundamentalist Ibadite people who, in the 11th century, sought refuge from persecution by settling in Algeria's most arid area. Ghardaia is built up and down a steep hillside. At dusk the Mzab architecture looks like pale ice cubes cascading between the hills.

The Mzabites live in those cube clusters, leaving the lower edges of Ghardaia for the less traditional. There are several hotels here, looking bright and pretty from the outside. There are two Turkish baths. There are pastry shops. And there are two beer bars — grudging Moslem concessions to a changing world. The bars close at 9 p.m. Ghardaia is still very much in the Sahara Desert, but it is tinsel and ice compared to what lies behind us to the south.

From here on the buses are rather efficient. They commonly depart early in the morning, so many people camp out in the bus station. Women are evident here, but now they are completely veiled.

In half a day the bus has climbed over the top of the Atlas Mountains. By mid-afternoon it reaches Algiers, and suddenly the last three weeks in the Sahara seem far behind, another world, a dream. ■

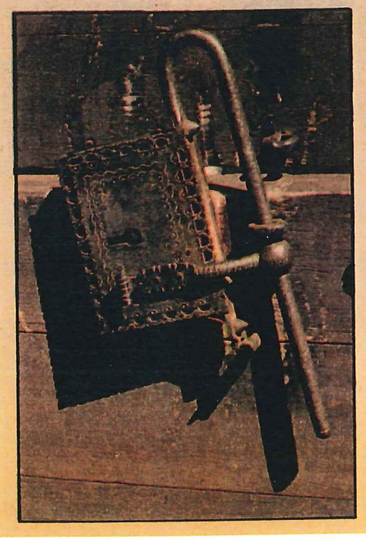
Bill Tilton is a Twin Cities attorney, radio producer and former political activist. He studied international and comparative law in Ghana in 1976 and crossed the Sahara by bus and truck later that year.



Minneapolis Tribune Picture

Sunday
April 30
1978

St. Augustine volunteer Demetra Tompkin prepared seafood gumbo soup in the kitchen of the Gallegos House, a typical home of an average citizen in 1750.



St. Augustine: New life for America's oldest city

At far left, Scott Manny, a high-school volunteer at historic St. Augustine, dressed in the uniform of an East Florida Ranger, an early version of the U.S. Army. At near left, an antique lock in the restoration.