

Jonestown: Impossible questions

5 villagers bear burden

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MATTHEWS RIDGE, Guyana — It had been quite a day for Albert Graham, a 62-year-old skeleton of a man who works as a clerk in this tiny, isolated village of Amerindians and others surrounded by tropical rain forests.

Garbed in his finest — brown checkered slacks that clashed mightily with his blue print shirt, silly platform shoes that gradually reduced his slow gait to a severe limp — Graham had spent the entire day

meeting his civic responsibilities as a resident of the North West Ministerial Region.

In the course of his duties, he had hoisted his frail frame up a 40-rung ladder to witness firsthand a guard tower vista. He had tilted back his head and grimaced, and then taken a long sniff at the smell of death. He had sat in a hard wooden chair and listened to two hours of tedious courtroom testimony. And he had taken notes on everything.

Now, this poor old man was exhaust-

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Jonestown inquest jury's awesome task

ed, worn down not only by an extraordinarily active day under a sometimes showery, sometimes sweltering South American sky, but also burdened by the enormity of his task.

Albert Graham is one of five village dwellers who have been drafted to serve as jurors in a coroner's inquest of one of history's most ghastly moments — Jonestown.

"I am not happy. I am not impressed with this Jonestown at all," Graham concluded yesterday as he stood outside the mustard-colored government center and rested up for a painfully long walk home.

"To me it looks like a slave camp.

"I'm afraid this does not reflect well on the United States," said Graham, slowly shaking his head.

Asked what he hoped to accomplish by the end of the inquest, Graham balked, admonishing in his low, slow-motion voice:

"As a member of the jury, I don't think I should talk about things like that. We are forbidden to."

As a member of the jury, Albert Graham, along with his four fellow panelists, faces an impossible task: He must find answers in five days to questions that promise to haunt civilization for centuries.

Why did more than 900 expatriate Americans ingest lethal doses of cyanide and surrender their struggle to carve a self-supporting community out of the rugged jungle? Was it mass suicide? Or was it murder?

Despite the futility of their quest, the jurors must press on quickly to satisfy two practical needs:

- Law in this country requires a coroner's inquest for every suspicious death in an attempt to resolve who, if anyone, is responsible. In this case, that challenge is multiplied by 913.

- Most of the Jonestown bodies — 60 tons of human corpses — remain in cold storage on the U.S. Air Force Base in Dover, Del. Technically, they are not to be released for burial until death certificates are issued by the Guyanaese. And regulations here require an inquest before that can happen.

Moreover, the inquest, which began Wednesday with testimony from a pathologist and a policeman, will play an important historical role: The transcript of testimony and the final jury report most likely will become the most extensive official documentation of the awesome tragedy.

So Albert Graham and four other Matthews Ridge residents have stepped out of the obscurity of this run-down mining town 30 miles south of Jonestown into history.

Yesterday, they insisted on seeing Jonestown for themselves.

At midmorning, a U.S. Army helicopter dropped out of the low clouds and settled down on the gravel airstrip here to pick up the panelists and ferry them to Jonestown. Besides Graham there were:

- Charles Hines, a 66-year-old road foreman with a habit of regularly scratching his inner ear with the business end of his ballpoint pen.

- Ivelwe Orrell, a worker at the Matthews Ridge power station and, at 37, the youngest panelist.

- Prince Albert Glasgow, a 53-year-old welder who seems to relish the double takes that follow the announcement of his name. Later he concedes: "It's really my first name. I was the first child and my father wanted to make a big deal out of it."

- Leam Poole, 46, a friendly mother of four.

Already in the helicopter were the two officials who are in charge of the inquest: Haroon Bacchus, a government coroner, and Manny Ramao, the director of public prosecution for Guyana. Both were dressed in the customary white smock shirts worn here by courtroom officials and barristers.

After skirting a wall, the helicopter landed on the Jonestown baseball field a little before noon. Another helicopter carrying a few newspaper reporters, a U.S. Embassy official and two Jonestown survivors and witnesses, Odell

- Most of the Jonestown

Rhodes and Stanley Clayton, already had arrived.

Standing by were five guards armed with carbines.

Their leader, an inspector Welch, approached the visitors and wrote down all their names.

He issued a warning: Nothing in Jonestown was to be touched or taken.

"They don't want you to take anything," said Bacchus. "You are not to remove anything from the premises. Not even the mud under your feet."

With Bacchus leading the way, the group moved through the center of the settlement where 50 pastel-colored huts had housed more than 800 persons. Each was no larger than a cheap hotel room.

Bacchus stopped at a trash can. Empty packets of Fla-Vor Aid were scattered about. He picked one up and read the label: "'Made in West Chicago.' That's U.S.A. Write that down. Made in U.S.A."

The government coroner would go on to make special notes whenever he found products from the United States among the Jonestown remainders.

And so it went. Bacchus guided the group to the residential area of the camp, stopping occasionally to sniff at an empty cosmetic bottle, examine a child's shoe, peer into a hut and inquire about who lived in which house.

Rhodes and Clayton, who contend they escaped from Jonestown well after the mass suicide-murders began, did their best to answer questions from Bacchus and the jurors.

But they refused to talk to reporters. Rhodes, meanwhile, kept his 35-millimeter camera clicking throughout the tour.

Finally, the party crossed a small pedestrian bridge that led to the pavilion where the deadly brew of cyanide and Fla-Vor Aid had been served, the place where the bodies had fallen in heaps. The smell, while weak, still lingered.

"Just have a smell at the place," Bacchus instructed the jury. "It's an unkind smell." The jurors took a whiff. Then the coroner tried to hurry them along. "I'm not feeling well," he explained. "I don't know why the smell upsets me. I don't like the smell."

"You should have been here a week ago," said one of the American soldiers who was tagging along.

The tour ended after a quick swing through the camp hospital and Jim Jones' living quarters. The jurors had spent just a little over an hour in Jonestown.

Helicopters flew the party over the thick carpet of tall vegetation to the regional government center here, where the inquest resumed in a large cement-floored room.

Bacchus sat in front behind a maple desk. Ramao, the prosecutor, stood throughout the proceedings on one side of the room, reading from a list of typewritten questions.

On the other side, the five jurors sat behind a long table and scribbled notes. The young American helicopter crewmen drifted in and out. And 14 townsfolk sat in the back, waving and winking at their friends on the panel.

Stanley Clayton was ushered out of hearing range by the lone guard, and Odell Rhodes climbed into the witness stand to be sworn in.

The swearing in was the last thing speedy about the session.

In Guyanese courts, the magistrate — in this case Coroner Bacchus — writes down in longhand everything the witness says. There is no court reporter.

Bacchus also insisted on repeating every word Rhodes said as he jotted it down, often drowning out the witness's testimony.

In two hours, Rhodes testified that he joined the temple in October 1976, came to Jonestown on Aug. 22, 1977, and was assigned to a work detail.

With Ramao and sometimes Bacchus asking the questions, it was established that there were armed guards at Jonestown, that temple members were briefed on how to act when visitors arrived, that letters home were written in front of a committee and that fear of the jungle kept most settlers from trying to flee.

The inquest was scheduled to resume today.

