

Revolutions, Political Strife Didn't Stop Family from Carrying on Missionary Work

By BRENDA WALKER

There aren't too many Americans around today who have lived through a revolution, and even fewer who have lived through two revolutions in one year.

But for former Hendersonville residents Bert and Virginia Sutton and their three children, Sharon, Anita and Clint, civil wars, coups d'etat, political arrests and evacuations have almost become common place.

The Sutton family returned to Hendersonville Sunday for a visit after

spending three and a half years in southern Africa as missionaries for the Southern Baptist Convention. It was a

warm homecoming for the Suttons at First Baptist Church here, where the members fondly refer to the Suttons as

their "very own missionaries."

Last August, the Suttons returned to

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FORMER HENDERSONVILLE RESIDENTS Bert and Virginia Sutton (center, back) and their three children (left to right) Sharon, Clint and Anita, have spent the past three and a half years as Southern Baptist missionaries in southern Africa. Their time, which was spent doing agricultural work in Angola and Botswana, was characterized by civil wars,

political arrests and evacuations. The family spent the past weekend here visiting with friends and talking about their mission work in services at the First Baptist Church, where they were members for five years before leaving for Africa. Times-News photo by Brenda Walker.

Times-News, Hendersonville, N.C., Mon., December 5, 1977

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Revolutions

the United States for a 10-month furlough. Their move back to the States was their 10th move during their three and half years as agricultural missionaries. In that short time, they lived in Portugal, Angola, South Africa, Southwest Africa and, finally Botswana.

It was just a little more than five years ago that Sutton, who was then working in Hendersonville with the Soil Conservation Service, first felt called to be a missionary.

"I was driving to work through Horse Shoe one morning in the spring of 1972 when I first felt called by the Lord to become an agricultural missionary," Sutton said.

"Before that moment, I don't even remember ever hearing about missionaries who worked in agriculture, but that day, I felt that the Lord had a task for me in agriculture."

Following a period of training and orientation at the Baptist seminary in Texas, the Sutton family left for Portugal for a year of language study before starting their agricultural mission work in Angola.

"Four months after we arrived in Lisbon, Portugal one of the biggest events in their history took place," Mrs. Sutton said. "The man who had been the Portuguese dictator since 1928 was overthrown in a coup."

"It was the first time we had ever been in such uncertain conditions," Mrs. Sutton said. "The economy and everything were unsettled, things were tense and there were a lot of demonstrations. We were scared, but we stayed inside for two or three days, and we were never in any real danger."

Finally, in January 1975, the Sutton family sailed for their planned destination of New Lisbon, Angola, where they were soon to live through even greater political unrest.

"We were only there seven months, but now when I think back over everything that happened during that time, it seems more like two or three years," Sutton said.

"We went to Angola to work on a mission farm owned by the Portuguese Baptists," Sutton said. "I had already started developing the farm and buying equipment at the time we left."

When the Suttons arrived in Angola, conditions were already unsettled. According to Sutton, Portugal had announced that they would give Angola its independence, and three major political parties were struggling to gain power.

"In August of that year, we left New Lisbon for what was supposed to be a two-week vacation in South Africa, but it turned out to be our evacuation," Sutton said. "During our trip out, the war started escalating, and it took us a week to finally get out of the country. Those that followed us trying to evacuate two weeks later were really too late."

Following the evacuation, Sutton and three other men flew back into Angola in an attempt to retrieve part of their possessions and to get seeds to some of the people in the northern part of the country who were starving.

"We flew back into Angola from South Africa with duffle bags and suit cases full of seeds," Sutton said. "We were able to get seeds into some areas with the help of Portuguese military aircraft, and we had a million-dollar food program going, but we never were able to get any of it to the people."

Even before the Sutton family left the country, Sutton and other missionaries were working to get food to starving refugees in the northern portion of Angola. In one such instance, Sutton and another man were arrested trying to get cattle and food into the area, but

eventually they were released unharmed and forced to turn back.

After their evacuation from Angola, the Suttons worked for six months in Southwest Africa with other missionaries helping Portuguese refugees who had escaped from Angola. When they finally had to give up any hopes of returning to Angola, the family started looking for a new area to take their agricultural mission project.

"About that time Botswana, a country in the central portion of southern Africa, began seeking technical help for agricultural projects," Sutton said. "We began praying, and decided that that was where the Lord wanted us to spend our last year and a half on the field."

The Suttons moved to Botswana to begin an agricultural training project in the northeastern most corner of the country, in the isolated bush country.

"Around here, the place we went to would be called the boondocks," Sutton said.

"The government had started on agriculture project in the northern bush country three years before, but they had abandoned it," Sutton said. "The project was located at Kasane, a small African village, and the closest place to get supplies was Francistown, more than 300 miles away."

For their first six months in Botswana, the Sutton family lived in Francistown while Sutton traveled

back and forth to Kasane getting the farm ready for the family and getting the training project started and crops planted.

Finally, in the summer of 1976, the Suttons moved to their new home in Kasane, a trailer which was brought to the training farm location by railway from South Africa and then cross country.

The Suttons' mission work in Kasane, Botswana, has included a whole variety of activities from farming, working with young trainees, Bible students and correspondence courses for the children.

Farming in the bush country of Botswana has its own special problems, Sutton soon discovered, including baboons, kudus, elephants, water bucks and other wild animals that seem to take pleasure in destroying crops. Maintenance of the farm equipment, irrigation system and electrical generator was also difficult, since parts were not readily available.

The Sutton children, Anita, 15, Sharon, 13, and Clint, 10, adjusted well to the situation, Mrs. Sutton said.

"The children have had some disadvantages, I'm sure, but the experiences have been a real advantage for them," she said. "We had to depend a lot on each other."

"I wouldn't trade anything for the experiences we've had," Sutton said.

"The Lord really took care of us," Mrs. Sutton said. "At times of discouragement, the Lord always sent

someone or something to encourage us."

The Sutton family will be in the United States until June. They are spending their furlough time living in Cookeville, Tenn., where the children are now in school. Much of their time is being spent talking at churches and to other groups about their experiences. Sutton is also studying to catch up on new advances in agriculture before he returns to the mission field.

"When we left Botswana it was becoming more and more difficult to get supplies into the Kasane area because of terrorists from Zambia," Sutton said. "So we don't know what's going to happen there."

"The young people there have a real hunger for education," Sutton said, "and they have a real desire to be in the first world, but they are so far behind that it will take years."