



What Did Emeagwali Discover? —Part 10

In the tenth installment of our weekly series at emeagwali.com, we walk down memory lane to March 23, 1974, and consider how Philip Emeagwali “discovered” Oregon.

Out of Africa

Transcribed and edited from a lecture delivered by Philip Emeagwali. The unedited [video](#) is posted at emeagwali.com.

On March 23, 1974, I left Nigeria for the United States. I flew on a Pan American (Pan Am) World Airways aircraft from Lagos, Nigeria. In 1974, there were few Africans flying to the United States. The Ikeja Airport was not crowded and it was the only functional one in Nigeria. None of us travelled with United States passport. It's not like today when the rich come to America for their annual medical checkups or for a weekend of shopping spree.

It was my first trip to an airport and the first time I saw an airplane on the ground. With the exception of the British bomber aircraft that bombed our house during the Biafra War, all aircrafts that I saw were 30,000 feet in the air and I developed the misconception that airplanes were the size of a car. I was amazed at the size and wondered how such a massive object could fly all the way to the United States.

The Boeing 747 began its regularly scheduled flight to New York from Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) with stops to pick up passengers in Lagos (Nigeria), Monrovia (Liberia),

and Dakar (Senegal). During the two layovers, stewardess suggested I relax at the lounge. I declined and sat in the aircraft alone because I didn't want to be left behind in Monrovia or Dakar. I noticed that the Senegalese boarding dressed colorfully and looked different from Nigerians.

We departed Lagos at about 6 p.m. and arrived in New York at about 9 a.m. When we landed, the door was flung open and I found myself indoors and inside the airport. I was impressed and excited like the proverbial young antelope who danced himself lame when the main dance was yet to come.



I definitely stood out in Oregon. Here is a photo of me taken for my passport for my travel from Nigeria to the United States. [Philip Emeagwali, in Onitsha, Nigeria, 1973]

“So this is America!” I said to myself. I was told that I had three hours layover before my flight proceeds to Oregon, via Chicago. Now that I am already in the United States, I felt safe enough to explore beyond the airport terminal. I decided to take a brief walk with an Ethiopian passenger that boarded the flight from Addis Ababa. He was the first Ethiopian I met.

The whole place was very cold and little foggy. I was dressed in Sandals and a V-neck blue cotton sweater I had purchased at Onitsha market. It was extremely cold but my adrenaline was flowing and I was excited.

I was blown away at the size of the people, cars and buildings in New York. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that such a place existed. In fact, it was such an emotional experience that I had to wipe tears from my eyes.

After transfers in New York’s John F. Kennedy Airport and Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, I arrived in Portland International Airport. I was clueless on how to get to my final destination. A stewardess made a telephone call and I was instructed to ride in airport Suburban Van going to Salem Municipal Airport.

I was silent during the 60-minute ride from Portland to Salem, which is the second largest city in Oregon. “So this is Oregon!” I thought quietly. Oregon smelt different from Nigeria’s. The air was pleasant and faintly scented. The scenery was beautiful and lush green. I was captivated by the houses which all looked beautiful and expensive, each with well-manicured lawns.

Much to my surprise, two female and one male students were waiting for me at the Salem Municipal Airport when I arrived at about 4 p.m. Helen, the resident manager at the school’s Butler Hall sent them to pick me up for the final 25-minute ride to Monmouth, Oregon.

I was surprised by the size of their car --- a Chevy Impala. I was also surprised to learn that many teenagers own and a driver's license. It was the first time I travelled in a car driven by a teenager or a female. I was deeply impressed.

I did not understand a word of their American English. So we rode to Monmouth with no conversation. The tension and excitement increased as I realize that I am minutes away from my final destination. "What will Oregon College of Education look like?" I wondered aloud.

I arrived in that friendly, charming college town of 7,000 people, some 36 hours after I had departed from Africa. I received a warm welcome from Helen, the elderly resident manager. She instructed Jim, her student assistant, to house me in Room 36 of Butler Hall.

I spent the first night alone in the four-bed apartment-like dormitory. When I woke up, I stood on the balcony of Room 36 and gazed into the cold, serene Oregonian air. I felt like a scared child who wanted his mamma.

HISTORY OF MONMOUTH

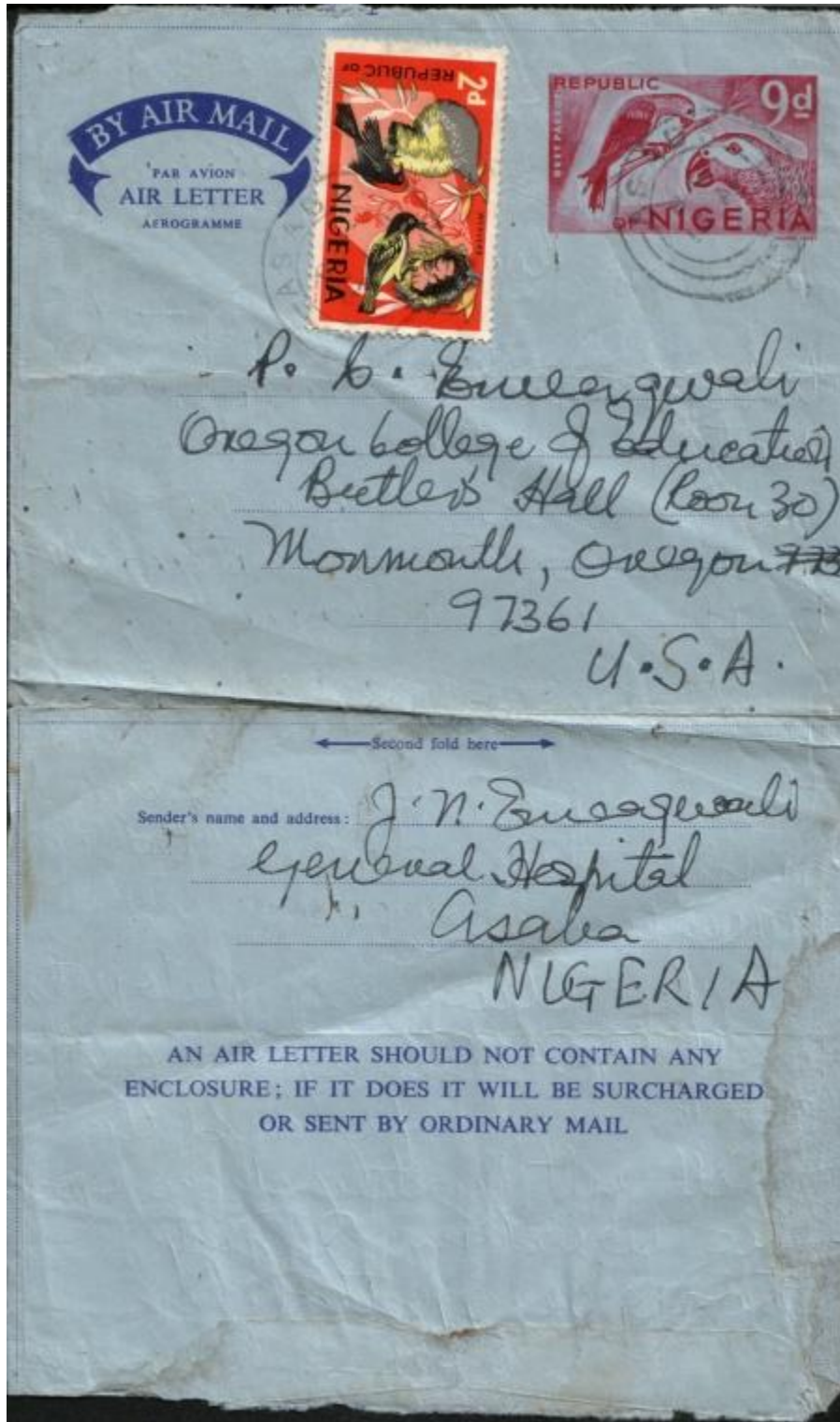
The town of Monmouth, Oregon was founded by pioneers in the mid-1800's. It's located in a country side called Willamette Valley. It is also a residential bedroom community for people that commute to work in Salem and Corvallis. Oregon College of Education was renamed Western Oregon University. It is Oregon's oldest public university.



A school trip from Monmouth, Oregon to the state of Washington. (Philip Emeagwali, in middle with blue shirt, September 1974)



I boarded a Pan Am aircraft similar to this one on March 23, 1974, in Lagos, Nigeria. I believe the aircraft was a Boeing 747. Pan Am, as it was called, was America's first international airline and stopped flying in 1991.



Ipueval Hospital
Asaba,
16.4.74.

Dear Son, Philip,
Your letter to
bored and its contents were
noted, our pleasure knew
no bounds at the receipt.
and same was extended
to the whole family.

You are aware of your
primary motive of being
there. Your efforts and
mine have resulted in
something good.

The choice of subjects
will broaden your out-
look in life and that
will ultimately show you
the wisdom of my
strong suggestion in
mystical studies. A welcome

choice indeed
In choosing part-time
employment, of course, you
are apt to know the type
that will not delay you
from your studies.
There is no need
for further discussions
but suffice it to say
that the next may
mail will afford
~~more~~ ^{more} subject-matter
with the best compliments
of the season from mother
brother and sister.
I am
Yours affectionately
J. N. Emeagwali

My first letter from Nigeria was from my father and was dated April 16, 1974. It was almost ten years before I made my first telephone call to Nigeria. Also, we had no faxes or email. I treasured letters from home and I will read them over and over and over.