

Lew Jones Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Lew Jones
Interviewer: Julius Sztuk
Date of Interview: July 16, 2019
Location of Interview: Surry, Virginia
Length: 23 pages

Biographical Note

Lew Jones served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1968 to January 1973 on a cooperatives project.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed August 21, 2019, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Lew Jones, recorded interview by Julius Sztuk, July 16, 2019, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Lew Jones

July 16, 2019
Surry, Virginia

By Julius Sztuk

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

SZTUK: [00:00:02] Today is July 16th, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk. I was a volunteer in Fiji from 1974 through 1976. Today I'm interviewing Lew Jones, who was also a volunteer in Fiji from October 1968 through January 1973. Lew was in the second training group in Fiji and he worked in cooperatives. Lew, how about starting off by telling us something about your background and how you originally heard about Peace Corps?

JONES: [00:00:33] Oh, thanks. I grew up in Williamsburg, Virginia, and I graduated from high school in 1959, the spring of 1959. My last two years of high school, I had gone to a military school in Front Royal, Virginia, called Randolph Macon Academy. And from there, I went on to Washington and Lee. But after three years, I wasn't, uh, I wasn't doing well. So they let me go. And so at that time, I needed to do something or I'd be drafted. So I went in the Navy as an enlisted man for four years. I was on a destroyer. And I remember during that time, we went to some poor countries, like in the Caribbean and stuff, Jamaica and places like that. And I remember

thinking to myself that somehow I'd like to have some interaction or do some kind of project or something dealing with people in other countries like that. So I think that might be where I got the inkling of maybe doing something in the Peace Corps.

JONES: [00:01:33] But anyway, after those four years in the Navy, I went back and finished at Washington and Lee and graduated in the spring of 1968. And that last semester they had some Peace Corps people come around, you know, talking about the Peace Corps. And at that time, I really hadn't. I majored in economics. I got a BA in economics. But I didn't really, uh, wasn't really that interested in joining a bank or whatever thing, whatever that people with economics degrees do, so. And also, you might remember that's kind of a volatile time back then, when the people were against Vietnam and people were against big business. And so anyway, it looked like, going to the Peace Corps looked like it might be a good thing for me to do, at least, you know, immediately, immediate thing to do after I graduated.

JONES: [00:02:26] So I put an application into the Peace Corps and at first they accepted me for a project in Malaysia, but that fell through. And so then they saw with my background, it looked like maybe I would fit with a project in Fiji working in cooperatives. And so I volunteered for that.

SZTUK: [00:02:52] Why did the first offer, first job fall through?

JONES: [00:02:55] They didn't get enough people or something.

SZTUK: [00:02:57] Oh, OK.

JONES: [00:02:58] So anyway, uh, so we left for Fiji in, let's see, I think at like the middle of October, but we didn't go to Fiji immediately. We had our training in the island of Molokai, Hawaii, and we were there until, um, about I think at the middle of December. We had, there were 120 of us in that group and they divided us pretty much in half. Half of us were going to be Fiji volunteers, the other had been for Indians, and we had language instructors, Fijian and Indian, and did our language training there and

cultural training. It was really a good place to be because it was kind of off the beaten track.

SZTUK: [00:03:42] Now they were, the whole group was going to Fiji?

JONES: [00:03:45] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:03:45] But some were going to be work with the Indian population in Fiji?

JONES: [00:03:48] That's right, yeah, that's right.

SZTUK: [00:03:49] They weren't going to India.

JONES: [00:03:49] That's right. And most, I would say majority of people in that group were going to be either secondary or primary teachers. There were like, we had probably maybe 15 or 20 of us were doing co-operatives and then I think about ten were doing filariasis. That was the thing about the mosquitoes. And then another group were doing fisheries, starting up fisheries. But with the rest, I think that's all of them, but the rest of them were going to be teachers. So we got to Fiji in like the middle of December, and us cooperative people. And I don't, I don't know if anybody else did or not, but us cooperative people, we stayed at the Cooperatives Education Center at Lami, you know, while the time we were there. And actually, we'll tell you later, I was in charge of that when I left, you know, three years later. But anyway.

SZTUK: [00:04:48] What about your, back in your training, what did your training consist of?

JONES: [00:04:53] Language training. That was primarily what we did, and then different cultural things, but we didn't really do that much stuff about cooperatives then. I mean, think we, I mean the teachers did a lot of training then. They did stuff with, you know, classroom situations and all that. But of course with us being cooperatives, we didn't, from what I remember, we didn't do all that much hands on training and why considering with cooperative stuff.

SZTUK: [00:05:27] You were in the Fijian group, you learned Fijian language?

JONES: [00:05:30] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:05:30] And did they bring trainers over from Fiji?

JONES: [00:05:32] Oh yeah, yeah. Oh yeah they did. And we, they were really good to us. I mean they, you know, the total immersion thing where during the daytime we were not supposed to speak any English. And then even at night, you know, they wanted us to pretty much stay away from English. And of course we did all the cultural things with the kava and kava ceremony. And it was, it was a lot of fun. I mean, just imagine 120 people together.

SZTUK: [00:06:07] Sure. It's a big group.

JONES: [00:06:10] Yeah. So anyway, we spent that Christmas there in Lami, stayed at the Coop Education Center, and then we split. During that time, when we got to Fiji, like I said I think it was around the middle of December, maybe earlier, we went around to a lot of different co-operatives, primary cooperatives and different kinds, just to find out what they're all about. Because for most of us, cooperatives was kind of a thing that we didn't know about it. And I did have bookkeeping, so you know, I was familiar with accounting, I was familiar with all that. But we had to learn. In our work, we had to learn how to do all that, which of course came later on. But they did take us around to see a lot of different.

SZTUK: [00:06:53] So this was kind of an extension of your training once you got into country before you actually started working?

JONES: [00:06:58] Yeah. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:07:00] I want to ask you, you had a little transition in Hawaii, which is an island. So it may have been similar to Fiji, but when you landed in Fiji, what was the impression? What was that you remember?

JONES: [00:07:19] I think the smell. I mean, it was just, I'm not saying, just the smell of the country.

SZTUK: [00:07:26] Yeah.

JONES: [00:07:26] And I guess maybe some fires were, the cooking fires were in the distance. But I remember that was one of the first things that, you know, that impressed me, that when I smelled what it was like.

SZTUK: [00:07:38] It was a good thing or?

JONES: [00:07:39] Yeah, oh yeah, yeah. So then after the New Year in early '69, they paired me up with another cooperative volunteer, Mike Babich, and we went up to Labasa and I worked at a co-operative union and he worked at a co-operative wholesale store. And then we kind of worked together. With the way it operated is the area around, uh, Vitu Levu. Vanua Levu is the second largest island. They had all co-operative societies all over there. You know, each village had a co-operative and most of them were marketing co-operative and consumer store. And so they worked, they would work together and their source of money was coconuts. So they would buy coconuts for the members and then they would turn them into copra. I'll talk more about that later.

JONES: [00:08:46] But then the money that would get, they would get for coconuts, they would use it to buy stuff in the store. So there was two branches of the co-operative, and the bookkeeping and everything. People there had to know the bookkeeping well enough to, you know, to keep track of all the business. And they had a treasurer and a secretary and they did have co-operative people from the Cooperatives Department, which is a government department, that would go around periodically to all the societies and make sure everything was going right. And through a lot of them, they'd go and they hadn't done anything since last time they were there except the basic stuff, like maybe the storekeeper would keep a charge, so they would have to catch everybody up. So. So what we would, what we were doing in Labasa. With the money that, when they send the copra, the money for the copra would come back to us. And they'd use

that money to buy goods from the Labasa Farmers Co-operative. That's where Mike Babich was manager.

JONES: [00:09:51] So when the copra boat would go to pick up copra, it would also take groceries, you know, for their store. And so Mike, Mike and I lived in a regular, we'd call it a flat, you know, for January until like August or September. And around that time, both of us, I mean, we were having a pretty good experience, but it was not, we didn't think it was quite in the bush enough.

SZTUK: [00:10:14] So you were in town?

JONES: [00:10:16] We were in Labasa, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:10:16] Tell me what the town of Labasa is like.

JONES: [00:10:21] Labasa is, I mean, it probably had couple thousand people there, and they had a lot of cars. And, you know, we'd go down to the market and get our, most of the time get our food that we're going to eat. And of course, we had electricity and running water. And I mean, it was. We thought it was a little bit soft for us.

SZTUK: [00:10:40] So OK, it wasn't rough enough for you.

JONES: [00:10:43] It wasn't too rough. So we asked if we could go to an island. And they, and so they agreed to let us go to this island called Thikombia, which is the northernmost island in Fiji, except for Rotuma. And so we went up there, started going up there in September. We went on a copra boat that was, the copra boats go around like at least once a month to all the villages and pick up the copra. And also, like I said, take the consumer goods up there. So we were getting ready to go up there and on the way up, Mike got sick. He got pneumonia, so he couldn't go. So I went up there by myself and I had already met a family in Labasa that lived up there that invited me to stay with them. So I didn't have to get, you know, get my own board or anything. So I stayed with them the whole time I was up there.

JONES: [00:11:36] And as it turned out, I stayed in. They have four villages up there, two of them are together at one at end of the island, and the other two are together about a mile or a mile and a half away on the other end of the island. And so I alternated between those two, those villages. And what we were doing was when I first went up there, each of the four villages had their own co-operative society, which they thought was really not very efficient. So the two villages at each end, I combined the societies, so it was like one cooperative. And then at the other end of the island, I did the same thing so they could, so they could work to, you know, everything. They didn't have to have so many treasurers and, you know, all that stuff. So that's what we did first.

SZTUK: [00:12:30] Were they pretty cooperative about combining those?

JONES: [00:12:33] Oh, yeah. They wanted to do it. They wanted to do it. But with the whole cooperative thing, it's, uh, there's so many problems because a cooperative is kind of against the culture. Because if a cooperative is going to run efficiently, run efficiently, you can't give credit. Because when you give credit, generally it doesn't get paid back that quick or at all. And then the cooperative starts going down and down and doesn't have any money to, you know, to do different things. So you've got to, and so a lot of cooperatives failed for that reason. And some of them, uh. So like I said, that was the biggest problem we had. But again, we tried to encourage them. But again, it was hard. You know, like if a storekeeper, uh, the chief came in and didn't have any money and wanted something. It was pretty hard to turn him down.

SZTUK: [00:13:28] Hard to say no.

JONES: [00:13:29] Hard to say no.

SZTUK: [00:13:30] Now were you the only American, the only non-Fijian, on the island?

JONES: [00:13:33] Yeah. There's 500. Me and 500 Fijians.

SZTUK: [00:13:37] And how long did it take? You had to go there by boat, right?

JONES: [00:13:41] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:13:41] How long did it take to get there by boat?

JONES: [00:13:44] Well, it's like if you went up on the copra boat, which is, you know, a good-sized boat, it would take a couple of days, but you'd make stops on the way up. But a couple of people on Thikombia, they had like motorboats, you know, like for, what 30 feet long? They're kind of closed in part.

SZTUK: [00:14:01] Yeah.

JONES: [00:14:02] And I went back and forth on them a few times, but they would still take quite a ways because you could barely see the tip of Vanua Levu from Thikombia. It was about 20 miles across there.

SZTUK: [00:14:13] Oh, OK.

JONES: [00:14:14] So. So anyway, so I went up there and I got up there, let's say late in September. And I stayed there probably most of the time for the rest of that year. And then part of the next year, off and on, I was going back and doing some things in Labasa. And finally, I think it was, when was it now? Oh, after being up there, I decided that I wanted to extend, that I wanted to stay for longer than two years. So.

SZTUK: [00:14:49] So your two years was up?

JONES: [00:14:51] Two years was up the following year.

SZTUK: [00:14:54] Oh, OK.

JONES: [00:14:54] In other words, I was in Thikombia pretty much for a year and plus a few months. And then in December of 1970, I left and I came back to America for, you know, they sent me for a couple of weeks.

SZTUK: [00:15:08] Before we leave Thikombia, tell me about the village. What kind of house did you live in? And did you travel?

JONES: [00:15:15] OK. The village I was in, it had a tin roof and it was, you know, wooden frame around it. But they also had bures, you know, the grass houses. In general, the grass houses were used for eating in and stuff, but not entirely. Some of the regular, you know, some of the regular houses were the grass houses. But the one we had was, like I said, wooden and, you know, it had windows and I slept on the floor.

SZTUK: [00:15:45] You didn't have a bed?

JONES: [00:15:46] No.

SZTUK: [00:15:47] Any kind of mattress or anything?

JONES: [00:15:48] No, no. But I got used to it and I think I slept on a blanket or something. They did have, in the house we were there, they did have, always had a regular bed there for guests, but I wasn't about to sleep in that.

SZTUK: [00:16:02] Oh, so you didn't stay? You didn't have your own house. You stayed with a family?

JONES: [00:16:05] Yeah, I stayed with a family.

SZTUK: [00:16:06] Oh. And they also slept on mats on the floor probably.

JONES: [00:16:10] Yeah. On the floor or else, in one of the grass house they would be, they would have softer mats, you know, floor wooden, wooden, wooden.

SZTUK: [00:16:18] Right.

JONES: [00:16:18] But I would eat with them. They would eat, we would eat in a grass house that was near that house. And there was two families that

lived together. They were, you know, relatives. And as we found later, I still keep up with those people after all these years.

SZTUK: [00:16:35] Yeah, so living in the same house, did you become like part of the family?

JONES: [00:16:39] Oh, yeah. Yeah. And one way that I knew I was part of the family was, you know, for a long time, if you did something wrong or, they wouldn't say anything for a long time. But then finally, when they started calling you down for things you were doing wrong as far as culturally or something, you knew that you're part of the family because they're treating you like the others.

SZTUK: [00:17:00] Yeah.

JONES: [00:17:01] So that was really a good turning point for me because I had one thing that was upsetting that happened to me. That's one thing that kind of sticks out. Some of the cooperatives I was working with, they were taking too big cash advances. You know, like when they'd send the bags of copra, they would let them take, like, so many dollars a bag. Like, if they had sent 100 bags, they'd let them have maybe \$200 to use to buy copra or coconuts for the members. But consequently, that meant that they're not going to have that much money coming back to buy, you know, to buy consumer goods with.

SZTUK: [00:17:47] OK.

JONES: [00:17:47] And so at one point, it looked like they really needed to send as much money as possible. And they told me, they agreed, everybody agreed that they weren't going to take the cash advance, but they did. And I remember I was, I remember I was devastated for a while, but I just, I just finally realized that there was anything I could do about it, just had to deal with it. But I remember it was upsetting.

SZTUK: [00:18:12] Now, you probably had to speak Fijian exclusively while you're there.

JONES: [00:18:19] Yeah. The man I stayed with, he had been in World War II over in the Solomons and he spoke good English. So he was a good, you know, anything I needed to know, he could tell me right away. But there are a lot of people up there that did not know English because they only had to take English through the eighth grade. And if they didn't go any further that, you know, and they're older, they probably never had a use for English anymore. So a lot of people, you know, didn't know that much English, but that was all right with me. It was good for me because it was.

SZTUK: [00:18:56] Sure.

JONES: [00:18:56] So I could learn it.

SZTUK: [00:19:01] Did you feel like you had a lack of privacy since you didn't have your own house, or did you just make yourself at home?

JONES: [00:19:08] No, I made myself at home. I didn't, I wasn't really. Somehow or another, I just, that didn't seem to be something I was, you know. Because I think I appreciated so much that they were taking care of me like one of the family that I didn't at all think I wanted my own place. I really, you know, it really being there, and the people down at the other village too that I stayed with. They didn't have any children, so when I. So I always had a good time when I stayed with them, you know, also. So I felt really, I really felt loved. Because another thing about it is I remember for a while when I first came there, it was like, you know, they'd always, when you'd go into church or something, they was always making me go first or this or that, you know, the guest. And it was something that I just didn't, or served me first or, you know, those things.

JONES: [00:20:06] And I didn't. I kind of fought that for a while and I think I made them uncomfortable. But then after a while, I realized, I just went with it. I said, well, they're going to do this. And what I did, when I decided to, you know, to go with it, everything just got so much better because I did realize that they, you know, that they really did love me.

SZTUK: [00:20:27] Mm hmm. So you were out there for just under a year then on that island, or was it?

JONES: [00:20:34] Yeah, but I went back other times for short periods of time and because again I knew so many families, I knew I wanted to go up and see them. And one of the last places I went before I even left Fiji in '73 was I went back up there early in '73, you know, to visit them again right after Christmas. But the base of the time I was there was that first year I was in, like I said, '69 and '70. And then when I came back in '71, we started a new project in the cooperatives and I went around to different cooperative societies with a young cooperatives officer. He was just a probably not much more than a teenager. And we would go around to cooperatives and villages for a one-night lesson on cooperative principles. You know, what the meaning of cooperative is, a little bit of management, just different things, around the kava bowl.

SZTUK: [00:21:39] Yeah.

JONES: [00:21:39] And we did that to an awful lot of villages around Vanua Levu. And, you know, we'd drink grog and they'd feed us and we'd talk about, you know, whatever they wanted to talk about.

SZTUK: [00:21:50] So he was your local counterpart?

JONES: [00:21:52] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:21:52] Do you remember his name?

JONES: [00:21:54] Yeah, Ismoey Johnny Vesey, I think he. I don't know what. Imosey Danny Vesey. I don't know if he's still in the Cooperative Department or not. He's one of the ones I never did look up when I went back. But some of, a lot of the others I, you know, I saw when I went back like in 1990, you know. So 2011. Of course, a lot of them have died. But he's probably the youngest one that, you know, that I've worked with. So I did that.

SZTUK: [00:22:23] Where were you living then? You had left Thikombia so where?

JONES: [00:22:26] They had, when I came back in early in '71, they had a batch of bachelors in Labasa, or people that.

SZTUK: [00:22:35] So you're back in Labasa again?

JONES: [00:22:35] Yeah. You know, single people who worked government jobs.

SZTUK: [00:22:41] OK.

JONES: [00:22:41] And I had a room there. So when I'd go out on these, you know, maybe go out for four or five, you know, during the week to these other places with.

SZTUK: [00:22:51] OK, so it was the bachelor's quarters for the local Fiji government workers?

JONES: [00:22:57] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:22:57] So the rest of the people there were Fijian and Indian?

JONES: [00:23:01] Yeah, that's right. And you could eat there too. So that was a good place to be. And so that's where I stayed while I was there. And I did that, like I said, from January until about I think it was about April or May. And I was down at Nabouwalu one time and Laisenia Qarase, who was at the time was in charge of the Coops Department. You know who that is, don't you?

SZTUK: [00:23:32] I've heard the name.

JONES: [00:23:33] Yeah, he was also a prime minister that got deposed back early, you know, 2000s. But anyway, he asked me, he was down there, there was some kind of cooperative convention or something down there. And he asked me if I'd be interested in going to the Cooperatives Education Center and be in charge of that, the warden there at Lami. And so I went over there. Like I said, this was in like the middle of '71.

SZTUK: [00:24:04] So and Lami is where?

JONES: [00:24:07] It's next to Suva.

SZTUK: [00:24:09] Suva. So it was a different island.

JONES: [00:24:11] Oh yeah, it was back on Viti Levu.

SZTUK: [00:24:13] And Suva is the capital city.

JONES: [00:24:16] Yeah. It was right next to Suva. So anyway, so I went over there and talked. I knew the guy that was charge, it was an English guy. It was called VSO, Voluntary Service Overseas, from England. He had been in charge of that and he was getting ready to go back. I think it's two years or something. And they didn't have anybody else from England coming over and they wondered if I'd take over. So I went over there and figured, well, you know, why not? That seemed like a good job. So I went over there and I had, the courses that we had for the most part were like five week courses. And they were on bookkeeping, cooperative principles, cooperative law. And I forget what else about cooperatives.

JONES: [00:25:12] And we would take people from these villages that I had been visiting all along, you know, the secretaries and treasurers and even storekeepers, and teach them bookkeeping. And that was the main thing. And like I said, even corporate management in five weeks long. And the good thing about that was up until that time, the English VSOs didn't, were not, didn't have language training. So they were teaching it all in English. And a lot of the Fijians, like I mentioned before, if they hadn't been around, you know, in a situation, their English might not be that good. So we started teaching the courses in Fijian and we, you know, we'd translate everything into it and that seemed to be a plus for doing that.

JONES: [00:26:00] And also each year we'd have an overseas course. It was the second, like a secondary course for people from secondary cooperatives, which are bigger cooperatives. And they came from places like the Solomons, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati.

SZTUK: [00:26:19] They would come to Fiji?

JONES: [00:26:20] Yeah, and we'd have the course there and we had people from the government would come down and teach different things. And I mean that was a little, I didn't teach anything on that, but we did have a course there like that. And, but like I said, some of the courses, sometimes we'd have courses just for Indian societies, and we had to have people in there teaching in Hindustani. But most, but I'd say a majority of them were, you know, were Fijians.

SZTUK: [00:26:48] Sure. Because most of the co-ops were probably in Fijian communities, right?

JONES: [00:26:51] Yeah. I mean the Indians did have some like sugar cane and stuff, but not as much as the Fijians did. So I did that until, uh. Let's see. Kind of the end of '70, close to the end of '72. And I had a cooperatives officer, Fijian, for working with me. And when I, you know, when it came time for me to leave, he took it over, you know, took charge of it. And so we were able to localize that position.

SZTUK: [00:27:23] Was this the same guy that you mentioned before or a different guy?

JONES: [00:27:27] No, this is Joele Colati.

SZTUK: [00:27:33] Joele?

JONES: [00:27:33] Colati. C-O-L-A-T-I. And I think he's deceased. So he took charge when I left. And so I officially left, I left in as of the 1st of January 1973, but I didn't really leave for four more months because I did some more work for, I think, written some reports on the last overseas course we'd had. And also I took a month's trip to New Zealand and Australia and came back to Fiji for a while. I didn't want to leave. And I think I finally left in about.

SZTUK: [00:28:13] You were there for almost five years altogether?

JONES: [00:28:15] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:28:16] OK.

JONES: [00:28:17] So I probably left in April or May of '73.

SZTUK: [00:28:20] Yeah, you reached your limit. So far you've lived in Labasa, Thikombia, Labasa again, and then back in Suva?

JONES: [00:28:28] Yeah, a lot.

SZTUK: [00:28:29] Very different. Very different situations. How did you like living in Suva compared to the other places?

JONES: [00:28:41] Well, I mean, it was more, it was away from the village and I remember that the job that I had being in charge of that was, of course, it was much, much more stressful than the other jobs I'd had. I remember that because, you know, like there were like 40 people taking those courses. And, you know, I had to be, order the food, and, you know, the cooks and, you know, be the, and also teach. So I remember it was a job that was something I kind of looked forward to completing whenever I did, you know?

SZTUK: [00:29:18] Yeah.

JONES: [00:29:19] I mean, I was alright with doing it while I was doing it, but it was something I was, it was not, it was not that much in my comfort zone as the other things had been.

SZTUK: [00:29:32] So talking about Peace Corps' goals. One is to provide technical assistance where requested. And in your position there, it sounds like you did quite a bit of that. How do you think your job?

JONES: [00:29:46] Well, again, I'll give an example. One time we went up to Thikombia. It was early on when I first got up there, trying to figure out why they're having some money problems. The copra wasn't getting processed like it was supposed to, and nobody could really understand why. But it was really simple. But it even took a while for me to understand it. When I

went up there, there were big piles of coconuts all over the place. And what had happened was the people brought their coconuts and the society had given them money for them, and they're supposed to prepare the coconuts communally. You know, chop them in half and get the copra, get the coconut out, and put it in ovens and dry it. The Agriculture Department has real strict regulations about how much moisture is in it. And, you know, all that work is supposed to go communally and then they would be ready to send the copra to market.

JONES: [00:30:46] But what was happening was the communal part was falling down. They, you know, they wanted their money for the coconuts, but they didn't want to, you know, they didn't want to, because they had a lot of argument about who's supposed to do it and all this. And so finally we, I finally realized, well, the problem is, we need to pay these people to.

SZTUK: [00:31:11] To process.

JONES: [00:31:11] To process. And of course, it's going to take the profit down. But you have to. You're going to have to bite the bullet and do it. So we started doing it, paying them so much for a tray or whatever, because they had to. They had these big ovens and they would use the husk with the coconut in the bottom to, you know, to make the fire to get the moisture out of the coconuts. So after we started doing that, things started moving.

SZTUK: [00:31:40] So the people that contributed more labor got a little more?

JONES: [00:31:43] Yeah, got paid more. And the big mountains of coconuts went down and, you know, the coconuts got processed and sent to market and things got right. But it even took me a while before I understood it. And later on I realized, I must have been pretty stupid not to realize it. But then after it happened, everything was good. I mean, it was, uh.

SZTUK: [00:32:07] But that wasn't a standard practice, so you had to implement that?

JONES: [00:32:11] Well, at least in Thikombia. I'm not sure what they do, you know, other places, how they would, you know, do it communally or not.

But that was a big eye opener. But again, the whole thing about getting them to, you know, not give credit was awful. You know, it was difficult because, you know, sometimes they would. The co-op officers would go in cooperatives and they would, the bookkeeper would have a book of, you know, that all the sales were in, and they would have another book that had the credit in it. And the co-op officers usually were wise to it and would say, well, let's see your other book too. And the other book was kind of their downfall because that was the one that they got all these goods without any money coming in.

SZTUK: [00:33:00] Yeah.

JONES: [00:33:01] And then when I went back there in 1990, I noticed that cooperatives had, uh, the emphasis on cooperatives had gone down a lot. And as it turned out, it looked like for largely, I think a lot of the people who had learned, you know, how to do the bookkeeping and management and all that in cooperatives, they took that knowledge and started going out on their own, private enterprise.

SZTUK: [00:33:30] Starting a private business.

JONES: [00:33:31] And that's what happened a lot because cooperatives, as far as I know, are not anything as prevalent. I think maybe their time had kind of, you know, because they were useful, because they taught people how to, you know, the business savvy. But as far as the cooperative part of it, it just looked like maybe they're kind of, you know, going by the wayside. So that was an interesting thing that I found out when I went back there.

SZTUK: [00:34:02] How about Peace Corps' goal to promote a better understanding of Americans? Being the only American when you're out there on Thikombia, do you feel like you had some impact there?

JONES: [00:34:14] Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, you know, as I've said before, since the last couple of times I've been back, especially last summer, there's so many people up on that island now, kids and grandkids, that I keep up with on, you know, like on Facebook. And it's amazing. I mean, I think being up there, we became friends for life.

SZTUK: [00:34:41] Yeah.

JONES: [00:34:42] I really think because there's so many people from Thikombia that I keep in touch with now. Some of them live in California and a lot of them we've become friends. And the next time I go back, I'm going to be looking up a bunch of them again. But again, that's from the. But over the years, like when I went back in 1990, there weren't that many, there wasn't anything like the internet or anything then. But I still looked up, went back to Thikombia, actually took my wife up to Thikombia. And, you know, I saw a bunch of people that I'd known. So it was life changing and continues to be.

SZTUK: [00:35:23] Do you recall any big revelations there about, or maybe things that surprised people about you or maybe that changed their assumptions about what Americans were like?

JONES: [00:35:40] Hmm. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about that, but I do know that. Excuse me. [coughs] The son of the family I stayed with up there, I'm back in touch with him now. I stayed with him last summer. He's 60 now, has kids and grandkids. And he mentioned something I'd completely forgotten about, that I'd helped him pay some school fees. I'd helped send him to secondary school when I was up there.

SZTUK: [00:36:11] That was when you were a volunteer?

JONES: [00:36:13] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And again, I've forgotten about it, but it was something that, you know, he'd always forgotten, always remembered. But again, it just remembering all those people and, you know, loving them and everything. I think that's one reason they remembered me.

SZTUK: [00:36:34] Yeah. Well, then there's the goal of promoting a better understanding of other people by Americans. And you started out talking about how in the Navy you had had some experience with developing countries that were less fortunate cultures.

JONES: [00:36:52] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:36:52] And your time in the Peace Corps, do you think that changed your view of people or gave you a better understanding?

JONES: [00:37:02] Yeah, but Fijians for the most part weren't that, you know, they seemed like they always had food. It wasn't like they were in poverty, like some of these other places are. I mean, I'm sure there are places in Fiji where people are really down and out, but it seems like the families in Fiji helped carry people along. You know, so one member of the family's having problems, the other, you know, the other members will help. And of course that's the cultural thing anyway. Also because it was like if somebody needed something and somebody else could help them, it was culturally they should. And I think that was just an important part of the culture. And so, at times I helped different things that.

JONES: [00:37:53] Actually the guy that I stayed with, he was [inaudible] on Thikombia and he had gotten in trouble somehow with the law, with some, I'm not sure what it was, but they came up there one time. The police came up there and got him took him back to Labasa, and he had to go to trial for something or another. And he said he was going to pay so much or he had to go to jail. So I ended up paying that too.

SZTUK: [00:38:21] Oh no.

JONES: [00:38:21] But again, I didn't mind doing it. And it was, you know, something I could have refused to do, but I didn't want to refuse because I, you know, had enough money to do it. But, you know, different ways you could help out. And I think that, I think enough, I think in that way the people realized where your heart is.

SZTUK: [00:38:44] So after five years in the country, you had a lot of close friends and it must have been really hard to leave.

JONES: [00:38:53] Oh, it was.

SZTUK: [00:38:53] Do you remember that day when you had to get on the plane?

JONES: [00:38:58] Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was sad.

SZTUK: [00:39:01] Yeah.

JONES: [00:39:02] And it took me, when I came back here, I think, like a lot of Peace Corps, they travel around a while. And when I first came back, I came across country in a bus and I even I went and looked up Mike Babich.

SZTUK: [00:39:15] Oh you did?

JONES: [00:39:15] Yeah, my roommate.

SZTUK: [00:39:17] He didn't stay for five years?

JONES: [00:39:19] No, no, unfortunately. But and I still talk to him once in a while. He's working at a co-op up above Philadelphia that's like a big farm. And people with handicaps work there, live there and work there. And he's one of the administrators there. So it looks like he found himself a good niche.

SZTUK: [00:39:42] So what kind of effect has your Peace Corps service had on the rest of your life since then?

JONES: [00:39:52] Well, I remember for a while when I came back, I was considering, you know, like what to do. And I was even looking into maybe doing some social work or, because I was looking for something like I was doing over there. But then I realized it's just, it's just not that easy. So I just dug in and for lack of another job, I ran a motel for about five years. That's when I met my wife. And then I got a job at a nuclear power plant for 25.

JONES: [00:40:24] But, you know, as I was telling you earlier, all along the time, along the years, I've been real interested about African Americans. And I've actually the year before I went in the Navy, I became friends with an African American young man who, uh, we both worked at the windmill at the craft shops in Williamsburg, and he went to Princeton. He was the first black they'd had in Princeton. And so we kept up over the years and he came back to Williamsburg about 10 or 15 years ago. He was retiring and

he was divorced and his mother lived in Williamsburg. So he got me interested in, there's an organization I'm in called All Together and that's in Williamsburg and other places. It's for a way for blacks and whites to get to know each other and have dialogs.

JONES: [00:41:25] And like we've been to, we'd take some field trips, like we went to a civil rights museum in Farmville, and we have one meeting a month. And we have interesting speakers, you know, for different things about civil rights and different things about. I mean, like the policeman situation and just all the, just the conglomerate things about black and white relations. And so I've gotten really interested in that. I've been doing that. But my friend passed away in 2013. But I still of course, I'm going there and I'm on the board right now. So we're the people that plan for the meetings and all that. And that's something that, I feel like that's something that kind of came from maybe my experience in the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:42:11] From your Peace Corps experience. Mm hmm. You've been back to Fiji?

JONES: [00:42:18] I've been back three times.

SZTUK: [00:42:20] Three times. And the most recent time was for the 50th anniversary?

JONES: [00:42:24] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:42:24] Tell us about that trip.

JONES: [00:42:25] Yeah, well, I think one of the goals of. I went back in 1990 first, took my wife for three weeks, and we went around a lot of places and looked up people we'd known. And then my wife, I went in 2011, we did a project. My wife had passed away in 2007, but we had a project. We did a project for the Habitat for Humanity. And the way I feel like going back to Fiji was if I'm going to go that far, I need to do something, you know, not be selfish, like not be a tourist. And that's why I really appreciated what we did back in 2011, because I was able to do that for the first week and then

go up to Labasa the second week and look up people. And the same thing last year. You know, that project we did at Ba was, I thought it was excellent. But then I was able to go around and see other people. I didn't get to Labasa, but I visited some other people that were from Thikombia that lived around Nadi. And one of them's growing sandalwood. He's in the sandalwood business now. And that's the son of the man, family I stayed with up in Thikombia.

SZTUK: [00:43:37] Wow.

JONES: [00:43:38] So I've really enjoyed going back, but I would not want to go back as a tourist. I haven't gotten close to a tourist resort. Just not interested in doing that.

SZTUK: [00:43:49] Yeah. So 50 years later you're still connected with Fiji and Peace Corps is still a big part of your life.

JONES: [00:43:57] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:43:59] That's great. Anything else you'd like to add? Any stories you remember that might be interesting or?

JONES: [00:44:12] Um, let me think. I can't think of anything offhand.

SZTUK: [00:44:19] OK. All right, Lew. Well, thanks a lot. It's been a great interview.

JONES: [00:44:22] Thank you.

SZTUK: [00:44:22] I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]