

Peter Nieblas Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Peter Nieblas served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 on a dairy agriculture project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Peter Nieblas

June 24, 2009
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:04] And today is June 24th, 2009, and this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson, and I'm interviewing Peter Nieblas. And Pete, why don't you start by just telling us kind of what you're doing now, retired.

NIEBLAS: [00:00:23] Retired in 2000. I retired in 2004. And I have an avocado grove I take care of. I raise flowers and take care of a grandson.

SIMPSON: [00:00:35] And where is it that you're living now?

NIEBLAS: [00:00:37] We lived in Valley Center, California. It's north of San Diego, about an hour and a half. God's country for us.

SIMPSON: [00:00:43] Well, actually, it's pretty nice out there. I know. And now what? I want you to think about the year before you joined the Peace Corps, how

did you happen to hear about it and how did you happen to decide to go with it?

NIEBLAS: [00:01:06] Well, it was really a fluke. I was in college and it was in my sophomore year and I was tired of school and saw this flier, Peace Corps. I looked at and I said, I'll send an application. So I sent an application in and heard nothing. Another application came in, filled that form out. It went on like that. And here comes an offer to go to Bolivia, you know, and of course, I had another offer to go to the Bering Sea with the Alaska Department Fish and Game. And I tried to postpone going to Bolivia and they say, it's either now or not. So I went to Bolivia.

SIMPSON: [00:01:45] How did you did you have a hard time making that decision?

NIEBLAS: [00:01:48] No, it was the hardest part was I had to make it and I made it because it was definitely a place I never imagined they'd ever go, you know. I had been to Alaska. So I jumped in.

SIMPSON: [00:02:04] So what did your family think, they decided to go in the Peace Corps and your friend?

NIEBLAS: [00:02:11] Oh, my family. Yeah, my mother would always say if you want to do it. And so there was no problem. There wasn't even hesitation on their part. And to my friends, they said, what are you doing? And I don't I don't know, but I'm going to try it.

SIMPSON: Sounds like a plan.

NIEBLAS: Yeah, well planned out.

SIMPSON: [00:02:32] So what were you studying in college?

NIEBLAS: [00:02:35] Well, civil engineering. It was then and I did eventually graduate as a civil engineer.

SIMPSON: [00:02:42] When you put in your application, did you ask for any specific country or place?

NIEBLAS: [00:02:51] I think I asked for South America because I have a Spanish background and that would be the only reason. No, I think I did, but no specific country, just the area.

SIMPSON: [00:03:03] Ok, so what tell me a little bit about the project, what you were invited to do? Well, just like just about the project, because I want to talk about training as well.

NIEBLAS: [00:03:16] We were the project we ended up going to was in Cochabamba, the valley of Cochabama. And I had to do with animal husbandry and dairy in the United States, no, the UN had to build a processing plant to plant the field. And it was produced it was designed to produce about 20 thousand liters of milk a day. And they were only getting like three or four. And they wanted some way of bringing it up. And so somebody got the idea of let's have somebody in this case volunteers, you know, try to encourage dairying. And so this we went down there to do it.

SIMPSON: [00:03:50] So tell me a little bit about the training. When you when you first went into the Peace Corps, what were you expecting or different than you were expecting or what was your impression?

NIEBLAS: [00:04:05] I had no expectations, you know, and I'd never been any kind of training, a formal group, you know, so I went along with the flow. You know, we had some language training that was logical. There would be language training. And there was some, you know, training. We lived with the Indians. I guess that was the experience, a little bit more of a different culture. The training, a lot of the training wasn't really relevant. We had advisers or people who had lived in Bolivia and there are U.S. Ag people come back and they gave us talks about what to expect. And I don't think they ever went out of the country because it was different, you know, but it didn't make any difference with important when you really got down there, what they could have done in the States, you know, it wouldn't have made

any difference. The environment was just different. You had to just say go with flow and that's what you did.

SIMPSON: [00:04:58] So overall, what did you think of the training in Arizona?

NIEBLAS: [00:05:04] That was the Indians. That was probably be the harshest food they had.

SIMPSON: [00:05:08] Can you tell me a little bit about what you actually did in the training?

NIEBLAS: [00:05:13] Well, they try to teach us how to construct, you know, in this case was chicken pens, you know, chicken barns or something like that. We built little buildings and, you know, just built a large free range chicken pens, you know, and and then, you know, they did teach us. Then we went in town, we had classes in the shop, metalwork and have some idea of tools. But that was basically it. Got my teeth fixed.

SIMPSON: [00:05:48] How about the next phase?

NIEBLAS: [00:05:50] That was Mayaguez, Puerto Rico.

SIMPSON: [00:05:55] Yeah, well, Arecibo first, right?

NIEBLAS: [00:05:57] Well that's still Puerto Rico, Arecibo. Oh I think this was Camp Crozier?

SIMPSON: [00:06:03] Crozier.

NIEBLAS: [00:06:07] They try to teach us how to learn to swim. I never learned I still don't know how to swim. But, you know, I think the the instruction there I was I don't think it would be interesting if you learned it or got were proficient and whatever they're trying to teach it is if you're willing to try it, because there were people who you know, they're like the team we had to repair of dams. You know, some of the girls have been doing just that.

One girl from South Carolina, I forget her name. She freaked out. Yeah. No way could you get her to the edge. You know, I think all that counted against her, anybody who really wasn't willing to give it a try, they didn't care if you did well or want to do it, you know, unless that was just to see, you know, what you're willing to try at. But that was, again, big thing outdoors.

SIMPSON: [00:07:02] How about the heights?

NIEBLAS: [00:07:04] All the height was the same thing, just to see, you know. They broke it out to your ability. My ability was such that I had to go with the girls. But again, with the same thing. I remember when they were sorting us out. Nieblas, go with the girls. Anyway, it was again it seemed to go on. The time you spend overnight will make the hikes, you know, because in actuality, actuality, when we got to Bolivia we never did any of that stuff. I didn't sleep out in the countryside. It was never even proposed to sleep out in the countryside.

SIMPSON: [00:07:47] What about Mayaguez?

NIEBLAS: [00:07:51] Mayaguez. That was the university that was more practical because of the Ag school. And they gave us classes and, you know, in different tropical fruits, animal husbandry, really pigs, some cows there also, and just some of the, you know, foods and stuff, you know, of Latin America. That was the most practical. Other than the language part. Good exposure to Latin countries.

SIMPSON: [00:08:20] So after you got done with Puerto Rico, then what happened?

NIEBLAS: [00:08:25] Then you come home. Regroup and then we had to go to Vermont. That was the Cuban Missile Crisis.

SIMPSON: [00:08:34] When we got to Miami, that was the Cuban Missile Crisis?

NIEBLAS: [00:08:36] Yeah, then we had to go to Vermont. I actually liked that.

SIMPSON: [00:08:42] Going to Vermont?

NIEBLAS: [00:08:43] Yeah, it was it was in the fall. And I never had never been on the West Coast. On the East Coast. And so all that was fascinating, all the people you know. The country was pretty even, just like you see, you know, in those calendars, you know, the barns and the ducks in the field and of flowers and stuff. And then, you know, I, liked Vermont, could have stayed there too.

SIMPSON: [00:09:08] A lot of people apparently really liked Vermont. Completely different after the desert.

NIEBLAS: [00:09:18] Oh, yeah. It was it was good. I went raccoon hunting with the janitor.

SIMPSON: [00:09:23] Oh, did you?

NIEBLAS: [00:09:24] Yeah, we were eating raccoon. Yeah, it was fun for me. It was because I never did that. And he had a dog, an old pickup, and the dog would be in the back of the truck and we'd drive along. I'm antsy. I'm ready to, you know, as soon the dog barks. The guy would say, no, just wait. You'll know, the dog then would make kind of a howl, jump out of the truck and take off, you know, and then again, I'm saying, well, let's go chase him. No, you wait. And you hear the dog barking, barking, and then the pitch of the bark changed. Ah, he's got one and finally the janitor would come out with his pistol and a flashlight and there we'd go and he'd have a raccoon up in the tree and go pop. One raccoon, put in the truck and go do it again. There was no real sporting.

SIMPSON: [00:10:13] Do you do with the raccoon?

NIEBLAS: [00:10:15] Well, he was up every spring and in the year to come there was they had a festival with the raccoon. Some kind of delicacy or something.

And this festival, they had raccoon meals and he was collecting in his lot of raccoons.

SIMPSON: [00:10:34] But I know they do that sometimes in the south.

NIEBLAS: [00:10:37] But possibly I think south. But a big rat.

SIMPSON: [00:10:42] And the big hairy rat. Yeah. So did you go into Boston?

NIEBLAS: [00:10:48] Yeah Boston. One place where I thought they didn't speak English. I remember asking a policeman some directions, you know, and he was really polite to me and I said, yeah, what did he say? Can't understand him. It was really, really thick his way of talking.

SIMPSON: [00:11:12] Did you were you are one of us had problems when we first went to training, understanding people from the east, the people from the south, or was that not a problem?

NIEBLAS: [00:11:24] I don't think. I don't remember it as being a problem.

SIMPSON: [00:11:33] Ok, so then, uh, after that, then I guess we were on our way to Bolivia. So tell me about your experiences when you got to Bolivia.

NIEBLAS: [00:11:48] When we landed in La Paz, the airport, some fourteen thousand feet. My head was bursting, the air so rarified up there. I just just couldn't do anything, you know? And I spent the first day or maybe two in bed, you know.

SIMPSON: [00:12:04] It's like the sea level.

NIEBLAS: [00:12:08] You know, I never had a head hurt like that. And so eventually you got a little better. And they took us, the Bolivians there. It was the kids group or whatever. But they took us for tours. Saw Lake Titicaca and some of the tourist sites that you see around there, the reed boats, and then a few days. And I don't know how many days it was. We got in their

jeeps and had a caravan to Cochabamba. And we were driving along the Altiplano, you know, just going.

SIMPSON: [00:12:38] Did you get to drive one of the jeeps?

NIEBLAS: [00:12:41] I don't remember. I can remember being the Jeep and on each side of the Jeep there was nothing. And these people, you know, these rock walls, and that was their farm and god it sucks, you know, out of people. I mean, I really feel sorry for that. That's what, it's hard to imagine to do anything to help the people who didn't have anything to start with. Nothing.

SIMPSON: [00:13:04] So what when you got to Cochabamba, what did you think?

NIEBLAS: [00:13:07] Well, Cochabamba is a lot like California, where we were not as high. I mean, it's higher than could be California, but they had the dry rolling hills. That kind of brushy hills and know big trees, eucalyptus. The climate is nice, you know. You know, winter got cool, don't think it snowed very much. But it was closer to where I was accustomed to the climate. Not too hot. Dry heat, too, wasn't any humidity, not like Cochabamba.

SIMPSON: [00:13:39] So tell me about where in Cochabamba that you live by yourself or do you live with a family?

NIEBLAS: [00:13:47] I lived with a family. Larry Wohlwend and myself lived with a family of German descent, Grosbergers. Husband, wife and two children, maybe three, three children, had two children and, you know, kids that were, you know, maybe five and four, and a small baby. He spoke English. He'd been in the States studying agriculture. And so he brought his he picked up in the state and he had a dairy and he raised chickens and he kind of had his hands and everything. You know, these people that any time you made a good politician, he was just into everything. Knew everybody, spoke the Indian languages and stuff, you know? You know, he was an interesting fellow, Grosberger.

SIMPSON: [00:14:34] So, uh, what, how old were you when you went?

NIEBLAS: [00:14:39] Went at 22. I was 22 years old.

SIMPSON: [00:14:41] 22. So what exactly do they ask you to do?

NIEBLAS: [00:14:49] Well. Back in the States, I had some knowledge of cows, we had milk cows, and so maybe we put in the cow works and stuff like that. And so we worked with the plant, the goal was to increase dairy production. Each one of us had an area which was our area to cover. And so we visited the farms and the people that had cows and the way we knew what they were with the plant appeal had a route where they picked up the milk cans. And so they gave us a list of their dairy and people, you know, and we would then we would visit those that were within our section, introduce ourselves. We're here to help the owner. And of course, when they say help, this is what they all say, we're getting money? No, we're not bringing any money, just trying to help you, you know, with your cows and they're little farmers, you know, four or five cows. You know, you call them cows that were they were males with tits, that's what they were. Really bad stock, really bad stuff.

NIEBLAS: [00:15:50] And then so we tried to help mainly at that time was the hygiene. The plant was trying to get the milk twice a day, which is the normal practice. But the evening milking would sour, and it was from poor hygiene. The plant furnished them, in the morning when they picked them out, they would drop off a block of ice so they could keep the canister at night in cold water. But the sanitation was bad, they lost their last milk. And so the farmers went to only milking once a day because they milk in the morning, they picked up in the morning. It was gone, it didn't go sour. You know, we were trying to encourage them to go ahead and milk twice a day. And some people went with it and some people never believed it. We explained to them that there were little bugs, you know, made the milk go bad. You know, they'd look at can, looks clean to me. That's what they actually said and they're really courteous, they didn't say you're an idiot or something. And they just kinda.

SIMPSON: [00:16:50] And make a difference that you were so young?

NIEBLAS: [00:16:55] I don't think it bothered him. I don't think I never picked up on that at all. And they may have picked up on the fact that what we were trying to tell them was really not so. They didn't see it, it really couldn't be. There wasn't obvious dirt in the container. They rinsed it out and stuff like that, but it wasn't clean enough.

SIMPSON: [00:17:18] So is that pretty much what you did while you were in Cochabamba?

NIEBLAS: [00:17:26] The program was supposed to be one year and it was supposed that we were trying to transition, transition into something else. We never transitioned. The director, can't remember the fellow's name.

SIMPSON: Barrone?

NIEBLAS: Yeah, that's right, Barrone. We were getting close to transitioning, he came up with the bright idea, let's do another year. And I was kind of tired of it because the hours were bad. I mean, you know, get up at 3:00 in the morning and get to these dairies, you know, and you had to be there if you didn't get out there before they started milking, they would be done before you got there and they'd be done because only three or four pounds. And it took you most of the morning to get to some of these places. So you had to be there early and so had get up in the morning at 3:00, get in my Jep and take off. Those of us who had this milk project, had jeeps, the rest of the people had the bus. Then I get back and I'd go to the plant and deliver my samples, do the testing on them, get all the data, fill in my paperwork, and then I go back and get home maybe about 10 o'clock and go to bed. Sleep until lunchtime. And then life started again and again.

SIMPSON: [00:18:39] So that was what you were doing for the work. What did you do in your off time?

NIEBLAS: [00:18:45] Learn to drink beer. Um, I liked going around town. You know, I used to spend a lot of time wandering the town and going into the marketplace and just wandering around, talking to people, just looking around.

SIMPSON: [00:19:00] You must have fit in pretty well. I mean, I bet they thought you were some kind of Latino.

NIEBLAS: [00:19:06] Yeah, they did. They spoke Spanish enough. I didn't have a real pronounced accent. You know, I could get along well. The people were very interesting, you know. And the fact that I was an American Latino, was different that a Latino from Argentina simply because it was some kind of animosity between some of the neighboring countries. You know, I liked it there. I mean, the two years was enough, but I liked it, had no problem with the time I was there.

SIMPSON: [00:19:37] So is there. Can you think of any significant things that happen to you or that you, while you were there, that really stand out? Well, you know, maybe significant is not the. Well, tell me about something that really is something that happened, really sticks out of your mind while you were there.

NIEBLAS: [00:20:12] The people were nice. They got along with everybody. I knew a lot of people like to converse with me and, you know, but, you know, when it comes out is when we first got to Bolivia, we were at the Lake Titicaca. And I always remember there was a beggar, you know, you see that guy.

SIMPSON: [00:20:36] Yeah, was he, uh, crippled?

NIEBLAS: [00:20:59] Anyway, it was sad to see him.

SIMPSON: [00:21:02] Was that the first time you'd seen something like that?

NIEBLAS: [00:21:07] Yeah, it was the first time I ever saw someone like that.

SIMPSON: [00:21:15] So moving on. Did you do any socializing when you were in Cochabamba?

NIEBLAS: [00:21:22] Just parties. The girls liked Americans. So the social life. Apparently, any guys that had anything going were gone. And the ones that were there were trying to go. Again, there were a lot of nice people. And that part is interesting.

SIMPSON: [00:22:03] So, uh. So over time, say at the end of the first year or say, for example, where were you when you heard about the Kennedy assassination?

NIEBLAS: [00:22:16] I can remember like it was yesterday, like it was today. I got off the bus. I lived actually in Cochabamba, a little suburb of Piacoyo, it was on the bus route. I'd gotten off the bus and was walking down the street to the house and this girl comes up, pops her head out the window, and says, they shot your president.

SIMPSON: Yeah. That was hard.

NIEBLAS: That was hard. I remember that. And then apparently, listening to news, but that's when you remember seeing or hearing it. I still think it stands out.

SIMPSON: [00:23:09] Yeah, I think that was very traumatic for all the Peace Corps volunteers.

NIEBLAS: [00:23:13] Oh everybody. Yeah they all remember that, wherever they were.

SIMPSON: [00:23:24] So at the end of your first year, sounds like you didn't have a hard time adjusting to the culture?

NIEBLAS: [00:23:33] No, I liked it there. The food was different, had to learn what to eat and where to eat, stuff like that. Always ran out of money.

SIMPSON: [00:23:42] It was all that beer drinking.

NIEBLAS: [00:23:48] And I got to eating and I would get done with my work around 10, 11 o'clock, you know, and I'd go to town. Couldn't go to sleep, I'd go to town and have lunch, you know. Bolivians have something called *salteñas*. I liked those. And the best *salteñas*, even to Bolivians, were made by a Chinese guy. Go over there, he makes the best.

SIMPSON: [00:24:15] Was that about 10 o'clock in the morning?

NIEBLAS: [00:24:18] From 11:00 until maybe 1:00.

SIMPSON: [00:24:25] Great. So in the long term, from where when you got done with your time in Bolivia, how did you feel about what you had done? Did you feel like you had done what you thought you what they thought you needed to do, or how did you feel about that experience?

NIEBLAS: [00:24:47] Well, I felt I did what they were expecting me to do, you know, in social context. I tried to help the people who were successful, but they were really slow to change. But I was satisfied with me. You know, I was ready to go. I wouldn't have signed up for another tour. It was time for me to go. After seeing how Bolivians live with it and realize, you know, I've got to get going with that I need to do, go back to school and finish. So I did eventually finish, but I was 27 when I graduated from college. But no, I was content and I thought I did what they wanted, what they're expecting. I think Peace Corps at that time was expecting a volunteer to go down there and try, not get in trouble, you know, and be friendly to people. And I did all that.

SIMPSON: [00:25:37] Yeah, tell me if at the end of your tour, you mentioned this earlier, did you think that the preparation and the training helped at all?

NIEBLAS: [00:25:52] Mostly the language portion helped and then the actual agriculture. Maybe living with the Indian American Indian reservation, the

Maricopa, seeing how another way people live. People who came from the State Department to give you advice and stuff, they were worthless.

SIMPSON: [00:26:22] Yeah, well, that I subsequently spent time in other doing other things down there, and it was true, but some people had no clue about anything.

NIEBLAS: [00:26:35] They weren't there. I mean, if they were, they spent the time in their room.

SIMPSON: [00:26:40] So you did probably provide some technical assistance and probably help people understand the U.S. and Americans better, and you got to know the Bolivians and lived with them.

NIEBLAS: [00:26:52] And we were from America trying to help you with your cows. And we did. The plant went from production of about three thousand liters per day up to eight or 10 liters.

SIMPSON: Oh that's good.

NIEBLAS: We had an impact, you know, and then the scientists there brought in the artificial insemination to try to improve the herds. It helped.

SIMPSON: [00:27:18] So after you got out the Peace Corps, have you had any continued involvement with Bolivia or Bolivians?

NIEBLAS: No.

SIMPSON: The family you lived with there?

NIEBLAS: [00:27:31] No, I abandoned everyone and went on my greedy way. I went back to college. I would read the paper about Bolivia and show my relatives my slides. But I didn't have contact. I didn't keep any contact.

SIMPSON: [00:27:52] Well, tell me, do you think that being in the Peace Corps changed the direction that you went after you got out? Would you have done the same thing had you not gone?

NIEBLAS: [00:28:05] I think I would have. If you go to Peace Corps, I think you stay in that direction. I think you should go and be in a program where you help people. My profession was, I built stuff. I didn't help the down-trodden.

SIMPSON: [00:28:19] Well, that's something.

NIEBLAS: [00:28:20] Well, indirectly, but it's not.

SIMPSON: [00:28:23] You were a civil engineer, and so that's the kind of thing you did in California?

NIEBLAS: [00:28:34] My specialty was water and sewer, so we designed and built water treatment plants, sewage treatment, the pump stations. Did that for 37 years. Civil engineering helps society, but that was in the back of my mind, I had a good job.

SIMPSON: [00:28:55] Where I were, you know, they were always trying to see if we were altruistic. I think we were altruistic. We were also looking for some adventure.

NIEBLAS: [00:29:03] Yeah, I think it to be something new. I was tired of school. I really didn't know which way to go to school. I mean, I didn't have good English ability. But I was good at math and understood the engineering concepts, so I went that way.

SIMPSON: Which are foreign concepts to me.

NIEBLAS: But they're not to me.

SIMPSON: [00:29:29] Everybody needs their little direction to go. OK, so basically you said you came back and went to school, but took a while to finish with that just because.

NIEBLAS: Changed majors.

SIMPSON: What were you doing before?

NIEBLAS: [00:29:45] Civil engineering. But it was structural, and I had changed over to water and sanitation, which required me to take some more hydraulic classes and take microbiology. And sewage treatment is a biological process. Had to learn that process, so it took me longer.

SIMPSON: [00:30:03] OK, well, most engineering or anyway, takes five years?

NIEBLAS: [00:30:18] And now I did get a master's, just not at that time.

SIMPSON: [00:30:28] So do you have any other comments or things that you'd like to add?

NIEBLAS: [00:30:37] My daughters used to ask if they should join the Peace Corps and I said, do it! Do it when you're young. Now, they can't do it. They're married or they got the career, they have too much time spent on their education, they can't let that lapse.

SIMPSON: [00:30:54] Well, I know I hear students talking that they would really like to be corps, but nobody's willing to give up that two years.

NIEBLAS: [00:31:03] It can be an impact depending on where you are in your education. I think it's harder, it's harder to go right after college, especially if you if you have the technical education, you have to keep that up or you lose it. The liberal arts would actually be pretty good.

SIMPSON: [00:31:26] Well, the problem with nurses is that, if they get out, they really need to practice, because I know that for me, I felt about 10 years after I was in the Peace Corps, I had. [tape break]

NIEBLAS: [00:31:46] There were bacteria and cleanliness and it wasn't cleanliness because it shined, you know, it had to be cleaned and not sterile, but at least clean. These people didn't think that was problem.

SIMPSON: [00:31:55] That would have been a real problem with trying to improve the sanitation.

NIEBLAS: [00:32:09] It was a big problem. They just did not get it and they would do what you suggested, supply them with the soap and stuff like that, but soon as they ran out of the soap or were in a hurry and they couldn't do it this morning because they got late, you know, it was not something they conscientiously believed in. Something they did with it might have.

SIMPSON: [00:32:29] I ran into that trying to teach him how to scrub, sterile technique, you know, because I finally had to teach it like a ceremony. Because you do this, you do this, because they didn't understand scientific principle, so you couldn't tell them that and figure that they would know how to use that, you just had to tell them a specific way to do it. And it always had to be in this way.

NIEBLAS: [00:32:58] You know, the hope of those people are the kids. The adults.

SIMPSON: [00:33:02] Did you have much contact with kids? A lot of a lot of people were teaching English and doing other 4S clubs and stuff.

NIEBLAS: [00:33:11] I helped, I taught English. The replacement teachers would go on vacation, I think I took Lofton's place for a while. But I didn't do it as a routine though.

SIMPSON: [00:33:29] Ok, well, if you have no other things?

NIEBLAS: I'm done.

SIMPSON: [00:33:32] OK, let me just stop this.

[END OF INTERVIEW]