

Paul Lofton Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Paul Lofton served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 as a milk tester on an agriculture project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Paul Lofton

June 23, 2009
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:04] All right, this is June 23, 2009, and this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson interviewing Paul Lofton. And first Paul, could you just tell us a little something about what's going on with you today, what you're doing today?

LOFTON: [00:00:29] I recently retired. I taught for 30 years. I was professor of history at Spartanburg Methodist College. And then I had a wreck, a teenager ran into me, to the driver's side. And I was driving which means he hit me. I was three months in the hospital and it forced me to retire. I was ready to get Social Security anyway, so I retired.

SIMPSON: [00:00:53] Ok, now let's just think back about before you went into the Peace Corps. How did you hear about Peace Corps?

LOFTON: [00:01:07] I guess, how did I hear about it? In the newspaper, on the news. It was impossible not to hear about it.

SIMPSON: [00:01:18] OK.

LOFTON: [00:01:21] As soon as Kennedy announced it, I wrote off and got all the information, the application form and things like that. I applied soon after it was announced. In '61 I guess, summer of '61.

SIMPSON: [00:01:41] Ok. So then what made you decide at that time to join the Peace Corps?

LOFTON: [00:01:50] It sounded like a great adventure, a chance to get away from school. I've been in school for all these many years. Here's a chance to go do something, have an adventure, to learn another language, that sort of thing.

SIMPSON: [00:02:02] Ok, so then we what? Did you have a specific area or country where you wanted to go?

LOFTON: [00:02:15] Not really. I remember I was one of the questions on the application form. I thought if I want to learn a language how to learn a language that is standard language, not some remote thing. So I said a Spanish speaking country.

SIMPSON: [00:02:31] Ok, so you did say that.

LOFTON: [00:02:34] As I remember.

SIMPSON: [00:02:39] What did your family and your friends think about you going into the Peace Corps?

LOFTON: [00:02:45] They were supportive. My parents especially they were a little nervous at first by going off to go for two years and be gone. But I think they were they were supportive.

SIMPSON: [00:03:03] Ok, now what project were you invited to join?

LOFTON: [00:03:12] I was invited to join the Heifer Project dairy project in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

SIMPSON: [00:03:22] Ok, and how did you when you when you were getting ready to go the Peace Corps, did you do any special preparation before you left that you were going to be gone for a while?

LOFTON: [00:03:34] Not not really. I remember we had to take a test in those days. We don't have to do that anymore. We had to take a Peace Corps test and somewhere around there it said, what farm experience have you had? And I said, I can milk a cow. I grew up on a dairy farm. I know about having dairy cows. I wrote about that. And sure enough, I was invited to join a dairy project group.

SIMPSON: [00:04:03] Ok, that's great. Ok, when you tell me a little bit about the, what happened after you got your invitation? Did you go to work or training or what happened?

LOFTON: [00:04:18] When I got it in the spring, sometime spring of '62 and we went to training in June of '62, I think. We're there by the Fourth of July, I know. I was in school at Duke University at the time. I got a leave of absence from there and then with the idea of coming back, but I would be gone for two years. I don't think I'd use the other special training that I remember. This was forty five years ago.

SIMPSON: [00:05:00] Yes, well, we're. What can you tell me about the training or the Peace Corps training?

LOFTON: [00:05:05] I thought the training was really good. Was a good experience. We learned about Bolivian history, Bolivian culture. We learned about Spanish. We also had a good crash course in American history about communism. I remember we talked about that and American culture

versus communism, that kind of thing. I also had a lot of first aid I remember. All that was good training. I thought they purposely made the training experience as frustrating as it could be, because the training period was also a selection process, to see who could put up with all the frustration. And so that was kind of a challenge.

SIMPSON: [00:05:54] Yeah. So what happened when you were in training there?

LOFTON: [00:06:00] Well, we were at Arizona State University, on the campus of Arizona State. I had an aunt who lived in Tempe of Phoenix at the time. I went to see her one weekend. Somebody that I knew at Duke had a sister or something that would live in that area and insisted that I call them up to go see them while I was there. I did that. It was never on the reservation. Maricopa Prema Pima Reservation for half of training. Ira Hayes, his mother was there. Ira Hayes was one of those Marines who put the flag up on Iwo Jima and his mother was there. Somebody pointing her out. That was a good experience, living on the reservation with the Indian people.

SIMPSON: [00:06:56] What do you remember most about that experience out there, about the things you did?

LOFTON: [00:07:02] We were living in a trailer. We had to fix our own food, fix our own meals, or at least what today we part of the frustration to see if we could get along doing that. I think after six hours in the trailer, only two of us went I think. The other four psyched themselves out or decided not to go.

SIMPSON: [00:07:26] Wow. So was there anything about that training that surprised you?

LOFTON: [00:07:34] I guess I was surprised at how frustrating it was, I thought they would be more encouraging, I suppose. There was a challenge to see who would put up with all of that.

SIMPSON: [00:07:45] Ok, so after the training in Arizona, then what happened?

LOFTON: [00:07:50] We went home. I think a week and then we were all gathered in Miami. We would go to Bolivia.

SIMPSON: [00:07:58] Wait before before we went to Miami. Where did we go?

LOFTON: [00:08:03] Well, that's what I'm going to say. In Miami, ready to go to Bolivia. We were eating supper and Kennedy came on TV and said we are blockading Cuba and we may go to war any minute. And meanwhile, there was some trouble in La Paz, so they decided we could not go to La Paz at that time. They took us to Vermont where they had a Peace Corps training house, and we stayed there for two weeks, three weeks in November before we went to Bolivia. So things kind of calmed down. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, we went to Vermont.

SIMPSON: [00:08:42] Ok, what do you remember about that was Brattleboro, Vermont?

LOFTON: [00:08:48] Brattleboro, Vermont. That was very nice experience. Fall time of the year, the birch trees were changing, very beautiful. And we knew we were not going to be selected out, we'd been selected. That was a good time there.

SIMPSON: [00:09:02] Yeah. So what do you recall about what you recall anything special about being in Vermont?

LOFTON: [00:09:09] We sat around a lot, played bridge, read books. We tried having Spanish classes, and they took us all into Boston one weekend. I visited my cousin at Harvard and he was surprised to see me there. Thought I was in Bolivia. But yeah, I was in Boston. George and I went together around the harbor to see him.

SIMPSON: [00:09:35] Ok, so when you finally got to Bolivia, what were your impressions when you were first coming?

LOFTON: [00:09:45] When we got to the airport, I left my camera on the airplane and I ran back to get it and I got all exhausted. I was sick the rest of the day because of the altitude. They had to have oxygen available in the airport, at 13,000 feet. And at that time, the airport would not pay. Our guests would come up when the plane landed. I was I was kind of sick for the first few days in La Paz.

SIMPSON: [00:10:17] So when. Well, tell me a little bit about what happened while you were in La Paz at the beginning.

LOFTON: [00:10:26] I can't remember. We had lots of lectures. We met various people. I think we met the president. I guess the ambassador. I don't remember. It was cold. We were glad to get Cochabamba. Cochabamba was much nicer than La Paz. It was cold, you couldn't walk fast because of the altitude, that kind of thing.

SIMPSON: [00:10:51] So what do you remember anything about the trip from La Paz to Cochabamba?

LOFTON: [00:10:56] We were in a jeep. There were about ten or twelve jeeps that were driving along a very narrow road, cars and trucks couldn't pass each other. They had to stop and one would back at to get the a wide place of the road, to let the other one go by. It took all day to get from La Paz to Cochabamba. I was glad to see green trees, grass growing, at Cochabamba, which we did not see in La Paz.

SIMPSON: [00:11:28] That's true. OK, when you first got there, what were your impressions of the local people, the Peace Corps staff and all that?

LOFTON: [00:11:40] Well, for about a week we live in a hotel in downtown Cochabamba. We continue to have orientation observers around the city and around the countryside. I was very impressed. It was so much better than La Paz. I liked it better.

SIMPSON: [00:11:59] Ok, did you, um.

LOFTON: [00:12:03] I discovered right away the central Boliviano Americano. That was a library and had books in English there. And right away I got some books.

SIMPSON: [00:12:16] Great. Can you talk about what you actually did down there?

LOFTON: [00:12:22] I worked with the milk plant there and in Bolivia they had one milk pasteurizing plant there would use that money and I worked at the mill grant. I was extremely lucky in where I was, the people I work with, the kind of work that I did, there are a lot of people in the Peace Corps I kind of lost. I think they have a lot of liberal arts type people in the Peace Corps, elite major thing, and they'd put them out of the community and tell them to find something to do, develop the communities, something like that. And they just kind of sit around for two years. It happened to my daughter. She was in the Peace Corps in Guinea, in West Africa, and they put her in a village. She was the only one there, by herself. And she got malaria, among other things. Had to come home early. But they kind of left her there and told her to find something to do. But that did not happen to me. I was very lucky in working with Mr. Wolf, Bob Wolf, who was the Heifer Project representative, who was a minister in the Church of the Brethren, who was also a basketball coach at a little college in Indiana.

LOFTON: [00:13:38] We had a basketball team in the Cochabamba city league. We were called AG Extension Service. And we played basketball. I worked in the milk plan and I was a milk tester. I knew about that because I grew up on a dairy farm, and the milk tester would come around, you know, somebody from Clemson and working through Clemson. And so I knew about the kind of work I was going to do. I had a specific job and a jeep that was my jeep and certain number of farms that I had to visit every month. I would get up early in the morning and go to the farm and weigh every cow's, take a milk sample of every cow's milk, and then there's a test to run in the lab on the percentage of butterfat in the milk. In the recordkeeping system there's a way to find out which cows were making money for them and which ones were losing money. It's a complicated

way of figuring out how much each cow is making above feed cows for that farmer. To know which cows to keep, which offspring to keep, which ones to cull, that kind of thing.

SIMPSON: [00:14:55] So did you enjoy that work?

LOFTON: [00:14:57] Yes, I knew what I was doing. Sam came back and he and I together had a jeep. I kept the jeep at my house. Sam and I worked together and he would go to a farm and then I would go to a farm and I would pick him up or vice versa. Usually the man would want me to stay and eat breakfast and I would like to try to get out of it if I could, but I'd often would have to think so. If you were used it hot it was okay. Yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:15:30] So is that pretty much the majority of what you did then?

LOFTON: [00:15:34] The majority of what I did, I was a milk tester.

SIMPSON: [00:15:38] What about when you weren't working? What kinds of things that you do?

LOFTON: [00:15:43] Ok, right. Our basketball team. Mr. Wolf organized us into a team and we were just sitting there playing basketball. I started playing softball with some of them were our softball. We went to the movies. No television in Bolivia at that time, there were no televisions. So movies were a thing. Movies were about two or three years old. So movies that I had missed couple of years earlier were now coming around current in Bolivia. I went to movies a lot. I read books from the English-speaking library. There was an English speaking school in Cochabamba and for six weeks or so I taught at school while somebody was sick or something. But I remember I taught, I think, geography and American history.

SIMPSON: [00:16:45] Well, that was kind of fun, I guess.

LOFTON: [00:16:47] It was kind of fun.

SIMPSON: [00:16:48] Yeah, right.

LOFTON: [00:16:51] I also taught an English class for a while. Bolivians wanted to learn English, so I taught an English class. I realized they were all speaking with a Southern accent and because they were trying to imitate me, and I was teaching them a drawl with a southern accent.

SIMPSON: [00:17:11] Yeah. OK, so over the time that you were there, how did you your life and your work changed? Did you adapt pretty easily or what? How did that go?

LOFTON: [00:17:22] I remember at the end of our two years we had a conference and why the question that came back was how did this experience change you. And my answer was, I had a new appreciation for agriculture. I learned that you can work with cows, work with people, working with cows, and not getting all mad and frustrated which was my case at home. And I decided not to go back to divinity school, but to get some kind of master's degree. And I didn't want to go back to the farm where I grew up and take over the farm. But if I could have a master's degree to get into one of the local colleges somewhere around there. And I have a hand in the college community where they always need English teachers, so I decided to go back in English.

SIMPSON: [00:18:20] Great. Let's talk about the end of the first year, midway between over midway through your experience. Do you remember any kind of special events or how you were feeling at that point in time?

LOFTON: [00:18:34] By halfway through, I guess looking forward to it all being over. I kept thinking, you know, six months to go, four months to go, things like that. But by the time it got to the end, the less I wanted to leave. I did not consider extending though.

SIMPSON: [00:18:53] It was hard to leave them at the end, I guess. So what did you live with a family like some of the other?

LOFTON: [00:19:02] At first, Ed Dennison and I lived with a family out near Sicavo, way out in the country. That was not satisfactory about three or four months after we had been there, we moved into town with a family where he had right there in my home. We already were living I was living with this family in downtown Cochabamba, right near the post office.

SIMPSON: [00:19:32] Did that work out better?

LOFTON: [00:19:34] That worked out much better. You were closer to the people, also close to the beach office and all that kind of thing.

SIMPSON: [00:19:43] Right. Did you have any health problems or anything like that?

LOFTON: [00:19:47] Everybody had health problems. I guess I had diarrhea some. I wasn't really bad sick, no.

SIMPSON: [00:20:00] How about did you do any good? Get to do any traveling?

LOFTON: [00:20:04] Yes, I do vacation. And I went to Ecuador and also in the Foreign Service in Quito. My parents came down and stayed about two weeks in Quito. I went to Quito. Another time I went to Brazil. In Rio. One day to Brasilia and Sao Paolo, about a week over there. Also traveled all around in Bolivia, went to Sucre, Santa Cruz, Trinidad. I never went to Potosi and I regret that. I never went to see Potosi. Went to La Paz a couple of times.

SIMPSON: [00:20:50] So, uh.

LOFTON: And Sucre.

SIMPSON: And Sucre.

LOFTON: And Oruro.

SIMPSON: Oruro for carnival.

LOFTON: Oruro for carnival.

SIMPSON: [00:21:00] Ok, so overall, when you finished your tour there, you said you were not you were not looking forward to leaving at the end, but you didn't extend. How did you feel about what you had done there?

LOFTON: [00:21:19] Well, we set up this milk testing program. There were two Bolivian boys with us and we taught them how to do it. They were supposed to take it over from us what we finished and they did. I don't think it continued. I think actually that the farmers had to pay to be a part of the program. And I don't know how many of them did that. I think it ended soon after we left. You have to remember, because the Bolivians who had had and I don't know if the people gave them our Jeep or told them or what, but I don't think it lasted. I don't know how much good we actually did in Bolivia. We had a big time with a good learning experience for us, but I'm not sure how much we actually helped Bolivians.

SIMPSON: [00:22:14] Ok, so how did that make you feel at the end?

LOFTON: [00:22:20] Well, I came home I was kind of a celebrity. Everybody wanted me to come to talk to book clubs, school classes, that kind of thing. I had lots of slides, so I was ready. I put my, developed a standard talk that lasted about 45 minutes ago, showing the slides. And so when I got out, I had a good experience, I said, I learned a lot. I had a big adventure, had a good time. I'm not sure how much good we actually did, though, in the long run.

SIMPSON: [00:22:56] Hard to measure that kind of stuff.

LOFTON: [00:22:59] Yeah, hard to measure that.

SIMPSON: [00:23:01] If you had it to do over again, would you do anything differently?

LOFTON: [00:23:06] Oh, I don't know. I guess not. As I said, I was very lucky in the place that I went, Cochabamba is eternal spring time. Not too hot, not too cold. With who I worked with, with Heifer Project and Mr. Wolf, with Luis Barrone at the milk plant, he'd been to Cornell, knew how to run a milk plant, about the kind of work I did. I had something specific to do every day, which I could do. And I was very lucky in what I did.

SIMPSON: [00:23:42] Yeah. So overall, how would you evaluate the service that you did? And of course, you know, the goals, they talk about providing technical assistance and a better understanding of the U.S. and then for Americans to better understand other countries.

LOFTON: [00:24:02] Well, the last two, I think we did very good. Certainly helped me. I think we helped a lot of Bolivians understand about Americans. I'm not sure how much we taught Bolivians, though, not sure how much we helped them. Yeah, but certainly they got to understand us, they learned about softball, they learned some English. A good number of Bolivians came to the States because of us. Came to go to school, came to live, whatever, but because of us a good number of Bolivians came. A good number of our group married Bolivians, if I remember.

SIMPSON: [00:24:56] Was there was there are quite a lot of dating and things like that in Cochabamba?

LOFTON: [00:25:05] We were invited to a lots of parties. We had to go eat with people around a lot. A lot of the young men, males our age, were away in the States, in Spain, in Lima, Buenos Aires or some place. And that left a lot girls who were our age who were sort of there looking for somebody. So we were invited to lots of dances, lots of parties.

SIMPSON: [00:25:34] Yeah, that's great. Have you continued any kind of involvement with Bolivia over the years?

LOFTON: [00:25:45] Not really. I've been back twice. I went in the summer of '66 with George Wright and his friends and Marybeth and I went in the

summer of '73, it was November, December by the time we got there. I haven't been back since. I read about them in the paper, but I haven't really kept up much.

SIMPSON: [00:26:12] So can we talk a little bit about what how this changed your life? You mentioned some about that in the beginning. How did the Peace Corps? Are you doing different things than you would have done had you not gone into the Peace Corps?

LOFTON: [00:26:31] I'm sure I'm sure I have, but I don't know what.

SIMPSON: [00:26:37] You said you decided not to do divinity school.

LOFTON: [00:26:40] Yeah, I got a master's degree in English and they called me back my undergraduate school. And old man died, they need an English teacher, so I went three years of teaching English. I'm not an English teacher, I found that out. I found out, though, I like being in the college community. And if I was going to stay in it, I needed a PhD. So I went back to graduate school in history this time because a good friend of mine was doing Latin American history and I was sitting in her bed and being a resource for her. And I liked something about Bolivia, about Latin America geography. So I went to the University of Texas and got a PhD in history. I say I went to Texas and got two degrees and a wife.

SIMPSON: [00:27:41] Well, that's a pretty significant change, you go from divinity school to English and then history.

LOFTON: [00:27:48] I've done a lot of things, probably fooled around too much.

SIMPSON: [00:27:53] But how do you think the Peace Corps experience affected you?

LOFTON: [00:28:00] A more international outlook, more tolerant of people who are not just like me? I don't know. There are all kinds of ways that I can't think of or mention specifically.

SIMPSON: [00:28:14] Can you think of any kind of specific things that happened that will really stick out in your mind while you were there?

LOFTON: [00:28:23] When I went there and they were kind of humiliating and the farm where I was to get the cow's milk and it was across the river and one night it rained and rained and rained. And I went out there in the dark in the morning and crossed the river ok. I stayed at the man's place and when I came back, the river was as high as I had ever seen it. I thought about all the Peace Corps training, about how they said always try. So I started across the river, three deep channels in the river. I got across two of them. On the third one, the water was coming up over the hood of the jeep and the motor conked out. The car began floating down the river, turned over its the side. I got the milk samples, I climbed out, got on top of the thing, it turned over. People lined up all the way along the banks to watch what I was going to do. I finally got out, waited another hour or so for the water to go down, but very embarrassing. I had to come pull the Jeep out, and it didn't cause all that too much damage, just labor, not replace any parts. But the Jeep was out of commission for a week or so while they cleaned it out. That's very embarrassing, floated down the river in a Jeep.

SIMPSON: [00:30:02] Well that's pretty, pretty interesting.

LOFTON: [00:30:05] But I saved the milk samples.

SIMPSON: [00:30:08] Well. That's good. Tell me, can you think of any other experiences that were especially memorable?

LOFTON: [00:30:18] National Geographic photographer came down and wrote a story about us and Peace Corps in Bolivia and it was in the October '64 issue. And Ed Densson was his contact. I lived with Ed so I went around with him. He took thousands of pictures and I was in maybe nine hundred of those pictures, but none of them got in the National Geographic, none of them with me in them. He had about fifteen pictures in the National

Geographic. I was in Bolivia. Well, I think it was October '64 was that issue I think.

SIMPSON: [00:31:02] So. And anything that was not funny or not pleasant that happened that you remember?

LOFTON: [00:31:13] You have the routine work that can be pretty frustrating at times. I'd always lock the Jeep, but things would get stolen out of the Jeep. Anything left unattended would get stolen. Once a man picked my pocket, tried to get my watch out of my pocket. I grabbed him in time and got the watch back. All of that was.

SIMPSON: [00:31:46] Assassinated?

LOFTON: [00:31:47] Yes, it was in the early afternoon, we were taking a siesta and Ed Dennison came in and said there's something on the radio about Kennedy being shot. We walked up, Larry Oglesby and I, to the, I guess, American consulate. And sure enough the news coming in there and Kennedy had been shot and everybody in Bolivia was just devastated. Flags were at half staff. We went to mass on Sunday, which was a special mass for Kennedy. I remember seeing a Bolivian woman, an Indian woman, sitting on the floor nursing a baby in the mass.

SIMPSON: [00:32:42] What do you think it affected people so much in Bolivia?

LOFTON: [00:32:46] Kennedy was extremely popular, partly because he was Catholic, partly because of the Alliance for Progress that was going on there.

SIMPSON: [00:33:02] Well, that was pretty impressive. What was traveling around Bolivia, like you said, you had traveled around in Bolivia?

LOFTON: [00:33:09] Again, I remember I went to Santa Cruz, five or six of us on a bus. The bus caught on fire, the Bolivians guys panicked and screamed and ran to the door. And I noticed all the Peace Corps people sat calmly

and everybody else piled off the bus and we kindly got up and walked out the bus.

SIMPSON: [00:33:35] So what happened to the fire?

LOFTON: [00:33:38] That put out, got the bus fixed, we went on to Santa Cruz. Yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:33:46] How about that? Is that typical of the bus trips?

LOFTON: [00:33:49] Yeah. When I went to Ecuador, I flew from La Paz and I rode the milk truck up to La Paz. Every night the milk plant rode from the leche plant, the milk plant to La Paz. And I rode with them to take it to La Paz. And that would go over those very narrow roads, dirt everywhere, coal. But it was free.

SIMPSON: [00:34:18] That had to be an adventure in and of itself. Did you ever get down to the tropical areas?

LOFTON: [00:34:25] Yes. Once Bill Barnell and George Wright and I, I forgot how we went, it wasn't a bus, some car, going into the Chicari, over the mountains into the east. We went as far as the road went, I forget the name of the place, but we got on a boat, and went three days on the boat going down the river, a tributary of the Amazon, the Mamoré or something like that, all the way to Trinidad and then we stayed in Trinidad a couple days and flew home.

SIMPSON: [00:35:00] So how did you like the trip?

LOFTON: [00:35:03] Oh, yes. That was quite an adventure.

SIMPSON: [00:35:05] Yeah.

LOFTON: [00:35:06] In eastern Bolivia just a generation or so ago the people were headhunters and just lived like primitive man.

SIMPSON: [00:35:20] So anything else you can think of about your travels and tribulations around Bolivia?

LOFTON: [00:35:28] We got to know a number of the Methodist missionaries there, especially around Santa Cruz. They were down that way. What was this name of the school at Montero?

SIMPSON: [00:35:41] I think it was a Methodist school.

LOFTON: [00:35:43] I don't know. But anyway, I got to know some of those people. And I was we went back in '66 and we're with George Wright. We stayed with some of them in Cochabamba and in Montero.

SIMPSON: [00:36:01] So do you have any last thoughts about the Peace Corps and its effect?

LOFTON: [00:36:08] When it was a great experience for me. Almost 50 years later, we're still getting together. Numerous people have been able to stay with us in our community, in Auston and in '96 and in Spartanburg. And then we've stayed with various ones around over the country when we travel around.

SIMPSON: [00:36:31] So there was a certain amount of.

LOFTON: [00:36:34] Camaraderie. Somebody in the Peace Corps came down to evaluate us. And said he liked our group, there was kind of a esprit de corps about the Bolivia II group that you didn't find in other groups.

SIMPSON: [00:36:49] Why do you think that was?

LOFTON: [00:36:51] Maybe because we'd had an extended training period. Remember in Puerto Rico they extended us because we didn't know enough Spanish and we spent another week on the beach learning

Spanish, then we went to Vermont and all that. It was November before we finally got to Bolivia. That was a good experience.

SIMPSON: [00:37:14] Ok, well, thank you, Paul. I think that probably takes care of this.

LOFTON: OK, good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]