

Tom Wagner Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Tom Wagner served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia from 1965 to 1967 on a soil surveying project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Tom Wagner

September 3, 2004
Ann Arbor, Michigan

By Ernest Zaremba

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

WAGNER: [00:00:03] But this is when I got back from the Peace Corps. I was back here in Ann Arbor and then ended up teaching at the community college and technical college. [tape break]

ZAREMBA: [00:00:27] As soon as I finish introducing myself. So then I have it running before. That's fine.

WAGNER: [00:00:31] Okay.

ZAREMBA: [00:00:34] This is Ernie Zaremba interviewing Tom Wagner, and today's date is?

WAGNER: [00:00:38] Today is the 3rd of September 2004. My name is Tom Wagner. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia. I was part of a rural community action group that was sent to Malaysia. My job,

however, was that of a soil surveyor. I was in Malaysia from May of 1965 to June of 1967.

ZAREMBA: [00:01:06] Okay, Tom, let's start with the present. Maybe tell us a little bit about where you're living now, what you're doing now, your interests, anything that relates to the present.

WAGNER: [00:01:14] Okay. Um, I'm living in Ann Arbor with my wife, who works for the University of Michigan. I worked for 30 years for the Environmental Research Institute of Michigan, which is based here in Ann Arbor. I retired two years ago, and I currently teach urban geography at Eastern Michigan University on a part time basis.

ZAREMBA: [00:01:41] Okay, now let's go back to the earlier years, back to before you joined the Peace Corps. And a year or two before when you started thinking about, whatever got that thinking going and in effect ending up with why did you join the Peace Corps? Those stories there.

WAGNER: [00:01:55] Well, as you probably know, John Kennedy actually came to the University of Michigan and inadvertently perhaps announced the idea of the Peace Corps on the steps of the Michigan Union. I was in that crowd at midnight on that October day. And, uh, as my academic career progressed in the School of Natural Resources, I thought more and more about the opportunities for travel and for using my skills in natural resources as part of the Peace Corps. And I graduated in 1964. I didn't have anything I particularly wanted to do from a professional standpoint. And so the opportunity to join the Peace Corps came up. I put in my application without any preference listed, and I got a letter back a couple months later saying I had an opportunity to go to Malaysia.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:57] And do you remember your reaction to the letter, or family's and friends' reactions?

WAGNER: [00:03:02] I was pleased with the invitation to go to Malaysia. I wasn't entirely sure where it was. I knew it was in Southeast Asia. My first, uh, my first activity was to go to a map and find out where Malaysia was. I

was surprised to discover at least Malaya is part of the peninsula of Southeast Asia. It's not an island group, although Borneo is part of Malaysia. But, uh, my parents, uh, my friends were pleased. They were satisfied. They thought that was a good thing to do. As you may recall, it was also at the time of the Vietnam War and the opportunity to go to Malaysia rather than to Vietnam seemed attractive.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:56] Okay. Where did you go for training?

WAGNER: [00:03:58] Um, I got on a plane here in Detroit. Flew to Los Angeles and met with other members of the group and a chartered flight that took us to Honolulu, Hawaii. And then in Hawaii we got a little flight over to Hilo, Hawaii. And our training was in a, what appeared to be an abandoned school about 4 or 5 miles outside of the city of Hilo. It was part way up the side of Mauna Kea, and we had arrived in January thinking that, in fact, you're going to enjoy nice tropical weather. When you get halfway up side, up the side of Mauna Kea, the weather is actually kind of cool and rainy much of the time. Most of us were not dressed for that, had not brought clothes for that, thinking that we would be living in a tropical country.

WAGNER: [00:05:03] I remember when we moved into the school, which really was a school compound where some of the classrooms had been used as dormitories. All the fellows were, single fellows were in one room, all with single young ladies were in a different room. But the married couples that were there were all put into the same room, and they found that to be a bit of a difficulty for both husbands and wives, kind of sharing the same dormitory space with each other.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:39] About how big was your group?

WAGNER: [00:05:41] We had an initial group of 99. Uh, 66 of which were then subsequently selected to go to Malaysia.

ZAREMBA: [00:05:52] And so it sounds like a fairly stringent, uh, selection process.

WAGNER: [00:05:56] We were being trained for what was then called rural community action. The intent was that the volunteers would go into villages and to work with village leaders to do whatever they thought would be useful to the village. Much of our training concerned building water seal toilets, latrines, looking at aspects of agriculture. We were taught how to raise and slaughter, uh, goats and swine. And so we had a kind of a broad, uh, training experience. I would say probably half or more of the volunteers, or at least the trainees at the time, had 4-H experience and came from farm states.

ZAREMBA: [00:06:49] Now, why do you suppose there was such a high attrition in 33 being deselected?

WAGNER: [00:06:55] Well, I don't really know. I know that indeed there was, uh, particularly I think it was more difficult for the young women than for the young men. But why? Partly because I, it was explained to us that we were really going to be put into a rugged situation where we would be in rural villages and not have access to health care and a variety of other things. So I think they were very careful about selecting people that could accommodate to those conditions.

ZAREMBA: [00:07:31] There's some volunteers that we've interviewed before have said that in their program it was kind of a real point of tension because they really emphasized the deselection. Was that true in your, in your program as you remember it?

WAGNER: [00:07:45] Well, the program was an educational program, language training in the morning and what they called WACAS, area studies basically, in the afternoon. There were tests that were given. There were two in addition to the end deselection points, and indeed there was a fair amount of tension. The question was with this group, how, you know, what? What do you have to do to get through? There were some that, uh, felt that they needed to be overachievers, that needed to demonstrate their prowess, in the things that they do and the things that they learn. There are others that kept their heads down and basically tried to be as invisible as possible. I was probably with that

latter group, and I would have to say I probably had a better time of making it through than those that were trying to be leaders.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:53] Now, in some programs, they went through a whole survival kind of thing where it was a physical aspect to your training. Was that true for, for you all in Hawaii or what happened?

WAGNER: [00:09:02] It was to a certain extent. Remember that we were already living in a rural area. We were raising ducks and pigs and geese and goats out in the back of the school. We did have two weeks at a isolated, what they called an isolated camp called Waipio Valley, which, as far as it was intended to be a representation of what a Malaysian village, or at least a Southeast Asian village, would look like. Part of the activities there would be to using bamboo, build, help build or repair a longhouse, and do a number of activities. I wouldn't call it survival, in part because many of us found the experience to be very enjoyable. It was, uh. It was an interesting time.

WAGNER: [00:09:58] Uh, it was a surprise to me that, in fact, some people did quit as a result of that experience. In particular the, they had something we call an isolation home, and you actually had to go and stay a night by yourself in a remote place. I mean, it was perfectly safe, but some of the, uh, trainees essentially had never had that experience of being completely alone. Yeah, I enjoyed it very much.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:32] Um, any other particular anecdotes or training that you might remember with other trainees or the staff, reactions to the staff or trainees?

WAGNER: [00:10:40] I think the staff was very good. I do recall that we received quite a bit of useful information. Because I ended up doing not rural community action, much of the training in terms of animal husbandry and sanitation was not useful to me, but nevertheless, I thought it was a wonderful experience and there was a strong bonding, I would say, between the group. When deselection did occur, it was painful to see, uh, friends that you had made leave.

WAGNER: [00:11:20] I think the, the one surprise for me when I first went into training was that indeed there were other people like myself who were interested in traveling in different parts of the world and without being paid to have this experience of service. No one prior to my meeting the trainees in Hawaii, uh, no one that I knew had been in the Peace Corps before or had basically similar aspirations. So it came as a surprise, a delightful surprise to me. Kindred souls.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:06] Now, how long was the training about, would you say?

WAGNER: [00:12:08] Training was three months.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:10] And how, how was the language training? What was your reaction to that to?

WAGNER: [00:12:14] Uh, I thought it was very good. It was an aural lingual kind of training, uh, repeat after me where the, there were a number of Malay, native Malays that were there, and they would repeat over and over again phrases which we would say in unison and individually work to imitate as carefully and clearly as possible. Only afterwards were we told what the words mean.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:44] That's sort of fascinating. That worked really effectively for you, you'd say?

WAGNER: [00:12:48] I think so. I was not particularly good at languages, and it did have the effect of providing me with, I think, some basic Malay skills. Malay is not a terribly difficult language, it's a tonal language. But the effect was that I still have some of those phrases running around in my head today.

ZAREMBA: [00:13:13] For example? If you could share some of this.

WAGNER: [00:13:15] Well, I mean the greeting *abacaba habibi*, how are you? There's a, there's a whole range of phrases, essentially, short phrases that one uses on the street or in the bazaar. [speaks Malay] That was one. Where is the post office? I remember trying that out the first day I

got to Kuala Lumpur on one of the local policemen that were standing there. The fellow just sort of looked at me and said, well, I'll tell you, Joe.

ZAREMBA: [00:13:57] In English?

WAGNER: [00:13:58] In English, yes.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:02] Okay, so then flew to, from, directly from Hawaii to Kuala Lumpur? Or you went back home for a bit?

WAGNER: [00:14:07] Well, we didn't go back home. We had three days in Hawaii. They flew us from, uh, Hilo to Honolulu. Put us up at a hotel for two nights so that in fact we could enjoy Waikiki Beach and make phone calls. And then we flew directly from there to Bangkok, because the chartered plane also had a group that was going to Thailand and after Bangkok we flew down to Kuala Lumpur. Greeted by the Peace Corps staff. We were Malaysia IX, ninth group.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:51] Do you remember your reaction when you opened the door and there you were in Kuala Lumpur? In particular, was it what you expected, not expected?

WAGNER: [00:14:59] Well, I'm not sure how much I expected. When they opened the door, the Peace Corps staff was there. The director, his wife, I think a couple of his children, other members, local members of the staff. And they put leis around our necks. And I remember that as being nice. Uh. We were thrilled to be finally in Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur. I remember that the tropics, of course, you opened that door of the airplane that had been air conditioned to get that nice, warm, humid, uh, waves and, you know, fragrant that, that I think you all experienced.

ZAREMBA: [00:15:47] How did you train in Kuala Lumpur then for a little bit or?

WAGNER: [00:15:51] Not really. We were, uh, we were put up for different parts of the time until we were ready to go off to our different assignments. I

mentioned that there were 66 of us that made it through the, uh, the training. Only 17 of us actually stayed in Malaya. The rest of the group set off to Sabah and Sarawak. And so I think after 1 or 2 days, that group left for Sabah and Sarawak and the 17 of us would gradually go off to our assignments.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:36] So you may have stayed in a hotel or something in Kuala Lumpur until you found your assignment?

WAGNER: [00:16:42] I think it was a hotel, although there was a Peace Corps hostel there too. The Peace Corps hostel had bunk beds for volunteers when they came into Kuala Lumpur. It was a place they could, they could stay.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:00] Now, did you have any voice in your assignment about either of who you might be teamed with, or where you would go or it was all assigned?

WAGNER: [00:17:08] No, I had no, uh, involvement in the assignment, the, partly because I had had some training in soil science when I was at the university. They decided that I would be seconded to the Department of Agriculture and work on soil surveying. I would become a soil surveyor. There were two Peace Corps soil surveyors that were there ahead of me, and they were both completing their assignments and leaving. And so both had very positive experiences. And partly because of this previous training in soil science, although I knew nothing about tropical soils, I was assigned to the Soil Survey Division of the Department of Agriculture, which, as I mentioned, was very different than from what I had been trained in. [tape break]

WAGNER: [00:18:09] My assignment, and the short answer was no. I had no role in choosing the assignment. On the other hand, the assignment was not specifically what I had been trained for because it involved assignment to a rural town where I would be one of two people that were involved in conducting and mapping agricultural soils in the center part of the country.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:40] The question, you said you were the third, two preceded you with soils?

WAGNER: [00:18:43] Correct.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:43] Were they still there when you arrived?

WAGNER: [00:18:46] One was there, just leaving. The other had just left.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:50] Did you have a chance to talk to this person or not really?

WAGNER: [00:18:54] Uh, I talked to him on the phone. He was stationed in a different city, Kuantan, over on the east coast.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:01] So is that helpful at all or not that you remember?

WAGNER: [00:19:05] Not really. In part because it really, the phone call really just had to do with arranging for the transfer of some equipment and things of that sort. I was assigned to a counterpart, uh, Malaysian, who eventually then went on to become the soil correlator for the entire peninsula of Malaya. But he and I then shared an office and basically taught me what I needed to know about carrying out a soil survey.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:39] Now you said there were two of you that did soil survey, is that correct?

WAGNER: [00:19:42] In this one office.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:44] Were there not two volunteers, or wasn't there another volunteer you said that was assigned to a similar assignment to you or not?

WAGNER: [00:19:52] Not at the time that I was there. I was the only one. There had been two previous to my arrival that had carried on soil survey work.

ZAREMBA: [00:20:01] Okay. So then how far away was this village from Kuala Lumpur to where you had to go? Or how many hours?

WAGNER: [00:20:07] The town was called Raub. It was in the central highlands and it was about 90 miles away, or four hours by bus.

ZAREMBA: [00:20:19] Would you spell that for us?

WAGNER: [00:20:21] R-A-U-B.

ZAREMBA: [00:20:23] And did you go by bus then, four hours?

WAGNER: [00:20:25] I did.

ZAREMBA: [00:20:26] Do you have any anecdotes about that bus trip? Was that your first?

WAGNER: [00:20:31] Well, it was my first bus trip in, yes, in Malaysia, and because it was in the mountains, there were a lot of switchbacks and in terms of getting there. Once I got to Malaysia or I got to Raub and got to the soil survey office that had been set up, uh, there was a Land Rover and there were, uh, the railroad would go close by route and I was given a set of tickets where I could write myself tickets to take myself and my crew up to where I needed to get off to do soil search. So transportation actually wasn't a problem. Although I do recall that four hour bus ride.

ZAREMBA: [00:21:19] Tell us a little bit about that.

WAGNER: [00:21:22] Well, the, uh, there are a lot of switchbacks. Actually, quickly what I learned was that in Malaysia, uh, you don't really need to take the bus on these long trips because they have taxis where you can go to the taxi station in Kuala Lumpur, and you can buy a seat in one of these old Mercedes, uh, diesel taxis. You may have to sit there for an hour or two until they filled up the taxi. But then that taxi would take people to your city or cities nearby, and they could do that four hour trip in about 2.5 hours. Uh, again, it's advisable to have a little

Dramamine and do that because they're driving pretty fast. And so the curves are pretty exciting.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:20] So was it a fairly exciting bus trip that you had, the four hour one with the switchbacks?

WAGNER: [00:22:25] That was a little bit slower. I mean, the bus was crowded. It was hot. Uh, but when you're in a country for the first time, it's all new and very exciting. And so, uh, I don't recall that I particularly regretted the trip or thought it was uncomfortable.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:46] So it's fairly mountainous then in the switchbacks of that?

WAGNER: [00:22:49] Oh yes. The main range of, uh, that goes down basically the spine of the Malay Peninsula, that's, it's about the same size and shape as Florida, except there's this mountain range towards the middle, uh, that goes up to about 70,000 feet. And so the town that I was assigned to, Raub, was in the foothills of the range, at about 500 ft. And that turned out to be an advantage, because it's actually a little bit cooler than all of the coastal towns.

ZAREMBA: [00:23:26] About how big of a town was it roughly, would you say?

WAGNER: [00:23:27] I would say it was probably about 10,000 people.

ZAREMBA: [00:23:31] So a decent sized town.

WAGNER: [00:23:32] It was, yes. It had two and a half main streets. It had three cinemas, had a roundabout, had a government guest house. And working for the Malaysian Department of Agriculture, I was treated as a division one government officer. So I was entitled to government quarters and to the perks, essentially, that government officers get.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:00] So what were your quarters like?

WAGNER: [00:24:03] I was given a, an apartment in an old, uh, apartment building, essentially, that the government had foreclosed on. It had six

rooms, of which I only needed one, and at later time several people came, Malaysians came to work at the soil survey office where I was assigned, and I would let them stay in the other rooms. I stayed in one that was sort of out back and kind of faced a vacant lot where timber was dried. And it was a public lot with people coming and going at all hours of the night. So it was interesting to look out my balcony and see the back alley of Raub and all of the activities that occur in the middle of the night.

ZAREMBA: [00:25:06] What kind of activities would be?

WAGNER: [00:25:08] Oh, all kinds of things. Uh, very often, uh, the shopkeepers who would have the, uh, living quarters on the second floor of their shops on Main Street would come to the back of their house, and they had been out drinking all night, and at 2:00 in the morning, they'd be banging on the door for their wives to let them in.

WAGNER: [00:25:33] Uh, there was a, there was a mad lady that lived in this kind of, uh, vacant lot. Uh, she was an old Chinese lady, uh, mad as a hatter. People would feed her. She would sort of sleep in, uh, under the boards and that were being dried, uh. And she would come over and look up at me on the balcony when I would have to go to the, there was a bathroom that basically right next to my bedroom. But I would have to go along this balcony and she would look at me, and I don't know what she was saying, but she would scold me and she would yell and scream and point at me, and everybody ignored her. As I say, they, uh, in the mornings they would, she would go along Main Street and people would give her food.

ZAREMBA: [00:26:30] Now, were you there the whole two years in this?

WAGNER: [00:26:32] I was there the whole two years.

ZAREMBA: [00:26:34] Was she there the whole two years?

WAGNER: [00:26:36] I think so, yes, I think so. Uh, I had been, hadn't been told that there had been a Peace Corps volunteer that had been assigned

to Raub prior to my being there. But he had tried to open some, I think he was a teacher, a youth club of some sort, and it hadn't gone very well. And so he actually had to leave early. So.

ZAREMBA: [00:27:07] Remember the story of that? What happened?

WAGNER: [00:27:08] I had no, that was, that is about as much as I ever knew, what I was told by local people. Oh, uh, you know, they, they had had a Peace Corps volunteer there, and it hadn't worked out.

ZAREMBA: [00:27:22] Now, this, were there any other Peace Corps volunteers nearby you at all?

WAGNER: [00:27:26] Later on, after one year, there was one young man who was sent to teach industrial arts in the local school. And then about six months before I left, there were, there was a Peace Corps couple that came to teach also in the local school. And then finally, uh, a month before I left, there was a fellow who came to work on TB. So when I first arrived, there were no Peace Corps volunteers. And then when I left, there were four.

ZAREMBA: [00:28:05] Now, were there other Europeans in the area or?

WAGNER: [00:28:09] Yes. Uh, there was an American missionary couple, uh, that was looking after a church in town. There were, uh, there was the British, uh, bank manager of the local bank there. I think that's pretty much it.

ZAREMBA: [00:28:28] Now, did that color people's perception of you, do you think, this previous volunteer that had to leave or?

WAGNER: [00:28:36] I don't think so. My job was to work with basically this federal, uh, soil survey project. It didn't involve me interacting, uh, professionally with the townspeople. I ate, uh, in the local shops, uh, when I was not out in the jungle, but I had no interaction that formed any sort of reaction on the people.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:11] Now, many volunteers report having a cook or somebody do laundry. Did you have anything like that in your situation?

WAGNER: [00:29:18] I had a young girl that would come and collect my laundry, and I, of course, would pay her and she would bring it back all nicely cleaned and pressed. She didn't know what she was getting into when we made the initial agreement, in part because when we worked in the jungle and you live in the same clothes for five or 6 or 8 days at a time, they come back pretty dirty. And so when she, after a couple of times, she insisted on renegotiating her agreement.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:55] So tell us a little bit about, uh, working in the jungle or and combined with your office work. So there was some office work and some jungle or maybe?

WAGNER: [00:30:02] We had a soil survey office where, uh, for the first year, I had this counterpart, uh, Malaysian, who had been trained in soil survey and was quite experienced. At the end of that first year, he returned to Kuala Lumpur to take up this role of coordinator for all soil survey offices around the country. So I was in charge of this office, which included a Malay assistant, a Chinese assistant, an office boy.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:39] Now, in charge, was the second year or this was the first year?

WAGNER: [00:30:41] Second year.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:41] Okay. Let's say the first year right now. Did your counterpart speak English?

WAGNER: [00:30:47] Oh, yes. Yes, he was Chinese, and English was, uh, the language basically of anyone at that level of government service.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:58] So did you need your Malaysian language much or?

WAGNER: [00:31:02] I did, because when I would go into the jungle, it would be for a week or two weeks at a time. And the only people that would be with me were Malay speaking laborers.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:16] How about your coworker? Would he be with you, your partner?

WAGNER: [00:31:19] Not after the first time. We went in together the first time, uh, so that he, in fact, showed me what the procedure was, how we would sample the soil, and how we would use that information, especially to make a map. But after that one time, I was on my own.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:41] And how did that go, say, especially early on?

WAGNER: [00:31:44] It went all right. Uh, there's a good reason that, in fact, people aren't flocking to map soils in the Malaysian jungle. And that is this, it's sticky, boring work. Uh, it's, you are literally drenched with sweat from morning to night. You're soaked from stepping into streams at the bottoms of hills. And, uh, it's, uh, it's, uh, it's actually not a very pleasant experience. It's, it's sort of boring.

WAGNER: [00:32:18] Uh, the evenings are interesting because the jungle, although it's still warm, it becomes more animated at night. Most of the animals in tropical jungles are nocturnal. Uh, the elephants, the wildlife, move around at night. During the day, the only thing that's moving around are the leeches who are after you as you stand there trying to make notes. You can see them, they're like little inchworms heading towards you.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:57] Are they attracted to the heat or?

WAGNER: [00:32:59] They are, I think they're attracted to the heat, yes. And although they were not large leeches, they are not buffalo leeches like you get in the paddies, they, uh, they get into your boot, canvas boots were what we wore in the jungle, and they gorge themselves. And very often you didn't know that you had a leech until the side of your boot started sort of turning red because they inject an anticoagulant. And

even though they drop off, the little hole that they bore in you still continues to bleed a bit.

ZAREMBA: [00:33:42] Now, how would you get them off if you wanted them off before they dropped you off? Did you have to use salt or something?

WAGNER: [00:33:47] Salt is, uh, was commonly used. Uh, tobacco was commonly used. Uh, my experience was I always had a little hunting knife and I could just kind of scrape them off, and they would irritate me enough that I would take the trouble to cut them in half, which just made two of them, but rather messy. I tried using a match, for example, too but that, that was really just true colors.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:19] You don't have to worry about them leaving any mouthparts in you or anything like that, like with a tick?

WAGNER: [00:34:23] Well, you do have to worry about that. You don't, uh. You know, you have to be a little bit careful in terms of. Actually, as I recall, I used to carry a little bottle of iodine and a drop of iodine.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:40] So describe a little bit about the work. You would just go to a spot, get some soil, and go, uh, 100 yards away or?

WAGNER: [00:34:50] Right. The purpose of the soil survey for the Department of Agriculture was that they were interested in opening up large areas to plantation agriculture in the interior of the country, and move people from overcrowded west coast states into the interior. So they had these, what they called federal land development schemes, where they would move portions of whole villages and they would build these villages for, uh, the settlers. And they wanted to know that the soils were suitable for planting, rubber planting. Different crops.

WAGNER: [00:35:41] These are areas that had been primary jungle. Some of the soils were very good. Some of the soils would not support that kind of plantation agriculture. So I was assigned a 3 million acre area to do a reconnaissance soil, where I would go in at two mile intervals on straight lines. I would try to follow a compass line, but that was really

very difficult to do, in part because in the primary jungle, the buttressed trees are very large. And if you're trying to go on a straight line, essentially you have to go kind of way out and around some of these trees in order to get back to the line that you're on.

ZAREMBA: [00:36:31] Would you use survey equipment like a transit or anything, or just a compass?

WAGNER: [00:36:34] I didn't have a transit. Uh, I had a compass. And what we would do is prior to actually going out and recording soil samples at eight, one eighth of a mile intervals, we would have the laborers chain off the distances. They would take a surveyor's chain, and they would put a stick at a certain intervals along what was called the rentis, which is, uh, which is the survey line. And then they would come out and then, uh, my colleague and I then would go in on that same track. They have to make measurements, but we would always know where we were because the track was done previous to the survey.

ZAREMBA: [00:37:26] And were you living in a tent or how did you live when you're out in the jungle?

WAGNER: [00:37:31] Well, a tent would be too hot at night. They had what were called camp stretchers, which basically is just a rectangular piece of canvas. And the laborers would cut sticks that would create a little sort of sloping roof that would go over then, uh, a canvas thing you will use for your, uh, your bed. That would be also with sticks put up, uh, a little bit above ground level. You don't really want to be on the ground with all the critters in the jungle.

ZAREMBA: [00:38:09] Any critter stories?

WAGNER: [00:38:11] Nothing of any great note. Uh, we would keep, I would usually, uh, have 3 or 4 laborers that were also staying in the camp, and so any large animal that would come along would see that indeed there were more people there than that the animal want to tackle. We had, we did wake up and see tiger tracks around the camp where the

tiger, you know, sort of surveyed things and decided that's not what he wanted to.

ZAREMBA: [00:38:50] Was that fairly dangerous? I think you might need somebody with a, with a gun handy or not?

WAGNER: [00:38:55] No, it's not. It's not particularly dangerous if you have 5 or 6 people there. No tiger's going to attack. Obviously, you don't want to go wandering off in the middle of the night. Make sure that you've done anything you need to do before, before you go to bed. But the jungle was very interesting because, as I mentioned, most of the animals were nocturnal and it becomes very noisy at night. During the day it's very quiet, but as soon as the sun goes down, all hell breaks loose. The tree frogs, the crickets, the monkeys. I can remember sitting there trying to read and there's this tremendous racket going on. And I can remember yelling up, shut up up there! And then quiet for about 30 seconds.

WAGNER: [00:39:50] And gradually then this din would start to build up again. But it was a noisy place. It was also interesting when it would rain. Rain, uh, of course, comes as intense tropical showers in Malaysia. And you could hear the rain coming from a long way off. Remember that there's a canopy of 100, 150 feet above you that completely obscures the sky. And these trees have these big waxy leaves. And the sound that you hear coming, it almost sounds like a freight train, are the drops of water hitting these big leaves high up in the canopy. And it would get louder and louder until it was, you could hear it was right overhead. Tremendous noise, but still no rain.

WAGNER: [00:40:50] And then about 20 seconds, 30 seconds later this fine mist from the splash would sort of filter down to the ground level. So. And, and very loud. I mean, you can't talk to anybody next to you, and then gradually the, uh, the shower goes off in the other direction. And if it's in the middle of the night, it has an interesting effect because some of the fungi, some of the fungus that is growing around the base of the trees or in the ear of the trees are photoluminescent and they are activated by this, the rain. And so you can see this sort of the whole,

it's very dark in the jungle, but you can see after the rain this sort of greenish glow being, uh, highlighting the base of trees.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:53] Now I would picture you just get drenched, but no, it was just this fine mist? Or sometimes you did?

WAGNER: [00:41:58] This fine, fine mist. And of course, I had this canvas over the top of my little cot.

ZAREMBA: [00:42:06] You know, I picture biting ants and all sorts of rainforest things, like scorpions.

WAGNER: [00:42:14] I took, uh, a mosquito net in the first few times. [cat meows] I should strangle my cat. [laughs] Um, but I found that working in the primary jungle, particularly working in an area that's not close to human habitation, mosquitoes are not a problem. Mosquitoes go after warm blooded animals, and the tropical jungle is actually a pretty sterile place. There aren't a lot of big, warm blooded animals in high densities. Only when you get to places where there are villages where people go along paths, then you get a lot of mosquitos. And with the leeches too, for that matter.

ZAREMBA: [00:43:02] What about poisonous snakes, like that?

WAGNER: [00:43:06] There was. [phone rings] Okay. [tape break]

WAGNER: [00:43:09] Uh, no problem with poisonous snakes. Poisonous snakes are normally water snakes. I was working in kind of highland areas. You might see, I did see a python, which is a very beautiful snake. And the skin is worth a lot of money. The laborers were delighted. The snake was all sort of coiled up by the side of the path. And at first I thought it was dead, because one of the laborers kicked the snake and it didn't move. Later took out his parang, his machete, and cut one of the coils that was a kind on top of the pile of the snake, and essentially about that much, about a foot of his tail was sliced off. And the rest of the snake kind of gave a lurch and kind of moseyed off into the, into the jungle without the benefit of his tail.

ZAREMBA: [00:44:15] So now you were up a little bit in the highlands. Right now we're at sea level, so it wasn't as humid as it could have been?

WAGNER: [00:44:21] That's correct. It was, it was plenty humid in the jungle. Uh, yeah. We were going up and down hill all the time, and so we were warm, but the temperatures were a little bit milder than what you'd get at sea level.

ZAREMBA: [00:44:37] Okay. I also, you know, you hear stories about the Amazon with various biting insects and all that particularly. Run into that in the rainforest?

WAGNER: [00:44:45] No, not a, not a problem. Again, the objective is to go into the jungle just as soon as the traverse line has been cut and chained off. The laborers would cut their way through the jungle. What you find is if you wait too long, then all the animals in the jungle use that trail as well. And if they use that trail, the tigers, the barking deer, other mammals, uh, will attract then mosquitoes and will attract leeches. But if you get in right away, essentially before the animals are using that trailways.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:35] What would you eat while you're off on what safari? Ten, ten days or so you'd say you were off?

WAGNER: [00:45:40] Well, anywhere from four to, I think the longest was probably about ten days. Uh. And I would what the laborers ate. I would bring along, well, I'd bring along some tins and cans of, uh, beef stew. They would cook rice. They would also cook little fried fish. They would fry up some fish, put the spices in. And I found I could live on that quite well.

ZAREMBA: [00:46:17] And were the fish from the jungle or are they brought from?

WAGNER: [00:46:19] No, no, they were dried fish that they brought from the market in town. And they would, of course, bring rice. And so they would have a little bit of rice left over from the night before for

breakfast. We would stop once for lunch, but basically it was just a cup of tea with lots of condensed milk in it. And then have a reasonable size dinner.

ZAREMBA: [00:46:49] Now in the areas you worked in the jungle, were there people there already living or is it not?

WAGNER: [00:46:55] There were relatively few people. This was an area that had been occupied by terrorists during the Malaysian emergency after World War II. Communists attacked the British in Malaysia and that emergency was declared over in 1955, but there were still remnants that were reported to be in the jungle. And so, for example, I was told I shouldn't wear jungle green outfit. I should report to a police station when I go into the jungle and then go out again. So they know that I'm working in the jungle. But the short answer was they were [inaudible].

ZAREMBA: [00:47:51] Did you ever run into any of these individuals in the jungle, as far as you know? [tape break]

ZAREMBA: [00:47:59] Okay. Now, would you run into these Aboriginal groups or tell me a little bit about these Aboriginals?

WAGNER: [00:48:02] Okay. Uh, in Malaya there are proto-Malay groups, groups that are, uh, fairly primitive, live in remote areas of the jungle that have their own villages. There are different groups of them. Some are still hunters and gatherers. Others have, uh, villages where they will raise crops for a while, and then the soil gets exhausted and they'll move to other areas of the jungle. So from time to time we would run into these groups of, uh. They were shorter in stature than the Malays and always very friendly and always very interested in what we were doing. I can remember going camping near one of their villages and being invited into their longhouse, where they'd dance and sing and put on quite a show.

ZAREMBA: [00:49:02] Somebody that I talked to in Malaya talked about longhouses. Is this is the area where the long houses were, where you were?

WAGNER: [00:49:08] Well, there's longhouses, uh, among the, um, among these proto-Malay groups. But the long houses are more characteristic really of [inaudible]. Different groups than others.

ZAREMBA: [00:49:28] Now, describe this longhouse, whether this is about.

WAGNER: [00:49:31] Well, it's, uh, bamboo, uh, up on stilts. Uh, uh, bamboo floor. Bamboo sides. Kind of thatch roof. And, uh, it's, it's, uh, probably 25, 30 feet long and maybe about, uh, seven feet wide, something like that. And you would have a number of these longhouses that make up the village. The young men would live in one. Different extended families lived in one.

ZAREMBA: [00:50:16] Now, could you communicate with them? Do they speak the language you were taught?

WAGNER: [00:50:19] Well, I was, uh, I had my Malay laborers with me and they could speak, uh, Malay very well, which the Aboriginal groups also understood.

ZAREMBA: [00:50:32] And what kind of, you said they'd invite you for a meal? What kind of meal would you have?

WAGNER: [00:50:37] Well, we, we would have tea. We would always start off with tea. That's, you know, whenever you're invited into a home, the first question is, a cup of tea?

ZAREMBA: [00:50:46] So hunter gatherers, they had tea.

WAGNER: [00:50:48] Yeah, they would have tea. And I would take along, although I didn't smoke. Well, actually, that's not entirely true. I would, uh, I did have these little short cigars if mosquitoes ever got to be a problem. A lot of cigar would keep the mosquitoes away. Would also knock me out for the night. But I would also take along some packs of cigarettes and pass them around to the Aborigines, and they were, they were just absolutely thrilled to have store bought cigarettes. They

would roll their own tobacco cigarettes. So that was a form of making myself compatible with this, with these groups.

ZAREMBA: [00:51:41] You say they roll their own. Was there tobacco in the jungle?

WAGNER: [00:51:45] Well, they would buy tobacco and then they would create cigarettes. But they were not, they were not Islamic. The Malays were Islamic. And so there were prohibitions against smoking for Muslims, the Malays. I remember asking one Aborigine if he was ever going to become a Malay. And he said, can't eat dog, can't eat guinea dog, can't eat pig. How can, man? In other words, he wasn't going to give up his diet that was forbidden.

ZAREMBA: [00:52:31] Well, speaking of that, when you were with the Aborigines, did you ever have dog as far as you know?

WAGNER: [00:52:36] Not so far as I know. We didn't have, as I say, we didn't have big meals with camp and go in and meet the headman and be introduced to his family. When you're in the jungle, there's not much to do. So both for Aborigine and for itinerant soil surveyors, it wasn't a terrible way to spend a couple of hours.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:06] Now, how often might this happen that you'd do that?

WAGNER: [00:53:08] Oh, it only happened, uh, 2 or 3 times during the whole two years I was there.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:14] Now, you were basically with your survey crew or soils crew.

WAGNER: [00:53:17] I was with my Malay laborers, who I would pick up from the local Malay villages for particular expeditions to go.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:27] So they weren't government workers, so to speak.

WAGNER: [00:53:29] They weren't government, no. They were, they were casual laborers that when we're planning. But they were from the same village

and so got to know a number of these laborers that would carry equipment, they would carry camping gear, they would carry expedition.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:54] Would they lay down these lines too for you then?

WAGNER: [00:53:56] Yes, they would do that.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:58] Was there much difficulty in training them to do this particular task?

WAGNER: [00:54:01] By the time I got there, they were all trained to do that. And then there was the, what, the old man who was basically in charge of all the laborers. One for 5 or 6. [inaudible] Six people. He arranged it. He would also arrange for the cutting of, traverse of, prior to.

ZAREMBA: [00:54:30] Now, you mentioned the rains. Did they come almost daily or was there a monsoon season?

WAGNER: [00:54:36] Yes, there were monsoon seasons. There was a, I think a southeast monsoon and a northwest monsoon. And so Malaysia actually had two, or Malaya had two rainy periods, one in, a small one in November. And then a more major one in late May, early June.

ZAREMBA: [00:55:04] Would that affect your work at all?

WAGNER: [00:55:05] We usually arrange so that we didn't go during that time. Just because it was not pleasant to be rained on while you were trying to make notes on quality and so forth.

ZAREMBA: [00:55:19] So what would you typically do then during the monsoon times, go on vacation or?

WAGNER: [00:55:26] Well, there was always plenty of work to do in the office after you collected this information. Our job was to create a soil survey, which included a map and report on the kinds of soils that we encountered. Part of our job then was to relate what we were seeing to

what other soil surveyors were seeing in other parts of Malaya. So the soil correlator would get two or 3 or 4 of us from different parts of the country together, and we would compare notes. We would look at the same soil profile and talk about whether it's similar or dissimilar from things that these other soil surveyors are seeing happening.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:10] So would you actually physically get together with these others?

WAGNER: [00:56:12] Yes.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:12] In Kuala Lumpur then, would you all meet up?

WAGNER: [00:56:14] In Kuala Lumpur, but sometimes in the districts that other soil surveyors were doing, Kuantan on the east coast, and then taking a trip down there. And we would actually then go out into the rural area around that town and look at the soils that that person was doing. We went down to Johor, 2 or 3 of us, and looked at the soils that were being. The idea, of course, was to come up with a uniform categorization of the different soils.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:50] Now these other soils people, were any other of them Peace Corps, or were you the only Peace Corps?

WAGNER: [00:56:55] I was the only Peace Corps volunteer. There were half a dozen, uh, Malaysian trained soil surveyors, and there were two Colombo Plan sort of surveyors. Colombo Plan being the British, well, actually the British, the British Commonwealth, uh, aid workers. So there were two people from New Zealand. I think there was one from Australia. That's all I can remember.

ZAREMBA: [00:57:32] Now when you were out in the jungle, other than out there doing your work, would there be any leisure time? What would you do with any leisure time you had out there, or was there really wasn't any?

WAGNER: [00:57:41] There was no leisure time when you were in the jungle. I mean, either you were mapping soils or you were resting at night. And

so you would, uh, the first thing in the morning is that you put on your wet socks and wet boots and continue to, to map until middle or late afternoon and stop.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:10] So things just wouldn't dry there for you in the jungles?

WAGNER: [00:58:13] There's no way that things would dry. There was plenty of water though. The nice thing was that there were streams. And so after a hot day of going through the jungle, you could cool off by sitting, usually you'd do this for a very big stream, so sit down and throw water over your head. No, they were nice and cool.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:36] I could picture health problems, rashes, whatever from all that. Did you want to say anything about that?

WAGNER: [00:58:42] I didn't have a problem with that. I was, I think, uh, as healthy if not healthier during the two years that I was in the Peace Corps at any time in my life. Of course we received, uh, gamma globulin injections. We had anti-malarials that we took. We had penicillin or something. If ever it felt like we were getting some intestinal problems, we had pills that we could take and I never had a problem.

ZAREMBA: [00:59:25] Did you very religiously boil your water?

WAGNER: [00:59:28] Well, water would. Well, I would take tea. Everybody drank tea. And of course, with tea, even though the water was probably full of critters, by the time it was boiled it was certainly safe to drink. Uh, and then when we were in town, there was soda pop. There was Cokes, and there was even beer. [tape break]

ZAREMBA: [00:59:57] Well, now it was Muslim, but they had beer there also?

WAGNER: [00:59:59] Oh, yes. The center parts of the towns were always Chinese. The Malays kind of lived in compounds and villages around the edges of the town, but alcohol was available. Hard liquor. I'd get,

I'd get Budweiser beer in the local grocery store, which was, which was fine.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:29] Did they have their own home brew too that they made out there?

WAGNER: [01:00:33] There, uh, yeah, there were rice wines. There were, uh, there were local liquors that would be created that very often the truck drivers would drink, and it was not infrequent to read the morning newspaper about trucks running off the road, particularly in this area.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:57] Did you ever try any of that?

WAGNER: [01:01:00] I think I probably did. I guess I would have to say that it left no impression on me.

ZAREMBA: [01:01:08] Now when you're out in the jungle, then you wouldn't particularly run to town. Maybe these Aboriginal groups, that'd be about it. I assume that there are. You mentioned earlier about taking the train. You would take the train to your site sometime?

WAGNER: [01:01:21] Yes. There is a train line. The main line in Malaysia goes right through the center of the peninsula. And although the train didn't go through, uh, the town that I was in, uh, about, uh, ten, 15 miles away, there was a town that had a train station. And when we would lay out the survey lines that we were using, they would go east and west. The train would go north and south, so we would get off the train at, and I was, I was entitled actually to pull the cord to stop the train. The train would stop and then we would pick up our traverse line, which would usually then take us to a river five or 6 or 10 miles away. And then our boatman, I also had a boat and a boatman, 45 horsepower outboard motor. He would meet us and take us back to the town where he kept the boat.

ZAREMBA: [01:02:37] Interesting. So you would take the train to a designated spot and know roughly where the river was in conjunction to us. The boatmen would be there, and you could take the train to another spot

later on, and the boatmen would meet you up there. You always go back by boat to the town?

WAGNER: [01:02:52] Yeah, we would usually do 1 or 2 lines at a time. And if there's a long line, we would just get off the train and then go for 7 or 8 miles. Have the boatman pick us up and then we would go back to Raub until the next, next time.

ZAREMBA: [01:03:18] So then you saved a lot of your office work for the monsoon season?

WAGNER: [01:03:23] Yes. There was a lot of, always a lot of this soil correlation work, writing up notes and actually doing the mapping after you identified the different soils at particular spots. And look at the map and decide the extent of the good soil. What's the extent of the bad soil? And then provide that map to Kuala Lumpur. And that was seen as necessary because the Department of Agriculture could not get loans for moving these people into the interior of the country unless they had a soil map to prove that the soils could support agriculture. Where it happens, people do it.

ZAREMBA: [01:04:12] I'm curious. My memory is that the soils really in a, in a rain forest can't really support. Perhaps but that's not true. There are some that could support a number of crops or?

WAGNER: [01:04:23] Tree crops are supported by tropical soils. There are some that are richer than others, depending on the underlying parent material, the kinds of rocks they came from. But generally it's true that if you simply plant an annual crop, including rice or cotton, the soil would be quickly depleted. But you can plant trees that take, uh, like a rubber tree might take 6 or 7 years before it grows tall enough to be tapped, but it both holds the soil in place and then gradually takes the nutrients, the leaf from the trees. Fertility and soil. In Malaysia, as other places, government programs that fertilizer and those kinds of tree crops. Oil palm is another.

ZAREMBA: [01:05:37] Now, when you were in town, uh, again, besides work, was there anything to do with your leisure time? Like you mentioned something about a movie show in town or something like that?

WAGNER: [01:05:46] There were three movie theaters in town. Occasionally they would have an English picture. There was a lot of, there were a lot of Indian Hindi pictures, a lot of Chinese pictures.

ZAREMBA: [01:05:59] So how might you spend some of your leisure time in town?

WAGNER: [01:06:03] Well, I, uh, I read a lot.

ZAREMBA: [01:06:07] Peace Corps locker type?

WAGNER: [01:06:08] Yeah, we had a book locker, and, uh. Socialized. I would get together every evening when I was in town with half a dozen other junior government officers. We would arrange then as a group to take our meals at one of the local restaurants. It was sort of a set meal kind of arrangement. We didn't know ahead of time what it consisted of, but it would always have plenty of rice, soup. We would have some sort of meat and some sort of vegetable. So we would get together and like clockwork, the local people used to say. Then walk, then up and back the two blocks of the main street of town afterwards, after we had our meals, then head off.

ZAREMBA: [01:07:08] Now would they speak English or Malay?

WAGNER: [01:07:10] They all spoke English.

ZAREMBA: [01:07:15] Any particular strong friendships that arose for you out of that group?

WAGNER: [01:07:18] I had a Chinese assistant who was very good, very ambitious, young fellow. After the completion of our survey, I recommended him for a Fulbright scholarship, which he got. He went to the University of Hawaii, eventually got a PhD. Then he went back and headed up an agriculture college.

ZAREMBA: [01:07:48] Have you had any contact with him since then?

WAGNER: [01:07:51] Not directly. I'm aware of what work that he has been doing in Malaysia. He's aware of some of the subsequent work that I have done. But we haven't gotten down, sat together and compared notes on previous years.

ZAREMBA: [01:08:11] Are there any other events from the first year that come to mind?

WAGNER: [01:08:21] Well, uh, as I mentioned, Raub was a fairly pleasant place to live. Uh, occasionally dignitaries would come to town. Vice Prime Minister came to town, Tumrasa, at one time. And so all the government officers were lined up to meet him, myself included. So it was, uh, an interesting experience.

WAGNER: [01:08:53] Uh, I arranged for a helicopter to land on town green one time. The Royal Malaysian Air Force would sometimes provide helicopters to soil surveyors who wanted to get a bird's eye view of the area that they're going into before they actually do that. I remember hearing that that was possible, so I requested that be done. And so this Royal Malaysian Army helicopter, uh, came swooping into town. All the kids came running, uh, to the town square where they play rugby and cricket. And my status in town went up when they saw that I ran to get on and then after a few hours of flying around, it brought me back and I got off. It was an interesting experience.

ZAREMBA: [01:09:59] Besides being an interesting experience, uh, was it helpful to you in your job to do that?

WAGNER: [01:10:03] I could have, I could have done my job without doing that. But on the other hand, it was, it's, uh, it's nice to have that opportunity. Remember that my assignment was a little different than most Peace Corps assignments, in the sense that I had at my disposal a Land Rover and an office and as many casual laborers as I wanted to hire. There was a fair amount of work in keeping track of all the

expenditures, gasoline, things of that sort. But it also provided a great deal of mobility in terms of getting around. I remember driving the Land Rover one Christmas to Penang to meet other Peace Corps volunteers.

ZAREMBA: [01:10:50] How far away was that?

WAGNER: [01:10:52] That was about, uh, again, it was probably about 50 or 60 miles, but it was through the mountains, so it would take 3 or 4 hours to go.

ZAREMBA: [01:11:02] Now, you mentioned with some of the local breweries that some of the truck drivers would end up going off the mountain. Was it a little bit dangerous driving around there with some of these drivers on the road?

WAGNER: [01:11:14] Well, yeah. Although you, if you're used to mountain driving or you get used to mountain driving, I don't think it's any danger, more dangerous than driving in traffic in Kuala Lumpur, in fact, I think of that as being more dangerous. I was in a big old diesel Land Rover and when they saw this Westerner driving a Land Rover, these little mini cars gave me plenty of room.

ZAREMBA: [01:11:49] And were there many mini, heh, many mini cars?

WAGNER: [01:11:52] There were in Kuala Lumpur. There were quite a few.

ZAREMBA: [01:11:56] How about out where you were, were there much?

WAGNER: [01:11:57] Not much. I mean, there's not certainly, wasn't certainly much traffic.

ZAREMBA: [01:12:02] So you would drive yourself, you didn't have a driver particularly? Or both?

WAGNER: [01:12:06] We did have a driver, for example, when we would send laborers to go into the jungle to cut through the jungle. We had a driver

take those people to a point where they'd be dropped. He dropped them off. If they were coming out on the road where they could be picked up. But I drove myself to, say, meetings down in Kuala Lumpur or any other occasion where I needed to get from A to B.

ZAREMBA: [01:12:42] How about, uh, any vacations or other travel you did while you were over there?

WAGNER: [01:12:47] Well, the Peace Corps offered a, uh, vacation allowance, which you could only collect if you took a vacation. Malaysia was kind of nice in the sense that allowance was generally a little bit higher than the neighboring countries because the standard of living was a bit higher. So myself and two other surveyors, actually four surveyors, Peace Corps volunteers, and I, uh, bought an airline ticket for what was called the Great Circle Tour, where the plane would take off from Kuala Lumpur. Fly us to Bangkok, then fly us to Hong Kong, fly us to Manila. And then to Jesselton, which is called Kota Kinabalu now. Then Kuching, Singapore, and back to Kuala Lumpur for less than what we could get in terms of our allowance.

WAGNER: [01:13:57] So in addition to traveling to each of those cities and sampling the beer in each of those cities, we took the train from Bangkok to Angkor Wat, which was an interesting experience, in part because all U.S. diplomatic relations with Cambodia had ceased at that time. So if we had gotten into trouble, we would have really been in trouble. But it was, it was an interesting experience.

ZAREMBA: [01:14:30] Talk a little bit about that.

WAGNER: [01:14:32] Well, we as I mentioned, we took the train actually to the border of Cambodia with Thailand. The train stopped there and we got off with our luggage. There was a bridge across what looked like a stream, which was the boundary, and on both sides there were customs houses. So we went into on the Thai side the customs house, and they marked that we were leaving Thailand. But we had no guarantee that we were going to get into Cambodia. So we walked across the bridge carrying our suitcases with us and asked for

admission to Cambodia. People were nice. They said fine and allowed us to go into Cambodia. We boarded this rickety bus that took us over some bad roads for about three hours until we got to Angkor Wat or Siem Reap, which is the town near the temple.

ZAREMBA: [01:15:44] And what was that experience like, being in Angkor Wat?

WAGNER: [01:15:47] Well, it was an interesting experience, of course, because Cambodia had been a French colony, and in town, French was more common than English was. We rented bicycles and drove around, rode around Angkor Wat, which extends a very large area. And then we took the overnight train down to Phnom Penh. And Phnom Penh was, wasn't exactly deserted, but there were very, very few Westerners there at the time. This is spring of 1966. And so we stayed in a hotel and saw a little bit of the nightlife. I can remember sitting in a sidewalk cafe trying to order wine. I think the word for wine was spelled V-I-N. So I kept trying to order vin. I don't think he understood "vin" because it's pronounced "van." Not sure if we ever got our wine or not.

ZAREMBA: [01:17:01] Now, when did we go into Cambodia? Do you remember when invasion? Because I'm getting at, did they have any animosity towards Americans at that time?

WAGNER: [01:17:11] Generally not. No. In fact, in my whole time in Asia, especially Southeast Asia, I mean. I went into Indonesia after my Peace Corps stay and spent a month in taking trains and busses up and down the kind of spine of the country. And on an individual basis, people couldn't be friendlier. You were a guest in their country. There was never any concern about personal security. People would always, if you had a question, if you looked like you needed some help, offer help. So, uh, the short answer is no. There was never any hostility that I experienced.

WAGNER: [01:18:00] In part, I remember building, I think we were building a little bit on some of the colonial traditions. I remember standing in a long line to get stamps at the post office one time. And people who couldn't speak English motion, motioning me up to the front of the so I can, you

know, I was a Westerner, so I could get my stamps. I said, no, no, no, that's all right. I'll, I'll wait with the rest of the people in there. They really couldn't understand that.

ZAREMBA: [01:18:42] Well, the second year, did that change much from the first year?

WAGNER: [01:18:48] Second year changed in part because there were other volunteers that came to town, three or four teachers. And so, um, holidays, and there were a lot of holidays because you had Christian holidays, you had Malay Islamic holidays, and you had Hindu holidays because a portion of the population was [inaudible]. So that having other Americans there and nearby was a pleasant experience. We would get together for holidays, have a picnic or have a meal. That I didn't have the first year that I was there. So long range.

ZAREMBA: [01:19:44] And so, again, that shift felt better having others around, other Americans in there. I almost wonder if you were the Lone Ranger. Well, that's kind of almost an elite position in a sense.

WAGNER: [01:19:58] Well, yeah, I remember, uh, the couple showing up in Raub and actually starting to work. Uh, maybe I was out in the jungle and coming back and sort of finding them there. I had no idea that they were going to be there, but it was certainly pleasant. Nice to have.

ZAREMBA: [01:20:24] And so did your work change much at all during the second year or?

WAGNER: [01:20:27] No. It was hectic, just kind of finishing everything up at the end of the second year, the end of this survey, and getting the maps drawn and getting the report written. So as I mentioned, there was a lot of paperwork associated. And then shutting down the office and sending equipment off to other surveying offices in other parts of the country.

ZAREMBA: [01:20:54] Well, looking back over your time, were there any satisfactions or regrets that?

WAGNER: [01:21:01] Well, certainly it was a very satisfying experience for me as an individual at that age, to be thrown into an environment where I was completely on my own, but where I had a whole host of resources with which to work. It gave me a sense of confidence that indeed I could, I could do that. And I would have 20 or 30 laborers working in the jungle at a time. I never had that many people working for me since. Uh, it was, uh, it was a time of personal growth and an opportunity to do what I had expected that I would do, and that is to in some sense test my own limits and working in that kind environment and environment that wasn't just.

ZAREMBA: [01:21:54] Yeah, no, what kind of situation would it be where you'd have up to 30 laborers working for you?

WAGNER: [01:21:59] Well, if I, if some were out cutting traverses, maybe I would have two teams of eight each and then I would go in on one of the lines with 8 or 10 people. Then of course I would have the boatman and the driver and the office boys and the others.

ZAREMBA: [01:22:29] I guess part of the question is, has to do with pluses and minuses of, of work and relationships with the people in the country. Were there any pluses or minuses, that kind of thing, with those?

WAGNER: [01:22:40] The minus was, of course, socially one of the things that was very clear, and I think what I learned about the Peace Corps volunteer that had been there ahead of me, that had developed a kind of a liaison with a young local girl, was that it was very, very difficult for locals to date Westerners. Uh, a young lady, uh, doing so would, uh, after the Westerner left, uh, none of the locals would ever date her again. And so it occurred to me that, in fact, I really did not want to look for a kind of a relationship with that would be potentially that, uh, that damaging.

ZAREMBA: [01:23:35] How did you find out about that? [inaudible]

WAGNER: [01:23:39] Well, partly because, uh, again, there was this Peace Corps volunteer that had been there ahead of me. Things have not worked out. Secondly, the one of the teachers I mentioned, there was a single teacher, taught shop industrial arts in the local school, who did develop the liaison and eventually married one of the local girls. But it was very clear that her future was bleak if he'd leave her.

ZAREMBA: [01:24:16] Okay. Then overall question here is to evaluate your service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. The first one, to provide technical assistance where requested. How would you evaluate your service within it?

WAGNER: [01:24:29] I certainly feel that I provided technical assistance. I was asked to do a technical job to create a map, and I accomplished that.

ZAREMBA: [01:24:40] The second one, to help promote better understanding of Americans by people served.

WAGNER: [01:24:46] People that I interacted with, I think I developed a rapport with junior government officers. I think many of the people were puzzled as to why an American would come and work under those conditions, and not be paid. Of course, we'd get an allowance for that. That's, uh, or the only really rational thing was that I was a spy. They'd be convinced that either I was looking for gold in the hills, because Raub had been a mining town, or that I was spying. But nevertheless, at the end of two years, they thought that I was looking for gold, I had found it. If I was a spy, I was a good spy.

ZAREMBA: [01:25:49] Okay, then for the third goal, to help promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans.

WAGNER: [01:25:56] Well, I certainly think that I came to appreciate the culture of the Malay and the Chinese and the Indian culture that I had contact with. It influenced me to go on to a career that involved international service and other countries. Five years in Nepal, two years in Bangladesh. A number of short-term projects in other parts of the world.

ZAREMBA: [01:26:23] Well, say a little bit about that. What were some of the projects in these other countries? You were like five years in Nepal, did you say?

WAGNER: [01:26:29] Yeah. Well, I had returned then after my Peace Corps experience to graduate school here at the University of Michigan. I came to the conclusion that my undergraduate education really wasn't sufficient to allow me to do things that were important to be done in connection with international development. I just didn't know enough. And then as part of that process, I went to work for a not-for-profit research organization called Willow Run Laboratories that was part of the University of Michigan that was involved in developing some advanced techniques for mapping using aerial surveillance and satellite data, but sophisticated radar and infrared. So I became knowledgeable. Michigan was one of the only places in the country where you could receive training this. And I became knowledgeable in this technology.

WAGNER: [01:27:39] And in 1972, the U.S. government launched a satellite that would collect data not just in the United States, but all over the world. And so then there became a demand for people who had this background. USAID had a program where it wanted to transfer knowledge of how to use this kind of data to people in developing countries. I was put in charge of a grant program where I would give small grants to investigators in a dozen different countries to carry out experiments in terms of using this kind of technology. Eventually then I was asked if I help to set up a national center, a remote sensing center, in Katmandu, Nepal. I knew that there had been some efforts prior to my coming there to introduce this technology to, technically there. But they wanted to create an institution that would both train local people and provide the facilities, advanced facilities, that are useful in using this kind of data.

WAGNER: [01:29:03] So I was looking for an opportunity to not just go as an advisor, but to live and work in a place for a period of time, a little bit like my Peace Corps experience. In this case, the project was a five

year project where I was the advisor and my laboratory, my labs here in Ann Arbor provided technical support. And I trained people in Nepal, foresters, agricultural people, geologists, hydrologists to make use of this kind of technology. I had the experience of creating something from scratch and seeing it continue after that.

WAGNER: [01:29:54] I did, uh, something a little bit similar to that in Bangladesh, although the center had already been created by a colleague of mine. And he became ill, and so I was sent in as a replacement and spent two years in Bangladesh, again working with local people to make use of this kind of technology. And my affiliation with these centers continues to some extent. For example, I have a, uh, a friend who I met in Bangladesh who is coming here to Michigan, uh, under a post-doc, the Fulbright scholarship, to work under me in developing further some of the information that's available with this technology. He'll be arriving the 1st of October.

ZAREMBA: [01:30:46] Well, uh, the last item here is the effect on you of your Peace Corps service. Uh, first immediate effect. Did you feel it was a culture shock, or did it change your life direction at all?

WAGNER: [01:31:00] Well, there certainly was culture shock when I got back to the United States from Malaysia and traveling from India. Things were much more traditional than life in the States in 1965, '66. Or, uh, 1967, '68. Um, but what it taught me was not to be afraid of traveling. I had a very positive experience, as I mentioned, after my Peace Corps assignment was finished. I spent three months coming back to the States. I spent a month for traveling through Indonesia by bus and by local taxi and train. I spent a month, close to a month traveling from Calcutta to Delhi and stopping at different places along the way, by traveling third class on the train.

WAGNER: [01:32:08] Uh, and I really didn't get culture shock until I got to Italy. And when I got to Italy, I felt sort of like I was home, and it was, there was a bit of an adjustment coming back to the U.S. They prepared us, of course, for the culture shock when we go to Malaysia. But they didn't

tell you that after two years, when you're back to the United States, things will be different.

ZAREMBA: [01:32:36] Describe a little bit your reaction to it.

WAGNER: [01:32:39] Well, it was during the time, of course, of a great deal of the protest movement and Vietnam. I was involved with the School of Natural Resources, Earth Day, it was a very sort of liberal and liberating time. And so I wasn't sure quite what to make of it. All of the stuff wasn't going on when I left, so it took me a little while to get used to the idea, these changes essentially in society.

ZAREMBA: [01:33:20] What about long term effects on you? What would you say?

WAGNER: [01:33:23] Well, the Peace Corps service, essentially made me embark on a career that involved international service. I remember when I first joined the Willow Run Laboratories at the University of Michigan, I said, well, it will only be for a couple of years until I get some international project and work on this natural science stuff. What happened was that with the advance of the technology, the technology allowed me access to international work that, that the donor agencies, the World Bank, USAID, Inter-American Development Bank, would come to Ann Arbor and say, hey, do you have a fellow who would be willing to go to these countries and promote this technology? So I feel very fortunate. But it's also a result of a Peace Corps experience, positive experience, that said, okay, this is, this is.

ZAREMBA: [01:34:33] Okay, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]