

**Larry Oglesby Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Larry Oglesby  
**Interviewer:** Sharleen Hirschi Simpson  
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**Biographical Note**

Larry Oglesby served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 on a rural development program (Bolivia II).

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Larry Oglesby

June 21, 2009  
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:01] OK, uh, this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson, and I'm interviewing Larry Oglesby, otherwise known as Butch in the old days, about his time in Peace Corps. So, Larry, can you tell us just a little bit about what you're doing now and all that?

OGLESBY: [00:00:21] Well, right now, I run an auto parts store in the little town of Galena, Kansas. And that basically is what I do now.

SIMPSON: [00:00:39] OK, then think back to when you went into the Peace Corps. What were you doing the year before you went in?

OGLESBY: [00:00:46] I was in high school when I went in. I was one of the eighteen year olds that went into the Peace Corps. We first found out about Peace Corps through our vocational agriculture teacher who right before we graduated told us there was a new program that had come out, was

started, and that some of us might be interested in. The more he talked about it, the more interested I got. Because at that particular time, I really didn't want to go on to college at that point when I got out of school, but we were young, we were idealistic, and we thought we could go out and change the world. And this was at the time Kennedy was in as president. We just had a lot of sense of adventure and wanted to see what was going on in the world.

SIMPSON: [00:01:51] That sounds like a good reason. You already talked about how you heard about the Peace Corps and what you did and what made you decide to go, and did you have any particular country or any place that you wanted to go?

OGLESBY: [00:02:03] South America and always had a calling for me. I didn't have any particular country at all. I just returned from south. I really can't tell you why. South America appealed so much, but that was my desire.

SIMPSON: [00:02:26] Right, now after you join Peace Corps, what did your family have to say? Were they surprised or are they happy? Did they wonder what the heck was going on or what?

OGLESBY: [00:02:44] No, they didn't seem surprised about it at all, but they were very supportive. That is what I wanted to do. That was fine with them.

SIMPSON: [00:03:05] After you joined, were you and were there was there any were there any reservations on your part? Like, what did I get myself into?

OGLESBY: [00:03:17] No, I don't think we had time to have any reservations because the when we got our invitation, everything seemed to happen somewhere. But the first thing I know, we got an invitation to take up our training at Arizona State University, out of Tempe, Arizona. All of this happened right after I graduated and we started our training in June, so there really wasn't much time to really get too many second thoughts. Just the excitement of getting to go and see if an 18 year old could make it.

SIMPSON: [00:04:06] So what project were you invited to join?

OGLESBY: [00:04:10] We were invited to join Bolivia II rural development project.

SIMPSON: [00:04:17] Ok, and what did you do, any preparation before you went in because you were going to be gone for a couple of years or anything?

OGLESBY: [00:04:28] I had no preparation before I went in other than just what we had learned in our vocational agricultural experience on the farm.

SIMPSON: [00:04:42] Now, can you tell me a little bit about the training, where it took place, who the faculty were, anything like that?

OGLESBY: [00:04:54] Well, I don't remember the name of all of the faculty. The training took place, our first cycle was at Arizona State University. When we arrived there, they put us up in the dorms, the old athletic dorms, and there was.

SIMPSON: [00:05:21] We were talking about training and you had got to Tempe, Arizona.

OGLESBY: [00:05:26] At Tempe, Arizona, they put a in the athletic dorms there. The first part of it, we went through a series of tests that, psychological and for what particular purpose I'm not sure. But I know that at the end of the cycle, we went through them again, so I say this for probably some kind of an experiment so they can see what kind of changes might have occurred over the years, the experience. People there had had set us up to work out on the Indian reservation also. We're going to spend the first month at the university and the second month they're going to stay at the Indian reservation, out on Baseline Road, just west of Phoenix. So Ben Bracken and I went, two 18 year olds had both been school bus drivers in school, so. We were assigned to ride the busses to take the group to and from the Indian reservation. We'd get up at three o'clock in the morning, go get the busses, come back to the dorm, pick everybody up and drive out to the Indian reservation. And we'd get off the busses. We would go run, do our

physical exercise. We'd run a mile before breakfast, after breakfast in the community room. And then we would do different classes, do whatever training we had that was still going in. Also, part of our field training, we're setting up our creditors and we will go live in. Well, we were on the Indian reservation. And we took our area studies there, surveying.

SIMPSON: [00:07:26] What do you mean by area studies?

OGLESBY: [00:07:28] Well, the area studies they had the anthropologists and people that were familiar with where we were going in Bolivia, they'd come in and give us lessons on what to expect when we got to. What the topography was, what the people were like. And I think that we need know. Then after we would finish out on the desert, because this was in June and very hot, so around noon, we would load back up, go back into the university, have our lunch in the cafeteria there, and then we would have our language studies and other studies in our last class and at about nine o'clock at night.

SIMPSON: [00:08:23] All day long. What was that the only training that you had?

OGLESBY: [00:08:30] No, after Arizona State then we went to the Peace Corps training camp in Arecibo, Puerto Rico.

SIMPSON: [00:08:40] Can you tell us a bit about that?

OGLESBY: [00:08:41] And there seems to be a lot of it, I think, for your confidence building, of course, that's where we had a lot of survival training. We had to spend the night in the jungle by ourselves after the. We walk across the island of farther away from point A to point B and different groups, and we took drown proofing courses where we had to swim in the ocean for a mile in coveralls. We had to be able to stay afloat in a swimming pool for at least 30 minutes with our hands tied behind our back. This was just generally a confidence building course, but of course, that was after the training we had in Arizona State University. This was more or less a

picnic. We enjoyed it. We did the rock climbing there and rappelling. And we encountered snails.

SIMPSON: [00:09:43] Was that the only place that you went in, in Puerto Rico?

OGLESBY: [00:09:49] No, we have a training camp in Puerto Rico, we went to the college at Mayaguez, the agricultural college there, where we took a study of tropical plants and also more Spanish. Because Spanish was the language that we were going to use. Which later, when we got to country, we found out that not only a lot of the people, Spanish was their second language and Quechua and Aymara were their first.

SIMPSON: [00:10:25] Ok, so in hindsight, did the training prepare you for what you were going to expect in Bolivia, do you think?

OGLESBY: [00:10:37] I think the training probably helped prepare us for what went on in Bolivia. There was a lot of things that the only way you could really learn to them was to be in-country where they were taking place, but I think it gave me the confidence to go in and do what you had to do in an environment that was unfamiliar to me. And made that environment a little less unfamiliar.

SIMPSON: [00:11:11] Now, let's go back to. After that, then what happened, did you go to Bolivia?

OGLESBY: [00:11:21] Oh, no. After we got out of the training camp in Puerto Rico, we were given a clothing allowance if we were to go back home. We had two weeks leave. We were allowed the clothes we needed. And to ship on the surface, right, to Bolivia. And then we were to regroup for the trip down there in two weeks. And after we've done this, we took and had all of our clothes shipped to, let's say, this would have been in October. We landed in Miami in October to regroup, and then I was met by a Peace Corps representative at the airport when I got off, that told me that we were not going. There was a lot of military activity going on at the airport. And this was the beginning of the Cuban Crisis, they sent us and told us to report

to the propeller room. They put us up in the hotel at the airport, told us to report to the propeller room that evening at the designated time and we listened to President Kennedy give a speech on the Cuban Crisis. And they kept us in the hotel there that night, and then they shipped us over to Miami Beach for three nights. And after that, they were trying to make up their mind where they were going to send us back to the training camp in Puerto Rico or if they were going to send us somewhere else, because at that particular point, due to the political situation, they didn't want to send us on to South America. And as luck would have, it means all of our clothes are going surface straight to South America and we were going to carry-on luggage basically with us. It was summertime in South America. They sent us to Brattleboro, Vermont. This is in October. So we go to the Experiment of International Living in Brattleboro, Vermont.

SIMPSON: [00:13:38] But what did you think about that time? What were you thinking?

OGLESBY: [00:13:42] Well, at that time, I wasn't too sure of what was going to happen when we got to Brattleboro. They gave us more Spanish. And here it is, so we're wandering around in our shirtsleeves. But after we've been there a couple of weeks, there was another group getting ready to come in that was going to the Dominican Republic, a group of teachers. And our reputation preceded us to Brattleboro, so they came in and the weekend that the group was to arrive, they took us for a weekend in Boston. So that they could talk to the other group before we did, we were known to be a vocal group and sometimes hostile due the extreme training we'd had.

SIMPSON: [00:14:32] Great. OK, so then eventually you got to Bolivia, right?

OGLESBY: [00:14:39] Eventually, we did. In November.

SIMPSON: [00:14:46] And what when you got there, what was your initial reaction? What did you think?

OGLESBY: [00:14:51] My first initial reaction was come in. We were flying out of we came out of Lima, Peru, up over the mountains. The mountains are approximately 400 miles wide in that area. And when we come up on the Altiplano as we were landing in La Paz, you were flying over terrain that had no trees. You could see the little villages below the farms, but the rock fences made up, so they grew potatoes. There was no vegetation inside anymore. And I looked out over the vast acres of nothingness and I thought, oh, my word, and I'm going to be here for two years.

SIMPSON: [00:15:39] A little sobering thought there. So what about the project, the Peace Corps staff, the local people, when you find it? Where were you finally assigned?

OGLESBY: [00:15:50] I was finally assigned, when we got in after we had our in-country briefing at La Paz, we drove from there to Cochabamba and I was assigned to a.

SIMPSON: [00:16:06] And how long was that ride?

OGLESBY: [00:16:08] That was a good day's ride for a short distance, up and down and around in the mountains. We had no idea what it was going to be like before we finally came into Cochabamba valley. This was the breadbasket of Bolivia. In the Cochabamba valley you're about eight thousand, nine hundred feet up into the mountains. The climate, you have about a 70 degree mean temperature year round and they raise anything there from vegetables to wheat, oranges, lemons. All kinds of crops. Everything was irrigated by artesian wells. A very, very, very lovely climate, and the place that I was assigned to work was called Quillacollo, the Quillacollo province, which was approximately, oh, I would say 10 or 15 miles west of Cochabamba. I worked with one of the agricultural extension agents in rural development.

SIMPSON: [00:17:27] Can you tell us specifically on that job what kinds of things you were doing?

OGLESBY: [00:17:37] Well, a lot of times you would do things that weren't necessarily rural development because sometimes you would go into a town. We did a lot of 4S clubs, which are the same as 4H clubs. We were with a group called Heifer Project, they were our sponsors. And Heifer Project, what they do is they brought animals in from the United States and they were sent up to where you would give one of the qualifying people an animal, and then when they reproduced, they would give you back one or two animals, that would be passed on to somebody else. So it was an ongoing program with trying to upgrade some of the bloodlines of the sheep and the pigs and the dairy cows.

SIMPSON: [00:18:40] So where were you living? Did you live by yourself?

OGLESBY: [00:18:46] Todd Wolf, our coordinator, he set us up to live with families, our group in Cochabamba. I lived with the Michelle family. We lived in Cochabamba.

SIMPSON: [00:19:03] And so what was that like, living with a family?

OGLESBY: [00:19:07] Well, that was a very pleasant experience because it's aimed at that particular age that I was, the family that I lived with that had a son that was about my age, that had gone to the States and that momma Michelle and papa Michelle, and my Bolivian sister. They were all just like family. It didn't take long for us to settle into a routine. The family life.

SIMPSON: [00:19:49] Do you think that that living arrangement helped?

OGLESBY: [00:19:53] Oh, absolutely that arrangement helped. We were living with the people and it helped you have much more understanding about their point of view, home things. A lot of times here we don't look at cultural differences or. And I think that that gave me an understanding, a better understanding, you know, of how alike all people are and the differences people have.

SIMPSON: [00:20:39] Yeah, what can you tell me a little bit about, say, a typical day or relationships that you had with any of the people there in your family?

OGLESBY: [00:20:54] For a typical day, you're going to work as a started off, when you when we first got there, as we would go around and visit the different farmers. Since the agrarian reform in Bolivia, a lot of the farmers at that time have been given two hectares, which is approximately five acres. And they raised enough food to feed their family. To them, a bicycle, a pair of sunglasses and a transistor radio was the top of the world as far as status symbol was concerned. And the only thing that they cared about raising at that particular point above and beyond what they needed was what they wanted to take to market, and that's where a lot of their socialization was in the marketplace. And when you first started out going around the countryside to the people, I worked with an agricultural agent there and as we made our rounds during the day, there were times you would come by when the people were setting down to eat or something and when they first knew you, you know, you just had pleasantries and went on your way. And as they got to know you, pretty soon you'd be invited to lunch. And if there was one piece of meat in the soup you got that piece of meat, as a courtesy. And in the country, there are a lot of the food was served, you ate out of a common bowl. Which fortunately, I'm one of these people, but I have no problem with food. So I fit in very well with that, and when you knew you'd finally arrived and was accepted into the community is when you come driving down the road and they would come wave you over and invite you in to eat with them without special invitation.

SIMPSON: Great.

OGLESBY: [00:23:02] As far as job goes, you might go into a town and we would be doing something. One schoolteacher might come over and say, would you come over and give English lessons. So you would end up on the school doing English tests.

SIMPSON: Kind of whatever was needed at the time.

OGLESBY: Just whatever at the time, right.

SIMPSON: [00:23:29] Can you think of any particular people that you either met or worked with that really stood out in your mind?

OGLESBY: [00:23:42] The people that are you referring to, people that I worked with or trying to help?

SIMPSON: [00:23:51] Either worked with or trying to help. Any of those.

OGLESBY: [00:23:54] Well, looking back on experiences and people, I remember that we went through a growing season demonstration. Everything in Bolivia, or in the Cochabamba, was a union. Even the founders of the unions, for their local unions, for the farmers and for one group we were doing an experiment in wheat. We took a growing season, we planted one test plot of the native wheat they had used for years and years and years and without fertilizer. We did a test of that with fertilizer. Then we brought a new variety in from Mexico. And we did that one without fertilizer and one with fertilizer. The changing of the seed alone, the variety that was grown, almost doubled the production. After the growing season, we did our measurements and we calculated this out and explained to the group how much more wheat they could raise on that property, how much more profit they can make out of it. And the head of the local union after we finished this experiment, got up and he said, this is all well and good, he said, we thank you very kindly for showing us how we can make this money, but we just have one question. What is that? Why do we want to make more money? So that's a hard question to answer.

SIMPSON: [00:25:44] It is a hard question to answer. OK, so you talked about your work. So what did you do in your off time?

OGLESBY: [00:25:55] In our off time, in Bolivia, the Latin culture. We visited. We didn't have TV or anything like this, so socialization with friends. We had a lot of live-in friends, we'd go to the pool. And in the evening you might go to nightclubs, there were parties going on all the time where people got

together and visited. On Sunday afternoon after church, a lot of our Bolivian friends, we would go down and sit and play calcio. I think calcio here, I'm trying to think what the game is here. Well it's the little cup with five dice.

SIMPSON: Yeah I don't know if we have that here.

OGLESBY: Oh, Yahtzee, I believe they call it. That was just one of the activities that we would do.

SIMPSON: [00:26:59] So did you do any traveling?

OGLESBY: [00:27:03] We did do traveling around the country, around South America. We got the, we had 30 days leave a year. Ted Dennison and Mel Zolensky and I, we saved their money. Ted was an avid skier when he was in Oregon so he wanted to go skiing in Chile. We just decided that we would take a ski vacation in some of the other countries. We went to Santiago. Which the first morning when we got there and we're eating breakfast, we're sitting at the table, the three of us, speaking English, when a couple of Chilean boys came up to us and started talking to us and wanted to know if we wanted to see the city. And we were a little hesitant about knowing where this was going to lead, but we said, sure, we'd like to see the city. So they took us out and showed us some of the museums, and that afternoon we went to the zoo. And it was getting later in the afternoon and one of the boys come to us and said, we're going to have to leave. We have to go now. So we made the offer, we said, well, what do we owe you for this tour you've given us? The boy looked at us and he said, you don't owe us anything, he said. Sometime when somebody comes to see your country, you take them and show them around. I thought that was a nice gesture.

SIMPSON: [00:28:58] Kind of a pay it forward. Ok, so do you at the end of your first year, can you think of any notable events that happened?

OGLESBY: [00:29:16] I remember the first year, this was about the time that President Kennedy was assassinated. I can remember I came in from work that day in the country because we haven't had the news out in the provinces and Mama Michelle was crying and wanted to know if we're going to have to leave and go home. We didn't know what she was talking about. And she told us that the council, to go to the council. We went down to the council and that's when we got word that Kennedy had been shot.

SIMPSON: [00:29:58] So how did you how did that affect you as a group?

OGLESBY: [00:30:00] As a group, I think it was a sad time for everybody, but it was one thing that the people of Bolivia. It affected them, I think as much as it affected us. They thought very highly of President Kennedy.

SIMPSON: Anything else that you can remember in the first year?

OGLESBY: I'm trying to remember back to the end of the first year, that was a notable thing that happened that I remember. But by the end of the first year, I think we had settled in and were very comfortable. We had established our life, our work habits, our socialization, our friends. It was no different, I don't think, as if we'd been here in the States.

SIMPSON: [00:31:15] OK. Did you have any health problems or anything like that?

OGLESBY: [00:31:22] Well, I am a person who likes my food very well. I had made up my mind. And I can remember, a lot of times that we were given instructions on the cleanliness of food, what to eat, what not to eat. The families of the. I can remember the first time that I went.

SIMPSON: [00:31:46] We were talking about health problems. You were talking about your eating in different places.

OGLESBY: [00:31:56] Well, the food in most of the places was wonderful. I had no problem with that. Sometimes in the country, guinea pig, you're going to eat those, a little rabbit. As I was saying in the restaurant we went to this

one little village, we went in and we sat down before we got waited on. I was looking at the salad and the dish fan, setting up the flies and. Finally, my group got up and left and a little boy came out and picked up all the dishes from where I was sitting, I could see back in the kitchen. One of the Indian ladies sitting back there with an apron on and as he brought the plates to her, she took her apron and wiped the plates and silverware off, stacked them up, and the boy brought them to us. I looked at them, I said, well, I'm going to be here for two years, so I'm going to eat and I ate. And I did go through periods of dysentery, which we had the medical kits they gave us had different things for taking care of that. But if it got where it couldn't, our doctor, we had our own doctors there, and if he didn't know what was, he would send us to the local Bolivian doctor, because a lot of the little things they had that they were more familiar with than we were. For the most part, I had very few problems. I think I probably built up a resistance to some of things there because I was not a picky eater. I ate the food and I enjoyed it.

SIMPSON: [00:34:12] Okay, now, when you came to the end of your time in Bolivia, how did you feel about the experience? Did you feel like you had met the goals that you had or the expectations that you had?

OGLESBY: [00:34:31] I learned that in going out and trying to change the world, it's a lot harder than what one might suspect, you know. It took me two years to find out how little I really knew about the situation and things there. I feel like that we did do some good, that we influenced some of the younger people. And not necessarily to our ways, but to better ways of what they were doing. Because it wasn't our job to train these people to be like us, but to help them with their endeavors, you know, within their own culture. After I left the country, on the way back, I sat and thought of the many things that I wish I had done, but I didn't do. For an example, back up in the countryside, coming down from the lagoons, and when the rivers come out of the mountains, down into Cochabamba. There is an ample supply of cold water, they have trout in the lagoons up there, they could raise trout. I often thought that would have been an ideal place to put a trout farm, because most of the fish that they brought in come from down in the

Chiparre area where they caught them in the river and packed them in ice and brought them up. Overall, for the time, we had I'd probably had learned enough about it that maybe I would have been better at it over the next two years, if I spent two or three more years.

SIMPSON: [00:36:30] Well, you were awfully young at the time. We finished you were only 20, weren't you?

OGLESBY: [00:36:37] Right, I was 18 when we went in and 20 when we got out.

SIMPSON: [00:36:40] Yeah, so if you were doing it 10 years later, or even five or six years later.

OGLESBY: [00:36:47] If I were doing it five or six years later. But like I say, sometimes you had to have that knowledge of what was going on and having lived it in order to see where the needs were and where the differences were. We tried to equate everything on our standards and on what we do, without knowing what's in the culture, what's acceptable, what's not acceptable, what's needed, what's not needed. Because the things we may think are important to them aren't important. And the things that are important to them, to us may hold little importance. And it takes time to learn how these things relate.

SIMPSON: [00:37:38] True. OK, did you when you got out of the Peace Corps, did you have any plans for the future? What did you what were you thinking you might do?

OGLESBY: [00:37:50] At that particular point? You know, I really didn't. When I got out of the Peace Corps, I went back and helped my dad on the farm for a while. And then I moved to Oklahoma City and worked as a traveling salesman for a while. And after that I got drafted and went through the army, served in Turkey. When I got out of the army, I ended up going to Joplin, Missouri, and went to work for a church.

SIMPSON: [00:38:43] Did you think that being in the Peace Corps helped you to be able to adapt to Turkey, a different culture and all?

OGLESBY: [00:38:52] Oh, being in the Peace Corps definitely helped and helps you adapt to anything. It's just like when you go back to the training in Puerto Rico. Your confidence building courses, and that's what you're drown proofing for. You can do things you don't think you can do. And once you realize that those things are achievable, that makes the next step in life part of the maturing process. I think my Peace Corps experience has helped me out tremendously in life since then. I think it gave me a better understanding of cultures and the world and watching world affairs. A lot of times I have to wonder about people that take little time and go to other countries and become experts when it took me two years to find out that I knew very little.

SIMPSON: [00:39:53] Yeah, that is that certainly is something. Now, that the three goals the Peace Corps had was to provide technical assistance where requested, to promote better understanding of the U.S., and better understanding of other people by the Americans. In light of that, do you feel like your service did allow those things?

OGLESBY: [00:40:18] I feel like it did allow that. Because we did provide technical assistance wherever we could. And I think we helped them understand us a little better, because through dealing and living with the people, it was much easier to have a better understanding of how they thought, and I'm sure they had a better understanding of how we thought. That we don't always. Our goals aren't always the same. It's like one the Bolivian boys told me before I left the country. He said there is one difference between us Latinos and you Americans. Oh, what's that? And he said, us Latinos, we work to live. But he said, you Americans live to work. And I got to thinking about that, a little bit of truth in that statement.

SIMPSON: [00:41:27] So over the years since you got out, have you continued any involvement in Peace Corps or with Bolivia or in Peace Corps activities?

OGLESBY: [00:41:48] Not as much as probably what I should have. But I have kept in contact with my Bolivian sister. And then all of my Peace Corps friends, we have a reunion about every two years.

SIMPSON: [00:42:07] And you have been the organizer of that, I might add, in the last few years. OK, so did being in the Peace Corps change you, your career plans or what your goals would have been or just what happened, do you think?

OGLESBY: [00:42:27] I think the best way that I could answer that question is when I arrived back at home and I had met with one of my friends. After I've been home for a little while and we were talking and I said, you know, it's really something, everybody has changed so much since I've been gone. And she looked at me and kind of laughed and said, no Larry, it's not us that have changed, it's you that has changed. So I guess there must have been some good in that.

SIMPSON: [00:43:06] So what do you think was the major change that came about? I mean, you come from a small middle America town.

OGLESBY: [00:43:16] And I think that those. My look at the world was different now. My world included the whole world, whereas a lot of the kids that stayed at home, their whole life would have been the boundaries of the community. That I think it broadened my outlook on life.

SIMPSON: [00:43:53] This is sort of related. We began to talk about this a little bit earlier, but when you came back, did you have a hard time adjusting because of those changes?

OGLESBY: [00:44:11] Well, the hard time I had was the fact that my interest and maybe the interest of my friends at that particular time had changed. Our outlook on life may have changed a little bit. There was probably a period that it may have been a little bit difficult. But for the most part, I would say that it was a more positive change, that it helped me when I got to dealing

with different workplaces and different people, that you had many more people skills than what I would have otherwise had and an understanding.

SIMPSON: [00:45:00] Well. I think we're pretty much at the end. Is there anything else that we haven't mentioned that you'd like to add to this?

OGLESBY: [00:45:15] No, the only thing I would like to add, I think that every young person should have the opportunity to have this experience. And there are things that can be contributed to the world, but the benefits that one gets out of it are much greater than what you get. I think that all in all, it makes you more aware of your community, your country, and the world as a whole. That we're all in this game together, you know, and need to work things out.

SIMPSON: [00:45:59] All right, well, thank you, Larry. I think that does it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]