

Thomas M. McMahon Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Thomas McMahon served as a Peace Corps volunteer in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from 1961 to 1963 in education and irrigation projects.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Thomas M. McMahon

August 25, 2018

Shawnee on Delaware, Pennsylvania

By Patricia Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:06] Today is August 25th, 2018, and I am Patricia Wand. I am interviewing Thomas Michael McMahon, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in East Pakistan, currently named Bangladesh. He served from July of 1961 until June of 1963, and he was in the East Pakistan I group which had a number of volunteers doing different assignments. So, Tom, let me first tell you how pleased I am to be able to capture your story today and to do this interview with you. I've been looking forward to it.

McMAHON: [00:00:58] Well, thank you.

WAND: [00:01:00] So before Peace Corps, think about that year before Peace Corps. What did you what were you doing then in that years 1960-61?

McMAHON: [00:01:13] Well, I had grown up in Rochester, New York, and was in the engineering school at Rochester Institute of Technology in my last year,

and I was thinking about trying to do something internationally when I graduated. And I had no clear idea. But when I had heard President Kennedy give the speech and asked for those who would be willing to spend two years abroad doing something very low pay, it occurred to me that that would be a very interesting thing to do. That was in January of 1961, when in March of that year there were five children in our family. My sister had gone by that time and was off on her own. But in March of that year, my father passed away unexpectedly and I was left with the decision to make because I was going to graduate in June of that year and after some conference with the family, and they were encouraging me to do what I wanted to do and when I thought I needed to do. And it was a tough decision for me to leave. But what I did and applied for Peace Corps and was accepted and I get a telegram that said, you are accepted for a program in East Pakistan. I didn't know where it was. And I opened up an atlas and coincidentally, I found it would only be about two or three hundred miles away from where my uncle, my favorite uncle, was serving as a as a priest, a Jesuit priest in India. And it kind of clinched it for me and to say I need to do that because be close enough to possibly visit my aunt, who's my both of these were my my brother and sister of my mother.

McMAHON: [00:03:23] My aunt was serving as also a missionary in Bolivia, at the time. So I sent the application in and it was accepted, as I say, and then went to Putney, Vermont, took the train from Rochester to Putney and settled in at the place called the Experiment in International Living. And there were 29 volunteers, I think possibly two more there at the time, because two people, I think, left during the interim period of training. So we had the training in Putney and it was an eye opening experience for me especially. I was motivated not only by the idea of serving abroad, but with the quality of the people that I met who were selected as volunteers along with myself. I felt so lucky to be in that group. And they were in many ways amazing people. And lots of cases kept lifelong contact with the several. And that was that was that was the beginning.

WAND: [00:04:44] Yes. Well, that sounds like an impressive beginning and afforded you an opportunity to break new ground, certainly in in the Peace

Corps in those early years. Thinking back a little bit more about your childhood, were there things in your childhood that you think influenced you? You mentioned your uncle and aunt, both of whom were deeply engaged in international activities. Were there other things that your family did that generated that maybe perhaps motivation? And also another related question. Did you go to your elementary and high school in Rochester as well?

McMAHON: [00:05:35] Yes, I went I went to elementary school and senior things at and Charles Avenue in Rochester. And the high school was Aquinas Institute and graduated from there in 1956. And I wanted to go to college and I didn't have any money. We didn't have resources. My father was a policeman, walked a beat and maybe only brought home a hundred and fifty dollars every two weeks, something like that. It was a very small not even then, and it was a struggle. And I and I knew that I wanted to go to college, so I had a chance to go to the co-op school where I could work three months and go to school three months, so I got I got an opportunity to work for the utility company Rochester Gas and Electric. And that gave you some qualifications, which I didn't realize that I would be able to use later on, and that I was working as a as a maintenance electrician in a power plant for the three months. And I went to school three months. And at that time I could afford to make enough money to be able to pay my college tuition and end up without any student debt, which is very unusual. And so when 19 of your earlier question growing up, my mother was a very adventurous person kind of person. And so she liked to, she was very well read and encouraged us to read.

McMAHON: [00:07:05] And we knew about what my uncle and my aunt were doing. And we would sometimes go to travelogs at the museum. And I remember there would be people showing slides of their journeys and their adventures and planes would land and they would have slides showing the mountain in Africa or in South America and seeing places that I thought I'd never be able to see. And until one night when I had that opportunity, I thought I needed to do this because I thought I'll never have a chance to do it again after I graduate. So it started from there. And that

was that was my interest. And I, I had I had a kind of it's kind of a life plan at that point. And that was a big check to get it started on that.

WAND: [00:07:59] Right. So your life plan included traveling.

McMAHON: Yes it did.

WAND: Inspired partly by your mother and her interest?

McMAHON: [00:08:06] Her interest and that of my aunts, my aunt and uncle. So then when we got took the train to got the invitation to go and took the train from Rochester in New York City up to Putney, Vermont, and was welcomed there by some people from the Experiment in International Living. And I had no idea what it was. But I found out that they had a long history of people serving in various locations overseas and in a home state type program. And that's the way it was going to be structured, as we were the first group to go to mainland Asia. And so we were excited about that. And we had a chance to interact with the other almost 30 people or 30 people at the time, 31 during that training period of about three months, if I recall, very intense on language like language, which I enjoyed a lot. It was every day the Bengali language was taught along with history and culture, and we had the opportunity to hear from people on both sides of the religious segments, you might say. And it was at that time East Pakistan was 80 percent Muslim and maybe 20 percent of Hindu and in a few percent of Buddhists and Christians as well. So we needed to understand the relationship and the history of the subcontinent, what the Indian, India had gone through with partition. And for many of us, it was the first time we had in-depth discussions of the conflicts and the potential things that we needed to be careful of, that we couldn't we needed to know how to eat and how to eat with our hands and how to welcome each other, welcome one another.

McMAHON: [00:10:16] But also that the understanding between the religious elements was delicate, to say the least. And that had come out in during partition in 1947. And they were still, I think, some residual parts to that. But going

back to Putney, it was three months of very intense. I did very, I thought very well in language because I enjoyed the language part. I always have. And I enjoyed working and getting to know the volunteers. We didn't know where we were going to go. I had my first assignment was to a place in northern East Pakistan, which is called Thakurgaon was so remote that it was very hard to reach what I understood and some of the people from the experiment. Had visited there, and I got the impression that they were kind of amazed that this young 22 year old, fresh, young faced engineer was going to go up and see if he could make a difference. And it was probably a lot of skepticism on her part and probably others as well.

WAND: [00:11:31] You know, before before we take you to the country, I'd like to to see ask a little bit more about the training. It was good that you've covered the content. And what about physical training? That was an element in the '60s, a very important element.

McMAHON: [00:11:50] An important element and myself being what we might call over coordinated. I'm not an athlete. I was out on the soccer field for the first soccer game in which I broke my nose by Peter Von Christersen and a good friend and a very good player. And there were so many good players and among the men that were there. But I wasn't. And so I didn't I didn't jump to had the balls the right time. And I packed my head, my head hit his head and ended up with Dr. John Hoopas, who was trying to put my nose back together again. And he did as well as best he could. And then he said after it was all over, he said, I'm not a surgeon. And I was still a little bit of a kink in it. It may be when you come back with me, you may have to be broken again to make it straight. And I said vanity is not one of my strong points. And therefore I expected that people passing by my last remains might notice that. But who knows?

WAND: [00:13:00] I will say, Tom, now that you pointed out, I can see that I could see that little curve.

McMAHON: [00:13:06] It's a little crook there, in the nose.

WAND: [00:13:08] But I would never have noticed it had it not been part of your story.

McMAHON: [00:13:13] Oh, that's good. That was part of my history in the Peace Corps. Yes, the training included the athletics. That was when I say I went along with it to be part of the group, but when I was not a champion.

WAND: [00:13:30] So you played soccer. What other things did you do as part of this physical training?

McMAHON: [00:13:35] Swimming and those people who couldn't swim? They really were trying to learn how, because we knew that Bangladesh was a country of rivers and we had this impression that we needed to know that. And so there were there were experts who were brought in from the local fire company, I believe, and they and also the local emergency services. So they give us some good ideas about how to take care of yourself in a place where you were on your own. And we had to be aware that there were things that were especially dysentery, which was a very great concern because we knew that there had been at least one incident, I believe, in the Philippines where, you know, a volunteer had been lost. And so we were well aware of that. We needed to we needed to take care of making sure that we eat right.

WAND: [00:14:34] And when you say volunteer, in this case, it would have been a volunteer with the Experiment in International Living because the Peace Corps wasn't in the Philippines yet.

McMAHON: [00:14:44] There were nobody in the country at that time. I think, you know, I guess that's right. Maybe they came to us later, but it maybe was during the training. I forget exactly when it happened, but it was used to be sure that we understood that you have to boil your water and you have to treat it with tablets, which we did the iodine tablets. And of course, we had to worry about malaria. So we all had malaria. I was diagnosed with a heart murmur and that was, I think, early. And the doctors knew and could understand that I had something they call the heart. And they saw that I

had rheumatic fever when I was a child. I didn't have any remembrance of it. My mother didn't either. But when we came to the end of training, I was almost selected out because myself and another young lady who was, um, was she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and she had to stay home for another year before she could come over. But the doctor who had given the approval for both of us to go at the time, it was overridden by Peace Corps people in Washington to see these two individuals can't go. So I was not going to be able to go. I only found that out about three days before the plane was going to leave from New York City.

WAND: [00:16:16] While you were on home leave

McMAHON: I was on home leave.

WAND: So you finished training. And what when did you finish training? Do you remember?

McMAHON: [00:16:25] I think it was it was in early October. In mid-October, the plane left. I think it was October 21st. But I only found out that three or four days earlier that I might not be able to go. Well, then I got a call from the Peace Corps group in the experiment who said that they were Dr. John Hoopers, who is a doctor and, you know, in the area. So wonderful guy who is the one who helped try to set my nose. And he was the he personally drove to Washington and one night to argue the case for myself and for the other young lady. And from what I understand it, he got the message that Sargent Shriver was at a reception or a dinner or something, and he went out there and made the case face to face, face fo face, made the case face to face. And. And I think Shriver then understood that that hope was made a good, strong argument that he was going to provide me with a what they call prophylactic dose of penicillin that I would take it with me. And I take a capsule every day while I was there, and that would prevent recurrence. And it was a huge bottle and a very, very large.

McMAHON: [00:17:50] And so that was the deal was made that I could go. But the other young lady would have to stay for a year at least. So I, I was

nervous about that, but I wasn't sure that I had it was going to be able to go and therefore it was getting close to the date of leaving. And I got a call from one of the people, the Peace Corps staff and the Experiments staff, we said the plane is tomorrow at 2:00. And I said, I don't know what to do. I haven't gotten total approval yet from Peace Corps. So she said to me, get on the plane and go to New York, bring your bring your luggage with you, and we should know. And so I did. And I boarded the plane my first time on an airplane in Rochester and flew to an engine. You know, Decota DC three, we call them goony birds, to New York City, and went into the hotel and saw one of the volunteers. And he said to me, Tom, I'm so glad you're coming with us. And I think it was Rachel or Kiki McCarthy. I said I really I said I didn't even know that. They said, no, go upstairs. And I went up and found I could go. And so I was elated and I thought, this is wonderful because I thought if I couldn't go, I thought my life would be ruined, you know? Oh, my God. I'd have to go back.

WAND: [00:19:29] End of your life. I can figure it out, you know, what to do next. So when you flew from Rochester, were you flying did you fly to Idlewild, which was the former name of the Kennedy airport?

McMAHON: [00:19:42] I think it was. Yes, I think it was. I would have remembered that. Um, yeah. And this is the first time on a plane. But, you know, we say at the Henry Hudson hotel and in New York and I the next day we got up and we went and we're standing in line and got on the plane. And I remember distinctly sitting on this plane of the 747, you know, that we thought was a magnificent airplane at the time, long since updated, but it was just wonderful jet and I sat down and I buckled up that seat belt and I thought to myself, nobody was going to get me out of that seat.

WAND: No matter even if they came on and said, you're out of there.

McMAHON: Yeah, they would have had to drag me out. I wouldn't have I wouldn't have gone up voluntarily. It would have been one of those things would be an incident. He refused to get out of that seat. And fortunately, the plane the door closed and the plane took off and we started flying out of the ocean

and I knew that we were Ok. And twenty four hours later, a long, long ride, we landed in the tarmac. Well, first of all, to Calcutta, which was a shock because when you landed Calcutta and I think it must have been very early in the morning, we got there. There were people out sweeping the runways, women that were crouched down with a broom and they would sweep the runways and just sweeping in a few feet at a time and look and you think to yourself, what is going on here? And so our first glimpse of what we were going to find out more detail.

McMAHON: [00:21:33] We then boarded another small plane to Dhaka and stepped off that onto a hot tarmac. And we were all dressed for winter because it was October weather when we left. And of course, we were just drenched in sweat and we were tired. And there was a few people from the embassy that welcomed us in. A couple of, um, their names were Cavanaugh. I think we just coincident, um, that was my mother's maiden name, a Cavanaugh. And we were assigned to their place that we could sleep over for the night, you know, in an air conditioned room. And we had a nice meal and the shower was just wonderful. And then we, that was our first day in Pakistan. It was a Sunday when we woke up in a few of us were at that time practicing Catholics and went to the church and we walked down. I remember the down to the church and listen to the boys and girls were singing and in the Catholic Church and participated. And then the next day or two, we we got together and some of us were sent to homestays in in Dhaka itself. And so I was in that first group to stay with, you know, a family of Bengali family in Dhaka. He was a lawyer and he was he and his wife. And they had a daughter who was a little younger than I, not too much. And, um, they were very kind to us. And I think we stayed there for maybe ten days.

WAND: [00:23:28] Two of you were there?

McMAHON: [00:23:30] It was just myself.

WAND: [00:23:30] Oh, you're by yourself.

McMAHON: [00:23:33] So we were all each individual. Each one of us went to a different location. We had a homestay.

WAND: [00:23:38] And so how, what language did they speak English or were you then on your own or?

McMAHON: [00:23:44] They spoke really good English.

WAND: [00:23:45] Didn't have to rely on your Bengali.

McMAHON: [00:23:48] Very good English. And he was he was Muslim. And a surprising part of it was his wife was Hindu, most amazing. And he was he was quite a jokester. And he took me he took me to a party one night and we were there with a mixed group of Muslims and Hindus that were in the professional elevation society that he was at. And somebody handed me a drink and I thought it was just soda. And I took a little whiff of it and it was scotch. And I thought to myself, my goodness, I can't be drinking. This is a Muslim country. This will make a bad impression. And his name was, um, Shaukat Ali Khan. His name was Shaukat Ali Khan. He was a lawyer, defense lawyer. And he said when I put it down, he said, Tom, that's very expensive. You can't waste that. And so I had to drink it, you know.

WAND: [00:24:53] And he wasn't offended. So he did he have any alcohol as a Muslim?

McMAHON: [00:24:59] I think he did. He gave it, I think, stretching or stretching things a little bit. But what we did during that, I think it was two weeks in the home stay together. Um, after that, we went to, um, Cumilla got on the train and we during during the homestay, we stayed at the home of the Bengali family and we slept there at night. And then during the day we'd ride our bikes to a place where we'd have some more training in local customs and history and the geography of the country, that sort of thing. And it was it was very good. It was really good in that we took the train to Cumilla about I think it was two weeks later. And that was the Academy for Village Development, which was a magnificent operation under the

direction of it was Pakistani by the name of Dr Hamid Khan, who became really famous later on and who was was, as I say, was Pakistani, who was assigned to Bangladesh, and he grew a great love for the Bengali people and the Academy for Village Development was a was becoming a resounding success internationally. People knew about it and they knew about is his background. He had been with what we'd call the Indian civil service many years before that, before partition, which was an extremely well respected and efficient organization, the ISI, as it was called. And it was the men and women, I guess primarily men who were mostly men, maybe 99 percent who were members of the ISI. They were given special special treatment. And I respect his his job was to do economic and community development and in various villages around the commercial area. So it became a test area for for health issues, for for for women's issues and very advanced at the time. When you think about this and for experiments in India and rice growing and working with Japanese consultants who helped the Bengalis look at the opportunity to do a third rice crop, a rice crop and management of the resources and as well as health and nutrition. So it was it was way ahead of its time and all of us were excited to be part of that. So that were there were there were many of us that, you know, we loved what was happening. And we just learned about this at Cumilla. And the first couple of weeks, three weeks we were there, but we weren't all assigned there and was just that we learned about all those great things they were doing. So my assignment at that point was to leave and go up to the university town called Rajiv Shah University.

WAND: [00:28:19] So, you spent three weeks in Cumilla?

McMAHON: [00:28:25] About three weeks, if I remember. But there were two were three, maybe maybe three or four people stayed there. One of the was doing engineering and other was doing working with the women's issue. And I was I was working and so with the farmers. And another was Africa was mostly helping with construction, I believe.

WAND: [00:28:51] So that the location that you were sent, what is the name?

McMAHON: [00:28:55] Cumilla. That that was where we had that, that the academy, the Academy for Village Development was there.

WAND: [00:29:04] Right. But then you were assigned?

McMAHON: [00:29:06] Then I was assigned later on to go as most of us were, to different other locations. So I was I was sent up myself and three others. Three of us. Four of us. Four of us were sent up to Rajshahi and my job originally was to work at a technical school and teach electricity and physics to students who were, you know, like middle school kids, and they weren't very proficient in English. And I wasn't very proficient in Bengali. But I did my best. And I became a I found myself enmeshed in a political situation between the principal of the school and the teacher, and that they felt one felt that I was doing a good job and I felt that I wasn't and that I wasn't communicating as well. And I tried my best in both English and Bengali, and that wasn't trained as a teacher. I was trained as an engineer, but I enjoyed trying to work with the students. I had 20, I think I 20 or 30 in the class and but the supervisors who turned out it wasn't they were too much upset with what I was trying to do. It was that each one of them wanted some control over me and they didn't know who was supposed to be giving me direction. And one guy would give me some direction. So I learned a little bit about Bengali politics that way. I did that for about six months. And and we we lived in a compound outside of the city and we had bicycles and the four of us who lived outside and then the two girls, two of our women were working in the hospital in Russia. And so we go back and forth sometimes to visit them, not enough because they got very angry with us. When we didn't show up once in a while, we would be too busy with our men type work.

McMAHON: [00:31:21] And then some one of them would ride out after a week or two and say two or three weeks. And we haven't seen you guys and you better come in because we get a little stir crazy. So we go out and then and I discovered that I had some other things that I could help them with. And I had gotten new, um, new lights for the emergency room. And they were

getting it all wired up by local electricians. They asked me if I'd look at it. I looked at it. And since I was pretty familiar with this stuff and I, I said, you don't want to connect that up right now. I said, Why? I said, because the emergency lights are twenty four volt and you're going to put two hundred and twenty volts on it. And you were blow the whole thing up and be the last you see of it. So we stopped it and I was able to get Transformer to make the change and have it set up so that it could work and it worked OK. And then I sort of got the reputation of one when things went wrong tactically around the country. Then I got a chance to go and I'd hop on a train and go back down and help somebody with a new truck that had come in from Germany, which was a a portable machine shop. And part of it wasn't working correctly and asked me to help get it going, which I did. And that was fun. So I got a little troubleshooter right then. Well, then we were working with, as I say, with the students for that period of time. And then the new constitution was proposed and the students around the country went on strike almost universally. And so those of us who were teaching had to find secondary projects or other projects. And so the Peace Corps office in Dhaka had determined that I might be able to work out at a place called the Ganges-Kobadak project, which is an irrigation project on the Ganges River that flowed from India.

WAND: [00:33:25] How do you spell?

McMAHON: [00:33:26] Ganges-Kobadak. G-A-N-G-E-S-K-O-B-A-D-A-K. Ganges-Kobadak. And so there was already a power plant and a pumping station that had been donated by the Canadians and it was actually disassembled from, I think in Ontario, Canada, and like an erector set taken apart piece by piece and we put it together back in Bangladesh. It was kind of an amazing assembly, I think. And so that was that was intended to be an irrigation project. And they'd already had begun to dig a series of canals, large canals, to carry the main part of the water to different parts of this this new settlement. It was an area that was pretty large, probably be consider now sort of the size of a good sized county. If you thought about it in American terms and the then the water then was distributed to what they call secondary canals, which would drain smaller canals into the

individual like subdivisions, if you would think of housing development and an individual tertiary canals, which would be the third smaller canals, would end up the individual farm plots. So all of these was intended to provide a source of water during a time when there wasn't water in and take it from the river, the Ganges River, and it was under strict guidelines from at least at that time, the cooperative agreements between between East Pakistan and India for the amount of water that would be taken out of the river because it was very, very critical to Calcutta and to have enough water flowing down to be able to flow out and keep the mud from settling in down into Calcutta. Anyway, it was always a super controversial that if you took too much water, then it was going to be, you know, huge fight on both sides or would it be at one another's necks? But we were we knew how much water that we could pump out and that was being pumped in. The main engineers knew that my job was to work with the farmers and to set up a new project. By this time, I lived there about a year. So my project as newly appointed Peace Corps volunteer leader I had that was anointed as a leader.

WAND: [00:36:02] So this was it was your second year?

McMAHON: [00:36:04] My second year.

WAND: [00:36:05] Ok, so we're moving into. So you've spent about six months teaching.

McMAHON: [00:36:12] Six months teaching. And then in the next few months, I was a little handyman and then going around and learning and, you know, how things worked and helping troubleshoot troubleshooting projects here that helped in other areas. So I tried to be helpful to the people or our staff and in Dhaka. And I think I was then and then a bit then the next group was on its way into this irrigation project and they were going to need places to stay. So I. There were 16 volunteers coming in.

WAND: [00:36:49] Oh, this is the next group of Peace Corps?

McMAHON: [00:36:50] Yes. Next group of Peace Corps volunteers.

WAND: [00:36:53] So East Pakistan II, if you will.

McMAHON: [00:36:55] That's right, East Pakistan II. And so they came in and I think it was 16 and two of them were women who were stationed at the hospital and in a clinic. And then the other 14 were in when I say six different locations were two each and they were out kind of spread out in the whole area, that that was the reach of the canal system. The network I was like I say, is county like a county wide system. And there were two that stayed in town and it had some function in town. And I was in town as well. And I was assigned a jeep. This is 1962. Too early to maybe. Ah, but so I had a jeep and it was kind of unusual. And first of all I had a small scooter in the jeep and my job was to, to get to make sure I get to each of those other six sites once a week and bring the mail and bring kerosene and bring any supplies that they needed to soap or just to make sure they were still alive and that they were OK because we wanted to be sure they were good. Everybody is healthy. So I did that. It was a little resentment on their part of thinking, who is this guy? Who is the first year? He's only been here a year. And I was I was pretty hot stuff because I could get by pretty well in the language, at least get around and drive and knew how to drive on the wrong side of the road, not getting killed. And so but I got along was mostly pretty well with the second group. And so they were they were sort of my charge.

WAND: [00:38:39] Where was that?

McMAHON: [00:38:41] That was in, there was an in a town called Kushtia. Kushtia was K-H-U-S-T-I-A [sic], I think it is. I may not have my spelling right, but it was Kushtia pronunciation. Kushtia was along the river where the river is dividing that river between India and Pakistan.

WAND: Ganges River?

McMAHON: Ganges River. And so, um, during that year, I forgot to mention that, um, it was Christmas in the first year. I go back a little bit and I wanted to visit my uncle in India. And so, ah, our leader, Bob Cherry, he was good enough to help get me permission to go, because it was not easy to go from East Pakistan to India, especially to get a visa, we were new. Nobody knew exactly what we were up to. There was a lot of suspicion that we might have been involved with CIA or that we might have been spying for the Indians. There was all kinds of rumors, but I was able to get a visa and then flew to Calcutta over Christmas and spent a few days with my uncle and flew into his town.

McMAHON: [00:40:01] And and it was, um. He was in a place called Jamshedpur. Jamshedpur in India, was a steel mining town. It's still producing town. And it was a very large contingent of people from Goa. And the Indians had not yet invaded and taken Goa, which they did subsequently know, a year or so afterwards. So Goa was an independent Portuguese colony. It was a tiny little colony on the west coast. But in this particular area there was a lot of Goans and they celebrated Christmas and it was a marvelous Christmas. It was one of my best. And I just I had such fun, you know, we just went from house to house and it was singing and eating and caroling and all this fun stuff and spending time with my uncle, who I loved dearly. And so it's been I think I spent about a week we could have there and went back to East Pakistan, but got while I was there and I visited my uncle twice. Um, well, again, for about a week or so, I had a chance to go in with him to the leper villages because he was at that time, um, trying to do something about the leprosy and had organized a project called the Damien Social Welfare Project named after Father Damien, who had been in in Hawaii. And I think I've done this many years ago.

McMAHON: [00:41:35] But in the leprosy project, I spent time which never we never, never forget, um, that my job was to be on the back of a truck and there was large bushels of wheat. It was bulgur wheat, it was called and bulgur wheat was sort of a poor substitute for rice. Once rice got low, people would eat the wheat what they needed, but the rice, the bulgur wheat was given by the United States to the Indians under a program called PL-480,

which was a food for work. Remember, you have some knowledge of this? Yes. You're shaking your head so you know some about it.

WAND: [00:42:22] It was a grand postwar exchange.

McMAHON: Yes.

WAND: And I worked in libraries and we received books from countries who received food from the United States.

McMAHON: [00:42:36] Yes. Yes. We do some kind of a there was an exchange of food for workers who worked on the roads. They would get paid in and wheat and bulgur wheat. And it was also some wheat available for the poorest of the poor. And my uncle at the time was working with Mother Teresa because they were close enough to Calcutta. So he would he would be getting recipients from there. But that that we bulgur wheat program was we did a lot of good, I think, in India and places like that, because a lot of construction was done and people were, you know, I paid in food, but my job in the lepers and the leper colony was the lepers would come up and they would have no hands, no fingers and hands. And all the ligaments in the nose and and the ears and hands would be gone. And a lot of them, no fingers would be. And it would be hard to walk because your feet were so sensitive that they if they stepped on something easily not know it and they die. So they'd have to be took pieces, all the tires, automobile tigers and cut them off, make shoes. But my job when they came was a Maxwell House coffee can you most of them had with a loop of wire across the top in India can there would be a piece of paper with the name of the person and the number of scoops of bulgur wheat they would get. And so my job was to there, hundreds of people would come and I would sit there and, you know, pick them up, find out two scoops, two scoops, and that would be under way.

McMAHON: [00:44:17] And that was that was what I did. And I, you know, got really sensitive to what was happening with the leprosy, leper colonies, which is still in very small amount. I think it's been reduced, but it's in Bangladesh

and in India as well, and I will be back later on today, Bangladesh and visited a leper colony there and spent time with them. But back to the '60s, the of the time, um, when I when I was back working with the project, you know, when I first started with the project, we didn't I only had a project of the volunteers on the various areas of the irrigation project. Um, my first assignment was in the power plant. And to and because I had worked in a power plant in this country was to help put together some maintenance packages. And I did I started to do it. I absolutely hated it. They said this is what I wanted to do. And Bob Terry, bless his heart, understood he was our leader and understood. He said that Tom needs to be working with the people, doing things, you know, and I needed to be in the village. I needed to be helping this new group and get away from this other more technically, just me developing packages of procedures. And I didn't I couldn't I couldn't do that. So to I then I began working with the villagers and what was a wonderful extension, agents. And the only way I could be credible is that I sought out the the experts from the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, FAO. And there was an expert there from Costa Rica and he was teaching the Bengalese. And I said to him, I need to take your class. He said, why? I said, I can't go out and work with them. And doing irrigation projects and deciding what's who needs water, who doesn't. And I can't do that because I know as much as they do. So I immerse myself in that. And soon I wish I was near the top of the class and understanding the whole irrigation process. And I could tell him I knew how to judge how much water was already in the land. And I, I knew when to give water when not two and different strains of rice, which would take it. So I was trying to keep up with them and I and I got some good respect from my irrigation workers who were there, who were the Bengalis working in that project. So when our new group came, I was pretty much up to speed on how to how to do some of the legwork in that project.

WAND: Right. Right.

McMAHON: [00:47:03] So not only did I deliver water in kerosene, but I also worked with the irrigation workers. Then I found out that some of the villagers really, really were we needed to do something about you, about sanitation.

And so I went to the USIS and I got myself a projector and a generator and got them shipped up. So I put it in the back of the jeep. And in the evenings, many evenings, we'd go out, we got dark and I'd go out into the village maybe 10, 15 kilometers out, and we'd set up the generator projector. And I had films in Bengali on sanitation and the latrines and washing your hands on the kinds of pathways of germs. And it was it was wonderful because people would come around and I mean, it's we're sitting in a room right now where there's a screen that's about the size that I had and the energy. And you can imagine if you get 50 people and 50 more and then 50 more and pretty soon 200 more, they're all in the back. And I can't see the film. They want to see it. And you have to come back the next day or another day.

WAND: [00:48:20] All right, technology.

McMAHON: [00:48:23] Mm hmm.

WAND: [00:48:24] Describe those films you borrowed from USIS.

McMAHON: [00:48:27] The first film was very professional done USIS film, which was when President Ayub Khan visited the United States and flew in in a Pakistani Air or Airways. PIA, Pakistan International Air, PIA. And it was it was in color and it was wonderful. And it was it was the language was Bangla and it was translated wonderfully in Bangla and the Bengalis absolutely loved it. Here was their president flying into the United States and its beautiful jet flying into Washington. And then he was shown traveling around Washington and they said that was you couldn't hear a thing that was so quiet and you watch at night cheering once in a while. But they watched and listened to every word and it was amazing. And so that was my that was my headline act.

WAND: [00:49:24] Right. That brought them in.

McMAHON: That brought them in.

WAND: But what kind of film was this?

McMAHON: [00:49:29] This was this was films that were produced.

WAND: [00:49:32] But I mean the technology, the film itself.

McMAHON: [00:49:33] Oh, the film itself was eight or sixteen millimeter. That was 16 millimeter, not eight. That was definitely 16. So I had gotten a projector that was available in Dhaka and they let me have it to use for this.

WAND: [00:49:52] So was there electricity?

McMAHON: [00:49:54] No, I had to bring a generator. OK, I got a generator and I bring it to you know, we'd set it up right off the truck and and crank up the generator and plug it in the projector and set up the screen. We could have the whole thing set up and set up the speakers on both sides. We set up in 20 minutes and we run for an hour and a half or so and it got late. And then we back it all up, put it back in a few days later, go to another place and do that so that we did it at night and during the day I was helping to get other stuff around. So that was, um, it was an incredible experience. And I, you know, had a, um, uh, a couple of young Bengalese my age who helped me with that. And then at night we would sometimes sit and just chat and talk about all kinds of things. And and, um, and I found that that was where I discovered that everybody's the same. And, you know, when I one time my Bengali friend, a young young man who was, um. He came and he had gotten a letter from his mother and he'd asked his mother about his mother, who was going to find him a bride, and he came to me and he said, Tommy, do you some good English. And so between English and Bengali, we communicated really well. Tommy said, mother is finding a bride for me. He says, I'm really worried.

McMAHON: [00:51:34] He said, I don't know what she's going to find for me. So he said, you need to, you know, write a letter back to her and say that you were concerned and you you know, you're looking for this, that or whatever. And so this letter, a letter comes back from his mother and he

reads it and his mother says to him, um, how can you possibly think that your mother would not do the best thing she could do for you? This was in Bengali translated English. I know you like no one else in the world knows you. And I know exactly the kind of person who you should marry, therefore don't have any concerns and don't be any anguish about it. I will find the right person came in there, read that and looked at him and I said that would be any mother in the world. I said, that would be my mother to me and your mother to you. You said there's connections. You know, I said it's all the same with that same maternal instinct. I know you so well, then I'm not going to. And so that was the arranged marriage. Yes. And I said, how does it work so well?

McMAHON: [00:52:40] You know, it seems to be arranged marriages work pretty well. You said works because the mothers know what's on both sides and the woman and then the mothers would talk to each other of, you know, and then finally kids get together and say, oh, they're pretty close. Amazing, amazing story.

WAND: [00:52:58] So did his mother find him the right partner?

McMAHON: [00:53:01] Yes. Yes, he did. And she did. And I would back 30 years later and then forty years later and found them each of those two times and found out the tragedies. His first wife had died. She had even an accident. They had disappeared to Calcutta and get some surgery and she didn't make it and he got married again. He had a couple of children that he introduced to me and we kind of relived old times both times I would back. Um, but that was so we did for two years. And it was I guess the second year was the most fulfilling for me because of the interaction I had with the villagers and the and the agricultural workers who were young Bengalis my age, who we called the. The equipment around it was a little bit of fertilizer, not much, they didn't want to use too much chemical fertilizers, too expensive, and they couldn't do much with it, but it was primarily just getting the crop right. Timing right, irrigation right. And making sure that the farmers knew what they were doing in dealing with the irrigation project. They hadn't done this before. So then, uh, then I as I say, I

helped. I found I found another place where the sterilizers that were being used were not working very well in the hospital. So I found out that I if I could fix the sterilizer. So I ended up fixing sterilizers a lot so that otherwise you'd get the hepatitis. And that was pretty rampant.

WAND: [00:55:02] So this was repairs on these are little appliances like?

McMAHON: [00:55:11] There were things that looked like crockpots and they were they were made in West Pakistan and they were very cheaply made. And they're not good quality. And so they they were sent over. And the needles that were to be sterilized. So they wouldn't bother sterilizing a lot of times. And sometimes they use the same needle over and over again. You know, dip it in water. And it was it was clear that it was just just hepatitis all over. I see, so that was the you became a very we became very tight knit group of the 20, turned out 29, cause two had left at some point. And so we loved getting together and going occasionally to the main city, Dhaka. And we had our our in our periods where we'd be invited sometimes to people who don't have beer or so if someone would get us get us into the New American club or able to do that. And that was that was once in a while. And so one time we I got one guy brought us up three, two or three cans of beer, one time up to Russia. I announce it and I'd had a beer and a long time. And I like I, I got to know, like beer and so I saved that. I put it we had a refrigerator, we had a little refrigerator that was run on kerosene. Oh yes. And you remember that.

McMAHON: [00:56:49] And we might have had the same thing. And I found out that we started it initially, couldn't get it to work, took it upside down and let it sit upside down for a day or two and then turned upside down to get to work. It was like resetting computer and at the same time, reboot, reboot the computer, reboot the refrigerator and light the thing up at the bottom. And it would keep our snakebite medicine cold because we had snakes in the area, which were pretty, pretty dangerous.

WAND: Did anyone get bit?

McMAHON: No, no. We had snake bite kits and we kept them. Like I say, I don't remember anybody got bit. But we were we were very careful with that in the Bengalis were even more so because they didn't have access to snakebite kits. But if we'd be out on a jeep driving along or even walking along and we'd be a group of Bengalese and you see snakes slithering along, there would be like a riot. They would pick up every piece of clod of dirt they could and they chase after and try to kill the snake. And it would be like they would descend on it because they were terrified. They knew exactly what would happen if they got bit. But we tried to avoid that. It was small stakes. Snakes and snakes. They were called the crates. It's and it would be up in the straw hat on the top of the buildings.

WAND: [00:58:09] The roof of the house?

McMAHON: Roof of the house, yeah.

WAND: But did they bite? Were they venomous?

McMAHON: [00:58:16] The crates were very venomous. And so we had too many problems with that. Generally we lived in what they call paca housing, which is which was like cement, didn't always have. My two daughters who were in Peace Corps later on, they lived in these kind of houses in Africa where they could hear this stuff up above them. But, um, during that period, we tried to work with each other, help each other, and we had a lot of pressure that nobody would go home. And so nobody at the end of the period of time, he said, the 29 of us, there were two that dropped out during training. So 29 went over and 29 came back. Two years later, we didn't lose anybody.

WAND: That's quite usual.

McMAHON: There was a lot of pressure. And so I put pressure on a couple of the guys and we put undue pressure on. And I said, you can't do this. You're not leaving. No, we're not going to let you go. But nowadays, a lot more volunteers leave.

WAND: [00:59:25] So it has either of those guys that you pressured into staying. Have they ever thanked you for doing that?

McMAHON: [00:59:35] I think I think he did.

WAND: [00:59:37] They were pleased with that?

McMAHON: [00:59:39] They went through the periods of down, you know, some depression and he got through it. Yeah, they were glad you could look back and say they did it.

WAND: [00:59:48] So, well, here we are. It sounds like close to the end of your two years there.

McMAHON: [00:59:54] Yes. At the end of the two years then I, uh, I had applied for a Ford Foundation fellowship while I was there. And I got accepted to Penn State with a fellowship that allowed me to go to Penn State for two years or I got back and get a master's degree in nuclear engineering. And I took nuclear because I felt that that was going to be the power source for a developing world. And as it turned out, it wasn't so much because even in this country, we had a long problem of adoption. And even though I never came back, I worked. After I got a graduate degree in nuclear engineering, I worked and helped design and build and start up nuclear power plant. So I became pretty good at that and but I, you know, coincidentally ended up in back and forth to Japan doing those kind of things for many, many years and then started my own company after that. That's a different story that we want to concentrate on Peace Corps.

WAND: [01:00:56] Right. Well, but these are irrelevant, aren't they? You know, interrelated. So, uh, any memorable things you want to reflect on or say about the Peace Corps, those two years themselves?

McMAHON: [01:01:14] It was the, um, the two years was a chance. I said when people ask me where I'm from, I said I was born and raised in Rochester, but I

grew up in Bangladesh. And they say, how can that be? I said, that's where I grew up. And it was that ability, the opportunity to be with people who are totally different from you, who are different to you, culture, different climate, different, everything different. It was why and to be aware, to be aware of what India and Bangladesh have. I have my brother in law is from South India, married my oldest daughter who served in the Peace Corps in West Africa. And she subsequently, she and I traveled one on one through India and Bangladesh and West Africa, as I did with my other two daughters at various times. So we are a traveling family. We love to do this, but my my son in law, he said, Tom, India and Bangladesh is an assault on all the senses at one time.

WAND: Sights, sounds and smells.

McMAHON: [01:02:26] Yes, everything. Sights, sounds, heat, smells, discomfort, whatever it is, all comes at you at one time. And yet to be able to handle that and to be able to accept it and to be able to say to yourself, look at where we are. We're sitting in a beautiful air-conditioned place. We got light 24 hours a day. We don't have to worry about electricity going off. We don't have to worry about the water we drink. We don't have to worry about the food we eat in general and the medicines we take and all the things that we take for granted. There's nothing new in most of the places, nothing. So all the experience of a Peace Corps, myself and my two daughters and don't having an experience of it as well. We've learned that no one, you can live very, very modestly with almost nothing, and you don't need all the accouterments that we think we do. And secondly, find our people are exactly the same, exactly the same. And I think deep down inside the emotions, the wanting a good life, wanting the best for your family, your children, and they just want to you want to want you want you want to live and be happy. That's it everywhere. Seems like a real goal and it's certainly made it difficult to do that. And so in the developing world, so when I hear stories of other volunteers, I'm always amazed that I didn't do enough. I just think I didn't do enough.

WAND: [01:03:58] So you came home and did a master's in nuclear engineering and you went into the nuclear engineering field, if you will, the nuclear energy field.

MCMAHON: Yes.

WAND: And so tell us just a few highlights then from that.

McMAHON: [01:04:12] Well, I became. Well, after I did that and I did that for 15 years and I coincidentally had gotten involved in the design and construction of a of a nuclear power plant in my hometown was very coincidental.

WAND: In Rochester?

McMAHON: So I ended up going back to Rochester after many years and then helping build and start up a nuclear plant. And the people coming to work in that plant were people had worked with years earlier in the old plants. And so this was great fun doing that. So I travel and after that, I traveled to Japan several times. I became the head of the department, Chief Electrical Engineer, it was called. The nuclear engineering company I worked with was called Gilbert Associates in Reading, Pennsylvania. And I did that till I was 40. And that oh, I have to tell you, this other time that happened in '62. I was in Bangladesh during the Cuban Missile Crisis and we were hearing it on the newspaper or on the radio, these people. And one day in the middle of crisis, a Jeep pulled up in front of my house and said, Are you Mr. McMahan? And I said, yes. He said, the governor would like to see you. And the provincial district engineer, but he was in charge of the whole area as a district engineer, was like the county commissioner, you know, so he said, he'd like to see you. So put me in car, went down, and I walked into his office, big desk. He looked at me, he said, Mr. McMahan, what is your president trying to do, blow up the world? We are not in favor of this. We want, I want you to convey a message immediately to your ambassador and to the consul general and then to the president that we are we do not want this to happen. And he said, why is your president doing this? And being sort of young and brash, I said my president doesn't

often consult me on these decisions. And he said, I understand how that could be, but I want you to convey the message, which I did. I sent a message back and said that the district engineer wants the president to know that he's.

WAND: [01:06:31] Not in favor.

McMAHON: [01:06:32] Not in favor of this crisis going on. So do something about it.

WAND: [01:06:36] Right. Right.

McMAHON: [01:06:37] That was one of the more memorable times. Then I had another occurrence where there was a whole town went on strike and they were protesting something for the government and no one was supposed to drive. And someone in my second group was driving. They learn to drive a jeep and they were driving and they encountered a large group of people and they were making a lot of noise and they stopped the jeep and somehow one of them had a stone or brick. And I don't think it was thrown, but I think it was dropped and it damn near opened the skin. It was bloodied the skin of one guy's leg. So it might have been dropped. I had specific instructions that I had to report anything like this back to Karachi. So I did. And I called and I said, I have to report this. And he's been he's been slightly hurt. It's OK. A doctor looked at his bandage and everything's fine. What wouldn't you know, in Time magazine the next week there was a report of this incident.

WAND: Peace Corps volunteer hurt in East Pakistan.

McMAHON: And I think I might have been named or who is the, you know, reported that the Peace Corps volunteer had been hurt on this. I thought, oh my god. Mountain out of a molehill.

WAND: [01:07:56] So you stayed with this same company then for fifteen years. And then?

McMAHON: [01:08:07] Then I started my own company.

WAND: [01:08:08] And then you started your own company. And by this time you were living in Reading?

McMAHON: Yes. Yeah.

WAND: What took you to Reading in the first place?

McMAHON: The engineering company. The large company.

WAND: [01:08:17]. I see. So you moved, right.

McMAHON: [01:08:19] And then when I started the company, I eventually took on two partners and we built it to about 120 people. And then we became pretty successful. And I determined at that time when I was 60, I was going to leave and we trained the next group of people. We hired not just any engineers, but we hired guys who knew how to run a business and we had to learn how to run a business, too. So when I did that and and then I became the marketing the outside guy, and so I became involved in a chamber of commerce and politics and then got. It got to help people on their political campaigns and always was inclined that way anyway, so when I did leave, um, that business and, uh, we, um, there was an opportunity to run for mayor of Reading, which happened in 2003 and I was elected in 2004. Four years later, became very active in the Obama campaign and eventually was able to spend time with candidate Obama, Senator Obama. My most memorable time was a bus ride, which was just he and I and one Secret Service guy and one staffer. And we were about a half an hour together going from one part of Pennsylvania to back to Reading.

WAND: [01:09:44] And what was that, 2007?

McMAHON: [01:09:47] That was in '07 for the '08 campaign coming up. He was just before.

WAND: [01:09:50] He was starting his campaign.

McMAHON: [01:09:51] And so we had a wonderful conversation. And I tell him about some of this. He asked me about the city. We talked about Peace Corps. We talked about the city. He talked about things we needed in the city. And I talked about a literacy program which started a whole bunch of things about that. I was very happy with the literacy program I was filling with some of the inner city kids.

WAND: [01:10:16] In Reading?

McMAHON: [01:10:17] In Reading. It was called Cops and Kids. It was a policeman working reading with kids.

WAND: [01:10:22] Did you help set that up?

McMAHON: [01:10:23] I did, but I borrowed it from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, who borrowed it from Racine, Wisconsin. And I got to know, everybody in that loop. I told the president this is a great thing that we should do all over the country. Later on, one of my major friends and I was that I had become and a certain point president of the Pennsylvania Municipal League. So all the mayors were I was president my last year. And so he came to me and said, what did you talk to the president about? And I said I talked about our literacy program. He's said, literacy program, I want to talk to you about money, get money for our projects! I said, yeah, I had to do this.

WAND: [01:11:04] So how long were you mayor?

McMAHON: Eight years.

WAND: Eight years. And is it like a term limit?

McMAHON: [01:11:09] No, no. There was a limit on my ability to keep doing 24/7.

WAND: Right.

McMAHON: I couldn't do it.

WAND: [01:11:15] So that was 2012 that you do finished your mayor position. So we're about to, we're about to bring closure here. And before we do that, is there anything that you would like to reflect on before we close this?

McMAHON: [01:11:44] Yeah, only the fact that. Well, I have three daughters, the oldest daughter, when she graduated college, decided to go in Peace Corps and I had never pushed it at all. So she went to West Africa in Guinea-Bissau and was there for twenty three months, less than the total term. And there was it was a revolution. She managed to be evacuated. Thank you to our U.S. government got her out. And then my she came home safely and my middle daughter then joined the Peace Corps and went to Cape Verde Islands for two years and became a teacher. She was interested in theater so she formed theater groups. Eventually, she came back to the U.S. and got her master's and Ph.D. in African theater. And so she's teaching at UC Santa Barbara. And so we became immersed in Peace Corps type things. So that was the strongest. And my love for travel was never diminished.

WAND: [01:12:46] Right. And have did you visit your Peace Corps daughters when they were?

McMAHON: Absolutely.

WAND: And how many times have you been back to Bangladesh?

McMAHON: [01:12:54] Twice. I went back twice. Once after about thirty years ago and after four years.

WAND: [01:13:01] So that means it's been a while since you've been back.

McMAHON: [01:13:06] Last I was back is 2002. 16, 17, 18 years ago, and I went back and I want to do some of the visiting and I stopped to see the Peace

Corps director and I also asked if there was any travel around the country. Is there anything I can do to help? They told me of a couple of cases where there some volunteers having problems. And what I stop and talk to them.

WAND: [01:13:31] And this was in Bangladesh?

McMAHON: In Bangladesh, which I did.

WAND: Yeah. Is Peace Corps still in Bangladesh?

McMAHON: [01:13:36] Oh, long gone. And they left year after that, shortly after I was there, but not because of me. Yeah, but I did spend some time with a couple of volunteers who were having some issues. So I think that might have helped.

WAND: [01:13:50] Right. Well, Tom, this has been a great opportunity to hear your stories and learn about your Peace Corps experience and how it's impacted your life and how you grew up in Bangladesh.

McMAHON: [01:14:03] You that definitely you know, it was a great experience. I wish I wish it was the way that we could, uh, somehow bottle it, or convey it in a meaningful way so people get a glimpse of what it was like, what the value of it is. And it's hard to it's hard to say that. And it's hard to tell people sometimes in a short amount of time. But, uh, so I coordinate our sister city relationship with Germany right now. I've been doing this for years, so I'll be be over there and next month and I help with students back and forth.

WAND: [01:14:37] What city?

McMAHON: [01:14:38] Reutlingen, which is near Stuttgart. R-E-U-T-L-I-N-G-E-N. It's a city about a little bit bigger than Reading and which but I've become great friends with the mayor of Reutlingen. So we have exchange programs with students from our high school and the history museum and musical

exchange. And I've been really interested in, I love classical music symphony, so I'm trying to get what I want. My goal is to get Beethoven's Ninth and, you know, combination of Germans and chorus and orchestra and everything all together.

WAND: [01:15:30] Right. What a great dream. So hold that thought about how we can portray the Peace Corps experience most effectively. That is exactly what the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience wants to do. So with that, I'll end this interview and we can talk about the museum.

McMAHON: OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]