

**Charlotte Thompson Oral History Interview**  
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Administrative Information

**Creator:** Charlotte Thompson

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**Biographical Note**

Charlotte (Kelso) Thompson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Chile from 1969 to 1971 on a housing and social work project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Charlotte Thompson

August 14, 2010  
Madison, Wisconsin

By Robert Klein

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

KLEIN: [00:00:02] Today is August 14, 2010. This is Bob Klein, and I'm interviewing Charlotte Kelso Thompson, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in 1969 to '71 in Chile in a project that was self-help housing. So let's go back about a year before.

THOMPSON: [00:00:29] Oh wow. Let's see. I had been married in September of '68 and was at Yale working to support my husband through graduate school. And he needed to avoid the draft further. So we chose to go into Peace Corps.

KLEIN: [00:00:56] Ok, let's go. Where he done your undergraduate work?

THOMPSON: [00:01:01] I did my undergraduate work at St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

KLEIN: [00:01:05] At Saint?

THOMPSON: [00:01:06] Olaf.

KLEIN: [00:01:06] Oh, OK. What was your degree in?

THOMPSON: [00:01:11] Art, but headed for architecture.

KLEIN: [00:01:14] And where had you grown up?

THOMPSON: [00:01:17] I grew up in Decorah, Iowa, a small town of six thousand in the northeast corner of Iowa.

KLEIN: [00:01:23] One might consider it a rural community?

THOMPSON: [00:01:26] A small rural area, yes.

KLEIN: [00:01:27] And you go to high school there?

THOMPSON: [00:01:31] Yes, I did.

KLEIN: [00:01:34] Siblings?

THOMPSON: [00:01:34] I have two brothers and two sisters.

KLEIN: [00:01:37] So during high school, were you active in volunteer activities? What did you do in summers, get to do any travel?

THOMPSON: [00:01:50] No, I probably hadn't left the state of Iowa, except for Minnesota, maybe to Rochester or La Crosse, Wisconsin. I think I had to work every summer. I had to work to earn a little bit of money.

KLEIN: [00:02:06] Working at a store or something?

THOMPSON: [00:02:07] Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I was involved in, you know, Girl Scouts and church activities and typical civic kinds of things.

KLEIN: [00:02:19] Not 4-H kind of things?

THOMPSON: [00:02:20] No, we did not live on a farm. It was a town of six thousand.

KLEIN: [00:02:26] OK. Were you the first in the family to go on to college?

THOMPSON: [00:02:29] No, my father very deliberately left a insurance company to become treasurer of Luther College so that all of us could have a college education. He had not finished a four year, but a two year program.

KLEIN: [00:02:46] So as you're finishing high school, you're going to St. Olaf, which is close, not too far?

THOMPSON: [00:02:56] No. Yes. Two and a half hours north.

KLEIN: [00:02:58] And at that point, what is your goal?

THOMPSON: [00:03:01] Well, in high school, I was determined I was going to be an architect. But my parents didn't feel that I should go directly to an architecture program. And I basically had the choice to go to Luther College in my hometown or to St. Olaf, which was my mother's alma mater. So I was still determined to be an architect. So I went through St. Olaf in three years so that I could start architecture school as soon as possible.

KLEIN: [00:03:30] Where did the interest in architecture come from?

THOMPSON: [00:03:32] Well, in part, I suppose, I followed my father around as he was the sort of client for the college in the college buildings. So I don't know.

KLEIN: [00:03:44] Yeah, but it was there. So you zipped through St. Olaf in three years. During summers, you're working.

THOMPSON: [00:03:53] Right.

KLEIN: [00:03:55] And any travel?

THOMPSON: [00:03:56] No.

KLEIN: [00:03:58] So you finished you and your degree is in art. What happens at that point?

THOMPSON: [00:04:05] Well, at that point, I get married and my architecture is delayed. But with the understanding, I mean, I met my future husband at St. Olaf, and he was in an architecture program at Yale. So it was agreed that I would work to help him through school and then I would go to graduate school.

KLEIN: [00:04:27] Oh, OK. At what point through your time at St. Olaf do you remember when you first heard about the Peace Corps?

THOMPSON: [00:04:37] Oh, not exactly. I don't, I mean, it was a pretty cloistered school. I mean, yes, we knew Kennedy and Vietnam and all that kind of but, but we were so focused on academics. At least I was.

KLEIN: [00:04:50] Had you known anyone who had been in the Peace Corps?

THOMPSON: [00:04:54] No.

KLEIN: [00:04:54] Oh, OK. So you then transferred. You go over to New Haven.

THOMPSON: [00:05:00] Right.

KLEIN: [00:05:00] You're working in your husband's going to architecture school. Did he finish?

THOMPSON: [00:05:06] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:05:07] But you didn't start.

THOMPSON: [00:05:08] No.

KLEIN: [00:05:10] Instead, you joined the Peace Corps.

THOMPSON: [00:05:11] That's right.

KLEIN: [00:05:12] And essentially, it was a sense of continuing. Did he feel he was safer from the draft in the Peace Corps than at architectural school?

THOMPSON: [00:05:22] Well, I mean, once you finished that, deferment was over. You had no choice really.

KLEIN: [00:05:28] Yeah. So it was pretty much a done deal then in both of your minds. Do you recall applying, filling out the application?

THOMPSON: [00:05:42] No, I don't.

KLEIN: [00:05:43] That's all right. Among other things that often they ask if you have an area of preference and if you have any.

THOMPSON: [00:05:50] Oh, I do remember that part, because we basically said anywhere else but Latin America, because we thought that was too close.

KLEIN: [00:05:59] And they may have also asked you to indicate whether you had any facility in the foreign language.

THOMPSON: [00:06:06] And that was French at the time, you know, from college. And that wasn't, I mean, I guess I was never great in languages, so I didn't consider that an issue.

KLEIN: [00:06:16] And your husband?

THOMPSON: [00:06:18] Neither.

KLEIN: [00:06:20] But he did have his degree in architecture?

THOMPSON: [00:06:22] Right.

KLEIN: [00:06:27] What was your family's reaction about?

THOMPSON: [00:06:29] Oh, my family, well on the one hand, they thought we were going halfway around the world, but on the other hand, you know, it was second best to being a missionary. So it was OK.

KLEIN: [00:06:43] And it wasn't Africa.

THOMPSON: [00:06:44] Right.

KLEIN: [00:06:49] So you got an invitation. And what was the invitation from Peace Corps?

THOMPSON: [00:06:53] It was like less than six weeks later you were to be in Washington, D.C. and ship off. So it was very quick, I mean.

KLEIN: [00:07:03] Specifically you were being invited to Chile?

THOMPSON: [00:07:07] To be in the self-help housing program.

KLEIN: [00:07:10] And was the idea that you were both going to be.

THOMPSON: [00:07:13] Well, it was a couples program. It was geared. All of us in the group were couples. The man was to do the self-help program, and the woman was to be a social worker, of which I had no training.

KLEIN: [00:07:27] Right, right. It sounds like a 1970s program. But you had no hesitation. You accepted the invitation.

THOMPSON: [00:07:39] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:07:40] And in those days, I think they had already begun in-country training.

THOMPSON: [00:07:44] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:07:45] So where did, you staged in Washington?

THOMPSON: [00:07:47] Yeah. Three days in Washington, shots, glasses, off we were to Santiago.

KLEIN: [00:07:53] Now let's just talk briefly about Washington. They're all married couples in the group. How many total?

THOMPSON: [00:08:03] Must have been maybe 20 couples.

KLEIN: [00:08:06] Do you recall your impression? I mean, now it's you and your husband. Now you're in the midst of a bunch of other.

THOMPSON: [00:08:12] Oh, we were all very excited, and we've really quickly became friends with other couples, especially once we were in country we did that.

KLEIN: [00:08:22] So is it comfortable setting? It wasn't like, Oh, you know, they all look different than me or?

THOMPSON: [00:08:26] Not at all.

KLEIN: [00:08:27] OK. You flew down to Santiago. You recall your initial impression?

THOMPSON: [00:08:34] Oh, yes, yes. The first night we arrived, some current volunteers took us out to dinner. I don't know how we got to the restaurant, but um, it was in Providencia, the fancy part of Santiago. And we thought, what in the world are we doing here if they can have this fancy part of Santiago? And they took us to a restaurant and they sort of suggested what we ordered. And I remember ordering *congriso*, which was very good. You know, growing up in the Midwest, I hadn't eaten a whole lot of fish, but it was one of those sort of in-house jokes about after they were done, we were done eating it and saying how great it was, they told us it was eel. So oh, OK. But you know, we thought, you know, this is ridiculous. I mean, if this life is this easy, you know, why am I here?

KLEIN: [00:09:34] Where were you staying at that time?

THOMPSON: [00:09:36] Well, they put us up very shortly, I don't know if that first night. Our training area was at the university extension sort of a center, which was out of town from Santiago but had a dormitory. And that's where our intensive language training was.

KLEIN: [00:09:56] And Peace Corps had been in Chile for a while, right?

THOMPSON: [00:10:00] Right. Since the beginning, actually.

KLEIN: [00:10:01] Was it a big project?

THOMPSON: [00:10:03] I think they probably had three hundred volunteers or something there at that time.

KLEIN: [00:10:08] And you've been greeted by the Peace Corps staff when you arrived.

THOMPSON: [00:10:12] Mm hmm.

KLEIN: [00:10:15] So you're now out at this extension and training begins.

THOMPSON: [00:10:19] Right.

KLEIN: [00:10:22] Training usually has several components. I would assume the major component was language.

THOMPSON: [00:10:27] That's correct.

KLEIN: [00:10:28] Can you describe how?

THOMPSON: [00:10:29] Well it was interesting in that it was, I believe, the first of its immersion type. There was a Princeton professor, I don't remember his name, who had decided that the best way to learn language is not to translate. So what they had done is he was there for a while, didn't stay

for six weeks, but was to pick people who had had some, I mean, they had worked in the *poblaciones* where the previous volunteers had, but they knew no English. So we were basically, after breakfast and until dinnertime, not allowed to speak English.

KLEIN: [00:11:07] From day one?

THOMPSON: [00:11:09] From day one. And it was pretty effective. It really was quite effective.

KLEIN: [00:11:15] Not allowed to. Were there people monitoring whether you sneak off and?

THOMPSON: [00:11:19] I mean, they couldn't prevent you, you know, but yeah, I mean, it was the intent, and we tried to stick by it, but I mean, and it was very, it was like baby talk. I mean, for the first couple of weeks, we were just pointing to things and repeating words. And I mean, it made no sense to us at all. And those of us who, you know, may not be English majors but wanted some structure of grammar and some structure of something were just pulling our hairs out with conjugating verbs. And, you know, say, you know, please tell me how this works. Don't just tell me to repeat it, but in effect, you know, my grammar's not great, but I don't translate. Once I shift gears, I don't translate. And that was precisely the point.

KLEIN: [00:12:05] So with the instructors, I mean, if you would point and the instructor might say, *agua*.

THOMPSON: [00:12:11] That's right. And then I'd say *agua*.

KLEIN: [00:12:13] And then you'd have to figure out how to get it into a sentence, right?

THOMPSON: [00:12:16] Exactly. Yep.

KLEIN: [00:12:19] That's incredible. So that was the core of the training.

THOMPSON: [00:12:23] That's right.

KLEIN: [00:12:24] For how many weeks?

THOMPSON: [00:12:27] Well, it got sort of divided up because I think it was supposed to be for 12 weeks or something. I don't remember exactly, but um, a Peter from New York. The fellows would play soccer out in front of the dorm at break time or whenever they did that. And El Mercurio, which no, it wasn't El Mercurio. The newspapers in Santiago. I mean, there's the middle of the road and then there's maybe a little to the right and then there's several to the left. And I think it was one of the ones to the left, not the right one, came out and photographed the guys playing soccer, which you wouldn't think was a big deal, right? But Peter was wearing fatigues and title of the newspaper the next day, CIA Training at Agricultural Dorm. We were kicked out instantaneously.

KLEIN: [00:13:28] Oh my goodness.

THOMPSON: [00:13:29] From that facility because the university couldn't, you know, deal with bad press. And so we were put into a monastery or convent kind of building.

KLEIN: [00:13:39] Who explained to you what was going on?

THOMPSON: [00:13:41] Well, by then we, the teachers, I mean, there was one. Once the Princeton professor left, there was a guy that was sort of in charge of the program.

KLEIN: [00:13:52] An American?

THOMPSON: [00:13:53] Yeah. And I mean, he, you know, the photograph was fairly obvious and the CIA's in the title, but, you know.

KLEIN: [00:14:02] No one from the Peace Corps office?

THOMPSON: [00:14:03] Well, yeah, they were connected with the Peace Corps office, yes.

KLEIN: [00:14:06] Did they come out and try to explain?

THOMPSON: [00:14:09] Yeah, I think so. But you know, we were, I mean, except for Peter, who was very politically savvy. Some of us were pretty politically naive as to the parties in Chile at that point. But we quickly learned and there wasn't any question of us staying. It was a done deal.

KLEIN: [00:14:30] Did anyone from the Chilean government come to your defense or say anything?

THOMPSON: [00:14:37] Not that I know of. But I mean, they might have been behind the scenes with Peace Corps staff folks but.

KLEIN: [00:14:43] Not that you were aware of.

THOMPSON: [00:14:44] I don't remember.

KLEIN: [00:14:45] But you were there on a program that the Chilean government had agreed to.

THOMPSON: [00:14:50] Oh yes.

KLEIN: [00:14:52] So you left the university extension and went to a monastery? Same language training continues?

THOMPSON: [00:15:00] More or less. It sort of began to then go into training as to your, what you were actually going to be doing.

KLEIN: [00:15:08] The technical skills.

THOMPSON: [00:15:09] More the technical stuff. I don't somehow remember much more language after once we moved. But, you know, so it wasn't, that part I didn't find very effective. I can't even remember much what they tried to do with social workers.

KLEIN: [00:15:25] Well, uh, when you shifted over to the monastery, you had already been in language training for what, four or five weeks?

THOMPSON: [00:15:33] Yeah, I think so.

KLEIN: [00:15:35] Did you have opportunities to get out of the monastery?

THOMPSON: [00:15:38] And yeah, we were on Saturdays or something, we some we were able to take public transportation into Santiago, and that was chocolate day and movie day.

KLEIN: [00:15:50] Do you recall trying to use your Spanish now with ordinary folks?

THOMPSON: [00:15:56] Then we had to negotiate our own way around Santiago. We were on our own.

KLEIN: [00:16:02] How did it go?

THOMPSON: [00:16:03] It was enough to get chocolate. I remember that.

KLEIN: [00:16:07] That's important.

THOMPSON: [00:16:10] It wasn't very good chocolate, but it was chocolate.

KLEIN: [00:16:14] And people seem to understand you?

THOMPSON: [00:16:16] As far as I can remember, because there wasn't, I mean, like in some of my later travels, there weren't people who spoke English. But you know, you can communicate a lot without language.

KLEIN: [00:16:26] Right. Now in the training then did the men split off from the women and do buildings?

THOMPSON: [00:16:34] I think at that point we did. And I think they actually went to some construction sites where they were doing self-help housing

because frankly, the program there in Chile, I mean, the Ministry of Housing was much more sophisticated than we are in the United States now as far as affordable housing. They had numerous programs. I mean, they did not need us as far as their housing program.

KLEIN: [00:17:00] Why were you there?

THOMPSON: [00:17:02] I think it was a deal. You know, we'll take your fertilizer if you take the Peace Corps volunteers or, you know, some. I don't know what the tradeoff was, but later that became a factor also.

KLEIN: [00:17:14] Was AID involved in any way in the housing program?

THOMPSON: [00:17:18] Not that I know of at that point. I think many years earlier, they might have been involved because there was a strong cooperative element to AID at one point.

KLEIN: [00:17:31] During the whole training period, was there any process of selection or was it assumed that you were in?

THOMPSON: [00:17:39] I don't remember ever feeling any pressure of being selected out. I do remember one couple left.

KLEIN: [00:17:46] Yeah.

THOMPSON: [00:17:47] I don't. It wasn't selection as far as I know.

KLEIN: [00:17:50] Ok. It's a relatively small group.

THOMPSON: [00:17:52] Yes.

KLEIN: [00:17:54] Did you have to go, were you interviewed by psychologists? Was there any psych testing at all?

THOMPSON: [00:18:02] It might have been, but I don't remember.

KLEIN: [00:18:04] Peer ratings?

THOMPSON: [00:18:06] Not that I remember.

KLEIN: [00:18:08] During the training period other than the language, a third component is often called area studies, where you learn something of the history and culture of the area. Was that done?

THOMPSON: [00:18:23] I think it was. I don't remember exactly how it was done, but it was sort of just part of the part of the discussions or something.

KLEIN: [00:18:37] Right. Most of the instruction was being done by Americans or Chileans?

THOMPSON: [00:18:43] Chileans.

KLEIN: [00:18:43] Other than language?

THOMPSON: [00:18:45] I think there might have been two or three Americans, but most of it was by Chileans.

KLEIN: [00:18:52] And at any point during training did someone from either the Chilean government or the Peace Corps come out and say, well, the project you're going to work on is this, you know, some definition of what it was you would expect to be expected to do?

THOMPSON: [00:19:10] Well at some point we were told what community we were going to, but we were all in the same program. So I don't think until we got to our sites, did we know that, you know, here's the camp of these people are being relocated to these houses and these are the houses you're going to be building because CORVI has an office in Ovalle, that's where you're going to be based out of.

KLEIN: [00:19:35] Right. CORVI?

THOMPSON: [00:19:36] CORVI was the subsection of the Ministry of Housing that we worked with.

KLEIN: [00:19:45] Oh, OK. So training comes to an end. Did you have any choice of the assignment?

THOMPSON: [00:19:54] Not that I remember.

KLEIN: [00:19:56] You were simply told you were going and were, well, you're always bound to be assigned someplace where there are other Peace Corps volunteers.

THOMPSON: [00:20:05] No, we were the only volunteers in that community.

KLEIN: [00:20:08] Well, with so many in the country, where were the others?

THOMPSON: [00:20:13] Most of them were in the south doing agricultural programs. We were in the north.

KLEIN: [00:20:17] Oh, OK. So you and your husband then get assigned to what?

THOMPSON: [00:20:23] Ovalle.

KLEIN: [00:20:23] Are you the only Peace Corps in the community?

THOMPSON: [00:20:29] Yep.

KLEIN: [00:20:29] How large a community?

THOMPSON: [00:20:30] Oh, it's, on market days it feels like maybe four thousand. On non-market days, maybe two thousand.

KLEIN: [00:20:44] Oh, well, that's all right. Before we get to the job, let's talk about living situation. And describe how you got from training to Ovalle. Did you have a chance to go out there before you moved in?

THOMPSON: [00:20:57] No. We got a bus ticket six hours north and I think the staff at CORVI there, there was three people at least.

KLEIN: [00:21:09] In Ovalle?

THOMPSON: [00:21:09] In Ovalle. I think one of them met us at the bus.

KLEIN: [00:21:13] So you at least expected.

THOMPSON: [00:21:15] Yeah, yeah. And we were taken to.

KLEIN: [00:21:18] Did you have all your worldly possessions?

THOMPSON: [00:21:21] Well, we had our suitcase that came from the United States and we were allowed and they did a group purchase in Santiago of, I think it was a mattress and *estufa*, which is a little stove. A mattress and a stove. Those are the two things I remember.

KLEIN: [00:21:43] Did you carry that on the bus?

THOMPSON: [00:21:44] No, no. That was shipped up by a truck the Peace Corps arranged that arrived weeks later.

KLEIN: [00:21:51] Later. Ok, so now your first day, you're there, you're greeted.

THOMPSON: [00:21:55] Yes, and we're taken to a pension, a house where several people have rooms that are just, you know, staying there. So we have our room and the meals are part of the package. So we were very pleasantly pleased with our accommodations and then basically we didn't stay there hardly I don't think more than a week, because CORVI had already built one community where the houses, we call them *mediaguas* because they come in two parts. It's like basically three by six meters with a pitched roof one direction, and then later they build the other three by six and the pitch goes the other way. So there was a *mediagua*, I don't know how it got built because it was self-help. And so who built it? I'm not sure, but maybe the instructors showing the people how to build. There was an empty *mediagua* available to us and we went to live in that community. And then we were going to build

another community. Well, I mean, a couple of hundred houses is considered a community, a *poblacione*. So we very soon then had our own little house and began to add on to it.

KLEIN: [00:23:15] And is that close to the town, I mean?

THOMPSON: [00:23:17] Yes, we could walk to town.

KLEIN: [00:23:20] No, it's just this is about a week after you've arrived

THOMPSON: [00:23:24] About so, I think, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:23:26] Have you gone to work yet or?

THOMPSON: [00:23:29] My husband, Paul, yes, had already, you know, because the men basically built the houses on, if I recall, Wednesday nights and Saturdays. So he went with Louis to the new home.

KLEIN: [00:23:43] Your counterpart?

THOMPSON: [00:23:44] Yeah, his counterpart and, you know, just started, you know, watching them build panels and pitched in however he could. But the house designs and everything were already predetermined. The materials already arrived. The system was in place. He was just an extra hand.

KLEIN: [00:24:02] Let me ask a naive question. Why was a Peace Corps architect needed in that situation?

THOMPSON: [00:24:10] He was not.

KLEIN: [00:24:11] OK, so I assume at some point that he came to realize that.

THOMPSON: [00:24:17] Yeah, yeah. Well, we were still enjoying the experience.

KLEIN: [00:24:20] No, that's, yeah. So you've moved into the community or what will become the community as it's built. Do you remember your first weeks, how it went with the language?

THOMPSON: [00:24:36] It was funny because I remember one of the very first nights we were there, we were invited to a wedding in another one of these small homes. You know, we were obviously, I mean, it was sort of like, I don't even know you and I'm being invited to your daughter's wedding? Well, the reception there after, I distinctly remember the young woman and a very handsome young man. And you know, it was about the size of this dining room and there were chairs all around the outside, around the room. And I think there was some music and some maybe dancing or two couples at a time in the middle. And olives were served and you spit the pit out on the floor, which I was not used to, and wine was served and you passed the glass on to the next person, which I was not used to. But, you know, we were sort of considered honored guests, which I felt terrible about because here was the couple and they were the honored guests. We weren't. We were just gringos, you know. Why are we here? So, you know, we very quickly became, people wanted to pull us to there to show how they knew these new people. And the kids were my salvation because, you know, Senora Carlota, Senora Carlota, you know. Whenever I heard my name yelled, you know, I just ran and played with kids and, you know, whatever.

KLEIN: [00:26:06] So have there been Peace Corps in the village at all, any time? So you were the first? Ok, let's get, uh. How about your work?

THOMPSON: [00:26:23] Oh, well, see, I mean, really, the program was very sophisticated. I mean it, it created a community by building and the momentum of this process. So there was a immediately a *junta de vecinos*, a neighborhood association. It had a president and it had officers and there was a *centro de madres*, which was the mothers club. So I was assigned to the mothers club in the community where we were living, not the one that Paul was building with the other folks. And I mean, I can never remember, how embarrassing. I go to the meeting of the *centro de madres*, and they give me the list of the

names of the people because I'm now the person who calls roll or something. I mispronounced every single name on the list.

KLEIN: [00:27:17] You may have been the entertainment.

THOMPSON: [00:27:18] Exactly, that's what I was. And it became very apparent very quickly that I had nothing to teach them. But they could teach me how to make baskets, you know? So it was amusing, and they quickly realized that.

KLEIN: [00:27:34] So from the get-go, you were reporting to work.

THOMPSON: [00:27:40] Well, I don't know if you call that work, when you go to a meeting maybe once a week, maybe twice, you know.

KLEIN: [00:27:46] So there was no office as such where you.

THOMPSON: [00:27:49] No, there was an office for CORVI for Paul. But basically, I was baggage. You know, to cook the meals and do the other things and, you know, become friends with the neighbors.

KLEIN: [00:28:02] But that was by design of the Peace Corps and not by any need of the community.

THOMPSON: [00:28:07] Right.

KLEIN: [00:28:08] I was going to ask then, somehow the assumption seem to have emerged that as the wife, you would be expected to do the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning.

THOMPSON: [00:28:19] Oh yeah, that was very traditional. I mean, my biggest impact was that I wore jeans and I didn't have a baby. So what was this strange woman doing here, you know?

KLEIN: [00:28:29] And that wasn't a problem?

THOMPSON: [00:28:32] Well, it was to my liberal feminism at that point, but I also felt that I was to respect the culture and learn more about it.

KLEIN: [00:28:41] OK, so then you were willing to set that aside because you were there on someone else's turf.

THOMPSON: [00:28:48] Right.

KLEIN: [00:28:48] So let's go, oh, maybe you've moved into the community that Paul's helping to build.

THOMPSON: [00:28:58] No, we live in one that's partially done, and his is just down the road a little bit.

KLEIN: [00:29:03] Yeah, OK. During the first few months, did you have any visitors from Peace Corps who came out to check on you?

THOMPSON: [00:29:18] I don't know when, who came, the regional rep. It may have been in that first six months or something, but there was one phone in, you know, two or three hundred houses and it was at the president's house. So one day we did get the call. You know, the president sent his kid up to our house to say, there's a phone call for you from Santiago. So we go back. And he says, well, I'm going to come tomorrow to visit you, and I'm like, OK, fine, you know, we're here. We're not going anywhere. So I don't even remember really other than him coming sort of walking around and seeing things and, you know, asking us if we were OK. And we got our money regularly and that was fine.

KLEIN: [00:30:05] Was there anyone in the house of women that to whom you were accountable, if you showed up or didn't show up?

THOMPSON: [00:30:15] I don't remember ever being told that she's your counterpart or she's your boss or.

KLEIN: [00:30:21] OK. And so there was no formal job that you were?

THOMPSON: [00:30:28] Not very formal, I'd call it.

KLEIN: [00:30:30] OK. And no, were you training anyone? Nor were you working?

THOMPSON: [00:30:35] No.

KLEIN: [00:30:37] And were you able to become friends with?

THOMPSON: [00:30:41] Oh yes. Oh yes. Very quickly.

KLEIN: [00:30:43] Well talk about that. At work or where you lived or combination?

THOMPSON: [00:30:49] Where are you live, I mean, you can't help it when you're, you know, only two meters away from the next *mediagua* and the kids are out. And I mean, we were on this little plaza. Well, sand, you know, so you clean your sand and you build a fence and you plant plants and you ask stupid questions. You know, what's this abalone thing and how you have to pound it to cook it and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, I quickly made friends with my immediate neighbors and there was only one store in the community that, you know, you'd go and you get your cooking. And the bread person goes by your house and yells, and you said, yes, I want two. And you know, so it's just those daily interactions.

KLEIN: [00:31:32] And all of this is going on in Spanish.

THOMPSON: [00:31:33] Right, right.

KLEIN: [00:31:35] And I gather that day by day, you're getting more and more comfortable.

THOMPSON: [00:31:38] Yeah, I so couldn't understand, but I could.

KLEIN: [00:31:41] Yeah. Were you on the coast?

THOMPSON: [00:31:45] No, we were basically 60 miles in. So we couldn't, you know, we did have. There was a fellow on the coast, you know, up the coast a little ways. But we couldn't see the Andes from where we were. We were inland but not.

KLEIN: [00:32:01] But not up?

THOMPSON: [00:32:02] Not up.

KLEIN: [00:32:04] I don't know the geography of the country. How did people in the community make a living? Was it agriculture?

THOMPSON: [00:32:11] It was basically agriculture, yes. And that was the hard part because I mean, to my eyes, market day was great fun. But it was in the middle of a beginning of a drought, so there wasn't any fresh milk available. You know, there were watermelons. But it was affecting the area considerably as far as the agriculture around it. For example, my immediate neighbor's husband worked in the copper mines, and so he was gone most of the time and would send money down. So there were, you know, many people who, you know, had a spouse elsewhere because of, there wasn't that much, there wasn't any industry or something in that community.

KLEIN: [00:33:01] How often do you get out of the community? Let's take the first six months.

THOMPSON: [00:33:06] I was slightly amazed how much vacation we got in. I don't remember that it was in the first six months, but I think the first year for Christmas or whatever, we took a month off. Let's see. That year, I think, did we go to Peru and Ecuador and back?

KLEIN: [00:33:27] Yeah. Did you travel with other couples?

THOMPSON: [00:33:29] No.

KLEIN: [00:33:30] Just the two of you.

THOMPSON: [00:33:31] Yeah. And then I think the next Christmas, we went to Brazil, Argentina, and back and around. So I remember we had two very long trips.

KLEIN: [00:33:40] Plus leave pay I gather.

THOMPSON: [00:33:43] I don't know if we actually got leave pay, but we got 125 dollars a month and that was more than adequate. I mean, it was ten times what our neighbors got and we could save money and eat steak and anything we wanted.

KLEIN: [00:33:55] Right. Let's take the first six eight months. At any point did Peace Corps pull you in to Santiago for a conference to meet with the others in the country?

THOMPSON: [00:34:10] Yeah, we did have a mid-term gathering of all the couples at a very fancy resort. And I think most of us by that time realized that we weren't really needed, but we sort of liked Santiago and we liked, you know, being in Chile and so.

KLEIN: [00:34:28] No one was willing to blow the whistle.

THOMPSON: [00:34:29] No, no, no. I don't think so. I mean, we made it maybe known, but they weren't going to take any action on it.

KLEIN: [00:34:38] So you knew that also.

THOMPSON: [00:34:40] I think so, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:34:41] And of course, the draft was still an issue.

THOMPSON: [00:34:44] Right. The politics was heating up at this point too. The election, the Chilean election was coming. And that, I think, was maybe, well, I don't know how the U.S. Government does its diplomacy. Sometimes it doesn't make sense. But Allende was campaigning actually in our *poblacione*, which was a really incredible, you know, experience because my quote illiterate neighbors were

explaining, you know, the politics of the left to me, which I, you know, wouldn't have understood in college. And Pablo Neruda came to our *poblacione*, read his poetry and my neighbors again explained, you know, he's referring to the incident in Iquitos. Or, you know, whatever else, like amazing.

KLEIN: [00:35:35] *Poblacione* is?

THOMPSON: [00:35:35] *Poblacione* is the name of a community or it's a community.

KLEIN: [00:35:38] Yeah, I get it, OK. Had Peace Corps, given the fact that there was a certain level of political instability or uncertainty, was there any kind of emergency procedure or evacuation procedure that had been discussed?

THOMPSON: [00:35:57] No. But in the long run, we were taken out because they elected the wrong guy.

KLEIN: [00:36:01] Yeah, but we speculate. You're still in your first year. You've done a lot of travel. How did you deal with the fact that, in a sense, there was no specific job there for you?

THOMPSON: [00:36:20] Well, we tried to be creative. And I realized I had to work behind the scenes. And you know, it was a very macho going on. So at some point we were asked to build some models of the various programs that they have, for what purpose, where they were displayed, I don't remember. But it basically, you know, I could build models and, you know, get it to scale, even though I was converting metric to inches like crazy and they probably thought, you know, OK, what's the scale on this, three meters to one inch? But other than that little detail. So and you know, we were trying to figure out a panel system because the inside of our homes, it was.

KLEIN: [00:37:08] Of course, you were living in one of these houses.

THOMPSON: [00:37:10] Yeah, we were living. It was pure studs. It just, you know, there was no inner wall. And, you know, here we're up near the desert

and the wood comes from the south and they ship it before it's really dried. And so very shortly we could stick our hands through the siding because it would dry. And so we thought, oh well, you know, we really should do something about this being, you know, it didn't bother anybody else but. So they had very elaborate jigs to build panels. I mean, they're a fairly sophisticated system for hands-on. So we built a jig and using basically plaster of Paris and some fibers of some kind that we got, we thought we'll build this, you know, equivalent plaster panel and then you'll have this sandwich. Well, it was so heavy and they cracked. It was just a miserable experiment. But you know, you learn that appropriate technology isn't quite what you think it is. But I do recall that we managed, the Peace Corps did send us, I think, Time magazine and the New York book section or something. So the inside of our place was plastered with the New York Times. So if anybody ever does archeology, they'll know that somebody with the New York Times was there.

KLEIN: [00:38:35] I gather it, was the weather, you didn't have extremes of weather?

THOMPSON: [00:38:39] Oh no, it was dry, pleasant. Never really too hot, never really too cool. Very little rain.

KLEIN: [00:38:46] But you at least tried to modify. And the idea being that if you came up with something, it might be of use.

THOMPSON: [00:38:54] Right.

KLEIN: [00:38:56] Was there a feeling of frustration or you just thought you were here like to make the best of it?

THOMPSON: [00:39:02] I don't think we were frustrated because we had somehow realized that, you know, this daily living thing is really quite comfortable. I mean, yeah, you know, we weren't. It wasn't.

KLEIN: [00:39:14] Well shame on you.

THOMPSON: [00:39:14] We were goal-oriented people, but we shifted fairly quickly that, you know, manana is OK. And you know, you don't expect to do eight hours of intense work.

KLEIN: [00:39:30] So after the first year, you've had at least one vacation, you're going into your second year, you can see the end of your tour. Sometimes people will say, well, before I leave this community or my Peace Corps tour, I'd at least like to accomplish this. Do you recall? Don't let me put your words in your mouth though.

THOMPSON: [00:39:56] Well, I did try one other crazy thing. I thought, you know, they should all have refrigeration of some sort. Well, without electricity, you don't really have. So with Peace Corps librarian stuff, I had gotten a book on appropriate technology and built this frame and a pan on the top and a towel. And so you put water in the top and it was an evaporation refrigerator. And I was so proud of myself. Well, then people come to see it and they say, well, what do you put in it? It's sort of like, well, soda, butter. You know, they're like, well, we don't buy soda or butter. So that one's very well out the door. So I'm sure Paul may have had, you know, goals of finishing the houses that they were building or something like that. But oh yes, we did have one other big project. Yes, we were very energetic in a certain sense that the people that we got to know in the community were two doctors who um.

KLEIN: [00:41:07] Chilean?

THOMPSON: [00:41:10] Chilean doctors who are required to spend a year service or two in a rural area. So they spoke English and so we would get together with them maybe once a month. You know, they had a lovely home. They invite us to dinner. We talked English. He'd been to Kentucky and the coal mines and was concerned about black lung disease. So through them, we were able to, I mean, there was the central plaza of this *poblacione* and then there were these little plazas. So there was nothing in the central plaza. And what was apparent to us was that the kids needed a school. Well, we didn't have the connections with the Department of Education, but we did have Department of Health through this doctor friend. So thanks to his

connections and so on, so forth, we got enough money to build sort of a two room facility that was going to be a health center. Not a school, but in reality, it became a school. So that was the extra project.

KLEIN: [00:42:13] Where did the funding come from?

THOMPSON: [00:42:15] From their Ministry of Health.

KLEIN: [00:42:17] OK. So it was through them that you would define the project.

THOMPSON: [00:42:23] And the community agreed that they would work on Sundays in addition to their Saturday task. Because the *poblacione* we lived in, I mean, they had their half house. And they weren't quite ready yet for the second or third phase, which would have given them more house and facilities. But so the men were willing to work on Sundays in addition to help build this school. So that basically almost, I think, got completed.

KLEIN: [00:42:54] Yeah, sometimes people have or develop a friendship with someone who becomes sort of a mentor into the culture. Because, you know, living in another culture, we're curious about celebrations births and deaths and marriages and holidays and everything. Did you have any opportunity?

THOMPSON: [00:43:21] Like that? I mean, these doctors played part of that role, I think. Paul had a counterpart, Louis, who he probably learned some of those things from. Well, I guess I made one mistake culturally in that I didn't really want to do my laundry by hand and I let my, I hired a woman who I must have maybe paid a dollar. I mean, minimal, to do my laundry once a week. And I mean, it became embarrassing very quickly. Everybody knew everything that I ever owned. And when I left, they went, well, I'll have your blue jeans and I'll have your bra. You know, it was like, oh no. Well, anyway, so some of these women sort of then sort of took it upon them to educate me. And I remember one in particular who considered herself sort of one of the upper leaders, ladies and the best house, and would invite me to drink mate. And but

it quickly became apparent to me that my presence there was getting her something, and I didn't know what that was. And you know, I had, I mean, maybe we were wrong, but we set a line in the sand that we were not giving anyone money. They would come and ask to borrow money, and we said no. But it was the kids who educated me I think. I remember a discussion with a 10 year old who said, you know, why do you have this stupid policy on Cuba? You know, it's like, well, I can't really tell you why we have this stupid policy on Cuba.

KLEIN: [00:44:56] We were all tempted at any point to try to organize a group of kids and watch them or?

THOMPSON: [00:45:03] Yes, I mean, in some ways, I don't know. I mean, it was not maybe as structured as that because it was very informal, everything. But a load of sand got delivered in our mini plaza. And that was the best playground that they'd have, you know. I mean, so I, you know, I thought about playground equipment and that kind of stuff, but what do you make it out of? But what happened in that little plaza was all of a sudden overnight arrives a *mediagua*, which is, you know, panelized systems. You just plunk it down and put a, pitch a roof on it, which was an evangelical kind of church. And you know, so there was. It drew people and they were singing at night and it was sort of like, oh, this isn't where this belongs, but that was, you know, our slightly prejudiced view cause it was right outside our door. So we talked to our neighbors and said, you know, do you really want this here? Should the church be in the plaza? I mean, that's where normally churches are. So in our good old American organizing manner, we got out a petition and created quite a stir and, you know, went around trying to get people signatures. Well, that's easier said than done when you're dealing with the illiterate people. But our neighbors, by that time, were so intimidated or whatever by us that they signed it. And this went to the Ministry of Housing and up the chain and the church left. But so, I mean, I don't consider that organizing playground equipment, but at least it made it potentially possible that could happen in the future.

KLEIN: [00:46:48] So did people ask you, why are you here?

THOMPSON: [00:46:54] Oh yes. Oh yes.

KLEIN: [00:46:56] What did you tell them?

THOMPSON: [00:46:59] Well, you know, we thought we could help, but you know, they were more amused by us than anything that we could help. I mean, I remember one woman who I met, you know, at the market and she said, you're putting the stuff in the wrong order, you know? So she told me to put the heavy stuff at the bottom of the bag. You know, you go around the market this way, you don't go around the market that way. So at some point they didn't expect me to be an expert on anything. You know, Paul was helping with the houses, and that was all.

KLEIN: [00:47:31] Yeah. What about politics? I mean, within the community, there must have been,

THOMPSON: [00:47:37] Oh, that was very, no, there wasn't. It was pretty far left. I mean, it was. And I mean, I think that's why, you know, both Neruda and Allende came to our *poblacione*. I mean, they were 99.9 percent in support of Allende.

KLEIN: [00:47:53] Did you get to meet Neruda?

THOMPSON: [00:47:55] No, I didn't actually shake his hand, but I listen to him because I was taller than most and I could, you know, have a photograph. You know, there were big posters all around town during the election, and I have one of those and it was great fun too.

KLEIN: [00:48:08] But how did that impact you? I mean, you and Paul must have been identified as Americans from the United States.

THOMPSON: [00:48:13] Right. And at that point, we weren't evil. I mean, we were, I mean, it was quite amazing to me in, you know, this 10 year old and I remember it specifically, says, you're not the government. They clearly differentiated us as people from the U.S. government's policies. So, you know, that was fine, even though the government paid our salary.

KLEIN: [00:48:36] Right. So you personally, you didn't feel any tension or stress.

THOMPSON: [00:48:43] No, no.

KLEIN: [00:48:43] Generally speaking, were there any health issues or?

THOMPSON: [00:48:48] Well, I remember I ate a lot of beets and having an outhouse, I didn't really notice anything. But then at some point I must have used an indoor facility and thought I had blood. And so of course, the Peace Corps wants you to come. So, you know, bus ticket to Santiago. Blood tests, all that good stuff. You've been eating too many beets, go back home.

KLEIN: [00:49:11] How far was it?

THOMPSON: [00:49:12] It was a six-hour bus ride.

KLEIN: [00:49:15] And how often did you go down to Santiago?

THOMPSON: [00:49:18] Maybe once every three months.

KLEIN: [00:49:20] Not really that much.

THOMPSON: [00:49:22] No.

KLEIN: [00:49:22] So you did all of your shopping and everything within the community?

THOMPSON: [00:49:25] Oh, yeah, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:49:27] Did you have visitors? Did people come to?

THOMPSON: [00:49:31] I don't remember any of the other volunteers visiting us, but we did go visit both. There were two couples in La Serena, Coquimbo, which was about two hours to the coast and north. And I think we must

have had Thanksgiving with them or, you know, some sort of holiday. And we did go to the beach, I remember getting sunburned on New Year's Day, with a single volunteer. What was he doing there? I don't know. He was doing fishing stuff. And I think we did go to visit one other couple that was further north and that was great fun.

KLEIN: [00:50:08] Was communication mostly by mail?

THOMPSON: [00:50:10] Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:50:11] And you could communicate. During all this time, were you communicating back to your family?

THOMPSON: [00:50:19] By tape recorder. I would send them cassettes. Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:50:24] And what were you reporting back?

THOMPSON: [00:50:27] Oh, I would just, you know, I would just tell them, you know, what was in the newspaper, what I ate, you know, for breakfast that morning. Or you know what an avocado was because they didn't know what an avocado was. You know, that kind of thing.

KLEIN: [00:50:39] Was it on these cassettes?

THOMPSON: [00:50:41] Yeah. Mm hmm. I don't know where they are.

KLEIN: [00:50:44] You'll find them. So let's, I gather this paradise did not last forever.

THOMPSON: [00:50:54] No, I think it was three months short of our two years and Allende was elected. And I think within a week or two, it was fairly quickly thereafter, we were notified that we would be leaving the country.

KLEIN: [00:51:11] Now, did you have any inkling of that?

THOMPSON: [00:51:14] No.

KLEIN: [00:51:15] So it came as a complete surprise.

THOMPSON: [00:51:17] Yeah. And we hadn't been told before the election that anything would matter or anything would change. But what I remember is we sort of could have taken another assignment, but it would have been for such a short period of time.

KLEIN: [00:51:34] Let's go through the steps by which you found out. I mean, was it a call, a letter?

THOMPSON: [00:51:40] It might have been a call to the president's house. And again, we ran down to his house and they said, you know, pack up your stuff. We'll send a truck, you know, come to Santiago by this date.

KLEIN: [00:51:54] There was no sense of urgency?

THOMPSON: [00:51:57] Yeah, we had, I mean, we didn't have a very long time.

KLEIN: [00:52:02] Or danger, I should say.

THOMPSON: [00:52:03] No. Oh, there was no danger. I mean, our neighbors protected our camera. I mean, that would have been a year's salary for them, and they knew we had it, you know. Our neighbors would protect us, you know. That wasn't any issue about that.

KLEIN: [00:52:15] So it must. Well, it must have been a wrench because here, I mean.

THOMPSON: [00:52:19] Oh yeah, we were ticked because we really were excited. I mean, we were there long enough to see when Allende came to the *poblacione*, he promised two things: plastic shoes for the kids so that they could then go to school. Because without shoes and a sort of smock, they weren't allowed to go to school. And dried milk because the kids had been without milk. And I think it was within weeks those kids had those shoes and there were packets of dry milk in that *poblacione*. I mean, I may be exaggerating, but you know, I remember

seeing what he had actually promised. And we were so excited, you know, and to see what the government would do and so on and so forth. But then we were told that we and the fertilizer, we're being pulled out. And I thought, OK, I'm good as shit, but other than that little detail, you know. So we were given the choice. We could have taken a short assignment in Ecuador or Peru, maybe.

KLEIN: [00:53:15] But you were then called.

THOMPSON: [00:53:17] Into Santiago.

KLEIN: [00:53:18] And did your original group get together as a group?

THOMPSON: [00:53:24] I don't know if we got together as a group because I don't remember saying goodbye to those folks.

KLEIN: [00:53:28] But there must have been a lot of confusion. I mean, you have several hundred volunteers and they weren't, I mean, were you put up at a hotel or?

THOMPSON: [00:53:39] Basically we could each make a choice, and I'm sure they processed us in different groups or whatever. And we chose to cash out our plane tickets and take three months to get home. Bye bye.

KLEIN: [00:53:53] Yeah. And that was it for the service.

THOMPSON: [00:54:01] That was the end, yep.

KLEIN: [00:54:02] Looking back on it, any other comments about, you know, was it worth doing or?

THOMPSON: [00:54:07] Oh, definitely. I mean, there is no question in my mind that that experience changed my direction of my life. I mean, I was so naive. I didn't have a clue about distribution of resources around the world. And, you know, I thought I could go buy copper in the local hardware store. No clue about what, you know, copper mines and

nationalization or anything of that sort. So, I mean, I couldn't have asked for a better education.

KLEIN: [00:54:39] Right, and under pleasant circumstances.

THOMPSON: [00:54:41] Under very pleasant circumstances, you know? So what if we didn't have electricity? No big deal.

KLEIN: [00:54:46] Yeah, yeah. Have you gone back?

THOMPSON: [00:54:49] Yes, I did go back. Actually, during that time, I knew that I wanted to go back to graduate school when I left. So I got via mail and thank goodness to my parents cooperation and having left stuff with them. I applied to graduate school and I got into UCLA. So we did end up back in Los Angeles and then having done my architectural thesis on housing after earthquakes, having experienced an earthquake. I then got an Organization of American States fellowship and came back to Chile as part of that, to study the housing that was built in the south after the earthquake. So I, you know, I was.

KLEIN: [00:55:34] In the south now.

THOMPSON: [00:55:36] Right.

KLEIN: [00:55:37] And your Spanish was still intact?

THOMPSON: [00:55:39] Yeah. Enough. Well, I mean, well, I shouldn't say. The OAS, Organization of American States. We were based in Bogota because they had a library and a research facility there. And ugh, to my total embarrassment, um, one of the very first nights because of a connection at the embassy and the, uh, not AID, but the.

KLEIN: [00:56:10] USIS?

THOMPSON: [00:56:11] Yeah, the Information Service. They had scheduled me to lecture on housing after earthquakes. OK. All right. Well, architectural professors in Bogota are quite formal and their Spanish is quite proper.

And mine was *poblacione*, some sort of square, guttural, improper English. I mean, improper grammar. But I got the point across. And they thought I was absolutely bonkers trying to build this shelter for two hundred dollars because it had to be shipped. And it was sort of like, why did you? Why did you do this? But at least I gave a lecture and they were very polite.

KLEIN: [00:56:54] Yeah, well, good. We can stop at this point.

[END OF INTERVIEW]