

Jack Franklin Davies Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Jack Franklin Davies served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1978 to 1980 as a rural development technician.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jack Franklin Davies

June 10, 2019
Palo Alto, California

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:02] This is June 10th, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk, and I'm interviewing Jack Davies, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1978 through 1980, working as a rural development technician. Jack, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today.

DAVIES: My pleasure.

SZTUK: Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your background before Peace Corps life and what things influenced you to join the Peace Corps?

DAVIES: [00:00:34] Ok, well, I'm one of five children of a military family, so my parents moved around the country and the world my whole life. Every two or three years we moved was actually born at West Point, New York. My father was an instructor at the military academy there. And eventually I went on to work for the United States government as an architect. But leading up to that, as a child, I was in the Boy Scouts that was greatly

influential. We did a lot of traveling that was most influential, but probably most of all, my mother was she's American, but she was born in Mexico and she spoke beautiful Spanish, unfortunately, never taught it to us. But I always appreciated Mexican culture and Mexican food and going across the border and shopping and bartering and all that. So I've always enjoyed meeting people and traveling and just the adventure of life.

SZTUK: [00:01:32] So. Well, when did you first hear about the Peace Corps and decided to join?

DAVIES: [00:01:39] I heard about it in college. I remember sitting in the architecture library one day and I saw some kind of an advertisement for it. And I talked to one of my colleagues and they said, well, why would you want to waste your time giving yourself away when you've just spent all this time and money to get an education? At the time, they referred to it as the white middle class adventure, which I took exception to because it just seemed like such a wonderful program for everybody, particularly minorities. And as it turned out, I met my future wife in Fiji and she's a Chinese American. But leading up to that, I had no influence from the Chinese culture community. But I was always interested in Chinese architecture. And I think all these things combined. I went to school at the University of Florida and took interest in solar architecture. So that just sort of naturally lends itself to working in a developing country, although my job was as a rural development technician, not an architect. So I was working more hands-on with builders and shipping materials and coordinating with the village councils for what they wanted and all that. But I may be jumping ahead here.

SZTUK: [00:02:50] So when you when you applied, did you have any idea, did you want to go to Fiji or did you have any kind of any country in mind or area that you wanted to serve in or what was your first choice?

DAVIES: [00:03:02] Well, I actually thought I'd be going to Africa, so I think I listed that as first preference. But my first offer was to Belize, which is just across the Gulf of Mexico. They wanted me to run a drafting department since I'd never even worked in a drafting department. I wasn't too qualified for that. But my father also said, if you're going to go, go far away. And so

the next offer, they came up with Fiji and that was a hard offer to turn down.

SZTUK: [00:03:26] Did you know much about Fiji before you went?

DAVIES: [00:03:27] I didn't know anything about it. I didn't even know where it was, unlike today with the Fiji water. But that's a whole other issue. And we drank local water out of the creeks mixed with the special stuff called yanqona or kava, which will kill anything in it. And I drank that for two years and have a hardened stomach.

SZTUK: [00:03:48] So you applied and you get this invitation to go to Fiji. What did your, what kind of reaction did you get from your friends and family? What do they think about you going into the Peace Corps?

DAVIES: [00:03:59] Well, I'm pretty sure, well, my parents were supportive. My father being in the military, he encouraged me to join the Peace Corps. Interesting point is that the military and the Peace Corps have the same mission. It's peace, just different ways of achieving it. So he encouraged me to go and dropped me off at the airport with my guitar slung over my shoulder and my cowboy hat. I'm sure I was a spectacle to the people in Fiji when I arrived.

SZTUK: [00:04:24] Did you have any kind of training before taking off or where did you guys do your training?

DAVIES: [00:04:30] Well, we staged in San Francisco for a few days, but that was just to get kind of the basics down. And then it was a two month in-country training in Fiji, including a one or two week immersion in a village. And that was the best part of all.

SZTUK: [00:04:48] So it was a village stay?

DAVIES: [00:04:49] Yeah, the village stay. Because if you didn't speak the language, you didn't speak. And I like to talk, so I got up to speed pretty quickly.

SZTUK: [00:04:57] Do you remember, um, your impression when you when you first landed in the country? Do you remember that?

DAVIES: [00:05:05] Oh, yeah, I thought the plane had been misdirected to India because as I stepped out, everything was Indian from India. Fiji's history is that one hundred years ago, the British indentured a lot of laborers and they now live in a lot of the towns in Fiji. So the airport is in Nadi on the west side of Fiji, an all Indian community. But then they took us to a beautiful beach. It was the same beach used in the movie Return to Paradise, just a gorgeous South Pacific island beach. And I found the biggest stick I could find. And I carried it around with me through the bushes. I was just trekking around because they used to be cannibals and I thought there might still be cannibals there. That was my first impression.

SZTUK: [00:05:50] They didn't tell you during orientation that the cannibals were gone.

DAVIES: [00:05:54] Oh, they might have, but I needed to check that out for myself. Second day was a little calmer.

SZTUK: [00:05:59] Any memorable experiences in training? So your training and consisted of language and culture.

DAVIES: [00:06:07] Culture, yeah. There was only 14 people in our technical group, so it was a small, tight group. What stands out is we used to sit around playing music and playing volleyball. Yeah, but the language training was pretty intensive in the morning and then again in the afternoon. But I always found that after eating a big lunch, you just felt a little sluggish and just couldn't absorb the language as easy as in the morning.

SZTUK: [00:06:30] Yeah. So you say the training was about two months and then you started on your job, reported for work. And where was that?

DAVIES: [00:06:39] So I was on the northernmost island in the Fiji group, Vanua Levu, means Long Island. And I was assigned to the Commissioner Northern Division's office. He is the one that oversees administrative and technical issues on the island, roads and bridges, and so on. So I was

assigned to the northeastern part of the island to work in villages. And I met with the local chief and his council. And we just sit down and figure out what their needs were, housing or some other civil projects, like a sea landing jetty at one of the health resorts, oh not resorts, a little health station. Yeah, they have health stations scattered around Fiji. Um, so I had a variety of different experiences, building and self-help construction.

SZTUK: [00:07:30] Yeah, yeah. And your living situation out there. Did you live in town or in the village?

DAVIES: [00:07:36] Both. Yeah. We had a nice flat in town. I shared it with another Peace Corps volunteer who worked the other side of the island. That would be Peter. Then so he'd go one way and I'd go the other way and yeah, met back at the house in town in the middle. And a lot of other Peace Corps volunteers came by to visit us as well.

SZTUK: We did.

DAVIES: Yeah. But then in the village, pretty much on my own.

SZTUK: [00:08:09] So you would you kind of based in town and you would have excursions out to the village or a few days out of town?

DAVIES: [00:08:16] Yeah. The primary assignment was in the village, but we had the flat in town that we'd come back and regroup. Yes, so two years of that.

SZTUK: [00:08:30] Tell me about your interactions and with, uh, with the local folks. So your coworkers were Fijian and Indian, I imagine.

DAVIES: [00:08:38] Right, yeah, in the government office. Lovely people. Fijians are the most friendly people on Earth, I'd say. But I studied Fijian language, so I really didn't get to know the Hindi half the community quite as much, but, um, two or three houses down from where I lived there, the secretary of the office worked there. And so they kind of took me in, sort of adopted me, if you would. But they spoke perfect English. They even had a typewriter. And so I do my memoirs on a typewriter at their house. And I

used to visit them a couple times a week, I think. You know, it's easy to get homesick when you're away, but, you know, boy they just filled in the voids.

SZTUK: [00:09:23] So no trouble getting accepted by the local community?

DAVIES: [00:09:28] And I also played in the band. So that got me accepted. I played bass guitar. We had a couple of little bands we'd play in town. They didn't have electricity out in the villages. They didn't have telephones, they didn't have TV. They did have newspapers. And they were a little old by the time they got out there. But, uh, but everybody communicated by the coconut wireless, which is just word of mouth and however fast the good stories travel.

SZTUK: [00:09:53] Yeah, yeah. So tell me about some of the projects. What are some of the most memorable projects you had out there?

DAVIES: [00:09:59] Well, I was originally signed for a housing project, low cost self-help housing projects. So they were cutting down hardwood timbers in the forest, sending them up the river to be milled, and then they'd send them back and we'd build Australian-style construction, which is just exposed framing, no drywall on the inside, metal roofs, no facilities. All the toilets were, you know, pit latrines outside. But because they needed to relocate this one village up from the river, um, actually made a whole development plan for them for a longer-term plan. And I don't know how much of that ever got built. We built the church, we built the first couple of houses and a community hall and then I left. So that was probably the most successful project. You don't really want to hear about the least successful project, do you? Since I brought it up. Well, I had to build a water reservoir for a school that was an elevated tank, but I forgot to line it with waterproof concrete on the inside and the efflorescence just oozed out on the outside. It was the ugliest thing. It looked like a cavern, you know, stalactite sunny outside. I hope my name didn't get associated with that.

SZTUK: [00:11:19] You think they were able to salvage it or?

DAVIES: [00:11:21] Oh, eventually, yeah. Somebody figured out, put some waterproofing on the inside. But I'm not a civil engineer, we got to do a little bit of everything.

SZTUK: [00:11:30] Yeah, well, it sounds like you had a lot of good interaction with the locals.

DAVIES: [00:11:34] Oh, I love the people.

SZTUK: [00:11:36] And, um. And so you met your wife there also?

DAVIES: [00:11:40] I did, yeah. So like I said, she's Chinese American. She was a teacher on one end of the island. And so I would sometimes visit her on my way up because she lived at the end of the road. And from there we had to take a bus or walk or a horse. So this was back in the mid '80s. Oh no, I'm sorry, early '80s. '78 through '80. So, yeah, they probably come a long way since then.

SZTUK: [00:12:10] So the roads at that time were?

DAVIES: [00:12:12] Gravel and very dusty. Yeah, we'd take these open sided busses up and down the island. By the time you get to the end you just covered in dust, couldn't even see your face. So we'd wear bandanas over our nose and mouth. And that's half the fun. And then eat a bunch of chili peppers on the other end to get your eyes to water and flush all that dirt out.

SZTUK: [00:12:35] And describe the island for me a little bit.

DAVIES: [00:12:38] Well, Fiji is composed of anywhere from 300 to 800 islands, depending on the tide. So low tide, you got a lot of islands sticking up, which means they're reefs, which also means they're extremely hazardous to sailing. But they're volcanic islands, so generally higher in the center. And then they go down to the ocean and are surrounded by coral reef. And some of the best diving in the world there. We used to snorkel a lot and just go swimming. Nice warm water, as you can imagine. But even in

the wintertime, it gets cold. They'd be walking around in fur coats in their wintertime.

SZTUK: [00:13:15] Yeah, when you when you get acclimated to it.

DAVIES: [00:13:17] Yeah, Southern Hemisphere winter. So Christmas was really weird. The warmest time of year is when you get to celebrating Christmas and singing the songs and they love Christmas. The Fijians are mostly Christian, the Indians are half Hindu and half Muslim. And then there's an assortment of Europeans and Chinese or whatever else. But a mix of people.

SZTUK: [00:13:55] Did you work with any of the other European people in the area, like the English people or?

DAVIES: [00:14:02] Yeah, we didn't really work together. We more socialized together at the Grand Eastern Hotel, which was the central focus on the island. They had a volunteer program. Um, that's a little different because they got paid. I think we were making 125 dollars subsistence at the time, which was generally enough to buy food. Our local hosts provided the housing in the village. You know, we just slept on a on the map in somebody's bure, which is a hut. Yeah, so fairly simple living.

SZTUK: [00:14:38] Do you think the perception of the local people or the attitude towards Peace Corps was different, might have been different, than towards seeing other Europeans that were there? Did they understand that there was a difference?

DAVIES: [00:14:52] Um, I think they did. They all knew at least one Peace Corps volunteer that had been there previously. So I was Group 31. So they'd probably been there 10 years prior. And apparently we left, you know, everybody leaves with a good reputation, so they always welcome us back. Um, but the perception, the difference. Yeah, I think they tended to treat us like the Europeans, more colonialists, until they realize we're Americans and we let our hair down, you know, no pretense at all.

SZTUK: [00:15:21] And did you get, uh, did you get to travel around a lot? What did you do on your time off, vacation time and so forth?

DAVIES: [00:15:25] Oh, yeah. So my first trip with my now ex-wife, we went to the outer island Rotuma, which is a Polynesian island in the Fiji group, which is Melanesian, and a typhoon blew through right after Christmas and we got stuck for a month. So don't ever let anybody tell you that being stranded on a tropical island is paradise cause it's not. So we ran out of money. We were staying with friends. We were just kind of picking up fruit along this road when we could. And it was pretty austere and we were happy to get home. But when we did, my wife had overextended her visa by a month. And I was AWOL. I got a message from the secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, saying parental inquiry, please reply.

SZTUK: [00:16:11] Because your parents hadn't heard from you?

DAVIES: [00:16:12] They hadn't heard from me in over a month.

SZTUK: [00:16:14] So. Well, that's quite an experience. So did you stay in a village in Rotuma when you were stranded there?

DAVIES: [00:16:20] Yeah, we stayed with friends. First we stayed with the parents, and then we had to move out because they.

SZTUK: And these were Rotuman friends?

DAVIES: Rotuman friends, yes. We had met in Fiji, the guy was actually a police officer in Fiji. So we went to Rotuma and stayed with his parents. But we had to leave there because they let the chickens roost inside the house. And my fiancée got infested with chicken chicks in her hair. So she had to wash her hair with kerosene, using one of these little fine tooth comb to scrape all the bugs out of her hair. Oh, she must have smelled horrible, but uh.

SZTUK: [00:16:54] That was pretty common, to get lice.

DAVIES: [00:16:55] So I heard, yeah, but that was probably the worst of it.

SZTUK: [00:17:01] And you stayed for the two years?

DAVIES: [00:17:06] Two years of normal tour.

SZTUK: [00:17:07] Did you think about extending?

DAVIES: No.

SZTUK: Any kind of reason why not?

DAVIES: [00:17:11] No. Yeah, I was engaged at the time, when my fiancée left after nine months. I was kind of lonely and so I didn't hook up with any of the Fijian girls and they all wanted to, they all wanted to. So I was a good boy. And then when I left Fiji, I traveled back and met her back in Detroit. No regrets. Yeah, otherwise I might have a Fijian wife.

SZTUK: [00:17:46] Yeah. So looking back at, uh, your stay there, what were some of your, what do you think are some of your biggest accomplishments?

DAVIES: [00:17:54] Well, I was a new architect and green as could be, but I had some building experience, so I learned a lot about working with people, being practical, about design solutions, shipping materials, or some things that just shouldn't be built in coastal areas that have hurricanes. I come from Florida. Fiji is not much different. Um, but I also learned about some of the methods of construction that they've been doing for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, where they'll take hardwood timbers, char the ends of them so they're bug-proof, nothing to eat, and they bed them in sand so they drain well. And these timber structures have been in the ground for over 100 years. So I've learned a lot about, you know, modern construction through Fijians.

SZTUK: [00:18:44] So you learn something from them as well.

DAVIES: [00:18:46] Right. Here's a trivial point, though. The fro pick, that was designed in Fiji. Originally called the Fijian, yeah, the Afro pick. So the

Fijians have had their influence on our society, not the least of which is Fiji water. Tastes better with kava in it.

SZTUK: [00:19:04] Tell us about kava.

DAVIES: [00:19:06] Well, kava is a pepper root. Don't know if it's indigenous to just the Pacific islands, but different groups of islands drink it differently. In Fiji, it's ceremonial. So they drink it for weddings, funerals, divination of high chiefs, and so on. And they treat it with a lot of respect. You have to continue drinking until it's all gone or, you know, other traditions like that. It makes you, according to James Michener, the author of Hawaii, it makes you feel strong and important. So that's why they use it for these important meetings where you're sitting around drinking with a chief. And because they didn't have TV at the time, we just sit around telling stories all night long. And I'm pretty sure that by the end of the evening, the stories got better and better.

SZTUK: [00:19:50] So that was kind of the social life then, gathering around.

DAVIES: [00:19:52] Yeah, for men. Now, the women, they were back in the kitchen cooking and chatting. So my fiancée, she got kind of rushed to the women's side, even though she'd sneak back out and drink grog with the men.

SZTUK: [00:20:05] So even being she wasn't Fijian, they still treated.

DAVIES: [00:20:08] Yes, she was Chinese. They didn't know the difference. And as well for an African-American volunteer, they treated her like one of the indigenous locals. So, yeah, we were treated more like colonialists, being white Europeans. Maybe that's changed now some.

SZTUK: [00:20:26] And since, um, okay, so you left Peace Corps in 1980, it's been a long time. Have you kept in touch with, uh, with friends and?

DAVIES: [00:20:42] I've certainly kept in touch with other Peace Corps volunteers. I've finally lost contact with the one family that I was writing to, um, up to about five years ago. They had a big hurricane or a typhoon and they had

asked for some money, and I believe they sent something to help them out a little bit. But, um, since then, I've just lost touch. And I don't know that I'll ever get back there again. It's probably on my bucket list, but I might be an old man when I do.

SZTUK: [00:21:12] So you haven't been back since?

DAVIES: [00:21:13] No, I just think about a lot.

SZTUK: [00:21:15] But you have traveled a lot.

DAVIES: Yeah.

SZTUK: What were some of the really unique things about the things that made Fiji different than other places you traveled?

DAVIES: [00:21:26] Well, let me compare it to Okinawa, where I lived for four years. So between the Fijians and the Okinawans, I'd say the friendliest people on Earth. Poor Okinawans, they just got stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time during the war years. But even the Fijians were involved in the war, and the Solomons, and the Japanese were terribly afraid of them because they thought they were cannibals. And if they were captured, they'd be eaten. So that was probably the most interesting thing about Fiji is their cannibalistic history, but that only goes back about one hundred years ago. The last guy to be eaten was John Savage, because he loaned his comb to the chief and he went and touched the chief's head as he retrieved his comb. And that was his last stand. I think they boiled him. Their biggest insult would be, we wouldn't even want to eat you. Oh, please, please.

SZTUK: [00:22:13] Well, that's a good thing.

DAVIES: [00:22:16] Yeah, but it's all said in jest.

SZTUK: [00:22:19] But you haven't kept in touch with the Peace Corps RPCV community and still involved somewhat?

DAVIES: [00:22:26] Yeah, well, that's what brings me out here to Palo Alto, is a reunion with the other Peace Corps volunteers from many, many years ago.

SZTUK: [00:22:36] And so in light of the three goals of Peace Corps, you know, providing assistance and promoting better understanding. Do you think you know from the personal connections that you made, that maybe you did foster some better understanding?

DAVIES: [00:22:52] I sure hope so. I sure hope so, because we're not stuffy. We're Americans. We're not as proper as the English, Australians, New Zealanders. We're just, we're different somehow. And I hope that conveyed. And I've got a lot of Fijian friends here in California, Sacramento, Monterey, and as soon as we meet each other and say, *bullla*, it's like we're best friends.

SZTUK: [00:23:23] When you're sitting around drinking with your friends, are there stories about Fiji that you like to tell? What is your favorite Fiji story?

DAVIES: [00:23:30] Favorite Fiji story? Well, I guess I'll use the one I mentioned the other day where the ambassador to Fiji came down for a conference with our director. And we were at a very nice luxury resort. And I was just starting to take interest in my fiancée. And I knocked on the door of one of the apartments and said, Irene, Irene! And the lady came to the door and says, no, she's not here, this is the ambassador's unit. Oh well, I got another one from Fiji. So I had to measure a sea landing jetty and I didn't have a long measuring tape. So I took a 10 foot stick and I was out there in the low tide, doing an end over end, doing an old measuring device to see how far out in the water I had to go with this rock jetty. And all the Fijians were up on the hill watching me dance under the full moon. They thought I was a devil and told me about it.

SZTUK: [00:24:27] Yeah. I wonder how they would have done it.

DAVIES: [00:24:29] I don't know, but I'm sure they were amused.

SZTUK: [00:24:32] Were you able to see a lot of your project completed, like the jetty?

DAVIES: [00:24:36] Yeah, most of them were small projects. And some were obviously ongoing with housing and such. But yeah, you know, I think I did some good in the housing area, but I probably did more good in the grassroots diplomacy know. I'm sure. Yeah. Go to Fiji if you can.

SZTUK: [00:24:54] Yeah, okay. Anything else you want to share?

DAVIES: [00:25:01] Oh, I'm sure there's a lot more to add, but for sake of time and the record, I think I'll call it a day, but thank you for the interview. It's my honor to have served.

SZTUK: [00:25:10] Ok, well thank you Jack. I appreciate it.

DAVIES: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]