

Mike Wildman Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

Creator: Mike Wildman
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Biographical Note

Mike Wildman served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1972 to 1974 as a vocational education teacher.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Mike Wildman

February 23, 2017
San Lorenzo, California

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:02] This is Phyllis Noble. I'm in San Lorenzo, California, tonight interviewing Mike Wildman, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from 1972 to 1974 as a technical education teacher in a vocational high school. Did I mention today is February 23rd, 2017? Hi, Mike.

WILDMAN: [00:00:31] Hi.

NOBLE: [00:00:31] So, um, Mike, let's begin with, uh, let's go way back. Let's talk about who you were before you joined the Peace Corps. Tell me a little bit about your childhood. Where were you born?

WILDMAN: [00:00:44] Born in Oakland, California, and grew up there until high school time and then moved to Piedmont, which is right next to Oakland.

NOBLE: [00:00:52] Uh huh. And did you have brothers and sisters?

WILDMAN: [00:00:56] I have one sister.

NOBLE: [00:00:57] Older, younger?

WILDMAN: [00:00:59] Younger.

NOBLE: [00:01:00] And so it was just a family of mother, father, two kids.

WILDMAN: [00:01:06] That's right. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:01:08] Mm hmm. You go, you went to school in Oakland?

WILDMAN: [00:01:11] I went to school in Oakland. And then in Piedmont for high school.

NOBLE: [00:01:13] Yeah. Yeah. Public schools?

WILDMAN: [00:01:16] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:01:16] Yeah. And what did your parents do for a living?

WILDMAN: [00:01:22] My dad was a engineer, and my mom didn't have an official job.

NOBLE: [00:01:28] Oh yes, she did. She took care of the family.

WILDMAN: [00:01:31] Took care of the family.

NOBLE: [00:01:31] Yeah. Yeah. Good. So did you take, with your family, did you take vacations together?

WILDMAN: [00:01:38] We did. We went to places like Lake Tahoe. And, um, hmm. Let me see. I don't know if we actually went to Yosemite. Yeah, we went to Yosemite also. That sort of thing.

NOBLE: [00:01:49] In the family car?

WILDMAN: [00:01:51] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:01:51] Yeah. Sounds very good. So you go to high school in Piedmont. And what kind of high school kid were you? What did you, what were you interested in?

WILDMAN: [00:02:01] Well, um, I didn't really have strong interests. I think the most interesting class for me was one in mechanical drafting. Um. And I have a recollection of taking driver's ed there and having some challenges with that in high school. But anyway, um, so I was kind of quiet, pretty quiet. I didn't really get involved in, in school activities.

NOBLE: [00:02:29] Sports?

WILDMAN: [00:02:30] No, no.

NOBLE: [00:02:33] Did you study a foreign language in high school?

WILDMAN: [00:02:36] Well, I think we had to. I think I studied Spanish.

NOBLE: [00:02:39] Uh huh.

WILDMAN: [00:02:39] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:41] And the only language in your home was English, right?

WILDMAN: [00:02:45] English, yes.

NOBLE: [00:02:45] So you studied Spanish?

WILDMAN: [00:02:47] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:47] It doesn't sound like it was memorable.

WILDMAN: [00:02:50] No, no. I never used it much so, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:54] And then you. So did you have part time jobs when you were in high school? Summer jobs?

WILDMAN: [00:03:01] I think I did. I got to remember, um, the timeline for that. I don't know if I actually had one in high school. When I was in college I did.

NOBLE: [00:03:11] What'd you do in college?

WILDMAN: [00:03:14] You mean for summer jobs, you mean?

NOBLE: [00:03:15] Yeah. And yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:03:17] I had, for a couple of summers I worked on the BART system, you know, the rapid transit system.

NOBLE: [00:03:22] Oh yeah, sure.

WILDMAN: [00:03:23] They were building that.

NOBLE: [00:03:24] Hmm. And what kind of work was that, construction?

WILDMAN: [00:03:29] Yeah. Oh yeah, definitely construction.

NOBLE: [00:03:30] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:03:31] So I was just a, you know, an assistant to an engineer and whatever things he asked me to do, I did. Um, had a job with PG&E, a summer job, and another one with Bechtel. They're both, you know, PG&E, you know who that is? That's the, or maybe you don't. Our electrical utility company.

NOBLE: [00:03:50] Okay. The P would be Pacific maybe?

WILDMAN: [00:03:52] Pacific Gas and Electric.

NOBLE: [00:03:53] Okay.

WILDMAN: [00:03:53] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:03:53] In Wisconsin we have MG&E, which is Madison.

WILDMAN: [00:03:56] Yeah. Yeah. Right. Yeah. So yeah, that's pretty much it.

NOBLE: [00:04:02] Yeah. And so what about in college? What did you major in?

WILDMAN: [00:04:06] Majors in engineering.

NOBLE: [00:04:08] And what school was that?

WILDMAN: [00:04:10] University of California at Berkeley.

NOBLE: [00:04:11] At Berkeley.

WILDMAN: [00:04:13] Yeah. So that was electrical engineering. And I got a bachelor's degree in that.

NOBLE: [00:04:19] Electrical engineering?

WILDMAN: [00:04:20] Electrical engineering.

NOBLE: [00:04:21] Yeah. Yeah. Wonderful. And then at some point, you got an interest in joining the Peace Corps. Was that right after college or was there an interim thing?

WILDMAN: [00:04:32] Well, it's interesting because I had this desire to ride a bicycle across country. And I, when I graduated from college, I did that. So that took a couple of months.

NOBLE: [00:04:47] So you bicycled from California to?

WILDMAN: [00:04:50] Actually from New York to California.

NOBLE: [00:04:53] The other way around. Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:04:54] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:04:56] By yourself or did you have a buddy?

WILDMAN: [00:04:58] No, I found the person through a want ad.

NOBLE: [00:05:01] No kidding.

WILDMAN: [00:05:01] That also wanted to do that. Yeah, I didn't. I know. To do that alone is very difficult.

NOBLE: [00:05:05] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:05:06] You know, it's just not very easy to watch everything and take care of everything. Just one person.

NOBLE: [00:05:14] And it's much more fun with a buddy too.

WILDMAN: [00:05:16] Yeah, yeah. So joining the Peace Corps. Well, um, after the bicycle ride, I had another job with Bechtel as like a junior engineer. And I just realized that it wasn't really something I felt like doing as a lifetime sort of thing.

NOBLE: [00:05:37] Mm hmm.

WILDMAN: [00:05:37] And the Peace Corps, for me, was a chance to, um, look at something different, you know, see the world. I thought maybe I would like teaching and it would give me the chance to do that. So those sort of things pushed me to join the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:05:56] So you applied. Did you send in your application after the bike ride or even before?

WILDMAN: [00:06:03] Afterwards. It was after that and after I had started working.

NOBLE: [00:06:07] Oh, that's right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you sent in your application. Did you tell your folks that you were doing this?

WILDMAN: [00:06:16] Uh, I think I did, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:18] Were they pretty supportive of the idea?

WILDMAN: [00:06:20] No. Well, you know, they already knew from the bike ride that I kind of had this independent way of doing stuff. So I guess they kind of figured that I was going to do it no matter what. But, you know, their, their, their hope was, I think, because, you know, my dad's an engineer and parents want their kids to have a stable kind of not dangerous life. So, um, yeah, they didn't like it so much. But when I, when I did go, they were, you know, we're always connected by letters. You know, there's, we didn't have the ways of communicating that we have now

NOBLE: [00:07:03] Right. That's right. Blue aero letters, is that?

WILDMAN: [00:07:05] That's exactly right.

NOBLE: [00:07:06] Yes. So you get, you send in your application and then you had to wait for a while. Did the app, do you remember if the application asked you if there was any part of the world where you would not want to be assigned? Or if you had a preference for a particular place?

WILDMAN: [00:07:24] I don't remember. I think it was more like they wanted to assign me to a technical teaching sort of thing. And maybe it was like, here's the choices.

NOBLE: [00:07:37] Oh, okay.

WILDMAN: [00:07:38] Maybe there were several countries that they said it was possible. And I don't remember really if I said, what I said.

NOBLE: [00:07:48] Okay, that's all right. And then eventually you get a letter. Did it come, did the news come to you via letter that you'd been accepted to train for a particular place?

WILDMAN: [00:08:00] I don't remember. I suppose it did.

NOBLE: [00:08:02] Yeah. Yeah. And, um, then you had to say goodbye to your family.

WILDMAN: [00:08:09] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:08:09] And to your, I can't remember, was it a sister?

WILDMAN: [00:08:11] Sister.

NOBLE: [00:08:11] Yeah. Yeah. Did you have a big party?

WILDMAN: [00:08:16] I don't think we did. No.

NOBLE: [00:08:19] I didn't either. And then, um, off you went. And so was the training here in the United States or was it in-country in Iran?

WILDMAN: [00:08:28] Well, the way this worked is that we, our group to Iran, gathered in I think it was Philadelphia, and there was like a four day sort of orientation thing and.

NOBLE: [00:08:41] Oh, yeah. Shots? Did you have to line up and get immunizations?

WILDMAN: [00:08:48] I don't remember. Probably had to get some done before that.

NOBLE: [00:08:51] Mm hmm. Yeah. And the orientation would have been nuts and bolts about Iran or something?

WILDMAN: [00:09:02] I just don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:09:03] It's hard to remember, right. What do you, what do you remember? What? How many people were there?

WILDMAN: [00:09:07] Well, I know our group had about 150.

NOBLE: [00:09:10] Oh, huge.

WILDMAN: [00:09:13] And, um, I guess one of the main points was they wanted to sort out, you know, who was really qualified and, you know, like able to go to Iran and manage there, I think.

NOBLE: [00:09:28] And they were able to figure that out in four days?

WILDMAN: [00:09:31] I don't know. I guess they figured some of it out.

NOBLE: [00:09:33] Were there some people who didn't get past Philadelphia?

WILDMAN: [00:09:38] I don't know for a fact.

NOBLE: [00:09:40] Yeah. And this group of people, were they, um, they're all going to be teachers?

WILDMAN: [00:09:48] Yes, they were going to be either English teachers or vocational type teachers like me.

NOBLE: [00:09:59] Mixture of men and women?

WILDMAN: [00:10:01] Yeah. And there were some married couples also. Just, just a few, two or three, I think.

NOBLE: [00:10:07] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:10:08] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:10] So then you all get on a plane in Philadelphia or New York, you flew out of?

WILDMAN: [00:10:16] Well, I guess it was Philadelphia.

NOBLE: [00:10:18] Uh huh. And did the plane take you directly to Iran, or were there some stops along the way?

WILDMAN: [00:10:26] I don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:10:27] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:10:27] I mean, basically, it was like that plane was our plane.

NOBLE: [00:10:31] Yeah. You filled it? Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:10:32] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:34] Had you been abroad before? Had you been in Europe?

WILDMAN: [00:10:37] No. No. The most I've been out of the country was Canada. You know, very limited.

NOBLE: [00:10:43] Yeah, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:10:44] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:45] So now you're crossing the ocean. That's a long, long flight.

WILDMAN: [00:10:48] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:49] And eventually you land in Tehran, I assume?

WILDMAN: [00:10:52] Yeah, that's right.

NOBLE: [00:10:53] Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember your first impressions when you stepped off the plane?

WILDMAN: [00:10:59] No. Uh. We were just there for maybe one day or something like that. And then we all went to Rezaiyeh, which is on the west side of the country.

NOBLE: [00:11:23] Uh huh.

WILDMAN: [00:11:24] And the government had given us a, I think it was like an elementary school that was for our training people to live there and have our instruction there. And that lasted all summer.

NOBLE: [00:11:40] So you went over at the beginning of summer?

WILDMAN: [00:11:42] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:11:42] June, maybe?

WILDMAN: [00:11:45] I guess.

NOBLE: [00:11:45] Yeah. And what's summer like in Iran? What, is it hot? I've never been there.

WILDMAN: [00:11:52] Oh, yeah, it's, it's, it's pretty hot. It wasn't extremely hot. I don't know what to compare it to, though, but it wasn't outlandish.

NOBLE: [00:12:07] And in Rezaiyeh at this elementary school, what sort of accommodations do they provide for you during training? Were you living with a family or were you in a dorm?

WILDMAN: [00:12:17] I think we were in a dorm, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:19] Uh huh.

WILDMAN: [00:12:19] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:20] So you'd be paired up with another guy or a couple of guys?

WILDMAN: [00:12:25] I think it was like a big room full of guys.

NOBLE: [00:12:27] Really?

WILDMAN: [00:12:28] I think so, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:31] And you'd eat dorm food?

WILDMAN: [00:12:34] Whatever they cooked for us. What did we have? You know, like the big round loaves of bread for breakfast and honey and cheese, I think. And, gosh, I think for dinner they, like, pushed us out the door. You know, they wanted us to go and see things. So I think we got dinner on our own. I think.

NOBLE: [00:12:56] So they must have provided you with a little pocket money.

WILDMAN: [00:12:59] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:59] Yeah. So in training, what was training all about? What did you learn in training?

WILDMAN: [00:13:06] Well, the big thing was the language.

NOBLE: [00:13:08] And the language is?

WILDMAN: [00:13:10] Farsi.

NOBLE: [00:13:10] Farsi.

WILDMAN: [00:13:11] Yeah. Yeah, that was the main thing. That was like at least half of each day, maybe more. I don't remember exactly. But then they also gave us some training in how to prepare like slides and even how to develop slide film, you know, with chemicals. They showed us how to do that.

NOBLE: [00:13:30] For teaching purposes? Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:13:32] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:13:35] How to make your own slides.

WILDMAN: [00:13:37] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:13:37] Wow.

WILDMAN: [00:13:37] Yeah. The whole thing.

NOBLE: [00:13:40] This is assuming that you'd have a slide projector available.

WILDMAN: [00:13:43] Yeah, it does assume that, doesn't it?

NOBLE: [00:13:45] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:13:46] No, but I never, I never actually did that. I don't know if any of us did that.

NOBLE: [00:13:50] Oh. Um, let's go back to learning Farsi a little bit. How was that taught? Were you in, there's 150 of you, so they divide you up into small groups for language instruction?

WILDMAN: [00:14:07] I guess they did. I'm sorry, I don't remember. But we had like a half dozen teachers there. So they must, they must have done that.

NOBLE: [00:14:15] And the teachers were native speakers of Farsi?

WILDMAN: [00:14:18] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:14:19] Iranian people.

WILDMAN: [00:14:19] They were Iranian people.

NOBLE: [00:14:20] Yeah. Yeah. So at the end of the summer, when training is over, did you feel that you could converse a little bit in Farsi?

WILDMAN: [00:14:33] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:14:34] Well, that's awesome. Do you remember a phrase or two of it?

WILDMAN: [00:14:39] Uh, [speaks Farsi]. My name is Mike. I learned a little bit of Farsi. [speaks Farsi]. You know, like, but see, that's the thing that's amazing is that because I used it, you know, then I can remember some of it.

NOBLE: [00:15:01] Right. So, yeah, we'll get into how you used it in a minute. Yeah. So what else? Let's see. So in your training, your training consisted largely of learning to understand and speak Farsi.

WILDMAN: [00:15:14] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:15:15] And was it a written language? Did you learn to read and write it too?

WILDMAN: [00:15:17] We did.

NOBLE: [00:15:18] Wow.

WILDMAN: [00:15:19] Well, they tried to teach us that, whether we learned it or not is another story.

NOBLE: [00:15:25] Okay.

WILDMAN: [00:15:25] But, but there was a big effort, you know, like immersion kind of training. And like I say, you know, making us go out and get meals and stuff.

NOBLE: [00:15:35] Sure. And then there was technical education, in your case, learning how to make slides, even though you might not have learned it later. Did that give you a glimmer of a certain kind of teaching and learning experience of actually hands on making things?

WILDMAN: [00:15:55] Well, I've got to remember what else they showed us. I mean, that was so unique. It kind of stuck in my mind. But I'm thinking that they also, like how to do flip charts and, you know, other teaching aids, what you could do. That's the one that I really do remember.

NOBLE: [00:16:11] Yeah, yeah. Did you do any practice teaching in the course of that summer?

WILDMAN: [00:16:20] I don't remember. Probably. That would make sense, wouldn't it? But I don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:16:26] Okay. So eventually training comes to an end and there must have been a swearing in ceremony and something.

WILDMAN: [00:16:37] Did we do something like that? I don't remember. Probably had a going away party, but.

NOBLE: [00:16:43] I think there was probably a swearing in thing where you raise your right hand and.

WILDMAN: [00:16:47] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:16:47] And that would either have been in Philadelphia or more likely in Iran.

WILDMAN: [00:16:51] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:16:52] And then they send you off to an assignment.

WILDMAN: [00:16:56] Right.

NOBLE: [00:16:56] Where did they send you?

WILDMAN: [00:16:58] Well, mine, mine was Isfahan. And that's the second largest city.

NOBLE: [00:17:05] Isfahan.

WILDMAN: [00:17:05] It's, you know, a main tourist city. It has these old buildings there. Um, so there were two of us, a guy from Texas and me, and we were sent to two different schools to teach this vocational electro technique.

NOBLE: [00:17:25] Vocational electro technique?

WILDMAN: [00:17:29] Well, what it means is that it would, ideally would qualify the person to be an electrician to install wiring, you know, like in a home or building, that sort of thing. All electrical equipment.

NOBLE: [00:17:41] Training people for a trade.

WILDMAN: [00:17:42] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:17:43] Yeah. And so you were both doing the same thing, but in different schools?

WILDMAN: [00:17:51] Right.

NOBLE: [00:17:51] Did you room together?

WILDMAN: [00:17:52] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:17:53] Talk. So before we talk about what went on in the classroom, let's talk about how you lived.

WILDMAN: [00:17:59] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:17:59] What? Describe the house or apartment or where did you live?

WILDMAN: [00:18:04] Well, we, we had a, rented a house. And the, uh, the Peace Corps volunteers. You know, it had been like several years' worth of Peace Corps volunteers in Isfahan.

NOBLE: [00:18:17] Oh, there had been. So there was a Peace Corps house identified?

WILDMAN: [00:18:21] No, no, there wasn't a Peace Corps house. But there was one person in particular that was Iranian that was very friendly towards

Peace Corps volunteers. And he helped us to find this house. The woman really didn't want to rent it to us because we weren't Muslim, but he kind of persuaded her to do that. It was an older house. It had a, well, I guess it's typical for really for houses in Iran, but the house is built around a central courtyard and it has the big door, you know, it's kind of like you have a walled house.

NOBLE: [00:18:59] And the wall, the door opening in that wall to enter the compound?

WILDMAN: [00:19:05] The door is opening to the street.

NOBLE: [00:19:06] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:19:07] And once you get through that, then you, I think there were no more doors to get through the main way of the, of the home.

NOBLE: [00:19:17] And then rooms opened off, onto a courtyard.

WILDMAN: [00:19:22] Onto the courtyard.

NOBLE: [00:19:22] Yeah, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:19:23] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:19:23] And so.

WILDMAN: [00:19:25] But it was.

NOBLE: [00:19:25] Did the woman?

WILDMAN: [00:19:26] It wasn't glamorous or anything like that.

NOBLE: [00:19:28] Okay, yeah. And then the woman who owned the house also lived there?

WILDMAN: [00:19:33] No.

NOBLE: [00:19:34] No. So it was just you and your Peace Corps mate. What was his name?

WILDMAN: [00:19:39] John Swanson.

NOBLE: [00:19:40] John?

WILDMAN: [00:19:41] John Swanson.

NOBLE: [00:19:42] Swanson. Okay. So it was just you and John in this house?

WILDMAN: [00:19:47] Well, yes and no. I mean, the house had maybe like four bedrooms at least, and we were like in this central location. And a number of volunteers were in smaller towns or villages around the area, so frequently, and we were happy, you know, to have these people drop in and.

NOBLE: [00:20:09] Yours was the place where they'd crash.

WILDMAN: [00:20:11] Yeah. So that was good. So we had, we had visitors a lot of times.

NOBLE: [00:20:14] I can see the parties right now. And what? So you and John each had your own room.

WILDMAN: [00:20:23] Right.

NOBLE: [00:20:23] And then was there a kitchen there?

WILDMAN: [00:20:25] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:20:26] In the house.

WILDMAN: [00:20:26] There was.

NOBLE: [00:20:27] Who cooked?

WILDMAN: [00:20:30] I think we took turns. The Peace Corps had given us this cookbook that was prepared by Peace Corps volunteers in Iran. So they kind of knew what worked, you know, and simple stuff. So we used a lot of those recipes.

NOBLE: [00:20:48] What a unique thing. Do you still have it? Do you still have that cookbook?

WILDMAN: [00:20:52] Maybe. Somewhere in a box in my garage maybe. I don't know.

NOBLE: [00:20:57] It sounds intriguing. So you and John would cook for yourselves. You took turns cooking and that. And where would you shop for food?

WILDMAN: [00:21:08] Um, well, let's see. There was the, right outside of our house down a couple was the store where they had fresh yogurt, a small store. And he was a friendly guy. So we would buy yogurt and eggs from him. And for other stuff, I think we had to go like about a half mile away to a Armenian store, a grocery store. They would have kind of more Western shopping sort of stuff. But I don't remember all the details. I think we would buy meat from a, well, you know, one of these butcher places local to our house. And definitely you cooked that a lot. You know, you don't want to eat that raw.

NOBLE: [00:21:54] Oh, right, right. Yeah, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:21:56] It's been outside and all that stuff. But we survived somehow, you know.

NOBLE: [00:22:03] What did you cook on? You had a stove of some sort?

WILDMAN: [00:22:06] What did we have? I think we had a little stove, a little gas stove. And it worked on those propane cylinders.

NOBLE: [00:22:15] Yeah, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:22:18] So we would have. I think that's how it was. I think we had one of those in the kitchen.

NOBLE: [00:22:22] And did you have refrigeration? Oh, you did. So you had electricity. Was it kerosene, the refrigerator, or electric?

WILDMAN: [00:22:29] No, we had electricity there. This is the second biggest city.

NOBLE: [00:22:32] That's right. Oh, okay. So you had electric lights?

WILDMAN: [00:22:37] Yeah. First class.

NOBLE: [00:22:39] No kidding. And how about running water?

WILDMAN: [00:22:42] Yes, we had that too.

NOBLE: [00:22:43] So you had flush toilets right there in the house?

WILDMAN: [00:22:45] Well, you know, the kind you squat on. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:48] Yeah, but still.

WILDMAN: [00:22:49] Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:49] You didn't have to go outside.

WILDMAN: [00:22:51] No. Sounds pretty good, huh?

NOBLE: [00:22:58] [inaudible] Well, wow. If you had electricity, did you have radios? Some contact with the outside world?

WILDMAN: [00:23:09] Um, I don't remember listening to a radio so much. I mean, there wasn't any. Were there Western stations? I don't think there were. Our music was more like cassettes.

NOBLE: [00:23:23] Oh yes, sure, yes.

WILDMAN: [00:23:24] So we had cassette players.

NOBLE: [00:23:25] Yeah. And you had brought your music from home?

WILDMAN: [00:23:30] Well, yeah, we could buy it also. We could buy cassettes.

NOBLE: [00:23:33] Early seventies.

WILDMAN: [00:23:34] Something like that. Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:23:38] Well, that sounds pretty, like a pretty good. Did it seem like an adequate living arrangement too?

WILDMAN: [00:23:45] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:23:45] Yeah. And when you walked out the door. When you stepped out the door, when you opened that door in the wall and stepped out onto the street, um, what did you see? What was going on in the street? What was the neighborhood like?

WILDMAN: [00:24:01] Well, it was a side street off of a main street. So there were people coming and going, you know, some people riding bicycles. And that was our way of getting around.

NOBLE: [00:24:12] You had a bicycle?

WILDMAN: [00:24:12] We each had a bicycle.

NOBLE: [00:24:13] Peace Corps provided the bike for you?

WILDMAN: [00:24:15] No.

NOBLE: [00:24:15] You had to buy it?

WILDMAN: [00:24:16] Well, they gave us money to.

NOBLE: [00:24:17] I see.

WILDMAN: [00:24:19] Yeah. So there'd be that, you know, people walking with groceries and kids and, you know, just people walking.

NOBLE: [00:24:28] Yeah. Not so many cars.

WILDMAN: [00:24:29] Not so many cars. Some cars. I mean, it's not like Iran had a scarcity of cars, but, you know, these kind of back alleys. It wasn't like people would be driving through there unless they live there.

NOBLE: [00:24:41] Yeah. Yeah. Okay, so you and John have different schools. How far away was your school from where you lived?

WILDMAN: [00:24:52] Like a ten minute bike ride, something like that.

NOBLE: [00:24:54] Oh, that's very doable.

WILDMAN: [00:24:56] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:24:57] Was it dangerous riding the bike in traffic and so forth?

WILDMAN: [00:25:01] Well, somewhat. I don't ever recall getting hit, but I just remember it wasn't like America, you know, where we kind of. Drivers are supposed to look out for bicycles. You had to be careful that people were not going to do something.

NOBLE: [00:25:21] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:25:22] I guess the most dangerous thing was in the winter when it was icy that I did fall off my bike at least once in that situation.

NOBLE: [00:25:30] Right in traffic?

WILDMAN: [00:25:32] No, not in traffic. Just falling off and getting bruised.

NOBLE: [00:25:37] Yeah. So, yeah, you talked about getting there. It was pretty hot in the summer, but winter comes and there's ice. Snow also?

WILDMAN: [00:25:46] Snow, a little. It didn't snow a lot there, but it did some. I mean, enough to leave build ups on the roads and they didn't really do like ice melting and, you know, snow plows and stuff. I think it was people shoveling as I recall.

NOBLE: [00:26:04] Yeah. Or tromping through it.

WILDMAN: [00:26:06] Yeah. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:26:08] So you get to your school. Let's walk in the door of the school. The school's a high school, a vocational school, at the secondary level. How old are the students?

WILDMAN: [00:26:20] Well, I guess like 15 or something like that?

NOBLE: [00:26:25] Mm hmm. You didn't have people in their twenties there?

WILDMAN: [00:26:30] I don't remember that, no.

NOBLE: [00:26:31] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:26:32] I think they're pretty much all young.

NOBLE: [00:26:33] Same high school ages here.

WILDMAN: [00:26:35] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:26:35] Mm hmm. Okay. And so what was that like when you first got to the school? If you arrived there at the end of, you arrived in Isfahan at the end of the summer, so does their school year begin as ours does in September?

WILDMAN: [00:26:55] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:26:56] Okay, so you're there, and somebody must have given you a list of classes and?

WILDMAN: [00:27:04] Well, the way it was, they did have classrooms and they had like workshops and I was assigned to be in a workshop. It was, it was challenging for me to be able to contribute something because the school had been there for a while and it had teachers for a while already. And to have some youngster come in and, you know, try to suggest how to do things didn't fly too well.

NOBLE: [00:27:38] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:27:40] And I, my understanding is that the central government, you know, kind of assigned volunteers to schools.

NOBLE: [00:27:49] As opposed to the school requesting a teacher with a particular skill?

WILDMAN: [00:27:53] That's right. That's right.

NOBLE: [00:27:54] Hmm, that's awkward, isn't it?

WILDMAN: [00:27:55] So it is. And, you know, I certainly got the feeling that they, the other teachers. We had two or three, maybe two. Sorry. There were two, two teachers in this workshop that had been there for a while.

NOBLE: [00:28:14] Iranian teachers?

WILDMAN: [00:28:15] Iranian teachers, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:28:16] Had they had a Peace Corps volunteer on staff before?

WILDMAN: [00:28:19] I don't think the school did. No.

NOBLE: [00:28:24] And so were you given your own class to teach?

WILDMAN: [00:28:28] No.

NOBLE: [00:28:28] Or were you sort of just there helping out?

WILDMAN: [00:28:30] It would have been extremely difficult for me to do that really. The, the, you know, the place that I found that I could fit in ironically was, it was in the auto mechanic shop, which is not what I was sent to do. But the person in that shop had acquired like engine tuning equipment, some other equipment from, from Europe, from England. And he wanted help to translate the instruction manual.

NOBLE: [00:29:04] Ah, yes.

WILDMAN: [00:29:05] And so I spent at least half my time there with that, the person that helped rent the house, you know, because I know English and he knows my English is good and his Persian is good. So together we would translate pages out of this manual.

NOBLE: [00:29:23] Manual. Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:29:24] And the instructor very much appreciated that.

NOBLE: [00:29:28] Oh, good. Good. Yeah. So now they're glad you're there.

WILDMAN: [00:29:33] Well, he was anyway.

NOBLE: [00:29:34] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:29:35] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:29:38] So it sounds like the person that you're mainly talking to and working with is the guy who was a friend of the Peace Corps, the same one who helped to find the house.

WILDMAN: [00:29:47] Yeah, that's, that's true.

NOBLE: [00:29:48] He had some English or?

WILDMAN: [00:29:50] His English was, was pretty good. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:29:54] But you were using, you were also using your Farsi?

WILDMAN: [00:29:57] Right.

NOBLE: [00:29:58] With other people on the staff?

WILDMAN: [00:30:00] Yeah. And just with daily life, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:30:03] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So that went on for a while. And then? Eventually you finish translating the manual.

WILDMAN: [00:30:12] Well, I don't remember the sequence of stuff, but it seemed like I was always working with him some way or another. And in the electrical shop, I was able to repair some experiments and get some equipment going. And, but I felt it wasn't, it didn't make so much difference really. You know, I tried. But the, uh, the reality is that. So engineers are kind of respected in Iran. But here in the U.S., you know, if you go to UC Berkeley and get an engineering degree, you know, to install a circuit for a light fixture is like, where do I start, you know? You know, they don't teach stuff like that.

NOBLE: [00:31:02] You had a more highly theoretical technical level.

WILDMAN: [00:31:06] You know, the higher areas. And, you know, ideally they would have had like licensed electricians go over there and teach this stuff. But anyway, you know, the Peace Corps does the best they can with the people that they get, right? So that's the way it worked.

NOBLE: [00:31:24] So they get an intellectual engineer from Berkeley trying to teach the basic electrical mechanics.

WILDMAN: [00:31:33] Yeah. So it's just, it was a difficult combination.

NOBLE: [00:31:37] But you're smiling when you say that.

WILDMAN: [00:31:39] Well, because for me, you know, it was, the whole thing was an experience, you know, a life experience.

NOBLE: [00:31:47] Yes.

WILDMAN: [00:31:48] I don't, I don't regret that. I mean, it was very valuable for that.

NOBLE: [00:31:53] For sure.

WILDMAN: [00:31:53] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:31:58] In that first year that you're there, how was your health holding up?

WILDMAN: [00:32:06] I don't think I ever had any major problems. I mean, every so often, you know, you had to be really, really careful. And every so often, if you eat some unwashed vegetable or, you know, you just don't pay attention, then you can get pretty sick. And I think that would happen to me every couple of months.

NOBLE: [00:32:26] Mm hmm. Of course, you had to probably boil your water and filter it.

WILDMAN: [00:32:30] We had to boil it or put some, you know, stuff in it. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:32:38] So you'd occasionally get sick, but nothing life threatening?

WILDMAN: [00:32:41] No.

NOBLE: [00:32:41] Yeah. Did you have, uh, when there would be a break in the school year for some sort of holiday, um, did you? What did you do? Did you travel or did you have a side little secondary project to work on?

WILDMAN: [00:32:56] No, they, they just, you know, we had the summer off, actually. So it was pretty amazing, you know. We still got the Peace Corps salary too.

NOBLE: [00:33:03] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:33:04] So, um. I, where did I go traveling with? I, there were different occasions, but the most memorable was, was going to this village above the Caspian Sea. And it was really rustic. You know, if you talk about no electricity and running water, this was that, you know, and I went with another Peace Corps volunteer that we were kind of friendly. And he was, I think, working in one of the villages in the area. But this was very fascinating. The people were very welcoming to us and they wanted to even, uh, at one point they were having some celebration for something or another, and they wanted us to sing and dance together.

NOBLE: [00:33:54] Oh.

WILDMAN: [00:33:55] And it's like, wait a minute, I just, I don't think so, you know?

NOBLE: [00:33:59] Yeah, well, their concept of dancing would be very different from yours.

WILDMAN: [00:34:01] I know, but it's like, they're very free, you know, and happy to, you know, and they grew up like that. And it's like, oh, let's have fun, you know? And I guess I just, anyway, I mean, I enjoyed it, but I just wasn't as free to be able to do that sort of thing. Kind of a regret, I guess, you know. But just that's the way it was.

NOBLE: [00:34:27] So you are. Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:34:30] But that was, that was a nice experience just to see people kind of enjoying themselves, you know, without all the television and, you know, all the stuff, you know. They just had a good time together. That's kind of for me very amazing, you know, to see that sort of thing.

NOBLE: [00:34:52] I'm going to ask you about that, about how that might have affected your life later on. But let's stay in Iran for now.

WILDMAN: [00:35:00] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:35:00] So were there any other trips you took?

WILDMAN: [00:35:05] I guess we just had the one summer in between and then. I forget how the schedule worked exactly. But after that, you know, that was the end of the two years, you know, the one summer between and then another year of teaching. And then the two years was finished.

NOBLE: [00:35:20] That's right.

WILDMAN: [00:35:21] So after that, I did kind of take my time and I think I went part ways with another, not a Peace Corps volunteer, but a guy that taught in a, somehow in a Christian school. But you can't really be a Christian school in Iran. I don't remember how that worked, but somehow they. But he and I traveled together through Turkey and Greece, and at some point we went our different ways. I don't remember when that happened, but that was also a new thing for me.

NOBLE: [00:35:55] Yes. A unique opportunity for a man who was still in his early twenties.

WILDMAN: [00:35:59] Yeah, that's right.

NOBLE: [00:36:01] Back in Isfahan when you're teaching, did you have, did anybody from Peace Corps come out to see how you're doing and talk to you?

WILDMAN: [00:36:14] Probably. I don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:36:19] So did you have a sense that you had a supervisor who was checking on you, or were you pretty much on your own?

WILDMAN: [00:36:26] Oh, we felt connected. I felt connected. And, you know, one of the things we would do anyway was to, uh, to go to Tehran every so often, you know? I don't remember how often, once every month or so, you know, we'd get on the bus and it's like an overnight, unpleasant

thing. But anyway, go to Tehran and we could visit the Peace Corps office and talk with people there and.

NOBLE: [00:36:50] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:36:51] Go to the American embassy and get all kinds of goodies, you know, the shopping there. And there was this interesting hotel that we stayed at. Goats running around in the hotel.

NOBLE: [00:37:08] Oh my goodness. In Tehran?

WILDMAN: [00:37:10] In Tehran, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:37:11] Suddenly it breaks the image that I had.

WILDMAN: [00:37:12] Oh, yeah. Well, this was a unique hotel. This was like the, the world traveler backpack person kind of hotel. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:37:24] I love the smile on your face. I wish this were a video recording.

WILDMAN: [00:37:28] Yeah, well, I'm trying to remember the.

NOBLE: [00:37:31] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:37:32] The things, you know. But yeah.

NOBLE: [00:37:37] You mentioned that, you mentioned a Peace Corps salary. In the sixties, they called it a living allowance, which was very modest. Do you remember about how much did you get and how did you pick it up?

WILDMAN: [00:37:50] Uh, I don't remember, but it was really like a lot. I mean, I actually bought a lot of rugs and goodies and stuff there, you know, that, you know, the copperware and stuff like that.

NOBLE: [00:38:04] How did you get that home?

WILDMAN: [00:38:08] Uh, we, the Peace Corps knew people that we could ship it with. But actually, I got some stuff stolen, so it didn't work out all that great. But anyway. In other words, we had enough money to do more than our needs.

NOBLE: [00:38:24] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:38:24] Some, a couple of people bought motorcycles. And I don't know if that was really supposed to be, but anyhow, I won't say any names then. It wasn't me. But yeah, just if you lived basically it was fine.

NOBLE: [00:38:44] You could save up a few.

WILDMAN: [00:38:45] Yeah. And they had some money also, a couple thousand dollars ready for us when we finished.

NOBLE: [00:38:52] Right. Readjustment loans.

WILDMAN: [00:38:54] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:38:54] Used to call them.

WILDMAN: [00:38:54] It sounds about right. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:39:00] Meanwhile, you've got a family back in California. Your mom and dad and your sister. And you were writing letters and getting letters from them.

WILDMAN: [00:39:08] Right.

NOBLE: [00:39:10] So it was that blue air letter.

WILDMAN: [00:39:12] That's what it was. The air grams. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:39:14] Try to cram as much as you could. Yeah. You still have them? Or does your mom have them?

WILDMAN: [00:39:20] I may. Well, my mom is, is at an adult community place, so whatever I salvaged from her home and I have it, I may have it somewhere. But I even had some, uh, one of the things in Iran for crafts was to make these tablecloths, you know, where they would stamp, you know? They would carve stamps, you know.

NOBLE: [00:39:44] Oh, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:39:45] And you would stamp the blue and then the yellow and then the red, you know, and make these really pretty designs.

NOBLE: [00:39:50] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:39:51] And I still have some of those tablecloths. Well, anyway, one Christmas I got the idea that I would bring a bunch of these aerograms to one of these shops where they're doing the stamping and said, can you stamp these for me?

NOBLE: [00:40:04] Oh.

WILDMAN: [00:40:04] So I got these really nice designs stamped on the aerograms.

NOBLE: [00:40:10] How lovely.

WILDMAN: [00:40:11] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:40:11] And then you sent them off?

WILDMAN: [00:40:13] Sent them, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:40:13] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Meanwhile, you're getting letters from your folks. They're writing to you too.

WILDMAN: [00:40:19] Right. Well, they actually came and visited one time.

NOBLE: [00:40:21] They did?

WILDMAN: [00:40:22] They did. They were in Europe for some convention or something or another, and they decided they would come. And so they stayed at a nice hotel in Isfahan. And when they saw our house, it was like, what the? You know, because the hotel is nice. They have like Western toilets and.

NOBLE: [00:40:44] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:40:45] You know.

NOBLE: [00:40:46] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:40:46] I mean, our kitchen featured cockroaches that would come out at night, you know, out of the drain, you know.

NOBLE: [00:40:51] Sure.

WILDMAN: [00:40:51] When you turn the light on.

NOBLE: [00:40:52] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:40:54] So my mom was like kind of freaked out about the situation.

NOBLE: [00:40:59] But she wasn't sleeping there.

WILDMAN: [00:41:01] No, she wasn't sleeping there. But it was nice. And one of the things that she remembered was going shopping with me in the bazaar, and she wanted to buy this pair of shoes. She saw these shoes that she liked and negotiate, you know, try to make a deal.

NOBLE: [00:41:19] Ah, so in the bazaar, you don't pay what their first price.

WILDMAN: [00:41:22] No, no, no. So we made some kind of deal and I wasn't satisfied with it. And I told my mom, look, we've just got to walk away from the person, okay? And she's all upset. I want the shoes. Mom, just got to walk away from the person.

NOBLE: [00:41:39] It's not how you do it. Right.

WILDMAN: [00:41:42] You know? So we walked away and he came after us and said, okay, okay, you know.

NOBLE: [00:41:46] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:41:47] And so my mom was happy about that. She remembers that one. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:41:58] Is there anything else that you'd like to say about your time in the Peace Corps? Would you recommend it?

WILDMAN: [00:42:10] Would I recommend it?

NOBLE: [00:42:11] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:42:11] I guess it depends who I'm recommending it to.

NOBLE: [00:42:14] Well, a kid graduating from Berkeley today.

WILDMAN: [00:42:17] I'd would say that it's definitely a good experience and a good way to see people in real life in a different country. But it also is going to mean some sacrifice and discomfort. So you've got to be okay with that.

NOBLE: [00:42:39] Mm hmm. Do you think it changed your perspective on the world in any way?

WILDMAN: [00:42:43] Oh, absolutely. No doubt about it. Dramatically.

NOBLE: [00:42:51] Does it affect your own perception of your own country, of the United States, having been abroad, having been there?

WILDMAN: [00:42:56] Absolutely.

NOBLE: [00:42:57] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:42:58] Yeah, no, I gave you that moment of going to the village, you know, and the people kind of enjoying their life.

NOBLE: [00:43:04] Yes. No TV. That's right.

WILDMAN: [00:43:07] And all that stuff. And another thing I noticed was that the families were very close to each other. And, you know, when I, one of the things that struck me when I came back to the U.S. was this kind of casual way of parents picking up their kids from the airport. You know, like no big deal, you know, like from the international terminal at the airport. And contrast that to Iran, where it is a really big deal, you know, to see one of your family people coming back again.

NOBLE: [00:43:38] Embracing.

WILDMAN: [00:43:39] Very close. Yeah. And another thing was the contrast between someone in Iran who really was qualified. I met one person who wanted to be a doctor. Very, very good person. Not, not, you know, a not a Peace Corps volunteer. But somehow we met. I don't remember how. But he wanted to be a doctor and it was just very, very difficult, almost impossible, you know. And it just, I realized, you know, it's like an unfair situation, you know, because I can come back to the U.S. and I can do whatever I want, you know? But to be a doctor in Iran is like this tiny number of people can go to school there for it.

NOBLE: [00:44:24] And would you have to be a member of the moneyed elite in order to get that education?

WILDMAN: [00:44:29] That I don't even know about. Probably so. You know, you probably have to be connected somehow to.

NOBLE: [00:44:36] Yeah.

WILDMAN: [00:44:37] So that struck me. It's like unfortunate, you know, that people couldn't have the opportunities that we have.

NOBLE: [00:44:44] Yeah. When you came back, what did you do with the rest of your life? Did you go back to school? Did you get an advanced degree or did you go right back to work?

WILDMAN: [00:44:57] What did I do? Well, I think I had taken some aptitude tests at some point that suggested that physical therapy would be a good career for me. Because I did have, I didn't want to live like I saw all the people at the companies that I work for, kind of these large companies. And it seemed like not so much of a joyful sort of career. And I realized that it's much better if you can do something that you're interacting with and helping people directly.

NOBLE: [00:45:36] Yeah. Do you think your experience in Iran helped you see that about yourself?

WILDMAN: [00:45:47] Well, it at least helped me to see that I needed to do something different than trying to go back to one of those companies or environments where I was before. So, um. So what? I started studying physical therapy, and to do that I had to take prerequisite courses at Cal State Hayward, now Cal State East Bay. So I was doing that. And, you know, Carol is a member of the Unification Church and so am I.

NOBLE: [00:46:23] Carol is my cousin, which is how we're mentioning Carol.

WILDMAN: [00:46:27] You know, yeah. I was going to the Berkeley campus to, after I got back, to do some research in the library. And I actually met one of the members of our church there on campus. They had a table there. And so I got connected that way. And, you know, I was, I was looking for something more than just kind of a small, selfish sort of lifestyle. And so I did want to meet this community. So I was introduced to the church and I continued to go into the, to continue with the physical therapy prerequisite classes. But eventually I realized, you know, really what I want to do is just be a full time missionary for the church.

NOBLE: [00:47:19] Ah.

WILDMAN: [00:47:19] So that's, that's, that's what I did. I didn't get another job with an engineering company for quite a while. Yeah. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:47:31] Well, thank you, Mike.

WILDMAN: [00:47:33] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:47:34] Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

WILDMAN: [00:47:36] No. Ask your next question.

NOBLE: [00:47:39] I think I'm out of questions.

WILDMAN: [00:47:41] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:47:42] Thank you very much. It's been wonderful getting your story.

WILDMAN: [00:47:45] Well, that was just one hour. You said 2 hours, not that I wanted to stay. Okay, that's, that's fine. All right.

NOBLE: [00:47:51] Thank you.

WILDMAN: [00:47:52] Okay. Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]