

Donald Gale Rozell Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Donald Gale Rozell
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Date of Interview: June 19, 2012
Location of Interview: Branson, Missouri
Length: 14 pages

Biographical Note

Donald Gale Rozell served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 on a variety of jobs (Bolivia II).

Access

Open.

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Suggested Citation

Donald Gale Rozell, recorded interview by Sharleen Hirschi Simpson, June 19, 2012, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Donald Gale Rozell

June 19, 2012
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:02] Today is June 19, 2012, and this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson interviewing Donald Gale Rozell, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia, went to Bolivia II project, from 1962 to 1964. OK, why don't you tell me a little bit about the first year that, you know, the year before you were going to go in? What made you decide to go into the Peace Corps?

ROZELL: [00:00:35] Well, Kennedy was the new president and we heard about his announcement on the news and it was exciting and a friend of mine, Esmail Rosheen, was my roommate at San Diego State and he applied and was accepted into Colombia I. And I applied a week later and ended up in Bolivia II. Wasn't much time in between the time we applied, neither one of us had graduated. We still had, we were still undergraduates. But once we got accepted, we were fired up and ready to go.

SIMPSON: [00:01:15] Ok, so did you do? So basically you joined Peace Corps because of the Kennedy call?

ROZELL: [00:01:26] Yeah, well, I mean, yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:01:28] And you wanted to be out doing something?

ROZELL: [00:01:30] And that and we had been working on my Spanish some over the years at San Diego State. We were close to the border. So Will and I, Orvano, another friend of mine. We'd go down to Mexico and hang out for the weekend or a week and practice our Spanish and stay up all night and drink and have a good time. And so the idea of going to Latin America suited me fine.

SIMPSON: [00:02:01] OK, so what did your family think when you decided to do that?

ROZELL: [00:02:11] I can't remember. I was estranged from my dad at the time. I can't remember him having any comment. Otherwise, my mom was kind of excited about it. My brother, you know, nobody had any much to say when I was the baby of the family and pretty much did whatever I wanted to do. And they thought it was a good idea. I was the only one who was finishing college, so I guess Mom was a little concerned that I hadn't finished, but I told her I'd do it when I got back.

SIMPSON: [00:02:48] So when you apply, did you ask for any specific country or any place you wanted to go?

ROZELL: [00:02:53] I might have asked for Colombia because my buddy was going to Colombia, or at least maybe I didn't even know when I submitted the application, but I would have liked to have gone to Colombia. But yeah, I got Bolivia I've ever heard of Bolivia before, I doubt I doubt that I had, although I'd taken a lot of Latin American history at the time, so anyway, Bolivia didn't make any difference to me. One place is as good as another. I don't know if I would have wanted to go to Africa or I was, well, Latin

America was what I was interested in, so I never thought about those other places until I went and ended up as a recruiter for Peace Corps.

SIMPSON: [00:03:42] Ok, well, and so you were invited to join the Bolivia II project?

ROZELL: [00:03:51] Yeah, invited to join Bolivia II, and we showed up at Arizona State University in Tempe in June 1962 and started the training program.

SIMPSON: [00:04:02] Did you do anything special to get ready to go?

ROZELL: [00:04:06] No, I quit my job and I don't remember how I got to Arizona because I lived in the desert down in Southern California. I was in San Diego and I don't remember how we got over there.

SIMPSON: [00:04:25] I know they sent me a ticket.

ROZELL: [00:04:28] Airline ticket?

SIMPSON: Airline ticket from Salt Lake City. So, for all you know, they might have, you might have flown.

ROZELL: From where? They would have gone into Los Angeles. Was almost as far away as Arizona. I lived halfway between Los Angeles and Arizona.

SIMPSON: [00:04:46] Ok, so let's talk about the training. What did you think of the training process? What exact things did you experience?

ROZELL: [00:04:54] Well, I enjoyed most of the training, especially the general studies type of stuff and the cultural stuff. The language for me was a lot harder. I was not and never have been a good linguist like other people in the group, including you. But so the language part, the hours of language, that taxed me a little bit. And probably they had some doubts about sending me because of my poor ability to learn Spanish. So subsequently the State Department sent me back to language school three times and I

finally tested out at fairly high in the State Department, but it took years. In fact, I didn't really start learning Spanish until I got a girlfriend in Bolivia.

SIMPSON: Yeah, that happens.

ROZELL: Marcella, do you remember Marcella?

SIMPSON: [00:05:54] Yes. Did you decide, did you find that the training was useful for your Peace Corps service?

ROZELL: [00:06:02] Well, I enjoyed it. I mean, especially I was young and in those days and I enjoyed the Outward Bound and I enjoyed the travel associated with it. You'd get tired some. And I think it would have been a lot easier for me if I had been a better language student because I was the biggest part of it. But I enjoyed the training and I especially enjoyed Puerto Rico, where it was a fun time in Puerto Rico. I think the group pretty much all got along well. We didn't really have any big issues among ourselves. And the only real trauma came, I think, in Puerto Rico when they started cutting people and we all lost a few friends that we never saw again after that. And I think at that time, too, I started losing a little respect for some of the, some of the administrative people for Peace Corps. And I think up until then, I never questioned them, but I think after that, then I started losing respect for specifically one person who I thought was incapable of judging us as potential volunteers. And yet he was sitting there on that committee and I thought he was an idiot, basically.

SIMPSON: [00:07:38] Well, there were a number of people who.

ROZELL: [00:07:40] You know who I'm talking about too?

SIMPSON: [00:07:44] I think so. Ok, so all right, we did have an extended training period. I mean, I don't think there's been a group since then.

ROZELL: [00:07:55] Six months.

SIMPSON: [00:07:56] Who ended up training so long because of all these things.

ROZELL: [00:08:00] But the fact is, did we go home and then come back and that's when they're extended it?

SIMPSON: Yes.

ROZELL: And after that, I didn't train much. I had a good you know, I went up to Vermont, which had never been in Vermont and fall in Vermont was just absolutely gorgeous. And I was from a place where I've never seen before like that. And I liked to read and sit in the windows of that big house and read a book.

SIMPSON: [00:08:35] It was kind of like a vacation.

ROZELL: [00:08:37] Vacation. Yeah. And then what'd they do, send us down to Miami, put us up there for a week or two?

SIMPSON: [00:08:41] You know, we were in Miami, we met in Miami. And then that was the night of the Cuban Missile Crisis speech, the Kennedy put up or shut up speech to Khrushchev. And then they sent us to Vermont. From Vermont, we went directly to Bolivia by way of Miami, you can't get out of it going south.

ROZELL: [00:09:04] So, you know, as long as kind of you get tired of being trained on that. Yeah. And we were both enjoying the trip down. I still remember fondly the trip down to La Paz flying on a 707. It was the largest prop plane at the time, don't remember what it was, but it was the largest prop plane. We landed in Peru and I remember getting a shoeshine and talking to somebody in Spanish at the shoeshine. And then we landed up in La Paz and you knew you were in trouble when the airline stewardesses all stood with oxygen masks at the door when they let us off. And that was quite a sight. And then I remember going to the palace for a reception with Paz Estenssoro, and I have pictures of that. And that was really interesting and La Paz was fascinating, but I'm just just happy I didn't stay up there.

I've been back two or three times to La Paz, it hasn't changed. That trip from La Paz down to Cochabamba was a fascinating trip. I drove one of the jeeps and it was from this road that was really scary. Remember that? It was a frightening road.

SIMPSON: [00:10:42] Terrible. I'm afraid of heights so it was like a nightmare.

ROZELL: [00:10:45] Yeah. I mean, it was really something. And those roads were barely passable in parts and we all made it down. And then when you get into Cochabamba, the valley, it starts to lighten up and you see all the growth and the vegetation. And it's really quite a pleasant surprise. I guess we stayed there a while. I don't remember driving to Santa Cruz, but few of us went down there. I guess we drove.

SIMPSON: [00:11:14] Yeah, we drove it. We were there just a few days. I think it was Thanksgiving when we got there.

ROZELL: And we went down there

SIMPSON: And we got to, you know, drive down to Santa Cruz. So when you got to where you were going to be, what, tell me about that experience.

ROZELL: [00:11:37] In terms of the job?

SIMPSON: [00:11:39] Mm hmm. Well, what were you supposed to do?

ROZELL: [00:11:45] That was kind of funny. I was supposed to be on the experiment station. And who was with, who was I out there with?

SIMPSON: Jim Herberger? No?

ROZELL: Yeah, Jim Herberger was there.

SIMPSON: Norm Coble.

ROZELL: Norm was there, yeah. And a kid that stuttered.

SIMPSON: [00:12:03] Oh, Peter.

ROZELL: [00:12:05] Peter Roycraft and Peter and I shared a house, a little house out there, or half a house. I forget what Peter's job was, but he was actually an agronomist or something you can actually do. That was a political scientist. I didn't know how to do anything. But they sent me out there to be my counterpart was to be the maintenance man at the experiment station and the job the best I could describe it, was to rebuild and get functional, the engines that had been left at the experiment station as part of the Point Four program. The Point Four program put a lot of money in the experiment stations and schools, and they gave them equipment and as soon as the machines broke down, everything else broke down with it. The concept was that they'd send these guys out to work and they didn't have any parts or the machinery. So that was essentially in the end, there was no job and so I spent the rest of my time making up jobs and making sure that I kept myself scarce from any authority figures that were trying to make me accountable for some work effort, and I had a wonderful time.

SIMPSON: [00:13:37] So what kind of things did you do?

ROZELL: [00:13:40] Norm and I did a Heifer Project thing through and with the Baptists or somebody had it, but we would distribute pigs and then you get two back and distribute two more. We did that. But with pigs, they progressed so fast that by the second generation we gave that up. But then we never got any more purebred animals after that. It was, that was the difficulty with that program, was getting them into the country. They were donated. Worked at 4H. Went to a 4H camp. In terms of a legitimate job, I just didn't do much of anything. I visited a lot with other volunteers, traveled a lot. At one point I went up, I had 100 dollars in my pocket and got a gift or something. And I went to Colombia by land to visit my buddy up in Pasto in Nariño Province. And that was quite an adventure, traveling by bus and hitchhike, and railroad. And you got all the way up there and

got all the way to Bogota. I was broke and I borrowed money from the Peace Corps director in Bogota to come back to Bolivia in time to just get back. Before I was found, I had a vacation or something. I guess we all did at some point. So part of it was vacation. But I got back so I didn't get in trouble for going, I don't think I did. I took a boat across Lake Titicaca and that was fun. I met lots of really nice people. I hung out with a guy named Mumford Bruns and then a rancher whose first name was Rene. I can't remember his last name, out of General Saavedra. They had a big cattle ranch. And so sometimes when Rene or Mumford wasn't there, I'd go to the cattle ranch and take care of it for them. Did you ever come out? Do you remember Rene?

SIMPSON: [00:15:49] I don't think so. I met people out on where the colonies were, you know, the Okinawan colonies, and I didn't I don't think I ever met those.

ROZELL: [00:16:04] Some pretty big cattle ranch. So Mumford and I hung out together a lot. Then I worked, I helped a Marian priest, Jim Fitzgerald, who was a priest in Saavedra, and he also came out to Mineros. I'd help him with the kids, or do different things with him. You know, I like to say that I didn't have a job. They forgot to give me a good job and I didn't.

SIMPSON: [00:16:40] Well, they did that with a lot of people.

ROZELL: [00:16:43] And it was too much effort for them to recreate your job somehow. And some of the people that were in charge of that stuff didn't know what they were doing anyway. And so it was best just to leave it alone, not complain and get on with your life and have a good time and, you know, enjoy the place.

SIMPSON: [00:17:02] Do you can you think of any memorable events that happened while you were there?

ROZELL: [00:17:10] Memorable events? Well, carnival. I got involved with the carnival and a combasa in Santa Cruz with guys, gals my own age, and

they just accepted me like I was part of the family. And I mean, it was a ball. It was seven days. Yeah, eleven days or something. And we partied. We had parties going every day, some place. That was my first experience with that. And it was it was fascinating and a lot of fun and a lot of nice kids. And that was year I was hanging out with guys my own age and gals my own age. And it was pretty much the elite class in Santa Cruz, the youth and beautiful women and good dancers and good food. And I was in their homes and it was really very interesting, very nice.

SIMPSON: [00:18:15] And, uh, where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?

ROZELL: [00:18:20] I was living in Santa Cruz and that was another job I made. I got a job organizing the USIS library. So I was helping organize that and I did some English teaching, but not much. And I was living in Santa Cruz and I heard it on the radio in Spanish. And they kept repeating it, as they would a news notice like that and repeating it. And my mind refused to hear what it was saying. And finally it came through what they were saying. And I ran out to find some other Americans who knew about it and heard about it and that when I. That was quite a thing.

SIMPSON: [00:18:59] It was pretty traumatic.

ROZELL: [00:19:01] It was pretty traumatic. Yeah, it was traumatic for me. And then there was a guy down there, he was in Bolivia III or something. His name was Reese. And I remember seeing him and I was kind of just shocked. And I said and he says he said something like, so what? I just looked at him and I said, you're an idiot, you know. I never dealt with him again.

SIMPSON: [00:19:28] Yeah, I remember him, he was. That would not surprise me, that comment.

ROZELL: [00:19:33] Something like that, I mean, you know.

SIMPSON: [00:19:36] Ok, so it sounds like you had a really varied experience down there and a lot of different things that you did.

ROZELL: [00:19:46] I mean, you probably remember things I did that I don't remember, but, you know, because I hung out with you guys as much as anybody, you know.

SIMPSON: [00:19:56] Mm hmm. Yeah, well, I remember the carnival in Santa Cruz, you know, blue paint.

ROZELL: Water fights.

SIMPSON: [00:20:05] Oh my. So at the end of all this, what do you think, what did you take away from it, that that experience?

ROZELL: [00:20:17] Well, it ended up affecting a whole career because I've now been since then, I've been overseas for 25 years. I ended up in the Foreign Service.

SIMPSON: [00:20:30] So it was really a life changing experience?

ROZELL: [00:20:31] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if you want something that's good for me, it really affected, you know, which direction I went. And I think it was just, you know, piqued my interest. I know that I became motivated to go back to school and to get a graduate education because I felt when I was in the Peace Corps that I really, as a young person down there, I didn't have anything to offer them. And I said, if I'm going to go back overseas and a career in any way, I need to prepare myself so that I have some skills that will make a contribution to the country that I'm in, because in the Peace Corps, I didn't have any skills make. So they'll relax and move, you know, do no harm. You know, I really believed it and for the most part tried to live by it. So I didn't do any harm, but I didn't do any good either. But when I went back, I went back to school with some motivation to learn skills and ended up with a Ph.D. in agricultural economics and got hired back, after three year tour in Vietnam, and then some time off to get rid of a wife, and etc. I went back to grad school, went

back to work for USAID, and then went directly back overseas and stayed a whole career with AID over there.

SIMPSON: [00:22:02] So tell me a little bit, when you got out of Peace Corps, you went to Vietnam, right?

ROZELL: [00:22:08] I went first of all, I went back to school and finished my degree, my undergraduate degree. Finished in '65 and got a job with USAID in '65. So I had a degree plus Peace Corps experience. They hired me in '65 to go to Vietnam. And there was some draft issues involved at the time because I was still single. But I went back to Washington and I recruited people for Vietnam, for USAID, had also recruited people from Peace Corps. And then I went to Vietnam and I was in Guangdong province for three years, and I left right after Tet '68.

SIMPSON: [00:22:53] So what kinds of things, were you working with farmers there?

ROZELL: [00:22:56] Yeah, refugees and farmers. Big programs, lots of responsibility. Very difficult situation. And it was a nasty area that I was in and, you know, I was lucky to get out of there.

SIMPSON: [00:23:16] Ok, so talk about what you think you got out of the Peace Corps?

ROZELL: [00:23:27] Well, certainly an appreciation for other cultures, I think, you know, growing up in California and growing up in a community that was half was 50 percent was Mexican-American. I grew up with that culture, but really didn't. You don't learn to appreciate them as much until I went to Latin America and then I developed a real love of Latin people and that stayed with me. And but I think, you know, in terms of Bolivia itself, you know, Bolivia pretty much a basket case, except, I mean, it's got pockets of real wealth and be able to create it. But because of its large indigenous population and it's you know, it's always going to be one of the basket cases. And there are several that have served in Africa the same way, you know. Difficult to just see how they're going to, you know, really

move, but I've been back a couple of times and, you know, Santa Cruz itself is a booming metropolis, you know, but Mineros where we were, Saavedra, nothing. Mineros. You know, in fact, the road bypassed Saavedra died a slow death when the road went around it because they paved it out so far. And Mineros, they put a sugarcane factory out there. Lots of drug dealers, you know, not a good start, you know, difficult.

SIMPSON: [00:25:17] So one of the things that the goals of the Peace Corps was to provide technical assistance was requested to promote a better understanding of the U.S. and to promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans. So of those?

ROZELL: [00:25:34] Well, two of them, I think we did all right on.

SIMPSON: [00:25:36] The better understanding of the U.S. and better understanding of other peoples by Americans?

ROZELL: [00:25:43] Yeah, I think we did pretty good there. I think on the technical assistance side, but there are you know, there are real exceptions to that. Some people, you know, really provided excellent technical services, you guys that were nurses or, you know, had skills to offer.

SIMPSON: [00:26:02] Well, I figured out years ago that I was prepared to do the job they wanted me to do. Fifteen years later, I was prepared to do it, but there I just did the best I could. OK, so tell me?

ROZELL: [00:26:17] Do you remember taking that jeep tonight with that lady to the hospital in Santa Cruz? She was pregnant, had the baby. Didn't we come and pick you up?

SIMPSON: [00:26:27] No, I don't remember. I think I was already in Santa Cruz. Maybe then because I went to Santa Cruz.

ROZELL: [00:26:33] We had a harrowing trip all the way in with a lady having a baby in the back of the jeep. And we got her in there. Lunelle was in there,

Myrtis was in there. But she was a teacher at that school, and then we just pushed her in at like the swinging doors of the emergency room and like two minuets later this nurse comes out and hands me this baby. She assumed it was mine.

SIMPSON: [00:27:07] Oh well! So tell me a little bit about the kinds of things you did after you got out. You said you worked for the USAID for 25 years. And were you doing economic development?

ROZELL: [00:27:20] Yeah. When I first started out we were programing. Well, the first assignment that I had after this, after Vietnam, but it was Costa Rica and there we were doing alternative crops and trying to diversify away from bananas and coffee and very successfully started growing every kind of spice known. And it's quite an industry now in Costa Rica. And that was started really by the guy that I went to work for down there. He was a he was a horticulturalist and he started that project. He pushed it forward. But what we ended up doing is employees of AID were writing the documents that move the money. So we did a lot of analysis of the economy, a lot of analysis of the of the implementation capabilities of the government, and then trying to plug in where we could use our technical assistance or scholarships to train people to implement those programs.

SIMPSON: [00:28:36] Do you think you could have done that job without the Peace Corps experience?

ROZELL: [00:28:41] Yeah, well, yeah, I could've but probably. I don't know. I just. Yeah, I mean, Peace Corps and I didn't think and by the time I got back there is a PhD and I was rather analytical, you know, in terms of data and the scope of what I was the ability to analyze problems and to develop solutions for them was much, much different. I think as a volunteer, I wouldn't have had a clue.

SIMPSON: [00:29:13] Oh, no, no, no. But I'm thinking later on in your career that where you ended up spending so much time overseas, if being in the Peace Corps had facilitated your being able to get take that trajectory.

ROZELL: [00:29:29] Yeah, probably started as you had empathy for the people you were working for, but you had to have that or you wouldn't have been in that business pretty much. I don't know if Peace Corps even had that.

SIMPSON: [00:29:44] Ok, so do you have any other things that you want to want to mention?

ROZELL: [00:29:49] No, I think that's good.

SIMPSON: [00:29:51] Ok, I think we're just about to the end then. I'll stop this.

[END OF INTERVIEW]