

**Donald Camp Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Donald Camp  
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**Biographical Note**

Donald Camp served as a Peace Corps volunteer in India from 1970 to 1972 on an agricultural project.

**Access**

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Oral History Interview

with

Donald Camp

August 15, 2019  
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:03] This is Evelyn Ganzglass, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. Today is August 15th, 2019, and I am interviewing Donald Camp, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in India from June 1970 to July 1972. And he served in India 102, Tamil Nadu Agricultural Development Project. Before we get to agricultural development, let me ask you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

CAMP: [00:00:41] Well, I came out of college a little bit aimless, and I knew I was interested in being overseas and experiencing overseas. I had had a little experience in India previously and I understood the Peace Corps programs in India. I was very interested in that. I also the Peace Corps also offered a potential draft deferment in those days, which was important to someone coming out of college in 1970. So that was an additional incentive. I was focused on India and I was focused on doing something useful.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:19] So it sounds good. So you had some contact with India before. What was your contact before?

CAMP: [00:01:25] When I was a high school student. My father had an overseas assignment with the federal government to Bangkok, Thailand, and I was sent away for a year to boarding school in northern India, Woodstock's school in Missouri. And then when I was in college five or six years later, I had a semester abroad in Pune, in India. So I had had two previous experiences in India.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:48] So clearly your background had some international exposure? Talk a little bit about your family and in where you grew up.

CAMP: [00:01:57] Sure. I was born in New York City. My father was a civilian employee of the military at the time and we moved around a lot. I grew up in Alabama, Texas, Virginia and suburban Maryland. And for three years when I was in high school, we lived in Bangkok, Thailand, and I lived there and in India for a year as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:20] And where did you go to college?

CAMP: [00:02:22] I went to school at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, which is one of the larger per capita producers of Peace Corps volunteers to this day, I believe.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:31] And why is that?

CAMP: [00:02:33] I'm not sure. It's it has an international curriculum and always has and draws from all over the country. And it's, I guess, part of the ethic of the school. Peace Corps is one option after graduation for sure.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:47] So when you applied for the Peace Corps, neither your family nor your friends were surprised. I guess.

CAMP: [00:02:54] I think that's fair.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:57] And were they supportive?

CAMP: [00:03:00] Yes. Yes. They knew that I had this kind of wanderlust and I wanted to do something with my life. And I had no desire to go to graduate school. And this seemed like a good solution all around.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:14] And you had studied international relations. Is that what it was?

CAMP: [00:03:18] Believe it or not, I was a graduate in mathematics, but I had studied political science and international political science and I was interested in that.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:26] So maybe math comes back in later.

CAMP: [00:03:28] Not much.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:31] Not much. OK, so you graduated from college and you applied for the Peace Corps. Did you say you only wanted to go to India?

CAMP: [00:03:40] I did not say I only wanted to go to India. I said I would be very interested in India and I had experience there. And I think that was helpful in there placing me.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:48] And then they did select you for India right away. How long did that whole process take?

CAMP: [00:03:55] You know, I don't remember the the application process, but it was probably about six months. I think I applied early in my senior year and and started training in June in California.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:11] In California. So you you were living overseas?

CAMP: [00:04:16] No, I was living in Northfield, Minnesota.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:18] Went to California. Talk a little bit about the training. What was that like?

CAMP: [00:04:23] I thought it was in retrospect, I think it was a very professionally done. I think they did a very good job both in. Expert technical training and language training, we went for two weeks in Davis, California, where we lived in very Spartan conditions and observed rice production in California, which is very different from India. It's all, you know, fertilized by plane and so forth. And after two weeks in California, we went to two weeks at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, which was, of course, a very different exposure. And we were doing technical training, no language training at this point. And one of the best things the Peace Corps did, like the first day we were in the Philippines in a rice paddy, they got us all into this rice paddy with oxen and everything else and said, OK, we're going to play a game of touch football. And here and we were all filthy by the end of the hour, but we never, ever hesitated after that to walk into a rice paddy barefoot in India and and check out the the plants for pests and so forth. I mean, it was a good, very effective introduction into

GANZGLASS: [00:05:47] So this was like two weeks after training started, you know, overseas. And then was the language training after the Philippines or where was

CAMP: [00:05:55] No, after two weeks in the Philippines, they took us to a rice versus rice research institute in the town of Aduthurai in Tamil Nadu, which was an Indian sort of offshoot of the International Rice Research Institute. And for two months, we lived in a sort of hostel at the Rice Research Institute and had intensive language training and

continuing technical training in rice production and agronomy and so forth.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:24] So. This was 1970. What was your group, one of the first that really had most of the training overseas?

CAMP: [00:06:32] I don't know the answer to that. It certainly was an early one. I know other people trained in Hawaii and elsewhere, but by 1970, there were a lot of Peace Corps volunteers in India and the Peace Corps had a fair amount of experience with training for India. I think the previous group, 60 to 70, are similar group on the same thing and also trained mostly in India.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:57] Very interesting. So you did the training and what language were you trained in?

CAMP: [00:07:04] The language of the area is Tamil.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:06] So you

CAMP: [00:07:07] A Dravidian language spoken at the time by about 45 million people, now probably closer to 100 million in South India and a little bit in Singapore and Malaysia and Mauritius, I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:16] And it was your whole group going to Tamil Nadu.

CAMP: [00:07:21] We had a group of about 20 all men and we were all going to be in one district within about 50, 60 miles of each other in in. It was a it's a Delta region, very fertile rice production region. So we were all going to be in the same district even.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:37] So did your whole group stick together afterwards? Were people, quote, deselected from your group?

CAMP: [00:07:43] Deselected more more personal decisions. I think it's a culture shock to be dropped into an Indian village, and particularly just the first week after training when we were suddenly dropped in the village. We had some drop outs because we weren't together. We were at, you know, 10, 15, 20 miles apart.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:08] So we didn't know each. So there were 20 of you. But each was going to go into a separate.

CAMP: [00:08:13] Exactly, exactly. And I was about 10 miles from the closest volunteer. So by the time we got out of training and into the village and after the first week that were probably down to maybe 14 or so and I think maybe 11 or 12 finished the full two years. So there was a substantial drop out rate. But the ones who stayed were quite happy. And we had, I think, generally successful experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:38] That's great. So language, you're the technical training, language training. You didn't mention cultural training. Did you have any cultural training?

CAMP: [00:08:48] We had a very good cultural coordinator who had been a volunteer in a previous India program where I'm still in contact with him. He's a good friend. And so, yes, certainly that was an important part of it.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:03] Did it prepare you for being dropped in the village? Well, you had been to India before.

CAMP: [00:09:07] I had been to India before. And one of my friends had also spent some time in India. But to everyone else who was brand new, I mean, the two months in the village, in the training program, in art, that I was actually a pretty good opportunity to absorb because we went out to local restaurants, we went to villages, we had village visits and so forth. So they did, I think, a good job to try and give us a sense of what was in store for us.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:38] Ok, so then where were you assigned?

CAMP: [00:09:42] I was assigned to a small market town called Sholapuram, S-H-O-L-A-P-U-R-A-M, which turned out to be a it's a it's a village town of about 5000 people. It turned out, interestingly, to be primarily Muslim village in a predominantly Hindu area. And most of the landowners were wealthy for the Indians who had spent time or their ancestors had spent time earning money in the Malaysian tea plantations and come back and bought up land. So it was it was a town with a couple of mosques and a few temples, but the mosques sort of dominated. So it was a Muslim town which was in itself a cultural experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:31] And this was always what was this all rice growing or what?

CAMP: [00:10:35] Also tea or no tea. But there was also sugar cane and a little bit of cotton. So in the dry areas, they grew cotton.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:44] But what was your role?

CAMP: [00:10:48] We were all sort of agricultural extension agents, as we would think of them in the U.S. We were all affiliated with the Tamil Nadu, the State Department of Agriculture, and we reported to the Agricultural Extension Service of Tamil Nadu. And our job was to promote hybrid varieties of rice. The famous IR8 and IR20, which came out of the same ag station in the Philippines that we spent two weeks in, and to teach farmers the sort of modern methods of agriculture which included fertile. And in those days included pesticide, so we all had back sprayers and training and repairing sprayers and that kind of thing, which is what I spent a lot of my time on, actually. So we were. We were. Teaching farmers who had grown patte for generations, rice for generations, sort of modern methods, which was

GANZGLASS: [00:11:50] And what were they, the other extension agents, the Indian ones, how they think about you guys?

CAMP: [00:11:58] We didn't you know, we were the only sort of representatives of the Department of Agriculture in the village. They didn't have any extension agents in every village. We reported to a fellow down the road in the in the larger town. They did have government servants in the village. They were called Romantic's. We are just village workers. So we worked a little bit with them, but we were the face of the Tamil Nadu Department of Agriculture in our.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:30] And did you interact very much with this guy to your supervisor?

CAMP: [00:12:34] Not very much, as I recall. You know, I'd go in if I needed help to exchange my sprayer or I had problems I couldn't fix or things like that. But we were left pretty much alone and from Peace Corps as well, you know, they came visiting every few months.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:49] And what did the rice farmers think about growing different rice or different techniques?

CAMP: [00:12:53] I think they were pretty they were pretty adaptive. As I say, the landowners were mostly guys who'd returned from Malaysia. So they were a reasonably cosmopolitan and then they were interested in what we had to offer. The problem with the new varieties of rice were that they didn't people didn't like them as much as the old right is just in terms of taste. So the farmers would grow the new varieties, sell it, sell the new varieties and buy the old varieties that people are still growing for their families to eat. So, you know, but but in the end.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:29] And who did they sell it to?

CAMP: [00:13:31] Well, they sold it to the government. Who would then give it to the ration shops. Who would sell it to the poorer people, for

instance, who weren't that picky about which rice they ate. But Indians could be pretty persnickety about the rice. But in the end, the the the. The new varieties, the hybrid varieties caught on and in fact, they were then, even after we left, blended with traditional varieties and became both high yielding and tastier good tasting.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:03] Really interesting. What was your daily interaction with the farmers? Did you get to know any of them?

CAMP: [00:14:11] I did. I got to know a few of them pretty well. I got to know. And just friends in the village, you know, I would go out and offer my help. And sometimes it was a matter of they wrenched my sprayer, which was a useful commodity. So during spring season, I would go out and present them a sprayer filled up with with petrol and they would use it and they would come to me what was broken and or I needed needed repairs. I would I would go out and sometimes help them diagnose diseases. And so you had learned had I had training. Yeah, yeah. I was a city boy, but they gave us a pretty good training in diseases of the rice plant and we had handbook's that. I still have, you know, that tell you how a rice plant should look at every stage

GANZGLASS: [00:15:06] And what to do if it doesn't.

Exactly.

And what was your living arrangement like?

CAMP: [00:15:13] I was the Peace Corps took care of it and it rain arranged my housing in a small unit in I wouldn't call a townhouse, but it was a it was a two room, fairly modern unit, by which I mean it had running water, which was really nice, and it had an attached toilet, which was much better than most of my call it my other Peace Corps volunteers who were in more traditional housing where they had to walk.

GANZGLASS: Indoor plumbing?

CAMP: No, not plumbing. It was a, it was a porcelain hole in the ground.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:49] Yeah, but but in the house, that's amazing.

CAMP: [00:15:53] Yeah, yeah. So it was it was not uncomfortable.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:55] And did you have neighbors that you interacted with?

CAMP: [00:15:57] I had a couple of neighbors. One was a teacher at the local school who became my Tamil tutor and a very good friend and then a much poorer family across the street in a thatched hut whose daughter brought me milk every morning. I contracted with them to buy, you know, a cup of milk for my morning coffee and things like that. And so I got two of them and it was invited to their place.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:21] Your Tamil was good enough. It was pretty good.

CAMP: [00:16:25] You know it got better because I was completely using Tamil, nothing else. Some people spoke some English, but not much in the village, so I was pretty much communicating in Tamil.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:35] What was your daily routine like? What did you do?

CAMP: [00:16:38] You know, it's funny, I was, I was in a small, fairly isolated village, but it was on the main road to Madras and every morning at eight a.m. I'm a news junkie. I had delivered, I think about my stoop. I had to walk two blocks to get a copy of the morning English paper from from Madras. So I had The Hindu, which was a wonderful newspaper and still is. And so I read the newspaper and had my coffee and went up to a little tea shop where I had a contract for food and they served me a little breakfast of Indian idlis and dosas, which are now popular here. But that was my that was my morning breakfast. And then I would go out in the fields while it was still cool and see if I was needed or could be useful and would come back for

lunch at house and do this and in the afternoon, frankly, it was often quite hot. And so naptime. I had a fan.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:38] Did you see other volunteers while you were there?

CAMP: [00:17:42] I did. I as I say, I had a friend about ten miles away who became a close friend and I used to bicycle down to see him or he would come up to see me if we were feeling down or just wanted some company. And we would go out on weekends and go to visit temples again and and bicycle. And then we'd get together as a group, maybe for Thanksgiving or other occasions.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:07] In one of the houses?

CAMP: [00:18:08] In one of the houses and someone would produce a cashew pie and try to cook a chicken or something.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:17] That's great. Did you get much support from Peace Corps while you were out there?

CAMP: [00:18:23] We tended to complain about Peace Corps headquarters. And but I think they they were serious. They were helpful. They had a technical specialist who came down to visit us every three or four months and come through and ask us what do you need and so forth. So, yeah, in retrospect, they were they were very helpful. And they were there was a regional office in South India, which was about. Well, eight or 10 hours away by train, and it was actually a place we often went for vacation, so we saw them.

GANZGLASS: This was in Madras?

CAMP: Actually in Bangalore.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:58] Oh, in Bangalore. Which has become a big time place now.

CAMP: [00:19:02] It was much nicer then. A beautiful city. Now it's a little congested.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:08] So you did that. But did you do that for two years?

CAMP: [00:19:11] I did it for two years, yes. And with with trips, you know, in the hot season, there's a period between sort of April, May and early June where nothing gets done in the villages. It's too hot. So I went with a couple of friends up to Nepal and my trekking now and one year I actually, I think. I visited my sister in Thailand, so I got around. All this on around seventy five dollars a month, but

GANZGLASS: [00:19:40] So you had some nice trips in between as well. Some some volunteers decide to stay. I guess you decided not to stay for a third year. Was that even an option?

CAMP: [00:19:50] I don't recall. It was an option and I think I was ready to go. Peace Corps at that point in 72 was facing problems in India at some stage. Indira Gandhi and in Washington fell out and the decision was made to draw down Peace Corps. So I think there was another there were groups that came in in 72, but that was about it. So we had no Peace Corps after, I think 1975 in India. So I don't think

GANZGLASS: [00:20:18] It was facing everything down. Do you know, was so overall, as you think about it, was this rice extension service a good thing in the community? Do you think it really helped the community?

CAMP: [00:20:32] I think it was useful. I mean, solar needed someone who was trained in agriculture and I was minimally trained and I did help people weather it. I don't know that that helped did not extend beyond the small village or the small town I was in. But it was it was a well-designed program and it was achieved its purpose. I think every Peace Corps volunteer says the same thing. It was probably better for me than for the people I was working with. I mean, it was great for me, but I think I made it.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:08] But what do they do for you?

CAMP: [00:21:12] It gave me a real look into a different world. It set me on a career focused on international affairs. It gave me a sense, it gave me some friends for life. It just it enriched my life because I saw a society I would never have seen otherwise, including in my junior year abroad program. You don't you don't live in a village when you're in college.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:37] You don't get that in depth exposure to it. So you came back from Peace Corps. Did you go on a trip? Was the trip to Thailand between things or the way back?

CAMP: [00:21:49] On the trip that I just I went through Asia on a quick trip on my way back, but I had things I needed to get done in the U.S. So I didn't I didn't a long.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:56] So did you go to grad school after you came back?

CAMP: [00:21:59] I did go to grad school for a couple of years. And I was so at that point so focused on South India that I went into a program at the University of Chicago in Tamil language and literature, which I was in retrospect, not suited for. I mean, it was a Ph.D. program that and when I got into classical Tamil literature, I realized I didn't want to spend my life doing this. But it was two years of more exposure to India. And I also applied for the foreign service at that point. And after two years, I got an acceptance from the Foreign Service and I decided to go that route.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:40] So I've interviewed quite a few people who have gone into the Foreign Service for USAID after Peace Corps. Do you have any reflections on a different approach or the impact of Peace Corps on the Foreign Service?

CAMP: [00:22:58] I you're right. There are a lot of people with that background in the Foreign Service. I think that still continues to be true. You know, I just know for me, it gave me sort of instant credibility. Well, first, I think it probably helped me get into the foreign service because I had proven proven experience living and working overseas, which never hurts. But I mean, I'll give you an example. You know, I was later ten years later, I was the desk officer for India and entertaining a group of Indian parliamentarians from Delhi. And they were a little bit aggressive, like, you know, why are you an American? You know, what do you know about India? How do you speak Hindi? And I said, no, but there are a number of official languages in India. And how would your Tamil or something, something along that line, something a little cheeky. And but throughout it's all you know, I've I think that experience has helped me in in demonstrating that I know something about a major part of the world and particularly that part of the world. And it's, I'm very grateful for the experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:07] So you were actually in the Foreign Service in India then.

CAMP: [00:24:11] You know, I never to my regret, I never served in India. But I I was I worked on India a long time in Washington as the desk officer and then later in more senior positions. So I went back many times to Delhi and back to Madras and overseas. My first posting was Sri Lanka, where I used my Tamil because that was the language, of course, of the dissident Tamil population, and then I went to the West Indies, Barbados, and then to come home and worked on India for a long time in Indonesia and then had two tours in China where, by the way, I was present at the inauguration of China I, the Peace Corps program in Sichuan when it started in China in 1993, I think. So I got to see the first few years in China.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:00] And as you reflect on your Peace Corps experience, we've talked about the impact on community impact, gave you credibility. Do you think Peace Corps volunteers have had any impact on approach

to U.S. foreign policy or or AID policy? I guess that's part of foreign policy as well.

CAMP: [00:25:29] You know, I don't think there's a collective influence so much as the fact that people who have who have been and certainly more senior positions in the State Department than I have Peace Corps experience and have and have used that Peace Corps experience. I mean, not so much in India, but for instance, there was a famous group of Nepal volunteers, I think four of whom became American ambassadors, all in that one group. And I think all of them at one point went back to Nepal in some stage to serve in the embassy there. So, yeah, Peace Corps has had an influence in the foreign service and it's been through the individuals who have had that experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:11] Are you still working in the State Department?

CAMP: [00:26:16] I am retired, but they still hire me back. I'm going up in September to work at the UN for three months working on South Asia, and I will be dealing with colleagues from the Indian mission to the U.N., the Sri Lankan mission to the U.N. and so forth. So I still draw on my experience and I can still there I can still sort of use it to my credit.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:37] Are you involved in Peace Corps activities at all?

CAMP: [00:26:40] I am kind of. I am well with my own group. I have sort of been the catalyst for pulling together. We're in contact with all 22 people were back together. We have a website which I should give you the reference to. And we have had some periodic reunions drawing like five to ten people from that group, which is pretty good

GANZGLASS: [00:27:02] From around the country. Is the group involved in India at all?

CAMP: [00:27:07] Our group per say is not, individually we are. We go back and visit our villages and so forth. Yeah, actually, one of the volunteers married a woman from Cherchunoppli. She lives in Ireland. They live in Ireland. And I should give you should interview them as well. I could. But we are also members of an organization called Friends of India, which is retired Peace Corps volunteers from all over. And they use our dues for charitable endeavors in India, and they are very good about getting people together. We had an All India reunion, I think, on the occasion of the fiftieth reunion of the Peace Corps here.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:48] And there must be hundreds, no thousands, I guess, of India volunteers.

CAMP: [00:27:52] A lot of research in the history of Peace Corps in India. I think there 4300 volunteers have served in India. When I was there, there were like a thousand in the country at one time. So it's a huge program.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:02] I was in Somalia. There were 400 and I can't remember we had four hundred and something total from beginning to end.

CAMP: [00:28:08] Beginning to end.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:09] Beginning to end. So, you know, India was large, large programs, totally different experience.

CAMP: [00:28:15] Let me tell you a little anecdote, if I may, from my research about Peace Corps in India. India was very much in the thoughts of Sargent Shriver and President Kennedy, and Sargent Shriver made one of his first trips, Peace Corps trips, to India. And he got an interview. He talked to John Kenneth Galbraith, I guess was the ambassador. And he and Galbraith went in to see Prime Minister Nehru. And Sargent Shriver talked all about how great the Peace Corps was going to be and how it was going to change India and what an opportunity it was for both countries. And Nehru said to him,

several people have told me this, that we welcome your young Americans to India and we wish them well and we look forward to working with them. But please do not be surprised if when they leave Punjab is little changed. You know, he was clear eyed about it.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:05] Is very realistic about that. That's great. Well, are there any stories that you'd like to tell that you haven't told me?

CAMP: [00:29:13] I'm not great at stories, but let me give you the website that we've put some of our recollections on. It's [www.india102.com](http://www.india102.com), and we had pictures, lots of photographs. I should have thought of stories to tell. But, you know, I was thinking what to bring to the interview today, and I couldn't find our sort of introductory book, which I've still got, but I found a little notebook. I was a little obsessive, and I I didn't keep a diary to my great regret, but I kept for about a year list of every single expense side, mainly because I was on a budget of seventy five dollars a month. And I can now tell you what, you know, breakfast cost in India in nineteen seventy one or what. I paid 30 rupees a month for 30 dinners at Rajas Teahouse and 30 rupees in that day I think was four dollars, four US dollars. So you can imagine

GANZGLASS: [00:30:17] Imagine for 40, for 30 meals.

CAMP: [00:30:19] For 30 meals and people don't believe that anymore.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:23] You were probably paying well.

CAMP: [00:30:24] Well, I paid well and I ate very well and all the rice and sambar and everything that I could eat. But people don't believe that now. And I showed them this. This is what things cost in 1970. And so it was easy to get along on seventy five dollars a month.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:40] And did you save any money?

CAMP: [00:30:41] Actually, I saved enough to go to Nepal for a for three weeks, which was kind of remarkable.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:46] We saved money as well. Yeah, very good. So thank you so much for the interview. Thank you.

CAMP: [00:30:52] This was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]