

C. Reid Melton Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

C. Reid Melton served as a Peace Corps volunteer in India from 1965 to 1967 on a rural public health and nutrition project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

C. Reid Melton

November 8, 2003
Santa Barbara, California

By Norma Wilder Benavides

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

BENAVIDES: [00:00:02] Today is the 8th of November of the year 2003. My name is Norma Benavides, and I am the interviewer for Reid Melton, who was in the country of India, in the 20A group of Peace Corps from August of 1965 to August of 1967. And it was a, um?

MELTON: [00:00:34] Rural public health and nutrition.

BENAVIDES: [00:00:37] Rural public health and nutrition project. Reid was also a trainer for groups going to India from '69 to '70. Start by telling me about yourself now. What your career is like, what your family's like, what your residence and your interests are?

MELTON: [00:01:03] Let's see. Right now, I am an organizational development trainer, executive coach, that works with anybody in organizations who need to improve their performance. And I work with nonprofits and international organizations and multinational industries. I've worked for

the UN, for the IMF, for USAID, and have worked in Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, India, Aruba. Uh. And throughout Europe, in the United States. And live in Santa Barbara with my partner, Peter Wright. We've been together 25 years and I just last summer returned from my 35th Peace Corps reunion. Not the 35th, 35th anniversary, not our 35th reunion. It was like our second or third reunion so, in Tahoe, which, and all but three people in our group attended. So.

BENAVIDES: [00:02:39] Wonderful, wonderful. Okay. Anything else you want to say?

MELTON: [00:02:42] No, that's fine.

BENAVIDES: [00:02:43] We'll get back to that as we go. Let's go back now to the year before you joined the Peace Corps and talk about your life then.

MELTON: [00:02:50] At that particular time, I was in college at Duke University studying anthropology and science, thinking about going to med school, but not really sure about it, and was absolutely fascinated with India. I think a lot of that had been vaccinated by my dad, who was in the oil business and would run off to exotic parts of the world and come back with stories. So I really wanted to do that sort of thing. And also listened to a lot of The Jungle Story, Jungle Book stories on Buster Brown on Saturday mornings on TV. I loved to, I really was fascinated with India.

MELTON: [00:03:44] And my senior year in high school, in college, I decided that I was, or it was actually my junior year in college. I decided I was going to go into the Peace Corps, was not going to go immediately to graduate school, and that I was going to go to India. And one of the things that I could do to make sure that I went to India, was selected for India, was to take an Indian language. So my senior year at Duke, I learned Hindi Urdu and, in a modern language technique, and then turned every single course I was taking that I possibly could toward India. My history course, my political science course, everything. When I had a chance to turn it toward India, I moved it toward India. So I wrote.

BENAVIDES: [00:04:34] Did they think about putting you in any other project?

MELTON: [00:04:36] Well, interestingly enough, when I went to training, even though I had a year of Hindi, they put me in half of our group that was going to Kerala, that speaks Malayalam and which really ticked me off. And I went in to the, the training officer, and I asked in a very passive aggressive sort of way, what criteria did you use to assign us to whether we were going to a Malayalam group or a Hindi speaking group? And they said, oh, well, we considered your background. When it was very apparent that they did every other one in the alphabet in the list. And so I said, well that's very interesting. I speak Hindi and you put me in the Malayalam group and they said, oh yes, you do? You didn't put that on your application. I said, oh yes I did. Many, many, many, many times. And so the woman interviewed me, started speaking Hindi to me, and I started speaking Hindi to her back. And she said, well, we really can't make that change unless you can talk somebody else in the other group into switching with you. And I said, well, if I can't talk anybody, then I'm leaving this training because I spent a year of my life.

BENAVIDES: [00:05:46] Getting ready.

MELTON: [00:05:45] Getting ready for this and I don't want that to go down the tubes. So luckily enough, I went in and a woman, a wonderful woman named Kathleen Sperry switched. Uh, no. A guy named George Thompson switched places, which started. A couple of other people said, well, if he can switch, then I can switch. So we, several of us switched and that seemed okay.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:12] It turned out to be okay.

MELTON: [00:06:13] Yeah. Turned out okay.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:14] Go back a little bit before that to the point of why you wanted to join the Peace Corps.

MELTON: [00:06:20] I wanted, I wanted to join the Peace Corps because I didn't know what the heck I was going to do with my life. I was, I thought I wanted to be a physician, but I wasn't really too sure. And I was really tired of school. And I just could not seem to want to go off into, uh, into graduate school.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:42] But you were also internationally interested with your dad's travels?

MELTON: [00:06:46] Yeah, my dad had been a technical guy for an oil exploration company.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:51] Ready for adventure.

MELTON: [00:06:52] Yes, he would. He went off to Egypt and Ethiopia and Venezuela and would bring back, you know, spears and camel bells and fezs and all of that sort of stuff. So I had a great show and tell in kindergarten with camel bells and fezs and stuff like that. So. And that was basically the reason.

BENAVIDES: [00:07:13] Okay. Wonderful. Anything else around that time? What your friends and family thought?

MELTON: [00:07:19] Oh, I had to, let's see. My, my, I. A lot of my friends, my high school friends all thought I was crazy because they were all intellectuals and were going to go off into graduate school immediately. And I felt a little bit of resentment because I thought, oh well, I'm going to come back and be two years behind them in that achievement mode. And of course, in the long run, that didn't matter at all. And, um.

BENAVIDES: [00:07:51] How about family?

MELTON: [00:07:53] My parents knew that I had to do what I had to do. My mother did. I did prepare, uh, start preparing my parents like a year beforehand. You know, announcing that I was going to go into the Peace Corps and that I was taking the exam and just to give them time, especially my mother time, to adjust to it all.

BENAVIDES: [00:08:23] So there was a little bit of hesitancy on her part.

MELTON: [00:08:25] Yes. And then, of course, I went to India and she said, well, you know, it's exactly 12 hours away from Central Standard Time. You couldn't get any further away from us than you. That was, that was her comment. Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:08:41] Okay, so before you go to India, talk about the training. You were in this rural health program.

MELTON: [00:08:50] Yes, and we trained at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

BENAVIDES: [00:08:54] Uh huh.

MELTON: [00:08:55] And our, the head of our training group was Roger Wangsness. And, um, you know, it was, it was, uh, it was very, very interesting. It was, it turned out to be very cold. They sent us up to an Indian reservation in northern Wisconsin to live in tents for two weeks, I guess to just toughen us up so that we could. Because we were going to live in some pretty rough conditions and we had to go through that. And we had to have our little project and what have you. And I ended up, my big project was helping clean up and fix a chicken coop on the Indian reservation so that they could get more chickens in. And also to, a couple of us laid a concrete platform around a well, a pump well. The well had been, was in pretty bad shape and was always muddy. And so we laid a concrete platform around it. That was my big, and we you know, you played the game. You knew, you knew, you knew what you had to do to get selected. So you did.

MELTON: [00:10:16] And of course, I was really. My biggest fear in not being selected was, was the physical aspect of it. And then like one week or two weeks into training, I ended up getting a terrible, terrible stone bruise on my heel and could not walk with, except with a cane. So that ruled out running any laps. So I didn't know what to do. And I thought they were going, they were going to think I was malingering. And since

I was a water safety instructor and there were some people there that could not swim, I said, okay, what I'll do is I'll just teach these people to swim in our group. And so I became.

BENAVIDES: [00:11:04] There always a, you had a solution.

MELTON: [00:11:05] Yeah, I became the, I became a swimming instructor for two or three people that were really fearful of the water and needed special help. And so I.

BENAVIDES: [00:11:17] They didn't have anybody else to do that?

MELTON: [00:11:18] Well, there were other instructors, but they were all, you know, keeping people swimming laps and stuff like that. And, and, uh. Of course we had to go through.

BENAVIDES: [00:11:29] [inaudible]

MELTON: [00:11:29] Yeah, I figured I was going to get, people were, they were going to judge, say bad things about me in the deselection.

BENAVIDES: [00:11:38] You've said that word several times now.

MELTON: [00:11:40] What, the?

BENAVIDES: [00:11:42] The deselection.

MELTON: [00:11:42] Oh. Well, it was a very nasty thing in, in our group, the way they were doing it. They would, they would come in and they would divide. They would give people envelopes to go from one room, to go to one room or the other. And the people that didn't show up in the room were sent back to the dormitories to pack and to leave before we were let out of the room. And so we really didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. Or if we did, they came in and said goodbye and then left. It was really Machiavellian. It was really not a nice way to put an end to that kind of relationship. So everybody had great fear and I. Intellectually, you know, killing the chickens and building the chicken

houses and, uh, you know, I'd studied South Asian culture in anthropology, so I, there was no problem with any of that. And I had a, I was the top language, needless to say, the top language student in Hindi because I'd already had a year of Hindi.

BENAVIDES: [00:12:58] And how many were you in your group?

MELTON: [00:13:01] Oh, 30. India 20A was like 35, something like that. I can't remember the exact number. There was another whole half of our group that we never even met. It was called 20B, and they went to different states and, but they were also rural public health and nutrition, and trained at different places.

BENAVIDES: [00:13:23] So you didn't know them.

MELTON: [00:13:25] And we met them over in India. If we ran into them, it was no big deal.

BENAVIDES: [00:13:31] So your group is 35.

MELTON: [00:13:32] Yeah, around that.

BENAVIDES: [00:13:33] Were there any married couples or?

MELTON: [00:13:34] No married couples in it, though currently I think there are like six married couples out of it. One couple got married during Peace Corps and then three or four years after Peace Corps, they got divorced. But then out of that, out of the remaining, everybody, five or six couples from the, uh, from the group got married afterwards and they're all together still. So and I was, and my roommate got married. My Peace Corps roommate got married, oh, three or four months after he got back with a woman who was in the Peace Corps. And I was best man in his wedding. And, you know, it had, all the women wore saris and the men, we had tuxes, but it was an Indian themed wedding so.

BENAVIDES: [00:14:34] Anything else around that? The project you were invited into, how you prepared yourself to go, and move away from your life for two years and?

MELTON: [00:14:45] No. I remember going back and preparing before we. We were allowed to go home for two weeks or something like that, or a week before we left. And that happened to be around Thanksgiving. So we had a nice Thanksgiving. And I remember my dad, uh, buying me a leather satchel so that I could travel with it and keep my radio, because we bought a Zenith shortwave radio. I need to have, needed to have the radio. And we were told, of course, things to take and not to take at that time. And I went out and actually bought a whole bunch of warfarin, which is rat poison, because, you know, going to poison all the rats. And, you know, I think we didn't even use it or we did. I donated it to the ag college or something like that.

BENAVIDES: [00:15:36] But you thought you would need it?

MELTON: [00:15:36] Yeah, we were told, you know, I mean, not to take it, but this is on the list of things that you might want to take. And of course, you know, toilet paper, deodorant.

BENAVIDES: [00:15:51] Did you take 100,000 rolls of toilet paper?

MELTON: [00:15:55] I took. Anything in my trunk that we, you know, we were all allowed a trunk to take over. I would compress it all and take up all the extra space in the trunk, that sort of thing. I wasn't overly concerned. And then I took two Sears catalogs, because that's what my great aunt and uncle used to use in their outhouses out on the farm, old Monkey Ward or Sears catalogs for toilet paper. And so I took.

BENAVIDES: [00:16:33] Two of those.

BENAVIDES: [00:16:33] Two of those, or maybe it was one of those and a, and a, um, a telephone book.

BENAVIDES: [00:16:41] Okay.

MELTON: [00:16:41] Never had to use them, though. And I ended up giving them to the people that that wrapped the betel nut, the pond. And so for many years, I'm sure people got their pond wrapped up. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:17:00] Okay, so let's go into the entry, when you got to India, just the, um?

MELTON: [00:17:06] Oh, let's see, we flew over. Flew over to India on Pan Am flight one. We were all scared, of course, and I sat with a woman named Helen Brownell. And in between us was a huge, huge German guy that sort of took over both of our seats, and because we were three across, and when he got off in Austria, in Vienna, we were really, really glad. Really glad. And stories about going over. We stopped in Beirut and everybody got off and all the guys went into the bathroom to go to the bathroom. And there was this humongous military urinal right by the front door. And you could see right down the urinal. And so and all the girls were going by the, the urinal, and they can look right down the urinal seeing the guys urinate. And so they were all passing comments. And of course, there was a, there was a female attendant. That was the first bit of culture shock. I laughed about that. I thought that was fun.

MELTON: [00:18:26] And when we landed in Palam Airport in New Delhi, everybody cheered. And I thought to myself, I did not cheer at all. I was, I was scared. And I just, I remember just kind of all the energy kind of sinking out of me and me feeling really nervous when everybody was going, yay, yay! I was going, oh, oh, you know. And then getting out and having to sit in the airport while we, you know, we went through all the terrible, terrible Indian customs and then the Peace Corps people there taking our passports and, you know, all of that sort of stuff and just kind of waiting and getting on the bus and smelling the, the. It was really early in the morning. So the, uh, the stoves, the *chulhas* were fired up and you could smell the cow dung and the jasmine and all the earthiness. And it was, I was fascinated, just fascinated.

BENAVIDES: [00:19:29] Yeah, you said you were fascinating, you were prepared, and you knew all about it. So I was curious. You were nervous other than.

MELTON: [00:19:36] Well, it's sort of like here's, woah, here's the whole next two years. What have I gotten myself into? We went to Maidens Hotel, M-A-I-D-E-N-S, and, uh, and.

BENAVIDES: [00:19:57] An orientation?

MELTON: [00:19:57] Just I remember some of the, some of the surprises there. One that they served hot milk on cereal. So you order a bowl of corn flakes and they'd pour hot milk on it rather than cold milk. And that was, you know, hot milk so that you don't get TB from unpasteurized milk, of course. And I remember walking out to a little roadside, roadside post office to get some, um, air grams to write back home to start that process. And so I spoke to him in Hindi and he answered in English and I was deflated, of course. Like, oh damn, well, I can't pass yet. I thought it was wonderful. I got a big, big. It was, first I was in a bit of a snit and then I started laughing about it because it was like, come on, Reid.

BENAVIDES: [00:21:02] You were trying and he was trying too.

MELTON: [00:21:04] Yes. So it was, it was funny. It was really funny. And then we went off to, uh, after a couple of days of orientation, I don't really remember too much of that, except that we had, I had my picture in the paper listening to the Secretary or the equivalent, the Minister for Health and Family Planning or something like that. So my picture's been in the, in the New Delhi Statesman. My picture was also in the paper in Milwaukee. And in fact, I ended up getting my picture in the paper because of the Peace Corps for a lot of reasons, back when I trained and my picture was in the paper and the San Diego Union five years later. So it was, you know, all Peace Corps related.

BENAVIDES: [00:21:53] [inaudible]

MELTON: [00:21:53] Oh, sure, sure, sure, sure. And, um.

BENAVIDES: [00:21:59] So first impressions?

MELTON: [00:22:02] Well, my first, you know, all the smells, the colors, the noise, the freneticism. And I had been so steeped in culture that I just did my absolute very best to fit in. Um. The other surprise that I had at the, at the, at the hotel was that I bought some pants and, two pair of wash and wear pants, and had not tried them on and put them in the, uh, my luggage. And then I got up that morning to put them on and they were like four inches. I'd gotten the wrong size. So the waist was four inches too short. I couldn't get them on. Needless did I know that three months later those very same pair of pants would be hanging off of me because I lost so much weight. But, uh.

BENAVIDES: [00:22:58] And why did you lose weight?

MELTON: [00:22:58] I was very sick. I, uh, in the first three months I probably got, well, I know I got bacillary dysentery. I was diagnosed with dengue fever at about the same time, and that was probably the first time I got amoeba. So I lost from about 180 down to 139 in three months, being sick and eating all that I could. And of course, we were there during the last two years of a three year drought. And so food was not really plentiful in our, in our village. But, uh.

BENAVIDES: [00:23:39] How did that affect your ability to work?

MELTON: [00:23:43] Oh, well, you know, I don't think it affected me at all. I was just like, it was, it was part of, it was part of the whole, uh, adventure. And luckily enough, we were allowed to have a cook in India because if we didn't have a cook, we'd be spending all of our time going to the market and trying to get food and what have you. So that helped an awful lot.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:13] So you got better?

MELTON: [00:24:15] Oh, sure. But I, but I, I had health problems the whole time I was in India, especially with amoeba.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:22] Any others or was it just you?

MELTON: [00:24:25] Some of them did. My roommate didn't. My roommate didn't. He lost a huge amount of weight, but he was never really sick and he was constantly constipated. And I constantly was the other way around. So I ended up using his toilet paper.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:45] Rather than.

MELTON: [00:24:46] Yes, yes.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:48] So, okay. So now you were in New Delhi, you said, in the training?

MELTON: [00:24:52] Yeah. And then we, and then we.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:55] And the specific assignment, what was that?

MELTON: [00:24:55] And then we drove, we were taken by train down to a place called Jabalpur, the biggest city near my village. And then we were taken into the, uh, we met the, our, the district health official, the assistant civil surgeon. Her name was Madame Lele, L-E-L-E. And she had us go out and buy whatever we were supposed to need for our kitchen and that sort of thing. And of course, we made all the wrong decisions, but you know. They said, oh, you buy, she said buy plastic plates because you'll break the others. And so we bought plastic plates and the plastic in India disintegrated in three months. And so we went out and bought real plates and that worked fine.

MELTON: [00:25:53] But I remember going into the village and we were driven into the village probably about 11:00 at night. And all you could see were the kerosene Petromax lanterns, because there was no electricity in the village, and it was a medieval looking village. And we went to the health center where waiting for us was our, the physician who was to

be our supervisor and a whole bunch of people there to welcome us. And, um, that was really a kind of a shock.

BENAVIDES: [00:26:37] How many were there of you?

MELTON: [00:26:39] Just two, just, just the two of us. Right. And Tom Peterson was his name. And then taken over to this room that was in part of the *gram panchayat*. That's G-R-A-M P-A-N-C-H-A-Y-A-T. It's the village council building. They'd taken a room out of it to, for us to live in. And it was very, very small and very, very public. I mean, everybody in the village knew, if we sneezed, they knew. And the next morning we woke up and it was right across the street from the, from three schools and all the school kids, like 200 school kids, were standing out in the road outside the fence, getting a chance to look at us. I have a picture of it. It's really bizarre.

BENAVIDES: [00:27:35] How did you feel?

MELTON: [00:27:39] Fun. Little ticked off that I sort of, I'm sure stars have to, you know, wade through the paparazzi, you know. I felt sort of the same way, I'm sure. It didn't really bother me. And so we stayed in that house for, oh, about three months or so because we had to get a larger place and a less public place. I mean, it really was living on stage. And I got sick there for the first time and, um.

BENAVIDES: [00:28:21] Everybody knew.

MELTON: [00:28:22] Everybody knew. And I had to go out and they built a little outhouse in the back. And I went out there and it was really cold because it was in the December. This is where, it was cold enough there to freeze water on the, you know, crust, the water on the top of our buckets. And of course, we had no heat. And so here I was really sick and vomiting and I'd go out in the backyard and vomit and.

BENAVIDES: [00:28:47] Break the ice.

MELTON: [00:28:48] And the, well, I was vomiting in the backyard, not on the in the water. And the, and the village, some of the village dogs snapping below me, trying to get, eat the vomit, fighting with each other, trying to eat the vomit because they'd come by. It was, it was pretty, it was pretty harrowing. And I, you know, I would yell at them and hurl at them, so to speak, and they'd go away with. And they'd fight over it with each other because they wanted to eat the vomit. They were hungry. They were hungry. And I think early on that was the, that was one of the times when I felt like, oh my God, what have I gotten myself into? When I was really sick. I'm out here in the middle of nowhere and really sick. And of course, the physician, an Indian trained physician, very fine doctor, gave me the medicine and I got better but.

BENAVIDES: [00:29:46] What did this scenario look like? I have a sense of the room in this building. It's public and the schools and the backyard.

MELTON: [00:29:55] And bamboo fences and dirt roads and tile roofs.

BENAVIDES: [00:30:00] And the people, were they colorfully? What was it, was it like a plain environment?

MELTON: [00:30:05] We were very, very, the. Physically we were sort of on top of a hill and down toward the bottom of the hill was a, was a lake. And that was primarily mud. It was, it was a, a *talab*, a tank, T-A-L-A-B, that they grew water chestnuts in and washed the cows in and went to the, all the. And of course in India, everybody went to the fields to go to the bathroom. And of course, when it rained, all the, all of that drained into the pool and then some people drank from the water. I mean, there were all kinds of health problems because of the *talab*.

BENAVIDES: [00:30:49] [inaudible]

MELTON: [00:30:49] Yeah. And, um, we stayed in that house for a while. The kids were colorful. The women, the women, the women in the, in the village were, um, what do you call it? The very, very poor village type. So it wasn't. You see these pictures of these modern sari, beautiful Indian woman with the saris draped and the silk, it was not like that at

all. Very, very basic, but colorful clothing. Humongous ankle bracelets that were, that must have weighed. [tape break] The women would cover their heads almost all the time. Little girls, little girls would wear American kind of dresses, frocks. And then when they became adult, I guess when they had their first period, they suddenly switched into adult clothing. And you sort of heard that little girl that used to come and laugh and play with me disappear. Well, she disappeared into womanhood, and you really sort of sort of saw them around. But, you know, they were not kids anymore.

MELTON: [00:32:18] And the saris were a little bit above ankle height. Women did not wear blouses. They were topless with the sash across, across. And they spoke a very primitive form of Hindi that was influenced by some of the tribal area, tribes around. There's a, we lived on the edge of tribal areas. India is filled with native Indians. The people, the people that we know as Indians that we see in the United States today are not indigenous Indians. They are a mixture of the Greek and Persian and other bloodlines that came in to mix with the tribals. And there are still huge areas and huge population of tribes in India, very much like our American Indians, that remain separate from the general populace. So we were on the edge of, of that.

BENAVIDES: [00:33:23] What was the typical day like?

MELTON: [00:33:26] Oh, well, it depends on whether it was summer or winter. In the summer, you'd get up at 4:00 and go back to bed by 10:00 and then get up again at.

BENAVIDES: [00:33:44] 10:00 a.m.?

MELTON: [00:33:44] Yeah. Go back to bed at 10:00 a.m. to nap. Maybe 11:00, maybe 12:00. You know, when it got so hot that you couldn't move, you'd go back and you'd sweat in your bed for 2 to 4 hours and then you'd get back up again. And the, the village would, would come to life again and go on until midnight. So there were, you were, every day you sort of had two days and two short periods of sleeping. And we'd go, and we'd go to bed. We'd take, when we'd go to bed, it was so hot

we would take our sheets and put them in water, wring them out, make our beds wet with wet sheets, and we'd sleep on the roof because it was cool. And then by 2:00, we'd put a top sheet on again, wet. And then by 4:00, when it was time to get up in the morning, it would get, you'd feel a little chilly and you could get up and you wouldn't put a sweater on or anything like that. But it was tolerable. In the winter.

BENAVIDES: [00:35:01] And then, and so you went to work then?

MELTON: [00:35:03] And it went to, yeah. And the schedule of the hospital that I worked at was like that. There was a, there was a morning session, a big siesta for the lack of a better word. And then it would start up again and run to.

BENAVIDES: [00:35:20] [inaudible]

MELTON: [00:35:21] No. We were asleep at 2:00, so. Start up again at 3:30 or 4:00 and run for two or 3 hours. And then it depends. And it'd depend upon the number of patients who were there and whether we closed at what time, that sort of thing. And then you'd, then the doctor would come down and sit. We lived above a pharmacy and, uh, our new house. After we moved out of the *panchayat's* house, the *panchayat*. And the doctor would come down and drink tea and he'd talk and see people who couldn't get into the hospital.

BENAVIDES: [00:36:00] There was only one doctor?

MELTON: [00:36:00] Yeah, only, well, there was, there was a traditional Ayurvedic doctor and then ours from the health center who was Western trained or trained in Western medicine. And we'd sit around and drink tea and tell stories and gossip and talk about politics and that sort of thing. And then we'd.

BENAVIDES: [00:36:21] All in Hindu?

MELTON: [00:36:22] Well, a mix, a strong mix of English and Hindi, mostly Hindi. But, you know, every once in a while it would be English. And then

we'd eat about 9:00, 10:00 or so and go to bed. I'd read and go to bed. A lot of times, especially in the winter when it was easy to travel, we'd get into the hospital jeep and go out to the outlying areas to dispensaries and what have you, to do little education projects, that sort of thing.

BENAVIDES: [00:37:00] First, tell me about the winter schedule as opposed to the summer schedule.

MELTON: [00:37:03] The winter schedule, you went to bed at 7:00 in the evening and got up at 9:00. I mean, I'm not sure whether these are the.

BENAVIDES: [00:37:15] [inaudible]

MELTON: [00:37:16] Yeah, I mean, it was, it was when the sun was out, you were out, and you'd or people would get up at 7:00 in the morning and stand in the sun to get warm and drink tea. And then the day would start and then you'd go all day.

BENAVIDES: [00:37:37] 7:00 p.m. or 7:00 a.m.?

MELTON: [00:37:37] 7:00 a.m. Yeah. You'd go, you'd work all day. And then when it got really, really cold, you'd get in bed. And you'd say. It was just the absolutely the opposite. Very much like living in winter here. You go to bed earlier and you sleep all at one point.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:03] Were there mountains around?

MELTON: [00:38:04] No.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:06] Was it flat?

MELTON: [00:38:06] It was hilly.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:07] Hilly.

MELTON: [00:38:11] Hilly with some plains. They grew rice, chickpeas, wheat were the major crops. Water chestnuts in the, in the tank when it had water in it. I was vegetarian most of the time that I was there. Never ate any of the fish that came from the tank. I wasn't eating any of the fish that came from that tank.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:36] Or anything else that came from the tank.

MELTON: [00:38:36] And we, and we would, we, uh, any time we ever had anything that was not vegetarian, it was usually in the big city close by.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:45] Now, did you go to the big city?

MELTON: [00:38:47] I would go on a weekend once every three weeks or so. My roommate really did not like the village, and he went almost every weekend.

BENAVIDES: [00:38:59] And what did you do on the weekend in the village?

MELTON: [00:39:04] Well, on Saturdays I worked with the doctor, hung out, read. We had our, our book lockers that were sent over with us. And so I read an awful lot, wrote letters home. Um. In the summer, it was sleep because it was too hot to do anything else. And in fact, one of the volunteers that was about 20 miles away from us used to bicycle in the middle of the afternoon, and everybody thought he was absolutely crazy. They kept saying, mad dogs, Englishmen, and now Americans go out in the midday sun. You know, it was. He would just ride 15 miles in the middle of the afternoon and everybody thought he was absolutely crazy.

BENAVIDES: [00:39:56] So [inaudible].

MELTON: [00:39:58] Oh, yeah, he was. He was. I'm not sure what he did, quite frankly. He'd come by and visit. He would tick off my, my roommate by eating all of our peanut butter. That really infuriated my roommate. I wasn't too happy with it either. But, uh, and he caused a really, really big ruckus in our village at one time. And I had to use this. We'd been

there for about a year, year and a half, and all of a sudden a bunch of people came toward me. I was sitting at the health dispensary and there was, it was like a mob, a small mob. And they were, I could not believe the anger that was coming out of them. And my landlord, who was also the pharmacist, was the person leading the mob. And I said, what's wrong? [speaks Hindi] What's wrong? And he said, uh, Ken [speaks Hindi].

BENAVIDES: [00:41:02] Which meant?

MELTON: [00:41:03] I said, oh my, no, no, no. Which meant, Ken spit in the mouth of a young child. And what he meant was spit in the face of, but it was, you know, that was the term. And I said, no, he didn't do that. No, no, no, no, no, no. And finally I said, I don't believe it. And it turned out the child was the grandchild of the head of the village. So this was really not going on too well. And so I ended up. Ken came bicycling through and I said, what happened? And I said, did you spit in the kid's face? He said, yes, I did. I said, why did you do that? And he said, because he was taunting me. They were sticking sticks in my, in my bicycle spokes. And they were calling me *laal bandar*, which means red monkey, which is a derogatory term for, uh, that they used for English because they would turn red in the face and had sandy hair and it looked just like the monkeys in our village.

MELTON: [00:42:08] And so I had to do something. And so I said, okay, thanks. You shouldn't have spit in his head, in his face, but thanks for the information. And so I, they had a big meeting and the, they were yelling and screaming at me and I, uh, you know, Americans ra ra ra! And I said, this is my story. This is what I heard, because Ken was out of the village. We got him out of the village.

BENAVIDES: [00:42:37] He wasn't a Peace Corps volunteer in the village?

MELTON: [00:42:38] He was, no. He was a Peace Corps volunteer about 20 miles away. And, uh, so I told the head of the village what had happened. And so the head of the village brought his grandson in and said, what did you do?

BENAVIDES: [00:42:54] How old was he?

MELTON: [00:42:54] And he, and he confessed. Ten, 12, something like.

BENAVIDES: [00:43:00] He told the truth?

MELTON: [00:43:00] He told the truth. And so, and I said, and I apologized for Ken. He should not have done that. And then he made the little boy apologize to me. And so it, well, things were a little rough for a while after that. But, uh, and the kids, and I always when they called me *laal bandar*, I ignored them.

BENAVIDES: [00:43:26] And what does that mean?

MELTON: [00:43:26] *Laal bandar*, red monkey. And he, then he, because I tan a lot they suddenly said I was becoming Indian and really, you know, I wore Indian clothes and they said, oh you can pass. You look like you're a Kashmiri Brahmin, you know? You know, they really accepted me. And a lot of it had to do with my ability with the language. They continued to call my Minnesota blond, fair roommate *laal bandar*. But if they started.

BENAVIDES: [00:44:00] Was that alright or was that a problem with the Peace Corps around looking like an Indian or?

MELTON: [00:44:03] No. No, no, no, no, no.

BENAVIDES: [00:44:04] So it was a positive thing that the Peace Corps was accepting?

MELTON: [00:44:06] Oh, well, Peace Corps didn't have anything to say about it, you know? And when they started to taunt me again, I would turn around, and this really worked, kids, well with the kids. The kids would follow me and taunt me with *laal bandar*. And then they would. I would turn around and I would say, all black dogs say red monkey, are saying red monkey. It's a game. You know, anybody who says, it's like

a little kid's game and I entered the game with them. And they said, oh, I can't be a black dog, so I won't call you red monkey. And it worked perfectly, perfectly fine. It was just fine. I felt a little bit guilty saying black dog, but, you know, that was, it was a game for the kids.

MELTON: [00:44:59] And they, and they ultimately ended up, because of the family planning work that we were doing. We were doing family planning camps where the doctors would come in and the female doctor who was the head of the region would come in and she would. This was when they were doing loops and she would insert loops. And so they would, they would, they would follow me in the village and say loop, loop, loop. Or [speaks Hindi]. You know, put a loop, use a loop. Or they'd say [speaks Hindi], which means a small family is a happy family, which was the national chant for family planning. And so ultimately I was associated with that more than anything else. And it was, and it was fun. It was, you know, there was nothing about it.

MELTON: [00:46:03] And then I, then I, then I started working in poultry and kitchen gardening, and we did a lot of vaccination. There was still smallpox in the area. And when there was smallpox in the village, the police and the army would surround the village. Even in the middle of the night. I got up in the middle of the night once to do this. And they'd isolate the village and then all of the health workers, we would go in and vaccinate everybody. And of course, we had to vaccinate ourselves to show the little vaccination scar on our forearm, to prove, to talk everybody else into getting the vaccination. So I did that, oh, probably four or five times during the time I was, I was there.

BENAVIDES: [00:46:57] So you had several different projects.

MELTON: [00:47:01] It was really interesting. We were sent there to do sanitation and build latrines, and nobody was interested in building latrines. Nobody in our village. And we had one. Several people had them, but absolutely nobody was interested in it. And I finally decided I'm going to, I'm going to stop hitting my head against the wall and do something else. And just do something else. I could, I could, I could do something unproductive for two years and not do anything, or I could do

something that was more accepting. So I did, I did the, helped demonstration poultry flocks and kitchen gardens and also taught in the regional social work school and taught communication skills.

MELTON: [00:47:54] And we would put on family planning plays and puppet shows in the, in the villages. I helped the doctor train people to assist in vasectomies. This was not back when vasectomies were coerced. I never really believed that that happened, but I guess it did. That was all after I left. And I saw some pretty rough stuff. Really, really rough stuff.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:29] Rough in the sense of?

MELTON: [00:48:29] Well, I helped the doctor put a guy's guts back in his stomach after he'd been gored by a bull. It was a TB center. And so periodically I would have to help aspirate lungs. They'd stick needles into the, big, thick needles into the lungs, through the ribs in somebody's back, and then pull out pus from the lungs from TB. That, that was.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:55] You started off by maybe wanting to be a physician.

MELTON: [00:48:57] Well, I, I was, I was, I was very much. I wanted a medical group in India. So I could kind of test myself, you know, and, uh, and it's what I got. I actually refused. They said, you can go earlier if you'd like and go into a poultry group. And I said, no, I'll stay. I'll wait for this medical group. Ended up still doing poultry.

BENAVIDES: [00:49:25] You said kitchen gardens and poultry what?

MELTON: [00:49:28] Raised poultry. I had, I had a, I had a demonstration flock of 400 chickens.

BENAVIDES: [00:49:41] Uh huh.

MELTON: [00:49:41] And I did it by going into, getting, going into partnership with local farmers. I never took anything out of it, of course, but we got, I got

special project money from the, from the Peace Corps. And we would build the, uh, the chicken huts, the coop, that was so huge. It was actually huge. And, and I would go in and politic with the, with the.

BENAVIDES: [00:50:11] I was going to ask you, how did you?

MELTON: [00:50:11] Politic with the, um, with the university, the ag extension, and get the ag extension people out to our village because they would, our village was not known to be receptive village. It was kind of far away from everything. And the ag people didn't like to go that far. And so I did an awful lot of, of sitting on the front doorsteps of the people in the ag.

BENAVIDES: [00:50:34] How far away were they?

MELTON: [00:50:36] About 45 miles or so.

BENAVIDES: [00:50:43] So making that contact.

MELTON: [00:50:45] Making it and continual and just continuing to go back and continuing to go there and buying the seedlings for the gardens and, you know, constantly being present, taking a trip in and meeting people there and just kind of like raising awareness. It's kind of like this.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:05] Did you take some of the villagers with you?

MELTON: [00:51:05] Most of the time, no. Most of the time, no. Sometimes it was kind of like the squeaky wheel gets the, gets the grease. Well, I was the squeaky wheel to get the grease into the, into, further into the region. They really didn't want to go off the road very far. And though there was a road that went to our village, it was still a pretty rough road and pretty far. And so they never would reach that from.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:32] Did they have to know the leaders of the community?

MELTON: [00:51:34] Yes. Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:35] Like what was the doctor's name, for example?

MELTON: [00:51:38] Oh, his name? His name was Prafulla Dagat, P-R-A-F-U-L-L-A D-A-G-A-T. And.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:47] Was he someone that invited you over for dinner to his place?

MELTON: [00:51:51] Oh, he was, well, he was my supervisor, and we would eat at his place.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:56] Do you have any personal contact with him?

MELTON: [00:51:58] Oh, absolutely. In fact, in fact, uh, a year ago, I went to Houston, Texas, to visit him because he was in the United States to visit his daughter, his first trip to the United States. So it's now 35 years later. I still have contact with him. We actually, you know, if you believe in past lives or kind of you meet somebody in your life every once and there's a special attraction or an energy or something there that. The doctor and I, the doctor and I had that, whatever that was.

BENAVIDES: [00:52:37] You hadn't kept in touch during that time?

MELTON: [00:52:40] Oh, yes, absolutely. Every, every few years. Not constantly, but every, but every few years.

BENAVIDES: [00:52:47] And you worked well together from the very beginning?

MELTON: [00:52:49] Absolutely. Absolutely. And his wife. In traditional Indian culture, ancient Indian culture, if a man dies and leaves a widow without a child, then it is the duty of the younger brother to provide that woman with a child, i.e. sleep with her. So that she gets pregnant. And that child is not his child. It's his older brother's child.

BENAVIDES: [00:53:21] The one that died.

MELTON: [00:53:22] The one that died. So there is, that's very old tradition. Now, what, what, what's the remnant of that in the culture is that there is something called *bhabhi-devar*, B-H-A-B-I D-E-W-A-R [sic] relationship, and that's between a woman and her husband's younger brother.

BENAVIDES: [00:53:46] Mm hmm.

MELTON: [00:53:47] Okay? So I was considered his wife's younger brother. And so there were several times, one time when she got very sick and had to go to the, to the city. Um, she, I accompanied her. No other. And that was okay. She, no other man who is not in the, in the family could accompany her, but I could because I was considered by everyone to be his younger brother.

BENAVIDES: [00:54:16] Now, that was an overt thing that grew out of the friendship that you were?

MELTON: [00:54:20] Well, there's, there was, there was a, there's something in India called fictive kinship. And if you, everybody is related to in some way as either if you're close as family. So all of his kids. In fact, all of his brothers' and sisters' kids called me *chacha*, which means father's younger brother. It's uncle.

BENAVIDES: [00:54:51] Did this man say, I want you to be?

MELTON: [00:54:54] No, he didn't say it. It just happens.

BENAVIDES: [00:54:56] It just happens.

MELTON: [00:54:57] It just happens. Yeah. Yeah. And in traditional India, men are not generally allowed into the kitchens except the brother's younger. I mean, the husband's younger brother can go in and be in the kitchen with the wife. So there's this left over relationship that's there.

BENAVIDES: [00:55:25] But it's also safe, this person?

MELTON: [00:55:26] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And you. And there's, there's usually a lot of teasing between that woman and the man, you know, the *bhabhi* and the *devar*. There's a lot of teasing. And his, and Dr. Dagat's wife, Sudha, had a really wicked sense of humor. And she, we would tease each other, no end. So.

BENAVIDES: [00:55:55] That was the family that you knew the best there?

MELTON: [00:55:59] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:55:59] Did you know other people there or?

MELTON: [00:56:01] Sure, lots of other people, but none like this. None like this.

BENAVIDES: [00:56:07] The Peace Corps director, did he come out or did she come out?

MELTON: [00:56:09] Well, you know, Peace Corps in India was really big at that time. And so it was divided into five regions, four or five regions, and each of those regions was as big or bigger than a whole country in another, you know, another place.

BENAVIDES: [00:56:24] Was there a regional director?

MELTON: [00:56:26] Yeah, there was a regional director in Bhopal.

BENAVIDES: [00:56:28] Did you see them much? Did they come visit you? Did you go see them?

MELTON: [00:56:32] Not, not much. We were really way out there. We did not, we did. First of all, it was a 24 hour train ride across the state to, or not 24 hours, but it was probably about, it's a 24 hour trip. You had to go to the bus stop, ride the bus in, get the train, you know. I think our Peace Corps director or regional director visited once in the two times, two years that I was there. And the country director never visited, of

course. And then our, the Peace Corps nurse came two or three times to give us our gamma globulin shot, of course.

BENAVIDES: [00:57:18] But did you go and meet volunteers from other villages?

MELTON: [00:57:22] Not much. And our group was so spread out that in the central area we would go. And should there be another volunteer from our group or from some other group in the village, we could, we would see them in the big city. And there was one, one couple of guys that lived in the big city that had several rooms, and we'd all sort of camp out in their rooms. They had a couple of extra beds and we'd all roll our sleeping bags and sleep on the floor.

BENAVIDES: [00:57:52] But that didn't happen very often?

MELTON: [00:57:52] Well, for Tom it was almost every weekend. And for me, it was every three weeks or so. And sometimes the people would be there and sometimes they wouldn't.

BENAVIDES: [00:57:59] So at the end of the first year, you were feeling better. You gotten through your illness, you had moved to another place that was better than the public place that was small.

MELTON: [00:58:10] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:58:11] And you had changed projects.

MELTON: [00:58:14] Oh, it turned out the whole time I was there, we just. Everything that we could, anything we could come up with to do, we'd do.

BENAVIDES: [00:58:24] So you created.

MELTON: [00:58:25] Oh, we, yeah, it was like you had to, you know, they told us in training you're going to create your own job.

BENAVIDES: [00:58:32] So like what did you do in the hospital?

MELTON: [00:58:38] Um.

BENAVIDES: [00:58:38] What was that like?

MELTON: [00:58:39] A lot of times it was assist, uh, in the medical procedures. You know, give shots because we were trying to give shots and stuff like that. We, uh. I know one project it took a couple of months to do was to straighten the hospital up and make it look like a hospital and repaint it and reorganize it so that things would flow better and people wouldn't be stumbling over each other. And, you know, all of the lines of patients that would come in from one direction and leave in another direction, rather going down this tiny little hall. It was actually like open verandas was what it really was. It was no enclosed halls, but there were always people stumbling over each other. And I said, well, here's this logical traffic flow kind of guy coming in. And we kind of reorganized things like that. I mean, we did things like that.

BENAVIDES: [00:59:39] So there was always imagination and creativity going on. Did you have times when you couldn't think of anything or there wasn't?

MELTON: [00:59:47] Oh, yeah, there were, there were some times like, oh, what the heck is going to go on? I'm going to, it's been a week and I haven't done anything. Or we started something and I'm going to have to shepherd this through the regional government. And so I really want to get it started in a week, but it's going to really take four months before I can get permission. And I have got to go and sit on somebody's doorstep to do something. So.

BENAVIDES: [01:00:15] So did you take trips and go to other neighboring countries?

MELTON: [01:00:21] Oh, we were not allowed to go out of the country without, without special permission. And, uh, we.

BENAVIDES: [01:00:30] Did you go on vacation?

MELTON: [01:00:30] I went on vacation. I traveled all over India, periodically, still had a lot of time left to, you know, the official time left. I was not out of sight very much at all. And I must admit, I did feel a little bit holier than thou about that compared to some of the other people who were traveling around a little bit too long.

BENAVIDES: [01:00:55] But you had a real determination from the very beginning to go there and to do a certain piece of work.

MELTON: [01:00:58] Yes, yes, yes.

BENAVIDES: [01:01:00] And then there was lots of imagination, creativity. So you were pretty stimulated.

MELTON: [01:01:05] I loved it. I loved it.

BENAVIDES: [01:01:07] So you had a really.

MELTON: [01:01:08] So, and I was, you know, I made a mark. I don't know what the mark is today, but I certainly, I certainly made a mark on the Dagat family. I hear from his daughter in Houston now that there is, there are legends about me amongst his family, the Dagat family, everybody. And I said, I don't remember any of this. But she said, oh, but there are stories. And it's nice. It's, it's, it's, yeah. You know, I think, I think some of the things that that happened. Being sick. The doctor, the doctor's wife lost a child that was born and died two, three, two or three days later. Going through a lot of that stuff with them, you know, that makes you family. That makes you real family.

BENAVIDES: [01:02:08] So you felt accepted and involved in a family?

MELTON: [01:02:13] Oh, yeah. Especially since it was, you know, I was raised as an only child with parents who kind of rejected their families and went off, left rural Missouri to go live in big Houston, Texas. And so I really had, I really had as an only child, I had no brothers and sisters. I only have three cousins, you know, and they were a way off, never saw

them. So I didn't have that, that sense of family. It was always just my mother and.

BENAVIDES: [01:02:41] [inaudible]

MELTON: [01:02:41] Well, it was just the doctor and his wife. But ultimately, I met his brothers and I met their wives and their kids and that sort of thing. And they were all scattered in Bombay and New Delhi and what have you, but I met them on and off.

BENAVIDES: [01:02:56] But you felt a part of their family.

MELTON: [01:02:57] Yes, very much so.

BENAVIDES: [01:03:00] So by the end.

MELTON: [01:03:00] In fact, when I, when I left India, I was medically evacuated from India.

BENAVIDES: [01:03:05] Oh, what was that like?

MELTON: [01:03:07] Oh, it was still, still amoebas and that sort of thing. And, uh.

BENAVIDES: [01:03:13] Did you not finish the whole two years?

MELTON: [01:03:13] Oh, well, uh, no, I went to end of service conference, the one that's three months before or. [tape break] So end. I went to the end of the service conference. They said, well, you're not going to go back to your village for a month before you come to, before you know. I've forgotten what they call the close of service or what it was. The one where you went in and then you didn't go back to your village. I mean, you packed up and left your village. There was a little conference at the very end, too, at that time. That's the one that I missed. But when I left, uh. There was somebody from the, uh, Jabalpur that was coming in to pick me up and my trunk.

MELTON: [01:04:11] And so I came, they came out to pick me up. And the doctor and his wife and the health staff had served me a big meal and all this little honored thing. And they were kind of ticked because they'd wanted to buy me a gold chain or something like that, but they didn't have time to have the goldsmith make it because I was leaving early. And so we went out to the jeep. I'm going to get upset talking about this. But we went out to the jeep and then the doctor said, Sudha, his wife, who had not come to the Jeep. He said, Sudha has something for you. Go back. And so I went back and it was just her and me. And she did this beautiful Hindu blessing and marked my forehead. You know, here I am, you know, 35 years later. It was really, you know, and I left doing what I'm doing now. So it was deep, deep stuff with the family.

BENAVIDES: [01:05:33] And you had no idea when he said that.

MELTON: [01:05:34] And I had no idea that. And it was this, this *bhabhi-devar* thing.

BENAVIDES: [01:05:42] You thought she was going to tease you and say goodbye.

MELTON: [01:05:44] Or she was just going to say goodbye or whatever. And here was this ceremony with burning camphor and prayers and holy water and rice thrown on my head and the mark, a *tika*, put on my, on my forehead.

BENAVIDES: [01:06:03] That meant you had total acceptance into the family?

MELTON: [01:06:04] And I mean, it was, it was, you know, I didn't. I was kind of befuddled but really moved and.

BENAVIDES: [01:06:12] Have you told this story before?

MELTON: [01:06:14] Sure. Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [01:06:16] So when you tell this story.

MELTON: [01:06:17] It always, it always, tears always come. And when I saw them two years ago in Houston, it was a real emotional thing for all of us. And is, is, uh, it was really funny because he was laughing. I had sent some pictures back that I'd taken in India and his grown son now. And most of his kids were born after I left. In fact, all of them were. The daughter that is kind of considered my goddaughter. And she believes that I named her. That's part of the lore.

BENAVIDES: [01:07:06] [inaudible]

MELTON: [01:07:06] Yeah. And all of the kids, he moved on from that place and became a cardiac surgeon.

BENAVIDES: [01:07:14] In another village?

MELTON: [01:07:15] No. In the big regional center. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I mean a real cardiac thoracic surgeon. And of course, they're well off now. And this, he was just starting his career. He was, he's only five years older than me. Just, he was fresh out of med school when I, uh.

BENAVIDES: [01:07:34] When you went to the village.

MELTON: [01:07:34] When he went to the village. Yeah. And his kids said, I can't believe that you lived in a place like that. So in many respects, his kids view that experience of him and his wife there in that village very much like me being in the Peace Corps. They can't believe that he lived out in that because they were not raised that way. They were raised fairly well off in a large city and went to school and went to graduate school and, you know.

BENAVIDES: [01:08:08] [inaudible]

MELTON: [01:08:08] Yeah, so. You know, we were both young and we went through all of this together.

BENAVIDES: [01:08:19] So leaving then, when you came out of that blessing and you had to come back and leave, that was?

MELTON: [01:08:26] Very emotional, needless to say.

BENAVIDES: [01:08:33] Was it the whole village or just the family.

MELTON: [01:08:36] For the blessing?

BENAVIDES: [01:08:38] Well.

MELTON: [01:08:38] No, for the blessing, it was just her.

BENAVIDES: [01:08:41] But I mean, was there emotion around leaving the village and the work?

MELTON: [01:08:45] Oh, you know, by that time, it was, it was like, I don't want to go home, but God I'm glad to get out of here. It was, it was really, really mixed. I had considered continuing on for a year, and my roommate had already left early. He left three months early. He finally said, I'm, I'm going to get married and I'm a teacher and I got to go find a job. So he actually left early, left the Peace Corps early, and did not attend any of the, any of the end of service or anything. And so I was there for about three or four months, three months by myself.

MELTON: [01:09:26] And, uh. I hope to go back and visit them again. I went back and visited them in 1969 because I trained Peace Corps volunteers and trained them both in the United States and in India. And so I got to visit them in 1969. And their eldest daughter Radha had been born by that time, and I took her a doll. She told me later, as an adult with her kids sitting around her, that that doll was the only doll that she ever had.

BENAVIDES: [01:10:05] Is there a reason for that?

MELTON: [01:10:07] I don't know. I don't know.

BENAVIDES: [01:10:09] Is there a cultural thing?

MELTON: [01:10:10] I don't, I have no idea. But it was a doll, a talking doll, and you pulled a string on its back and it would say things. And the first time we did that, she screamed bloody murder and threw the doll across the floor. But she, she's very, to this day, she's very attached to that doll. She still has it. And she says it's the only doll she ever had. So. Um. And, oh, and when I visited them in Houston, which was my hometown, what I got to do was to take them around Houston and see and show them where I lived, all the places that I lived, the places that I went to school, showed them.

BENAVIDES: [01:11:04] [inaudible]

MELTON: [01:11:04] Yeah. And of course, they learned a lot about me. And we went and visited my mother's grave together. So, again, real family stuff.

BENAVIDES: [01:11:17] Real connection.

MELTON: [01:11:19] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [01:11:21] Certainly an achievement of that whole experience.

MELTON: [01:11:24] And they've got one daughter living in Houston. She's married to, guess what, an Indian software engineer in Houston. They have another daughter who's studying microbiology at the University of Michigan. And their son, who is in business, lives in Bombay. And I forget what kind of business he is, I think it's something to do with textiles. But he's been accepted at Harvard and Wharton business schools. So he's no, he's not a dumb guy either. And but he's refused to go until he gets a full scholarship. And his father says knowing him, he may wait a couple of years, but he'll end up getting the full scholarship and coming.

BENAVIDES: [01:12:19] So they're mostly [inaudible].

MELTON: [01:12:20] So they're all, two of their three kids are living in the States and the other one is coming to go to school. But they'll go back to India

ultimately, I think. I think, who knows, who knows. And uh, just trying to think of other, other things about.

BENAVIDES: [01:12:50] At the end of the tour, did you, you must have felt a great sense of achievement of just having done so much.

MELTON: [01:12:58] Well, it was sort of yes and no. There was so much to do. And I'd wanted to do so much more, but couldn't because things just take time. And I remember every once in a while being just incredibly frustrated and saying, what the hell am I doing here? I'm going to go home, and things are not happening. And then I'd go into this big city and there was a, there was actually a missionary there. Uh, Miss Campbell. I don't even remember her first name. And she always had tea and cookies at 4:00 every day. And I knew that you could combine. You could have a really good tea. She made really good tea. And two cookies, very abstemious. It was very proper. She was born and raised in India, though she was American. The only time she lived in the United States was when she went to college.

MELTON: [01:14:06] And I remember saying to her, Miss Campbell, nothing's happening. And she'd go, well, what have you done? And I would say, well, we did this and this and this. And there was one time when she, I said, you know, I really got one of the farmers to use a steel plow. Steel plow rather than a, than a wooden plow. And she said, Reid, you know that that's about 5,000 years of development. So don't put down what you're doing. And she would always kind of set me straight about time, really, and change in India. Like, slow down. Keep the pressure up. But don't be so impatient. You're laying some foundations. And that was, that was a good thing for her to be there. She, I mean, she was a real character.

BENAVIDES: [01:15:04] It was a good thing for you to hear that.

MELTON: [01:15:05] Yes.

BENAVIDES: [01:15:07] That reframe of what you were doing.

MELTON: [01:15:09] Absolutely. Absolutely.

BENAVIDES: [01:15:12] And so when you came home, you felt, you felt that.

MELTON: [01:15:17] I felt, you know, it was like I could have done more. I mean, that's always the case in my life. I always feel like I could have done more. But, you know, and my experience in India got me into really good graduate schools. I ended up getting a National Defense Education Act fellowship to study Hindi to put me through graduate school. I ended up using it, of course, to help train Peace Corps volunteers and going back to India. I also went back to India in 1975 when Mrs. Gandhi was having her emergency, and I thought that they were going to close the country down and I'd never get to see my friends again. And I went back to visit then. That was, that was nice. Then I've not been back since 1975.

BENAVIDES: [01:16:14] [inaudible]

MELTON: [01:16:14] My Peace Corps service, I got one of my jobs with the Legal Services Corporation because I speak Hindi. Not that I would never, ever use it in that job, but the guy who hired me said he was down between you and two other people. And we started talking about your Peace Corps and your ability to read and write and speak Hindi. And when you wrote my name out in, in, in Devanagari script and I thought this guy's got some ability to think. And of course lawyers like thinkers. And he told me later on, two years later, he says, you got the job because you speak Hindi. Not that it has anything to do with your job because I'd already was up in the finalists anyway. So he used that to make the distinction.

BENAVIDES: [01:17:06] Can you think of other things like that that have influenced your life since Peace Corps?

MELTON: [01:17:10] Well, I, you know, obviously, I did a lot of work in international, a lot of international work later, and went off to Sudan and worked there with the, with the Geologic Survey and the International Monetary Fund. And I did, I did a lot of work in Pakistan

and ended up. Toward my, the end of my tour, I'd go to go back to Pakistan about two months out of every year for about four or five years, two one month trips. And during that time I would do teambuilding courses for Pakistani program leaders and rural development boards of directors and that sort of thing.

BENAVIDES: [01:18:06] Did you call from your hands on experience?

MELTON: [01:18:10] Oh, sure. Sure. And I went back and I.

BENAVIDES: [01:18:15] And you knew how to do it.

MELTON: [01:18:16] Yeah. And kind of scared the whole time in Pakistan because things were getting rough. Even I had to have a bodyguard every once in a while the last couple of trips in Pakistan. And I went to, I spent most of my time in Quetta, in Peshawar, which are places where Americans are not too welcome today. And, uh, my Urdu, which is the same as Hindi except written differently and pronounced a little bit differently, got good enough for me to begin to really think in or do while I was doing the training. And one time when I stopped, I realized that I was thinking in Urdu and translating into English to Urdu speakers. And I froze and I and I said, I got to tell you what happened. And they laughed and they said, well, just speak Urdu. And I said, it's terrible Urdu. And they said, that's all right, we speak terrible Urdu too. And so I just began, when I thought it in Urdu, I would say it in Urdu along with my English. And so I was known for doing the trainings in Urdu. Well.

BENAVIDES: [01:19:27] Right.

MELTON: [01:19:28] It wasn't really, wasn't really in Urdu, it was like 10 percent, 20 percent Urdu. But it was, but it did an awful lot for their acceptance of me and their receptivity to what I had to say. And that was, that was a lot of fun. Other times I use my language is with taxi drivers in New York City because so many of them are Hindus or Sikhs.

BENAVIDES: [01:19:57] A lot of connection, that word keeps coming to my mind as I listen to you. Connection with the language, with the people, with this particular family.

MELTON: [01:20:12] Oh, when I went to New Delhi, when I landed in New Delhi, I felt a sense of being at home and I never got lost in New Delhi. I always knew where I was. I always had a sense of place and direction in New Delhi, in a strange city, you know. And I've gotten lost in plenty of other cities, but I never felt that way in New Delhi. So.

BENAVIDES: [01:20:45] How do you feel? Do you have any kind of summary feeling or statement or?

MELTON: [01:20:52] Oh, I'm so, I'm glad I did it. I think it's wonderful. I think it's probably the two most concentrated, influential years of my life. Had great impact on the rest of my life. I've been able to surprise people, especially Hindi speakers, all over the world. Um. I visited Morocco once and there were some young Moroccan boys following us around in the village markets, Peter and I, and wanting to practice their English. I mean, this happens every place in the world. And so they said, uh, and one of the ways I would get rid of beggars in Morocco is I'd speak Hindi back to them. They wouldn't understand it. You know, they'd try German and Italian and, you know, all of this and I just speak Hindi back to them.

MELTON: [01:21:58] And one guy said to me in French, you're speaking Hindi. And I looked at him and I said, whoa. So I turned and asked him. I said, why? Why? How do you know that? He says, oh, Hindi movies are really popular. Indian movies are really popular in Morocco. And so, and so they wanted me to help them, to teach them some Hindi. So here I am speaking to French and Arabic speakers wanting to learn some Hindi words in Morocco. And I'm thinking, I'm talking to them in French, thinking in English, and teaching them Hindi. And needless to say, after about 20 minutes I was exhausted. But I said, I taught them things like, you know, hello, how are you? I love you. You know.

BENAVIDES: [01:23:02] How much is this?

MELTON: [01:23:02] How much is? You know, all that kind of, that kind of stuff is what I was teaching them. I mean, they, and they were they were really good at picking up the language. So it was just, just so that they could understand a few words in, not just read the Arabic subtitles, but actually understand the Hindi words. So that was fun.

BENAVIDES: [01:23:26] It kind of pulls together everything that, your entire experience with international languages.

MELTON: [01:23:32] I'd love to do some more of it. Yeah, I'd love to do some more of it somehow or another. I've thought about going back in the Peace Corps.

BENAVIDES: [01:23:41] As a volunteer?

MELTON: [01:23:42] As a volunteer. Years, you know, when I quote retire.

BENAVIDES: [01:23:49] Would you go back to India?

MELTON: [01:23:50] Oh, in a minute. In a minute. I'm trying to think of some way to get back there now in a, in a way that is not just tourist. I mean, it would be great to go back as a tourist and to visit the Dagats. But I would like to go back there with some, some real purpose to, to make the connection again with a group of people, to do some work together. I tried several times earlier in my career to do it. I was, I was actually accepted by the Ford Foundation to do an internship with the Ford Foundation in the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Office. Because my graduate degree's in city planning. This was right after I was graduating from graduate school and was pretty much ready to go. And the, uh, there were all kinds of riots and Naxalite. Naxalite is a kind of terrorist group that was operating in Bengal at the time.

MELTON: [01:25:05] And the head of the foundation operation there was murdered. And so they ended their operations there. And needless to say, I did not go. And about five years later than that, after that, I was going to go to work for CARE in Bengal. And it turns out at that time I

was getting ready, really getting ready to go. And my mother was diagnosed with cancer and my father lost his job. And it was the only time that they ever asked me, please don't go so far away. And I ended up making a decision not to go because my parents needed me, basically. And so I stayed. But both of those that were purposeful visits and I'd like to find some other kind of personal. Personal and purposeful visit.

BENAVIDES: [01:26:11] Ways to visit.

MELTON: [01:26:11] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [01:26:11] For an amount of time?

MELTON: [01:26:13] It would be nice. It would be nice. I mean, given the way we live now and what we have here, it would be difficult to do that unless we just uprooted ourselves and moved off. So.

BENAVIDES: [01:26:25] Wow, this has been very interesting and heartfelt.

MELTON: [01:26:32] Thank you.

BENAVIDES: [01:26:34] And a very unique experience. Very unique experience.

MELTON: [01:26:35] Thank you.

BENAVIDES: [01:26:39] And I think you've said it all.

MELTON: [01:26:43] Ah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]