

David H. Wessel Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

David H. Wessel served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1962 to 1964 in a rural community development program.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

David H. Wessel

February 4, 2014
New Orleans, Louisiana

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:01] Today is February 4th, 2014. This is Phyllis Noble. I am interviewing David H. Wessel, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1962 to 1964 in a rural community development program. And David, do you want to say a few words so we can make sure it's picking up your voice?

WESSEL: [00:00:27] Yes. I'm David Wessel, and I did indeed serve from 1962 to '64 in the Peace Corps in Colombia. Rural community development.

NOBLE: [00:00:38] Great. Thank you. I'm going to turn this off and make sure it's recording.

WESSEL: [00:00:41] OK.

NOBLE: [00:00:42] Here you go. So, David, let's go back to what you were doing a year before you joined the Peace Corps. Were you in college?

WESSEL: [00:00:54] Yes, I was in college at Loyola University here in New Orleans. I was in my last course of college in chemistry, and I was, the day I finished my final exam I got my acceptance in the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:01:14] Oh, perfect timing. Oh, that's great.

WESSEL: [00:01:18] The first Peace Corps volunteer from Louisiana.

NOBLE: [00:01:21] Oh, you are the first. Oh wow. Well, that's very nice. Let's go a little bit farther back now when you were, uh, where did you find yourself when you were a little boy? Where did you grow up?

WESSEL: [00:01:35] I was born and raised in Miami Beach, Florida. And I was the youngest of 10 children.

NOBLE: [00:01:42] Oh my goodness.

WESSEL: [00:01:46] My brother was a senior here at Loyola when I was a freshman, and he talked me into coming to Loyola. And of course, once you come to New Orleans, you love New Orleans.

NOBLE: [00:01:59] Yeah.

WESSEL: [00:02:00] And you're very happy, especially as a college student.

NOBLE: [00:02:03] I'm sure, for a number of reasons. So you had nine brothers and sisters, all of those older than you. And I'm trying to imagine what life might have been like for you. Um, you couldn't all fit into a car and go on a road trip. What sorts of things did you do as family? Did you take vacations?

WESSEL: [00:02:29] No, never. The first trip we ever made sort of as a family, in two cars at that time, but it just so happened my sister had married someone with a car, so we had two cars available. My mother and father were sort of like pioneers in Miami Beach. And there was very little development at that time, although a lot was going on, new hotels, etcetera. You know, it

was like the beginning of the boom in South Florida. And um, so I was born in 1938, the youngest of 10. By the time I was three or four, my oldest brother went into the Navy, so there were only nine of us. But we lived in a three-bedroom house, one bath, for 11 people, basically. And 12 sometimes. Most our entertainment was mostly neighborhood and people we went to school with. They'd come to our house, you know? And we did very little traveling. Once in a while, my mother would pile some of us into a car and go out and see where the newest development was going on.

NOBLE: [00:03:57] Ah yes, but that was pretty local.

WESSEL: [00:04:00] Yeah, yeah. So it was very, uh, I was only. The only trip I ever made was to my brother's wedding in Louisville, Kentucky, when I was a freshman in high school. And that was it.

NOBLE: [00:04:17] And you had, um, certainly you mentioned one brother who had gone to college.

WESSEL: [00:04:23] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:04:24] And he went to Loyola right here in New Orleans before you. Were you the only two of the ten?

WESSEL: [00:04:30] No, we had. Out of the ten that were, I think, five of us who got college degrees. My brother Bill was here at Loyola. My brother Jack went to the University of Florida and was a judge, subsequently went to Loyola Law School and then returned to Florida and was a judge in Florida. My brother Joe graduated from the University of Miami. He was my oldest brother. And my sister Rita was graduated from Barry College in Miami, and she was a teacher all her life.

NOBLE: [00:05:16] So that's really quite remarkable. Five out of 10 graduating from college. So from this, I would assume that your parents saw the value of education and were encouraging.

WESSEL: [00:05:26] Yes, they were. We were Roman Catholic. We went to Roman Catholic school, grade school and high school.

NOBLE: [00:05:33] And college.

WESSEL: [00:05:34] Yeah, and college eventually. And we, you know, education was very important. My mother had an eighth grade education. My father had a high school, was a high school graduate, but had one year of college. He was construction, in the construction business. So it was upward bound sort of, you know, family. You know, we were, uh, I think my parents were very happy that we were doing well in school and so that we could go to college.

NOBLE: [00:06:12] They valued that. Yeah, that's great. So then you go to high school locally. Was it Catholic high school in Miami Beach?

WESSEL: [00:06:19] Saint Patrick's, right.

NOBLE: [00:06:20] Uh huh. And what did you do when you were in high school? What sort of extracurricular activities?

WESSEL: [00:06:25] Well, I played football and basketball and I was in choral and I, uh, I did all the things that were in at the time. And we, you know, we had a very nice high school. It was sort of an advanced type school. Uh, I would say probably a college prep type school, run by Dominican nuns from Adrian, Michigan, and very, very, um, on the line of college prep.

NOBLE: [00:07:04] Yes, yes. And I'm assuming that you had some kind of foreign language?

WESSEL: [00:07:12] We had Spanish. I had Spanish in high school and in college. But that didn't help me too much until I got to Colombia, when I learned it. I had to learn it.

NOBLE: [00:07:25] Yeah, but at least you had had some introduction.

WESSEL: [00:07:28] Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:07:29] The structure of the language starting back in high school. And so then you went on to college. And did you say you had a degree in chemistry?

WESSEL: [00:07:37] No, I had a degree in history and it was required, um, two sciences were required and my last course was chemistry.

NOBLE: [00:07:50] Oh, I see. OK.

WESSEL: [00:07:52] I had to actually go an extra semester because I thought I had everything put together, and then I realized I had to do one more course.

NOBLE: [00:08:02] So you were a history major?

WESSEL: [00:08:03] Yes, history major.

NOBLE: [00:08:05] And you continued studying Spanish.

WESSEL: [00:08:07] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:08:08] And was there a particular kind of history that you were focusing on, American?

WESSEL: [00:08:13] No, it was just a general history course. I was very much into sociology as well. That was my minor. And I think that the Jesuits had an emphasis on, Jesuits run Loyola, and they had an emphasis on community involvement and service work, you know. And I was part of the revolution that was going on with, for getting blacks the rights. I marched in parades with other Loyola students.

NOBLE: [00:08:53] So this is late '50s, very early '60s?

WESSEL: [00:08:56] Right before I went to the Peace Corps. The year before I went the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:08:59] So what you were involved in civil rights.

WESSEL: [00:09:02] Yeah, we were involved in civil rights. We went into a program where we were trained how to teach elderly black people to fill out the forms that were necessary for registration to vote. And it was very discriminatory. It was very discriminating. Even I had problems with the form when I first went to, but they helped me. They would not help black people in that group, at the counter, they had to know how to fill out the form when they got there.

NOBLE: [00:09:42] OK, so you taught people how to fill out the form.

WESSEL: [00:09:44] So we went to the, you know, the longshoremen's place, meeting place. And the people would come to us and we would teach them what they expected you to do on that form.

NOBLE: [00:10:00] That's right. They couldn't come in with a pre-filled form.

WESSEL: [00:10:04] Right.

NOBLE: [00:10:05] But they had to know what to do once they handed it to them.

WESSEL: [00:10:08] Right.

NOBLE: [00:10:09] Wonderful.

WESSEL: [00:10:10] So I was very much. There was a famous sociologist who was on Loyola's faculty, Joseph Victor SJ, and he really pushed us to try to get involved in that movement, in the rights movement, you know.

NOBLE: [00:10:31] So important.

WESSEL: [00:10:32] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:34] And did you do that in the summer, during the academic year or in the summertime?

WESSEL: [00:10:39] During the academic year, because that's when the elections were being held, you know, the primaries.

NOBLE: [00:10:45] Oh yes, of course. That's right.

WESSEL: [00:10:47] So it was leading up to the election of JFK.

NOBLE: [00:10:53] That's right. So you wanted to get all those voters registered. And then what did you do in the summers?

WESSEL: [00:11:01] In the summer, I worked at various jobs. I waited on tables. I bused tables. I was a cocktail waiter in a famous bar that a lot of Loyola students hung out at. And I also worked for WDSU TV as a switchboard operator, and I worked with J. Aron Company. They were importers of coffee and sugar. And I was a microfilm operator.

NOBLE: [00:11:40] Oh, wow.

WESSEL: [00:11:41] So I microfilmed all their documents for longevity.

NOBLE: [00:11:48] Yes, it was a skill that remained useful for a few years.

WESSEL: [00:11:51] Yeah, now it's completely useless. I don't think they have microfilm.

NOBLE: [00:12:01] Um, so let's see. Was the draft a factor then, back in '62?

WESSEL: [00:12:07] It was. At Loyola there was a requirement that you took ROTC for two years.

NOBLE: [00:12:15] No kidding. It was a requirement?

WESSEL: [00:12:17] Yeah, it was self-designed, you know, by the Jesuits. But um, I didn't. I didn't stay in it. And so I was eligible for draft. But you were given a dispensation or what they call it if you?

NOBLE: [00:12:39] A deferment.

WESSEL: [00:12:39] Oh yeah, until you got out. But in high school, I played high school football and I got my both knees split cartilages. And when I came out of the Peace Corps, a week after I got home, I was, uh, I got notice to show up for the draft.

NOBLE: [00:12:59] And they looked at your knees?

WESSEL: [00:13:00] They had a doctor and they looked at my knees and I was 4F. So I did a lot of mountain climbing in Colombia and it never bothered me. But they were concerned that it would be a problem.

NOBLE: [00:13:13] The first physical benefit of high school football that I have, of college football, that I've ever heard.

WESSEL: [00:13:18] That's right. Exactly. And now I'm paying for it because my knees are giving me very bad problems.

NOBLE: [00:13:26] Sorry, but you didn't have to go to Vietnam.

WESSEL: [00:13:29] Right, that was the big thing.

NOBLE: [00:13:31] So how did you become aware of the Peace Corps? You were.

WESSEL: [00:13:34] Well, I was a big fan of JFK and we had a group of us who were talking about things like, um, Tom Dooley was in Laos working. He was a doctor and he did, he sort of suspended his practice and spent several years in Laos helping the poor. And we thought that might be a possibility to do after college, you know? And then the Peace Corps came along and I, you know, took the test and made the application.

NOBLE: [00:14:16] On your application, did they ask you a question that was something like, do you have a particular part of the world that you would like to go to especially? Or did they ask you, is there any place you would not be willing to go?

WESSEL: [00:14:32] I don't remember. I don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:14:35] OK. So you didn't request Latin America?

WESSEL: [00:14:38] No. But I guess because I had Spanish, you know, two years of Spanish in college as well as two years in high school. I figured that was part of that.

NOBLE: [00:14:50] Yeah. Yeah. And so did you know, did you have friends who joined the Peace Corps? Did you do it together with some buddies?

WESSEL: [00:15:00] I did not know anybody that had even taken the test.

NOBLE: [00:15:06] And of course, in '62, you couldn't possibly have known anybody who has already come back because they were just first, still over there.

WESSEL: [00:15:14] Right. Yeah. I had actually, the Navy was recruiting one time at Loyola in my last year, and I, my brother, one of my older brothers was a Navy Air Cadet. I mean, he flew airplanes for the Navy. And so I thought that would be a great thing as an alternative if I don't get the Peace Corps. And they picked me up one Saturday morning and drove me over across the river to Algiers, to the Navy base. And the first thing they did was give me an eye test and I was red green colorblind, and they put me back in the car and took me back home because that was one thing you couldn't be, you couldn't do because.

NOBLE: [00:16:05] Pilot a plane.

WESSEL: [00:16:06] Right, pilot the plane. So, yeah, it was very interesting that that was the development. And then the last day I took my final exam, I got the invitation for the Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:16:24] So at that time, you were not married. You were single guy right out of college.

WESSEL: [00:16:30] Right.

NOBLE: [00:16:31] History major. So your invitation came the day you took your final exam of your last course. And then how much time before you had to show up for training?

WESSEL: [00:16:45] It wasn't much because I finished my last course in January and February 2nd, I believe, was the day I was supposed to be in Arizona at Arizona State University is where we trained.

NOBLE: [00:17:01] And that's what, Scotts, it's outside of Phoenix?

WESSEL: [00:17:03] Right outside of Phoenix, yeah, in Scottsdale. Right near Scottsdale.

NOBLE: [00:17:11] And so you just had to drop everything and go, but you were at an ending point of something anyway.

WESSEL: [00:17:18] Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:17:20] So that seems to be pretty good.

WESSEL: [00:17:21] It solved a lot of problems.

NOBLE: [00:17:22] And did you know at that point right away that it would you'd be training for Colombia? Or was it some unknown country?

NOBLE: [00:17:28] No, I think the telegram did include, you know, invited to training for program in Colombia for rural community development.

NOBLE: [00:17:44] Okay. So you knew which country it would be right from the beginning. And of course, you had to share this invitation with your family.

WESSEL: [00:17:54] Right.

NOBLE: [00:17:55] You were here in New Orleans and you received it, but you had to get the word to your family in Florida. So did you go home to tell them or did you call them on the phone or how? What was that like with your family?

WESSEL: [00:18:07] Well, that was interesting because I was very excited. I had two brothers here at the time. They were both in law school at the time. And this was very much very exciting, you know, that I got invited to go. And for them as well. And so I called up the family and told them down in Miami, and they thought it was great. My mother, you know, said, I wish I could go, you know, after having 10 kids. So yeah, so they were very positive about it. I have an older brother that was always a Republican, and he didn't think it was such a great idea.

NOBLE: [00:18:53] Was he the one who was in the Navy?

WESSEL: [00:18:54] No. No, he was, he lived in Miami. Oh, he worked for McCormick Spice Company. He was a representative for them.

NOBLE: [00:19:08] So one brother wasn't so supportive but other people were cheering you on.

WESSEL: [00:19:15] We still have an argument once in a while.

NOBLE: [00:19:19] And so you go up to, you get yourself somehow from. You must have gone home, right?

WESSEL: [00:19:23] Yeah, I went home to, you know, bring my, a lot of stuff from here to my home in Miami. And then from there I went to, um, Tempe, Arizona, is the name of it.

NOBLE: [00:19:44] And did Peace Corps fly you there, from Miami to Tempe?

WESSEL: [00:19:47] Yeah, and we changed planes in Atlanta. And one of the people on the seat next to me was Peace Corps volunteer, was going the same place.

NOBLE: [00:19:58] Same place. And was that your first time ever in an airplane?

WESSEL: [00:20:03] No, no. I had to flown. My sister worked for National Airlines at the time, and they flew between New Orleans and Miami, so I would get free passage once in a while, standby. Yeah, in college.

NOBLE: [00:20:22] That's cool. OK. So you're on your way to training in at the university, at Arizona State. And you know you're going to Colombia. But I'm thinking in 1962, you were not the very first group. There were others already in Colombia.

WESSEL: [00:20:41] One group was in Colombia.

NOBLE: [00:20:42] So you were Colombia II.

WESSEL: [00:20:43] We were in Colombia II.

NOBLE: [00:20:45] Do you remember first reporting to training? You had somebody with you that you had met on the plane. And then what was that like?

WESSEL: [00:20:53] And it turned out there were a number of us. There were a number of us on the plane or on another plane at the same time because they had a van that they picked us up in at the airport and they had, you know, signs where to go and all that. And so there were about 35 or 40 guys who were invited for training.

NOBLE: [00:21:20] All men?

WESSEL: [00:21:22] Right, right. So we all were arriving about the same time.

NOBLE: [00:21:26] And so they took you to a dorm?

WESSEL: [00:21:29] Yeah, they took us to a dorm. And, uh, it was a very interesting training program. I don't think they really knew what they were doing.

NOBLE: [00:21:41] That was so new.

WESSEL: [00:21:43] Right. They had done the same type of training with the first group, first group trained in Colombia, first troupe or group trained in, uh,

Colombia, the famous school in. What in the world is the neighborhood?
Outside of New York.

NOBLE: [00:22:13] Outside of New York?

WESSEL: [00:22:14] Just outside of New York.

NOBLE: [00:22:19] Cornell?

WESSEL: [00:22:19] Oh no, it wasn't Cornell, that's north. This is south. Where they had the Super Bowl?

NOBLE: [00:22:26] Oh, New Jersey, some place in New Jersey?

WESSEL: [00:22:28] New Jersey. Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:29] Yeah, that was where Colombia I went. It's interesting that they didn't send you right back there, because people already had gone through it once. But so what was it like? Did they give you a rigorous physical Outward Bound?

WESSEL: [00:22:48] Yes, very rigorous physical training. The first, one of the first things we did was we went, after the first day or two, we went to an Indian reservation and lived on an Indian reservation for about five days I would say. I don't think it was a full week, but it was, you know, almost full week. And we, and that may be why they switched it to Arizona rather than New Jersey. Because there was this access to the Indian reservation and a lot more Latinos in Arizona.

NOBLE: [00:23:30] That's right. So Southwest would make sense for a number of reasons.

WESSEL: [00:23:34] Right. And uh, that first week we just did. We walked, we sort of had a partner that we walked with on the reservation, and we asked people if there was anything that we could help with. We introduced ourselves as Peace Corps trainees and we would pick cotton or do anything. So there was, uh, it was an interesting experience that first

week. And then we went into a very physical, uh, not academic so much as physical. But we, of course, Spanish classes and history classes of Colombia.

NOBLE: [00:24:15] Yes. Yes.

WESSEL: [00:24:17] And uh, so the training period was for like six weeks, I would guess. And then we went to Puerto Rico.

NOBLE: [00:24:28] Oh, you did. For yet more physical challenges.

WESSEL: [00:24:31] Right.

NOBLE: [00:24:31] And language too.

WESSEL: [00:24:32] Yes, and language. A lot of emphasis on language in Puerto Rico and plus what they call, uh, rigorous, like Navy SEAL exercises. We learned how to belay from a mountain, how to climb a mountain, do mountain climbing and belay down. Those were sort of tests. They felt that they had to push us to, uh, make us make sure that we wouldn't crack under duress.

NOBLE: [00:25:13] In stressful situations.

WESSEL: [00:25:14] Right. And swim under underwater with our hands and feet tied. And the length, the double length of an Olympic sized pool, underwater in one.

NOBLE: [00:25:30] Without coming up?

WESSEL: [00:25:32] Without coming up. And it was, some people couldn't make it. Some people were dropped.

NOBLE: [00:25:37] And if they couldn't do that physical challenge, they'd be out? They would be deselected?

WESSEL: [00:25:41] Yeah, there were several that were dropped. Now we felt that they were dropped because they couldn't do the thing. But you know, there might have been other reasons as well. But yeah, it was very much a challenge, but it made, I think it made those of us who were, you know, somewhat athletically inclined. But, you know, never having to do anything like that, want to move on and make sure we did it, you know, make sure we accomplish that. And they took us out into the wilds in groups of three or four, and you had to find your way back with the help of maps and all that.

NOBLE: [00:26:25] Oh, yeah, yeah.

WESSEL: [00:26:25] And they gave us food to eat, you know, it was like a four-day trek. So Puerto Rico was an interesting, very interesting experience. And we trained, at that time there was another group going to Peru, and we trained with them and that had females in it. So that was a diversion. But it was a great experience. The training was great.

NOBLE: [00:26:51] And the language training, did you find that adequate?

WESSEL: [00:26:53] I found it adequate. It was, um, it was not. I don't think I really got it completely until I got into my building there. And I had to, you know, there was no one around that spoke English so. My site partner, of course, at first, but he spoke perfect Spanish because he was from McAllen, Texas, down on the border. And so he. So the challenge was to learn, you know, to just use it. Make mistakes.

NOBLE: [00:27:30] Sure. But back in, back during training, um, was the language taught conversationally or was there grammar analysis?

WESSEL: [00:27:44] No, it was grammar, mainly grammar and, um, tapes. We had to listen to tapes and.

NOBLE: [00:27:52] Language lab. Yeah, yeah.

WESSEL: [00:27:53] Yeah. Language lab.

NOBLE: [00:27:55] Um, did you have, who was teaching? Were they Colombians teaching you?

WESSEL: [00:27:59] Yes. Not Colombians, but Latinos, for sure. Yeah, it was a Latino woman who was in charge of the, um, from Arizona State.

NOBLE: [00:28:08] OK. But I suppose if you were being sent all over different parts of Colombia, having a language instructor from Colombia wouldn't necessarily make a difference.

WESSEL: [00:28:18] Right.

NOBLE: [00:28:18] The people on the coast speak different.

WESSEL: [00:28:22] Yeah. Very different. But Colombia is very proud of their language and the pronunciation. And so they are known as the most accurate Spanish speakers in all of Latin America. Right from Spain. That's what they claim anyway. Today, it might be different.

NOBLE: [00:28:47] So did you, during training, did you already know what part of Colombia you were going to?

WESSEL: [00:28:55] No. Just we got assigned at the very last minute. We got, after leaving Puerto Rico, we went to Colombia and we had two weeks in Bogota, where we had some, uh, training and we were assigned to a family, a very wealthy family. Am I getting ahead of the?

NOBLE: [00:29:21] Well, a little bit, but that's OK, because that's also sort of part of training, isn't it? Your orientation to the country?

WESSEL: [00:29:27] They assigned us to a family and the family was wealthy, very wealthy. All of the families were very wealthy. They wanted us to get exposed to that type of surrounding and also use Spanish, before we went out into the poorest country, parts of the country. And so to see the difference in living conditions and survival. And that was very good. And most of us had very nice families and continued to correspond with them way after the Peace Corps experience.

NOBLE: [00:30:05] So you learned that just because people are wealthy, they're not necessarily evil. You were being introduced to a variety of.

WESSEL: [00:30:13] They were basically very happy to have Peace Corps volunteers and many of the families had unattached females who were about our age. So that was a bonus.

NOBLE: [00:30:27] Better than Puerto Rico.

WESSEL: [00:30:30] And many of our group married Colombians.

NOBLE: [00:30:32] Did they?

WESSEL: [00:30:33] Yes, I would say maybe out of the 30 or so that ended up staying in the program, probably maybe 10 got married to Colombians.

NOBLE: [00:30:47] So about 30, um, out of 35 or 40?

WESSEL: [00:30:52] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:30:53] So you lost five or 10 out of.

WESSEL: [00:30:54] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:30:55] And so what did you all think about that deselection process? Did it seem fair to you or were there some people who were upset that, um, some colleagues were disappearing?

NOBLE: [00:31:10] Um, we were sort of surprised at some people, especially a couple who were very good at Spanish. You know, as opposed to some of us who really struggled in Spanish. But um, it was interesting. They gave us a psychiatric session.

NOBLE: [00:31:30] Just one interview with a shrink?

WESSEL: [00:31:34] Yeah, yeah. And um, this is a side light. The person who was in charge of the whole.

NOBLE: [00:31:43] The whole Peace Corps?

WESSEL: [00:31:46] Yeah, he came to Arizona and he interviewed every one of the volunteers. And you know, uh, well. You know, word, as soon as some people came out, they said, don't forget to do this, don't forget that. One of the things they said, don't forget to say something about sex, because for some reason.

NOBLE: [00:32:17] Don't bring it up?

WESSEL: [00:32:18] Yeah, do bring it up. Bring it up so that they know you're a normal person.

NOBLE: [00:32:24] So did you sense that they were weeding out homosexuals?

WESSEL: [00:32:28] I don't think so. I don't think they had any intention. I think that was just made up by the volunteer you know. But the interesting thing is some, the doctor who was in charge of the whole thing, his son married my niece.

NOBLE: [00:32:46] Oh my goodness.

WESSEL: [00:32:48] Right. He was good friends with the Kennedy family, especially Sarge Shriver. And he lives in Connecticut now. I've met him many times and his, but his son, yeah, married my brother's daughter.

NOBLE: [00:33:05] And would they have met had it not been for you?

WESSEL: [00:33:08] No, no. They met independently, and one day I was at the market and my niece came up and said, I want you to meet someone. His father was the doctor for the Peace Corps back in the Kennedy years.

NOBLE: [00:33:20] And you said, well, I know him.

WESSEL: [00:33:21] Right, right. So he was on that recent program as a matter of fact that Tom Brokaw had done on TV. He had a conversation, Tom Brokaw had a conversation with that doctor. So that was a very strange mix that came about years later.

NOBLE: [00:33:46] So you had mentioned that people had, that everyone had to be also interviewed by a psychologist. That was a, you had a different interview, right?

WESSEL: [00:33:55] No, I think it was part of the same, the same thing, but it was mainly in Arizona. I don't remember anything further.

NOBLE: [00:34:06] Not later. They weeded some off right there.

WESSEL: [00:34:06] Yeah, either in Puerto Rico or in Bogota before we went to our villages.

NOBLE: [00:34:11] So six weeks in Arizona, more or less. And then yet how many in?

WESSEL: [00:34:17] And probably I think it was at least two weeks, but I'm pretty. It might have been a month. I can't remember whether it was a month or not.

NOBLE: [00:34:27] And then another two weeks in, um.

WESSEL: [00:34:29] Another two weeks in Bogota, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:34:31] Between, um, I'm trying to think when you said goodbye to your family before you went to training. After training was over, was there another opportunity to go home and do more shopping?

WESSEL: [00:34:46] Yes, they sent us all home to pick up whatever we needed? And for a week of possible relaxation. And then a group of us flew out of Miami and a group flew out of New York. And we met in Puerto Rico and then in Puerto Rico we had a charter plane to go to Colombia.

NOBLE: [00:35:14] OK. Was that the training part of Puerto Rico? Or were you back in Puerto Rico now the second time, just as a?

WESSEL: [00:35:20] No, no, that was training part.

NOBLE: [00:35:22] Oh OK. So after you did that incredibly physical challenging thing in Puerto Rico, from there you went straight to Colombia.

WESSEL: [00:35:31] Right. And I might point out that Colombia has three mountain ranges and they have a Caribbean coast and a Pacific coast, but there's not much water or otherwise to go swimming in or anything.

NOBLE: [00:35:50] So it becomes clear that the reason for doing this was sort of a.

WESSEL: [00:35:56] A test.

NOBLE: [00:35:56] A psychological test. Could you make it? And was your body strong enough to handle whatever? So at some point there must have been a swearing in ceremony. Maybe in Puerto Rico, maybe in Arizona, maybe in Bogota. Do you remember standing up and raising your right hand?

WESSEL: [00:36:13] And I think we might have done that. Sarge Shriver came to Arizona, to Arizona State, for our graduation.

NOBLE: [00:36:22] OK, so that must have been the ceremony.

WESSEL: [00:36:23] Yeah. And actually, I had the honor of presenting him with a basket that was made by the Indians that we had visited and stayed with. And so that was a great memory for me. Not perhaps not for anybody else.

NOBLE: [00:36:43] Oh, about how very special.

WESSEL: [00:36:48] Yeah. So I'm pretty sure we did to have a swearing in perhaps at, uh.

NOBLE: [00:36:54] Maybe it was in Arizona. Although then if they were going to do a final weeding out of people in Puerto Rico, maybe even some of those people.

WESSEL: [00:37:02] Yeah, maybe that's true. It could have been in Bogota too. I really don't know. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:37:10] Anything else you want to say about training before we really dig into life in Colombia?

WESSEL: [00:37:15] Well, the only thing that I could say was when we were in training, we were in a big group of. A big group in the auditorium. And we were having a discussion on how training was going and how, you know, what. And it happened that the director of the Colombia project, the Peace Corps director of the Columbia project, came to introduce himself and to get to know some of us. But at that very time, two Peace Corps volunteers were killed in an airplane wreck on their way from Cali to Buenaventura.

NOBLE: [00:38:10] Right within Columbia?

WESSEL: [00:38:11] In Colombia, yeah. And so that was a big upset that we were exposed to. They were on a regular commercial flight and it went down and in a, you know, very thickly unpopulated area of Colombia. And they named the two camp sites in Puerto Rico after those two volunteers. They were the first to be killed.

NOBLE: [00:38:40] First Peace Corps casualties.

WESSEL: [00:38:42] Yeah. But um, I can't remember their names now, but I've known their names for years. But at any rate, so that was an interesting part of our training and our exposure to what we were facing before we ever got there. What we faced when we got there was completely different, I think, you know.

NOBLE: [00:39:05] Maybe not what you anticipated.

WESSEL: [00:39:06] Right, right, right. We didn't know what to anticipate, actually, because of the mix of the type of training we were getting, etcetera.

NOBLE: [00:39:16] So the day came when you're done with Puerto Rico and you all pile on, you probably all 30 of you piled onto a charter plane that took you from Puerto Rico, nonstop maybe to Bogota.

WESSEL: [00:39:29] Nonstop, uh huh. And we arrived at Bogota, and we went and stayed in, bussed to a dormitory for one of the universities.

NOBLE: [00:39:43] And what time of year was it? What month of the year was this?

WESSEL: [00:39:47] It was, I would say. We went into training in February. By the time this, you know, was two months later, three months later. So we were in the middle of summer here, or in the beginning of summer, and down there it was winter. It was still very, it was very cold in Bogota. But of course, Bogota.

NOBLE: [00:40:13] The altitude.

WESSEL: [00:40:14] Yeah, the altitude. And I remember wearing a topcoat I brought with me, you know, and all that. And there are pictures of us, you know, and everybody had these coats.

NOBLE: [00:40:26] Bundled up.

WESSEL: [00:40:26] Yeah, bundled up.

NOBLE: [00:40:28] But you must have been told. And prepared for seasonal changes.

WESSEL: [00:40:30] Yeah, right. And we did training at the Jesuit university in Bogota. And now I'm trying to think of the name of it. And a very famous Jesuit priest gave most of the talks about Colombia and about what was happening in Colombia, because it was this big division between the conservatives and the democrats. And yeah, anyway.

NOBLE: [00:41:06] And did he speak to you in Spanish or?

WESSEL: [00:41:08] He spoke to us in English mainly. He happened to be a very good friend of my sociology teacher at Loyola, because they were both Jesuits. And he was a sociologist as well as my Loyola teacher. So I had a chance to talk to him about that. And, you know, and it was. And he eventually went and joined the one of the groups that were protesting the government and he was killed in that.

NOBLE: [00:41:46] Oh my.

WESSEL: [00:41:47] Under those circumstances, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:41:48] While you were a volunteer there?

WESSEL: [00:41:50] No, no. It was years later. Years later.

NOBLE: [00:41:54] So you arrive in Bogota and you're placed with a family that was quite comfortable.

WESSEL: [00:42:03] Yeah. Comfortable accommodations, you know, after that first few days in the dormitory.

NOBLE: [00:42:10] And then you'd come together during the daytime in university classrooms or something?

WESSEL: [00:42:15] And the Jesuit university there. I forget what the name of that university is, but probably something like Colombian Jesuit University.

NOBLE: [00:42:23] Yeah, but in Spanish.

WESSEL: [00:42:25] Yeah, right.

NOBLE: [00:42:27] Gee whiz, do you remember who the country director was of Peace Corps at that time?

WESSEL: [00:42:33] Yeah, it was. I'm trying to think, um.

NOBLE: [00:42:39] Names are awful hard.

WESSEL: [00:42:42] Yeah, and I should know this name because, uh, Chris Sheldon was his name. Chris Sheldon. And Chris Sheldon was portrayed in a movie called the, uh. I forget what the name of the movie was, but he had a boat that he took his son and a bunch of other kids in, a sailboat, and they did a summer of tutoring, et cetera, and they ran into a storm. It was called, the movie was called something like The Something Storm [White Squall]. And he lost the boat and he was one of, one or two or three survivors.

NOBLE: [00:43:26] Oh my. And he had some of his children with him.

WESSEL: [00:43:28] Yeah. And his son died.

NOBLE: [00:43:29] Oh, how do you live with that?

WESSEL: [00:43:31] Yeah, right. And he was, uh, yeah. But Chris was quite an interesting guy and very low keyed. And then there was another. CARE was our co-sponsor of our group, you know, and so they were, they supported Peace Corps by supplying a certain amount of money and, you know, food and stuff like that. They sent food to Colombia, and they sent the food to drive through to Peace Corps sites.

NOBLE: [00:44:11] So then you would distribute it?

WESSEL: [00:44:14] With the Department of Health.

NOBLE: [00:44:15] Yeah, yeah, OK. So at some point, this is two weeks or so, right, in Bogota?

WESSEL: [00:44:24] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:44:24] And then your whole group splits up?

WESSEL: [00:44:26] Splits up and are assigned to a Columbia I volunteer. So we all went to a site where there was a Colombian I volunteer and we lived with them. They had made arrangements so that there was, that whoever was going to get a volunteer had another room. Or accommodations, two people in one room.

NOBLE: [00:44:48] That's right. So by the time you arrived at your site, the member of Colombia I had been there already for how long?

WESSEL: [00:44:59] Six months. At least six months.

NOBLE: [00:45:02] So then you were going to overlap for at least a year, maybe a year and a half you'd be together.

WESSEL: [00:45:08] Right.

NOBLE: [00:45:08] With the other person being sort of the senior more experienced one by a few months?

WESSEL: [00:45:12] Right. But my. The big problem there was that he was from McAllen, Texas, and he spoke Spanish perfectly. And so nobody ever talked to me in my village because they knew he could speak Spanish and I was just sort of learning. So I became very frustrated. But by only a few months later, I had a terrible case of tonsillitis and they had to remove my tonsils. So I was in the hospital for a few days.

NOBLE: [00:45:46] Back in Bogota?

WESSEL: [00:45:48] In Bogota, yeah. And the Peace Corps director came and saw me and he asked me how things were going. And I said, you know, I feel like I'm not accomplishing very much because my partner, who is a very nice guy and we're still friends, speaks Spanish perfectly and etcetera. And so I said, I think I need to change. So I moved from a nice, pleasant, calm, tropical place.

NOBLE: [00:46:24] Which was what, if it was tropical it was near the water?

WESSEL: [00:46:26] Tropical. It was down south, in the south of Colombia, to the mountainous part and very cold, very cold. But I went, I was transferred with another fellow who had, didn't have the same problem, but wanted to change. And so the two of us were assigned to this village called El Carmen de Viboral.

NOBLE: [00:46:50] Ah, El Carmen?

WESSEL: [00:46:53] El Carmen de Viboral, which is like three words. So the Carmen of the snake pit. When it was founded, the village was founded and, of course, there was a great Catholic influence, priest, et cetera. And they wanted to name it El Carmen. But because of these, they had lots of snakes in the area. And so they named it El Carmen de Viboral.

NOBLE: [00:47:27] They got it all in there.

WESSEL: [00:47:28] Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:47:28] But there had never been a Peace Corps volunteer there before.

WESSEL: [00:47:32] No, there was a couple. There was a guy and he had gotten married.

NOBLE: [00:47:38] To a Colombian?

WESSEL: [00:47:40] No, to an American.

NOBLE: [00:47:41] So now there were four of you.

WESSEL: [00:47:44] Yeah. No, they were moving and that's why they were sent us. So I went from the, you know, plains to the mountains. And very overcast most of the year. Very, very cold climate. But I just, you know.

NOBLE: [00:48:01] And it was cold all year long?

WESSEL: [00:48:03] Yeah, pretty much so. There were some nice spring days, you know, part of the year. But you know, basically it was pretty cold.

NOBLE: [00:48:13] And here you are, a Florida Miami Beach boy and then you're up in cold mountains.

WESSEL: [00:48:22] It was, yeah, the climate where I went to eventually to El Carmen was more like the winters of New Orleans.

NOBLE: [00:48:32] And it can be quite chilly.

WESSEL: [00:48:34] Yeah, overcast and cold.

NOBLE: [00:48:35] And I'd like to just interrupt the interview to tell the listener that it is February 4th here in New Orleans.

WESSEL: [00:48:45] You're shivering.

NOBLE: [00:48:45] It's darn cold.

WESSEL: [00:48:48] New Orleans is shivering, and that only means it's 40 or 50 degrees here.

NOBLE: [00:48:57] So where, were you living with a family or were you living on a what?

WESSEL: [00:49:04] We rented a little, like a little house. You know, the houses are built all together, you know, in a block.

NOBLE: [00:49:11] In the village.

WESSEL: [00:49:12] You know, there's a wall separating one house from another.

NOBLE: [00:49:16] OK. They're all attached.

WESSEL: [00:49:19] Like the French Quarter here, you know?

NOBLE: [00:49:22] Are they two stories or are they single story?

WESSEL: [00:49:24] Mostly one story and very Spanish style. But we had, we found a place. We lived for very short while in the place where the previous volunteers lived. And one of the previous volunteers was in our group, but he was made. The reason he moved, he was made, what are they? A leader, which meant he went around to all of the groups in the state that, you know, that had a Peace Corps volunteer. They call them states. I mean, we call it states, but it was that. Anyway. And the other guy got married and so he was going into another group where there were married couples that had recently come to Colombia.

NOBLE: [00:50:20] Yeah. Yeah.

WESSEL: [00:50:21] So they lived in a place and we didn't particularly care for it. So we started looking around right away and we found another smaller, smaller place that had two bedrooms.

NOBLE: [00:50:35] So Peace Corps didn't find this for you. You shopped around on your own and you negotiated. And you're expected to pay for that out of your Peace Corps allowance?

WESSEL: [00:50:45] That's right. Right. And that was a hundred dollars a month at that time.

NOBLE: [00:50:51] The equivalent of a hundred dollars?

WESSEL: [00:50:53] Yeah, equivalent of a hundred dollars a month. And yeah, it was in pesos, in Colombian pesos. And it was adequate, plenty adequate. We always, we would be able to save a little so that we could, you know, when we gathered enough time, we could go on little trips and what have you.

NOBLE: [00:51:12] You lived frugally.

WESSEL: [00:51:14] Yeah, right. And it was very inexpensive to live.

NOBLE: [00:51:18] Yeah. You did your own shopping, your own cooking, you cooked for yourselves?

WESSEL: [00:51:21] I cooked. Yeah, I knew how to cook. So my partner and I lived together and I did most of the cooking. And then he left. He got sick. They tried to find out, but they finally sent them back to the States, here to New Orleans actually. There used to be a public, a United States public hospital here. And he stayed here for a few months and then they sent him to Washington. And I'm still in touch with him. But he had a psychological problem, I believe, and that was part of the problem. All of us had something go wrong while we were in Colombia. You know, I had a bout with some, you know, respiratory problems. But then they got, they cleared it up and, you know, no problem.

NOBLE: [00:52:13] So you're living, your little house then, like that first one, was it also attached to other houses on either side?

WESSEL: [00:52:21] Yeah, it was, right. And this, very often in Colombia, they have the central patio type house, whereas all the rooms open onto the patio. Well, the house we moved into was, that we rented, found and rented. It was more like an apartment. Had two bedrooms and had a little place for a kitchen and an outside bathroom with a shower.

NOBLE: [00:52:58] Oh, that's nice.

WESSEL: [00:52:59] You know, a shower, but there was no doors or anything like that. So I mean, there were two guys. So no problem. And then they had this little walk-up thing that was, I guess it was that people would go up there and just sit and enjoy the view.

NOBLE: [00:53:17] Sit on the roof?

WESSEL: [00:53:18] Yeah, it had a cover. It had a like a, um, what do they call these things that they put outside made out of wood, you know? They were like an umbrella type thing, but only made out of wood and had a roof so you could sit out in the open air. But it wasn't closed.

NOBLE: [00:53:39] And the word is escaping me too, but I know what you mean.

WESSEL: [00:53:40] Yeah. And so, uh, we hardly ever used that. But we, in spite of the fact that there were only three rooms, there was a room that we used for reading and listening to music, etc., once we got some music. But we had this little kitchen and we had a Bunsen burner and you know, something, you know, very primitive type.

NOBLE: [00:54:14] Like a camp stove or something.

WESSEL: [00:54:16] We tried, yeah, camp stove. That's what exactly what it was. But we made do.

NOBLE: [00:54:23] Did you have running water?

WESSEL: [00:54:25] We did have running water for the kitchen, and for the shower.

NOBLE: [00:54:30] And did you drink it? Oh, and you had a toilet too?

WESSEL: [00:54:33] Yeah, no. We had to boil the water. We had to boil the water. And even though the natives all drank the water, they told us, make sure you boil the water. And we had, well, of course, Colombia was famous for their beer, so we drank a lot of beer.

NOBLE: [00:54:55] Yeah, no worries about having to boil that.

WESSEL: [00:54:59] That's right. And that was one thing we didn't have to worry about. But so and it was right near the center of town, the central plaza, down about half a block away. And it was, it accommodated us very well. I stayed and I lost my partner. They tried to bring in other people, see if they wanted to stay in that. I don't know. They had more of a decision, the people that followed us, than we did. We were sent to, you know, a place and we were there until, you know, something serious came up that we transferred.

NOBLE: [00:55:35] But you spent the rest of your two years there?

WESSEL: [00:55:37] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:55:38] And did you get lonely when your partner was called away?

WESSEL: [00:55:43] Somewhat.

NOBLE: [00:55:44] But the rest of the time, you were alone there?

WESSEL: [00:55:47] Not so much. Um, we had two and a half days a month, as I recall, for free time. So at least once a month, we go into Medellin, the capital of Antioquia, which is the department that we were in, the state, and we would see other Peace Corps volunteers then. Once in a while, Peace Corps volunteer would come out and visit us. You know, another Peace Corps volunteer in another village. I didn't do that very often, but a lot of, a number of people came to my village. And sometimes several would come. And then we'd have a party with some Colombian, with the comments, in our little house. But, you know, just drinking beer and getting to know you and all that stuff.

NOBLE: [00:56:39] So how long a journey was it from El Carmen? How do you say it?

WESSEL: [00:56:44] De Viboral.

NOBLE: [00:56:45] De Vivoral.

WESSEL: [00:56:45] It's with a B. In Spanish, they say B.

NOBLE: [00:56:51] Yeah. And how long did it take you to get from your village into Medellin?

WESSEL: [00:56:55] Ok, took about, on a *collectivo*, which is a bus, an old United States school bus, made into open air type thing where you get on and you slide down to the other side and people follow you.

NOBLE: [00:57:14] Was it still yellow on the outside?

WESSEL: [00:57:16] A lot of them were, but many of them were painted. And then they, uh, you know, I was way up high and Medellin was way down in the valley. And so it was very treacherous.

NOBLE: [00:57:30] That's what you mean by sliding down.

WESSEL: [00:57:32] Oh yeah, it was lots of crosses on the way down.

NOBLE: [00:57:35] Meaning deaths where somebody died?

WESSEL: [00:57:37] Yeah, in an accident. Yeah. And so, but uh, and it took about an hour, maybe an hour and a half to get from my village to, in one of those. It was, um. And you know, it wasn't expensive at all, you know, and there was a village in between that where they had, was a larger village. And that is where I would go often to get like meat and things like that, you know, to cook. Because they didn't always have meat in my village.

NOBLE: [00:58:17] Yeah. Uh huh.

WESSEL: [00:58:18] But um, it was not difficult. I mean, that little town was only maybe 15 minutes away, you know, so you could get a *collectivo*.

NOBLE: [00:58:31] You didn't have a bicycle or motorcycle?

WESSEL: [00:58:34] No. In the middle of my stay, someone in Minnesota or someplace donated a bunch of, um, trail bikes and they sent me one, a trail bike. Because I had the roads that I could hop to my, the little villages where I worked.

NOBLE: [00:58:58] Which we'll talk about in a little while.

WESSEL: [00:59:01] And so I had one of those. But I had a horse and that's why.

NOBLE: [00:59:11] Oh, you had a horse.

WESSEL: [00:59:12] Yes, I had a horse. His name was Tarzan. I was inherited it from the previous volunteer that was there. And he, uh. But you could rent

a horse, too. There were horses that someone could, you know, if you wanted to go out into the boondocks, as we called it. But I mean, it was like, you know, a group of people living in a way out.

NOBLE: [00:59:40] Very isolated.

WESSEL: [00:59:41] Right. But I had this, and this was probably the last year of my service. I had this little motor scooter or motorbike. So I could get into the next town. But I rarely, if ever, I don't remember ever taking it to Medellin because that was pretty much further trip and then you have to have someplace to secure it.

NOBLE: [01:00:11] That's right. That's right. But if you have a horse, you have to have some place to park your horse. And you have to feed the horse.

WESSEL: [01:00:18] Yeah, I had to rent a little place to leave the horse that he could roam around. And then there was a little kid that came and visited us a lot. And I'd, you know, ask him if he would like to take the feed out, to feed him on a regular basis. And then I'd pay them, you know, a little bit. And uh, this was more than he'd ever get, you know, at home. Or, I mean, it's very poor, poor situation. And so he would, he would help out with that. But then I once in a while, I'd have to go out, you know, I'd go out and look at the horse, and I said, this horse isn't eating. And I was thinking that maybe the food wasn't getting to him. But uh, but he survived, you know? When I left, they took the horse and sold it. They did not put in a new volunteer in my village.

NOBLE: [01:01:18] I was going to ask you. So the expense of maintaining that horse, paying the kid to watch the horse and buying the food, would have also come out of your hundred dollars a month living allowance?

WESSEL: [01:01:31] Right.

NOBLE: [01:01:31] Yeah, yeah. And I'm still trying to get a picture of your house. Did you have, we didn't talk about electricity. Did you have a light bulb in there?

WESSEL: [01:01:39] There was electricity for two hours on Wednesdays. So if you wanted, and then they expanded it to more days, I can't remember how many days, but we used a lot of candlelight and oil lanterns. But the center, the center of town where the plaza was, where the church was and then the government offices. And then there were a few saloons, you know, like drinking places and food places. Only two perhaps in the whole village. And so on the nights we didn't have, uh, we didn't have electricity and we didn't want to stay in, we'd go down to the canteens and, you know, have a drink with the people. Well, that's what we're supposed to be doing anyway.

NOBLE: [01:02:49] That's right, socialize with the people.

WESSEL: [01:02:51] We were, yeah, supposed to get to know these people. And they had a drink called aguardiente, which is like a what you might say, firewater. And it was pure alcohol. You know, it was like taking a bottle of alcohol you used on your skin. And they always wanted to challenge you to, you know, drink that stuff. It was awful, but they are very. [tape break]

NOBLE: [01:03:26] We were talking about, um, going into town to socialize and one of the reasons that made it, um, an attractive option is that you didn't have electricity at home except for a couple of hours on Wednesdays. And before we get back into the bar and the aguardiente and the rum, I just want to finish getting a handle of your living arrangements. You're living in this house. And it was more like an apartment. What was it made of? Was it wooden? Was it brick?

WESSEL: [01:03:57] It was made out of brick. And it was, uh, it was pretty primitive, but made of brick and mortar. It was not, um, the floor was tile floor, you know? There were two industries in town, small industries. They made inexpensive dinnerware, ceramic dinnerware, which were sold in the five and ten type stores in Colombia. And that was the one and only big industry in the town.

NOBLE: [01:04:45] And could you bake in it or was there some danger of the lead or whatever in the glaze?

WESSEL: [01:04:52] Yeah, no, I don't think so. I think, yeah, there was a caution that we had to take.

NOBLE: [01:04:58] Did you have an oven?

WESSEL: [01:05:02] I did. I bought an oven. It was a very interesting contraption. It was like, oh, something, I guess maybe you might find out in a campsite. A metal square or metal frame thing and it had a wire at the bottom of it I believe that, you know, got electricity. So at the one time when we had electricity, I could cook in it.

NOBLE: [01:05:35] You'd have to really plan ahead.

WESSEL: [01:05:36] Yeah, right, right. But we did have a burner, a Bunsen burner type camp stove that we could cook in other times, you know, but like if I bought a little piece of roast or something like that, like roast beef, I could cook it in the oven.

NOBLE: [01:05:57] And then without electricity, you mentioned music eventually, but without. So you would have had a battery operated record player or?

WESSEL: [01:06:09] No, no, I had. I got it. Once we got electricity, probably by the second year we were there, we got electricity. And electricity on a more regular basis, but not full time. I think we got it on every day of the week, every night of the week, it went on a certain time at night. And then I could, I bought a little record player.

NOBLE: [01:06:47] Had you brought records from home or were you listening to local?

WESSEL: [01:06:50] I asked my brother, a brother here. I had some records here in New Orleans in his apartment. And so he sent me them. It took it took forever to get here, but he sent them to me. And then there was, um, when you went to Medellin, there were. Medellin was a pretty cosmopolitan city. And they had some, uh, some places where they sold records, you know, I suppose, especially Spanish, Latin.

NOBLE: [01:07:23] Yeah. So did you get into Colombian music?

WESSEL: [01:07:26] Uh, yeah, pretty much, because.

NOBLE: [01:07:27] Dancing the cumbia?

WESSEL: [01:07:28] Yeah, the cumbia. Oh yeah, we were big in cumbia and we were also, uh, whenever there was festivals, there was a lot of dancing in Colombia, you know, the festival. Whether they were church oriented or otherwise, you know, there was dancing and everyone there, very happy people, you know, very happy go lucky people, you know, they love. Their famous expression was "*puente*," which meant that a national holiday arrived on a Thursday or Friday, and then you had the whole weekend and they'd call it a bridge. *Puente* means bridge. And so you took advantage of the holiday to combine it with the weekend.

NOBLE: [01:08:21] Sure, I can just imagine that if it was a holiday on the Thursday, then why on earth would you even think about going to work on Friday?

WESSEL: [01:08:29] Exactly. Very much like New Orleans.

NOBLE: [01:08:35] And you talked about reading a little bit. You mentioned reading. Did Peace Corps provide you with a book locker?

WESSEL: [01:08:43] They did. They did give us a whole locker of books.

NOBLE: [01:08:49] Today, you know, they don't do that. Can you describe what a book locker was and what was in it?

WESSEL: [01:08:53] It was like a regular, uh, you know? Two feet high, maybe two feet high and four feet long. You know, like they do in the army. And they send you a whole thing of books from, you know, any kind. Romance novels or, you know, the whole gamut. A dictionary was in it. And you know, a number of things. You might have brought some books with you too. But um, Medellin is the second largest city in the country, and it had a lot of bookstores and some in English and some, you know, a lot more in Spanish. So that was available to us. And the interesting part about one of

my, one of my most enduring and important projects in my village was a town library. They never had a town library and there was a group of women who wanted to establish one. The idea of our, when we were in the Peace Corps, was that you went in and you got to know the people and then you try to get people to get together and decide what they wanted for their community.

NOBLE: [01:10:25] Yes.

WESSEL: [01:10:26] And there was a group of women who wanted a library. And so we would meet once a week and we would discuss how we're going to implement this library. And we got a library eventually, with the help of. A lot of people from the village gave books. A lot of people that had left the village and lived in Bogota or Medellin or what have you, had sent books to our group, our library group. And I, of course, had to learn the Dewey Decimal System in college.

NOBLE: [01:11:06] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you had an idea of that.

WESSEL: [01:11:09] And so we tried to set it up the same way. And eventually we collected over five hundred books and we opened the library. The priest gave us a little room next to the church that we could use.

NOBLE: [01:11:27] You didn't have to rent the space?

WESSEL: [01:11:29] No, we didn't.

NOBLE: [01:11:30] Just fix it up a little bit maybe?

WESSEL: [01:11:31] Right. So yeah, it was. We just had to get some chairs and some shelving and things like that.

NOBLE: [01:11:37] And were those donated? Did people build the shelves?

WESSEL: [01:11:38] Yeah, basically donated labor. Yeah, right. And we got the library set up not too long before I was about ready to leave. And we finally got it done. But we got a lot of help from the Pan-American Union.

They supplied us with books and they supplied us with sources for books and. The Pan-American. What did they call it, Pan-American? I don't think it's any longer in existence, but Pan-American something. League? Anyway, it was a United States effort to work with Latin American countries in this hemisphere. Anyway.

NOBLE: [01:12:26] And did you have to have a staff person who would be trained and keep the bookshelves in order?

WESSEL: [01:12:34] Oh yeah, no, that was completely volunteer. The women that were on the committee, right? So and it was rather successful, and the priest was very much in favor of it. He donated the room for the. He wasn't always that favorable about things we did. But that one he did. And well, there are so many women. They were all women, but they were my age. They were graduates from the *collego*, the high school. Women and nuns taught it. And so. And we had, you know, quite a group. We had a lot of fun.

NOBLE: [01:13:18] Now how did you get that going? How did you find the people? How did you identify which people you would sit down with and start organizing this library?

WESSEL: [01:13:31] We had a, uh, our connection was with the Department of Health. So we worked with the people that were sent out here as extension workers like, to work in villages like ours, to establish health programs, you know, teach people how to, you know, make, you know, utilize what's available to them as well as, whatever, you know, the health questions, help answer health questions, programs, etc. Anyway, so I went. So my Colombian co-partner was from the Department of Health.

NOBLE: [01:14:20] So you did. You had a Colombian counterpart.

WESSEL: [01:14:23] Yeah, yeah. And he was, you know, it was an off and on relationship because he had much more work to do that was more, not hands-on, you know.

NOBLE: [01:14:36] And did he live in El Carmen?

WESSEL: [01:14:38] Yeah, he did. He did live in El Carmen, but he was gone quite a bit. But anyway, then they had volunteers. And these were the women that volunteered for the health department. And they, I got to know them.

NOBLE: [01:14:53] And then they were the ones who came up with this idea.

WESSEL: [01:14:56] Yeah, they came up with the idea. We want a library. And we have meetings and then Barry and I would cook something, you know, for them, something that they are not familiar with. Like spaghetti and meatballs. And they loved it, you know, because they had never had that. You know, I can't think of any.

NOBLE: [01:15:20] Well, what would have been the typical diet of people living in your village?

WESSEL: [01:15:24] Well, yucca is a big, that's a root. And that is like a, what do they call them, red potato? What is red potato?

NOBLE: [01:15:41] A yam?

WESSEL: [01:15:45] A yam, yeah. It's like a yam, but lighter in texture.

NOBLE: [01:15:49] Yeah, could it also be sometimes called manioc or cassava?

WESSEL: [01:15:55] Maniac is a little tougher.

NOBLE: [01:15:57] Is it?

WESSEL: [01:15:58] Yeah. Cassava? I can't remember.

NOBLE: [01:16:03] It's a white tuber.

WESSEL: [01:16:06] Yeah, right.

NOBLE: [01:16:08] We ate that in Nigeria, and I think I've heard people say that yucca is something like what you were eating across the sea, which doesn't have a lot of nutritional value.

WESSEL: [01:16:17] No, no, no, no. Potatoes were farmed. Tomatoes were farmed. And a number of vegetables. So I'm trying to think. A lot of soup. You know, soup was a very popular thing.

NOBLE: [01:16:35] Onion? Garlic.

WESSEL: [01:16:36] Yeah. Or chicken. But you know, one chicken for a lot of soup. And then, um, so chicken was made and then they might serve the chicken separately. And yucca as the main dish, and the soup was extra. But it was.

NOBLE: [01:17:01] And the yucca would be sliced or mashed or?

WESSEL: [01:17:04] No, you know, it would in many, many ways, many ways. But very often it was in pieces and very often in soup. Rice was very, very, very popular. Rice was very popular. And um, let me think about what else? It's a long time ago.

NOBLE: [01:17:29] Anything green?

WESSEL: [01:17:31] Uh, not much. Not very much at all. Um, I can't remember any spinach being grown or lettuce or anything like that. That is a very tough product to grow. I mean, you know.

NOBLE: [01:17:48] Oh, lettuce?

WESSEL: [01:17:49] Yeah, we don't even grow it here I don't think. I think it's too hot. I think you have to have, you know, California weather.

NOBLE: [01:17:59] We grow it in Wisconsin.

WESSEL: [01:18:01] Oh, yeah, in Wisconsin, probably. Yeah. Um, but yeah, the food was really one of the biggest drawbacks, and that's why we resorted to, I

resorted to, you know, cooking myself. There was like a hostel in my village where they called it a hotel, but it was hardly a hotel. But it was, you know, they had, the main dish was chicken soup, you know, and very little parts of chicken, mostly broth.

NOBLE: [01:18:38] So to keep yourself healthy, you would go and purchase some kind of meat maybe?

WESSEL: [01:18:44] Fruit and vegetables from the market, they had market every Saturday. So people brought in stuff from the farms surrounding the people. So you could buy. And then in this little village that was close by, a larger village than mine. A famous village too, Rionegro it was called. Black River. Famous in history of Colombia. But anyway, they had not only a butcher, but they had a much, much better market, farmer's market. So you could go in there. So you know, it was, uh.

NOBLE: [01:19:37] So did you see yourself as, um, trying to expand the choices that people would make when they're shopping to get more healthier food?

WESSEL: [01:19:51] Yeah. One, uh, yeah. We were, like we had gone out into a very rural village, rural area. We call anything that was outside of our village rural. The village wasn't much more, but they were clustered together. I mean, my village was clustered. There were ten thousand people in my village.

NOBLE: [01:20:16] Oh, wow.

WESSEL: [01:20:17] Yeah, so it was spread out pretty much. But outside of that, you know, everything was, you know, just groups of people that had settled outside due to farming land and survive. And so we had a tomato co-op that we had grown, that we started, with some farmers that, you know, were interested in growing tomatoes.

NOBLE: [01:20:43] So they hadn't grown tomatoes before?

WESSEL: [01:20:47] Yeah, no, they did, but on a very small basis, you know.

NOBLE: [01:20:51] So the co-op was an idea to help them grow more efficiently and get things to market cooperatively.

WESSEL: [01:20:57] That's right. Right. And then we had these excursions by the health department to go out to a village that we could do demonstrations. And I especially remember, the reason I remember is because I have a photo of a group of us going out there, the other people. Some of the library crowd and my counterpart and anyway and the nurse from the Department of Health and the doctor. And we all went out to this village, to this little not much of a village, but it was a cluster of people, and we demonstrated on how to cook rabbit. And so there were rabbits, a lot of rabbits in the area.

NOBLE: [01:21:46] Rabbits were plentiful. Ok. That's a good source of protein.

WESSEL: [01:21:50] That's right. And because you know, the way. They lived off the land and they would come in on a Saturday because that was market day and buy stuff that the farmers brought in. And then they would, they buy enough, you know, like we do, for a week until the next market. The thing is, they would, um, most of the time resort to making the most simple things, you know, back in their own homes, you know? So we were trying to get them to eat a little bit more nutrition and we mixed in some vegetables with that rabbit demonstration. But um, it was uh, it's hard to try to change people's habits.

NOBLE: [01:22:53] You know, that's a part of it. What one eats is part of one's culture.

WESSEL: [01:22:57] Right, right. Exactly. Exactly. And they were very big on rice. Very big, you know.

NOBLE: [01:23:03] Probably white polished rice.

WESSEL: [01:23:04] Right. And when CARE sent me down a big thing of cornmeal, they fed it to the animals. They didn't know what.

NOBLE: [01:23:19] People don't eat that, right?

WESSEL: [01:23:20] Right. So I started showing them how to make cornbread, you know, because that was a Southern dish. And they loved it.

NOBLE: [01:23:32] Did they? Oh good.

WESSEL: [01:23:32] Yeah, they loved it because it was something different and it was something in a way they were familiar with, but they, you know, just never developed their bread making.

NOBLE: [01:23:44] Initially that came ready ground in a big bag.

WESSEL: [01:23:47] Big sack, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:23:48] But then did they ever get into growing corn for their own consumption?

WESSEL: [01:23:53] They did. They did grow corn, but they didn't. I don't think they ever grind it for cornmeal. And they fed it to their animals, a lot them did, because it was a low-grade corn.

NOBLE: [01:24:09] Well, you'd have to have a mill. And if you didn't have a mill.

WESSEL: [01:24:14] Right, right. And exactly. And they had, in some of the areas they had. I'm trying to think of where that was, but they an innovative mill where the horse would walk around in circles. Walk around in circles and grind the corn.

NOBLE: [01:24:38] Yeah, yeah.

WESSEL: [01:24:39] Yeah, they did have that. I remember that now. I don't know where in the world that was. But uh, it's hard to remember now after 50 years.

NOBLE: [01:24:48] Sure.

WESSEL: [01:24:49] You know, the Peace Corps was one of the great experiences. I consider it one of the great experiences in my life, you know, wouldn't trade it for the world. But you still, you get older, you can't remember everything.

NOBLE: [01:25:03] Yeah, but we do remember a lot. So there's a few details.

WESSEL: [01:25:07] A lot more than we do of the, you know, the stuff we do here in the United States that, you know, just comes naturally, natural for us. I went back, you know, as a Crisis Corps volunteer.

NOBLE: [01:25:24] Oh, you did?

WESSEL: [01:25:24] To El Salvador, after two big earthquakes in 2001. And I helped in construction because I had construction ability and, uh, it was interesting to see how some things have changed, but some things remain the same. You know, the Salvadoranians were not much different than the Colombians. And the thing I thought was really impressive was that the quality of volunteers was still very high and they were still very enthusiastic.

NOBLE: [01:26:02] Yeah, yeah, those things remain the same.

WESSEL: [01:26:05] But a lot of the stuff was reminiscent of Colombia.

NOBLE: [01:26:09] So when you were up there trying to, um, work more nutrition into people's diets and getting a co-op for the tomato growers and getting a library going, um. At any point, did you have the sense that, um, you were doing something that another Colombian could do just as well? Or did you have the sense that it needed to, that your work could be done uniquely by an American?

WESSEL: [01:26:42] No, I didn't. I think that what we came to realize was that Colombia, uh, was not developing very rapidly at the time because there was no interest in those people with the knowledge and the people without the knowledge, you know, to, you know, the people that there was not people. It was. When we came down, there was someone from

Switzerland that was doing some work in that village. But I think that the Peace Corps, that was one of the contributions they were making, was that they were giving the people in all these villages all around Colombia the opportunity of a person with a different perspective.

NOBLE: [01:27:39] Yeah, yeah.

WESSEL: [01:27:39] To show what a little bit. A little bit. Not a great deal. I have to admit it's not you're not changing the world, but a little bit of innovation that they could carry on when we were not there.

NOBLE: [01:27:53] That's right. So yes, yes. And your counterpart, you already explained you're so very busy that he didn't. He really didn't have the time that you did to devote in such a very local focus.

WESSEL: [01:28:06] Right. And he would leave a lot, you know, he would be gone. I don't know whether it was because of the work schedule or because, you know, I thought he was just goofing off. But, you know, and he was going back into Medellin, all the executives and all that. And so I think that the fact that we were there in the village 90 percent of the time, you know, and we were trying, you know, different things, you know. And just our presence was a big contribution to the life of Colombia because they had never known anyone to come into their village and live.

NOBLE: [01:28:52] That's right. And this is what an American is like?

WESSEL: [01:28:58] And they all thought I was half crazy too. Somewhat anyway. [coughs] I'm having terrible congestion.

NOBLE: [01:29:05] I'm glad we've got the water here. Do you want to take a little break? No? OK.

WESSEL: [01:29:10] I'm fine. So the only thing. I don't know.

NOBLE: [01:29:17] So did your Spanish keep getting better? Obviously, it must be getting better and better the whole time.

WESSEL: [01:29:22] Oh, definitely it was, especially after I got into El Carmen because I lost my partner. And so once you stop talking to someone in English, you're on your own, you know. You have to speak Spanish, or you don't speak.

NOBLE: [01:29:36] Yeah, you might. So it sounds like you went weeks without speaking English, right?

WESSEL: [01:29:41] Oh yeah.

NOBLE: [01:29:41] After you were alone up there?

WESSEL: [01:29:43] Yeah, sure. And uh, I don't know. I had a good time. I have to admit that I had a good time. I enjoyed the Colombian people. I enjoyed their teasing me about my Spanish and, um, you know, about the expressions I picked up and I used at the wrong time.

NOBLE: [01:30:10] And they'd find that funny.

WESSEL: [01:30:12] Because our lives were pretty simple, too, you know, and they didn't have much to entertainment.

NOBLE: [01:30:19] You came and provided that.

WESSEL: [01:30:21] Right.

NOBLE: [01:30:22] And you were this sort of gets us back around to where we were at the end of the last tape, where you would go into town and have a few beers with the guys and they were trying to get you to drink aguardiente. But then, you were just about to say the other thing that they made, and the tape shut off. It wasn't aguardiente, it was?

WESSEL: [01:30:44] Oh, uh.

NOBLE: [01:30:51] Oh, now I'm putting you on the spot. You had said something about rum. I think you were saying that they made it.

WESSEL: [01:30:57] De Caldas was the famous rum in Colombia, but in Medellin there were a few restaurants. There was a Swiss bakery that was very popular because they really had great pastry, you know, and you certainly didn't get that in the village, at your site, we called it. There was one Chinese restaurant in Medellin that we went to because that really did give you, you know, some vegetables and, you know, as well as all the other stuff, the pasta and all that. But Colombia, I mean. Medellin was such an international town, city, that we got to know Germans and French people and all that, and so there was a mixture of them and they were there for different reasons, not like us. They were there with money backing them so they would have parties. And, you know, we would go to their parties.

NOBLE: [01:32:13] They'd invite you. Very pleasant.

WESSEL: [01:32:15] Right, right. And so and then there were, you know, some other people that were there that were doing, you know, some hands-on work like teachers from England and So I don't know. I liked going to Medellin mainly because of what, you know, mainly because of what you could eat. But I wasn't really wild about exclusively hanging around with the other Americans, you know, other Peace Corps volunteers. I like seeing my buddies from my group. But just to go and hang out with the rest of the Peace Corps volunteers was not my cup of tea.

NOBLE: [01:33:02] More interesting things to do. Did you have, um, people coming out to your village to check up on you or to see if you needed any help? Did Peace Corps staff come to visit you?

WESSEL: [01:33:18] There's a Peace Corps leader there. We had a Peace Corps leader who was from either the first or second group, the first group or our group. And when the first group made changes or something like that, they switched them around or they left because they were terminating service. Then we had someone from our group. And in fact, my Peace Corps leader was just here in town a week ago, and I hadn't seen him in 50 years, but he was chosen from, you know, the group. A number of my friends were made leaders. So they had a jeep and they traveled from one site to another to see what they needed, what people needed, how

things were going. You know, nothing, you know, and nothing great. You know, it was a visit and a connection with the outside world.

NOBLE: [01:34:21] And what about doctors? Did you have to go into Bogota or something to get checked out?

WESSEL: [01:34:26] Usually we had to. No. Or Medellin, the big cities. There was Barranquilla on the coast and there was Cali on the west coast and there was Bogota and there was Medellin. And so everyone had access to one of those places to go.

NOBLE: [01:34:53] And were you required to come in for vaccinations and stuff?

WESSEL: [01:34:56] I don't. I don't think so. We had, I think, we had two conferences where everyone came. [tape break]

NOBLE: [01:35:05] Second tape. And I think we lost a bit of our conversation because we didn't realize that the tape had run out. So but we were talking about medical care and you were saying.

WESSEL: [01:35:17] Yeah, I had, I do not remember. Except for the fact that I had to go in for this tonsillectomy. The next time I ever saw a doctor, and it was a Colombian doctor, and they recommended him from Bogota, from the Peace Corps office in Bogota. Because I was, I don't know what the symptoms, to tell you the truth, were. But he determined that I had this rheumatic fever.

NOBLE: [01:35:42] My goodness.

WESSEL: [01:35:43] And that, um, he was concerned about it. And so I had to go to him, back to him, a second or third time. But it cleared up. And so it turned out to be nothing. Other than that, I never saw a doctor. You know, I mean, there was a doctor in my village. He lived there and I would talk to him and he was always trying to practice his English on me. But he, I don't think he ever treated me. I might have gone to him for a cold or something like that, and he'd give me a prescription. There was a little pharmacy in my village. But other than that.

NOBLE: [01:36:21] So you were pretty healthy? The occasional cold or something.

WESSEL: [01:36:25] Yeah. The climate didn't seem to affect me that much, even though it was damp.

NOBLE: [01:36:31] Dysentery didn't?

WESSEL: [01:36:33] I might have had dysentery one time. the whole time I was in Colombia.

NOBLE: [01:36:41] Wonderful.

WESSEL: [01:36:41] But you know, I made sure that I drink purified water and boiled water.

NOBLE: [01:36:46] Careful. You were careful. I think what we missed, I think this tape recorder ran out of tape on that side and we weren't aware of it, but you were saying some very, I thought, important things about what are the limits on what a Peace Corps volunteer can realistically expect to accomplish.

WESSEL: [01:37:09] Right.

NOBLE: [01:37:09] Yeah, something being more important than the project itself.

WESSEL: [01:37:12] That's right. It was the little, um, minuscular something that you might have contributed without even knowing it. But because we're Americans in a, you know, an advanced society, supposedly at that time even, even more so maybe. But the little contribution you might make by saying, you know, you might boil your water, you know, instead of drinking right from the. You know, you might find out you're not having so many colds or what have you, you know?

NOBLE: [01:37:58] Yeah. So your children might not be having dysentery.

WESSEL: [01:38:01] That's right. And I think that that was as much. The fact that we were living in a village where U.S. citizens had never lived before. Might once in a while come in with other, you know, somehow get to a village like mine. Very questionable, except for the fact that they did have these ceramic factories here.

NOBLE: [01:38:27] Oh, people would come in to.

WESSEL: [01:38:29] See what the ceramic factory looked like, you know, and all that. I don't think that, you know, and they were small, they were not big operations. But we. The Peace Corps generally, I think that even today, after spending some time in El Salvador, I could see that the presence of the Peace Corps is as much an uplift as anything else in a country. That someone, some foreigner, came down here to live with us and, you know, actually lived in our village.

NOBLE: [01:39:18] And did a few things a little bit differently.

WESSEL: [01:39:19] That's right. Yeah, exactly.

NOBLE: [01:39:24] How did you manage to? Surely you wanted to tell your family in Florida about some of the things you were doing, right? How did you let them know how you were and what you were doing?

WESSEL: [01:39:38] Well, you know. The frustration is always so easy to communicate to folks back home, you know, and that possibly was a contributing factor of what, you know, what our life was like there. But you know, my family was pretty good, especially my mother. My mother used to write me all the time, you know, but she was that type of person. She had a wonderful penmanship and she was, you know, born and raised in Iowa. And she was only an eighth grade education, but she got a job with a bank because of her penmanship. Her penmanship, they were taught the.

NOBLE: [01:40:46] Palmer method?

WESSEL: [01:40:47] Palmer method. And she had this beautiful penmanship. And you know, in those days, the typewriters were just coming on.

NOBLE: [01:40:54] And ledgers were kept by hand.

WESSEL: [01:40:57] Right. Everything was kept by hand. So my mother wrote, you know, great letters and kept up to date, and I used to write back more about what I envision might be going on at 1190 Beers Drive in Miami Beach, Florida, because there were still brothers and sisters living there. And if they weren't living in that house, they were living nearby. And and so it was always, I sort of kidded them about, you know, how life was progressing without me.

NOBLE: [01:41:29] How long would it take for a letter to get from El Carmen to Miami Beach?

WESSEL: [01:41:38] Probably faster than the letter to get from Miami Beach to El Carmen. Mainly because they did have a good postal service, and it was inexpensive. It was fairly inexpensive. And I think that my letters arrived quicker than theirs to me. I know one thing, that my wife, my wife now, who I was dating a little bit in college, sent me a Christmas package of brownies. And I got it like in May, you know. So it was really. Still ate them.

WESSEL: [01:42:36] Oh!

WESSEL: [01:42:38] But it was. It was. That was sort of the biggest discrepancy, perhaps in the communication. I never, I tried calling home once in a while, or once or twice or three times.

NOBLE: [01:42:55] From Bogota maybe? Or Medellin?

WESSEL: [01:42:56] Yeah, from Medellin. But the connections were really not very good. So I just gave up on that.

NOBLE: [01:43:04] Oh, what a contrast between communication then and communication today with today's Peace Corps volunteers, where they tweet and email. Instant communication.

WESSEL: [01:43:16] That's right. Right. And you know, communications between them, you know. When I got into El Salvador, I was amazed at how many kids had cell phones.

NOBLE: [01:43:28] That's right. And the volunteers could talk to each other.

WESSEL: [01:43:31] I think everybody has a cell phone. I think they issued cell phones.

NOBLE: [01:43:33] Yes, I think you're right.

WESSEL: [01:43:34] And they issued me a cell phone. Yeah, I remember that. Yeah, they issued me a cell phone too. It was very interesting.

NOBLE: [01:43:41] And we, on the other hand, back in the sixties, were totally isolated from other volunteers as well as from Washington.

WESSEL: [01:43:49] Oh yeah. Because we had a central. In my village, there was a central office for the telephone, attached to the church as I remember. I mean, I guess they rented a space from the church. It was a small cubbyhole. And you could get messages. You could get phone calls from, and someone would run to your house and get you, and you'd come down to answer the phone. But, uh, it was so prehistoric that, you know, I seldom used it. Maybe a couple of times I got a phone call. Either from Medellin, or I think one time there was an effort to get to me from Miami. But uh, I didn't.

NOBLE: [01:44:47] It didn't work.

WESSEL: [01:44:49] So communication. It wasn't so bad either.

NOBLE: [01:44:54] No, our expectations were different. I want to go back with you into your village and you're organizing farmers who are growing tomatoes

and you're trying to get a cooperative thing together, which would be for everybody's benefit. Who owned the land? Were these people owning their own? Do they have ownership of the land, which they were using to grow tomatoes? Or were they renting from a wealthy person?

WESSEL: [01:45:24] Yeah, it was. There was a mix. There was a mix. And there were a lot of people who lived on property that was rented and the rents were very minimal, you know. But the owners might have been one of the owners of the ceramic place, ceramic mill. And he was not into, you know, running blindly.

NOBLE: [01:45:54] He owned it, but he didn't want to work it.

WESSEL: [01:45:57] Yeah. So he'd rent it to someone, you know, and they could stay as long as they want to as long as there wasn't any big development. The interesting part about is my wife and I went to Colombia in 1995 for a return visit.

NOBLE: [01:46:11] Was that your first visit back?

WESSEL: [01:46:13] First visit back. And you know, they were. It was completely different. They had built an airport that was 15 minutes away from my village. Whereas it took me two and a half hours to get to Medellin, where the only airport was, you know? So not only was that a big change, but the village I was from went from, you know, 10,000 people to like 50,000.

NOBLE: [01:46:44] City.

WESSEL: [01:46:44] Yeah, right. And although I have to tell you, they had a public library and they had a public library ever since I left, in that village. But the government had come in to subsidize it. So now, not only municipal government, but the state government. And so and I went into that library and there were kids on computers in the library.

NOBLE: [01:47:16] Oh my goodness. March along.

WESSEL: [01:47:16] So that was really.

NOBLE: [01:47:18] But the idea of the library, and the ownership of the library by the community.

WESSEL: [01:47:24] Who knows what it's like now. They said they're closing libraries now and having I mean, I saw a piece in the news on one of the programs, that one place closed the library and everything is audio, you know.

NOBLE: [01:47:43] And digital. So those of us who enjoy turning the paper pages of a book are not so sure that's a good thing. Um. So you are on your own pretty much. You didn't have people from Peace Corps or from the government telling you what to do. Was there any influence from United States agricultural corporations? I'm thinking Monsanto, for example. I don't mean Monsanto, but like as an example of a corporation that was trying to push their fertilizer or pesticides. Were you encouraged to promote the use of?

WESSEL: [01:48:25] Yeah, no. I never came across. An interesting part of my two years in Colombia was that when I was in college, I worked as a switchboard operator at WDSU, television and radio. Basically television. Radio was across the street, but I worked part time as a switchboard operator. And when they got wind that I was going to Colombia, one of the newscasters there set up an idea that he would come down to Colombia and do a story about that. Unfortunately, something happened. I don't know whether it was the assassination of President Kennedy, but that was pretty close to the end of my service.

NOBLE: [01:49:21] Oh, that's right, that would have happened while you were in Colombia.

WESSEL: [01:49:25] Oh yeah.

NOBLE: [01:49:25] Oh dear. Well, let's get back to talk about that in a minute.

WESSEL: [01:49:27] Yeah, but anyway, but he never made it, but that was the only other thing. The other thing was I worked also part time in college for a coffee importer and sugar refiner. And Colombia, of course, is big coffee

producer. And they were writing me letters asking me, you know, are you working near coffee producing country? And we want to talk to you about, you know, your future with our company.

NOBLE: [01:49:59] You haven't mentioned anything about coffee growing. Tomato growing, yeah.

WESSEL: [01:50:03] That's right. But coffee growing. I wasn't familiar with it because in my area, it was not. It was not being grown. But just down the road, the coffee, the coffee farms, I mean, coffee plantations, were prolific. The tomato program was doing well for a while, and all of a sudden the participants sort of lost interest. And that was a disappointment because I thought that would be, you know, good because they do use a lot of tomatoes.

NOBLE: [01:50:45] Yeah, yeah. Did you ever find out what was behind that?

WESSEL: [01:50:50] I think it was just a lack of cohesion among the farmers, you know, and deciding that they would do it on their own. So it was, that was sort of disappointment, but, you know. Since I was alone, and finally they gave up on sending me a Peace Corps volunteer every few months.

NOBLE: [01:51:15] And you weren't replaced, you said, when you left?

WESSEL: [01:51:17] No, I wasn't. Yeah. So once I got, you know, that was over with, I was able to, you know, devote more time to the library and to these schools that we were building. Two schools that we were building, one in the village, not too far from where I live. But then another one up into another farming area. And the priest was very involved with that one too, for some reason. He wanted to see a school for these children out there in the rural areas. So he used to come out with me all the time.

NOBLE: [01:52:01] Were you involved in the actual construction of the building?

WESSEL: [01:52:04] Yeah, but it was made with CINVA blocks, which is a combination of dirt and a little cement. And CARE was our and they

provided the machines, which are handmade, hand operated. So, you know, like a press.

NOBLE: [01:52:28] Yeah, yeah, to make the block.

WESSEL: [01:52:30] To make blocks and that's what we, that's what we built the school out of. I had a little bit of a problem with the local priest because he. All the rural schools had a living area, a bedroom, for the teacher. And he didn't want to do a bedroom for the teacher. But there was some word in the village that this teacher was, you know, a paramour of the priest, you know, which is not unusual, especially in Spanish countries.

NOBLE: [01:53:19] But he didn't want to set her up with a room?

WESSEL: [01:53:21] With a room, yeah. So she had to come in from her, she had to come from her parents' home to the school. So there was something going on, because he wasn't looking to the future.

NOBLE: [01:53:40] That's right. And they need get somebody else coming in from farther away.

WESSEL: [01:53:44] Right. So the other big effort we made was in a village, a rural, very rural, over a mountain. The farmers there wanted to carve a road so that they could get their product to the market on Saturday and Sunday easier, because otherwise it took, you know, a very long time to make this over the mountain and into the village.

NOBLE: [01:54:20] On just a horse path or something.

WESSEL: [01:54:22] Yeah, right. So we were building a road, a dirt road, with oxen pulling the grader behind it. And the difficult part was to get out there and then come back in the same day, because it was a long trip. And if you're going to get anything done, then you had to, you know, you had to do it fast and you had very short time. And the first time I went up there, I had a partner and he went with me and we got out there on our horses. And the rest of the group, the priests went with us and, you know, other these officials from the health department and all that went with them. But they

left right, shortly after the priests had a little blessing and all that. And then they left and we stayed and helped continue to build the, you know, to get these oxen.

NOBLE: [01:55:25] Yes, get the work done.

WESSEL: [01:55:27] And it got time, you know, to get out of there or it's going to be dark. So we got our horses and we started to go back and we got completely lost. We had to go back to where we started from and we had to sleep and we had to displace part of the family so that we could sleep in one of the beds. Because they didn't want us to, at that point, try to make it back in before it was dark.

NOBLE: [01:56:02] Because it would be hazardous. It would be another cross on the side of the road.

WESSEL: [01:56:05] And after that, that partner of mine, he was from my group and we were great friends. But he asked for a transfer to another, so that was really the end of it, when he left. So, uh, I didn't have any other. One guy they sent out there and he went back into the village and he borrowed someone's motor scooter or something, and he had a wreck and he ended up in the hospital and they had to, they sent him back to the United States.

NOBLE: [01:56:41] So there you were.

WESSEL: [01:56:42] There I was.

NOBLE: [01:56:45] So you stayed the whole two years?

WESSEL: [01:56:47] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:56:47] Did you ever have the option of extending beyond that?

WESSEL: [01:56:50] No. Well, they did. If you were, they did say, if you were in the middle of a project that you felt that, you know, your presence was important, you could extend. But I didn't feel like that was necessary at the end of the year. Some of my friends did stay for another half year or a

year and uh, I wouldn't have minded it at all. But I just didn't have the, you know, I didn't want them to be misled that I was going to, you know, spend another six months or a year.

NOBLE: [01:57:25] And I think there was somebody named Linda back here writing to you.

WESSEL: [01:57:29] That's right.

NOBLE: [01:57:30] Did you travel on your way home?

WESSEL: [01:57:34] Yes. Four of us went from Bogota, Colombia. Flew from Bogota to Panama City, the city of Panama, the capital of Panama. And we bought. We heard that you could get an inexpensive car. You could buy a car inexpensively. And so one of the guys, he was interested because he wanted to buy the car when we got back to the States from the rest of us. So we all chipped in for the car and we got. But he wanted a Volkswagen. So there were two of us who were tall, like me. I was 6'3". And two of them were short, and it was misery. I left them in Guatemala.

NOBLE: [01:58:33] A Volkswagen Bug?

WESSEL: [01:58:35] Yeah. And I went to the Yucatan Peninsula from there, then flew back to New Orleans. But they went on and he bought the car from us and sent us money. But that was, uh, and the problem was that he was also interested in hurrying getting back to the United States. He was from Charlotte, North Carolina. And he was homesick, I guess.

NOBLE: [01:59:01] That's too bad because there's a lot to be seen in between Panama City and.

WESSEL: [01:59:04] In Central America, yeah. My wife and I had an opportunity, after my Peace Corps service in El Salvador, my wife came down and we backpacked from Panama up through Central America.

NOBLE: [01:59:18] Oh, wonderful.

WESSEL: [01:59:20] And we had a great experience.

NOBLE: [01:59:22] You backpacked? But you were in your 60s?

WESSEL: [01:59:24] We opted for *collectivos* and the *chivas*, the United States school busses that they turn into transportation vehicles for the rural people in all of Latin America. So that was a great experience too.

NOBLE: [01:59:44] Is there anything else you'd like to say that's important about what you did or what you were thinking about while you were there in Colombia?

WESSEL: [01:59:56] Well. I don't know, there are a lot of, you know, when we were in Columbia, there were a lot of us who thought perhaps we needed more backup from the Peace Corps office or, you know, or CARE. But CARE was a little bit more responsive than actually the Peace Corps office was. Peace Corps just wanted to make sure that no one got seriously, seriously ill or in trouble.

NOBLE: [02:00:33] But they didn't see themselves as supporting you in your work?

WESSEL: [02:00:35] Yeah, right, right. I didn't get the feeling of that. I felt that, uh. And it was just the opposite when I went to El Salvador. I thought that the support from the Peace Corps office was much greater than we ever had.

NOBLE: [02:00:52] Huh. Isn't that interesting?

WESSEL: [02:00:53] Yeah, yeah. So they learned something over the years. I mean, this was the first year of the Peace Corps, what we were in. But other than that, the experience was probably the most important and mind changing experience I had in my life, you know, because the rest of my life was in the United States and working and working, you know, in a job and dealing with, you know, the everyday things of raising a family and all that. Whereas Peace Corps experience was living in a different culture and feeling like you were accomplishing something, but also having a lot of fun.

NOBLE: [02:01:42] Yeah, yeah.

WESSEL: [02:01:44] And no one was telling you, you can't have the fun, you know, you have to put your nose to the wheel or whatever.

NOBLE: [02:01:51] But they also wanted you to socialize with the locals, and you sure did.

WESSEL: [02:01:54] That's right. Exactly. Yeah. And I loved it. I thought it was two of the best years of my life. You know, I still say that. And I think almost everyone I've ever come across says the same thing. Peace Corps was, you know, life changing for them and very much worthwhile. And I'm very active in the local Peace Corps returned volunteers here.

NOBLE: [02:02:20] Great, great.

WESSEL: [02:02:22] In this city. And every year we got a new bunch of people coming back. And they're all, you know, they're all very enthusiastic.

NOBLE: [02:02:31] Are you active in Colombia support network?

WESSEL: [02:02:34] Yes, I am. Yeah, I am involved in that too. And I served on the board of the National Peace Corps Association some years ago.

NOBLE: [02:02:44] Oh, good for you.

WESSEL: [02:02:44] And they are having a big recognition weekend and dinner, you know, for everyone. I don't know whether I'm going to go, but.

NOBLE: [02:02:54] I hope you can.

WESSEL: [02:02:55] Yeah, it would be nice. I have a lot of friends out there now that I did not know from my Peace Corps experience, but from being involved with the National Peace Corps Association.

NOBLE: [02:03:06] There's a woman in Florida right now whose name, of course, because names are disappearing from my brain, who is very, very active in a Colombia project.

WESSEL: [02:03:16] Yeah, yeah. Is that Helen?

NOBLE: [02:03:19] Dudley.

WESSEL: [02:03:20] Dudley, yes, she has a great friend of mine. Yeah.

NOBLE: [02:03:22] Oh, good. I'm glad you know each other.

WESSEL: [02:03:24] Yeah, we know. We know each other. And she, my son is a chef in Miami. And the first dinner they had for fundraiser for the Colombia project, they had at my son's restaurant in Bal Harbour. And they gave, you know, a good price so that they can raise money.

NOBLE: [02:03:47] Terrific. I'm glad you connected with that.

WESSEL: [02:03:50] Yeah, yeah. And I'm still, I'm still very much involved. She's a great person.

NOBLE: [02:03:54] Isn't she? Absolutely remarkable. And then in Madison, Wisconsin, there's Jack Long and his wife Cecilia, who are very, very immersed in all things Colombia. Jack was in the Peace Corps in Panama. But having married a Colombian woman is very interested peace activities in Colombia.

WESSEL: [02:04:14] Yeah, right. Are they involved with the Colombia project?

NOBLE: [02:04:21] It's a different project, it's called the Colombia, oh. Colombian network friend? I can't remember, I'm sorry. I can't remember. It's not Helen's project.

WESSEL: [02:04:31] No, no. It's a different one. It's a different one. And they advocate for, you know, like the Indian population in Colombia.

NOBLE: [02:04:40] Yeah, and there's a peace community of some of, say, *apartado*, I think is what it is.

WESSEL: [02:04:46] Yeah, that's probably the one I participate in. I participate in them. I never go to any of their things because, you know, it's a long way. Although I've never really, I've been in Wisconsin. Love Wisconsin. Are you from Wisconsin?

NOBLE: [02:05:03] I live in Wisconsin now, yeah.

WESSEL: [02:05:04] Yeah, yeah. I recruited for the Peace Corps when I got finished with my tour in Colombia, and they sent me to Wisconsin to start out in, um, what's the name of the city at the very top that's part of Minnesota, I think?

NOBLE: [02:05:26] Superior, Wisconsin. Duluth, Minnesota.

WESSEL: [02:05:29] Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior. Yeah. So I went there first and then I traveled.

NOBLE: [02:05:33] So you were working for Peace Corps after?

WESSEL: [02:05:35] Yeah. I came back and I was a recruiter. You know, they had this program where they took former volunteers and they sent them all over the country. And I drove from there all the way down to Madison. It was one of the nicest experiences that I've ever had. Yeah, it was, I loved it. I went from real cold snow and all that in Duluth down to into springtime. Yeah, it was great.

NOBLE: [02:06:04] That's wonderful. Well, this has been a delightful interview. Thank you very much.

WESSEL: [02:06:09] Thanks for doing it. I'm glad that they're trying to make an effort to do it. You've probably picked up some good stories, huh?

NOBLE: [02:06:20] Yeah, and yours is very much a big one. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]