

Norman Coble Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
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Biographical Note

Norman Coble served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 on an agriculture project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Norman Coble

June 24, 2009
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:03] OK, this is June. This is June 24, 2009, and this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson. And I'm interviewing Norm Coble. OK, why don't you just tell us a little bit about yourself right now. What are you doing?

COBLE: [00:00:25] Well, on the tour right now or retired, I guess permanently. I taught science for 36 years, seven years in junior high, 29 in high school. I enjoyed it very much. I had a great relationship with my students. Right now I'm, as I said, retired. I'm keeping busy with a variety of things. I have a lot of interests. I've got grandchildren that want my attention and I enjoy their company. And, uh, since I'm retired, people think, oh, he's retired, he's got time to do this. So, yeah, I keep see, I enjoy life.

SIMPSON: [00:00:59] Yeah, I bet you do. I mean, of the retired people I know have no time. OK, let's just start by thinking back before you joined the Peace Corps or the year before and think about how you heard about it and you know why you decided that kind of time.

COBLE: [00:01:21] Well, I had gone through two years of college. I was tired of school. I had two friends and the three of us decided that we would take a trip down to the tip of South America, Patagonia, and turn around and come back. And the one friend had, uh, his home was in Nome, Alaska. He said he could pick up a jeep and trailer for nothing Army surplus, and you could get a thousand dollar job during that summer. Another friend said you can get a thousand dollars. I said I could get a thousand dollars. So that was our plan. Well, it turned out the whole thing turned out that I was the only one who made any money. The other two couldn't get jobs, couldn't get the jeep, couldn't get the trailer. And so I was rather depressed or did not depressed. I was just disappointed not being able to go. And so I went back to my summer job with Green Giant. And, uh, but before I did that, my mother said, you know, the Peace Corps is looking for people. Maybe you'd be interested in applying for a position or something down South America. That's where you want to go. So I applied and about three weeks later, they said, yeah, report for training. And so I was very happy to go. And, uh, I was looking for adventure and I enjoyed my statement on that very much.

SIMPSON: [00:02:36] Well, tell me whenever you decided to go into the Peace Corps, what did your family think?

COBLE: [00:02:44] That they were very supportive. Fact. My mother, who suggested I try and my dad was very supportive and he said, yeah, sounds good.

SIMPSON: [00:02:55] Ok, so since you knew you were going to be gone for a couple of years, did you do anything special preparation at home to get ready to go or?

COBLE: [00:03:04] Not really. I was ready to go. I was looking forward to something different and I was ready to go. I was wanting to do right.

SIMPSON: [00:03:12] Ok, well, then let's look at when you first got to training in. Tell me a little bit about your impression of that and.

COBLE: [00:03:24] Well, I enjoyed the physical part. I always enjoyed the physical part of training. But my first impression, I got in the plane in Chicago was 72 degrees. The plane landed in Tempe, Arizona, and I walked to the front of the plane and started to step out. There's 113 degrees. I almost turned around back, but I knew I'd committed some, but not the training. I enjoyed the training, I did.

SIMPSON: [00:03:48] So, what can you tell me about the training, from your perspective, what did you do?

COBLE: [00:03:57] Not really knowing what to expect. I didn't know whether the training was appropriate or not. I don't know. The language training I think was good. The physical training was probably more than we needed. But as I said, I enjoyed that. So as far as preparing us for living in Bolivia, I think they probably did as well as they could have. They gave us information about another culture, conflict or not. But you know what to expect from the culture. And I had really, uh. I expected pretty much with the games. I had no disappointments with it.

SIMPSON: [00:04:40] I mean, can you think of anything in particular that had happened in Arizona you remember in your mind?

COBLE: [00:04:53] I enjoyed living on the reservation. I got a kick out of it and a few other things, you know, the little things like Bill call me all night. I missed the bus when you're in Tempe and head back to the Indian reservation, I guess that was not unusual. The people doing the same thing. And of course, pump number one was interesting.

SIMPSON: [00:05:13] The only cold post in the hole.

COBLE: [00:05:18] I can't think of any one particular thing, but the whole experience. I enjoyed the one time we went to that Indian meeting, where were the Indian reservation invited to me. I was impressed with it and enjoyed.

SIMPSON: [00:05:34] So after Arizona, then what happened? Tell me a little bit about that.

COBLE: [00:05:40] Journey from Arizona, time for after the training. I flew to Puerto Rico. I don't remember anything particular about it after Arizona. I mean, I remember finishing up with Arizona. Did we go home for a while after that or we go right back to Puerto Rico? But OK.

SIMPSON: [00:06:03] Yeah, in Puerto Rico, we were in the group that went to New Orleans and

COBLE: [00:06:10] Yeah, yeah, I don't remember anything about New Orleans except seeing the city where we live.

SIMPSON: [00:06:15] Yeah. How about once we got in Puerto Rico? What was that experience like?

COBLE: [00:06:23] When we landed or when we started raining?

SIMPSON: [00:06:26] When we got to Arecibo.

COBLE: [00:06:29] Arecibo, I don't have any recollection of anything in particular. Like I was expecting to be shuffled off to a training center and the next morning we begin training. I expected it. And so I guess what happened was pretty much what I expected. OK, so nothing sticks in my mind.

SIMPSON: [00:06:52] Ok, how about the training there in your mind about that training?

COBLE: [00:06:56] Uh, the only thing I can remember that really stuck in my mind was that running two miles in Arizona, I you know, I don't like to run, but, you know, I did two miles and jog the first time. I jog two miles to try to jog two miles hour in Puerto Rico. I said, no, this humidity is more like. But yeah, the training I had there was interesting. Yeah, of course it was it stressed the Spanish language, I think much more intensely than. But again, the physical training was actually I love the rock climbing. That was that was from.

SIMPSON: [00:07:37] What about the drown proofing?

COBLE: [00:07:39] Oh, yeah. Hey, when I was a kid, ten years old, that's what I did. And when I got to Peace Corps training, they told me, well, this is drown proofing all it is. I've been doing this all my life.

SIMPSON: [00:07:53] Ok, so what about the hiking?

COBLE: [00:07:58] Loved it. Loved it.

SIMPSON: [00:08:00] Which group were you in?

COBLE: [00:08:03] And, some users talking about that. I was with the Russ Nightawin. I was also with the group with Larry Oglesby. And I can't remember some of the other people in that group. But the reason I remember Russ was that we were scheduled to go over to Mingo. And so we went up to Mingo and we got to the point where we could hardly get through the trees. And the guy said, no, there's no way to get over this. So we went back down to, I guess, the road we're walking on. And Russ and I looked at each other and said, I think we can get up that mountain. So the next day we went back and I went back it over the other guy's window and we were determined if there was any way whatsoever we were going to get over that mountain. But we got to the point where we were squeezing side. We decided, no, there's no way. So that was the thing that stuck in my mind about that that height.

SIMPSON: [00:09:06] Ok, so, uh, did you get separated from the group? Did you make it back?

COBLE: [00:09:13] Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. We wouldn't do. We were going back.

SIMPSON: [00:09:16] How did you get there?

COBLE: [00:09:18] How do we get there. Walk. Oh yeah. Sure we walked. Yes, we walked. We got separated. When we finally asked us if we would like being separate and we said, well at first we decided we were thinking, should we burden this fellow poor fellow with beating us? But we were so hungry. So we said yes.

SIMPSON: [00:09:44] I assume you took money to bail them out, not to take the money, but he was forced to live off the land.

COBLE: [00:09:52] But, you know, I don't remember. We may have bought something to drink. I don't recall buying anything to eat. I don't call him either.

SIMPSON: [00:10:02] OK, so Puerto Rico basically was a walk in the park for you?

COBLE: [00:10:12] Yeah, yeah, I enjoyed it.

SIMPSON: [00:10:14] After Puerto Rico, did you tell me about what happened?

COBLE: [00:10:19] Well, I was excited. Get ready to go. Yeah. While I was packing away. Yes, well, I knew I had a few friends over and talking with them and telling them what I had experienced and what was going to be going on in the future. Yeah, it was it was fun doing it.

SIMPSON: [00:10:48] But what about when you left home for a little bit after getting ready for tell me what your next impression.

COBLE: [00:11:01] I was anxious to go.

SIMPSON: And what happened?

COBLE: Well, normal goodbyes.

SIMPSON: [00:11:07] Well, but when you got to the destination point that they were put together through Miami.

COBLE: I believe so.

SIMPSON: And you remember about that?

COBLE: [00:11:19] I remember meeting with the people that were there, you know, the bunch it was going to be going I don't remember anything in particular. It seemed to me that we were pretty happy bunch, we were over here.

SIMPSON: [00:11:34] Except for the Cuban Missile Crisis.

COBLE: [00:11:35] Yeah, yeah, of course, because we didn't know that.

SIMPSON: [00:11:38] Well, how did you feel when they told you weren't really going to Bolivia yet?

COBLE: [00:11:43] Uh, I don't remember. I guess I probably felt disappointed. But then I believe they told us that this is probably going to be a temporary thing and that we'll eventually be going. But they didn't know exactly when. And they told us we were going to be housed in Vermont for a while. I thought. That's right. Vermont is beautiful this time of year. So I thought, OK, I can handle this.

SIMPSON: [00:12:10] Yeah. Yeah. So, uh, do you remember anything particular in Vermont? What did you do in Vermont?

COBLE: [00:12:20] I can remember that we were at any time during the day or night, we could get peanut butter cookie sandwiches or something like that, and I enjoyed the fact that we were basically free. We didn't have any responsibilities to report to here or report to there. And it was kind of a vacation in between training and employment or a placement in Bolivia. So, yes, it was an enjoyable break from training and it was restful. I enjoyed it. Yes.

SIMPSON: [00:12:54] How about Boston?

COBLE: [00:12:57] You know, we were talking about it and I don't remember a thing about Boston. Yeah, well, I guess I did. I don't remember.

SIMPSON: [00:13:04] I don't think we left anybody behind.

COBLE: [00:13:07] Yeah, I remember, you know, the summer I think it was Larry was talking about or somebody I think everyone was talking about the fact that they didn't want our group to influence the group of teachers that was coming in. And I had forgotten all about them until he mentioned it. And so they removed us for a while and sent us to Boston. And I have no recollection of that. You know, if somebody had told me that had happened. I don't like cities. Yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:13:36] Yeah. Well, OK, so when we finally got to Bolivia, can you tell me something about your impressions or what you thought when you first got to La Paz?

COBLE: [00:13:49] Cool. Now, when I saw the La Paz coming in over the mountains, got to get down to the airport. I thought this this this is a nice place. I like this place. I like the mountains. The scenery was pretty much what I expected to see, the people were interesting. I mean, the garb and I went and again, we pretty much knew what to expect there. And I saw it and I thought, yeah, this this is interesting. This would be an interesting experience.

SIMPSON: [00:14:23] So do you remember much about the trip from La Paz to Cochabamba?

COBLE: [00:14:31] Oh, yes, I drove. Did you?

SIMPSON: [00:14:33] Yes. Well, that was brave.

COBLE: [00:14:35] And I like doing I was doing four wheel drives around the curves, and I like doing that. And I can remember Jim Herberger and Judy and a little silver in their car and they didn't seem to have it.

SIMPSON: [00:14:51] I obviously I wasn't in the car you were in. I practically had a nervous breakdown, but.

COBLE: [00:14:59] You should have been you wouldn't have been on it shouldn't be a good thing you weren't in my jeep.

SIMPSON: [00:15:04] So I want to go up to Cochabamba then. What where did you end up going? What was your particular job?

COBLE: [00:15:16] Uh, well I wasn't stationed in Cochabamba while we were there.

SIMPSON: [00:15:19] That's right. You were in Santa Cruz.

COBLE: [00:15:23] I mean, I was.

SIMPSON: [00:15:26] I know. Yeah. It's like. Yeah. So then we did the trip to Santa Cruz. Did you drive too? That was a better road, wasn't it?

COBLE: [00:15:40] Yeah, flat top.

SIMPSON: [00:15:40] Yeah, yeah. So when we got to Santa Cruz and where did you end up?

COBLE: [00:15:46] Uh the place we all stayed for just a night or two before we start started being dispersed to our area. There's a pension and I remember that we stayed there. No, I think when we got there it was probably afternoon or something like that. And we were sitting around at these tables and somebody had mentioned maybe Israel clerk had said something about them. They would bring us coffee and a roll or something. And we were sitting there and kind of expecting this because we've been told to expect it. And it turned out that the people running the place didn't do that except in the morning they would bring your coffee rolls. And so they finally, I think, did start to bring but it was something that they didn't expect, as we found out. But that's the only thing I remember about that particular time we went in there and.

SIMPSON: [00:16:45] So then where were you posted?

COBLE: [00:16:47] In Santa Cruz.

SIMPSON: [00:16:48] Right, in Santa Cruz?

COBLE: [00:16:49] Yes, right in.

SIMPSON: [00:16:50] And with what

COBLE: [00:16:52] Oh, let's see, the AG Extension Agency, I was working with a man who was a veterinarian there, and I worked part time with him and with four cops and I worked with another veterinarian. And my job there was to help them take blood samples to check for brucellosis in the urine. So I alternated between those two officers.

SIMPSON: [00:17:22] So how did you like that?

COBLE: [00:17:25] Yes.

SIMPSON: [00:17:26] Were the people that you work with pretty easy?

COBLE: [00:17:28] Yes. Wonderful people.

SIMPSON: [00:17:30] How about the language?

COBLE: No problem.

SIMPSON: Had you had Spanish before you came in?

COBLE: [00:17:38] Yes to that mainly was the polishing, the speech, you know, the length of the grammar as far as the how the structure, but becoming fluent. In other words, you can speak without a lot of infinitives, things like that.

SIMPSON: [00:17:58] Yeah, there were some people never did get out of the end. So that were you stayed working the whole time you were there?

COBLE: [00:18:08] When that was made? That was the only place I worked with those to do offices.

SIMPSON: [00:18:14] Can you remember about midway through how you were feeling?

COBLE: [00:18:21] The one problem I remember is that they ran out of the antigen to check for brucellosis. And so for me, it was several months that they were waiting for this and we had nothing of that type to do from that office. And that was frustrating because there wasn't really enough from the other office to keep me busy. And so I was kind of like go to this one office, which we were testing for brucellosis, and I would try to help out there and see what needs to be done. But he was a little bit frustrating. I know Jim Herberger and I wish we could have been sent out into the middle of the jungle, you know, basic agricultural practices. But he said, no, we're not to do that. I was actually looking at my one concern with the job that I had was that in my replacing a Bolivian that could be paid to do this.

SIMPSON: [00:19:18] There was a concern I had as well, and I actually was the beginning. Yeah. So what do you remember, particularly from that first year and a particular incidents or adventures or whatever, what did you do when you weren't working?

COBLE: [00:19:40] Um, well, let's see. The Bolivian American center, I got acquainted with Dan Ritter, who was had been put in place directing that, and he asked me if I would be interested in teaching English to Spanish speaking people. And at first I demurred. And he said, well, I don't know. And he kept asking me and I said, OK, so I started teaching Spanish or English. And I had one class, which were students from about 10 to about 13 and another class, which was adults. And I found out I liked it. I enjoyed it.

SIMPSON: [00:20:26] Yeah. But before then, no?

COBLE: [00:20:30] No, I, uh, I never thought about teaching as a career, but I enjoyed that.

SIMPSON: [00:20:37] So what, uh, can you tell me about some of the things that you did other than say teaching?

COBLE: [00:20:45] Oh, yeah, let's see, um.

SIMPSON: [00:20:47] Were you there during any of the Carnival activities?

COBLE: [00:20:50] Yeah, although I didn't, uh, I went I went to, uh, I guess one of the carnival activities, but I was more a spectator than anything else just to see these people, see what was going on. Um, but the things I remember were things that happened on the job. Um. See, there was one case where I was taking a blood sample from this cow, she was laying down and she reached up with her hind foot and just clipped me across the belt. And I rolled over backwards to do the somersault and the *campesinos* that were there got a big bang out of that. Another time, I was taking blood samples from a bull, which we didn't have to do. And we told the owner, we don't have to test bulls, but I want you to test me for. Well, you had these huge horns and they'd been cut off, fortunately, in the end. What about that big around? And they had his head tied to this skull. Well, I was taking this blood sample and of course, thick skin working, getting that needle in. And then that head came around right in the middle of the forehead, right near the end of the swing.

SIMPSON: [00:21:59] Just with one of the horns. Yeah, it was a flat part.

COBLE: [00:22:06] I want to see on another time that talking about road conditions, have you ever met a pothole which was so steep and deep that even a four wheel drive vehicle with a winch couldn't pull it out of the hole? I broke the cable on the winch kind of thing back there, wove the thing back together and then got a tire, too, and made a ramp out of the hole. I got my sign out, but, yeah, those are the things that are interesting challenges.

SIMPSON: [00:22:42] Because they were quite a few challenges trying to drive around in the Santa Cruz area. Did you ever go out to the Okinawan Colony?

COBLE: [00:22:52] No, I never got out there that I can recall. One thing I was assigned to do, though, was to help a new Chinese settlement. And they wanted me to go out there and teach them how to use the tractor. And fortunately, the tractor they had was a John Deere A and I cut my teeth on the John Deere A. So I was able to show them what they can do.

SIMPSON: [00:23:11] Fortunately it wasn't some Russian tractor. Yeah, yeah. OK, but I didn't know you had gotten involved and I didn't know a lot of the things that you could do it because I was so focused on how I was with you today.

COBLE: [00:23:28] I think a lot of us were that way. I mean, we had our jobs and so many of us were so far away geographically. Well, not so far in miles. But, you know, we couldn't get there and we didn't see each other, but once in a while. So we really didn't know what the other people were doing except on occasion we would get together and talk the other day to day, basis, why of course.

SIMPSON: [00:23:49] I think just as an observation, I think the people in Cochabamba were much closer together because were each other more often. So tell me about some of the jungle tours that you do you have heard.

COBLE: [00:24:10] Well, we had 30 days vacation, two to three day vacation periods during the year. And we heard talk about some people going to Rio de Janeiro over the holidays. So a place like this and. I had no interest in it. I'm not a tourist or type. I don't care to go to cities. I don't care to go to shows necessarily. And apparently Jim is the same type. And I was thinking, well, what am I going to do with my vacation? And one day Jim said, no, I'm just let's build a raft float down the river. I said, good. So we spent nine months every weekend doing that building. Eventually, they take a trip.

SIMPSON: [00:24:57] Were you able to actually get down where you meant to go?

COBLE: [00:25:00] Yes, that's right. It took us a little longer than we expected. And we had a few very exciting times, but we accomplished what we wanted to do and we were very happy with it.

SIMPSON: [00:25:09] What kind of exciting time?

COBLE: [00:25:12] Well, we were in a hurry to get started because we were already behind schedule by about three days. And so the river was wide and slow moving and sluggish. And we thought, well, we'll just float down

the river for a day and then we'll make our paddle so we can move the raft sideways, bank of the river to miss anything that might be in our way. Well, we got started this way and the river changed, got narrower and running a lot faster. And the rapids kind of go round in circles, and sometimes you would be hearing, so the front was going this way. Sometimes sideways and backward. And I can remember sitting in the rafters, it was kind of. I guess it was I don't know about backwards, but kind of by myself, I don't remember now. But anyhow, there were at least two of us. Uh, it was a Jim and John and Tom, and at least two of them were up in the what was in the front of the raft. And I heard him say, we see that big tree up there. I think it's going to hit that. No, no, no, no. We're going to miss it. You can see the currents going around it. We're going to we're going to recognize that. You know, I think we're going to hit that. No, no, no, we're not going to. Pointing out that! The raft rode right up on a branch that was probably about or at least 18 inches in diameter, a branch of the raft here, it just perfect dead center. And the whole raft came out of the water, accepted to be right to court. Lost. No, that wasn't it wasn't till after we got the report. Anyhow, we were stuck there. Well, we managed to get the raft slid off the branch, but in the process, the river was going fast enough. And when that first corner hit the water, it submerged the raft, washed all of our canned goods away. First day, lost all of our canned food!

SIMPSON: [00:27:20] What did you do then?

COBLE: [00:27:21] We decided to fish. And we'll hunt game. We've got 50 pounds of rice. We've got about, I don't know, about 30 or 40 pounds of beef jerky. We'll make it. It is going to be nearly as nice as we've thought, but we'll make it. So we just took off and left it.

SIMPSON: [00:27:43] If you make your paddle then?

COBLE: [00:27:44] Yes immediately.

SIMPSON: [00:27:51] Wow, that's a pretty interesting journey. So where did you get off the river?

COBLE: [00:27:58] We went up there. This was one of the people who went on the raft, Tom Stachelek, on that incident where we were on that route, on that log and that stuck in their branch. He had started to get sick, although he thought it was because he got poked in the stomach with a log. But after we got going a little while, we pulled up for the night on Long Island. The next morning, river's gone down. We were basically on the beach. We couldn't go anywhere. We were there for three days. And during that time we got sicker. And when the river finally did come up, Tom said, I can't go with you. He left the raft, got eventually got back to Cochabamba and found out he had hepatitis. And it was where he left us was the last time we saw any human habitation for two weeks. So we would put any water. He would have died. But yeah, we had some most of the rest of the time was incidents where things looked like they might be dangerous all the time. And one time we thought we were going to lose the raft. Sure. That we had this huge, huge log hopping along the shore and we pulled over because floodwater had come down and a lot of stuff floating down the river. And we've been told, stay out of that. So we're on the edge, staying out of it, and this monster log. I can't imagine it could have been any less than two and a half feet in diameter with bumping along. We thought, sure enough, that things would just turn around or well, when it got close enough, we were able to push it with our feet and it can just bump along the raft. That was right at the end of the Yapacani. And then we got on the Rio Grande. We began to see settlers.

SIMPSON: [00:29:53] Were there like crocodiles?

COBLE: [00:29:58] So we saw nothing of that sort. They told us to watch for piranhas, but during the flood stage, the water was so roiled up and so muddy that nothing was. I don't know where the fish go, but they weren't biting. Yeah. And we during the night, toward the end of the, uh, I think it was the Rio Grande, they just before we got to the moment we saw some freshwater porpoise, that was the only thing we saw that was in the water.

SIMPSON: [00:30:29] So after you got down there, was it Trinidad that you went to, how did you get that point?

COBLE: [00:30:36] We had we had this planned out when we got to Trinidad and we knew we could get a plane back to Cochabamba or Santa Cruz, which city we landed in. But that was planned out for.

SIMPSON: [00:30:50] So would you say that was a highlight?

COBLE: [00:30:53] Oh, yeah, definitely, definitely, yes.

SIMPSON: [00:30:55] And how long did it take you actually?

COBLE: [00:30:58] I believe it was 33 days.

SIMPSON: Thirty-three days.

COBLE: Yes.

SIMPSON: [00:31:03] Did you lose some weight?

COBLE: Yes.

SIMPSON: Well you lost all your canned food. So, um, are there any can you think of any other experiences that you will particularly stand out in your mind?

COBLE: [00:31:23] Uh, I worked with a Bolivian, Julio Flores, who became a very good friend. So I was his American brother and he was my Bolivian brother. He was unusually tall for Indian, same height I was. And we got along just famously. But, yeah, that was interesting. I enjoyed working with the two veterinarians at. I wish I could remember the one's name, the one I enjoyed working with more. I can't remember his name. I believe he came to the States and he told me he'd come to the States for some training. But those two gentlemen were. Yeah, I enjoyed working with him and the whole the whole office there, the, um. Our culture in the office.

SIMPSON: [00:32:14] So you have you maintained contact with him?

COBLE: [00:32:18] No, I haven't. No, I think we exchanged one letter between Julio Flores and myself. But other than that, no, we lost contact.

SIMPSON: [00:32:29] So when you think back about what you did in Bolivia, do you think, um, how do you think you could change what you ended up the trajectory that you as your life, for example, or what you ended up doing? Would you have done the same thing had you not gone into the Peace Corps?

COBLE: [00:32:50] That's somewhat difficult to say, because I had planned on going into veterinary medicine before I left and I continued that I completed my education toward that goal. And after I finished my undergraduate work, I had gotten married in the meantime, and my wife was helping put me through college. I was working part time doing college full time. So when I finished it and got the degree why I had planned to go into veterinary school, but finances were pretty tight and so my wife suggested that you better get it maybe when you're getting a job for at least a year. OK, there aren't any jobs available. Well, the school district over here just 50 miles away looking for teachers, I said teach. You better think about that because we do need a job. So I went over there and I applied and they gave me a contract and I started teaching. And after the first year, uh, I thought, you know, I like this. I enjoy this.

SIMPSON: [00:34:04] What were you teaching?

COBLE: [00:34:05] Uh, there I was teaching junior high science, eighth grade start with. But I again, I had never intended to go into teaching, but, uh. It was something that I found out. I enjoyed this, and so I never intended to make a career of I just went one year after the next. After the next.

SIMPSON: [00:34:25] All of a sudden it was a career.

COBLE: [00:34:26] Not all of a sudden, it took thirty six years.

SIMPSON: [00:34:30] Yeah, yeah. Well, that's pretty amazing. So when did you ever have any health problems?

COBLE: [00:34:37] And only when I first got down to Santa Cruz. I had a little trouble adjusting to the diet for a few weeks. But other than that, nothing.

SIMPSON: [00:34:49] Yeah. And so, uh, in terms of what you did down there, how did you how do you feel about you feel like you were able to make a contribution or how did you feel?

COBLE: [00:35:02] Well, again, the job I was doing was something that was not wasted. But in the one case, working with, uh, taking blood samples, I was concerned because while I was there, they let one of the technicians go. And I asked the veterinarian, I said am I replacing him, he said no. He said the funding has been cut. And he said and he said, we can't keep him regardless whether you're here or not. So and he wasn't doing their blood testing anyway. That was not his function. So I thought that maybe I could have been you'd been more useful in other areas, but that was the job I enjoyed the most, actually. So he really didn't want to give it up. As far as what we're trying to accomplish. But I think that's hard to say, because it may it affected me, did I affect the Bolivianos? Who knows? I hope it did. You know, I hope that was a positive experience for them.

SIMPSON: [00:36:22] Do you think they were able to understand a little bit more about Americans from knowing you?

COBLE: [00:36:28] Well, again, I would hope so. Hard to say, it's hard to say, although I do recall that everybody that I met wanted to try to speak English. So the fact that they were trying to learn English or were interested in speaking English indicated to me that there was some interest in North American. And nobody I met was critical of North America, although on our trip, but we traded the raft trip for a canoe ride, the young man, I suppose he was in his mid 30s, sharp fellow on the trip down river in the canoe. We got to talking and he said, you know, he said this U.S. aid that you're sending down here. He said all it's doing is corrupting our officials. They just put it in their pockets. He said, what you need to do is to send somebody down here to have oversight over the money that's sent to make sure it goes for the purpose for which it was intended said otherwise, they just put it in their pockets. So he being, this was way back in the jungle where there's no way to get there, except maybe a plane, a river. And yet he was up on things and he knew what was going on and he didn't agree with certain things.

SIMPSON: [00:37:47] So what did you what was your overall impression of the majority of the Bolivian that you worked with. The ones that you worked with, worked with that you met?

COBLE: [00:37:58] The ones I worked with, they were wonderful. I mean. I couldn't ask for any better compatriots as far as working. And along the river, when we finally got to a place where there were settlements, when they saw that raft coming in, we stopped where people just swarmed. We want to know what you were doing here. So when they realized they were we were gringos and we had come down the river and this nobody does this. It was an interesting experience for them. And us both. Yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:38:38] Um, I often had thought that one of the things we did as volunteers was push boundaries, but, you know, because they were a lot of traditions there. And while we tried to work with them, I think a lot of times the things we did push some of those boundaries, like, your raft, you know, coming down the river on the raft. So do you think that experience, uh, say, helped you in your years teaching?

COBLE: [00:39:19] Maybe the experience I had in teaching helped me to understand the difficulties that students would have in learning the material. Because trying to teach, especially the adult class, the kids would catch on pretty quick, the adults at some of them were having a tough time. And trying to understand their difficulty, I think helped me to try and understand my students difficulties in understanding and them getting material. Um, well, I guess I wouldn't be having to do with the experience though.

SIMPSON: [00:39:56] Well, I mean, you're, uh, you were teaching down there. Uh, do you think that just all the different people that you met helped you to understand? Did you have much diversity in your classes?

COBLE: [00:40:11] Um, not a lot, pretty homogenous. Uh, northern Illinois at that time, there was very little minority groups.

SIMPSON: [00:40:25] Well, all in all, do you feel are you glad you were in Peace Corps?

COBLE: [00:40:40] Oh, yes, I enjoyed it.

SIMPSON: So you think it was a positive experience?

COBLE: For me, definitely, and I hope for the people I contacted or was put in contact with down there and I hope works for me, definitely very enjoyable.

SIMPSON: [00:40:56] Well, do you have anything else you'd like, any other I can think of something that we haven't talked about that stands out in your mind? Do you remember where you were when Kennedy was assassinated?

COBLE: [00:41:05] Oh, yes. Yeah. Um, at the leprosy colony.

SIMPSON: [00:41:09] Oh, you were at it?

COBLE: [00:41:10] Yeah, I had been asked to drive Dr. Gray for some reason up to there. And I didn't understand why at first because I thought he was just coming back to Santa Cruz. I thought, well, why is he want me to drive him and bring him back. When I found out he was on his way to La Paz. So I had I had driven him to the leper colony and we were there and I was out in the field just walking around and somebody came out and said President Kennedy had shot. So, yeah, that particular image is in.

SIMPSON: [00:41:44] So what was the reaction of the people around you?

COBLE: [00:41:50] Well, I mean, when we got back to the hotel with the building, we were just standing around and just kind of shaking our hands and, you know, I suppose some people were crying, I don't remember for sure, but I suppose we all felt kind of, good grief. This is a terrible thing.

SIMPSON: [00:42:17] Ok, well, if you don't have anything else that you want to add to this, then I guess we're done.

COBLE: OK.

SIMPSON: And thank you.

COBLE: Alright.

[END OF INTERVIEW]