

Thomas Stachelek Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
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Biographical Note

Thomas (Tom) Stachelek served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 on a rural development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Thomas Stachelek

June 23, 2009
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:01] Is June 23, 2009. This is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson, and I'm interviewing Tom, you go by Tom or Thomas, Stachelek. OK, Tom, let's start by just telling us a little bit about what you're doing now. What in terms of what you've been doing kind of briefly since you.

STACHELEK: [00:00:30] I retired from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections in January of 2005. I worked at the maximum security prisons for 33 years. And so presently my wife and I are babysitting our grandchildren. We do that all through the school year until our two daughters are finished for the year and we're enjoying it.

SIMPSON: [00:00:59] Great. So now let's think back to when you were going to go into the Peace Corps, the year before you got before you actually joined. What were you doing and how did you happen to decide to go into the Peace Corps?

STACHELEK: [00:01:13] Well, what happened to me was I actually became interested in it almost as a kind of a joke. I was in high school, I was a senior in high school, and it was January of 1962. And my good friend Al Clark, who was also a senior, said, hey, you can get an application for the Peace Corps down at the post office in Pottstown. He said, let's ask Father Kimball, our school principal, if we can go down and fill out an application and get some information on the Peace Corps. So I said, oh, that's a couple hours off from school. So we went and asked the principal and he thought about it for a minute. And then he said, sure, go down and find out what you can and come back and tell me about it. And I don't remember exactly everything we did, you know, and I came back, we talked to Father Campbell about it, and I kind of forgot about being a high school student. I really didn't expect to hear about imagine my amazement when a few months before I graduated, I guess it would have been in April or May of '62, I got an invitation to go to a training program for Bolivia. And I talk to my parents about it. My parents weren't too sure where Bolivia was, and I was still in high school. And they said, do you really want to do this? And I thought about it and I said, you know what? I don't want to turn this now because I might not get another invitation, so I'm not going to turn this down. So I responded and I said, yes, I was interested. And, you know, I began to receive papers and documents through the mail that kind of started the whole process. I graduated from high school on June 10th, 1962, and June 30th, 1962, which was my parents' 30th wedding anniversary, that day I left for Phoenix. I got on a plane in Philadelphia, first time I'd ever been on a plane, and flew via Chicago to Phoenix and started the dream. So I was really quite amazed. I was surprised. I thought, well, you know, I have to try this.

SIMPSON: [00:03:43] So you told me what your parents thought. How about your friends? Did they think you were just going on a big adventure?

STACHELEK: [00:03:52] You have, you know, the Peace Corps was relatively new. Although, you know, I'm from near a town, Schwenksville,

Pennsylvania. And strangely enough, one other guy from Schwenksville was already in the Peace Corps! So there was a little article in the local newspaper, The Schwenksville Item, that a second person from the Schwenksville area was going into the Peace Corps. So kind of wasn't a novelty to Schwenksville. Or I guess to the readers of The Schwenksville Item. But a lot of my friends, they all thought it was great. I don't think anyone said, you're crazy or don't do it. They were all very encouraging.

SIMPSON: [00:04:34] So what kind of an impression did you get when you got to Phoenix, got to the training? Tell us a little bit about that.

STACHELEK: [00:04:45] The very first impression I had was getting off the plane and in 1962, they didn't have the ramps, the roll up ramps to the plane. They opened the plane door and you walked down the steps and you actually got onto the runway and close to the terminal. And I remember stepping out of the plane and heat was just, it was just overwhelming. And I as I was going down the steps, I said, it must be the jet engines. But the further I got away from the plane, the hotter it got, boy! And then there was the smell from the stockyards. I went out and, you know, country boy, that's something you should be used to. But I think the combination of the heat and the smell from the stockyards was just kind of overwhelming, I thought boy, what am I getting into here? And we got to the training site in Tempe, and I remember I don't remember all the, you know, well, the all the incidentals, but I remember going to our housing unit which, you know, which is, as you may recall, was under the stadium, under the grandstand,

SIMPSON: Hallowed halls of Haigler Hall.

STACHELEK: [00:06:06] Haigler Hall. And I said, jeez, I didn't know there was a place that people could live under grandstands. Looked like there was a lot of other nicer places to live. But I thought maybe that was the first tests, living under the grandstand. You know, it was air conditioned. It was comfortable, started to meet some of the some of the group

members. They were an interesting group, and being a country boy from Pennsylvania, I'm sure some of those people thought I saw that funny. But, you know, there were people from all over the country and accents I'd never heard. And a couple of them, I couldn't really understand everything they said, honestly I couldn't. But they were all were, you know, kind of instantly you made friends and talked about yourself and talked about each other. And so it was it was pretty easy to be assimilated into the group and to feel part of something. You know, why you can, even with my age and there were there were folks there that were way older. You know, Ezra Funk was near 80, I think. And there were some there were some other older people cause, you know, I'm going to be 66 now. So I don't think that's so old. But I thought they were really old. When you're 18, you think that way. But I really felt a part of the group almost instantly. I didn't I didn't feel any misgivings about being with the people that I was with.

SIMPSON: [00:07:45] Can you tell us a little bit about the training?

STACHELEK: [00:07:50] The training, I thought was extremely intensive. Let me jump ahead. A couple of years ago, a few months after I got out of the Peace Corps, I got drafted and I was in the Army for two years. And I always said to people in the Army, you know, this training people are complaining about, but you know, the training in the Peace Corps was a lot harder. It was it was a lot more difficult. It was a lot more emotionally and physically demanding I thought. Early up in the morning for PT and breakfast and studies. I remember we had a couple of classes when it was still dark, that kind of thing. I remember doing some welding early in the morning and building little boxes for chicken to lay their eggs in, nesting boxes and things like that. The intensive language studies. I'd had Latin in high school because that what you had in Catholic high school. Took a couple of years of Latin and I had, I think two years of French. So I have some basic understanding of other, you know, of other languages. But the, you know, the immersion in the Spanish was intense.

STACHELEK: [00:09:17] One thing I remember about the language training was that we had a language lab late, late in the evening. It was like at seven thirty or eight o'clock at night. And, you know, I had those headphones on in that lab and I'd be nodding off, really tired. But the cultural studies, the political science, those things for an 18 year old high school graduate, they were pretty intense. The other thing that that fascinated me was the psychological testing, because I'd had absolutely no experience whatsoever with anything like that. And I guess they gave you the Rorschach and the, uh.

SIMPSON: Minnesota Multiphasic.

STACHELEK: The MMPI, which we used in prisons, and I think that thematic appreciation test and draw a house, draw a tree, I think we did that, that kind of thing. Draw a man, draw a woman. And I'm sitting there trying to do these things and I'm trying not to laugh. I'm trying to think, what is it these people are looking for? And you know with the MMPI, they ask you the same question 57 different ways over and over again. How did I answer that? How should I answer it? Is it right? Is it wrong? That kind of thing. So for, you know, an 18 year old, it was interesting. And I never had the feeling that I was doing badly. You know, my approach was, well, you know, I'll say what I think. You know, a psychologist showed you a picture and kind of everything looked like a bug to me, you know? After a while, now you should be able to imagine seeing other things in there, you know. But my approach was to just, you know, be honest, be open.

STACHELEK: [00:11:34] And I remember one of the pictures that you had to look at. It was a man, an older man, sitting on the bed and he looked kind of dejected and he was sitting on the edge of the bed. What do you think's happening in this picture? I guess, you know, if you are more sophisticated or experienced person, you could come up with all kinds of thoughts, well it looks to me like he's just getting up and he didn't sleep very well. He has a strange expression on his face. And the guy, the tester, kept saying, is that all? Is that all? Yeah, that's all I can think

of. I can't think of anything else. And then, you know, after you get past that, you think maybe I should have said this or, you know, you had all these afterthoughts, you know, it could be this and it could be that, but I guess the tester saw me as a simple minded kid.

STACHELEK: [00:12:38] And I guess that's all right for him. Another thing that that interested me with the training and of course, it was later on, was the peer evaluations and the selection process and the selecting out process. I thought that was, you know, a pretty intense thing. Because as people began to be cut from the program, I was always kind of surprised. Well, you know. But that guy or that girl didn't make it. Well why, you know. They seemed to have so much more experience or more education, that kind of thing. So it was it was kind of surprising and it was always a little scary, you know, and somehow we would know that another selection process or evaluation was coming up and some people would be, maybe invited to be on another project at another time or just sent home. So that that was intense. We are moving to the Indian reservation. That was an interesting experience.

SIMPSON: [00:13:51] That was different for you?

STACHELEK: [00:13:53] Oh, yeah. I had no real concept of what, you know, an Indian reservation would be like. I was surprised by the poverty, surprised by the living conditions.

SIMPSON: [00:14:12] I finally remembered the name of the guy that was the sheriff, it was Nickson. I think it was.

STACHELEK: It might have been, yeah, the Indian policemen, they were kind of scary guys, I thought. Living in the trailers, helping to set the trailers up, you know, that was.

SIMPSON: [00:14:29] What did you do out on the reservation? What did you do on the reservation? As part of your, you mentioned welding, was that out on the reservation too, or just other stuff?

STACHELEK: [00:14:45] No, my recollection is of most of our training experience and learning experience was actually in setting up the trailers. They were the ones that we put in the sanitation systems. We'd put in the sewage lines and things like that. We learned a little bit about irrigation because, you know, the Maricopa had the cotton fields and the irrigation systems. I remember working with Larry Wohlwend, he helped to get a bulldozer running more efficiently than it was running. We were talking about that and I didn't think it was running, but not very well. But we started the chicken co-op, we built the chicken, we've built a chicken houses, the chicken shelters, and brought in all the chickens and gave some classes and in poultry science to the Maricopas, to the tribe there. I remember some of the Indian women who worked in the kitchen, I guess it was at the tribal center. And they were they were very nice, the ladies that were there. The standing joke was as soon as we left, it was going to be the biggest chicken barbecue in the history of Maricopa County.

SIMPSON: [00:16:12] Probably. What about after that training in Arizona, can you talk a bit about the next phase?

STACHELEK: [00:16:23] Well, the last thing that I remember is leaving Arizona, of course, we had a graduation program and that was very nice, but I had four wisdom teeth taken out a couple of days before we left, before we left Arizona. And I think I had them. They weren't through my gum. So I had to have them and I had to have them cut out and pulled out. And I had some stitches. And we left on a Saturday, I believe, to go to Puerto Rico. And I went and had the stitches out because I remember flying in the plane, with jaws like a chipmunk. My face was swollen up from having those teeth pulled. We traveled as a group, and I thought that was neat. I remember we had a whole plane to ourselves and back then anyway, flying was very glamorous. At least I thought it was, you know you know, everybody, they really treated you well. They treated you nicely. We had the whole plane to ourselves. We flew, I know we had a little layover in New Orleans. And we went down to Bourbon

Street and walked around and got on the plane again and got to Puerto Rico. Got to the training camp in the Yungas, I guess it is?

SIMPSON: Near Arecibo.

STACHELEK: Yeah, the tropical rainforest there.

SIMPSON: [00:17:50] Camp Crozier, I think it was.

STACHELEK: [00:17:52] Cape Crozier, yeah, that was the name of it.

SIMPSON: [00:17:55] What do you remember about the Puerto Rican experience?

STACHELEK: [00:18:01] Well, the physical training there, as I say, in my experience, it was more demanding than basic training in the Army. With all the, to me, they weren't physical challenges, they were more mental challenges, you know, to be able to slide down the pulley rope and rappel over the side of a dam and do the drown proofing in the ocean. When I that that was something, I've never been a good swimmer and I didn't like that at all, being out in the ocean and just staying out there and learning how to drown proof yourself. But what I remember most about it is the trek we had to do across, the kind of survival trek that we had to do across the island. All of the Puerto Rican people that we met out in the countryside were so very nice. They were they were always inviting us in for something to eat or something to drink. And when they heard we were going to sleep outside.

SIMPSON: Felt sorry for you.

STACHELEK: [00:19:11] And they'd say, no, you don't have to sleep outside, you can come and sleep on our porch. But the people were very, very nice. Very, very gracious. We ran into one little bit of trouble when a local police chief didn't want us hiking through his territory and he insisted that we get in his jeep and he drive us. So he drove us a couple a couple of miles, not very far. We tried to explain to him, you know, that,

you know, we were just in survival training and he didn't want any parts of us going through there. So, you know, he kind of rode us out of town in his jeep. I remember I took some pictures and he was very nice about it. Another funny thing happened. We were hiking one day and we came to the end of the day and we wanted to sleep. And we were on this on the top of a pretty steep hill. And it was a macadam road going down.

STACHELEK: [00:20:12] And there was a lovely place where we could sleep. And one this little place at the top of the hill was an old truck. And to what it looked like, it had been abandoned. And we were going to start a fire to heat something. You know, we were supposed to live off of tree snails and pick stuff. We didn't do that, we stopped at the little tiendas and got a little Vienna sausages and whatever we could buy, but anyway, we were going to heat some food. We were looking around for, you know, dry firewood. We used to be able to buy the real cheap, Palo Viejo rum. And if you poured out on your firewood, you had an instant fire. But somebody looked inside of this truck and the some of the stuffing on the front seat was popping out.

STACHELEK: [00:21:04] And it wasn't it wasn't like a cotton padding. It was more like a wood fiber. And one of the guys, I think it was Larry Kumar, he was going to pull it all out because he said that would be great to start a fire with and he kind of came to a conclusion. No, you know, leave it alone. Get away from the truck. Well, we go to sleep, and about four o'clock in the morning, we were awakened by these guys that were coming in. It was five or six guys and it was their truck and they were coming to go to work. And the reason why they parked it there was because they had to push it down to get started. So these five or six Puerto Ricans, I don't know whether they were farmers or whatever, but they were going to work. And, you know, I guess they were shocked to see us there as we were to see them. But they didn't say anything. I said good morning. We said good morning.

SIMPSON: [00:22:03] Thank God you hadn't taken that truck apart.

STACHELEK: [00:22:04] You know, some of them got in the truck and a couple of them pushed it down the hill to get it started. And off they went. We said, thank God we didn't mess with that. Who knows what would have happened. We would have been some disappeared Peace Corps volunteers, they would have never found us. Then after the physical training part of the camp. There are a lot of things you didn't, I don't think you had to do anything. You didn't have to rappel off the dam, or you didn't have to climb up that seemed like a 100 foot pole and jump off holding on to that bike. But what kept me going is, there were always girls in front of me. And I think that's where it started. And the girls are crazy. They liked doing that kind of stuff, some of them. They'd climb up there, jump off. And so, you know, how can I not do it if they're doing it? You know, because I can remember sitting up on top of that high pulley, you actually had to sit on top it and get the line and kind of jump off.

SIMPSON: [00:23:15] I thought that was really scary.

STACHELEK: Yeah, it was it was scary. So, you know, getting through that was pretty amazing. Then we went to the University of Mayaguez, some more Spanish and training in tropical agriculture. One funny thing, I remember two funny things I remember about that, I'm pretty sure they were back in Puerto Rico.

STACHELEK: [00:23:48] We had, we were doing some work with swine, with pigs, and this guy was showing us how to give injections and then we castrated a couple of the pigs. He showed us how to do that. And I remember one of the girls said, oh my god these poor pigs. Why are we doing this to them? And I remember the guy said, don't worry about it, because after you're done with them, we're going to butcher them. And I think this girl, I remember her name, her name was Sue Sterling. She wasn't with our group.

SIMPSON: Probably with one of the other groups.

STACHELEK: [00:24:32] I'm pretty sure that was Sue Sterling and she just kind of freaked out, she couldn't go on with it anymore. And the other thing I remember doing that was that was funny, I always think I was funny it and when people ask me about the Peace Corps, I would tell a funny story. I tell about learning about artificial insemination and learning to artificially inseminate the cows. Of course, I'd seen it done on the on the farms at home, but I had never done it. But we actually got to do it. And unfortunately, we all had to use the same cow. There was only one cow there. And, you know, you have to use a long rubber glove and you have to lubricate it with, you know, to evacuate the bowels and you know, all the while you have the semen tube in your mouth, you're holding it in your mouth, and you're doing this with the other hand. And as each guy did it, the poor cow was really passing a lot of gas because it was nothing really there to evacuate. It sounds gross to talk about it. But to me, it's funny because I was sure and when I took my turn with a big, long rubber glove up to my shoulder, I was getting all that in my face. And everybody else, including the instructor, they just thought that was hilarious. It wasn't hilarious to me then. But when I think back on it, I think, you know, that was the funniest thing that I ever participated in in my life. And of course, when I got to Bolivia, I never did anything like that. But that was just funny.

SIMPSON: [00:26:32] So after Puerto Rico, what happened?

STACHELEK: [00:26:36] Well, after Puerto Rico, we got two weeks leave. And that was in October of 1962. And we went home and we were given the opportunity to, you know, gather up whatever, you know, different items we wanted to send it over and take with us. And we were supposed to meet in Miami for a flight to Bolivia. And it was at the exact same time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Because we got to Miami and the Cuban Missile Crisis had already started and people were leaving Miami in droves. And we were just getting there.

STACHELEK: [00:27:19] And we stayed the first night in the airport, the Miami International Airport. And I remember we went to a small conference room and we listened to President Kennedy address the nation about the Cuban Missile Crisis. And we were told that we couldn't leave for Bolivia because of potential unrest and opposition to the United States and, you know, not knowing what was going to happen with the with the Russians and the blockade and naval blockade that President Kennedy had set up.

STACHELEK: [00:27:55] And so we left the airport hotel and we went down to Miami Beach, which I thought was really cool. That's the only time I've ever been to Florida. And the only time I've ever been to Miami Beach was that. And I remember we were there, I guess maybe two or three days. There was some unrest in Bolivia, I believe, or in Latin America because of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and so we were told we weren't going to go to Bolivia. And I thought, well, you know, we're in Florida, we're in Miami, Puerto Rico is close by. We'll probably go to Puerto Rico. Made sense to send us back to the training camp.

STACHELEK: [00:28:48] And lo and behold, we went to Brattleboro, Vermont. How they decided to send us to Brattleboro, Vermont, I don't know. But I remember it was beautiful. We lived in a big, stayed in a beautiful mansion, Shenandoah. I believe it was the home of an author, I don't remember exactly who. It was October in Vermont. It was beautiful. We did some Spanish studies. I remember that, but mostly just kind of loafed around and enjoyed it, at least I did. And I remember going for a walk in the country lanes and things like that. And then another group came in from the Dominican Republic and they were going to do all of their initial training in Brattleboro. It was the Experiment for International Living. That was the name of the organization that had the facility there. And one of the directors told us that they didn't want us to be a bad influence on these new newly arriving Peace Corps volunteers that were going to the Dominican Republic. So they said, we're going to send you away for a couple of days. And he put us on buses and we went to Boston and we stayed at the Boston at the

Copley Square Hotel in Boston, which at the time was kind of a little a little on the seedy side. I mean, not a bad place, but it's not what it is today. Today Copley Square in Boston is a pretty fashionable area, it wasn't then. But we had another vacation, totally unexpected and really, really nice. A couple of days there, went back to back to Brattleboro. And a couple more days there, I don't remember exactly, because I don't remember exactly when we left for Bolivia.

SIMPSON: [00:31:00] I think we got there by, we were there for Thanksgiving, I believe in Cochabamba.

STACHELEK: [00:31:11] I don't remember it, but.

SIMPSON: [00:31:13] Talk a little bit about arriving in Bolivia.

STACHELEK: [00:31:18] Well, the airport was not impressive. I remember the big, there was a big sign, kind of a rustic sign, Bienvenida a La Paz. The airport is much higher than the city, and I remember going down off of the. There might have been paramilitary police, you know, in the streets and patrols. We met some of the officials from the Bolivian Department of Agriculture. We had a visit with at the presidential palace with President Paz Estenssoro and somebody in that ornate meeting room broke one of the chairs. They were these wooden gold, ornate golden chairs all around the side of the room. And I guess you weren't supposed to really sit in them and somebody broke one of them. And we kind of put it together. But Ambassador Stefanski was there and Director Singer and we met the president, who welcomed us to the country, which was pretty neat, and we had a group picture taken on the presidential palace stairs. I remember we made a trip up to Lake Titicaca in Bolivia and we went out there on a bus trip and explored that area. And then we went on, we got our Jeeps or overland jeeps, and we went in convoy to Cochabamba. And it was a long, long, long ride.

SIMPSON: [00:33:09] Were you in Cochabamba?

STACHELEK: [00:33:11] Yes. No, I was. Yeah, I was in Cochabamba. But I can remember driving across the Altiplano and I can remember Mr. Wolf, our director, telling us, you know, the problems they had in the road because a lot of, there were no paved roads. The highway wasn't paved. And I remember him telling us that sometimes Bolivian trucks would break down and they'd have to change a tire or fix a flat and they wouldn't have a jack. So they would actually dig a hole in the road and get the tire off that way. Take a tire off and patch it and put it back on and then just drive off and leave the hole in the road. So, you know, that concerned me driving along, taking turns driving. And you know what if you hit one of these holes in the road? But I remember looking off across the Altiplano and we would see these little tiny mud villages. And I kept thinking myself, I hope I don't have to live in a village like that because I don't think I could do that. And I remember little tiny Bolivian kids would stand by the highway and they'd be screaming for you to give them some candy or throw them some food. I know some of the guys and girls would toss out oranges and things like that as we drove by.

STACHELEK: [00:34:32] But my fear was that place looks so barren to me and some of those villages looked so forlorn. And I thought if I had to live in a place like that, I don't see what good I could do and I don't think I could do that. But then I remember suddenly we started to descend into the Cochabamba Valley and it was like going into the Garden of Eden. I mean, it was just incredible. You started to see green and you started to see trees and you started to see the small alfalfa fields and I said, oh, I'm glad to see this, you know. It was quite an amazing transition and I was relieved. And of course, the city of Cochabamba is a beautiful, beautiful little city. And I remember one of the, one of our instructors telling us in Arizona, he was describing the weather in Cochabamba. And he said, if you're walking down a street in Cochabamba, he said, you said you won't really be sure whether you want to walk on the sunny side of the street or the shady side of the street. He said kind of, you know, you just won't be able to make up

your mind whether it's a little too chilly for a little too warm. But when we arrived, as you just say, it was in November. It was, I thought it was a very beautiful city.

SIMPSON: Like spring.

STACHELEK: [00:35:57] Yeah. It was. There were a lot of trees and flowers in a couple of squares. We stayed at the Hotel Colon and the Prado was there.

SIMPSON: [00:36:11] Can you talk a little bit about what kind of work you did in the Altiplano, I mean Cochabamba?

STACHELEK: [00:36:16] I went out to live in the village of Tarata, which was about 20 kilometers outside the city of Cochabamba. And I was assigned to work with a Bolivian department of extension agent. There was one when I first got there. He was there for about a month and then he got transferred. So for about four months, there was no one there. I was on my own, which meant I couldn't do very much. And most of the people that I came into contact with were, or that came to the office, we had an office on the plaza, didn't speak Spanish.

SIMPSON: Quechua or Aymara?

STACHELEK: [00:36:59] They were, I think they were Quechua Indians and they spoke Quechuan. Of course, we knew very few words of Quechuan and they would come in and they would want to buy a plow or they would want to buy seeds and they might use one or two words of Spanish. And the rest was Quechuan. And sometimes I'd have to go and get my landlady and I walk down the street to where I lived and my landlady would come and she would translate for me and explain to me. Of course, my Spanish wasn't that great either when we first got there. So that was pretty rough. You know, being alone. While the other agent was there, he could show me around and introduce me to

people. All of the people were were wonderful. They were very gracious.

STACHELEK: [00:37:48] No matter how far out you went into the countryside, they were very, they were super respectful. Here's this young person and, you know, here's these village elders and leaders calling me doctor and penyaro and senior. They were all very, very respectful. Curious. And the other thing is the kids in the village and the teenagers, they were just delighted to hear me try to speak Spanish. And of course, you know, they all wanted to practice their English on me. And the famous, what every little kid would ask me was what time is eta? What time is eta? For the longest time, what are they saying? And they were saying, what time is it? Because after they said it three or four times, then they point to my watch. What time is eta? And I lived with a Bolivian family, a widow and her three small children. Mr. Wolfe described my home as rustic before he took me up there. My home was on the corner, the corner house and on the town plaza. And there was electricity, sometimes for two or three hours a night, but not usually. The only source of water in the village was in the main plaza. There was a pump pipe everyone got their water from there. There was absolutely no sanitation. Because Mr. Wolf explained to me when he brought me to the house, he said, he showed me around because obviously had been there before to set up living arrangements. And he took me around a couple of adobe walls and opened this little kind of wooden door, more like a gate.

STACHELEK: [00:39:44] And he said, this is what the family calls a corral. He says this is where he'll go to the toilet. This is your toilet. And I walked around and he said, you just squat, you know, bring toilet paper. And you just squat. And I said, well, OK. Then I found out, you know, that that's what happened. And eventually I found that there was a little old man that came very early in the morning with a bucket and he cleaned everything up. And I think he got like a nickel from my landlady for doing that every morning. But eventually we made a big improvement because we built slab latrines. We got the concrete slabs, latrines. It

was a concrete slab. We had to pay the guy to dig a hole in the corral. And I told him it had to be about six or seven feet deep. And this guy dug a hole that went halfway to China. He was so far down there that I could see him at the bottom of the hole. It doesn't have to be that deep. But we put the slab over it and had another guy come in and we built it over, whether it be in, put a little roof over it. So that became a family outhouse.

SIMPSON: [00:41:10] Was she happy about that?

STACHELEK: [00:41:11] Oh, yeah. I was happy! I kind of never liked the idea of that corral. And then eventually we put two in the school and we put one down at the train station and one in the marketplace. So the house, as I say, was rustic. I paid thirty dollars a month room and board and that included my food and the room I stayed in.

SIMPSON: [00:41:40] So what did you do for entertainment around when you weren't working, in Bolivia?

STACHELEK: [00:41:51] Well, because I get where I did, I got an extra thirty dollars a month in allowance and living allowance and that was so that I could come into town, Mr. Wolfe explained to me, give you a little bit of extra money so you could come into town, you can get showers, you can get something to eat. We didn't have meat. Very rarely did we have meat. We ate a lot of soup, which was very good. But mostly I ate rice with a fried egg on it. That was a meal almost every day for weeks at a time because meat was hard to come by. Couldn't get me unless an animal died. And then it was usually something like a dried jerky that my landlady would, you know, cook in soup and try to fry up.

STACHELEK: [00:42:38] She was a very good cook, but the other the other thing that we did at once in a while was the guinea pigs. The Bolivians called them *conejillos* and the family that I lived with had all these guinea pigs running around when we first got there. I said, oh the kids have pets, isn't that neat? And on Sunday for dinner there was a guinea pig on my

plate and their little head and eyes and little feet still there. I ate it and I got to like it. But I told my landlady, I said, we know Americans and the animals with the heads on them. You know, we don't do that. So I didn't get served *conejillos* with the head on it, but they did leave the feet on it but they made nice little handles, you know, but I actually got to like it. The other thing I got to like in terms of food was fried bread. That was a substitute for me. And I've tried to do that umpteen times, but I could never make it taste like my landlady made it taste. The food could get quite monotonous, the rice, rice and an egg. But that's all there was. And that's what my family ate. So that's, you know, that's what I ate. And a lot of potatoes.

SIMPSON: [00:44:11] We have manioc, you know. Yuca.

STACHELEK: Yeah.

SIMPSON: So, OK, so, uh, did you at the end of your first year, did you have any kind of sense of, you know, how things are going in all, remember how things were midway through the experience?

STACHELEK: [00:44:41] Well, of course, in November. We got a letter from President Kennedy at the end of our first year. I thought that was quite an honor to get a letter from the White House that the president sent congratulating us on the first year.

SIMPSON: And it actually got to you in Bolivia!

STACHELEK: [00:45:00] Yeah, yeah. The other thing that I remember very clearly was the day that President Kennedy was assassinated because I had eaten lunch and I was upstairs, you know, taking a siesta. And I had a, the Peace Corps give me a transistor, Zenith transoceanic radio, shortwave radio. And I was listening to the Voice of America. I used to listen to the Voice of America and the BBC. And this announcer kept talking and he said several times, President Johnson. And I was laying there kind of half awake, half asleep. And I said, what's the matter with

this guy? Doesn't he know it's Vice President Johnson? But, you know, he said it several times and then he started to recount the assassination of the president and, you know, that was just absolutely shocking. And besides that, besides the shock of that and hearing about it in that way, I was surprised by the messages of condolences from all the Bolivian people in the village. They were very upset. And I know they had, in Cochabamba, they had tributes and they had memorials. And it really, his assassination really had an impact on the Bolivian people.

STACHELEK: [00:46:36] I was surprised by that. I was really surprised by that. But those, those sympathies were sincere.

SIMPSON: Yes, they were.

STACHELEK: [00:46:47] The people were really saddened by his death. So that I very much remember. Another thing I remember very much at some point here was my first experience with an earthquake. It wasn't a tremendous earthquake. Again, I was laying on my bed and my bed started to shake and I thought my landlady's dog was under the bed again because he used to get into my room sometimes and I thought he's shaking the bed. I leaned my head over and I was going to whack him with my shoe and there was no dog under there. And then my doors, the shutters on my balcony door started shaking. An earthquake! An earthquake. I said, oh boy.

SIMPSON: [00:47:38] So, uh, at the end of your time there, did you how did you feel about your experience as a Peace Corps volunteer?

STACHELEK: [00:47:47] Well, I thought it was probably one of the best things that would ever happen to me in my life. I had that feeling even then. And it has been, it's been a fantastic experience. You know, the things have happened to me afterwards and I've had opportunities afterwards that I directly attribute to the fact that I was in the Peace Corps. One of the things that every, all the other group members, all the older group

members did was, they always told me when you get out of the Peace Corps, you have to go to college, you have to go to college, you have to go to college, you have to get an education. And so I made up my mind that, you know, I was going to do that. One of the great things that the Peace Corps did for us, if you remember, is you give us a footlocker of books. Albeit, you know, one of them was John Kennedy's Profiles in Courage. But, you know, I remember reading that footlocker full of books by my gas lantern that I had.

SIMPSON: [00:48:50] There were some pretty impressive books.

STACHELEK: [00:48:51] Yeah. Yeah, but, you know, I thought I always thought, I thought for years, one of the best things that could have ever happened to me because it made me realize that I had to get an education. It made me realize that, you know, you could, you as an individual, I as an individual, could do things that would help people. I've always believed that all my life and of course, I've had regrets. And I think about it sometimes, not really regrets. But I said I think to myself, you know, it's a shame I couldn't have done more. It's a shame I couldn't have done more. I did a lot of little things. And I had always hoped that at least the Bolivian people that I came in contact with, I think they appreciated what we did. We worked with the Heifer Project and we brought sheep and cows and chickens and a lot of rabbits in the area where I was. And I know the people appreciated that. And I know that the benefits would be long term.

STACHELEK: [00:50:05] But I hoped that the Bolivian people would get a better appreciation for Americans, you know, and I think they did because we had we had good people. And as I say, I think my experience in the Peace Corps helped me to decide to go to college because when I was in high school, I don't have any intention of going to college. Eventually, I got there. As I say, I got home, I was home a few months. I had my physical for the military and then I got drafted. But that even made, excuse me, because it made the military easier and made my service in the Army easier. I'm used to being away from home for one

thing I was used to doing without my wife. We met while I was in the Army, before I went over to Germany. She would always say, well, you know, why don't you call me from Germany? I said, you know, I was in Bolivia. I never. I was there for, you know, 18, 20 months ago. I never called anybody. And, you know, you just didn't do that. I wrote letters. I wrote you letters. But, you know, I think it prepared me for a lot in life. When I got to college, there's no doubt about it, that one of the reasons why I was accepted, I went to Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. And one of the reasons that I was accepted was because I was a returned Peace Corps volunteer. Plus I was a veteran and they were looking for diversity. And that made me diversity. I was older.

SIMPSON: [00:51:35] What did you major in?

STACHELEK: Political science.

SIMPSON: Political science. Well, you read the right bunch of books.

STACHELEK: [00:51:40] Yeah. One of my professors in political science, Dr. Miller, uh, we were talking and I told him about being in the Peace Corps and I told him about the training we went through and he was so impressed he wanted to see the training syllabus. We brought it in and, you know, we talked a couple of times, very informally. And one day after class, he said, Tom, wait a minute. He said, I've looked over your training syllabus and I've looked over, you know, all the papers that you've given me. So I'm going to give you six credits of Latin American history. He said, I teach two courses, I teach Latin American history course, and I teach a politics of Latin America, South America. He said, I'm going to give you those six credits. So I got, you know, I got six additional credits, which I thought was a big thing. Because when I went to college, I was a day student. I lived at home, but I worked, I worked at night. I had a full time job at night, so all those little things. When I went to work for the Department of Corrections, you know, it was good that I could put my application that had been a Peace Corps

volunteer, that I had worked with minorities and all of those things. It's just it's always helped me that I could look back on some Peace Corps experience and use it.

SIMPSON: [00:53:08] Sounds like it kind of changed the direction that you would have gone.

STACHELEK: [00:53:10] Oh, yeah. There's no doubt about it. My grandmother. My grandmother died, when I was in the army, but I had lived with her for a couple of years on the farm after my grandfather died. She says, well, when you graduate from high school, you'll meet a nice girl and get a job and get married. And if you want to, you can live here on the farm. You know, she had she had those kinds of plans for me, you know? So, yeah, I went in an entirely different direction. And, you know, as I said, I spent 33 years in the Department of Corrections and a pretty responsible position. I worked with people from all over the country and people from all over the world and people with all kinds of experiences, but I always go back to my Peace Corps experience and I say, you know what? There's something that I remember from here that I can use there.

SIMPSON: [00:54:08] So if you had to put it in a nutshell, what would you say you got out of that Peace Corps experience? That applies in all these different ways?

STACHELEK: [00:54:20] Geez, that's a hard question.

SIMPSON: [00:54:23] I'm just, I don't know the answer. I'm just asking it, just you know what?

STACHELEK: [00:54:31] Well, confidence. Absolute confidence that, you know, if I could go through everything that I went through in the Peace Corps. And I thought I could pretty much do anything. I was the first person in my family to go to college, first person to graduate from college. You know, I have just always been able to do the things I had to do and,

you know, and it's no matter what, you know, what life throws at you, you know, I've always felt confident that I could deal with it.

SIMPSON: [00:55:14] Well, that's a pretty great thing.

STACHELEK: [00:55:17] Oh, absolutely. And, you know, I.

SIMPSON: [00:55:20] I think we're about at the end of our time. And thank you.

STACHELEK: [00:55:25] Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]