

**Larry Wohlwend Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Creator:** Larry Wohlwend  
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**Biographical Note**

Larry Wohlwend served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia from 1962 to 1964 as a tractor mechanic.

**Access**

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Oral History Interview

with

Larry Wohlwend

June 25, 2009  
Branson, Missouri

By Sharleen Hirschi Simpson

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

SIMPSON: [00:00:01] Um, today is June 25, 2009, and this is Sharleen Hirschi Simpson, and I'm interviewing Larry Wohlwend. OK, Larry, why don't you tell us a little bit about what you're doing now.

WOHLWEND: [00:00:19] I'm retired and I do a lot of scroll signs, which keeps me busy in the cold months of the winter and the hot months of the summer.

SIMPSON: [00:00:30] Where are you living now?

WOHLWEND: [00:00:32] In Green Bay, Wisconsin. We farmed for 30 years and then I retired and we bought a farm house and remodeled that. We sold it, bought another house and remodeled that one, and now we moved because it's just too much work.

SIMPSON: [00:00:55] Too much work. OK.

WOHLWEND: [00:01:02] So that's brought me up to today.

SIMPSON: [00:01:05] Well, then the next thing that I want to do or I want you to think back to the year that you joined the Peace Corps and think about what you were doing before and how you heard about it and what made you decide to join.

WOHLWEND: [00:01:20] Now, that, of course, that was in 1962. And I had been going with a gal for a year and we're going to get married. Then she decided that we weren't going to get married, but I had gone to business school in Milwaukee and my instructor had been around a bit around the world, and that's something I always wanted to do. So as soon as I wasn't tied down, I let me talk to him. And he called Washington, because he was a friend who was. I think. Anyway, he called Washington for me and said that I'd like to join the Peace Corps. And they called me back and a week later they said, you go get your tickets from Milwaukee and you get your passport picture and the tickets will be waiting for you at the airport to go to Arizona to start training to go to Bolivia. Where the hell is Bolivia? I don't know and I don't care. I just want to go. And that's the way I started my training.

SIMPSON: [00:02:36] So you didn't really indicate any particular preference to where you wanted to go?

WOHLWEND: [00:02:40] I wanted to go to Africa and I was really, well, that's one place that he had told me about, my instructor. And I thought it was really interesting and everything. But after I heard those guys trying to learn Swahili, boy, I'm glad we went to Bolivia.

SIMPSON: [00:03:00] All right. So tell me a little bit about the training and can you describe some of the things that you went through there?

WOHLWEND: [00:03:11] Well, we got to Arizona on the plane. I got off the plane and I thought, why are they heating up this plane right in the middle of this airport? That was so hot. I have never experienced anything so hot. And that was the start of my training. Of course, then we lived in the stadium at Arizona State University, Tempe, and that was hotter than hell, which I had never experienced. Then we live on the reservation out in Arizona.

SIMPSON: [00:03:44] Did you have any second thoughts about that time?

WOHLWEND: [00:03:49] No, no, it was really interesting. And I said, uh. I never pursued the fact of traveling the world, but this was the opportunity and I wasn't looking back. I encourage anybody that I meet today, through all these years, and if they want to do something to join the Peace Corps, that was the best experience of my life.

SIMPSON: [00:04:19] So what exactly were you doing out there on the reservation?

WOHLWEND: [00:04:26] We played with the bulldozer.

SIMPSON: [00:04:30] That you actually got to do something with a bulldozer?

WOHLWEND: [00:04:35] Yeah, we leveled some land with a bulldozer. Seems like we did a lot of exercising, and one of the things that fascinated me most was that we could jump in the irrigation ditches with all our clothes on, get out and walk away and be dry in a short time. And of course, Larry Oglesby was very fascinating. When we walked along the drainage ditches, he'd say, stop! Why should we stop? Well, there's a rattlesnake here. Oh, yeah, what's a rattlesnake? I have never heard a rattlesnake. And so we pound on the irrigation ditch and out comes the rattlesnake. And he grabs it by the head and he took it back to the university, found a sack to put it in.

SIMPSON: Oh my gosh.

WOHLWEND: All the all the training out there, it was very interesting. I visited the Indian homes and talked to some of the Indians there. And I still have a dish that I got from one of them, a clay pot that they gave me. From Arizona, that was neat.

SIMPSON: [00:05:44] So what did you think of your fellow volunteers?

WOHLWEND: [00:05:48] All very interesting. First I roomed with Ezra Funke who seemed like he's was his 90s then already, but I'm not sure. And Ralph Long, who was a very personable person. Actually, when Pete Nieblas and I ended up together in Bolivia, I had never roomed with them or never had Spanish courses with them or anything else, but we ended up together in Bolivia, which was really great.

SIMPSON: [00:06:23] So after Arizona, then what happened? Can you talk about that?

WOHLWEND: [00:06:29] Well, we went through. Of course, that was the Cuban Crisis so we went to Florida and from Florida, they sent us back to Brattleboro, Vermont.

SIMPSON: [00:06:40] What about Puerto Rico? Weren't you there? Arecibo, Camp Crozier?

WOHLWEND: [00:06:47] Yes, yes, yes, yes.

SIMPSON: What do you think of that?

WOHLWEND: Well, that was that yeah. That was in between. Well, that was really. The person that cook the meal in Puerto Rico was an ex Army cook, and he said he's never seen a group eat more than we ever did. The food was the best. They had five gallon cans of grapefruit juice and grape juice and orange juice. And it was always colder than cold and it was just delicious. But the training there was very interesting, except

for some of the houses we lived in. I had never seen the family that I lived with. It was just a room. So I never got to meet them or but I really don't know if anybody else ever lived there.

SIMPSON: [00:07:46] You mean in Mayaguez?

WOHLWEND: [00:07:47] In Mayaguez, yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:07:50] Because in Crozier, we lived in the tent.

WOHLWEND: [00:07:51] Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIMPSON: [00:07:53] You did you participate in that? What was your least favorite or most favorite activity there of the physical activities?

WOHLWEND: [00:08:00] [inaudible]

SIMPSON: [00:08:01] You really like that, huh?

WOHLWEND: [00:08:03] [inaudible] Off the dam. Yeah, I thought that was my greatest experience, something that I would never thought of trying to do. But after the other person did it, I figured, well, they can do that, I can do it.

SIMPSON: [00:08:19] Well, I figured if I was able to do it, anyone could. And how about the hike across the island?

WOHLWEND: [00:08:32] That was interesting and it was fun. It was all in every part of it. I lived on the farm. I just worked on the farm. And we'd never been, my dad wasn't a traveler. And why I grew up loving to travel, I don't know, but every part of this whole process was just tremendously interesting to me. I never had a bad day, never a day I didn't like that. You know, I rather think about going home or something like that. There never was a day.

SIMPSON: [00:09:07] So after Puerto Rico then, what happened? And I guess that's we went home.

WOHLWEND: [00:09:15] We all went home, yeah. And then we were supposed to meet back in Florida. Which we did, and, of course, that was the Cuban Crisis and they sent us to Brattleboro, Vermont.

SIMPSON: [00:09:30] And what about that experience?

WOHLWEND: [00:09:34] Well, what do we do? We played cards and I think the country was beautiful. It was very nice weather, and then they sent us to Boston for the day to get to do something and get us out of their hair I guess, that's what I've heard. My best experience there was talking to a Bostonian cop, asking him directions.

SIMPSON: [00:10:06] So how did that go?

WOHLWEND: [00:10:07] Well, between the two of us, and I can't remember just who I was with, when we walked away, he said, did you understand what he said? And I said, no, I didn't understand a word. He said, he might have been talking Spanish for all I know. That was one thing in Puerto Rico. The Spanish instruction was superb. That fellow taught us Spanish, more than we learned at Arizona State.

SIMPSON: [00:10:39] That was at Mayaguez?

WOHLWEND: [00:10:41] That was Mayaguez. That fellow was terrific, he taught is Spanish.

SIMPSON: [00:10:46] Ok, so now let's go back to when you finally arrived in Bolivia, what were your impressions of that?

WOHLWEND: [00:10:58] I was sicker than a dog.

SIMPSON: Because of the altitude?

WOHLWEND: The altitude just killed me. I had headaches for days. And for me, that was kind of a blur. We went and met the president, the whole group. And they took us someplace, which some of the fellows have talked about, but I really don't remember too much about it. The most I remember was leaving La Paz and starting out to Cochabamba with our wagon train and getting gas. Stopping for gas and the drive down there.

SIMPSON: [00:11:37] There that probably would have been notable for you, the way they had the gas.

WOHLWEND: [00:11:43] Yeah, that for sure. It was a very primitive type deal.

SIMPSON: [00:11:49] So once you got to Cochabamba, then what happened? Can you talk about that?

WOHLWEND: [00:11:54] Well, we first when we first got the Cochabamba, our coordinator Claude Wolfe had places for us to stay. Everything was kind of set, that there was no messing around. We went right to the. I think that's about the first time I got connected with Pete Nieblas because we both lived out in the country in the same place. And so it just went like clockwork, everybody went to their places it seemed like, and we all had our jobs to start doing. I worked at experiment station at Cochabamba, and Peter worked at the plant, the milk producing plant, testing milk. So I went to the experiment station and I worked with Fung Chow Se Mao, who was a Chinese. And at the experiment station I worked with the mechanics there. Doing various mechanic work, and in the afternoons, I had pretty much to myself, which I went out and worked in Arani with Bill Schnek and then with Pete Nieblas and we did various things. So that was pretty much a daily routine. When I went out to Arani with Bill Schnek during the agrarian reform when they split up the farms to give land all the *campesinos*, they had a Cletrac tractor, a track tractor there, and they built the house around it. And there it sat. But nobody knew how to do anything with it. So Bill

says, do you think we can get it running? Let's go look at it. Well, news travels fast in the small town and everybody came out to watch us look at it, and they thought, boy, this is going to start running right away and I said, no, it's going to take a while. So we took the plugs out of it. I don't know how many years they had standing there, took the plugs out of it, drained the gas, and took the carburetor apart and various things, but took it took a month before we went back and had it all back together again. So then finally, it came time to start it and it started right up.

SIMPSON: [00:14:39] Wow.

WOHLWEND: [00:14:40] And I mean, it amazed me as much as it amazed them. You'd never seen an adobe wall come down so fast, as those *campesinos* tore that wall down so they could drive that tractor out. I took the tractor out and I don't know, I can't remember, some type of field cultivator or something behind it. So the thing that always kind of bothered me that these people always worked around these ant hills. If there's an ant hill that took up a section of the ground they could have been working, they never destroyed it. So when I got behind that Caterpillar, I ran every ant hill down that was in the compound and I worked up the whole ground. That was all these places have adobe walls around them. So they each had their own little land. I don't know what they did later on, but that fellow's land was leveled from one end to the other because we ran all the ant hills down.

SIMPSON: Did you get rid of the ants?

WOHLWEND: I really I really couldn't tell you anymore. I really don't remember. And then they had an Italian tractor out there with one cylinder that you could change the heads on and run it on anything that was fuel. And we messed around with that for a while, got that running.

SIMPSON: [00:16:17] They must thought you were a mechanical genius.

WOHLWEND: [00:16:21] Well, it sure surprised them and it surprised me that the Cletrac started running again, just like that. So then in the afternoons, I worked with Peter a couple times. First, he was in the farming and the milk testing. I think the came for most of the year. Anyway, Peter had been there and, of course, their weather was something like ours, that as soon as the hay got ripe, they had rain, rain, rain. So he was wondering how he could preserve this hay. So Peter was talking to me about it, to build a trench silo. And Peter says, OK, tell them how to build a trench silo. We went up and talked to them and I picked out a spot that I thought would be good for a trench silo and told them how to build it, and then I said, then fill it with hay and he had a tractor there and I could run the tractor over back and forth to pack it down so it wouldn't spoil. And he looked at me and he says, well uh, he said, how about if we take these mahogany hammers? They were 12 by 12 by 18 inch blocks on a handle. And he said, how about if we pounded them with those hammers? And I said, well, jeez I suppose it would work but man, that's a lot of work. Well, he says, I can get a few campesinos out here to work cheaper than I can put a gallon of gas in that tractor. OK, whatever it takes. So he built the silo and we looked at it and everything and said, that should work. He cut his hay, put it in there and they packed it down with these big hammers. And then wintertime came and said, when he needed feed, why that's when he opened the silo up. Well, he didn't tell us that he opened the silo and he says they smelled it and everything and phew! Well, if you ever smelled grass silage, why it doesn't have a very sweet order to it. But once you get used to it, it's good smelling stuff. So they hemmed and hawed around. And then they finally decided, well, what do they have to lose? They fed some to the cows.

SIMPSON: [00:19:06] Cows probably liked it.

WOHLWEND: [00:19:07] Cows just loved it. Then they started milking and then he called us up and we went out and looked and they had dug out quite a bit already. And he had about four inches of spoilage on top, which was normal, keeps the air from the rest of it. And that was that was our

success, after working for 15 months or something there. I always tell that story. And I said, you know, it took us almost the whole time we were in the Peace Corps to do that. So things didn't move too fast. But the people were.

SIMPSON: [00:19:42] Did the people understand how to do it so they could do it after that?

WOHLWEND: [00:19:48] Well, as far as I know, they did well. They saw the results and he knew the way he built it and how it worked and everything. And so. About the time that the project got finished, that he was using it, it was almost time for us to leave. It took that long.

SIMPSON: [00:20:10] Like things don't happen overnight.

WOHLWEND: [00:20:13] They sure don't.

SIMPSON: [00:20:15] Well, that sounds like a really fascinating project, Larry. Tell me what else what other things come to mind when you think about the projects that you did? Either that did work or didn't work.

WOHLWEND: [00:20:38] Well, it's not so much they didn't work, it just forever to do anything. Like you say, in farming you don't see results. It's like a scientific experiment. It all takes time. I always say the best thing that I got out of the Peace Corps or in Bolivia was what they taught me, not what I taught them. It's all what they taught me. The life that was there was very important. In Arani when I visited Bill Schnek the thing I like best was the goat cheese. Of course, Dr. Grace goes, that's probably got so many germs in it. I said, well I've survived so far. But the projects. I did various things but nothing as good as the silo and getting those tractors started after two years we were there.

SIMPSON: [00:21:43] So when you weren't working, what did you do?

WOHLWEND: [00:21:48] Well, Peter had a friend that had some guns so we went hunting *codorniz*, which is like a quail. And that was very interesting. We went down to Chapare. The friends of ours had a place down there and along the river. We hunted alligators and ate alligators. Then I went with, I can't remember just who, but it's up in the mountains, one of their projects up there, and we went up there and gave smallpox shots to kids, which they weren't too happy about, but we told them that we would take their picture after we got all done. Well then everything was pretty good because they wanted their picture taken. Course we didn't have cameras that you could see right away, the picture that turned out, but just to get their picture taken was fascinating.

SIMPSON: [00:22:52] Did you do any traveling outside of Bolivia?

WOHLWEND: [00:22:57] We sure did.

SIMPSON: [00:23:00] But where did you go?

WOHLWEND: [00:23:01] Well, Bill Schnek and Pete and I went to Machu Picchu and went to Peru. And then Bill Schnek went back and Peter and I went down to Chile, Santiago, Chile, and we rode the trains back up through Chile and back up to La Paz and took the bus back down to Cochabamba, which was a real experience if you've ever ridden the train. And we went on bus trips around Bolivia, up to Portasee, and there were busses that ran on the railroad tracks down to part of the country. And we took those and at that time, I learned to say, [inaudible].

SIMPSON: Which means?

WOHLWEND: What are you laughing at? Because I have odd shoes with the lifts on them. The *campesinos* would come up and they would talk about it, you know, and they were kind of laughing and everything. And Peter and I would wait for them to get closer and closer and then I would say

[inaudible] and they would just fade away. And that was one of our troops. And the other trip we went down to Brazil and Paraguay, down to Argentina. And we're always trying to take in as Argentina, not as Americans. So we've never heard anything about being American, but we always heard things about us being Argentineans. But we saw a lot of the country, as much as possible. That was one thing that was really amazing because Peter and I had the same ideas As far as we could go as cheaply as we could possibly go. If we got into hotel rooms that smelled like Lysol, that was great. We knew that there was some disinfectant in them anyway. We got sick once in a while, but not very much. But Peter and I traveled, traveled a lot as much as we possibly could.

SIMPSON: [00:25:33] So if you think back about your time in Bolivia, other than the silo and the tractors that you got resuscitated, uh, what stands out in your mind that you remember?

WOHLWEND: [00:25:56] The people. The people were always, the people were great. They were nice to us, they helped us. And they were, the people that fascinated me and the way they worked. But when you can see how fella take coat hangers and do welding with them, and that's all he's got, that really fascinated me because I would never dream of trying to weld with a coat hanger, but that's all they had for materials so that's what they used.

SIMPSON: [00:26:32] A lot of improvisation.

WOHLWEND: [00:26:36] Yes. Yep. Everywhere. I mean, a tin can to those people was worth more than what was inside of it. But, boy, when you had the tin can, you could do so many different things.

SIMPSON: [00:26:51] And so where were you when Kennedy was assassinated? Do you remember that?

WOHLWEND: [00:26:58] I was at the Tombarada and I didn't hear anything about it then until I came back to the family we lived with and they said, well, are you leaving right now or are you leaving tomorrow? And we said, are we leaving? For where? To go back to the States. And we said, no. And they said, why not? I said, well, what are we going to do? And I said, things there will keep on going, the Peace Corps will keep on going. It isn't going to stop. And they couldn't believe it. And it's one of those things that happened, but they were just amazed that we didn't turn and go right home after that.

SIMPSON: [00:27:54] So after you got out of the Peace Corps, what did you do?

WOHLWEND: [00:28:04] I went home. Bought the farm, because my dad said, you buy the farmer and I'm going to sell it. Well, that tied me down. I continued working on diesel engines. Because I had the farm and commitments, when they had the big earthquake in Alaska, I worked on a fellow's truck that had come down and bought a brand new truck and was driving it back to Alaska. I said, boy I'd like to go. He says, I'll take you up here if you want to help drive. But he says, I'm leaving in the morning. And I said, well, give me one day to get things in order. And he said, no, I can't, I've got to be on the road. So that opportunity went past. And, of course, being tied down with the farm. I eventually met my wife and married and we've spent 30 years on the farm and we've been married for 40 years.

WOHLWEND: [00:29:24] Spent 30 years on the farm as a diesel mechanic and then I retired. So now we have four kids living near us with grandchildren and great grandchildren. Because when I met my wife, I was 27 and kind of a ready-made family because she had four kids. Later on one of our sons passed away. And we had our youngest son, Larry, Larry the third, born in April, the same as my dad.

SIMPSON: [00:30:07] So, Larry, how do you think being in the Peace Corps, well, you told me already that you thought you learned more from the Bolivians that they did from you.

WOHLWEND: Right.

SIMPSON: How do you think being in the Peace Corps changed the direction of your life?

WOHLWEND: [00:30:30] It gave me an insight to what life is like besides our own little corner of the world. And when people talk about poverty, that's one thing that always, you know, what is poverty? Explain poverty. In your form of life, their form of life, or their part of the world. I mean, like in Cochabamba, you saw kids in the way that and dirty playing in the streets, playing with whatever they had, having a good time, laughing, hollering. And I'm sure their life, you know, wasn't a joy, but they had good times, too. And people say, oh, they're so poor, OK, they are in some respects. But to our type of living or their type of living are they poor? They might have been the happiest kids in the world, who knows. So they never felt sorry for themselves. And of course, they always came begging for us, you know. When Peter and I would walk downtown with candy or something, we'd give them some candy cause we were always buying candy, which I loved. [tape break] Walking and just ignoring them. And I motioned to Peter, look down, and he kind of looked down. Well, these two kids were laughing at each other and everything and making jokes, walking alongside us and all of sudden saw us looking at them, "*pobrecito, pobrecito.*" And we just laughed and laughed. But that was quite an experience that that's one thing. Poverty is, I don't know how to say it, but it's always when people say those people in other countries are so poor, by what standards do you consider them poor?

SIMPSON: [00:32:32] All right, that's an important insight.

WOHLWEND: [00:32:36] That's the big difference in how other people live.

SIMPSON: [00:32:42] If you have not gone in the Peace Corps, do you think that you would have done different things than what you ended up doing?

WOHLWEND: [00:32:50] Well, I would have still tried to go overseas. I would have went overseas somewhere because that was one of the things that always interested me. And of course, my instructor talked about it several times.

SIMPSON: [00:33:08] How old were you when you went in the Peace Corps?

WOHLWEND: [00:33:09] Twenty-two.

SIMPSON: [00:33:11] Twenty two and a bunch of us about that age, young, it was a pretty young group.

WOHLWEND: [00:33:18] Yeah. We're kind of the older well, middle older ones. It was a little bit younger, and then Ralph Long who was quite a bit older. Who I enjoyed visiting very much after we got out of Peace Corps.

SIMPSON: [00:33:34] I actually went to visit him too in Oklahoma there, on my way back to Texas. Uh, OK. Well, have you maintained any kind of contact with any of the people in Bolivia that you knew?

WOHLWEND: [00:33:52] No, not at all. Life just got going too fast, right, between farming and working at night and everything. I always wanted to go back but, of course, that money was always kind of short.

SIMPSON: [00:34:10] Yeah. Do you think that being in the Peace Corps changed, it sounds like you did quite a bit with technical assistance, with your silo idea and tractors and things like that, and then you said that you thought you had learned a lot from the Bolivians and that you feel like you think they understand more about Americans because of being in contact with you.

WOHLWEND: [00:34:47] Well, there's one family that we knew quite well, with four or five kids. And I mean, they were teenagers. But I don't think I ever convinced them that my mother did her own washing and cooking on

the farm. They just could not quite picture the fact that we worked the farm ourselves and my mother did the things herself. They just couldn't quite grasp that she didn't have some maids to help her. Like either in Bolivia, I think you were a maid or you had a maid, it seemed to me. That's one of the things that I don't know, I ever convinced them about the way we lived or not.

SIMPSON: [00:35:47] Well, it's hard to tell. Yeah, so overall, you said in the beginning that you it's experience that you would encourage other people to do, that you would have done it again and you had it to do over.

WOHLWEND: [00:36:02] Oh, yes. Oh, yes. All the time. Anybody I've talked to that had the least interest in joining the Peace Corps. If anybody ever did it, I really couldn't tell you. Farm congress days, which we have in Wisconsin and some other places, they invited me to join the Peace Corps group that was there to talk to people. It didn't last too long because it turned out about 100 [degrees] that weekend or during the week they had it, and it was just so hot that it lasted one day. But other than that, I've never really gone out for public speaking or things like that.

SIMPSON: [00:36:50] So tell me, Larry, from your point of view, why has this diverse group that was Bolivia II stuck together, maintained contact?

WOHLWEND: [00:37:02] Well, I think we all kind of got the same set of values. There's nobody in our group that feels above anybody else, I don't think. As far as I know, I mean, and we really enjoy getting together. So it's the, some we see more often. Stop and see George Wright a couple of times, and I really don't. I guess it's just the, we were all pretty much in the same category I would say.

SIMPSON: [00:37:41] Even though people came from diverse backgrounds.

WOHLWEND: [00:37:43] Everybody's got a different background.

SIMPSON: [00:37:49] It's usually not always the kind of group you would you would have been prepared to see maintain contact that much.

WOHLWEND: [00:37:58] No. Well, the first, the first time we didn't go either. There was too many things going on, we just couldn't get away. But then after that, why, I said, I'm going to go. Whatever's going to happen, we're going to go. It's always been enjoyable, seeing the guys, and girls.

SIMPSON: [00:38:36] Do you have anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked you about?

WOHLWEND: [00:38:39] No, I guess not. I think that pretty much covers it. It was just the most enjoyable experience. The one thing I just, I'm really glad that I didn't get married and spend the rest of my life there. Hard to say, but looking back, I think that's one of the best things that happened in my life, not getting married and joining the Peace Corps.

SIMPSON: [00:39:12] All right, well, thank you, Larry.

[END OF INTERVIEW]