

Tom Roschke Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Tom Roschke served as a Peace Corps volunteer in India from 1970 to 1972 in an agricultural development program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Tom Roschke

August 21, 2019
Falls Church, Virginia

By Donald Camp

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

CAMP: [00:00:02] Today is August 21st, 2019. This is Donald Camp and I am interviewing Tom Roschke, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in India from, India 102, from June 1970 to July 1972 as an agricultural development volunteer in the state of Tamil Nadu, district of Thanjavur. I was in the same district in the same program, so I am familiar with parts of his story. Okay, Tom, could we start by talking a little bit about yourself very briefly, where you came from and what you were doing before you join Peace Corps and then get into reasons for your joining and how you heard about it?

ROSCHKE: [00:00:51] Sure. Well, I grew up in Missouri, a small town in Missouri, Joplin, Missouri, and then spent high school in Texas, in West Texas, in a little town called San Angelo, and then went to college and applied to Peace Corps in my senior year of college and joined the Peace Corps right after I graduated. So that's kind of how I got there.

CAMP: [00:01:20] How did you hear about the Peace Corps, do you remember?

ROSCHKE: [00:01:24] Well, at that time, which was the seventies, the advertisements were everywhere. Television, newspaper, magazine, it was widely advertised. And the one thing that sticks out in my mind is that there was a guy one year ahead of me who joined the Peace Corps. I happened to know, I didn't know him well, but I knew who he was. So between all the advertisements and this other guy's going, I said, I started to think, you know, maybe that's something I could do.

CAMP: [00:02:00] And what was your motivation for going this route?

ROSCHKE: [00:02:05] Well, I didn't have any worries about the draft because I had a very high draft number and it was never going to be reached. So that was not an issue. But I came to the end of college and didn't know really what I wanted to do. And I'd always found this idea of going into the Peace Corps fascinating. So I thought, you know, this could be a great time to do that.

CAMP: [00:02:27] And did you have a specific country or theme that you wanted to pursue in the Peace Corps?

ROSCHKE: [00:02:34] Well, ironically, my choice was Latin America. So I didn't have any particular activity that I wanted to do. But I, uh, I put down Latin America on my application, and of course, it came back India and agriculture. Well, the agriculture I was okay with because I'd worked a little bit on farms in the summer and things like that. And India I was okay with. Nothing wrong with India. So I said, okay, let's try it.

CAMP: [00:03:08] Great. And so you had some training in agriculture. Peace Corps presumably took you farther than that. Would you like to talk about training, where you trained, and the subjects that you were trained in?

ROSCHKE: [00:03:23] Sure. Training started off in California. And we did just sort of two weeks, two or three weeks' worth of kind of orientation and just getting a general idea of rice culture and a little bit about the Indian

culture. And we didn't do any language training at that time that I recall, but we kind of started to get an idea of who the other volunteers were and who was in, who our instructors were, and a little bit of the subject matter of what we needed to know. Then we went to the Philippines. We were in training in the Philippines for two weeks. Uh, and there we got an intensive rice training. So, I mean, down to the point where we actually worked with the plows in the fields and got into the fields and did all kinds of things. So, uh.

ROSCHKE: [00:04:22] So that was a real introduction to rice cultivation, which is what our assignment was going to be. Then from there, we went to India and did in-country training for, I guess, what, eight weeks, maybe? Something like that. And at the end of that, we, those of us who were left, became volunteers.

CAMP: [00:04:44] Where were you trained in India? And what were the, what was your training site like?

ROSCHKE: [00:04:50] In India, we were trained in the south in Tansur district at an agricultural research station. And there they actually had facilities for training agricultural extension workers. So it was really pretty ideal for us to be there. And we studied all kinds of different varieties of rice. And there we started our language training and we started our, had more intense cultural training and we worked actually in India at that time. So we got to meet Indians and get to know a few of them in their homes and things.

CAMP: [00:05:27] Could you talk a little about how the Peace Corps managed training? Did you think they did a pretty good job? And I guess the three areas would be language, technical, and cross cultural. Um, I can't think of any other one. How did, how did they do in terms of getting, getting you ready for your assignment?

ROSCHKE: [00:05:50] Well, they did all right. There was an awful lot for them to do. And I felt when the whole thing was over that I really didn't know enough. But they only had the summer really to teach us. And same thing for language. And cultural training, well, I guess we probably learned more

useful cultural things from Mike Thorburn than anything else. He kind of gave us a clue as to what it's like to be a Peace Corps volunteer and what do you have to do in order to meet the people and integrate a little bit.

CAMP: [00:06:33] Mike was our cross-cultural coordinator and was a volunteer, was a returned volunteer, correct?

ROSCHKE: [00:06:38] Returned volunteer.

CAMP: [00:06:39] And he served in Tamil Nadu or Kerala?

ROSCHKE: [00:06:41] He served in, uh, my understanding was that he served in Karnataka, which is up near Bangalore, in the poultry project up there. So I thought, in short, I think, I thought they did the best they could given the given the time available.

CAMP: [00:07:02] You know, one of the things I remember about that period was that we had a psychiatrist from Peace Corps on hand. I can't remember her name now.

ROSCHKE: [00:07:10] Helen.

CAMP: [00:07:11] Helen.

ROSCHKE: [00:07:11] Helen Ash.

CAMP: [00:07:12] Thank you. Tell me about what you think her role was. I'm interested in that aspect.

ROSCHKE: [00:07:18] I think her role was, was dual. One was to sort of prepare us as best she could. And the other one was to spot those of us she felt couldn't really hack it as volunteers in the village. And so it was being a dual role. Those of us who are a little uneasy probably, you know, always were careful to present a good side to Helen. And then she, uh, did probably saw through us, but we were careful never to sort of go off the deep end with Helen.

CAMP: [00:08:04] To your knowledge, did she, uh, actively discourage anyone, any of our group from, from pursuing, from continuing beyond training?

ROSCHKE: [00:08:13] I don't recall. I thought there were one or two that she kind of questioned, let me put it that way.

CAMP: [00:08:20] Fair enough. Let me take a step back, please, because one of the things I wanted to ask you, and partly because I'm vague on it, is talking about our arrival in India. We came out of, uh, we came out of the Philippines via Hong Kong, as I recall, where we were caught in a typhoon.

ROSCHKE: [00:08:38] That's right.

CAMP: [00:08:39] And then we arrived in Delhi.

ROSCHKE: [00:08:41] Yes.

CAMP: [00:08:42] Tell me about your recollections of Delhi and the trip down to the ag research station in Tamil Nadu.

ROSCHKE: [00:08:51] I have a very vivid, what I think is a very vivid recollection of that, those day or two in Delhi. And in retrospect, my feeling is, um, it wasn't kind of fair to us to give us such a raw welcome. We were taken to a large home which was sort of converted into a hotel. I think it was an old, probably an old British home or something like that. Anyway, and dinner was served. I don't know that anybody else remembers this, but dinner was served, as I recall, at a long table or maybe two tables. And then behind us stood all these bearers in uniform, which you can still see now in hotels in India, in fancy sorts of hotels in India. But I remember us all thinking, well, is this what India is like?

ROSCHKE: [00:09:49] And the answer was, which we found out before too long, no, this is not what India's going to be like for us anyway, and certain parts of India are still like that. But I felt like, and there was a swimming pool outside in the back. It was, we were told not to drink water, but. And we

got, and what was helpful was we did get some free time to go around Delhi and see parts of Delhi.

CAMP: [00:10:18] And then after did we go to the embassy at all? Did we, were we greeted by anyone other than the Peace Corps office that you recall, or were we greeted by the Indian government?

ROSCHKE: [00:10:29] We must have had a greeting or two, but it just didn't stick in my mind who probably would take him to the embassy or something like that. I don't recall much.

CAMP: [00:10:38] And then after two days in Delhi, we took the plane?

ROSCHKE: [00:10:41] We took a plane.

CAMP: [00:10:42] To Madras.

ROSCHKE: [00:10:43] Went to Madras and stayed in the Woodlands Hotel. And it seemed we kept hitting woodlands all the way down. So I guess we just by luck. Anyway, stayed there for a day or two and, um, and from there take a trip, took a bus actually down to Thanjavur District. And that bus ride sticks in my mind because we were going through village after village after village and narrow streets with, you know, sharp turns. And that was our introduction to the India we were to know later on. A lot of dust and a lot of heat and.

CAMP: [00:11:33] Dust and heat.

ROSCHKE: [00:11:34] Dust and heat.

CAMP: [00:11:34] I remember that as well.

ROSCHKE: [00:11:36] And a lot of horns.

CAMP: [00:11:38] Exactly.

ROSCHKE: [00:11:39] A lot of people blowing their horns.

CAMP: [00:11:41] So we got down to our training site and we're there for two months. In that time, we went out and visited areas to practice our, our Tamil, which was the language of the region. Would you like to talk about our Tamil training and your first attempts to speak it and how it went over the long term?

ROSCHKE: [00:12:03] Well, I think the Tamil training was absolutely essential, and yet I don't think very many of us picked up enough Tamil in training to, to carry us through. We picked up our Tamil, we got enough to get started. But then we picked up our Tamil as we went through our village experiences and some of us had tutors and things like that in the village, and that helped. But it was a long process to really pick up enough Tamil to communicate well.

CAMP: [00:12:39] And did you continue your training on a regular basis once you got to the village?

ROSCHKE: [00:12:43] I had a tutor who came twice a week, but, not twice a week. Once a week. But, but unfortunately, his method of training was the Indian method of training, which is rote. Say it over and over and over again. And if I didn't understand what he was saying, he would just repeat it back to me. And I found it very hard to absorb much doing that. And I wasn't getting the same sort of, uh, in the village. In training, for example, we took a pretend visit to the market and we would buy tomatoes and we would use some of our phrases and sort of get them into context. In my training in the village, there was no context whatsoever. It was just repeat, repeat, repeat. And I was somehow supposed to absorb that and know what to say. So I have to say that after three or four months, I terminated the tutoring and just proceeded on my own. And I probably learned more training, more Tamil from the people I worked with than anything else.

CAMP: [00:13:48] Tell me about your village.

ROSCHKE: [00:13:50] Village?

CAMP: [00:13:50] Well, tell me first about your first arrival in the village.

ROSCHKE: [00:13:53] Ah, my first arrival. Well, total confusion and bewilderment. I was very pleased with the house. The house itself was more than adequate. It was a bedroom and a living room and a kitchen and an upstairs sort of veranda thing. But I had no idea how to live there. Where do you get drinking water? Where do you get groceries to cook with? And how do you take a bath? And of course, the well was dry, not dry, but need to be primed. And so I couldn't get water out of it.

CAMP: [00:14:30] So that suggests Peace Corps didn't really give you much introduction, did they just bring you to the village and drop you basically? Here's your house.

ROSCHKE: [00:14:37] Pretty much. They felt like, they felt that they had dropped me, dropped off my furniture and, uh, and put me in a good place. And that was good enough. And so it was pretty much catch as catch can. And I have a very vivid memory of all the children who came in to see what was going on. Very few adults, maybe one or two adults, actually poked their head in. But I wanted to be very friendly, so I didn't chase anybody off or anything. But how much talking could I do with the kids? I didn't know enough Tamil to understand most of what they were saying.

ROSCHKE: [00:15:13] And I had a special complication because there was a volunteer who had been there from the previous group who had stayed a year and had spoiled all the kids rotten. And so when I got there, they were all looking for handouts and I didn't have anything to hand out, so uh, and I thought it was a bad idea anyway. So after a few days they kind of figured out they weren't getting anything from me and they kind of got angry. It took a while for everything to sort of settle down and to an equilibrium after that.

CAMP: [00:15:48] Some of our fellow volunteers were a little freaked out in those first few days by all the people and the constant staring. Did that, did that bother you?

ROSCHKE: [00:15:56] Yes, it did. It bothered me a lot. But that's, that's why I think Mike Thurman's coaching. He said at some point, you know, you have to have your privacy, and so they'll understand if you just tell them you need some time to yourself. And basically, you know, I was friendly as long as I could until I had something to do or something to, something to go see. And then I would say, okay, you know, you guys have to go home now. So. And I was so, I was okay with it, but I know it was very tough on some other people. They couldn't, couldn't tell people to leave.

CAMP: [00:16:36] How large was your village? Where was it physically situated? And, and what was the approximate, what was the name of it, for starters?

ROSCHKE: [00:16:48] The name of my village was so complicated sometimes even the bus drivers didn't know and the bus went through it every day. So the name of it was Kovil Devarayan Pettai. And Kovil stands for temple. Devarayan Pettai probably was the initial name of the village. Oh, Pettai means small. So Devarayan Pettai means small place. Small village. So, um. The history of it was that when everything was Hindu, this was probably a lower caste segment of the village. Another caste, another section, which is probably the Agraharam and.

CAMP: [00:17:39] The Agraharam was the Brahmin, traditional Brahmin part of the village, correct?

ROSCHKE: [00:17:43] Right. Right. And, uh, and it was usually separate from the lower caste or the untouchables. And so when the Muslims had come in to South India, the upper caste people converted to Muslim, to Islam. And so that left the village half Hindu and half Muslim. Ironically, the temple, which would naturally have been located in the bristol, in the, in the Brahmin section of town, was then located in the, at the edge of the Muslim section of town. So it kind of fell into disuse and I, in fact, didn't even know it was there for probably a year. And finally I found it and went over there and explored a little bit. But anyway, so there's a village, it's on the main lot and on the main road between Thanjavur and Kumbakonam, each of them about ten, 15 miles in one direction or the other. And, uh, let's see. Did that cover what you?

CAMP: [00:18:49] Yes. And what was the approximate population?

ROSCHKE: [00:18:53] It wasn't large. The section I was in was maybe, I'm going to guess three or 400 people.

CAMP: [00:18:58] And was it on the river?

ROSCHKE: [00:19:02] Um, well, it was not too far from the river. It wasn't actually on the river. Probably if you go back about 100 yards or so, you would get one of the tributaries of the, of the river. The river by that time was in the delta, and it had, it was starting to split into tributaries and to reach the sea.

CAMP: [00:19:22] And you say you were 15 miles from Thanjavur and 15 miles from Kumbakonam.

ROSCHKE: [00:19:28] About that.

CAMP: [00:19:28] So did you get into those larger towns fairly often or were you usually in the village all the time?

ROSCHKE: [00:19:38] I did fairly frequently into both those places. Thanjavur we had the district headquarters, so we had to go in there sometimes to meet various people. And Kumbakonam I did my initial shopping to fill the house, to furnish the house, and I ran through my 1,000 rupee house furnishing amount very quickly, and I found out that I just had to go and live with what I had. So that was hard, but I got to know Kumbakonam a little bit and Thanjavur pretty well.

CAMP: [00:20:20] So you had described your house as fairly almost luxurious for the village, I would say.

ROSCHKE: [00:20:28] Yes, it was.

CAMP: [00:20:29] But let's be practical. Did you have running water and did you have a toilet inside the house? What did you do for that?

ROSCHKE: [00:20:37] No, no, that was a there was a, um, an outhouse in the back yard. That was my toilet. And then there was a pump right outside the back door. Unfortunately, if I ever left the house for a few days, the pump would go dry and I'd have to have some water to prime it again. So, um, but it was available for bathing and that sort of thing. And then I'd have to boil the water if I wanted to drink it or cook with it.

CAMP: [00:21:07] What did you do about eating? How did you get your meals?

ROSCHKE: [00:21:11] Very good question. I cooked for myself or ate at local restaurants, there were a lot of little eateries around, for a week or so. And then it turned out there was another volunteer who, uh, whose family knew of a young man who could cook for me. So he came to me. He came to me and started cooking. And he knew the area and he knew what to buy. And I had my pots and pans and things that I had. So he was in business right away. An interesting story there because I thought it was totally unprepared to deal with the cook, and I think I probably would have been better off if I had a meeting with a family or had a family supply the food or whatever but.

ROSCHKE: [00:22:00] I found that I was running out of money at the end of the month and I figured out finally that a lot of my money was disappearing on his shopping trips and he was writing his own receipts when he would come back to me. So that, we lasted a couple of months, maybe three or four months. And then I decided that either I was going to, uh, be broke for the rest of my stay in India or I was going to have to let him go. So the problem wasn't his pay. The problem was the fact that he was siphoning the money off for something else. So I let him go.

CAMP: [00:22:33] And after that?

ROSCHKE: [00:22:34] After that, I did my own cooking and ate at some of the local places, and you could very cheaply eat at the local places. Or occasionally I would get a family to bring me food.

CAMP: [00:22:47] I remember when we got together as volunteers, we often talked about the state of our health. How did you, how did you do in terms of the health side of things?

ROSCHKE: [00:22:57] I had a problem with the health. I think pretty much everybody did to a certain extent. We just did not realize, I think, to the extent to which we had to really be super careful about what we ate and what we drank, because about once a month I'd get sick and I'd be sick for a couple of days. And then, uh, and pretty much all the time I would have a stomachache and my stomach would rumble and get cramps. And one of the nicest things about coming back to the United States after it was all over was that went away. I still remember how nice it felt not to be sick.

CAMP: [00:23:40] Wow. You mentioned that there had been another volunteer in your village and you also mentioned that there was another volunteer who had recommended your cook to you. Tell me, how close were you to other volunteers and how often did you see them?

ROSCHKE: [00:23:55] Yeah, I was, uh, I was closer to two volunteers who were from the previous group. So they, they had been there a year already by the time we got there. I was closer to them than, physically, than I was to our own members. So one was just a mile down the road. That was Jim Emery. And the other one was, oh, maybe three or four miles away in Kabisthalam. And that was Joe English.

CAMP: [00:24:25] Mm hmm.

ROSCHKE: [00:24:26] And, um, so I got to know them fairly well. They were both very friendly and helpful.

CAMP: [00:24:33] Were they helpful in getting you to, uh, understand how, how you could best live and how you could best accomplish your work and so forth?

ROSCHKE: [00:24:42] Well, I would say in many ways, yes. And in other things, they couldn't help me because the number one thing I think that I needed was

to be able to get to know some farmers and get them to trust me. And that was probably my number one difficulty there. And each of them, uh, had met and was dealing with a few farmers, but it was always with special circumstances. One was the farmer that Joe lived with. He had a very big farm, and so he had all he could do just to work with that farmer if you wanted to. And he had plenty of money, so he was very wealthy. And so it wasn't as though it was a risky proposition for him to do something that Joe recommended.

CAMP: [00:25:38] Let's segue from that into your work itself. You were, I think of us as agricultural extension agents. But, but who were you working for? Who did you report to, if anyone? How in the village or in the provincial capital? And talk a little about your typical workday and what you did.

ROSCHKE: [00:25:59] Yeah, I think, well, in one sense, there was no typical workday. But in terms of, in terms of structure, I reported to a block development officer and they were called BDO, block development officer, and they had a meeting once a month or something like that to which I was invited and in fact sort of required to attend. And all of his village, all of his agricultural extension workers from that area came to that meeting. So there were maybe 100 of us, of which I was the only Peace Corps volunteer. And in that meeting, and he would tell us what had happened and what had been decided and what the priorities were and those kinds of things. A lot of it didn't apply to me, but I was there anyway and I got to learn what they were up to.

ROSCHKE: [00:26:47] So my, my, my daily, almost daily contact really was with the gram sevak, who was a village development officer. He, um, he was doing very much similar work to what I did, but he had additional responsibilities besides agricultural extension. He was doing family planning and he had a quota for people he had to get, uh, what do you call it? He had to have. Sterilization was required and he had to get a certain number of people to sign up for that. It was a big population program. He had to teach all kinds of health things, but he was very helpful. He would come by on his bicycle in the morning and he and I would go out and we would try to meet people and talk with them. And I got to see how he interacted with all of his people.

CAMP: [00:27:48] And so when you did find a farmer who wanted assistance or was willing to work with you, what did you do and what was your goal there in terms of what you were trying to get the farmers to do at that point?

ROSCHKE: [00:28:04] Well, our goal was to try to get them to use modern methods of fertilization, weed control, water control, pesticide use, which rice varieties to use, a variety of things like that. And, uh. What I, the problem I ran into, I think, was that most of the farmers that I met were pretty subsistence farmers. And so their livelihood, whether or not their family would eat the following year, depended on whether or not their crops did well. And so they weren't willing to do a whole lot of experimentation unless they had pretty good assurance that this was a good thing. To get that, you had to go to the higher income type farmers.

ROSCHKE: [00:28:54] And, uh, and I did meet a few of those and get to work with a few of those, but unfortunately it was not, um. They were already, let's put it this way, they were already the clients of agricultural extension workers who were from India and could speak Tamil and had motorcycles and all sorts of resources that they could offer. So there wasn't a whole lot of positive interaction there either.

CAMP: [00:29:24] In thinking of resources we had to offer, the one thing I remember was I had a sprayer that people wanted to make use of, a backpack pesticide sprayer. Did you have one of those and what did you do with it?

ROSCHKE: [00:29:35] I did have one. I had a backpack pesticide sprayer. It was gas powered. And when it worked, it was great. When it didn't work, it didn't work. And at one time I had to take it all the way to Kumbakonam on the back of my bicycle. And the guy adjusted the carburetor a little bit and got it working again, or fixed the points or whatever it was he did. He didn't show me what he did, so unfortunately I couldn't fix it the second time, but I tried to get local people to fix it. Sometimes they could, sometimes they couldn't.

ROSCHKE: [00:30:04] The big problem I had was it was very popular, but the big problem I had with it was if I lent it to somebody and he would say on Thursday and he would take it Thursday morning, and he was supposed to bring it back Thursday night, but it didn't come back Thursday night. So the guy who was supposed to take it on Friday didn't have it to take, and pretty soon people didn't sign up for it because they figured they weren't going to get it when they signed up for it. So to get it back when they were supposed to bring it back, I think it was a little silly probably to sign somebody up for the very next day. I should have said signed up maybe one or two people a week. But if you do that, your season is over and you've only helped a few farmers. So I try to get it going faster than that in general and it didn't work.

CAMP: [00:30:52] So what kind of support did the regional office of Peace Corps out of Bangalore provide you in terms of visits, in terms of materials, etcetera?

ROSCHKE: [00:31:03] Well, we had our, we had our supervisor who was, uh, boss. Um.

CAMP: [00:31:10] Full name?

ROSCHKE: [00:31:11] Uh, Srinivas. Srinivasan. What was his full name? K Srinivasan I think.

CAMP: [00:31:16] Sounds right.

ROSCHKE: [00:31:18] And we called him boss. He, he was happy with that. I think that was his suggestion. And he was the one who knew a lot of the agricultural development workers in that area. He was originally an agricultural development person and he's the one who got us our assignments and helped to pick the villages and seem to know the hierarchy of the agricultural development people in the county district. So he came, I forget, maybe once a month, maybe once a quarter, um, to see how we were doing. And, um. I never learned too much from boss, to be honest. But he was there.

CAMP: [00:32:05] Mm hmm. What about written materials? What about things, I mean, coming out of training, did you have guidance on identifying pests in the field, that kind of thing?

ROSCHKE: [00:32:17] Well, we had our basic training materials that we could take home with that, but, um. You know, what I found was that they didn't, the farmers in my area didn't need guidance on those kinds of things because they were already getting lots of guidance from the local agricultural extension agents and the, and the, and the village level worker that I knew. So what they wanted for me was help with stuff that couldn't be solved in other ways.

ROSCHKE: [00:32:45] So one time some farmer came to me and he kind of figured out what I was there for, and he asked me to come with him to his field and take a look. And he took me to his field. And there he had a rice field, nice rice field. And in the middle of it there was about three feet round circle where nothing would grow. And he said, he pointed to that circle and he says, and all the rice around it was all like two, three feet high. He said, what's wrong with that circle? And I said, you know, I just can't tell you. So that was the end of my consultation with that particular farmer. He had everything else he needed from the other guys.

CAMP: [00:33:21] Huh. That's interesting, actually. And you never found out? Did he ever grow rice there again, do you know? Did he ever figure it out?

ROSCHKE: [00:33:29] No, no, not that I know of. He just, he gave up on it. Well, you know, it was a very small part of his field. It was just one spot there. And it was very curious and probably, you know, at sometimes, sometime or other somebody may have put some chemical in there or some oil. Who knows what that would prevent the rice from growing?

CAMP: [00:33:49] Quite likely. Were there other crops that were grown around your village other than, um, other than paddy rice?

ROSCHKE: [00:33:57] Yeah, there were. There were. Of course, there was a lot of banana. There was cotton, there was sugarcane, there was betel leaves

which are grown on large trellises. And I remember that because one time there was in the monsoon, there was a heavy rainstorm and a heavy wind and vast amounts of betel trellises fell down. They were ruined. They never recovered. And I was able to go out and look at them with the farmers and, you know, commiserate with them. But, of course, I couldn't do anything in terms of, they just had to rebuild. That was, that was just the loss that year.

CAMP: [00:34:39] Some of our colleagues in our group branched out into other things other than rice. And some of them worked with chickens and things like that and trying to promote chicken raising. Did you do any of that?

ROSCHKE: [00:34:51] Yeah. One time I branched out into cotton and, oh, sugar cane. Sorry. And so the problem with sugar cane, what makes it so expensive and eats into the profits of the farmers, is the weeding. So a large chemical company, representatives from a large chemical company stopped by my house once or twice. And they said, you know, if you can find some farmers who are willing to try this, we have a herbicide which will kill the weeds, but it'll let the sugar cane grow. So I went to one of the wealthier farmers in the area and asked him if he would be willing to try a small plot with that. And he said yeah. So he started up a small plot, I don't know, maybe eighth of an acre or something in his. In some farmers' holdings, that's the whole thing. But in his case, it was just a small part. So we thought we were going to save some money. And we applied the herbicide, we planted the sugar cane, applied the herbicide, and lo and behold, it killed the sugar cane.

CAMP: [00:36:02] Ah! Oh no.

ROSCHKE: [00:36:02] So I went back to the, uh, to the guys from the chemical company and they said, I think it was ICI. And I said, we've killed this farmer's sugar cane in this trial plot. They said, yeah, we found out about that so we don't sell that anymore. And they just had no sympathy whatsoever. And I never saw those guys again. So that was a waste of time, a waste of money for this farmer. And certainly we made no progress in trying to show them how to grow things better.

CAMP: [00:36:33] That's right.

ROSCHKE: [00:36:34] In fact, the chemical company was doing the trial runs on farmers' land. So instead of doing it themselves.

CAMP: [00:36:42] Did you get any sort of, I mean, was there any accountability for the work you were doing, either from Peace Corps or from the block development officer in the Indian government? Or how, how did you, how were you judged, if you will, on this?

ROSCHKE: [00:36:59] I distinctly recall a couple of things on that. One was we met with the Joint Director of Agriculture, Mr. Venkataraman. There were about eight or ten of us volunteers sitting in a room together, and we expressed frustration with the fact that we didn't feel like we were making a whole lot of progress with the farmers. And he was a very nice man and very intelligent and very capable. And I think later on he became Minister of Agriculture of the state. And he just said, listen, I have a thousand professionally trained college graduate agricultural extension workers who speak the language and they deal with dozens and dozens, hundreds, let's say, of farmers. And to be honest, I have to focus on those guys. I don't have time to take care of the ten of you guys who can't seem to speak the language, don't know very much. And he didn't say it that way, but that's what he meant.

ROSCHKE: [00:38:04] He said, listen, I'm very happy to have you here. I think it would be a wonderful opportunity for somebody who's interested in getting to know the Indian culture from a sociological perspective. So we're just happy to have you here. But unfortunately, I can't do a whole lot to improve your situation where you can be more productive. So that was one thing. So he, he basically gave us carte blanche to be there and not achieve too much. Well, that was shocking. It was relief to a certain extent. We did not feel terrible about being there, but still it was quite surprising.

ROSCHKE: [00:38:44] And then, the other thing, of course, that I would recall was that we got a new regional director, Dick Eccles, who decided, from G.E.

And the G.E. general policy of G.E. is to, is to rank order everybody in terms of productivity. And periodically you chop off the unproductive ones. So he had boss, our supervisor, he has us rank order in terms of productivity. We have no idea how he measured that, but he did. And my recollection is that we all got together and he decided that three of us had to go. And my recollection is we got together and we said, what are we going to do about this? This is, this is nuts.

ROSCHKE: [00:39:39] And so we, um, we got together in a hotel room in Thanjavur with them. And we all sat around on the floor of the hotel room because there wasn't room for sitting. And then we explained what we'd all done and what particularly the three who were selected to be deselected. And we, we somehow managed to persuade him that it was okay for us, for us all to stay. And he changed his mind on the spot and said, you convinced me, continue to do what you can.

CAMP: [00:40:16] Were any threats made by the volunteers or was it just an explanation to him that everyone was making a contribution and it was unfair to single out a couple?

ROSCHKE: [00:40:25] I don't recall any threats. I thought everybody was very, um. Considering how upset we were, I thought everybody was extremely reasonable in trying to explain to him in a very nice tone of voice what we felt was the situation. And that was the, that was the last we heard of that.

CAMP: [00:40:47] Interesting. So how would you grade the accomplishment of, accomplishments of yourself and the group and the project as a whole in terms of what it accomplished in all respects for you, for the village, etcetera?

ROSCHKE: [00:41:04] Yeah. Actually, I felt like some of the volunteers had done significant work and I didn't, I could, I can point to a few things that I did, but fairly minor. And, um, and I thought some of the other guys did much more than I did in terms of actually working with farmers. And I was, you know, I thought that was great that they did that. I thought the main value

was that we got to know India in a very personal way at the village level and that the Indians got to know us.

ROSCHKE: [00:41:47] I will just say, just in contrast, we knew some of the people in the consulate in Madras. They had no contact above the upper echelon of people in India. And I invited some of them to come down to the village and they actually came down on a weekend and I showed them around and got to introduce them to some of the people. And, uh, and there they were just amazed at how things operate on a local village level. I think it really helped them. They needed more of those programs in their, in their life. They didn't see that. They met the industrialists and the top-level politicians.

CAMP: [00:42:26] Absolutely. Hmm. We were in India at an interesting time. Mrs. Gandhi was prime minister. And in 1971, India basically went to war with Pakistan over Bangladesh, over the fate of East Pakistan. We were far away in south India. But can you talk about how that affected you?

ROSCHKE: [00:42:52] Well, actually, uh, we didn't realize how little affected we were, I think, but things just continued on as before, with the exception that if you went to, say, the train station, you were not allowed to photograph the train stations or public transportation places and important buildings. But in the village it was business as usual. People were very, at least in my village, people were very friendly as ever. And we even talked about the war and what was going on up there. I understand that in the north, I understood later I think, that in the north there was a whole lot more tension. But in the south we were well accepted.

CAMP: [00:43:41] Most of us in those days had shortwave radios to get news from the outside world. Um, some people, some of us, had problems with villagers who thought those were perhaps two-way radios on which we were transmitting during the war. Did you ever encounter anything like that?

ROSCHKE: [00:44:01] I think I probably did once or twice. And the, uh, and the local officials came around. They knew I had a radio and they, uh, they came

around to check my radio and I showed them what it was, and they wanted to make sure I was legally licensed for that. So I showed them my permit, as I recall, and that was the end of that, and they never came back. But now remember, the whole problem with India and Pakistan was Muslim versus Hindu. Well, my village was half Hindu, half Muslim. So there was a lot of Muslim population in that area and a lot of Hindu. You'd think there would be a lot of animosity between the two groups and there was not. Leave me, leave me out of this. They just, they just continued their lives doing whatever they wanted to do, they needed to do. The farmers went to their fields and the merchants went to their shops and everybody continued doing business.

CAMP: [00:44:58] That's interesting. I think I agree in terms of my experience. But what about daily life apart from political events happening far away? What were the relationships between the two, between Hindus and Muslims in the village generally in terms of social contacts, cultural, etcetera?

ROSCHKE: [00:45:17] Well, not too. There was not actually that much interaction.

CAMP: [00:45:21] Was there physical separation?

ROSCHKE: [00:45:23] There was a physical separation. There was about 200 yards between the two sections of the village. And then, uh, there's actually, on the other side, there was actually another Muslim village and another one after that. So but there was very little interaction. If I went to a village level panchayat meeting, for example, it would be all upper-class Muslims. And the lower-class Hindus had no say in the panchayat running. So, you know, the highest level probably in my village, in the Hindu part of the village, was a teacher. We had a very well-respected teacher, but no high-level income people in that area.

CAMP: [00:46:10] So were the landowners mostly Muslim then?

ROSCHKE: [00:46:13] Landowners were mostly Muslim and the Hindus had land, but they had very small amounts. So they didn't have extra capital, say, for example, to invest in betel cultivation, which was capital intensive.

CAMP: [00:46:26] This is betel vine, B-E-T-E-L.

ROSCHKE: [00:46:28] Yes.

CAMP: [00:46:28] As opposed to beetles. Yes.

ROSCHKE: [00:46:32] Yes, that's right. Leaf cultivation. So they were much lower income, I would say they probably had no more than a quarter of the income that the Muslims had and it was really subsistence for them. And it was, I was pleased to see that they were still sending most of their kids to school so that the next generation maybe had a better opportunity.

CAMP: [00:46:55] Did your village have schooling up to high school or just or elementary?

ROSCHKE: [00:46:59] Elementary.

CAMP: [00:47:00] Okay.

ROSCHKE: [00:47:00] Elementary.

CAMP: [00:47:01] Do you remember where kids went to for high school, how far away it was?

ROSCHKE: [00:47:03] They probably had to go to Papanasam is my guess.

CAMP: [00:47:07] Okay.

ROSCHKE: [00:47:07] But I don't recall exactly where that high school was.

CAMP: [00:47:10] There were also other foreigners around the district, not in the village, but non Peace Corps, some of whom we knew I remember in Thanjavur. Did you work with any of those and what were your relationships?

ROSCHKE: [00:47:24] Yes, that's actually how I met my wife.

CAMP: [00:47:27] Ah, good. That's a good segue. Okay.

ROSCHKE: [00:47:30] We, yes, there were, there was a United Nations development project in Thanjavur, which is 15 miles away, and they were investigating the groundwater there. How far down did the groundwater go when people ran their irrigation pumps, for example? And therefore, how many pumps can we put in and how intensely can we withdraw the water before we're hurting ourselves? And so they were doing serious research, took about four years or five years for that project to finish. And I met through some of the people in Thanjavur, I met some of those people and some of the researchers there.

ROSCHKE: [00:48:10] There was, it was an international team led by a man actually from Poland and other researchers from the Netherlands and other places besides Americans as well. So I knew a researcher there named Clyde Swenson, who knew one of the Americans on that UN team, and we were all sitting around playing cards occasionally on a weekend, maybe. And, uh, and he was one of the guys. He was the guy who introduced me then to Laura, who was an Anglo-Indian secretary working for the UN Development Project.

CAMP: [00:48:51] Could you explain the term Anglo-Indian?

ROSCHKE: [00:48:54] Ah, yes. Anglo-Indians are almost a caste in India, but they are the descendants of Britishers primarily, but also other foreigners and Indians' intermarriages in India. And they formed a subgroup in India for probably 300 years, ever since the British arrived, and it's been a very up and down history for them. But so they speak English at home and they dress primarily like Americans, and then they worship in the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church and they study English and go to college and do all kinds of things.

CAMP: [00:49:42] Tell us about Laura.

ROSCHKE: [00:49:44] Laura was a secretary there. She had graduated from college and was a secretary there working for the United Nations Development

Project. And so I met her in the office, and she came from a military family. Her father was in the military and she lived in Tiruchi [Tiruchirappalli], which was another, um, I don't know, let's see. Tiruchi is about 30, 30 miles away from Thanjavur, further east, further west. And so they had an Anglo-Indian community there. And the Anglo-Indian community means maybe 500, maybe 1,000 people were there in Tiruchi. And so they had many, um, well, they would have a monthly dance, for example, which in Thanjavur district was unheard of. Any, any sort of social activities among non-Hindus was strictly on a home basis. Whereas in, in Tiruchi and the suburb of Golden Rock, they had it every month.

CAMP: [00:50:52] And how did you, you know, you met her as, uh, when she was in the UN office, but how did you get into dating? I mean, what is the there, there was something of a cultural difference here, right?

ROSCHKE: [00:51:08] Absolutely. There was a, there was a. I knew already from being in India a year that there's not any such thing as dating per se. And so when I chatted with her, I just talked with her a little bit in the office. And then probably a time or two later when I went in to talk to this American that I knew, I would stop by her desk on the way out. And then one fine day I just said, well, how would you like to go out for some tea? So I took her out to tea and we chatted and I got to know where she was staying. And she was staying at a convent nearby. And so we would go out, I asked her out for tea several times after that, and we got to know each other that way. And then I introduced her to other volunteers and, uh. It was a Danish volunteer named Sven, whom we all knew, more or less, and so I got to know her that way.

CAMP: [00:52:08] And when did you meet her family?

ROSCHKE: [00:52:10] Met her family after about six months or so. Went to Tiruchi and she introduced me to her mother and father. And at that time, probably she had a sister or two there. She had three sisters and one brother. And it was, it was an extended family. So she also had four or five other relatives living in the house with them. So I got to meet them all.

CAMP: [00:52:33] And what was their reaction to you?

ROSCHKE: [00:52:36] Their father's, her father's reaction to me was, why did you bring this guy here? And I really don't want to see him anymore. So I stayed away from the family for a while, knowing that the reception wasn't all that warm there. But eventually she talked to her father without me and talked to her mother, possibly more importantly than talking to her father. And, uh, and then I went back. And as I was sitting in the front room talking with her father, we talked for like 3 hours, I think. Drinking tea and chatting and talking about everything but anything that mattered.

ROSCHKE: [00:53:20] And then her mother comes. She brings her mother. Her mother comes in from the back room where they've been chatting for about 3 hours. And she says, so you want to marry my daughter? Oh, not even that. So you're going to marry my daughter? And I said, I would love to. And that's, and then so in a sense, she overruled her husband, Laura's father. And that's how it happened.

CAMP: [00:53:47] You described Anglo-Indian community as almost a caste. Looking back at her father's initial reaction, do you think it was because she was marrying outside her community, basically? Or is it more than that?

ROSCHKE: [00:54:01] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Largely, a large part of that. Yeah. Naturally, growing up in that community, there were plenty of young men who, who knew her and they had many of these social activities, so they all knew each other. So he figured, why go outside of the community when you can marry inside the community? And I will say also, as a military man he was assigned to Vietnam.

CAMP: [00:54:26] Hmm.

ROSCHKE: [00:54:27] So he was on the U.N. Commission for Vietnam, the, what do they call them? The observers. He was one of the observers for the UN in Vietnam. And he was not impressed with American servicemen and their behavior in Vietnam. So that was a bad sign. And he decided he

didn't want his daughter marrying one of these Americans. And he decided that he didn't, especially didn't want him to her to marry an American who was going to then take her outside of India. So she would be basically, suppose I was going to treat her badly. There was nobody there to be with her, to help her.

CAMP: [00:55:11] Interesting.

ROSCHKE: [00:55:11] So he was opposed to that pretty strongly.

CAMP: [00:55:15] But, but Laura's mother made, convinced him otherwise.

ROSCHKE: [00:55:20] Convinced him otherwise, sort of did an end run around him. And he just couldn't, couldn't say no. I guess he figured he couldn't say no at that point.

CAMP: [00:55:31] That's fascinating. I remember your wedding as one of the most vivid events of my time in India. Would you like to talk about that event?

ROSCHKE: [00:55:38] Yeah, that was an amazing event, I will say. I, you know, I appreciate you and all the other volunteers coming so that I wouldn't be all alone at my own wedding. And, uh, and but everything was handled by Laura's family. They invited all the guests and arranged for all the, arranged for the ceremony and the reception afterwards. And it was just, it was basically a Western wedding, Western reception, but in an Indian context.

CAMP: [00:56:11] And an Indian church.

ROSCHKE: [00:56:12] Indian church. And, um, afterwards we all went to, about 300 people went to a big reception in the big hall that they had there and stayed till almost midnight. And then we headed, headed home.

CAMP: [00:56:37] It was almost all Anglo-Indian, as I recall.

ROSCHKE: [00:56:40] Almost all Anglo-Indian.

CAMP: [00:56:42] Okay. And very lively.

ROSCHKE: [00:56:44] Very lively.

CAMP: [00:56:45] They like to have fun.

ROSCHKE: [00:56:46] Yes. They love to have fun. And they are great dancers. And they, uh, the music was all Western and about 10 to 15 years, 10 to 20 years behind. So they liked country, liked country and western. A lot of that. Jim Reeves and others. And, uh, but they played it well. They had all the guitar playing and the, whatever other instruments, you know, they had a keyboard and some other things.

CAMP: [00:57:13] I don't even remember. Did you have a best man?

ROSCHKE: [00:57:15] The best man was Sven.

CAMP: [00:57:17] Ah, good.

ROSCHKE: [00:57:19] And, uh.

CAMP: [00:57:20] The Danish volunteer.

ROSCHKE: [00:57:21] Danish volunteer. And the other parts, uh, groomsmen were Brian, Brian Hirschfeld, and Arnie Burmeister. And, um, let's see, was that it? I think that was it. Because Laura had herself and her three sisters. Let's see. So, no. So there's one more on, no, that's right.

CAMP: [00:57:45] No, that's right. Three and three.

ROSCHKE: [00:57:46] Three and three. So we had three members on each side of the bridal party and then we had ourselves. So all together that would make.

CAMP: [00:57:53] By this time you'd had a little exposure to the Anglo-Indian community. But those of us coming from the village did not and were

astounded that this culture existed so close to our villages and was so Western and so lively and so different from the rest of.

ROSCHKE: [00:58:08] Yes.

CAMP: [00:58:08] What we'd seen in southern India.

ROSCHKE: [00:58:10] It was a world away. It was completely different from anything we had been exposed to in the village and. And in fact, to be honest, I, I didn't realize how much, how extensive that, that was.

CAMP: [00:58:23] Um, okay. So now bring us up to date on the last 45 years and what's happened with your family.

ROSCHKE: [00:58:31] So we've had, we live in Washington, D.C., now, and we have been here for almost 40, over 40 years. And after finishing graduate school, we settled down here in Washington, D.C., and we've had a girl and a boy and now we have two grandchildren. And, um, and my wife went to work for the World Bank when we came to Washington and they gave us home leave, so they sent the whole family to go to India. So we went to India like maybe ten times and got to see all the people there. And one of the things that came out of that was that our daughter met one of the young men from Laura's hometown and married him. So now they live here 5 minutes from our house and he's working in data processing, making more money than I ever made and doing very well. And she's teaching and our son is in, lives 10 minutes away and he's selling real estate so.

CAMP: [00:59:35] That's great. Well, this has been a great interview. But before we end up, are there other stories that come to mind that you would like to share? Anything else that I've missed here?

ROSCHKE: [00:59:53] There is one which sort of summed up a lot of my experience. That is I met, when I first went into the village, probably within the first couple of weeks, I met a school principal of a Muslim school. But he, his English was good, but I, he tried to get me to speak a little bit in Tamil. So I said, I only know a little bit of Tamil, and I said it in Tamil. So I said, I

only know a little bit of Tamil, *koncam koncam* Tamil. And when I left two years later I met the same man. I went to him and I donated actually some of my books to him and his school and I wanted to say goodbye also. So, so he said, your Tamil is a little better than it used to be. And I said, yes, but it still just *koncam koncam*. And he couldn't help but, he remembered from two years ago when I had said *koncam koncam* then, and when I said *koncam koncam* now, and he, he, he remarked how even my *koncam koncam* had improved enormously. And I thought, yeah, you're probably right. Yeah, he was.

CAMP: [01:01:16] That's great. Tom, thank you very much. This was great. It helped me relive my two years there as well and told me some things I'd never heard in all this time. So thank you very much.

ROSCHKE: [01:01:27] You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]