

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Peace Corps/Foreign Missions Project

Volunteer Lifestyle

O. H. 665

HELEN VRBJAR

Interviewed

by

Joseph Rochette

on

October 18, 1984

HELEN VRBJAR

Helen Vrbjar was born on October 24, 1920 in Youngstown, Ohio, the daughter of Mike and Anna Vasko. She graduated from high school in 1938 and later went on to become a practical nurse, graduating from Choffin School of Practical Nursing. Mrs. Vrbjar is currently employed by the Youngstown Hospital Association where she began working in November 1954. During this time she received the Commendation for Caring.

Mrs. Vrbjar served in the U. S. Army from May 1945 to January 1946. Having raised two children, Michael and Tad, and wanting to do something different, she decided to join the U.S. Peace Corps in 1966. She served from October 1966 to November 1968 as a nurse for a health and community development project in a small coastal town in Brazil. After completing her tour of duty, on her return to the United States, Mrs. Vrbjar visited Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, continuing on to stop briefly in each of the Central American countries.

Helen Vrbjar currently lives in Lowellville, Ohio where she is remodeling a house she bought this past year. Aside from her other work, she enjoys cake decorating as a hobby.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERISTY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Peace Corps/Foreign Missions Project

INTERVIEWEE: HELEN VRBJAR

INTERVIEWER: Joseph Rochette

SUBJECT: Brazil, South America, training, conditions,
practical nurisng experiences

DATE: October 18, 1984

R: This is an interview with Helen Vrbjar for the Youngstown State University Peace Corps Project, by Joe Rochette at 166 West Wood Street, Lowellville, Ohio on October 18, 1984 at 2:54 p.m.

When and where were you a Peace Corps volunteer and what was your project?

V: It was in Brazil from October 1966 until November 1968. It was a health and community development project.

R: What do you think sparked your interest in becoming a Peace Corps volunteer?

V: I suppose I'm a bit unusual because I wasn't the typical volunteer going to college at the time. I had raised my children already and I was working steady as a practical nurse. I felt like I was getting into a rut, I guess. I didn't want to go into that rut so I thought I had better do something to prevent it. The Peace Corps was fairly new, about five years old at the time. It sounded good to me.

R: What was involved as far as applying, the application and interviews or anything like that?

V: There were written applications to begin with, and then a test that was given downtown, which the applicants had to take. There was quite a bit of paper work, as I recall.

R: What do you remember about training?

- V: It was a highly intensive period of training, a three month period. This took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The language was the thing that was stressed mainly. That is the thing that came hardest to me. It was quite difficult to really pick up on that language. I remember when I went overseas I wasn't really too bright with the language, but I picked up more of it thereafter in talking with the host people.
- R: Was there any part of the training that was in-country, in Brazil?
- V: No, not really. Not at that time. I understand that since that time they have some in-country training programs, but at that time in that particular program we didn't have it.
- R: What about things as maybe cross-cultural aspects?
- V: The culture of the country came into it quite heavily, and its history, the geography of the country and all of those things.
- R: Now in hindsight when you look at the training program what things do you think maybe could have been improved upon?
- V: I don't really know that I would say it could be improved upon. I remember that the classes were awfully long. It was an awfully long day every day for me. I would go to bed feeling awfully tired. The classes would start in the morning, around seven o'clock really. We would have lectures sometimes as late as 10:00 p.m. I found that very tiring, but again I wasn't the typical twenty-some year old; I was forty-six.
- R: Who were the instructors?
- V: They were returned Peace Corps volunteers, many of them. We also had some Brazilian people from the host country as language instructors. That was about it.
- R: In the group that you were in, how many people were involved?
- V: It was interesting; we started out with a group of about sixty-four and about half of that group ended up going to that country. Some deselected themselves and others were deselected along the way.
- R: After training and once you arrived in-country what was volunteer support like? What I mean by that is medical facilities and housing, the Peace Corps itself, how it was set up.

- V: I thought the medical aspect for the Peace Corps volunteers was very good. We had a doctor for our group who would come in periodically to see us, and if ever we had any problems we could either send word to him through our local Peace Corps office or see a host-country doctor. That part was good. I felt that I was well cared for.
- R: As far as the Peace Corps administration, the director and assistants . . .
- V: In that particular area the director was posted in Salvador. Our minor director was in the capital city of Sergipe; that is the state that I was in. I thought they did a fine job and I thought they picked good people for that.
- R: What were some of the other projects that were in Brazil at that time?
- V: Farming was always an ongoing project, including crop rotation and soil preparation.
- R: Do you have any idea how many volunteers were in Brazil at that time?
- V: About 700.
- R: To get an idea of the environment that you lived and worked in, could you describe the region where you were at in Brazil?
- V: I was stationed in Sao Cristovao, which is about the fourth oldest city in Brazil. It is a coastal town and there wasn't much of an industry there, except for a textile mill. There was some fishing. It was a very poor area, certainly underdeveloped. It had bad roads and all of that. The people were quite friendly. They were really very nice people. They were helpful. They tolerated my poor language at the beginning and, thanks to them, I learned it much better eventually.
- R: When you are talking about language, what language is that?
- V: Brazilian Portuguese. A lot of people think that in Brazil one speaks Spanish, but it is not so. Neither is it European Portuguese.
- R: If you think back, what was a typical day like?
- V: Sometimes frustrating, I have to say. I worked in a health post for quite a while and there wasn't much to

work with there. It was very frustrating to take what was already a quarter-inch wide piece of tape and tear it to make it a one-eighth inch piece of tape. As far as sterilizing dressings, I did the best I could with that. I couldn't really consider them sterile, but I "baked" them in an oven on low heat. The problem was just not having much stuff to work with. Another problem was not being able to get it. I would have to get it through the mayor. I can remember one day, in frustration, taking the empty silver cans where dressings were kept and going up to his office and showing them to him. There were no dressings at all, absolutely none! It was kind of frustrating to work with nothing, but then, that is the way Peace Corps is.

R: At this post, to whom were you responsible? Was it local authorities?

V: It was a local health post. To actually be responsible to anyone it would have been the mayor.

R: At this post or in your town, were there other volunteers?

V: There was one volunteer in that town besides myself. She worked with physical education and did a good job.

R: When you think back, what were the hardest things to get used to versus the easiest things to get used to?

V: The hardest things to get used to were the giant cockroaches and occasional rats that I would see. I have an aversion to them. That was one of the big things for me because I knew I had to get used to them and live with them.

R: What do you think the easiest things were?

V: An easy thing would be that you could just kind of do your own thing. You didn't really have a boss. Eventually you would be responsible for something to someone if you did it wrong, I'm sure. But doing what you as an individual wanted to do was great! I enjoyed that.

R: Before, you mentioned that feeling frustrated in Peace Corps work is a common thing. How would you deal with times like that?

V: I would try to understand the culture of those people and the way that they did things. I could see that it didn't really mean a heck of a lot to them whether they had anything to work with or not. I figured this is their territory; it is not really mine, and this is the way it is and I'm going to have to face this.

R: In your spare time were there any diversions, places to go?

V: In my spare time I had a ball. On paid vacations I toured almost all of South America; that is something I couldn't have done if I hadn't been in Peace Corps.

R: How was that set up as far as days that you worked?

V: We were allowed two weeks' vacation per year and this was paid for by Peace Corps. During the first year, vacation time had to be spent in Brazil, in the host country. During the second year, it had to be spent on that continent, or South America. One could not leave for home during that time. It was set up so in the book of rules.

R: What were some of your adventures on your vacations?

V: I was able to vacation on very little money. The best way to see that country or any place where I've never been before is to go by bus or train; you can't see much of a country from a plane. Therefore, my traveling was done mostly by bus, and I really enjoyed the bus travel. One time on a bus there was a bad road we were on. There were a number of people on this rather large bus. Somebody in a little, Jeep-type car wanted to pass and couldn't. It became a sort of little war with the bus driver and the driver of the Jeep. Eventually the little Jeep behind us did pass and scrape the bus a little. I found that to be kind of terrifying because I don't think one should play games when one is driving, especially with a busload of passengers.

R: What other countries did you visit?

V: I visited in Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, and every one of the Central American countries, but that was on the way home.

R: When you traveled, as far as staying at hotels or accommodations and things like that, how did you manage?

V: I usually traveled with another Peace Corps friend, who agreed with me that we should travel as cheaply as we could. We stayed in very inexpensive places. I can remember heating water for a sponge bath in one place we stayed. I can remember taking an almost ice cold bath in Bolivia.

R: Just talking about trying to go along as cheaply as possible, I'm very familiar with that because I did that. What was the living allowance at that time?

V: I can't tell you an exact figure because I don't remember. I know that I was able to save a good part of mine. I lived very well. One time I had a dirt floor in my rented house. I had to have an outside toilet built because there were no facilities at all, but I did live in that house for about a half of a year at least.

R: What about some everyday things, like food that you ate?

V: In Brazil at that time and in that area the living was kind of poor. I felt that I could relate better to the people I worked with if I lived in the same fashion that they did. There were some instances, but not many, where Peace Corps people would live in the better houses, but that wasn't the rule, really. I didn't see that many of us did that.

The main food would be beans and rice. One would have that about once a day at least. We did have meat, or I did at least. I can't say that all of the poor people did, because I'm sure they didn't. We would have meat once a day. It was not a dairy area. The milk was a very poor grade of milk. The milk man would come with the milk and we could see him watering it down, getting a little water out of the creek. When we got it we had to pasteurize it. It barely passed for milk. It was very watered down. I enjoyed the fruits and vegetables; there were plenty of fruits, bananas and oranges; the mangoes were delightful.

R: Something that a lot of people don't like to think about, but which is a reality, what are some of the sicknesses that not only the local people have fallen in contact with, but volunteers?

V: Dehydration in the children, of course; a lot of youngsters died from that because they were undernourished. There was a lot of dysentery of course, some malaria. I saw a case of elephantitis in one of the hospitals. We, of course, came prepared with all kinds of immunizations and medicines. I didn't see the incidence of heart attacks or cancer that we have in the states.

R: What do you remember about volunteers themselves? Was there any malaria?

V: I don't know of any case where any of the Peace Corps volunteers got malaria or anything like that. There were a couple of cases of dysentery coupled with dehydration. A couple of the girls were in rather bad shape, just barely able to go on with their work. A lot of it had to do with diet. The one girl refused to boil her water; she just wouldn't. I always felt that that was her problem. She continued to suffer. Schistosomiasis, there was a case

of that. Dysentery in varied stages was common among Peace Corps personnel.

R: Was there any kind of preparation when you came to the country? What about that day?

V: I can remember that day very well. We had come to Rio and from there to Salvador because I would be stationed in that area somewhere. The first night that I would have stayed in the hotel came a message that they needed a nurse in one of the outer areas in Bahia. It seemed that I would be the one to go because the other girls who were with me were geared more for community development. Another girl who wasn't in nursing, and myself, were taken by cab over to the bus station and we traveled for I don't know how many hours until we reached a little town. We gave DPT shots after carrying the medicine with us on the bus. That was my first day, after arriving in Rio, in the area in which I would be working. I did stay there a week or so and gave injections to the children and tried to explain that they should be followed up by two more injections. After those few days the other girl and I left that area and I ended up in São Cristovao, while she went to another town. For the DPT project, we had a coal stove and did the best we could to boil the needle each time, maybe a minute or two or three. It wasn't possible to boil the needles for twenty minutes. We had very few of them, and the patients were many.

R: As far as at the station itself were there other nurses that were Brazilians that were nationals or their equivalent of?

V: Not in the small town where I ended up, not in Sao Cristovao. There were two girls who were somewhat trained to give injections, but there was not an RN in the town.

R: What about other foreign aid agencies from other countries, did you come in contact with . . .

V: Yes, there were some. Strangely enough there was somebody from Denmark on a similar mission. Others that were there weren't as well-known obviously as the American Peace Corps volunteers.

R: From what you observed or what people said to you, from that perspective what do you think was the opinion of the people of the Peace Corps volunteers?

V: Most of the people liked us. Sometimes they distrusted us once in a while. At one time someone thought I was a spy. So we did run into little things like that. Sometimes

by a more educated person we would be quizzed and questioned--Why are you here? You told me you have a new car at home, television, why are you here? What are you doing here? They found it hard to believe, but once in a while, the thinking person did, that we would give up whatever we had at home and come and live here the way they do when we didn't have to. Therefore, they had a few doubts sometimes as to just what our missions . . . what our "motive" was.

R: What would you tell them if they would ask that?

V: I would try to explain that where I come from everybody has a car and television, but not everybody could do this, what I'm doing now, and that I'm enjoying what I'm doing. Those things, the material things, don't really mean as much, is what I would try to tell them.

R: Are there certain people when you look back that stick out in your mind?

V: Yes, I have friends that I still write to.

R: What work do they do?

V: There was a woman with whom I lived; she was a widow at the age of thirty-eight at the time. I lived with her for about nine months of the first fifteen. Then I wanted to try living in my own place and doing my own cooking and everything; she was devastated when I was leaving because of what people would think, she said. We were very truly good friends and she was very upset that I should be leaving. She didn't know how she could face people. I tried to explain to her that we still would be friends and that I would still visit her. That was difficult for her to understand, that I wanted to live on my own, in my own way, for the remaining time.

R: Were there ever things that, because of being an American from our culture, you were just not able to get used to there?

V: There was a little beer garden in the second town that I worked in. They had good cheese sandwiches there. They also had cold drinks and pop, so I would go there. I wanted to go there and get a cold drink. The first time that I told somebody about going there, she said that she would send out and get it for me. I agreed. Again when I wanted a cold drink I sensed that something was fishy, something was funny, and I got the idea that I should be going there. Then I was told outright that I just shouldn't go there; only men go to the beer garden

Women's presence was frowned upon, but I did on occasion go there because they had good cheese sandwiches and cold pop.

R: How do you think it was different for women being volunteers than for men?

V: In that country I would say definitely there was a double standard when it came to men and women. When I taught practical nursing classes, my group in the class would consist mostly of women, so I wouldn't get too much of that in my classes. I think all in all that the townspeople, whether they were men or women, did have respect for me, I must say that. Sometimes with a younger female Peace Corps Volunteer, they would find it hard to understand--here she is barely out of school or whatever and on her own. Women had to be more careful not to do anything wrong.

R: Were there any problems with being unmarried?

V: I had more explaining to do than about merely being unmarried, because I was divorced. In that country there isn't too much divorce, not as much as we have here, certainly. They didn't really probe as to why I was divorced. In time they kind of seemed to accept it. I don't think it made much difference. I think after they knew me that didn't seem to matter. After all, in Brazil there are a great many people in very similar circumstances, but without a legal divorce. It was more common there than here for a man to have two families.

R: When you think back, when somebody mentions your Peace Corps experience what things may have happened that stand out in your mind?

V: One thing that can't help but stand out in my mind is when I worked in the health post and the poor people would come in; also the doctor was supposed to come once a week. Sometimes he wouldn't show, and when he did come he would see fifteen people, and then he would leave. One poor lady was bringing in her three boys, youngsters at the time; they were all very sick with malnutrition. The doctor would see fifteen people, but never got around to seeing her children. The second week this happened I could see the kids getting worse. They were looking really bad. Finally I went to the capital city and went to the secretary of health and asked him what I could do to help this situation. He did give me some medication for the children. One of them died and another one got well, while one just

barely made it. That stands out in my mind because it was such a sad thing. It was so sad that there was nobody doing anything for these children.

R: Was that probably the most frustrating thing, just the idea of feeling helpless?

V: Yes, it was a very helpless feeling, sure.

R: As far as volunteers' relationships within the country could you describe any meetings or annual get-togethers there may have been?

V: I remember the nice party we had at the director's house in Salvador. It was a real happy occasion because there were peanuts the way we know peanuts to be, instead of them being boiled. There were things that made you feel like you were at home like chocolate cake. There was dancing and the kids were all having a great time. It was like a little bit of home for a couple of hours. We would often meet each other in the capital city, in Sergipe, and sometimes one might come and spend the night with another Peace Corps friend or whatever. Those were always happy occasions because that would sometimes be the only chance you had to speak English. We felt much closer to one another than we would have in a different atmosphere.

R: I'm sure while you were there there were times when volunteers would have problems with this or that, with their work or with the other people in their community. Do you remember how people dealt with that?

V: I had a problem after I left the town of Sao Cristovao and I went to a different little town where there was a hospital. I was very much resented there because there were a couple of ladies, young women, working there who were not nurses, but had been working in that hospital for a long time. I truly felt that resentment. There was a doctor there too in that town. He realized that after I would be gone he would still have these girls that would stay on, naturally. So he couldn't do too much for my complaints, could he?

R: No.

V: He would be left with the same personnel that was there before I came. I started to give more of my time to an orphanage and to health classes for children, and less to the hospital.

R: When you made this move from the one town to the next or any other times in your dealings, were you ever compared

by people that you worked with to previous volunteers?

V: Yes, there was such a thing as comparison. I had never thought of it until you asked. Really, it was quite frequent.

R: In a way did you resent that a little bit?

V: Yes, I did. The people were outspoken when they would talk like this. I knew that if they would say something about someone to me they very possibly could say something about me to someone else, whether it be good or bad. I would rather have not heard their versions as to what others had said or done. It is like here; we all have our own friends and your friends may be different from mine. I think it boiled down to that.

R: Were there any local get-togethers or ceremonies, maybe marriages or things that you attended that you remember?

V: Yes. During my time there I put out four classes of practical nursing students, not licensed or anything, but classes that I had made up. At the end of each class we would have a little party and it was delightful. Everybody loved those little parties. One time a group of friends gave me a surprise birthday party. That was something!

I attended a local wedding and learned that soap was an appropriate gift. Graduations from school were big things. On religious holidays, the whole town turned out for big processions, sometimes carrying a cross, and often times everybody carried a lit candle.

R: Now when you look over the whole thing, the whole time that you spent there, if you could, what things do you think you might have changed or maybe hoped that were different?

V: My hope would be that those at the helm would do something for those at the bottom. The people that have the power and the money should do more for the poor people. That is very obvious. We, as individual Americans, can do very little to change an inbred system.

R: What about government or military disturbances?

V: It was still a military government there. Any aggressions seemed to be on a small scale. There weren't any disturbances while I was there.

R: What about the last month you were there?

V: I had made friends there and the closer it came to leaving,

the more I hated it. I cried when I left. It was a phase in my life which I realized would never occur again. It was something which lasted for about two years and I would never take that route again, and I knew it. I had ambivalent feelings, because I was glad to be returning home.

R: What do you think that you accomplished? I don't mean concrete things necessarily, saying you did this or that, but as far as what you think you did that was important that you did.

V: One of the girls that worked at the health post with me was able to go to Salvador and was given a scholarship to go to nursing school so that she would be an RN in her own country.

If I accomplished anything, it was planting a seed here and there in the mind of a small child, usually in regard to health. It is my contention that adults who have only little education find it difficult to learn and accept new methods; but children have more open minds and are more receptive to change.

Also, I feel that each volunteer helped to establish better rapport between the host-country and the United States.

R: When you came back I don't know if you experienced this, but even now if somebody would say something like--Don't you think now that maybe you wasted that two years? Maybe you could have been doing something here in the United States. When or if somebody says something like that, or said something like that, what was your reaction?

V: It was a terrific experience and even if nobody else got anything out of it, I got an awful lot out of it. It meant a whole lot to me; it still does, what I was able to do. I enjoyed it. It's true that one person cannot do a whole lot. But there were many of us. I feel that each of us left his or her mark, if only because of our good intent. After all, nothing like this had been attempted before, and now we are at least trying it. I feel that we left our scattered marks along the way, and that here and there somebody will pick up on them.

R: Once you did come home what were your feelings?

V: I guess I did a reversal, because all through training I kept hearing about culture shock. On my first day back to the U.S., that is when I learned what culture shock was. That is strange, I know. I had become used

to a different sort of life for a little over two years, and now I was back. I knew that the way it would be here would be forever more. It would never again be the same. That was my culture shock.

R: Are there any things you can remember specifically, any frustrating moments doing some everyday things?

V: Over there?

R: Here, once you got home?

V: Yes, it was a crowd of people everywhere. Everywhere there was a line. I went to the store to buy something and there was a line of people on my first day in the country again. These people were all over and I had to wait in line. It wasn't like that in my Brazilian village.

R: If you were to come in contact with someone thinking about joining but who was kind of unsure, and maybe you knew the person or knew that that is what they were considering, what would you say to them?

V: I would try to give him the pros and cons. By knowing a little bit about the individual that was contemplating this there would be different things that I would have to point out, whether good or bad. Peace Corps is not for everybody. I would say to make sure you are mature enough. Go prepared with some background in something that you know well how to do. Have some determination and vitality. Do not expect miracles.

R: While you were in-country, in Brazil, were there any cases of people who left during this thing?

V: Yes, there were a few that did.

R: Was there a feeling of the other volunteers . . .

V: I also knew one or two that considered going. Every once in a while they considered it, but didn't leave. One girl who left wasn't really mature enough to be in a situation like that. I personally felt bad that our government had spent quite a bit of money for her training which she did not put to use. But I also felt that perhaps we should have better screening. The majority of volunteers were glad they went and did a fine job.

R: I would like to thank you for sharing this experience with me because I think it goes a long way in making people more aware of Peace Corps volunteers, the things that they do, more of the travel log kind of story. I think a lot

more people are sometimes interested more in that than in the actual Peace Corps volunteer experience itself. Is there anything you would like to add?

V: I can't think of anything except that they were terrific people over there. They were awfully nice to me and very tolerant of me and the little mistakes I made in the different culture.

R: Thank you very much.

V: You are most welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW