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International service and cross-cultural engagement

Preserving and documenting the Peace Corps experience

After 56 years in operation and 500,000 or so service years offered collectively by 230,000 Peace Corps volunteers, there are many stories to tell and much data to record about Peace Corps. Who is collecting those stories and recording that data? Who is documenting the cross-cultural interactions among Peace Corps Volunteers and the communities they serve? And who is assessing the impact of those grassroots encounters?

Numerous returned Peace Corps Volunteers and committed archivists, librarians, and museum curators are dedicated to capturing a record of Peace Corps experiences. This article offers a brief overview of select collections and projects and has three goals:

1. confirm that Peace Corps continues to thrive as Americans seek to be civically and cross-culturally engaged;
2. encourage information professionals and *C&RL News* readers to participate in collecting, preserving, and promoting stories and data of Peace Corps Volunteers; and
3. challenge scholars and researchers to examine the impact of Peace Corps.

The specific purposes of each collection and project to gather stories and data vary, but ultimately all exist to safeguard the record of the Peace Corps experience, to educate the general public about Peace Corps and its values, to support research, and to encourage the production of secondary sources that enlighten and promote service, global understanding, and cultural respect.

Capturing the resources before they disappear

Preservation efforts featured in this article include collecting books, paper documents, oral history interviews, audio story slams, videos of Peace Corps experiences, and testimonials by host communities as well as 3-D artifacts. The range of returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) engaged in collecting and preserving the record is as diverse as what's being collected; e.g., retirees, recently returned volunteers, archivists, librarians, museum professionals, academics, journalists along with nurses, lawyers, techies, and those who have never before considered preserving information for its own sake.

Since 1961 Peace Corps has sent more than 230,000 trained volunteers to live for two years in 141 host countries, speaking their languages and working side-by-side with local counterparts engaged, for example, in teaching, community development, agriculture, market co-ops, and public health. The Peace Corps approach to socioeconomic development—that is, on-the-ground, peer-to-peer activity that responds to needs expressed by the local community—was in

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1961, and still is, a nontraditional approach to international development.

Challenging scholars and researchers

This article issues a loud and deliberate call for research. Primary resources are essential in research, thus the preservation of the record is the first step.

Very little research has been conducted regarding the impact of Peace Corps over 56 years. Now, with a growing mass of documentation, the Peace Corps community is poised to encourage and conduct more in-depth research.

Research questions regarding Peace Corps are wide open and offer exciting opportunities for original, meaningful analysis. Think tanks, graduate schools of international studies, and interdisciplinary undergraduate programs are appropriate venues. Academic librarians who work side-by-side with faculty and graduate students are in a perfect position to promote Peace Corps research. This article invites them to become advocates.

Looking at the collections

The working files and papers of the Peace Corps itself, the agency that oversees the international service of approximately 7,300 current Peace Corps Volunteers in 65 countries, are government property and housed in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in various locations, including Washington, D.C., and presidential libraries.

Numerous universities hosted Peace Corps training programs in the 1960s and some campuses, like the University of Michigan, played significant roles in the history of Peace Corps. Many records related to Peace Corps activities in those universities can be found in special collections in their respective archives or libraries.¹

Early systematic preservation efforts

Early, strong, and effective advocates for writing and disseminating the Peace Corps experience are RPCVs John Coyne and Marian Haley Beil (both Ethiopia, 1962-64), who

began Peace Corps Writers before Peace Corps' 25th Anniversary in 1986. Peace Corps Writers encouraged RPCVs to write, write, write, and promoted their publications at the Peace Corps Writers website.² Although still accessible, the site stopped adding material in 2009. Since then, Peace Corps Worldwide continues with an informative website and three blogs.³ Because of the dedicated work of Coyne and Beil, hundreds of books by Peace Corps authors have been published and marketed over the last 30 years.

Two unique documentation projects began shortly after Peace Corps celebrated its 35th anniversary in 1996 and are growing stronger, thanks in part to their affiliation with the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA). The Committee for a Museum of the Peace Corps Experience and the RPCV Oral History Archive Project, both founded in 1999 on separate coasts with different missions, represent systematic efforts to preserve the Peace Corps legacy.

Projects and libraries actively soliciting primary resources

The Committee for a Museum of the Peace Corps Experience was founded in 1999 in Portland, Oregon, by three RPCVs: Martin Kaplan (Somalia, 1962-64), Bill Stein (Niger 1990-93) and Michael Renning (Niger, 1995-98). As a 501(c)3 private, nonprofit organization and an affiliate group of NPCA, the committee has an established record of artifact acquisition, professional exhibits and fundraising, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Its purpose is to educate people about Peace Corps and to preserve its legacy.

In conjunction with Peace Corps' 55th Anniversary in 2016, the Committee for a Museum of the Peace Corps Experience expanded its regional focus to the national level. Since then, a nationally based core planning group is redesigning the website and addressing all aspects of a virtual and place-based museum, including policies and best practices for acquiring artifacts and stories from RPCVs and staff.⁴

The RPCV Oral History Archive Project, an affiliate group of NPCA, was initiated in 1999 by Robert Klein (Ghana, 1961-64), who was in the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers to begin overseas service in August 1961. As Peace Corps turned 35 in 1996, Klein began to recording the life story of every remaining member of his Ghana training group. Klein worked with archivists at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (JFK Library) to develop a protocol and standards for the oral history interviews. The project calls for returned Peace Corps volunteers to interview other RPCVs about their Peace Corps experiences. The in-depth interview (60 to 120 minutes) includes a discussion of the volunteer's life before Peace Corps, training for Peace Corps, serving in-country, and finally reflecting on the impact Peace Corps had on the volunteer.

More than 610 recorded interviews are archived at the JFK Library and are part of NARA. From 1999 until 2015, approximately 530 interviews were recorded on audiocassette tapes. Since 2015, the interviews are recorded digitally and can be accessed online. Fundraising is underway to digitize the earlier analog recordings.⁵

The JFK Library houses the RPCV Oral History Archives Project as part of the RPCV Collection. The RPCV Collection accepts correspondence, diaries, books, maps, photos, and AV materials from any RPCV who began service while President John F. Kennedy was in office (1961-63). Approximately 325 RPCVs have deposited materials, and the library continues to collect materials. The collection is arranged by country of service, and most documents are not digitized.⁶

U.S. Peace Corps Records are material acquired by the JFK Library from the Peace Corps agency, many microfilmed in 1964, netting nine rolls of microfilm. Beginning in 1987, the library received additional publications from the Peace Corps/ACTION Library, which are part of the collection.⁷

Several important collections of personal papers have direct interest to Peace Corps, including those of R. Sargent Shriver, Peace

Corps' founding director; William H. Josephson, first legal counsel to Peace Corps; and William Henry Byrd, founding director of outdoor fitness training programs.

Peace Corps-related archives at American University Library (AUL) in Washington, D.C., are several and evolved with various collecting policies since 1999, when AU accepted the administrative files of Friends of Colombia and documents from volunteers who served in Colombia.⁸

Shortly after, NPCA began depositing its administrative files at AUL, followed by Friends of Nigeria, and more recently the Friends of Ghana and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Washington. AUL welcomes deposits of administrative files from any NPCA affiliate group.⁹

American University's commitment to preserving the Peace Corps legacy expanded markedly in 2013 when it launched the Peace Corps Community Archive (PCCA). PCCA accepts materials generated or collected by Peace Corps Volunteers during their years of service in any country at any time period, including recordings of oral histories and memoirs of RPCVs, but not 3-D objects.¹⁰

The PCCA website offers access to finding aids for PCV papers by country through the content map. Across all Peace Corps archives at AUL, more than 160 returned Peace Corps Volunteers have deposited their papers. The website also lists numerous Peace Corps-related archival collections in different institutions under its additional resources button.¹¹

Collections at large government institutions

- *Library of Congress (LC)*. A search at the LC website, using the term "peace corps," brings up more than 3,700 items, many available online, held by LC.¹² Items include books, periodicals, legislation, web pages, photos, manuscripts, videos, audio recordings, music, and maps. These materials are classified according to their subject matter. For example, Peace Corps writers'

fiction will classify in PS, while nonfiction about a specific country may be classified in its geographic area. The majority of titles about Peace Corps itself fall into specific HC numbers which cover economic history and development. U.S. documents related to Peace Corps are in the government documents collection.

A large number of books were added to LC in conjunction with Peace Corps' 50th Anniversary, titles of which are cited with abstracts in a comprehensive list compiled by Rex A. Hudson (Bolivia, 1970-71), Federal Research Division. The 2015 revised bibliography *An Annotated Bibliography of Peace Corps Writers' Books in the Library of Congress* lists 825 volumes by Peace Corps authors or about Peace Corps.¹³

- *Smithsonian Institution*. More than 2,500 items are cited from searching "peace corps" in the Smithsonian collections.¹⁴ Among the artifacts are 43 items donated to the Smithsonian American History Museum by Peace Corps on September 11, 2011, and photos and videos created during the 2011 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, both events celebrating Peace Corps' 50th Anniversary.

The Smithsonian accepts materials that fit its collecting guidelines and interest its curators. Clicking on "finding aids" at the Smithsonian collections website allows one to browse various collections related to Peace Corps or assembled by Peace Corps Volunteers. "Papers of Peace Corps Volunteers, 1920-1982" includes deposits from 101 volunteers and collections from two missionary groups, which accounts for the beginning date of 1920, instead of 1961, the first year of Peace Corps.

The "Records, 1970-1979" offers documents from the Smithsonian-Peace Corps Environmental Program in which Smithsonian scientists worked with RPCVs to develop guidelines for international conservation, biological, ecological, wildlife conservation, and national park development. The materials were used by volunteers for environmental programs requested by host countries.

Research opportunities ahead

This brief overview is by necessity curtailed and selected. It is intended to inspire interest in Peace Corps-related materials and to engage the library, archive, and museum communities in advocating for collecting Peace Corps records and stories.

The next step is research. The field is wide open to study the impact of Peace Corps Volunteers around the world and the activities of returned Peace Corps Volunteers in the United States. New insights await researchers who pursue assessing the value of Peace Corps grassroots, cross-cultural, and community-based approach to international development, including its impact on the development field itself.¹⁵

Notes

1. An abbreviated list of locations exists at <https://blogs.library.american.edu/pcca/additional-resources/>.
2. Peace Corps Writers website, www.peacecorpswriters.org/.
3. See peacecorpsworldwide.org/.
4. www.museumofthepeacecorpsexperience.org.
5. <https://www.peacecorpsconnect.org/campaigns/rpcv-oral-history-project>.
6. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RPCV.aspx?f=1>.
7. The finding aid at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/USPC.aspx?f=1>.
8. www.american.edu/library/archives/finding_aids/friends_of_colombia_fa.cfm.
9. www.american.edu/library/archives/finding_aids/fon_fa.cfm.
10. www.american.edu/library/archives/pcca.
11. <https://blogs.library.american.edu/pcca/additional-resources>.
12. <https://www.loc.gov/>.
13. <https://www.loc.gov/peacecorps/Bibliography-PeaceCorpsWriters.pdf>.
14. Smithsonian collections, <https://collections.si.edu/search>.
15. Please contact the author with comments, questions, suggestions, or additional resources at patwand@mac.com. ✍