

Carolyn Olsen

This is an interview with Carolyn Olsen. It's July 14, 2006, and we're at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, and this is about her involvement with the West African Smallpox Eradication Program. This interview is being conducted as part of the reunion marking the 40th anniversary of the launch of this program. The interviewer is Kathryn McNutt.

McNutt: I'm glad you're here. The purpose is to do an oral history. We hope to capture for future generations the memories that you have about all of the participants and their families in eradicating smallpox in West Africa.

So, essentially we'll just kind of walk through your story and what your and your family's experiences were. You were involved in the Smallpox Eradication Program in Liberia. Could you tell me what years you were there?

Olsen: We lived in Liberia from September '67 to May '70.

McNutt: And what was your family situation.

Olsen: My husband and I had just gotten married in March of '67. We came to CDC for training in July, August, and September, and then we went off to Liberia.

McNutt: That's a bit of a transition.

Olsen: Yes. We were in California before we came to Atlanta. So the weather in Atlanta was hot and humid, and when we arrived in Liberia, it was actually cooler and less humid.

McNutt: Really?

Olsen: Even though we were on the equator.

McNutt: So, what was your experience? Kind of paint a picture for me. When you first got to Liberia, what were your living arrangements?

Olsen: When we arrived in Liberia, the living arrangements were interesting. The house was outfitted so that you had your basic needs until your freight came. We were met at the airport, which was about 25 miles from town, and taken into town. Dr. Shalimar and his wife took us out to dinner. Then they took us to our little house and said that they would come back the next day. It was a Saturday. We were living in a kind of a compound, and right at the gate there was somebody else's packing crate that someone was living in. When your packing crates came, oftentimes the local people would take the box, which was very large, and make it into a house.

It was probably 9:00 PM, but when you're on the equator, it gets dark at 6:00 PM and gets light at 6:00 AM. So we were going to go to bed. We had sheets on the windows because, again, we were just moving into this house. All of a sudden there was this bright light. So we opened windows, and a transformer on this pole was burning. We were going to call the fire department, but we realized we didn't have a telephone. So we just watched it and thought, "Well, if it comes to the house, the house is made of cinderblock." But the fire just kind of went out. And after it went out, we realized that we did have a telephone. However, the black rotary telephone that was under the bed had no cord or connection. Since we really didn't know where we were-and our neighbors were gone for the weekend, so-it was probably just as well that the telephone was inoperable. So that was an interesting start.

McNutt: Is that when it hit you that you were in West Africa and not the States?

Olsen: I think that when we stopped in Senegal before arriving in Liberia, that was when it hit that us that we were in a very different place. And living overseas then was very different than it is now. There was no email or operable telephone. And so basically for 3 years, we did not talk to our family. We sent letters and, if necessary, there was teletype and occasionally a telegram
Also, occasionally at work, my husband would talk to CDC. But most of the time we were on our own.[And, again, we didn't have a telephone-even though we were in the biggest city in the country.

McNutt: Monrovia?

Olsen: Yes. And on that first Monday, 2 days after we arrived, the USAID van came to get my husband to go to work. There were about 20 men on the porch, and the driver said to my husband, "Oh, they all want to work for your wife. They want to be the houseboy." I looked at them, and I thought, "How am I ever going to choose?" I'd never had house help. So I thought, "Well, I'll just take the first person, and I'll just have a different person every day until I pick somebody."

McNutt: You're trying them out.

Olsen: Trying them out. And so I told Timha I was only hiring him for one day. And in Liberia, they speak pidgeon English. It's a little different than English.

So Timha came to work for me that day. He was an older man. I was only 25, so he probably was 35, but he seemed like an older man. And we didn't have anything in the house, and so I thought, "What can he do? Well, he could wash some clothes." So I had him wash my husband's shirts and a couple of things because we'd been traveling. After he finished that, he hung all our clothes on the bushes outside so that they could get dry. I thought that I could bring them in, so I said, he could go. And then I looked a little later, and I thought the shirts were mildewing because they all had blue and green on them. So I brought the clothes in and I used all the different cleaners to get the spots out, and I was thinking, "Boy, things really mildew fast here." So when Dennis came home for lunch, I told him we had to buy a dryer.

Well, the next day came and everybody was on my porch again. Timha was there again, and I noticed that he was wearing a country shirt, made out of indigo. I realized then that when he was wringing the wet clothes, he had put them up against his shirt, and the dye in his shirt had bled on all of our clothing.

Well, luckily, the driver had a friend or a brother or something, and he introduced me to David Parker, who then became our houseboy for the next 3 years. He was a very nice man, and it worked out very well.

McNutt: You didn't have to try all of them.

Olsen: Didn't have to try. And Timha became our gardener. That was the job he wanted. He didn't want to be the houseboy.

Another episode with Timha was funny. The farmers do slash-and-burn in the fields. So I asked him to clean up the yard, and all of a sudden I look out and there's fire. Everything he cut down is burning. But other than that, keeping the house was easy.

McNutt: You had electricity, you had a stove, refrigerator, a dryer.

Olsen: We bought a dryer, and we had a stove that was furnished. The stove used gas, and so we always had to make sure, if we were going to have company, that we had enough gas so that all of a sudden we didn't run out in the middle of entertaining. Somehow, USAID [US Agency for International Development] would only give us one gas canister at a time.

But the people were very, very nice. We felt very comfortable. And the American community was nice. But the smallpox program didn't quite fit with the embassy and it didn't quite fit with USAID, so we were kind of our own program.

I am an environmental engineer, and so I wanted to find a job. I found one, working for a firm that was doing an extension of the airport. But then someone who I didn't know took a job that supposedly took a job away from a local person. The upshot was that no dependents could work except as schoolteachers or nurses, so I couldn't work.

And then they approached me and asked if I would substitute at the American school. So I taught 7th through 12th-grade math. I had never taught before, but somebody told me the first day of school that you need to be really tough. So I was really tough. Any time the kids were not good, I would immediately give them a test. So after about a week, they just knew they were going to be good when they came in.

And, having never had any education classes, I just taught them like I was taught. Years later, it was rewarding when I met some of my students who had actually done well. It was a relief that I didn't do permanent damage.

McNutt: They can't blame you for anything.

Olsen: Right, right.

And then, I guess it was the second year, the principal or the superintendent of the American school crossed the Liberian government and was asked to leave Liberia, so I became superintendent. One day I was sitting in my office and the phone-

I told you the phones didn't work, but all of a sudden the phone on my desk rang. I was so excited. I picked it up and said, "American Cooperative School," and they said, "Oh, wrong number," and it never rang again.

But the thing that was so nice about our African experience, it gave us a feeling not only for Africa but also for what French countries were like, since we took trips, as part of the smallpox program, to Ivory Coast, which is a francophone country. And we were given vacations every 2 years or so. On our first vacation, in 1968, we went with a Peace Corps charter to East Africa for 6 weeks. That was when Jomo Kenyatta was Prime Minister of Kenya, and Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya were on such good terms with each other that they had common currency.

McNutt: Really?

Olsen: The drought had not occurred yet in Ethiopia. It was a very kind and gentle country under Emperor Haile Selassie. So we saw part of Africa that no longer exists, and it was a very enjoyable, interesting experience. It was also interesting to see how that part of Africa was different than West Africa.

Now, we weren't always just going on vacations, but we were able to go to Europe also. Neither of us had been there, and to spend 6 weeks in Europe just wandering around was really interesting. It was winter, so we ended up in a lot of art museums and other museums. It gave us a whole different perspective on the world.

McNutt: Sure.

Olsen: Those breaks were nice because, when we went back to Liberia, we could kind of look at life a little differently. In Liberia, there were only a couple paved roads, and we just looked at the same thing every day.

And as far as the smallpox program goes, I did not go up-country with Dennis because there was really no place to stay. Later on, when we lived in India, I used to travel with him because they had guest houses and different places where we could stay. But oftentimes he would stay with Peace Corps volunteers, and so a lot of the Peace Corps volunteers would then come to stay with us when they came to Monrovia.

Toward the end of our stay, we got very excited because

cholera was all of a sudden detected in Sierra Leone. They anticipated it coming into Liberia, so Dennis had an opportunity to meet with President Tubman, who was one of what they called an honorable. His parents had come back to Africa after Abraham Lincoln was president, when many of the descendants of slaves in the United States went back to Liberia. So Liberia was never colonized.

But Liberia had an American influence. Their Pledge of Allegiance is just like ours, with a few words changed, and their flag is just like ours except it has only one star. And during the Second World War, Roberts Field was used as a base where the planes would fly to Africa from Brazil and then up to Europe. In fact, sometimes you would see houses made of military runway materials.

But in theory President Tubman was a benevolent dictator. And when we came back, we were in Washington for a short time. I would tell people that Liberia was the kind of place that, if you went out at night, you always took a flashlight because there were no lights except the Moon and the stars, and you wanted to make sure you didn't step on a snake or step in a hole. You had no fear of any of the people. And at that time in Washington, DC, if you heard someone walking up behind you, you immediately turned to see who was there.

I remember seeing the soldiers. They didn't carry real guns; they carried wooden guns. And oftentimes, after a parade, they would carry their shoes on their guns because they weren't used to wearing shoes, but they had to wear them for the parade.

McNutt: How interesting.

Olsen: But socially, we had to make your own entertainment.

McNutt: Sure.

Olsen: The last year we were there, they brought in television. But before that, it was the BBC news.

And, actually, Liberia was 45 minutes off of Greenwich Mean Time. During World War II, there was supposedly a German ship off the shore that sent word they wanted to meet with the president of Liberia at 10 o'clock, and so Liberia changed its time so that the Germans would be late, as 10 o'clock became 10:45 Liberian standard time.

McNutt: No way!

Olsen: Yes. But sometimes people would say that Liberia was like a poorly done United States.

But we were in our 20s, and it was our first assignment. We had a very enjoyable time and we met lots of people.

At the American school, about 50% of the children who I taught were Americans, about 25% were from other embassies, and the other 25% were Liberian students. Of this last group, some had parents, who were doctors and honorables, and some students were on scholarship. So it was a nice blending. We got to know people from all kinds of different embassies, like the Asian embassies. And if you were their child's schoolteacher, you were a very special person. The students seemed to get together very well. They took care of each other.

McNutt: So tell me a bit more about the social life. You were probably one of the younger couples there, I'm assuming. What were the social activities that you did?

Olsen: There were a lot of cocktail parties, and you found excuses to have parties, like for St. Patrick's Day. The social life on weekends was really out at the Voice of America transmitter site, which was about 20 miles out of town. They had to maintain short grass around the transmitter, so they made it into a 9-hole golf course.

The golf holes were sand with a little bit of oil mixed in. People kept the sand raked. So if you got out on the green, it was like putting on the bottom of a sink: the ball went down toward the hole, like water toward a drain. So you really had an unfair advantage. But it was very interesting.

And we all had young Liberians as our caddies. They lived near Harrisburg, which was where Voice of America was. My regular caddy was Michael. He would make sure there were no snakes where I was going. But I never had a bad lie because Michael could pick up a golf ball with his toes, and by the time I got up to my ball, it was sitting on top of a nice little tuft of grass waiting to be hit.

One year before Christmas, Michael said, "Missy"-they called a man Boss Man, and the ladies were called Missy-"Missy, are you going to get me a Christmas present?"

"Well, Michael, what would you like?"

And he said, "I was looking in the book, and I think I would like roller skates."

Now, there was no pavement. I mean, there was a dirt road to get there, there was a dirt parking area, and there was grass on the golf course.

And so I said, "I think that you really don't want roller skates."

But in ways it was kind of sweet, the simplicity of life and not realizing some things.

Another sweet moment was when we all made curtains. You could always tell when people came to Liberia by their curtains. People who came in the rainy season had bright curtains; people who came in the sunny season had dark curtains. I used to sew things, and I always had material left over. And David, who worked for us, said, "Are you going to use that material?" So I gave it to him. And one day, Dennis was up-country vaccinating in a certain area. David's wife and children were in that area, so he went along so that his children would definitely get vaccinated. And they took a picture. And there were my bedroom curtains-everybody was wearing them.

McNutt: Oh, my gosh.

Olsen: But I'm trying to think of some of the other social things we did. I remember our going-away party. Usually when you invited people for these cocktail parties, there were always so many things to do that maybe only 50% would come. And just about the time we were leaving the country, there was an outbreak of what they thought was smallpox. It was way out in the hinterland, where you had to hike in. It turned out to be monkeypox. But Dennis and his replacement, Randy Moser and the team hiked in.

And so for our farewell party-and the Moser's welcome-to-Liberia party-they were all still up-country. But Barbara Moser and I were putting on this party, and everybody showed up. And our house was just like they used to stuff Volkswagens: it was just full of people. And about halfway into the party, Dennis and Randy arrived in their Dodge truck.

One lady, as she was leaving, said to me, "That was a really good cheese ball."

"Oh. Did you like it?"

She said, "Yes. My friend and I ate the whole thing. We got stuck in the corner and we couldn't get out, so we would get drinks from out the window, and we just ate the whole cheese ball."

I think the thing that was nice about Africa is it gave

you a totally different perspective of the world and gave you a wonderment for travel, for things you can do-or the things you try to do anyway.

McNutt: So it's great to have that perspective in your early or middle 20s.

Olsen: Right, yes.

McNutt: Changes your whole outlook.

Olsen: Some of the people who are here at the reunion I have never met before. They were in the first group in '66. We were kind of the fill-in group, so we had a much smaller group. There were maybe 10 or 12 of us. So, except for meetings that were held about once a year in someplace like Abidjan, we didn't meet the other people because Africa was so remote that to get from one country to the other you often would have to fly to France first.

McNutt: I've heard that. That's crazy.

Olsen: And, as opposed to India, where we traveled all over, Africa was hard to travel in. But we had a lot of people from CDC come through -and it was always fun people, like Jim Hicks [James W. Hicks]. Then we would catch up on the news, because we were never quite sure what was happening in the world. Bad news travels fast though, so when Martin Luther King was killed, we knew within hours of its happening; the same thing with Bobby Kennedy. Like I said, bad news traveled very, very quickly.

And it was hard to convince Liberians that there was actually a man on the Moon. That was happening while we were there. The local people would say, "Oh, yes, Missy, oh, yes, there's somebody on the Moon." But they had never flown; they had never really been aware of so many things out there.

McNutt: It was 2 different worlds coming together.

Olsen: Right. But, then again, you don't have to be educated to be smart, or to be wise. I think that all of us learned a lot from the different people we encountered.

And at that time, since Liberia had a heavy American influence, we would have a lot of American foods. We had 2 supermarkets, run by Lebanese. The Lebanese also were the

jewelers.

When I went into the supermarket, I would check the cottage cheese to see if it was green or not. Or I would buy one box of cereal and take it home, and if it didn't have weevils, I'd go back and buy a whole bunch of boxes. But weevils and ants were just everywhere, so we kept everything that wasn't canned in the refrigerator. Even when I baked a cake, I took it out of the oven and put it in the refrigerator. If you left it sitting out for a little while, you'd come back and it would have ants all over it. And if I made spaghetti, I had a strainer so that, after it started boiling, I could scoop all the weevils off the top. Otherwise, it would look like you had pepper in your spaghetti.

Flour was the hardest thing. You had to sift your flour because the weevils didn't go through the holes, and then you'd throw them away and you'd make whatever you were going to with the flour.

McNutt: What did you do for water?

Olsen: Originally, we were on a well. We had to boil the water and put it through a filter. We had these big tall filters with clay candles on them. Once a week, the filters would be boiled and cleaned so that we always had water.

Now I was teaching school. One day I was taking a shower. I was totally lathered, and the power went off. So the water went off. So I called David, who brought me the water from the dehumidifier and I poured that on. I still needed more water. So then it was ice water from the refrigerator. So even to this day, I wash my hair, rinse it off, wash one arm, rinse it off, just in case.

McNutt: Tools of the trade.

Olsen: And after that day, we had a large plastic garbage can that we always stored water in, and every couple of weeks we would replace the water. [Toward the end of our tour, we were actually on a water system, but we still boiled our water just as a precaution.

We had excellent restaurants. Salvatore's had probably the best Italian food I've ever eaten in my whole life because they had to make everything from scratch. So they had their own pasta, their own cannelloni. When I went to Italy, it was almost

anticlimactic because I had better food in Liberia. And eating out was a very social thing. We ate out quite a bit.

There was also a Lebanese restaurant. And this is kind of funny. They had an expansion, and the back area-again, you're talking 100% humidity, 90°-100°F-was decorated like an ice cave, with blown white plaster. You'd go back in there, and they'd have air-conditioning blowing down. They made wonderful hamburgers and shawarma sandwiches.

And since I worked at the school, some of the teachers were from different neighborhoods. We had a Haitian French teacher, and we had some Liberian teachers. It was a nice way to get to know different nationalities and different people and work with them.

McNutt: What did your family think about your taking off at age 25 for Africa?

Olsen: Oh, I had already been to Brazil with the Peace Corps,. I grew up in Wyoming and my first job was in Los Angeles, and I had never been to California. Being the youngest of 7, I was a bit of an adventurer.

McNutt: So what special training did you have? You mentioned training at the CDC. What prepared you or your husband for West Africa?

Olsen: The participants all went through the EIS [Epidemic Intelligence Service] course, so even though my husband is not a doctor, he went through the course that's usually reserved for the EIS Officers.

McNutt: Is that a 2-year course?

Olsen: No. It was a 3-month summer course. The EIS Officers who were staying then worked with CDC for 2 years. But we went off to Africa. So there was a lot of statistics and epidemiology, even mechanics. The spouses were invited to attend any of the sessions that we wanted to, which was quite interesting.

Plus they had another course, one taught by Dr. Waddy [B. B. Waddy], who was very English and had spent many, many years in Africa. He talked about tropical diseases and the African culture. Other people talked about things like the weather. So we had demographics, history, and geography.

But when we first arrived in Liberia, we had very, very

little because you were only allowed to carry 40 pounds of materials with you. So we had a couple books and a few other things. But then CDC sent some program materials, so, with nothing else to read, I read the book on tropical medicine. And one by one, you followed the pictures and would see the diagnosis. And not being a doctor, I would think, "Oh, I've got this rash." I think I needed something else to do.

I had a couple bouts of food poisoning. One was caused by strawberries. They looked just like the kind of strawberries you bought at the grocery store, but they had probably been frozen and thawed a couple of times on their way to Africa.

They used to actually send California lettuce and California celery to Liberia. It did not come by airplane; it came by ship.

McNutt: And it made it?

Olsen: Yes. We would save the lettuce for special occasions. We had these green Tupperware containers. If you took the core out of the lettuce and put the lettuce in a paper towel, it would last. I'm sure it had no food value, but it was like, "Oh, lettuce, lettuce from the States!"

And the tsetse fly is in that part of Africa, so they couldn't raise cattle because they would be killed by the tsetse fly. So all the meat was imported. About the only thing you would get locally was chicken.

McNutt: That answers a huge question for me because I did not see many cattle when I was in Liberia in June, and I was wondering why not.

Olsen: There is some other bug that gets into clothing that is washed. The bug is in the water, and so you have to iron everything.

McNutt: Interesting.

Olsen: Yes. And at that time, there were parts of Liberia that were not mapped, because the heat would cause steam to rise in the rainforest. We had some friends who were with the USGS [US Geological Survey]. They kept waiting for a clear day. But if you look at the 1967 USGS map, there was a section of the Liberia map, they probably have mapped the area by now because of the satellites.

But I'll tell you about one of our regular activities. Everybody wanted to have some African art. It was very "in" in the States to have African art, and so people would buy different things. There was a group of vendors or sellers, who were called Charleys. So there would be Charley number 1, Charley number 2, Charley number 3. And if you purchased something from them, you could actually write check to "Charley Number 3". Liberia used the US dollar. So I have cancelled checks to Charley number so-and-so.

The Charley's must have had a great network. You would hear a noise on your front porch, and then you'd hear the doorbell ring. You would open the door, and there would be like a little store. The Charley would have laid down all his artifacts, and then you would look to see if there was anything you wanted. They would often come on weekends when most people were at home, and we would bargain and bargain. The Muslim Charley's, would sometimes take a break and go say their prayers and come back, and you would bargain some more. My husband didn't like to bargain, so I would be out on the porch to bargain, and then I would bring an artifact in the house and he'd, "Oh, that is so ugly, I don't like it in our house!" and I would go bring it back out and the price would be lowered.

One day, I started bargaining because I was bored and there was nothing else to do. I was probably at maybe \$10 and the Charley was at \$15, and after an hour we were going nowhere. And then I decided I would use a different technique, and I said, "Well, \$7." And he looked at me and said, "Missy, \$7, two aspirin, you give me a headache." And I still have the artifact. It looks like somebody made it out of mud. It's an interesting, kind of strange piece.

One time, my husband was up-country. We had night watchmen, so I felt perfectly safe. One of the Charleys that I hadn't dealt with before came to the door. He had a fine Senefo artifact. It was the only piece he had, and so I knew there wasn't going to be a lot of bargaining. I think I probably ended up spending \$100 or maybe \$125. It's a beautiful piece, and I must get it into a museum someday.

But the next night the doorbell rings, and there he is again, and he wants to buy it back from me for \$250. So evidently, somebody had heard about it and had offered him much more. But I said, "No, no, no. It is sold."

McNutt: Someone within your group heard?

Olsen: One of his customers, because we would describe art pieces we were interested in obtaining. The Charley would then try to find them. .

If you had company, especially when anybody from the States was visiting, the Charleys knew it. If you were having a cocktail party, all of a sudden you would hear a ring, and there would be tie-dye on the porch banisters and different Africa items at their little store on the porch.

And then, sometimes rogues-they didn't call them burglars in Liberia-came in at night. They never hurt anybody.

McNutt: While somebody was there?

Olsen: Yes. So at night, when you went to bed, you locked the front door, the kitchen door, and every door in the house. You had these big skeleton keys. Then you locked yourself in the bedroom. And if you were lucky, you had a bathroom attached to the bedroom, but if not, you locked the bathroom too. And off to bed you went.

The first incident occurred the first time my husband was out of the country. It was my first night alone in Africa and I had locked myself in. I hear this tap-tap on the window, and I think, "My goodness, somebody's coming in." Finally, I looked out, and there was my husband throwing rocks at the window. He had come back early, and when he rang the doorbell, it rang in the kitchen, and I was 2 locked doors away.

McNutt: Your husband was trying to break in.

Olsen: Yeah. But then one time I got up in the morning, went into the kitchen, to turn the coffee on, and noticed that we had been broken in. I ran out of the kitchen and locked the door, and I said, "We've been robbed."

And Dennis said, "What did they take?"

I said, "The water filter."

And he said, "What?"

And I said, "They were in the kitchen. The only thing I could see is that the water filter was gone and the window was gone." (We had these sliding windows).

It was just before Thanksgiving, and the embassy had brought in turkeys for us. So we had 3 turkeys in our kitchen freezer, one for Dr. Thompson and his family and 2 for us. Well,

the rogues had taken 2 turkeys and a kitchen curtain to wrap them in because they were frozen solid. That's all they took.

We all had tin roofs, and when it would rain, it was like somebody playing the drums. We had the most exciting electrical storms. There were big booms, and the power would go out. The storms would come in off the ocean.

The robberies were timed. Just as the thunder boom resounded, the rogues would take the window out. In our bedroom, we slept with our heads against the wall. On the other side of the wall was where the burglars had actually come in the house. We didn't hear them at all.

We were in embassy housing. So Dennis went to the embassy to report that we had been rogued. The burglars had gone through the whole area; they had taken money; they had taken stereo equipment. Dennis said he felt kind of strange saying they took 2 turkeys and the kitchen curtain. The robbers had tried to get out of the kitchen, but they couldn't get the door open, so they were confined to that little area.

McNutt: That's funny. So, security-wise, you weren't worried while you were there.

Olsen: No. We were never in fear. I mean, there was just no concern.

McNutt: It was relatively stable out there?

Olsen: Very, very stable. Again, you had a night guard. But you paid him, and I'm sure he paid whoever it was that was stealing so they wouldn't come and rogue you. I have a letter that a night guard wrote me. He was a very old man. The letter said, "Dear Mother, please buy me a bed so I can sleep on your couch while I guard. I might have considered his request if he had called me Missy, but "Dear Mother."

McNutt: What kind of problems did you have in establishing working relationships with the African counterparts there?

Olsen: Well, I wasn't working, except at the school. I really didn't have problems.

By that time, I could understand pidgeon English, and usually they were a very kind and quiet people. Many times, the little boys who played soccer with a grapefruit in the vacant lot next door would come over to get a drink of water or just to

say hello. Or they would pick the papaya off my tree and then want to sell it to me. But we never felt threatened at all. I'm sure things have changed-the world has changed-but then it was very nice.

They made beautiful tie-dye. I used to buy tie-dyed material from the lady who lived under the bridge. Her name was Mama Sony. I would take other American women to her. I think sometimes people were reluctant to interact with local people but I was very comfortable with them because I was teaching Liberian children at school and working with Liberians. So it was very natural.

At that time, there was a large international population, too. There was the German store, and there was a large Irish population, so we made many international friends. We would get invited to their houses for dinner, and so we'd have all kinds of different foods.

McNutt: So, what about your husband? Within the smallpox program, how did he or the team work to get people to sign on to the program and agree to being vaccinated? Did they have to go to tribal leaders?

Olsen: They didn't have the kind of health systems then that they had in some of the colonial countries. Oftentimes they would go to the different villages. And all of his staff were Liberian. He oversaw program operations, and Dr. Thompson was in charge of the medical aspect. I don't know; he'll probably describe it. But his office was incredible. It looked like it washed out to sea and came back. His office was in an interior room, and somebody had painted it a few years before, but when they painted it, if there was a bookcase, they just painted around the bookcase, so you could see where the furniture had been in the past.

I remember one time he was really upset because, again, it was really humid and really hot, and he had gone to the USAID mission and asked if he could have an air-conditioner. And they said, "No, that's a Liberian building, you can't have an air conditioner, or everybody will want one." The statement that was made was, "You have the benefit of working with local people. Therefore, you should be able to cope with the local conditions."

But he enjoyed working with the Liberian staff. Years later, he went to Liberia on short-term consultancies. His staff

were still there and were very pleased to see him. He went up country, where he found out that his driver was now a paramount chief in one of the villages. On his way back, there was a pole thrown across the highway, which meant stop. It was placed there because John Masaquoi wanted to give him a present. He had this country shirt. He stepped aside and said to Dennis, "Tell Carolyn to wash it in Clorox; it's been under the bed."

We have only fond memories. We have things that probably no longer exist. They made country money. Nimba Mountain had such rich iron ore that they just pounded the iron ore into 6-inch sticks with kind of a forked end and a round circle at the top and twisted, unrefined iron; one piece of country money was worth a penny.

Years later, I met somebody whose cousin had lived in Liberia back in the Firestone days. She used to go into the bush. In the afternoon, they would tell stories, so she made a whole book of notes. After Liberia had all its problems, she went back to her notes that she had taken in the '40s, and even though she was in her 70s, she made a book on Liberian folk tales. It is entitled, You Can't Unsneeze a Sneeze. And reading those tales just brought back so many memories.

Food, for instance. They have one thing that's made out of casava called dumb boy, and it is to make you feel full. And you're a dumb boy if you don't swallow it quick because if you chew on it, it swells in your mouth and you can't swallow it.

McNutt: That's interesting.

Olsen: And then you would eat it with just a little bit of what they called soup, which is kind of like our chili.

McNutt: Wow. I love to hear these stories.

You said that you did a lot of work, and you spent a lot of time with the locals as well as the expatriates. What was it like coming back to the States? How did you fit in again?

Olsen: We came to Atlanta for about a month, and then Dennis was assigned to San Francisco Bay area. One of the hardest things was going back into the grocery stores, places where you had so many options. You had a whole row of dog food. We had gotten so used to having a limited amount. In Liberia, if the ship came in, everybody knew that there was fresh or at least new products.

I think the part that amazes me is when you return to the states and you start to tell people about your experiences, and suddenly their eyes glaze over. Then you realize that you are now a part of a different group. If you really want to communicate about travel or about experiences, you have to find a new group of people who also have done similar things or who are well-read. I find that people who are well-read oftentimes enjoy the same interests.

The thing about reading or seeing movies of these areas, be it Darfur or whatever, you don't get the heat and the smell. And the heat and the smell are just as much a part of everything as everything else.

I think it gives you an appreciation in the United States of many things, but at the same time, it makes you realize that you're fortunate and you need to give something back.

McNutt: What was the toughest problem you faced, and how did you handle it?

Olsen: It must have been so tough, I put it out of my mind. I feel like I had no problems.

Oh, I know. This is a funny problem, but it seemed traumatic at the time. They didn't have parallel parking. You pulled in. And a parking spot in front of the grocery store was always prized. We had a little green Volkswagen, and I'd just been to the grocery store. I was backing out. I looked and no cars were coming; it was clear. And I backed up and I ran into a car, a big black Mercedes.

McNutt: Oh no!

Olsen: And a lady came out. I could tell she was an honorable's wife. I was in the middle of the main street, but all of a sudden, I was totally surrounded by Liberians. Everybody was talking about this great wreck. The woman was distressed. The policeman was there. And I am the only white face in the crowd. All of a sudden this very tall black man comes and puts his arm around me and stands next to me. He was the husband of one of the schoolteachers at the American School. Dennis was up-country, and so I gave the woman my name and I told her we would have her car fixed. What had happened was, she had passed my parking spot, but her friend said, "Oh, there's somebody coming out," so she backed up, and so she ran into me.

McNutt: She should have been looking for you.

Olsen: She should have been looking for me. So I was looking for oncoming traffic, and she is backing up down the street. Bang! I was so distressed. I went home and knitted. Whenever I'm distressed, I knit, so I knitted. And when Dennis came back, I said, "You've got to talk to Honorable so-and-so because I ran into his wife's car."

Well, the honorable said, "Forget it. She was distressed because she had just gotten it out of the shop from her last wreck."

But, I mean, when you're suddenly surrounded, I mean, it's scary.

McNutt: So you were glad that man was able to help you.

Olsen: Oh, yes, yes. He said he was driving down the street and he saw this big crowd of people. When somebody sees a crowd, something must be happening. He said, "And there you are in the middle of it."

McNutt: So, back to smallpox, at what point did you think that smallpox would actually be eradicated in Liberia and West Africa?

Olsen: Well, I have to tell you, I've never seen a case of smallpox. As close as we came was toward the end, when they found a case of monkeypox. It was the first time they had found monkeypox transmitted to man, and the lesions looked like smallpox, but it didn't manifest in the rest of the family. And so a lot of people went up into that area. They would take a scab and send it to CDC to be verified. So it was kind of like the show-and-tell. But it was kind of an exciting time. But, like I said, I never saw a single case of smallpox.

Evidently, somebody had come through and vaccinated the people years before. Or perhaps, because of their isolation, smallpox just never happened there.

But there was so much migration. People from other countries moving in and moving out.

McNutt: The tribes aren't divided along country lines.

Olsen: No.

McNutt: So, had your husband seen smallpox there? He was more up-country.

Olsen: Not in Liberia. He saw it in Sierra Leone. He went there short-term.

One day we were driving. Our car hadn't arrived, so we always took the taxis. And I said, "Dennis, look! I think I see smallpox!" And here was this little kid sitting there by the road. They have what they call the sandy society, and they have mud stuck all over them, and it looked like some kind of disease.

But taxis were interesting. The taxi drivers spoke in pidgeon English. You could take a bus for 5 cents, or you could take a taxi for 25 cents. But you would have to flag the taxis down. Even the policemen didn't have police cars; they used taxis. You would take a taxi up-country.

Our Peace Corps friends would go down to the taxi area to catch a taxi up-country. One time the taxi driver was very aggressive. His fare was inexpensive to take them all the way back up to their village. They went with him, and the person in front was not talking. About 5 miles out of Monrovia they realized the passenger in the front was dead. The taxi driver was taking him back to his village.

McNutt: Oh, my God.

Olsen: One night we had a group of Peace Corps people come to visit. It was late, so we were going to take them back to where they were living in Monrovia. We were going down the main street; 4 of us were in the back of a Volkswagen, and 2 big guys were up front. And all of a sudden this taxi pulls around and tries to stop us. And pretty soon this taxi goes around us again, yelling, "Stop in the name of the law!" So we pulled over, and this policeman, who was drunk, comes to our car and says, "You're under arrest! You have 2 people in the front, you have 4 in the back. That's 7; that's too many." And he said, "Follow me. I'm taking you to the police station." And we're thinking, well, should we go or should we not because we had always been instructed to go to the embassy.

The one fellow in the front with Dennis was Peace Corps, and he was teaching law. He said, "I'd like to see this part of the law." So we proceeded to the police station. It was

midnight. So Dennis and the arresting officer walk into the police station. They have to wake up the policeman on duty.

So now the policeman and the arresting officer come out to the car, and you can tell that this policeman is really tired. He looks in the car and says, "Professor!" The policeman was one of the lawyer's students. So policeman said to the arresting officer, "Now, I know these people and they are okay, so we will let them go." It's now like 12:30 AM. Just as we're leaving, the officer who had tried to arrest us said, "Okay, I'll let you go this time, but if I see you out after midnight, there'll be no mercy."

Policemen also directed traffic. If they arrested you, they would get in the car so that they could take them to the police station.

But we had these little driver's licenses, little red books. The people who work there for business had told us that if we ever got stopped to just put a dollar in the license and give it back, and they'd let us go. Well, I had one friend. She was downtown, and this policeman started to give her a ticket, and she had done nothing wrong. So she proceeded to give him the riot act. He took her license and put a dollar in it and gave it to her!

McNutt: How funny!

Olsen: But, again, you would go to the movie and you would always have some young fellow watch your car. When you got out, you would give him a quarter or 50 cents, and your car was safe. Your car probably would have been safe anyway, but it's just the way that they made some extra money.

But the movies were interesting because it was back when they had reels. Sometimes you would see the middle reel, the first reel, and then you had to try to figure out the movie. Or they would have broken it and spliced it in backwards or something. When we saw "Wait Until Dark," the opening scene showed the plane backing into the airport port from the sky.

McNutt: Whoa! Is there anything from your experience or from the program that you were involved with that you would change?

Olsen: Nothing I would change. It was such a wonderful opportunity. I think that it is a shame that young people don't have that opportunity now. You know, Peace Corps sometimes gives them an

opportunity. But, actually, they usually work at a grassroots level, and this was more on the professional level.

The thing that was kind of amazing was that most of the people in the smallpox program were probably 10-20 years younger than their counterparts. They were all in their mid-20s or early 30s, and most of the doctors and people in Liberia that Dennis worked with were probably in their 40s or 50s. On the social level, it probably took us 2 years before we started getting invited to Liberian houses.

When we were in India, it was much easier. In India, we lived in what was basically an Indian house, and we would have different people come to a party at our house, which was probably not as good as what they lived in. So then when we would be in their city or New Delhi, they did not feel uncomfortable inviting us to their house. So that made it much easier to interact.

But I think in Liberia, there was a status level that was involved. Even though the salaries weren't that good and the housing wasn't that good compared to stateside, they were still better than what many people had.

When the power went out, we had a game we would play. Whoever had the flashlight would have the almanac and ask questions. The other entertainment, if it was light, was watching the geckos.

But I think that we benefited because of the people who went before us, in 1966. So I would say the training for the group that went in '67 was good. The other thing is, Bill Foege [William H. Foege] and the Thompsons had had to leave Nigeria, because of the civil war, so they were at CDC during our training and gave us first-hand experiences of what it was like. And different people would tell you things to take to your post.

We were very spoiled as far as having American foods. People who came to visit from Mauritania or Guinea would think they'd died and gone to heaven because they could have dill pickles and ice cream and all these things that you couldn't get in other countries.

McNutt: So, how did participating with this project change your life?

Olsen: I would say that, being an environmental engineer, it gave me more of a global view of the world, and also a real appreciation for water, especially the needs of people for clean drinking water. Unless you have lived in a situation where you really

have to plan what you're going to drink, you don't have that same appreciation for water. And remember we lived in Africa before bottled water. Nobody carried bottled water around, and you didn't go to the store and buy a case of bottled water. So you had to make sure that your water and your food were clean and good. That was a challenge.

McNutt: And did this first experience contribute to later work experience? You talked about India.

Olsen: Yes, India, and in my profession. I was a utility manager, and I was on the board of American Water Works and Water for People. Then I was the president of the nonprofit Water for People. For the last group, I would talk to people, trying to raise money for water projects.

And being a woman in a professional field, Africa was, to some degree, a matriarchal type society, but in India you realize how downtrodden women are. But in any society, it's the women who end up carrying the water.

McNutt: And the little ones.

Olsen: The little ones, yes. And so it just gave me a real appreciation, for different cultures. And to know that almost everywhere you go, there are people who are wiser than you.

McNutt: So is there anything else that you want to add? Any words of wisdom for the next generation of public health workers? I mean, you've had so many nuggets already. Any last statements?

Olsen: I think that it is very good that we were able to see the world and see the problems of the world. I think also that people need to realize that there are problems here that are also very trying, and we need to be aware of that. People really need to know about health issues. Maybe we don't have the tropical diseases, but we have the overweight and the diabetes and the other things that affect that same socioeconomic group here.

Water and wastewater are my areas of special interest. Global warming and cultural changes are going to see the development public health problems that we don't even envision yet.

McNutt: Thank you for your time.

Olsen: Thank you.

McNutt: What a wonderful discussion.