

Interview with Interviewee JoAnn Wehrle

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Breiseth: It is the third of November, 2013, on a beautiful sunny afternoon in Springfield, Illinois. We’re at 2001 Bates, in Springfield, and I’m with JoAnn Griffith Wehrle, Roy’s wife, who has consented, happily, to respond to some questions because she shared virtually the whole time in Southeast Asia with Roy, although for part of the time, she had to be living in Thailand, while Roy was in Saigon. But she finally ended up in Saigon before they came back to the States. JoAnn, you got married and almost immediately, you were in Laos.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: And what did you enjoy about Laos and the country because you spent some really important time there.

Wehrle: Oh, I just loved—the culture was all different for me, for us, and the people were such nice people. Everything was exciting because it was all new, and it was kind of primitive, you know, with wooden sidewalks and little shops and a little market.

Breiseth: What were your living conditions like in Laos?

Wehrle: Well, we had an American-designed house. I don’t know what it was, it was like stucco or something, painted white. It didn’t breathe; it was hot in there. We had two bedrooms and a living room/dining room combined and a small kitchen. The stove came like up to my waist, which was perfect for our maid.

- Breiseth: You were an Amazon woman there.
- Wehrle: But we weren't really allowed in the kitchen. The servants didn't like you in the kitchen.
- Breiseth: So, you had servants right from the beginning?
- Wehrle: Yes. You have to really because you don't recognize the foods in the market.
- Breiseth: Did you have Chen right from the beginning?
- Wehrle: No. We had... Gad, I can't think of her name. Oh, Marie, Ann-Marie.
- Breiseth: Ann-Marie.
- Wehrle: Ann-Marie.
- Breiseth: I've heard so much about Chen, but it would be interesting to get your perspective. He sounds like he was a very important part of your lives.
- Wehrle: He was because he came with us... When Roy became, I don't know if it was deputy—I'm not sure which position he had—but we were given a really large house with a fence around it and a yard. We had to entertain a lot, so we couldn't have done it without him. He was a superb cook, and his wife was really great too. She just, you know, cleaned.
- Breiseth: Were you the one who made the request of him when there was going to be a dinner party? I mean he came with you to Saigon, as well as being in Laos.
- Wehrle: Right, right.
- Breiseth: But were you kind of his manager?
- Wehrle: I'm the one, right. We went over the menu together, what we were to have, and then he would go to the market because some of that stuff in the market, I just didn't recognize and probably a good thing. I did recognize a rat.
- Breiseth: Yuck. Did he have a pretty broad range of recipes in terms of with China and Laos and Vietnam, French?
- Wehrle: We didn't do a lot of Asian. He did fried rice. He did mostly things like stuffed crab and kind of European type food. He had wonderful fried rice that was the best fried rice I've ever had. But other than that, I don't think he did a lot of Asian food.
- Breiseth: When Roy goes to Saigon, do you go immediately to Thailand or do you stay in Laos for a while?

Wehrle: I was evacuated from Laos, to Thailand. Well, we could go to the Philippines or home wherever you wanted. I went to Thailand. I was evacuated there from Laos, and then I was evacuated there from Vietnam. So, if you combine the two, I was there three years, in Thailand.

Breiseth: In Thailand, in Bangkok.

Wehrle: Yes, in Bangkok.

Breiseth: And what were your living conditions like there.

Wehrle: Oh, great, very American, kind of. Well, when I first was evacuated went from Laos, three of us girls got together. One had two children, and we had a house. Then, when they moved off to other locations, I moved into an apartment downtown, right by the Erawan Hotel, which was great. When we first went down, we had no place to stay. We stayed at the Erawan, which was wonderful. The food was incredible, and they had a swimming pool. I mean we just lived it up; it was great.

Breiseth: Having spent time with Roy in the interviews so far, it's clear that when he got to Bangkok, which he refers to in the notes as "B-K-K"—it took me a long time to figure out what that meant—that that was really incredibly important relaxation time for him.

Wehrle: Yes.

Breiseth: Talk a little bit about how he was or how he seemed when he came back, particularly from Saigon, and then what you guys did to relax.

Wehrle: Well, as the time went on and things in Vietnam got worse, he would come back with terrible headaches. One time, we went to the doctor. He gave him codeine, and Roy just took a half of one because his headache was so bad. He came and just put his head under the water faucet, turned the water on. But before that, when he would come we would just take trips. There's plenty of things to do in Bangkok. We went down to the beach at Phuket and places.

Breiseth: Is this a swimming kind of beach or just walk along the shore?

Wehrle: No, it's a swimming beach.

Breiseth: I noticed in his notes, although we never talked about it, that he really liked to swim. That was a form of relaxation.

Wehrle: Yeah. He liked it better than I did.

Breiseth: From Minnesota?

Wehrle: Well, you know how they have the undertows? I got caught in an undertow, and I didn't know if I was up or down. That was scary, so I kind of was more cautious. Then, we went to another beach area, when they brought a snake in on the net. That kind of did me in too as far as swimming in the ocean went.

Breiseth: Now, all through the notes, there's reference to a dog.

Wehrle: Oh, yes, Peba.

Breiseth: Say his name again.

Wehrle: Peba.

Breiseth: Peba.

Wehrle: Bad spirit.

Breiseth: Bad spirit. What kind of dog?

Wehrle: He was an Australian Terrier and the cutest little thing. We got him as a puppy from friends of ours who had the parent dogs.

Breiseth: In Asia?

Wehrle: In Laos. And he was just so cute. I don't know quite why we got a dog, because we traveled a lot, but he was a cute little dog, and we had a lot of fun with him. He went everywhere with us.

Breiseth: Obviously, then, it had to be well-behaved.

Wehrle: Yes.

Breiseth: And you brought him back to the States?

Wehrle: We brought him back to the States. We had him here in this house until he got 15 years or something.

Breiseth: Really?

Wehrle: Yeah.

Breiseth: Remarkable. And he adjusted to American life?

Wehrle: Yeah, he was a good dog. He didn't run away or anything, you know; he stuck around the house pretty well.

Breiseth: What are some of your memories or impressions of when you came back to Washington for visits? You came back a couple of times with Roy.

Wehrle: Yes. You mean when Roy was working there?

Breiseth: Did America seem very different to you?

Wehrle: When we got into New York, I was surprised, because I always thought the United States, everything was so clean, but we got into New York and it seemed like things were dirty. It was crowded and people rushing all over. So, it was kind of a shock coming back, because in Laos everything is quiet, peaceful, but it was fun being back too. One of the times when we came back, when Roy worked in Washington, is when I found out I had that parasite. That did me in for a while because I just didn't feel right, but once I got the right medicine, it was just gone like that.

Breiseth: I never pursued this with Roy. Were you in Washington for any length of time during his period in Asia? I just assumed he was back for a couple weeks at a time.

Wehrle: No, except on Home Leave

Breiseth: In '67, then you're living back in the States. But I mean, I'm thinking of when you came back, while you were still assigned overseas.

Wehrle: We just went really, basically, to our families because we hadn't seen them for so long.

Breiseth: Sure.

Wehrle: We'd go to Roy's in Belleville and then up to mine in Minnesota. So, that's kind of where we spent our time.

Breiseth: Well, let's go to Saigon, particularly, when you are with Roy in Saigon. How close did you feel to the actual war and to war activities?

Wehrle: Well, somewhat, (coughs) but most of the time, you were not touched by the war, unless it came into Saigon. (coughs)

Breiseth: I'll pause.

(pause in recording)

Wehrle: Are you ready?

Breiseth: Most of the time in Saigon...?

Wehrle: I went around town. I collected stamps. I used to go to the stamp store, just walk around town. I did a lot of walking because I had Peba with me, and I took him out for walks. But there were times, I think I was telling you before, when I would sit on the veranda, and you can see the strafing going out on the

countryside. It's a strange feeling because it's like nothing's happening to you, but out there somewhere, something terrible is happening. And then we had mortars came in. We also had demonstrations with tear gas. But, other than that, basically most of the time, it was just calm in town.

Breiseth: Just independent of the war, which of those three countries did you find most appealing, Thailand, Laos and...

Wehrle: Oh, Laos.

Breiseth: Laos. When I bring up Laos, you both start to smile. It's just clear, it got into your souls.

Wehrle: It's just such a sweet country. I don't know today, I'm sure it's... But we were there; it was rough, you know. We had to take a ferry across the Mekong to get to Thailand to buy what you want. We bought a bicycle there, and Roy and I would ride sidesaddle on the bike. We would go all over in the countryside. Sometimes, there would be a boon or a festival going on, and we'd stop and get grilled chicken on a stick. The people live in thatched houses up off the ground. They just seem content. They didn't need a lot of stuff, just so long as they had food.

Breiseth: And it was warm enough that you didn't need insulated houses.

Wehrle: It got cool during some months. You might need a sweater, but just a few weeks.

Breiseth: Back in Saigon. Talk a little bit about the entertaining which you and Roy would do.

Wehrle: Well, most of the entertaining was done when Roy was alone. That's when he brought in a lot of the people who were coming through. So we did entertain; like for Thanksgiving, we would have a big group over. I don't know how Chen fixed turkeys and stuff. When I think about it, I've never really looked closely at the kitchen. I don't know what he had to deal with back there, but he would cook these big meals that didn't seem to take him any effort. I don't know.

Breiseth: You were there for the great reception for Roy when he left? That comes through all the letters.

Wehrle: I don't even remember it.

Breiseth: The night when he never got out of the receiving line, just so many people came to say goodbye and to thank him. He refers to the fact that you were there.

Wehrle: Yes I was, but by that time I had a baby, so I probably was... I don't know.

- Breiseth: Now, there must have been some interesting experiences of carrying a baby and having one in Saigon.
- Wehrle: Right, right.
- Breiseth: A good hospital?
- Wehrle: Oh, wonderful—a French hospital. Yeah, it was great. It was nice. You've got servants to help you at home. They didn't really do much with the baby, but they do all the meals. We ran out of electricity one time, so we had to walk up the stairs and down, until it came on. And then, when Chen and Amoy left early, then I was there by myself. I had to wash the diapers and hang them out on the railing to dry, because I didn't have anybody to do that.
- Breiseth: Readmission to reality.
- Wehrle: People were so nice though, in Saigon, too, but, of course, I was pretty isolated because there's so only Mrs. Lodge there, except for international women.
- Breiseth: What was she like, Mrs. Lodge?
- Wehrle: You want me to tell you? (laughs)
- Breiseth: Yeah.
- Wehrle: I really knew her more in Thailand than because we were evacuated. It always cracked me up because she ate baby food. (laughs) I don't know if she had some kind of problem or what, but she was very nice, very nice. I liked her a lot, but I didn't know her real well.
- Breiseth: Were there any other American wives that you got to know really well?
- Wehrle: In Vietnam?
- Breiseth: Well, in Thailand or...
- Wehrle: Well, in Thailand, sure, there were a lot of women who were evacuated with me, so most of us knew each other.
- Breiseth: Were the evacuations at all unusual, or was it just that it was, you need to leave the country, so you got transported out?
- Wehrle: In Laos, when they had the Vietcong come into town and took over the town, I was supposed to take some women in the car and drive to the river. We were going to take the boat across, but then Kong Le allowed us to go out by air. He opened the airport. So, we all went out by airplane. Roy and a couple of

the men stayed behind. Then, from Vietnam, there was no problem. They just put us on a military plane.

Breiseth: Right, you leave before the really scary part for Americans, which comes many years later, but you leave in the fall of 1967, somewhere around there. As you watched Roy coping, particularly with the Saigon period, what struck you about his way of handling all that pressure? I know you were helping him on his headaches, but you must have been watching your relatively new husband.

Wehrle: I'm not in on any of the negotiations or anything, so I don't know. I know it was a very stressful time for him, and I know he would talk a little bit about the rice problem down in the delta and that sort of thing.

Breiseth: Well, and he was writing you letters about all this.

Wehrle: When I was in Thailand, yes.

Breiseth: That's part of how we put this whole thing together—the letters he wrote you and to his parents.

Wehrle: Right. That's when I was in Bangkok, and he was in Vietnam. All I know, really, is what he writes me.

Breiseth: In the letters.

Wehrle: In the letters.

Breiseth: While talking to the two of you together about this, it was clear that, when he got to Bangkok, he wanted to put all that behind him.

Wehrle: Yes. I think he expressed most everything in the letters, and then when he came to Bangkok, we just relaxed.

Breiseth: It sounds like a very good way to do it, because I'm sure there's some other Americans under comparable pressures who didn't handle it that well.

Wehrle: I don't know. It made a big problem for some of the women.

Breiseth: So your timing on childbirth was optimal.

Wehrle: Good. (laughs) Right.

Breiseth: I think they call that family planning.

Wehrle: Yes. At the time I didn't realize it, but by looking back on it, I would not have wanted to have children at these times. It didn't seem to bother some people. They would leave them with the servants and they would go off to Nepal or

India, somewhere. But I didn't feel comfortable doing that, and I wouldn't have felt comfortable.

Breiseth: Who were among the memorable colleagues of Roy's that you got to know?

Wehrle: Well, Dick Crist was one....

Breiseth: His major deputy.

Wehrle: Yeah, Dick Crist was like family; I mean he was. We were really close to Dick. Clay, what was his name, Clay McManaway.

Breiseth: Yeah, McManaway.

Wehrle: We were kind of close to him. I can't think offhand, any that were real... Well, Elliot and our friends, the McQueens, from Laos. We kept track of, even when we were here, back in the States, and they're in Texas. They were close. There were lots of them—Thomases.

Breiseth: Did you get to know Dick Holbrook at all?

Wehrle: I didn't know him that well; Roy did. I knew of him, but I didn't know him that well.

Breiseth: Did you ever meet General Westmoreland?

Wehrle: Yes. We had a big dinner; I remember a big dinner. I remember us sitting next to Nixon, and I thought, this is really boring. (laughs) I remember Lodge, and I remember Westmoreland too, but I didn't know Westmoreland's wife very well.

Breiseth: A couple of memories you have of what Lodge was like as a person.

Wehrle: I don't really have much memory of Lodge, I don't think, as a person, because the only time I ever saw him would be like at a dinner or something like that, and I didn't always sit next to him or anything, but he seemed like a nice person to me. Westmoreland seemed pretty arrogant but Lodge seemed more down to earth.

Breiseth: When he was in the room, was he the dominant person? I just look at his pictures and his height, and he looks so kind of aristocratic.

Wehrle: Well, he probably did; I don't remember.

Breiseth: Just as the ambassador, everyone would have paid deference to him.

Wehrle: Right, right.

Breiseth: What other topics or memories would you like to have remembered on this?

Wehrle: Oh, gosh, I don't know.

Breiseth: How about coming home and resuming life in the States, which is really almost the first time since you were married.

Wehrle: That was hard.

Breiseth: Why? Why hard?

Wehrle: Getting back. Because, we were each used to doing our own thing. For me, it was hard to even get back to cooking, because I couldn't remember how long it took for a potato to get done and meat to get done at the same time.

Breiseth: I'm just learning that now, so.

Wehrle: And then just funny things seemed to happen. Our dog: I was giving the dog a bath in the bathtub, and his paw got stuck in the drain, and he's yelping. I rushed out in the hall. Some guy was coming down the hall, and I asked him to come in and help. He got that paw out. I was afraid he [the dog] was going to bite me or something. I was afraid I would hurt him, trying to get that out. But just like weird things happened, you know? When you think of how long it was that I didn't cook anything, and where we were never together for long enough to kind of really...

Breiseth: Get to know each other.

Wehrle: Get to know each other. But, of course, we learned a lot through the letters because we would communicate poetry, books we'd read. We would share music we heard. So, in some ways, you get to know somebody even better.

Breiseth: Yeah. My relationship, almost all my letter writing, our letter writing back and forth, was before we were married. Then we were together after that, and so the expressing ourselves that way, we never had a gap really, virtually ever.

Wehrle: Right.

Breiseth: Besides the cooking, this is really the first time you're kind of living a normal life as a couple, which must have been...

Wehrle: Well, it was kind of lonely for me at first because I had nobody that I knew when we first went back in Washington, and Roy was busy. He had these long hours. So, I was kind of lonely at first, when we got back. In Thailand, Vietnam there was so many things to do and friends to do them with.

Breiseth: What started changing that? When you went to Cambridge?

Wehrle: No, when we came back to Washington.

- Breiseth: Right. But you went from Washington to Cambridge, to Harvard.
- Wehrle: Cambridge was great. I loved Cambridge. Chandra was about two years old then, so I was busy with her, but I loved Cambridge and Boston. I'd take the subway over to Boston. Yes, I loved Cambridge, and, because I had Chandra, that kept me busy.
- Breiseth: Pretty major purpose, to give shape to your day.
- Wehrle: Right. Roy's mother would come up to visit. It was nice.
- Breiseth: Did Roy seem to get used to the slightly less pressured life back in Washington?
- Wehrle: I'm not sure it was less pressured.
- Breiseth: Really?
- Wehrle: Working for Grant, He had...
- Breiseth: This is Jim Grant.
- Wehrle: ...come back with his bad headaches because he just worked him so hard, long hours. I think Roy enjoyed working for Grant a lot, but it just was difficult.
- Breiseth: You did not go back with Roy in his January, '68 fact-finding trip back to Vietnam because Chandra would have been a baby, so you stayed— Did you have an apartment in Washington or a house?
- Wehrle: Let's see, Chandra, when she was a baby we had a townhouse that we bought, that had just been built down in... What were the swampy areas?
- Breiseth: Southeast.
- Wehrle: ...to the right of the Capitol. It was perfect because Roy could walk to work, and we were close to the Smithsonian, and there were a lot of things to do. So, we had a really nice townhouse. We kept that and when we came here, we had a woman who rented the house, who, in the end there was really good. We had some bad renters, but she was really good taking care of the house and everything. Finally, we sold it to her. But it was a great location.
- Breiseth: And I suppose you got a car again when you got back because you had...
- Wehrle: We always had VWs.
- Breiseth: But you had no car over in Laos?
- Wehrle: We did have a car.

Breiseth: Oh, did you?

Wehrle: We had our Bug.

Breiseth: In Saigon?

Wehrle: A VW Bug. I don't know if we had it in Saigon. I think we did. We had it in Laos, so I think we sold it to Dick. I don't remember driving around in Saigon though, so I don't know.

Breiseth: Well, anything else?

Wehrle: No, I don't think so.

Breiseth: Well, I'm glad you did this.

Wehrle: It was a fun time. I wouldn't have missed any of it for anything. I mean, it was just all interesting, exciting. Especially Laos because that's where we went first. The culture was so different and so interesting.

Breiseth: And we talk on the interview with Roy about some of the involvement you both have had with refugees coming from Laos and Vietnam. What about Cambodia, have you had much to...?

Wehrle: No.

Breiseth: Laos and Vietnam. And that you both have made a lot of difference in people's lives, coming over here to become Americans.

Wehrle: Well, Roy did most of the work. We worked together on getting the houses ready and stuff like that.

Breiseth: Working through the church.

Wehrle: Right. And these people have just stayed such close people to us. They always say we got them there. We helped them. They never forget that.

Breiseth: Yeah.

Wehrle: You know? It's obviously an important thing in their lives.

Breiseth: Well, it's huge; it's huge.

Wehrle: And they do so well; they're doing so well. It's amazing.

Breiseth: Well, and you've taken me to a Lao restaurant and a Vietnamese restaurant here in Springfield.

Wehrle: That's right. They have lots of them here.

Breiseth: They clearly are making their contribution to this country.

Wehrle: We didn't take you to the big one, Magic Kitchen, which is where the first Lao people bought their restaurant. We didn't get time to go out there. We'll have to do that another time.

Breiseth: You only can get so much in for a guest who comes for a week.

Wehrle: That's right.

Breiseth: Well, thank you, JoAnn, this was a lot of fun, and I hope you will enjoy it as you listen to you.

Wehrle: Yes, it will be exciting.

(end of interview)