

Interview with Donna Edmondson

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

DONNA EDMONDSON

Interviewed by: Patricia Norland

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Q: This is Patricia Norland. I am interviewing Donna Edmondson on March 24, 1994, in Arlington, Virginia, for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History project. Donna, could you give us a little background on your early years before you married Bill (William B. Edmondson) and came into the Foreign Service?

EDMONDSON: I was born in Superior, Nebraska, in 1927. I have a twin brother and an older sister. My father was a lawyer and during my childhood years he was a county judge. I grew up in Nebraska and eventually attended the University of Nebraska, where I met Bill, in German class. He had just returned from Germany where he was in the Army, and I had also recently returned from Germany where I'd lived for a year with my parents, my father being then in the Army as a Judge Advocate.

Bill and I were engaged in 1950, and after graduating from university, I lived with my parents for a year at Fort Bragg, NC, while Bill went on to graduate school in Boston. We were married the following year and settled in Washington where Bill was an intern at the Department of State for a year before he entered the Foreign Service. He took and passed the written exam before we were married, but didn't learn that he had passed the oral exam until after our marriage. I remember that when we learned that he had passed and was invited to join the Service, we wondered, "Should we do this or shouldn't we?" We

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decided, “Well, why not?” and thought we would give it a try and that if we didn't like it we could get out and do something else. So, here we are 40 years later (laughter) with many Foreign Service years behind us.

But it was an interesting career, spent mainly in Africa. Our first assignment was to the American Consulate at Dar es Salaam in what was then Tanganyika. I'll just go on to say that while we were there the African countries were approaching independence and the Department asked young officers who might be interested in Africa generally to take special training, and we debated about it — that was in the early 50s — and decided against it at that time. In 1955, we went on from Dar es Salaam to Bern, Switzerland. While we were in Bern, Bill decided that he would like to go into African studies. I think he always thought that would be an interesting area in which to work. Our life in Switzerland was very nice but he didn't find the work there quite as interesting as it had been in Dar es Salaam. So at that point we were pleased to get an assignment for him to do African studies at Northwestern University.

Q: Do you have interesting memories of Dar es Salaam?

EDMONDSON: Yes, I have good memories of it; maybe one's first post usually brings nostalgic memories. Dar es Salaam, when we went, was the capital of Tanganyika, long before independence when, after union with Zanzibar, it became Tanzania. When we were there, it was a trust territory under the UN, administered by Britain, and it had a very colonial atmosphere. I think of it as a beautiful sleepy little seaport, and we were very happy there. It was a two-officer consulate which had been opened only a few years before we arrived. We, of course, were very young, rather newly married, inexperienced in Foreign Service life, and often the only Americans in town. The consul had already left on transfer when we arrived and the vice consul whom Bill was replacing was transferred a month later. So Bill, though very green, took over the consulate until a new consul arrived months later. He always thought that was a good way to start, however, because he had to learn quickly how to do everything that had to be done, from administrative and consular

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work to political and economic reporting. There were American missionaries up-country, but not in town, and sometimes there were one or two American businessmen, but there were periods when we were the only Americans living in Dar es Salaam. The new consul didn't arrive until May and we got there in January (1953), so Bill got lots of hands-on experience in the first few months.

For myself, I remember being rather lonely and homesick the first few weeks. The first six weeks we stayed in the New Africa Hotel, an old colonial-style hotel in the middle of town; a very new experience for us. I think probably because there were so few Americans, we became quite popular, and the British found us interesting to have around, so we were invited to a lot of parties and functions and I soon found friends and started playing canasta a lot because that was what was “in” in those days.

It was a time when, historically speaking, Julius Nyerere (who later became the first President) was just beginning to be known — and not thought very well of by the British, of course, since the colonial government considered him an “agitator.” There was very little social intercourse — almost none, really — between the colonialists and the African people of the country. I remember that about the only Africans we saw much of were occasionally when one was being given a grant or scholarship to come to the United States. We would always entertain him and his family in our home. Aside from them and Nyerere and a few others, I don't remember that we saw many Africans in a social setting. I remember once when we invited a young African student who was going to the States on a scholarship — he came by himself and we were really showing him how to eat in the American style because he didn't know and he wanted to learn what table utensils to use and so on. We asked him if he wanted to wash up before we sat down at the table and he disappeared into the bathroom for what seemed like a very long time and afterward it looked as if he'd taken a bath — the tub had been used. Anyway, he was in there long enough. Bill, of course, saw more Africans in his work and saw some fairly often. And he certainly saw Julius Nyerere quite a bit and became quite friendly with him.

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I remember that at one time a Visiting Mission came out from the UN Trusteeship Council to report on the Territory. They were there quite a long time and did a very thorough report, in which they said they thought that Tanganyika would be ready to become independent in a matter of 50 years, which would have taken us up to the turn of the century! I don't think I'm exaggerating, maybe it was 30 years, but it was a long time. And of course they did gain independence in a matter of about ten years.

The UN Visiting Mission's report was public, but it wasn't very widely distributed and not many copies were sent out to Tanganyika. The government had some and Bill had one at the consulate. Julius Nyerere was preparing at that point to go to New York to make his first presentation before the UN Trusteeship Council. As I said before, the British colonial government didn't think very much of him — his appeal at that time was as “just a teacher up in the Pugu Hills” outside of Dar es Salaam. But he wanted to see that report before he left for New York, so Bill loaned him his copy. Well, that really caused a fuss with the colonial government. Those officials who opposed Nyerere's demands for greater self-government and resented U.S. policy favoring more rapid progress in that direction, regarded Bill's contacts with Nyerere and other Tanganyika nationalists as a form of interference. Unfortunately the governor and chief secretary were out of the country at the time and one of the less-progressive officials, who was the acting governor, accused Bill of “advising” Nyerere (which was untrue) and tried to get Bill declared persona non grata. That wasn't done, but the British colonial attach# in Washington raised the matter with the Department of State, which assured the British that Bill was only performing legitimate political reporting responsibilities.

But Dar es Salaam brings special memories for me because both of our children were born there in the Ocean Road Hospital, which again was very colonial with British doctors, or maybe some were European, but anyway they were all white, although there were some African nurses. There was only one obstetrician in the country and he happened to be on leave in England when our first child, Barbara, was born, so she was delivered by

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the eye doctor. I hadn't met him before he came in to deliver her — up to that time I was seeing the OB [obstetrician] who'd just left town. So she was delivered by Dr. Ellis Jones, who was very nice — I liked him.

Then within a few months I got pregnant again and Dr. Ellis Jones, the eye doctor, saw me through the first few months of my pregnancy with Paul. But the other doctor had returned by the time Paul was delivered. But you know, it was all very old-fashioned. When I was in the hospital with the new baby, I couldn't even get out of bed for three days and then I was kept in the hospital for another week after that. Well, it was a long time ago, 40 years, and I suppose things have changed.

Q: So that was your first post.

EDMONDSON: Then we went on to Switzerland for two years, than to Northwestern University for a year of African studies. Then we were in Washington for four years, until 1961. Bill was then assigned to Accra, Ghana, as second in the political section. We were pleased because everybody who'd ever served in Ghana liked it. The Ghanaians are very friendly and lively and we had a good time there — at least for two years. It was an interesting period too because the President, Kwame Nkrumah, was becoming quite enamored of Russia and the Communists and changing his attitude toward the West. He'd been at university in the States, at Lincoln University, and was friendly toward the States until then. There were a number of demonstrations against the embassy because the way Nkrumah felt determined how the government and party members acted. So political activities became quite anti-American while we were there. At one point there was a very dramatic episode. Our embassy building was very attractive — a wooden building with a very pretty polished wood facade. It sat up on stilts arranged around a courtyard, and there was a stairway that came down through the courtyard. One day there was a demonstration during which someone pulled down our flag from the flagpole. Well, a young black officer named Emerson Player ran down the steps, out into the hostile crowd of demonstrators, and managed to run the flag back up the flagpole. It was a courageous act and made

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news in the papers at home, since it was observed and reported by a New York Times reporter.

Despite a lot of anti-American feeling in the government, most of our Ghanaian friends and acquaintances were still friendly. We had lots of friends in Ghana, and we enjoyed our life there. After we had served two years and had home leave, we began our second tour and Bill became chief of the political section. I wasn't there long, however, because our son was injured. In January 1964, he was playing with friends and was hit in the eye with a toy arrow which injured the eye very badly. Soon afterward, he and I returned home for extended medical care. Our daughter stayed with Bill another six months until he was reassigned to Washington so we could be reunited.

One rather interesting element in the experience of a lot of Foreign Service families in Ghana in those days was that there were frequent attempted coups against Nkrumah's government. One would start one's shopping some mornings and suddenly there would be tanks and soldiers on every corner. I remember that at the very time that Paul had his accident and I was rushing him into town to find a doctor, a coup was being attempted and as we were hurrying to the hospital there were tanks all over the place. Of course I was so upset I didn't pay much attention.

After we all got back to Washington, we were here for another year. Bill was Ghana desk officer during that time. Then the doctors thought that Paul would be able to go abroad again and in April 1965 we went out to Lusaka, Zambia, where Bill was assigned as DCM. Our ambassador was Bob Good. He (unfortunately, no longer living) and his wife, Nancy, were wonderful to work with and became very good friends. Again, looking back, I think we really had a good experience in Lusaka, as we had in all of our foreign assignments.

Zambia was not a very exciting country. It's landlocked; there wasn't a lot to do; and we were always restricted in our traveling — diplomats had to give notice before traveling more than 25 miles outside the capital. And it was a small post because the Zambian

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government restricted the number of people that could be assigned to each embassy. But we enjoyed it, and once more Bill found his work there very interesting. He always worked very hard, always has; he always spent part of each weekend in the office.

We had a wonderful house to begin with. Zambia had just become independent. We arrived in 1965, having left Ghana in '64 after three years' service, the year Zambia became independent. Our government had built a new residence for the ambassador, so we moved into what had been the consulate residence. It was a large house and had been built in the shape of a rondavaal by a South African. It had a large round living room with a bedroom wing on one side and a kitchen and dining room on the other. The kids were happy — there were a number of children their ages in the embassy family and they had Zambian friends as well. They went to a local public school for the first year and then to the new American/International School.

Our life became more complicated when Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) declared unilateral independence from Britain, because all of Zambia's petrol supply had entered through Rhodesia from Mozambiquan ports. So Zambia's supply of petrol was virtually cut off by the UN embargo of Rhodesia. Eventually there was an airlift of petrol, and during that period they built a new "great north road" and eventually a pipeline to bring supplies in from the north. But at the start we had very little petrol and we all started to ride bicycles. I often say that my first ever traffic ticket was on my bicycle. I usually biked to the store to do my grocery shopping then — it wasn't far to the grocery store, a nice flat ride, crossing only one street, without traffic, there being hardly any cars because of rationing. But as I crossed that street one day on my bike, a policeman lurking behind some bushes suddenly stepped out and gave me a ticket for failing to observe the stop sign!

I used to work at the YWCA. I did volunteer work at all my posts, especially in Zambia; in Ghana I got an award for my volunteer service with children in a hospital there. There was a lot of volunteer work in Ghana by many of the women, I was certainly not the only one. Well, we know a lot of Foreign Service women do a lot of volunteer work. My name was

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misspelled on the award, so (laughing) I don't display it. They left a "d" out of Edmondson; I really thought they could have gotten it right.

In Zambia I taught English at the Y and worked in a milk distribution scheme — we distributed milk to children in some of the local areas. I also started a group who put together simple sewing projects which we distributed to patients in the hospital along with magazines and other things. I used to go to the Y on my bike because there was no gas for the car. After rationing eased, our family took one long trip through Zambia, traveling with a trunk full of spare gasoline. This must have been rather dangerous, but we couldn't be sure of getting gas en route because we were going way up country as far as Lake Tanganyika.

I wouldn't say that Zambia is a beautiful country. It's high, on a plateau, and the climate isn't very hot — not tropical as it is in Ghana and much of Tanzania; at times during the year the weather in Zambia could be quite pleasant. But much of it isn't very "scenic." We had a long trip and it was very interesting. I remember going over terrible roads, hitting rocks, with our trunk full of gasoline! Obtaining gas was pretty dicey, as the British would say. We were told we could get it at one particular place and were counting on this. When we got there, the station was closed and we had all kinds of trouble locating an official so we could purchase some. It wasn't an easy period at the post because the loss of petrol halted so many things.

Q: Who was president of Zambia then?

EDMONDSON: Kenneth Kaunda. We knew a lot of interesting Zambians. We lived next door to the Mapendas — he was the minister of agriculture — and we knew a lot of the other cabinet ministers. Zambians seemed less outgoing than most Ghanaians and other West Africans; East Africans just aren't that type, but they're good friends once they get to know you. We were there for four years, two tours. Bill was charg# d'affaires for a long time late in our tour; our new ambassador was Oliver Troxel, who had been our DCM in

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Ghana. He arrived about seven months after Bob Good left, and we left soon after Troxel arrived.

Q: Zambia had begun a period of hardship in that some [of] its supplies — not its food but ...

EDMONDSON: I don't remember that we had a problem with food — there was South African canned food at the grocery store — only with petrol. We had taken food with us, as one usually does to African countries, and I suppose I had a good supply, I don't remember. In Ghana we'd had a little commissary but none in Zambia.

We left Zambia in 1969 and spent five years in Washington. After a year at the National War College, Bill was with CU, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, when it was still in the Department of State, as director of the office of African Programs. He enjoyed it. Bill has always felt that the exchange of people is a very important part of diplomacy and foreign relations. He thought his job was important but not everyone thought so. I remember at a cocktail party overhearing someone tell him, "You're wasting your time, you should be in some political type of job."

In 1974 we went out to South Africa, where Bill was DCM until '76. We had never even wanted to visit South Africa, we were really tuned in to the black African countries which harbored so much ill feeling toward South Africa. We shared that feeling, I guess. A lot of Americans and Europeans living in Zambia vacationed in South Africa, it was "the natural place to go." But we never did, didn't even want to visit the country. And then we were assigned there, Bill as DCM.

When we first went to South Africa apartheid was still in full bloom. There was a lot of what was called "petty apartheid." I think I was first aware of this when soon after our arrival I drove to the post office, taking my cook with me. I was startled when she didn't accompany me into the post office. She couldn't go in that way, she had to go around back and go in through another door, and I was wondering where she had gone. This sort of situation

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applied in many ways to blacks; at some shops they had to step up to an outside window and ask for what they wanted instead of entering the store. Restaurants, restrooms, buses, and many other facilities were strictly segregated. I think even then few diplomats invited blacks and whites to parties together. We saw many changes while we lived there.

But in many ways our tour in South Africa was a wonderful experience. We moved between Pretoria and Cape Town every six months. When we first arrived in the country we went to Cape Town and were there for a long time because parliament was in session and there was an election which prolonged the government's stay there. We arrived in September and lived in Cape Town until the following July. Cape Town, as you know, is a lovely city — one of the nicest in the world.

Q: Was it difficult to change residence just like that? Did you have to take a lot of things with you?

EDMONDSON: Of course it was difficult, but I tried not to complain because for us it was not nearly so difficult as if we'd had children with us; ours were both in the States in college. People with children who had to change schools every six months had a much harder time. In both cities we had a beautiful DCM's residence. We had good servants, all of whom had been with the embassy for years and knew exactly what to do. It was always a big move, however, because we always moved everything with us that we'd brought to South Africa since we wanted to make each place seem like home. So we took all our books, pictures and knick-knacks, clothes, and so on. And everything was professionally packed, just as if we were making a permanent move. So it was a major disruption every six months.

I always felt that it was wonderful that we got to know both the Transvaal and the Cape areas — they're so different from each other. The Cape tends to be more “British” — many of our friends there were of English background or English-speaking. Up in Pretoria most of the people we knew were Afrikaans. What was amusing was that one was

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always asked, “Which do you like better, Cape Town or Pretoria?” We always had to try to be diplomatic and think of something good about each place; particularly about the place where you happened to be when the question was asked. The Pretorians, the Transvaalers, always seemed to think that the climate in Cape Town was so terrible and felt sorry for us having to go there and suffer “those terrible southeast winds;” and of course the friends from Cape Town felt sorry for us having to return to dull Pretoria. But really I never minded going back to Pretoria because the life in Cape Town during the parliamentary session was so busy, so social, one was going to parties every night — two or three — and luncheons. Everybody was entertaining everybody else and it was a relief to get to Pretoria in July after parliament had ended. A lot of government people were gone on vacation then, so it was very quiet for about a month; you could relax and put your thoughts together and enjoy the quiet life for a while.

Q: You said you had taken the Blue Train?

EDMONDSON: Well, during that first tour we did not take it. We always drove because we wanted to see as much of the country as we could. I think we made two round trips during our two year tour — once via Durban, making a big sweep around the southern and eastern coast, and once through the Orange Free State and the Karoo. We had expected to stay three years and thought we would have time to take the Blue Train, but after two years Bill was asked to come back to become deputy assistant secretary for African affairs, so our tour was cut short; we felt sad that we hadn't taken the Blue Train. We left South Africa thinking that it would probably be a long time before we saw it again, but it had been a very good experience and an interesting time to be there.

Our ambassador to begin with was John Hurd, a political appointee from San Antonio, Texas. He was very popular with the Nationalist Party and had conservative ideas. Before we arrived he had got into big trouble by going hunting with one of the cabinet ministers on Robben Island, of all places, where the political prisoners were held. This didn't set well with a lot of South Africans and others, and the press made a big thing of it. But we

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liked Ambassador Hurd and his wife, Nancy, a wonderful party girl with a great sense of humor. Our husbands both worked hard, and she would often call me up late in afternoon. “Donna, what are you doing?” “Nothing.” “Come on up, let's have a drink.” So I'd often go up and sit with her until our husbands came home and joined us. Then the Hurds left and Bill Bowdler, whom we'd known long before, was appointed ambassador. We were very pleased to serve with him and Peggy.

We returned to Washington for only two years, until Bill returned as ambassador to South Africa — a big surprise to everybody, I guess, certainly to us. I must say I wasn't really excited about going back. I knew it wouldn't be an easy post; and Bill had mixed feelings. But of course I was happy for his being appointed ambassador at an important post. For a while it seemed he might be appointed ambassador to Zambia, a possibility I really preferred even though it was a much smaller post. I knew there would be more problems between the U.S. and South Africa because of the new administration and President Carter's emphasis on human rights. But it was nice to return to the wonderful people in South Africa, both black and white, even those with quite different viewpoints from our own. A lot of South Africans reminded us of midwesterners in the U.S. — because of their background as farmers — Afrikaners even more than the British, and we felt comfortable with them.

It wasn't an easy post, perhaps more so for me than for Bill because there were a lot of anti-American and anti-Edmondson articles in the Afrikaans newspapers because of Bill's and President Carter's liberal views. I think such things bothered the officers less than their spouses since the officers were involved in what was going on and the wives just got to stay home and read the articles in the newspapers. It was an interesting time because the U.S. and other western countries were trying to persuade South Africa to cooperate in bringing peace to Zimbabwe and to take steps toward independence in Namibia (South West Africa). The “Group of Five” — ambassadors of the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, and Canada — were always working as a team vis-a-vis South West Africa. At one point the foreign ministers of those five countries came out, including our

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Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, David Owen from Britain, and Genscher from Germany. Mrs. Vance accompanied her husband and it was a treat from me to get to know her. Hosting all those foreign ministers was exciting. Quite often they held meetings in our home and we have a picture from a newspaper showing all five sitting in our front yard, in a beautiful setting overlooking the city.

Q: Again you had two residences ...

EDMONDSON: Yes, they were both nice, big houses, and we were able to get some pictures from “Arts in Embassy” to supplement our own. But the people in Washington for some reason thought it was dangerous to let us take any of the better art works to South Africa, so we had to choose from some of the prints and less highly rated pieces that the Department owned. These pieces from Arts in Embassy must be displayed only in public rooms in an ambassador's residence. When they finally arrived, we often wondered, “Did we really pick that one?” Some hardly seemed what we would want to show in a public room, but we couldn't hide any in our bedroom either! Among the items we unpacked in Cape Town was a big abstract painting in brilliant blacks and reds, resembling what one could imagine only as hellfire and brimstone. It didn't seem to fit anywhere. “Where in the world are we going to hang this?” After numerous tries, and while it stood hidden in a back hallway, I asked my wonderful head butler, “Right, what do you think of that painting?’, And he answered, “Oh, it's very nice, Madame, but not to hang in the house.” (laughter) We eventually put it back in one of the little rooms on the ground floor; at least it wasn't in a private family room.

At the time of a move we always seemed to be in a big hurry. Some official guest was due to arrive the next day after we moved. The many paintings were a special problem. Bill and I often disagreed when we moved back to our other house — “Where did we have this picture?” I'd say “over there” and he'd say, “No, I think it was here.” So rehanging always took a long time. Then Bill had a wonderful idea: he numbered each painting and put the same number on the nail where the picture was hanging, so even our second man, who

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could barely read English, could look at the numbers and match them up. So the process was fast and all the pictures got hung in the right places. But it was a very busy residence. We had many official guests.

Q: Do you recall who some of them were?

EDMONDSON: Well, Dick Moose came out several times — he was assistant secretary — and later Chet Crocker. And various officers from the Department in Washington. Steve Low, who was our ambassador in Zambia, was there several times and Frank Wisner, ambassador in Tanzania and his wife. Pat Derian was a guest and became ill while she was there so had to stay several weeks. Her husband, Hodding Carter, joined her for several days. Mr. and Mrs. Gerard Smith stayed with us while he consulted with the South Africans about atomic energy. Well, it's hard to remember all of them. And of course we had a number of personal guests — South Africa is a wonderful place to visit. We had very nice guest rooms in both residences and there was a very competent household staff. The cook was temperamental but a good cook and unless we had a really big party I left things up to her. To introduce the new DCM, however, we gave a series of five dinner parties, both in Pretoria and Cape Town, with about 80 people at each party. Then I helped out in the kitchen. And I always did all the shopping. I recall at one point, because I was having to make one more dash out to the “Pick and Pay” grocery store to get something we'd run out of, grumbling, “I can't keep up with these guests!” and my servant, Right, saying, “Madame, you must know that this is not a house, it's a hotel.” Which was almost true.

Q: You mentioned one party that was especially successful — the Christmas party?

EDMONDSON: Oh yes. We were asked by one of the South African ladies' magazines if they could come and photograph our Christmas dinner as portraying a typical American Christmas. I was asked in August, I think it was, so I thought, OK, fine, that's nice, until she said, “We have to do it next month to get it in the December issue.” So we had Christmas in September and it was beautifully reproduced in color in the magazine. We made it a

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party with a big buffet laden with all the typical American Christmas dishes, decorated with red and green candles, and a big silver punch bowl of eggnog. We invited all the embassy staff for Christmas dinner in September, and some of them (she laughs) brought Christmas presents. I still hang up a beautiful Christmas decoration that somebody gave me on that occasion.

Another special party we gave was when our DCM Harvey Nelson and his wife departed the post — a cowboy party. It was very successful, featured in the newspaper with big photographs. Everybody entered into the spirit, particularly the Greek ambassador and his wife and the French ambassador and his wife; the two women, both young and very attractive, were featured together in the newspaper pictures. We had the servants dress up as cowboys with bandannas and cowboy hats and they thought it was very funny. My head butler was a wonderful, competent servant and he never once, when I suggested doing something one way, said, “But we always have done it this way.” He had been at the embassy residence for twenty years or more and could easily have said, “But Mrs. So-and-so always did it this way,” but he never did. Except when we had the cowboy party and I told them they should wear the bandannas and cowboy hats, and then he did say, “Madame, we have never done this before!” (laughter) But I think they enjoyed it.

Q: You mentioned something about a Fourth of July party.

EDMONDSON: When we went to South Africa, Bill was a Carter appointee and there was a lot of anti-American press; relations between the National party and the American government were probably at an all-time low because of the Carter administration's strong anti-apartheid views, which Bill agreed with. When Ronald Reagan was elected, our country's policies changed toward South Africa — they were much more friendly toward the apartheid Nationalist government — their policy was called “constructive engagement.” So many people in the National Party thought that Bill would be immediately replaced, probably soon after Reagan's inauguration. Sometimes there were gibes in the Afrikaner press to the effect that the American ambassador should be leaving. But it was some time

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before a replacement was named, so Bill was asked by the Department to stay on. On the Fourth of July that year — 1981 — I decided that instead of the usual reception I would plan to have a real American picnic. We got a lot of help from the embassy family and planned a wonderful picnic with hot dogs and hamburgers, red white and blue bunting, American flag stickers for everyone, and a real holiday spirit. Well, the Afrikaans press gave this a political cast: “Obviously,” the press observed, “the American ambassador is not in good standing with his government because they seem to be cutting off his funds. He can't afford to give his usual reception — he is going to have a party with hot dogs!”

This infuriated me. The whole idea had been mine and it was a wonderful party. Hundreds of people came, more than we had ever had, including the foreign minister and other top government officials. Everyone had a great time. And after the party there were some very nice comments in the English-language newspapers about the U.S. Fourth of July picnic — a great success and a nice change from the usual diplomatic reception. I felt vindicated.

Of course that was the party where I foolishly — I guess I have to tell you this — ran into the house at one point (the party was held in the garden) to check on how the food was holding out (an unnecessary trip since I had so much help) and on my way back to the garden, I tripped and fell, and broke my arm and my nose. I was quickly whisked upstairs and the party went on without me. I remember thinking that at such a big party it wouldn't be so obvious that I wasn't there to say goodbye — people would just assume that I was somewhere else in the crowd. Very few guests knew that their hostess was upstairs with broken bones!

My arm was set later that day but it had to be reset about a week later. (My nose had just been cracked so that wasn't a problem.) We were due to leave the country on July 22nd so I wore a cast at all the farewell parties. At a party that the foreign minister, Pik Botha, gave for us, he cut up my meat for me and made a little speech about how sorry he was that Donna was leaving the country with a broken arm.

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Q: How did you find the South African women? You shared a number of events with them...

EDMONDSON: Well, most of my contact with South African women were through various associations, charities, and of course through the many social and official functions we attended. When we went back to South Africa the second time I knew a lot of women — black, white, and colored — and they were for the most part very friendly. One of the most outstanding women, whom we knew very well, was Helen Suzman. I am always surprised when someone doesn't know of her because I had heard of her ever since the 1950s when we first went to Africa. In parliament she had been a lone voice against apartheid for years. Then in the elections soon after we arrived in 1974 five others (all men) were elected on the Progressive Party ticket with her. In all sincerity, I told Helen Suzman once — and it sounds as if I was trying to flatter her — that if I had to make a list of women that I respected and admired most, she would be Number One without any question. She was so remarkable — very friendly, witty and sharp-tongued, she had to be to stand up by herself for so many years to those Nationalist parliamentarians — but she's down-to-earth, a good friend.

Helen sometimes invited us to lunch at parliament in Cape Town and, if we happened to have house guests, she would include them in the invitation. That was a special treat for our guests. Her husband was a doctor, older than Helen, and he didn't accompany her to Cape Town when parliament was in session — their home was in Johannesburg. They often entertained there and sometimes her husband would go to sleep after dinner with his cigar in his mouth. No one would notice until Helen jumped up suddenly to dust cigar ashes off his clothes. We liked them both very much.

It is interesting to try to understand what makes a person like Helen, who grew up in very good circumstances, become so concerned and so involved in the welfare of the Africans. She has written a book recently, a book of her memoirs. Pat thinks I should read this little bit, a squib about it that my husband wrote which is on the back cover. He says,

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“Fascinating narrative, full of Helen's delicious commentary, acerbic wit and biting repartee that so tortured the proponents of apartheid. Her verbal exchanges with parliamentary opponents included here are sparkling. Her hard boiled compassion and devotion to human rights ring clear. It is difficult in a few words to express my full appreciation of Helen's book and of her ideals and principles.” But his expression “hard boiled” may be misleading, because she wasn't really hard boiled. She is very refined, although of course she could probably be hard boiled in some of her exchanges with parliamentarians. She is really a cultured and lovely woman and it has been a great experience to know her.

During our first assignment when we were in Cape Town, the 1976 Soweto riots occurred, a very traumatic time for everybody in South Africa. These riots were started by school children demonstrating against having classes taught in Afrikaans instead of English. They started in Soweto in the Transvaal but spread throughout the whole country and it was an unsafe period. The road from Cape Town to the airport went very near one of the townships, Guguletu, and some cars were stoned on that road. One felt rather nervous about driving to the airport. It certainly was not an easy time for a lot of the South Africans who really wanted to see changes in the country but hated to see riots and people getting hurt.

I started out talking about South Africa mentioning some of the petty apartheid that we saw as soon as we got to South Africa. This changed a good bit while we were there. We were in South Africa a total of five and a half years — between 1974 and 1976 when Bill was DCM, and then 1978 to 1981 when he was ambassador. So it was a long time and there were a lot of changes during that period. A lot of the petty apartheid disappeared. A number of restaurants accepted black customers and restrictions in public places became less and less.

And while we were there, things like theaters were integrated. The live theaters, I am thinking of especially. There is a beautiful theater in Cape Town, the Niko Milan which in a way reminded us of the Kennedy Center. It is very splendid with beautiful chandeliers

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and lovely halls. When we first went there of course it was completely white, no black could attend any of the productions. So while we were there we, as well as many South African and most of the diplomats, supported a boycott of the Niko Milan until it was finally integrated. First they tried to open it to blacks and whites on different nights, that is, only for blacks on certain nights and whites on others. But that didn't work and eventually it was completely integrated. Right from the start of our time there, there was a small theater called The Source that was integrated and was often attended by blacks. The Baxter theater, which was part of the University of Cape Town, was also integrated from the start.

It was a cultural place. There were a lot of traveling productions; there was good opera, ballet — you know, really good things. Some of the new shows that were being produced in London and New York very soon came to Cape Town. While we were there, but right at the end of our stay, so that I don't remember it so well, a beautiful opera house in Pretoria was built.

All in all you really have everything you want in South Africa. You have lots of things to see as far as game parks and so on, and beautiful mountains, and lovely beaches. During our second tour we often traveled between Cape Town and Pretoria on the Blue Train, which is one of the remaining luxury trains in the world — it's really like traveling in a five star hotel. Since Bill was ambassador we always got first class treatment. The government of course paid our way for official travel between places, but a couple times we spent money ourselves to upgrade to one of their special suites. One time we had their deluxe suite, which not only had its own sitting room and bedroom and bathroom, but also a bathtub, a big bathtub in the bathroom, so that you could glide across the Karoo luxuriating in a tub full of water. It was luxury at the highest. And beautiful meals were served in great style. It was a wonderful way to travel.

Q: And very rare.

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EDMONDSON: Very rare these days, yes. It was fun, and we traveled that way several times during our last tour because by then we had seen a lot of the country and had made other trips between the two cities, and had guests, family guests usually, that we wanted to take to see various places in the country. We saw a lot of South Africa while we were there because of these trips. And other trips — we drove to Zimbabwe at one point.

Q: What kind of road?

EDMONDSON: It was all right. They had a good paved road between Harare and Pretoria, Johannesburg. There wasn't any problem in driving.

Q: Did you get to see any homelands?

EDMONDSON: Well, we visited Zululand and Chief Buthelezi which was an interesting trip. As it was an official visit, a lot was made of Bill's going as ambassador by Buthelezi and his staff. Buthelezi, as you may know, is not an easy person and hates to be criticized and it was not a particularly good time as far as our relations with him. I mean as far as the U.S. relations. We weren't quite sure what his reaction was going to be, or what he was going to be like while we were there. But he went out of his way to make it a really great visit, a state dinner, etc., and it was quite an occasion. We never went to any of the nominally independent homelands — that is, those declared by South Africa to be independent — as one made a point of not going to them because they were never recognized by the U.S. or any other government. So we wouldn't go off to Sun City where many people went to gamble at the casinos — like people here go to Las Vegas or Atlantic City.

Q: Now Soweto, were you able to visit there?

EDMONDSON: Oh, you mean the townships.

Q: And the townships too. I did say homeland. Both.

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EDMONDSON: Oh, we did of course. We went to Soweto a number of times, guests of people who lived there. We were quite friendly with some people there and some of them had lovely homes and gave very lively parties. Of course one thinks of Soweto as having only tiny little houses, one after another. And it is true of most of the townships, all over South Africa. Most of the houses are just little boxes. But in Soweto especially there are certain areas where there are some really nice homes, where Africans, who can afford to, build for themselves. We also visited black friends who lived in simpler homes in Athridgeville and Mamelodi, near Pretoria. I remember one evening when we arrived in Soweto being told by the host that we should not park in an obvious place, but to park behind the house or off the street because our car had diplomatic tags. He thought it wasn't safe for the car to be too obvious. In Cape Town I was on the Board of a center for handicapped children in the township of Guguletu and I visited there a number of times. The woman who had first started this center, and continued to be the guiding light behind it, was a good friend and a remarkable woman. She had earlier been very active in the struggle for equal rights for all races and in fact had at one time been imprisoned because of her activities.

Q: Black Sash???

EDMONDSON: The Black Sash is an organization, started many years ago, by women who felt strongly about equal rights and often demonstrated against certain unfair policies of the government. There were many brave women involved in the Black Sash. Jean was probably a member although I don't associate her particularly with the organization as I do certain other women that I knew. I'm not sure Jean was too active in the Black Sash. In fact when I knew her she was not so active politically. I suppose being imprisoned at one time made her more wary. It must be a pretty terrifying thing. The security police came in the middle of the night, told her to get dressed, say good bye to her children and husband, and to go along with them.

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Q: I wonder what prison was like there. Is it like, just being in a room?

EDMONDSON: I suppose somebody like Jean was not ill treated. I think she was in a room by herself. But just the experience, you know, of being in prison, and having someone wake you in the middle of the night — pretty terrible. Even if you were treated politely.

Q: Did you have any contact with the prime minister or his wife?

EDMONDSON: Well, of course, I knew them and I made my calls, and I talked to them at social and official functions. A lot of the ministers' wives were very nice, friendly women. We knew F. W. De Klerk, who was at the time a rather junior minister but considered “up and coming.”

We had a very interesting party in Cape Town when the editor of the Washington Post, Ben Bradlee, and his wife, Sally Quinn, came on a visit. It was a large dinner party and we sat at a number of round tables. Helen Suzman, who was often very outspoken, was at my table along with a colored labor leader, also very outspoken, and De Klerk who was our guest from the ministry. Helen Suzman and De Klerk and the labor leader really got into a hot discussion. And Ben Bradlee was sitting at the same table and enjoying every minute. He told me later that he had never enjoyed a diplomatic dinner more. At another table Sally Quinn and Mrs. De Klerk were on Bill's left and right and their conversation was probably not so animated. In fact, they had a very pleasant conversation and Mrs. De Klerk very nicely invited Sally Quinn for lunch the next day at her home.

Well, Sally Quinn, who at that time wrote for the Style Section of the Washington Post, later wrote an insulting article about Mrs. De Klerk's luncheon. She put Mrs. De Klerk in a very bad light. We were rather horrified when we saw it and felt responsible as the two ladies had met at our home. I don't know if Mrs. De Klerk ever saw the article — I hope not.

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We knew the De Klerks only socially, not intimately at all. They were very well respected in the country. I probably knew Mrs. Pik Botha, wife of the Foreign Minister, the best of the ministers' wives, although I can't say that I knew her intimately either. But Pik Botha had been the South African ambassador here during the time that Bill was deputy assistant secretary in the African bureau, so we saw them socially here in Washington as well as having known them during our first assignment in South Africa. A couple of the ministers had English speaking wives who were a little easier to get to know, though they might not have been particularly liberal types. Maybe it was just the common language and heritage. But the Afrikaners were very pleasant, very down-to-earth people.

Q: Well, you handled it so well, you and Bill, at a very difficult time.

EDMONDSON: Well, I don't know how well we handled it, Pat, but it was a difficult time for Bill. It was not an easy post. It would have been easier to just go along and not say anything and be accepted as a good fellow, but he didn't do that.

The political situation in South Africa was always a topic of conversation at dinner parties and so on; it was the topic of conversation. Usually they were friendly discussions but sometimes not so friendly. I remember one time in particular at a small private dinner party one of the guests was especially argumentative. So often the South Africans liked to say that the situation there was just like our own situation, our treatment of blacks and native Americans, and that we had been equally hard on our African American citizens. They didn't understand the difference between the two — that we have tried to abolish racial discrimination and segregation rather than reinforce it by law. The young man at this particular party was just very abusive and I got so angry. I just couldn't understand why Bill, who can have a discussion without getting angry at all — he's really very good about keeping calm — was answering this man calmly and matter-of-factly and the young man was just getting more and more abusive. And I was getting angrier and angrier and really wanted to stomp out of the place. And our host and hostess were obviously very embarrassed about the whole situation but not able to shut this guy up. But most of our

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conversations with Afrikaners, English speakers, and others, though sometimes rather heated, were not abusive.

Q: That answers my next question, which was were they openly hostile because of that problem?

EDMONDSON: No, I can't say that people were openly hostile to us. I think on the whole the South Africans are hospitable people, they're very much like Americans, as I've said before. They're nice people basically and they didn't want to embarrass us or make us feel uncomfortable. Even though they realized that our political leanings were considerably different from theirs, they weren't hostile about it.

One more point about how dinner conversations always turned to politics: they also often turned into wine discussions because they were so proud of their wines. While we were still new arrivals I always went home from parties with lists of wines that people told me I had to try! I soon gave that up, however — we went to too many parties and there were too many different suggestions. Politics and wine: those were the main topics of dinner conversation in South Africa.

Q: Did you entertain blacks and whites at the same time — did people decline to come because there would be a mixed group?

EDMONDSON: On no. I think, on the contrary, a lot of white South Africans — this was true certainly of many journalists, professors and other professionals — looked forward to coming to our home because they knew that blacks would probably be there and it was often the one place where they could have a discussion with blacks. I can recall any number of occasions when after a function people would thank us for the opportunity to meet people of different races. Certainly whites would say, probably more often than blacks, that they really were happy to have had this discussion with so-and-so because they'd heard about him, were happy to have met him and have a good talk with him. I think that some of those we invited were a little surprised or maybe even a bit embarrassed to

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find themselves sitting at table with Africans, but nobody ever made us feel that we were not doing “the right thing” by having mixed parties.

Q: That's good to know. Continuing with influences that you felt, you mentioned an experience you had while traveling.

EDMONDSON: Well, one of our house servants was from Zimbabwe and he accompanied us when we visited that country in order to visit his family. The trip was an eye-opener for us. He was ill when we left Pretoria and actually remained in Zimbabwe because he was too ill to return with us. At that time hotels and restaurants were still segregated and on our trip it was a problem to find a place where we could eat together — often we had to carry something out to him in the car. A few hotels did have a place where they would put up a black, rather like servant's quarters. And at one place up in the northern part of South Africa he was treated very well because he was so ill. They helped him to his room and took food to him.

Q: To turn for a moment to women in South Africa — we've already discussed Helen Suzman. Were there many white professional women?

EDMONDSON: Oh yes. There were doctors. We had a good friend who was a doctor at the hospital in Cape Town. There were white female university professors, lawyers, business leaders, and other professionals, but not many black professional women. We did know a number of black women who were nurses and teachers. But, as was true in our own country not too many years ago, those were about the only professions that black women were able to go into. They had a lot of black nurses in all the hospitals.

Q: To turn to art and entertainment, was there any special type of art or entertainment that helped inter-racial understanding, in the theater or music or painting or ...

EDMONDSON: Well, I think in performance more so than in painting. African groups performed dances and musicals, and in some theaters, particularly in Johannesburg in

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one of the small theaters called the Market Theater, some wonderful shows of African music and dancing were presented. Some of these went on overseas to the States and European countries. Not many entertainers or sports figures from the U.S. came to South Africa at that time since people here were boycotting South Africa because of apartheid. Stevie Wonder did come out and the South Africans made a big thing of that. And while Bill was DCM, Arthur Ashe came out and held tennis classes for blacks in Soweto.

Q: I'd like to ask about the Americans' morale. Was there a differential allowance then to compensate for ...

EDMONDSON: No, there was no differential allowance. Looking back, I don't see any reason to have had a differential. It was a good post for most people, and as far as I remember, morale was good — at least I wasn't ever aware if it weren't good. Maybe the ambassador's wife doesn't always know what's going on, but I don't think that there was any morale problem. And at that time there wasn't any feeling of being in danger. I think probably after we left there was more of that; I know the crime situation got worse, there were more demonstrations, and so on. While we were there everything was very much controlled. It was only during the riots of 1976, just before we left the first time — as I mentioned earlier — that cars passing townships on the main road to the airport in Cape Town were stoned on some occasions.

Few white South Africans and fewer foreigners visited the townships often, as the South African government tried to restrict entry. In fact even diplomats were supposed to apply for permits to enter any township or homeland area, but our embassy made it a point not to do so. Neither we nor other U.S. embassy personnel sought permission when we went to the townships, and some went more often than we did. In Cape Town, a township called Crossroads became quite famous. It was a squatters' town of shacks of cardboard and corrugated iron sheeting shelters that people had put up.

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We went there several times. Police would often come and bulldoze down a part of it and demonstrations often occurred there. One didn't want to be there when that happened, but we were never really in a situation where we felt unsafe.

Q: The other day we were talking about what was being done to further good relations — to cover the racial gap. For example, USIS or AID.

EDMONDSON: When we were there the U.S. didn't have an AID program.

Q: Why was that?

EDMONDSON: The U.S. did not want to provide assistance through an apartheid government and I think the South Africans didn't want it. The embassy did provide some small grants of humanitarian or self-help nature directly to certain private organizations devoted to helping black South Africans. AID came in soon after we left. USIS made quite an impact there — I remember their activities particularly in Cape Town, though they were very active in Pretoria, Johannesburg (including Soweto), and Durban as well.

Q: Now, to turn in quite a different direction, do you have any reflections on the scenic beauties of the country?

EDMONDSON: Oh yes. The jacaranda trees! They were so gorgeous. They bloom in our fall, spring there. We had them also in Lusaka, which came alive in purple jacaranda in October. They were beautiful in Pretoria.

We were fortunate in the moves between Pretoria and Cape Town — our periods in each place were during the best season. We were in Cape Town from January to July when it was warm and pleasant. Then we went to Pretoria in July for the rest of the year, part of which was winter — beautiful, dry, cool days and chilly nights. We had fires in the fireplaces in the evenings — that was our only heat besides electric heaters. The flowers in both places were gorgeous — we were very fortunate in having really good gardeners

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at both residences. In Pretoria a contract gardener, Mrs. Wilson, oversaw our garden. She came out every day and toured the garden with the two gardeners and discussed what they should do that day. The Pretoria residence sits on a hill overlooking the city and a beautiful garden on a lower area. In Cape Town too we had a beautiful garden and excellent gardeners who knew their business. I never tried to interfere because they knew so much more than I did. In Pretoria, for instance, I'd go out one day and see where the day before there had been a lovely bed of flowers, and they would all have been taken up and new seeds put out because the gardeners knew this assured another growth.

Another bit of luck was that one of our maids was a gifted flower arranger. Every morning she fixed big beautiful bouquets throughout the house. I wished I could have set her up in a florist shop when we left, but serving in the American ambassador's residence may have paid better. Unfortunately, she and the cook weren't on speaking terms and that made things a bit difficult. The story was that some time before our arrival in South Africa, the cook, who was a good cook but temperamental and sometimes kind of ornery, opened and read a letter that Zina (the maid) had received. She then told Zina that she had had a dream the night before and told her everything in the letter without telling her she had read it. Well, later Zina learned of Maggie's trick and of course there was a big to-do and Zina was going to quit. Mrs. Bowdler, the ambassador's wife then, finally talked her into staying, but she said she would never speak to Maggie again. That was several years before we came, and she'd kept her word!

I was going to say that the country is really beautiful. The Cape area has a beautiful seacoast and Cape Town is built up around dramatic Table Mountain. We spent lots of time hiking around Table Mountain. Bill got very friendly with a former president of the Mountain Club and the two men climbed every weekend. But he and I often spent a Sunday afternoon up on the mountain, hiking some of the many trails. Cape Point, the tip of the Cape peninsula, was a lovely place about an hour's drive from Cape Town — one always took visitors there. There were lots of baboons around the Cape — they would get on your car and of course people would ignore instructions not to feed them. One time we

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were picnicking on the Point with some friends who were visiting us from the States when suddenly we were surrounded by baboons. We quickly scooped up most of our belongings and moved, but I left a package of Ritz crackers thinking perhaps that would satisfy them while we retreated. The baboons were big fellows and sometimes when we were walking on Table Mountain a couple of big ones would be walking along behind us.

We weren't usually in Cape Town during springtime but one year when parliament was in session longer than usual we stayed and were able to enjoy the wildflowers. We made a couple of trips up to a desert-like area where the wildflowers were thick like a carpet — gorgeous. In the Transvaal, up toward Krueger Park, there were lots of wildflowers at certain seasons. It's a very scenic area, mountainous and very beautiful. South Africa really has just about everything anyone could ask for — mountains, lovely beaches. The Garden Route from Durban down the coast to the Cape is so scenic. And then the Karoo, a desert-like area in the center of the country has a beauty of its own; rather desolate with rocky hills and bluffs dotted around.

Q: Do you think that Americans are more or less well informed about South Africa today than they were ten or 15 years ago?

EDMONDSON: I think they're probably better informed now because of the recent developments after Mandela's release from prison and after the elections last year when it was so much in the news. When we were there, a lot of Americans were aware of South Africa's problems but didn't really want to know about the country because of the policies of the national government. And many people just don't know much about Africa. Sometimes when we were in the States and told someone that we were stationed in South Africa (or had been stationed in South Africa) they would ask, "Which country were you living in?" They didn't know there was a country called the Republic of South Africa. But I think a lot of people are better informed about it now.

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It's been interesting to reminisce about our Foreign Service Career. You know so often you are asked, "What post did you really like best?" There were good things about all our assignments and, really, I enjoyed them all. I think probably the first post, as I said, is always exciting — to be out for the first time and feeling you are representing your country. We certainly have many happy memories of Dar es Salaam. And Ghana was nice because the people were so friendly, and there were lots of good things about Zambia. And South Africa had so much going for it. And of course being an ambassador and an ambassador's wife is really a nice experience; you know that as well as I do. It's a wonderful experience — you can't get away from that.

Q: You came home after South Africa?

EDMONDSON: Yes, we came home and Bill became a Senior Inspector and then Deputy Inspector General. We had some very nice trips then. I didn't go on all of his inspection trips, but I went along some of the time: China, which was very exciting, Morocco, and later we went to Australia and New Zealand. He retired in 1986 but was called back to do some inspecting and I went with him then to Russia and Finland. So really I have probably made more interesting trips like that after he got into inspecting than even when he was serving overseas — because he was traveling to different kinds of places.

Q: Yes, and you had no responsibilities.

EDMONDSON: Yes, just being a tourist. That was nice.

Q: And staying one place long enough to really ...

EDMONDSON: Yes, we were a month in China, three weeks in Hong Kong, a month in Russia, three weeks in Helsinki, and a month in Morocco. Those were exciting trips. Looking back on our Foreign Service career, I think there's one thing I might have wished differently, well, maybe two. I think that although I really did like the African posts, as you can see, it would have been nice to have had more assignments in different areas

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— Switzerland was our only assignment outside of Africa. And I regret that all of our posts were English speaking (well, not Switzerland and we did use German there but so many Swiss speak English and prefer it to German). It has meant that we have never really had to learn another language well. Bill's language when he came into the service was German, having served in Germany after World War II, and I had taken German at university. We both had studied French too but were never assigned to a country where we had to use it, so don't speak French well at all. So we haven't had the advantage that you and others have had who have served in foreign language posts and had to learn another language. But, all in all, I wouldn't change much about our career in the Foreign Service.

Q: Thank you very much.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: William B. Edmondson

Spouse Entered Service: 1952 Left Service: 1986

Relationship to Foreign Service: Spouse of Retiree

Posts: 1953-55 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1955-57 Bern, Switzerland 1957-58 Northwestern University, Illinois 1958-61 Washington, DC 1961-64 Accra, Ghana 1964-65 Washington, DC 1965-69 Lusaka, Zambia 1969-74 Washington, DC 1974-76 Pretoria, South Africa 1976-78 Washington, DC 1978-81 Pretoria, South Africa (as Ambassador) 1981-86 Washington, DC

Place and Date of Birth: Nebraska; December 20, 1927

Maiden Name: Kiechel

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Parents:

Doone Kiechel, lawyer and judge

Mary Kiechel, teacher

Education: Public schools, University of Nebraska

Date and Place of Marriage: October 6, 1951; Fort Bragg, North Carolina

Profession: Teacher

Children:

Barbara Schneider

Paul Edmondson

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: At Post: * welfare * hospital * YWCA * handicapped children * teaching English

Washington, DC: * Recording for the blind * National Gallery of Art * AAFSW - Housing Office

Honors: Award for volunteer work, Accra

End of interview