

Interview with June Byrne Spencer

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

JUNE BYRNE SPENCER

Interviewed by: Mary Louise Weiss

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Q: I'm interviewing June Byrne Spencer at her home in Chevy Chase, Maryland for the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History.

What were the circumstances that led you to enter the Foreign Service yourself in 1943?

SPENCER: Well I was single, working in Washington, and I wanted to do my part in the War. I wanted to be patriotic and do what I could. I felt that working overseas would be the best thing for me. I didn't feel that going into the Army as a WAC was what I wanted to do. And I had been interested in foreign life and I guess I was certainly attracted by what was perceived to be the glamor of it all. And I asked particularly for Lisbon. Which I didn't get, but I got very close to it. And I felt that I was single and therefore I could afford to go away.

Q: Did you have any training for it here in Washington?

SPENCER: Oh, absolutely not. You know it might be amusing to tell you a bit about my first interview. I went to the old State Department building which is now the Executive Office Building. It was a marvelous place at that time, very laid-back, even in 1943, two years after the War began. And very slow-moving, the halls were quiet. There were only Black messengers, shuffling along, taking their messages. The doors - the entrances to

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the offices - were through old-fashioned divided doors that you could see through the top and the bottom, and they swung open.

Q: Swinging doors. Were they louvered? I seem to recall some louvered.

SPENCER: Yes, there were louvered doors. There was no air conditioning. I well remember that because I was perspiring profusely, I was so nervous about the whole thing. (laughs) At my first interview, a very nice woman said, "I don't see why you want to go into the Foreign Service. You make more money than you will ever get overseas and why don't you just think it over a bit?" So I went back rather crestfallen and then came back again and said I really did want to.

Q: She was trying to discourage you?

SPENCER: Yes, why I don't know.

Q: Because you are a woman? SPENCER: I don't know.

Q: They must have needed help at that time, yes. Well, that was a wonderful building. It's too bad it isn't ours anymore. So you did have another interview?

SPENCER: So I did have another interview and I don't remember having to take any tests of any kind. I certainly didn't get any training. I just received a letter from, I forget who it was now, saying I was being appointed to the Foreign Service Auxiliary at \$1,800 per annum.

Q: Wonderful. (laughs)

SPENCER: And that I should let them know immediately whether I accepted this. And then there was a long list of considerations. I just found that letter the other day, I can't believe I kept it this long, but I did.

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Q: Was the letter from the Secretary of State or from the Foreign Service?

SPENCER: No, from the Assistant Secretary of State.

Q: So then when you were accepted, you went directly to Spain.

SPENCER: I went directly to Spain and it was a most exciting, thrilling, glamorous, nervous-making experience in a way. First of all, I had just three weeks to turn my life upside down and leave Washington for Spain. I had to sell everything in my apartment, rent my apartment, get all of my shots. And those were considerable. We had to have simply everything at that point.

Q: Training for the future. Had you been a government girl?

SPENCER: I'd been a government girl, yes. I'd worked at the Department of Agriculture first when I came out from Texas and finished my school work at Arlington Hall. I worked for the Justice Department and for the War Production Board - in the Russian Department of the War Production Board. It was exciting.

Q: Arlington Hall makes me think of the new Foreign Service Institute campus. Arlington Hall will be part of it, very much a part of it.

SPENCER: Yes, I can't believe it. Full circle, full circle. But anyway, I flew from New York on a Pan Am Flying Clipper. Not many people remember those golden days of flying, but they simply were. I had a berth, I had to share it with a friend - she became a friend. At that point I didn't know her, but we were put together because her name was also June. (laughter) So we were bunk mates and we flew to Bermuda and there I had my first experience in the Foreign Service of being "ripped-off." I had my going-away present of a beautiful traveling clock stolen.

Q: Oh really. Were you put up overnight there? At a hotel? Was it a re-fueling stop?

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SPENCER: No, I don't think so. That was a re-fueling stop. I think our bunks, or berths, rather were made up then. And then we slept. It was an overnight flight and we flew at night and the plane was blacked out. Our next stop was Horta off of Portugal. Would they be the Azores?

Q: Possibly. I think you may be right. Some of those clipper ships stopped at Lisbon.

SPENCER: Well, mine went on to Lisbon afterwards. But we had to stop there. It was another re-fueling stop. We went in then and landed on the Tagus River in Lisbon. And that was really a very dramatic landing for me. First of all, I'd never had anything like it. And secondly, the man I was sitting next to at this point had been the pilot on a previous Pan Am Clipper that had crashed in the Tagus River.

Q: Did he let you know that?

SPENCER: He did and he was holding my hand tightly all the while. It was the first time he had been really on a plane and the first time he had gone back to this particular spot. I think he had been fired by Pan Am and perhaps he was trying to find a reason for the crash at that point. But it was dramatic for that reason, it was dramatic because several people on the flight sort of had hysterics, they were just very nervous about the whole thing. And again, the Pan Am flight just before ours we knew had been shot down. And on that flight had been the famous British actor Leslie Howard.

Q: I was thinking about that flight, I didn't know what relation to yours it was. I believe there were other well-known people on that same flight.

SPENCER: Yes, I believe there were. But on the flight that had crashed in the Tagus River, there had been a well-known American singer who had been very badly wounded. I think she was paralyzed from the waist down and sang thereafter in a wheelchair.

Q: I recall that. I can't recall her name, I recall that.

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SPENCER: And then, there had been a Foreign Service officer who had distinguished himself with several acts of bravery by saving people on board. His name was Walter Butterworth.

Q: Oh, yes, I've heard his name. Well that was a very dramatic entry to your new career abroad.

SPENCER: Yes it was.

Q: So you started your Foreign Service career in Madrid. What was it like there at that time? The War was - Europe was certainly at war. And you were starting off as a new, young, unmarried clerk in the Foreign Service Auxiliary. What was it like for you there, a small embassy, medium-sized, what kind of life did you have there?

SPENCER: I suppose that it might be considered medium-sized. It was a period of intense activity, of very hard work and a lot of hard play. There were many deprivations, but there were also many wonderful times that we had together. There were luxury restaurants, luxury hotels, and a startling contrast between the rich and the poor. We saw that dramatically. Let me just tell you that when we landed in Lisbon, we were put up at a hotel there. Several of us were going on to Madrid and a number of the people were staying in Lisbon. Lisbon at that point was the center of all the spy activity. Lots of people were operating from there.

No arrangement had been made for me to get from Lisbon to Madrid, as I remember, and I drove there in a wonderful black limousine with the head of the American Petroleum Institute (laughs) who was actually assigned to Madrid. And I don't believe he was a member of CIA, I think it was a legitimate job. But in any event, he was a very nice man. He had an eye for pretty girls. He invited - oh, I shouldn't say that (laughs) - but anyway, he invited me to share his black limousine to Madrid and we did. We just had a fascinating day's trip and then came over the hill at sunset and I saw this beautiful city just bathed in a

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golden light, and I thought, "My goodness, here life is beginning!" And I was thrilled to be there. No arrangements had been made for me to stay anywhere.

Q: Were they expecting you? (laughter)

SPENCER: Well, I think they were in time, but not at 7 or 8 o'clock at night, the Embassy was closed, so Walter Smith, bless his heart, took me to the Palace Hotel.

Q: This was the petroleum gentleman?

SPENCER: This was the petroleum gentleman. And there was room. In those days you didn't have to wire ahead. And there was a room. I was ushered into the most beautiful room I'd ever seen, virtually. It had marvelous white linen sheets and lace and large armoires and Spanish maids hovering. I just thought I was in Heaven. And that this was going to be the beginning of the most wonderful period of my life. And this was my war effort! As it turned out, there were many privations along the way and I didn't always live in such luxury, but that was the beginning.

Q: What kind of privations?

SPENCER: The food was simply terrible. The food was very bad. When I first arrived there, we had to get most of our things on the open market. And Spain was still suffering dreadfully from the results of the Civil War. Only those people with a great deal of money who could afford to use the black market were able to buy great luxury items or good oil or good flour or staples. We all had terrible stomach problems, terrible stomach problems. The flour that we got had a bit of flour in it, but a great deal of sawdust. The oil that we got was very, very strong. Unless you were very lucky, you lived on green peppers, heavy olive oil, potatoes, occasionally stringy meat. It was rough. However, subsequently we made arrangements with the Embassy in Lisbon and did get staples and were able to get a few of those things that were much better. And by the time I left, we were able to buy quite a few things on the market. But the stores did not have many canned items. We

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had fruit. We had wonderful oranges in season. We had asparagus in season, we had strawberries in season.

Q: How long were you there?

SPENCER: I was there two years, until VJ Day.

Q: There was no home leave then?

SPENCER: No.

Q: You were there when the War ended then?

SPENCER: I was there when the War ended. At that point I was ready to come home. It seems ridiculous when I think of it, but I was. It was my first time out of the United States. When you're young, two years seems like a long time. So I was just ready to come back. And I suppose I'd had a few cultural shocks along the way. And I did come back. And it was interesting.

I had another dramatic trip. That time coming back. I was on the first Liberty Ship that was sent back to the United States after the War in Europe. It just turned around in midstream, headed for one of the southern Spanish ports and loaded up with Spanish wine and took on six passengers. Do you remember those Liberty Ships?

Q: Oh yes.

SPENCER: They were built just for the War and they took troops over and supplies, and there was room in them for six passengers. And I was one of the six passengers, and I think they took on eight, actually. As a result, I had to sleep in the hospital bay. But that was all right.

Q: Were the other passengers people like yourself, civilians?

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SPENCER: Well, I can't remember who they were actually, There was a Spanish family, a man and his wife and daughter. I just can't remember who they were, but it took me three weeks to get home.

Q: Across the Atlantic to New York?

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: Had you been re-assigned to Washington before you left?

SPENCER: No, I had resigned. I had had to resign. I had asked for a transfer and I wasn't given one, so I resigned. When I came back, I had to scramble to get another job which I did get in the Department of State.

Q: Was that Foreign Service-related?

SPENCER: No, it wasn't at that time. It was a most interesting job. I was administrative assistant to a General Nelson who had been brought in to the Department of State on one of its many re-organization turn arounds.

Q: Have you read the book by Brinkley on Washington?

SPENCER: I've started it, yes. There I am, there I am! (laughs)

Q: So you worked in the State Department from 1945?

SPENCER: Well actually it was all very quick and condensed, my period in the State Department at that time because I worked just briefly for General Nelson. Actually, he was just assigned there for a brief period to do this re-organization job. I wanted to get back into something connected with the Foreign Service or foreign life. I didn't think that I wanted to go overseas again particularly, but I was interested in a different kind of work than just State Department.

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I did go to the Foreign Service Institute which had a new life at that point. It was the old Foreign Service School - I think it was called the Foreign Service School at that point, it was not called the Foreign Service Institute. I felt very strongly about having been sent out to Spain without any more instructions than I had been given. I had seen a lot of what I considered problems with other people in my circumstances. And a certain amount of injustice, what I considered injustices, perhaps they were not.

But in any event, I had an interview with Mr. Perry Jester who was the head of the Foreign Service Institute at the time, and gave him a rather long memorandum on what I thought training should be for Foreign Service staff people. I felt that they were just as important in representing the United States as officers in a way. So, very soon, I was taken on as the Acting Registrar there at the Foreign Service Institute. And it was a period of intense growth at that time because by then a lot of new Foreign Service officers had been brought into the State Department, and they had been given the exams, overseas, oftentimes, and were being brought in at the lowest - at FSO 6 or 8, I think it was 8 at that point.

Q: Many came in laterally.

SPENCER: Except many of them, as we spoke earlier, had come in laterally and a lot of those were older people who had worked prior to going into the Army. But a lot of these were just very young men who had gone right into the Army after college and came back. So that the Foreign Service Institute developed a very short training period for them. They had, at least in the short period that I was there, graduated eight classes of from 25 to 30 each.

Q: You spoke of injustices when you had been in Madrid. Was it because you were a staff person, you felt there was an injustice in relation to the families or the officers when you were in Madrid?

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SPENCER: Well perhaps I felt that. I certainly had never . . . I did feel like a lesser person as a staff officer than the officers. There was very much a hierarchy in those days, and I think it still exists. But I'd never been exposed to anything like that before and now I can see that perhaps it's perfectly natural. And as a matter of fact I didn't really suffer that much from it, but I like sometimes to tilt at windmills, perhaps. (laughs)

Q: You felt it and you wanted to be included.

SPENCER: Well yes, I was a lot, a lot. And there were very few young women at the post when I was there so that I really was included in a lot of officer's parties, and just had a marvelous time in that way. But still there was an element of difference that existed between the officer and the clerical personnel.

Q: Do you think some of that had to do with the elitism that existed before the more democratization of the Service?

SPENCER: Yes, I do think so, yes. Also, while we're being very frank, there was certainly a degree of anti-Semitism at the particular office where I was when I was abroad. And I hadn't experienced that very much before, had also fought against it, felt strongly against it. So that I certainly did come back with the feeling that the Foreign Service was an elitist group or considered itself such.

Q: So when you were working at the Foreign Service School, you felt that this was an opportunity to redress some of the wrongs?

SPENCER: No, I didn't. I didn't really. (laughs) just felt that I had a very interesting job and I wasn't thinking about that at all. I was just trying to learn how to do what I was supposed to do, which was to organize some of these courses for the young men involved.

Q: I misunderstood. So the memo that you put forward was . . .

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SPENCER: For clerical training. And I wasn't given any responsibility for that and, as a matter of fact, there was some clerical training that went on at the time at the Foreign Service Institute. I don't know how much the clerks got, but my remembrance of it was that it was not particularly appropriate.

Q: Was there any kind of orientation of areas or any kind of preparation for living abroad?

SPENCER: I don't believe so. Not for them. Not very much, not very much.

Q: And how soon did this new training develop?

SPENCER: I don't know if they ever took any of my ideas or not! (laughs) I had hoped that they would take the whole memorandum and start running with it. All I know is that as a result of that memorandum, I did get my job as Registrar in the Foreign Service Institute. And there I met a most wonderful officer and had a very whirlwind, is that what you say, whirlwind romance, and off I went again into the blue. And this time married to Jimmy Byrne. And our first post was Berne, Switzerland.

Q: Appropriately.

SPENCER: Well, actually, you know, we always wondered how assignments were made because when I would stand up and read off to these young officers the palpitating news of where they'd been assigned, they'd all asked for Paris or London or some place. And they all got the worst, nothing that they had asked for. Except, that in our case, we just felt that they assigned Byrne to Berne, they assigned Thomas T. Turner to Tunis (laughter), and several other people like that. They just had their little joke.

Q: Well, that explains a lot!

SPENCER: That explains a lot. They never stopped using that system.

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Q: There used to be the joke that when it came time for assignments, they would take all the files or the forms, toss them up a staircase, the ones that landed on top went to London, Paris, and so on down the line.

SPENCER: One of the wonderful young officers who was, in our eyes, very sophisticated, very suave, knew everybody, had asked for London. And he was given Bahrain. No one knew where Bahrain was, we all had to go scrambling.

Q: Put the map on the wall?

SPENCER: Put the map on the wall to find it. That was such a nice man called Malloy who subsequently spent a great deal of time in the Near East and was, if you remember, assassinated.

Q: Yes I do. He became an expert on the area. So you went abroad the second time, again to Europe, but as a married Foreign Service wife? And this put you in a different status.

SPENCER: Well, yes it did. (laughs) I remember being so scared, goodness gracious, as a junior wife, feeling that I just had to do the right thing. I think I was just like all junior wives everywhere. I wasn't so junior by that time, I was getting a little long in the tooth. (laughter) Thirty years old. But nevertheless, I still felt my responsibilities keenly and had a very difficult time in a way carrying them out, Mary Louise, because the old-time ambassador there had just left two or three days before we arrived, and there was, I guess, a *Chargé d'Affaires* at the time who had a French wife and, as you know oftentimes in those days the foreign-born wife was extremely difficult to deal with and she was a woman who had been in the Foreign Service for a long time and just expected me to know everything that I was supposed to do, didn't give me any guidance whatsoever so that I had to . . . Several older women at the post were very nice to me and I asked them what should I do about calling, and they said, "Oh, I don't know, we don't do very much anymore." And at the

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same time, it was really very formal. I should have called on the wife of all of the people in the Embassy ahead of me. And then there were all sorts of funny rules at that time, if you will remember, about whether, if you called in person, you turned down the right-hand corner, and if you sent your card by messenger, you turned up the left-hand corner. I can't remember what those things were, but I'd heard about them vaguely and they scared the devil out of me.

Q: You didn't receive any kind of social usage or protocol before you left? That came in later. You'd had no training or orientation or anything.

SPENCER: No, and nothing at the post at all. So I just felt that I ought to make a few courtesy calls, so Jimmy and I did that, but never knowing what we were supposed to do really (laughs). I mean it was just a difficult little period for me.

Q: When we first arrived at our first post in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, we were living in a hotel and the inspectors were there, also at the hotel, so we were hearing things they were saying about our brand-new post on arrival as junior officers. But one of the things that they said was that the morale amongst the wives was very low, that the ambassador's wife would have to do something about it. This was Mrs. Riddleburger. I discovered as time went on that all of the senior wives were European, foreign-born. In her case, Dutch. She spent a lot of time going to be with her family and so on.

The DCM's wife was French, the Agricultural Attach#s wife was Italian, and naturally you'd expect them to. If they had to go to the dentist, they'd go to their own country. And so many of them were not at the post and it was a difficult post in some ways and isolated. And we just floundered. And finally a women's club was started. But I know that feeling of needing the guidance, or at least the kind of leadership from the senior wives, and it wasn't there, for understandable reasons, but it wasn't there.

SPENCER: It was very hard. I think in that period that we're talking about, the officers had been in Europe as young officers and their assignments had been very long there. And

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they necessarily, not necessarily, but had formed these attachments and married these foreign women. There were many of them in the Service.

Q: And still are. I notice in the AAFSW News, there's a picture of the foreign-born spouse group in Kyoto which is a large group and they have their own organization here, and I think it's wonderful that they now feel that they're an entity and they're recognized as being unique. And I think it's a good thing for their morale, too.

SPENCER: Yes, I do, too. It was a problem that we saw when we first started the Foreign Service Women's Association. We didn't go into it deeply at that point because we didn't have time, but it was a recognizable problem.

Q: While you were in Berne, did you find there was any need for organizing the women? Was there a group, an international group there?

SPENCER: No, myself and several of my friends developed an American women's group there. At first, we were all having babies and that took up a great deal of our time. I was there for five years, by the way. And then we started meeting to talk about children and formulas and recipes and all of that and it just got more and more boring. And as more and more Americans came into Berne, we saw that there was just a problem there and we started this little group and included in it American wives of Swiss nationals, or anybody else that wanted to come. So that was developed just about a year before I left there.

Q: That was a support group?

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: Did you discuss the needs for things like training or anything back home.

SPENCER: No, and we didn't really call it a support group, I guess we didn't think of it in those terms. It was really an opportunity for American women to get together and meet each other and expand their acquaintance. It was very hard to get to know the Swiss. A

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lot of these women were not assigned to an embassy. I mean we had our own contacts by then, but some of the women did not, so it was hard for them to meet other American women.

Q: And this must have been very helpful for them.

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: And then you came back with a young family?

SPENCER: Yes, (laughs) I went over with a great big steamer trunk, and my husband. I came back with two children, a step-daughter, a nurse and, I don't know, a household full of furniture.

Q: Quite a change in your life.

SPENCER: Quite a change in my life, yes.

Q: When you came back to Washington with this growing family and household, did you have time for your own interests in regard to some of the things you were speaking of earlier, the need for training for wives going overseas and so on?

SPENCER: No I didn't. We just had a terrible time when we first came back, trying to find a place to live. We just lived from hand to mouth for about six months. We lived at the old Alban Towers and, I think I told you this, a place on 16th Street which is now an old folks' home. And our real estate agent let us have a place in the country for a month. I had a friend in Georgetown who let us stay there for a month. Eventually, we found this house and bought it and moved into it. I think I told you also earlier that we were just desperate for a house and we came into this one near Christmas. And there were three or four pies, pumpkin pies, mincemeat pies, the odor was just permeating the house and they were sitting around on the counter. Now I've learned that this is what you're supposed to do if

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you're trying to sell a house. (laughs) So we were taken in by that and anyway we bought the house and we lived here.

And I was very busy moving in and getting established and making friends. There wasn't anything that the Department did. I don't remember ever going to a wives' lunch before we were sent out again. I must have, but I don't remember that at all. I just remember being very busy getting settled.

Q: This was quite a transition period you went through when you came back. Settling.

SPENCER: It was. I've spoken about that in this report which I hope you will let me get to later on because I think it was an experience that was not unique to me, but to everyone.

Q: Absolutely, absolutely. So in the period you were here, you were not active in any kind of a group with other Foreign Service women. You were, as they were, raising your family and so on.

SPENCER: I had several friends from Berne because all of us had been there a long time. With the change of the ambassador there, somehow there were three or four families that were all sent back to Washington, so I had those friends. But otherwise I felt very strongly that it was important for me to immerse myself into the life of my own country. I'd been away for five years then. And one of the reasons we wanted to buy a house in Maryland was that we wanted to vote. And there was absentee voting here.

Q: Not in the District.

SPENCER: No. And I volunteered for a job on the Hill. I did some volunteer work for some congressman's office there. And I took a course at the Red Cross. And I just did a lot of things like that.

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Q: You mentioned that you did not have any knowledge of a Foreign Service Women's group. There had been a luncheon group and I don't think we want to go into detail now, but there had been a group - senior wives.

SPENCER: Oh yes, absolutely, there was one, and they did have periodic lunches. All I'm saying is that I must have gone to them, I just don't remember them necessarily. But we had three or four Washington assignments. I did go to those lunches, certainly during the second and third assignments. I remember that very well. I just don't remember it during this period.

Q: Then you went to Addis Ababa and Tunis before you came back to Washington again?

SPENCER: Well, no, we came back for a short assignment in-between the Ethiopian and the Tunisian posts. And those were most interesting because one was East Africa, was Coptic Christian, very primitive, and once again, like Spain, but not really. There was this tremendous contrast between great wealth and great poverty because all members of the so-called Royal Family in Ethiopia had great wealth, jewelry, they lived in what were known as palaces, but they were just comfortable houses by our standards, but palaces by those standards. Tunisia was Muslim and was just in its first stages of independence after having thrown over the French Colonial period. And that was in itself a most interesting period.

Q: As a Foreign Service wife, did you find those two posts more satisfying or rewarding in any way, having a little more experience now, than your earlier posting in Berne?

SPENCER: I think so, but they were difficult posts. I don't mean to say that life was always difficult. But Addis was such a primitive country. The diseases were so endemic. We were sick a lot of the time. I had young children at the time. One of my daughters, at the age of six, had to undergo a series of excruciatingly painful rabies shots. And my son was only a year old and he had dysentery that just could not be stopped. So there were problems of

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that sort there. And we had inexperienced ambassadors. We had - the ambassador who arrived just shortly after we did, was a man who was a Lutheran minister and he said that his life was directed by three Ps - preaching, politics, and poultry.

Q: Poultry?

SPENCER: Poultry. He loved chickens. And he had a little chicken farm on the embassy compound. He took care of these chickens. He'd always had them in Minnesota where he came from. I remember going to a dinner party there, mostly Americans I believe. After dinner we were taken into - the men separated and the women separated, and we were taken into the ambassador and his wife's bedroom/bathroom. And we passed through his bathroom where he had these two chickens. (laughter) They were wrapped up in towels because they had the chicken pip, whatever that is. (more laughter) One of them was his favorite chicken which was called Mopsie. (laughter) The ambassador's wife said, "Oh he's so worried about Mopsie. Mopsie sleeps in his room!"

Q: He took his hobby very seriously.

SPENCER: He took his hobby very seriously. He also started out his staff meetings on Fridays with a prayer. When he first arrived, he said that he was not going to have any alcohol served in the embassy residence. And he came to this conclusion first, because he didn't drink himself except other than just - I guess he had a little wine occasionally. But also he was received at the White House by President Eisenhower before he came over as ambassador and the President had served only sherry, so he felt if the President could do it, then he could do it. However, it didn't quite work out that way.

Q: Oh, that's wonderful. You came back to Washington in about 1959?

SPENCER: Yes.

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Q: What took up your main interests once you came back? You had been away to additional posts, meanwhile. You came back and your children were a little older. Had you found much change in Washington in regard to your Foreign Service friends?

SPENCER: Not a great deal, I guess. My circle had enlarged. I knew that many more Foreign Service people. My life was devoted mostly to my Foreign Service friends, but we were lucky enough to know a lot of others outside of that official circle, so it was not totally devoted to that. I was just kept very busy with two girls, and again my stepdaughter spent a lot of time with us. She was a teenager at this point. My son was ten and so I had four children. We did a lot of entertaining. There were people coming through all the time. We had an extra bed so that it was just a busy life.

Q: Yes. Washington is a very busy place.

SPENCER: It is.

Q: What eventually got you interested in organizing Foreign Service women? How did that come about? Were you at this time attending any of those luncheons that had been held for a long period of time for a rather small group of women?

SPENCER: Yes I had gone to them. Actually, I had become the recording secretary of the Women's Policy Group and that had come about because a friend of mine had asked me to take over her job because she had been transferred elsewhere. And that's the way the Policy Committee worked. At that point, in '58 - '59, there were about seventeen women who met several times a year to develop plans for the lunches. They had enlarged the whole scope of their activities to include a few neighborhood teas and I don't know what else. They might have had some visits to Baltimore to the Public Health areas there.

Q: What did they call themselves?

SPENCER: I don't know what they called themselves. The Foreign Service Wives' Group.

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Q: They had been the group that attended luncheons?

SPENCER: Yes, and that had been a major activity. That had been started in the '30's by Mrs. Wilbur J. Carr, and I think her husband had been head of the Foreign Service at that point. She said, in a little statement, "that a group of us ladies thought that we would have lunches a few times a year to get together". It was a social group.

Q: Were there other women like yourself who were going to these who felt the need for something more? The Policy Group was formed to discuss what?

SPENCER: Well, that's what they called themselves. They called themselves the Policy Committee and I guess that was - the Policy Committee of the Foreign Service Wives' Lunch Group, I think that was it. And looking over my notes, I find that that was a group consisting of about seventeen women. And it was always headed by the wife of the Director General of the Foreign Service. And the other members of the group were assistant secretaries' wives, deputy assistant secretaries' wives, heads of offices. It was primarily high women of rank who headed the Policy Committee. It was a self-perpetuating group in the sense that everybody got their jobs, so to speak, the way I did. You just asked someone to take over. No one was elected. It wasn't that kind of thing. There was rarely anyone in there who was very junior. My husband was an FSO 3 and I was the most junior wife there. I guess that's why I had the job of recording secretary - to do the dirty work!
(laughs)

Q: So the nature of the contact between and among Foreign Service women in Washington at that time was social luncheons, more or less?

SPENCER: I would say so. Although by that time people were getting to realize that there were many more things that had to be done. That's why they had started this little neighborhood tea group, to try to search out people in the neighborhood who were in the Foreign Service and talk to them if they were going into a post. Or if they were just coming

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from a post. Or if someone had just come into the Foreign Service, to try and introduce them to the post that they were going to. That kind of thing. But it was a very informal, loosely organized group.

Q: Later on, I recall when we came in, there were neighborhood coffees to welcome new wives.

SPENCER: When was that?

Q: That was in 1956.

SPENCER: Well, they tried to do that, but it was extremely hard because the methods of obtaining the names was so difficult. It was just virtually impossible to get the names from the Department of State.

Q: That's right. But I remember feeling, when I went to the first one, that I was part of something I was very proud to be a part of. And that all these other women, many of whom had Foreign Service experiences already, were welcoming and made me feel I was part of something rather significant.

SPENCER: It's a good feeling.

Q: Yes it is. Well, then a transformation took place in that group. You felt yourself, perhaps others of your friends felt, the need for more than just a social organization. How did that come about?

SPENCER: Well, it came about this way. Several of us had been talking about the need. We just felt that the problems were so enormous. All of us by this point had had three or four posts. In my remarks here I speak of the young veterans who were brought into the Foreign Service just after the War. And by the time we're talking about, 1959, that's 13 years after the War, these young men were veterans of another sort. They were veterans of three or four posts and a couple of Washington assignments. And I think that we were

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all looking at the Foreign Service and at our life in the Foreign Service trying to analyze it, and we just felt that there were problems there that needed to be addressed. That the State Department was unable, or unwilling, to do.

Q: That they hadn't recognized.

SPENCER: That they had not recognized. And so there was a suggestion box at one of the lunches and I put in that suggestion box a - I can't even remember what it was, but it was a very strong statement at the time that we should have a formal organization with elected officers. And this was read out at our next meeting. The jaws dropped, I mean there was just hushed silence. It was heretical. It was.

Q: Were these meetings at that time held in homes?

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: And the luncheons had been?

SPENCER: So I just stood up and said yes, I had written that, and I felt that it was important for us to investigate the possibility of developing an organization. And we had a most perceptive, independent-minded wife of the Director General of the Foreign Service, Mrs. Waldemar Gallman. And she caught her breath and sort of looked around and said, "Well, all right June. Why don't you," and then she named two other people who happened to be friends of mine, "see what you can do to develop such an organization?" And from then on it took off.

I have a chronological account of what we did here which I would like to get into the record at some point. But I'll just tell you that we tried very carefully to start out slowly, to build. We wanted a professional organization, we wanted an organization that would last, we wanted an organization that would address all of the problems that we could envisage now and in the immediate future. So we just felt that we had to go slow on this. And also

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develop a confidence in what we were doing and in the kinds of people that we were. The atmosphere was so hostile, you simply cannot imagine what we went through at the very beginning.

Q: So you became part of a small group? Would you like to tell us who the other women were in that little committee? About to make some changes.

SPENCER: Well, there were just two of us at that point. And what we did, well let's go back to that question. Those two women that she asked were Nene Dorman and, I've forgotten who the other one was, I have her name here, Ann Penfield. What we did was to get about 20 of the brightest women that we could find, that we knew, and one person would suggest another. And they had all had very different experiences and they were all of different ranks. And we wanted that.

Q: And were they outside of this kind of elite group who had been meeting?

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: So you were bringing in new thoughts?

SPENCER: Yes. At the same time, we had Mrs. Gallman as the honorary head of our little group. We didn't even have a name at that point. But we kept her informed of everything that we did, and we invited her to every single meeting that we had. The meetings took place in this room. It was just a period of intense activity.

Q: And she was very supportive of it?

(End of tape)

Q: You spoke of the hostility and the general atmosphere, and it was not just amongst the women, those elite group of luncheon-goers who were feeling. Things were changing.

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SPENCER: Yes. Well, this was what I wrote in my notes, Mary Louise. "We realized and soon found out that the atmosphere in which we were trying to establish ourselves as an official organization was extremely hostile in the Department, in administration particularly, the Foreign Service Institute, and with some higher-ranking wives, particularly with the wives' group. For that reason, we had to tread very carefully. In addition, we wanted to build carefully and soundly and to be sure that we had the support of a great many Foreign Service women. And this is what we did at the beginning.

We gathered together about twenty of the brightest women we could find, of varied experience, of varied background and ranks. We had ambassadors' wives, Foreign Service clerks, women officers, and junior wives. Plus a great many middle-ranking wives, those whose husbands and themselves had about twelve to fifteen years' experience and several posts behind them. Most of these women had worked during the war years. One was an officer in the WACS, one had worked with OSS, one had been Chief of the Division of Public Liaison at State, one was the Foreign Policy Chairman in the League of Women Voters, one had been a kindergarten teacher, one had been Personnel Officer in Oslo, and so on.

And as I say, we met constantly day after day in this house around my dining room table, trying to decide what we wanted in an organization, and how we should go about getting it. We wanted permanence, we wanted professionalism, we wanted common sense. We wanted to cover all of the issues. We wanted to plan with foresight and judgment. We wanted vision for the future. We wanted communication.

People wandered in and out of my house. There were always coffee and sandwiches on the sideboard. And sometimes women were just in town briefly and would be brought in for their opinions. Sometimes they were working or busy and could only come briefly or I would go in and talk to them. I was the secretary and drafter, and we hammered out draft after draft of aims and purposes, letters, memos, application blanks and other documents.

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Q: Sounds as though you were starting another career.

SPENCER: Well, it was a period of intense activity and, to some of us, intense excitement and creativity, if you will. I wanted to say that my husband and children were extremely supportive. I was lucky to have household help so that I could give a lot of time to it. There was a vast amount of detail and Xeroxing and running around seeing people, placating, soothing, checking, selling. Most of all selling. And trying to appear not as a threat.

Q: That was a very delicate period of time.

SPENCER: It certainly was.

Q: This was all voluntary? Did you have the need for funds? Were you collecting for the paperwork?

SPENCER: No, no. We had a friend. (laughs) my husband, who gave it. But I went constantly to the Department of State and to Personnel and to AFSA, because, after all, they were the people who had been in business in this kind of an organization for years and years, and they didn't see any need for the women to organize. None of the men saw any need for the women to organize. What was the point? And I must say that there were times when I think my husband suffered a little bit. And some of the other husbands, but particularly mine later on.

Q: You mean within the bureaucracy?

SPENCER: Within the bureaucracy.

Q: The wife was stirring things up?

SPENCER: Yes, stirring things up. What was she doing it for? Was it a - now we would say a power grab, or what was the reason for it?

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Q: This is long before women's lib was pushing for so many things.

SPENCER: Yes, it was long before that. I tried to make a friend of the Under Secretary for Administration, Mr. William J. Crockett, because his wife had been in the group and I wasn't sure that she was particularly friendly to our aims. And besides, he was a man whose friendship we needed. And Mr. Thomas Estes, I think he was head of Personnel. And of course we had Mrs. Gallman who was the wife of the Director General. And eventually we went to Mrs. Rusk who was extremely supportive, very supportive, and so was the Secretary. So that was how we really were able to become accepted. But I think that we did a lot of groundbreaking beforehand trying to allay their fears.

Q: Did you find a great deal of opposition and tension when you were meeting with these officials in the Department of State and had to go back repeatedly to convince them, or was it a gradual. . .

SPENCER: It was a gradual acceptance and I never went in in a combative fashion. That's not my way, and I was always tugging at my forelock and shuffling my feet along.

Q: And wearing your hat and gloves?

SPENCER: (Laughs) That, too. Goodness, yes. I spent so much money on clothes in that period. I was always trying to look my very best.

Q: Of course. You were gaining confidence, I'm sure. You and these other women were working and meeting and writing your memos and letters. Obviously there were women who felt exactly as you did and had the know-how and were going about it in a very professional way which won the respect, I'm sure, of the male counterparts, the male officers in the Department who held the positions of power.

SPENCER: I think so because we had enough women who were involved in it. And their husbands went through enough - they permeated the Department, so to speak. And we

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really, as I say, were not combative or aggressive in any way. We knew what we wanted in time.

Q: But things were changing generally, too. I was thinking of the great changes that the Wriston Program brought about within the Service itself.

SPENCER: What year was that, Mary Louise? I've forgotten.

Q: That was in the middle '50's. My husband came in at that period. But the Wriston Program brought in, again, as the end of the War did, a new group, more democratic group of officers into the Service which changed the Service. And changed the group of women or wives. So our society in general was changing, our Foreign Service was changing, the Department of State was changing, and surely the time was right for you to be doing this, and that must have helped pave the way, so to speak.

SPENCER: Yes. It couldn't have happened earlier, I don't think. It happened just at the right time. It was sort of an organization that was meant to be born then, at that time. [The other women] felt the same way. They were anxious to work. They had all experienced the things that I had experienced. We'd all shared some of the same problems.

Q: Did the group who had been in the luncheon group, more or less senior wives, were they gradually convinced, or was there still some feeling of disagreement there as your committee went ahead?

SPENCER: I think they were gradually convinced. Perhaps there were some women who never did see the need for it, but a lot of people don't like change anyway. And don't forget that most of these women were high-ranking. They'd been in the Foreign Service in the good old days and a lot of the change that they saw in the Foreign Service was an anathema to them.

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Q: Yes, of course it was. When did you finally win over, that is not only the group of Foreign Service women, but acceptance in the State Department, to recognize that this group did have something to say, and did have something to offer in the way of suggestions for training and so on? This was about 1960?

SPENCER: 1960. We spent the end of 1959 talking, a great deal of early '60 talking, but we went ahead very fast. We sent out a notice to 1000 women in the Department, telling them that we wanted to start this organization. It was a very simple memorandum that we had drafted. And the aims that we listed were very modest and simple. And we said we felt that the Foreign Service would be better served if we had - and the women themselves - if we had a simple organization. What did they think of the idea?

And we got back an overwhelming response. That it was a good idea, that they liked it. So that we went ahead then and started writing, started getting together tentative by-laws, a certificate of incorporation. We had an application blank, we had a ballot with the selection of officers for the new organization, and we started rolling.

Q: And you got yourself a title?

SPENCER: (laughs) We did, we did. I think you know the story. We started out calling ourselves the Foreign Service Women's Association, and when we wanted to have that incorporated, wanted to incorporate ourselves under the laws of the District of Columbia so that we could become a tax-exempt organization, a title search went forward and it was discovered that there was another organization on the books named "Foreign Service Women's Organization." And that was a defunct organization that had been started by some students at Georgetown University.

And we spent a lot of time tracking down the officers of that group. There had been three of them who had been listed on the paper. We finally found one who was not about to - she became rather suspicious, she wasn't about to give her agreement to dissolving this

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organization and for us to have the name. I don't know why, they were all separated, it was defunct, it didn't even exist. But she wasn't going to do it.

So, in the interest of time, we had to get this done. We then had this pretentious name of "Association of American Foreign Service Women." And as I once said, there's nothing more pretentious than that, than the Association of American Railroads. It sounded a little like that to me. (laughter)

Q: By this time, did you have group activity interests, different committees for different interests that the women felt should be taken care of in a formal sense? Was there a committee for this, a committee for that?

SPENCER: Yes, yes. I have a very interesting table of organization which we drew up. It covers certain of the things that had been done like neighborhood teas and lunches and hospital visits. But it went much beyond that. It's a very nice little chart. Let me show it to you. This. We always tried to . . .

Q: This is about membership application.

SPENCER: . . . to temper our good works with a little bit of humor.

Q: Yes. So this was May, 1960. You had a board with the appropriate officers and six committees in addition to a junior wives' committee. Six committees, special events, programs, Washington assignment, education, membership and publicity.

SPENCER: And there are a lot of different things under each one of these. We had a lot of activities scheduled as you can see.

Q: After you sent out your memos to the 1000 Foreign Service women, did you get a good response from that?

SPENCER: We did.

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Q: And were they signing up at that point?

SPENCER: No, we didn't send out applications at that point. Subsequent to that . . . First of all, we wanted to get the approval of people to know if there were enough women in Washington who wanted an organization, who were willing to support it.

Q: So that memo went only to those in Washington?

SPENCER: Yes, yes. We felt that we couldn't go overseas at that point. So we did do that. Then after that, we sent out another letter addressed to all women in the Foreign Service from Mrs. Gallman. This was March 1, 1960, and at this point we are still the Foreign Service Wives' Group. She signs herself, Chairman, Policy Committee, Foreign Service Wives' Group. And the subject of her letter to all of the women is the Foreign Service Women's Association.

And she says in here, "You will find attached an application for membership now being formed as a result of the enthusiastic response to our poll of Foreign Service wives, and 2, a statement of aims and purposes of the projected association." She said, "Your prompt action in making application for membership will make it possible for me to announce the names of the nominating committee at the luncheon on April 5, a month away."

So we did get enough applications for membership. She went ahead and developed a group of women who were willing to stand for office in the Association. We were excessively democratic. We had three women for each post, which seems like a lot, but we wanted to get away from the Wives' Group policy of just, as I said before, a self-perpetuating group. So that's what we did there.

Q: Was there any restriction to holding office in the new group - to senior wives or wives with husbands with titles?

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SPENCER: On the contrary, we had junior wives, we had Foreign Service clerks, we had . . .

Q: I meant the president and the vice president.

SPENCER: No, no. The honorary president was the wife of the Secretary of State, the honorary vice president was the wife of the Director General, and that was the only thing that we did.

Q: So things were really rolling at this point, and you must have felt pretty satisfied and pleased. (laughter) Overwhelmed perhaps.

SPENCER: Yes, pretty hectic experience. I just wanted to say here that when we look at the committees and activities, it shows a rather close adherence to some of the past activities of the wives' group. As I reported, the hospital visits, and that, with a number of enlargements, we really wanted to think big. Also, we felt that the transition could not be too abrupt, that we couldn't stop doing some of the things that we had been doing. Although we deplored, in a way, some of the social side of the group, we just felt that we had to keep that social side along with the substantive in order to give something of interest to everyone.

Q: Yes. When I came into the AAFSW, it was, I felt, a good combination for those who preferred only the more social activities and being able to see their friends, but with enough other activities that were more worthwhile for those who were a little more serious. There were so many needs to address for families, the women themselves, in the way of training and orientation, and children.

SPENCER: Mary Louise, let me just give you a little look at the atmosphere in the old days at the luncheons there, because I think that was an interesting contrast, while we're talking about doing that. The lunches were held, as I say, at various places. At the National Press Club, the Cosmos Club, and restaurants. In those days, all wives were tracked

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down by telephone calls, and in the name of the wife of the Director of the Foreign Service were “invited” to attend. There was always a receiving line of ranking women who wore corsages. And everyone wore hats, gloves, and I must add, a respectful countenance. And the lunches were always covered by the Society Section of the Evening Star.

Q: I noticed in your scrapbook that there were frequent articles in the Washington Post covering these activities, many with photographs of those receiving lines.

SPENCER: Yes, exactly. If one were overlooked and did not receive a telephone call inviting you to lunch, and that was easy as there was no established list, that was just too bad. You didn't ask to go and perhaps you felt just a little bit left out of the club. I know it happened to me several times when I'd come back.

Q: That's not a very good feeling.

SPENCER: No. (laughs) So that was just another one of the things that we wanted to change if we could.

Q: When did you find the need to charge an annual membership fee to cover some of the activities?

SPENCER: We did that from the very beginning. And we were reluctant to charge anything, but we felt that it covered two purposes. First, we had to cover some of the expenses of printing notices and postage, and secondly, we felt that if one paid to belong to an organization, it made it more important. Now I say all of that, and then I will tell you that the dues were \$1.00. (laughter) \$1.00 at the beginning. Subsequently they were increased to \$3.00.

Q: Did that cover the expenses at that time?

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SPENCER: Well, it didn't cover some of the extraordinary duplicating expenses which we had, and it didn't cover the legal fees.

Q: But then some fund-raising needs were expressed.

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: But more for external activities or support of local charities and so on, beyond the dues. The first fund-raising was the Book Mart, was it not? I think it was called a book mart.

SPENCER: Actually, Mary Louise, it was for Foreign Service scholarships. And we felt that Foreign Service scholarships were something that everybody could rally around. Those scholarships had been in existence for years and years and were administered by the Men's Foreign Service Association. Not only did we believe in them, but we just felt that, as a matter of acceptance, that everybody would go along with that. And we knew that they were needed. It was all of these reasons put together were what made us go for that as a *raison d'etre*. One of our *raisons d'etre*.

Q: And look at how that has changed. How much we're taking in from the annual book fair for scholarships.

SPENCER: The first thing that we did as a very junior organization was the Christmas of, I guess it was 1960, wasn't it? Or 1959. In any event, there was a really marvelous, marvelous Christmas bazaar that was put on at the Shoreham.

Q: Yes, that was 1960.

SPENCER: 1960. And Pat Armitage had charge of that with Mary Stutzman, yes. And . . .

Q: Schmertz?

SPENCER: What was her first name?

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Q: *Andy.*

SPENCER: Wonderful, wonderful. All of them were just wonderful. And they just worked their heads off. And there were just workshops all over town creating the most charming handicraft items you can imagine. I still have waste baskets and a Christmas ornament from there. All sorts of things.

Q: *All hand-made I believe, by the women.*

SPENCER: All hand-made. And the bazaar was built around the departure of the Secretary of State, Mrs. Christian Herter. And she was the guest of honor, and she cut the ribbon for the opening of the bazaar. We made \$1,452. And there are some of the most marvelous pictures in our album of all of us on the committee upstairs after the bazaar. I had rented a suite up there for us. We all went up there and took our shoes off and counted the money. And had a drink, and we were thrilled, thrilled with \$1,452! I can see it now. We just thought we were the greatest money-makers in the world.

Q: *That was the first fund-raising event?*

SPENCER: That was the first fund-raising. Then after that, Pat Armitage said, "You know, that was a lot of trouble. Why don't we do something that isn't so much work. Let's have a book fair." I can remember those words so clearly, something that is not so much work, let's have a book fair. And the first one, as you know, was held in the courtyard of the State Department for just a few hours, one Friday. It was in the courtyard that's just right outside the cafeteria.

Q: *I remember that.*

SPENCER: What did we make then? \$1,500?

Q: *I think it was close to \$2,000, perhaps. (laughter)*

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SPENCER: Well, we made enough for three scholarships. I remember the pride with which we gave those three scholarships of \$500 each.

Q: So this became one of the major activities of the Association?

SPENCER: Yes. It was very interesting how the book fair and the thought of scholarships really took over, and for a while, it was almost the tail that wagged the dog. People were so involved in the book fair, and I realize it's a tremendous amount of work, they didn't want to spend a cent of the money that was raised at the book fair, not even for paper clips or notepads or stamps or anything. They just wanted everything to go to the scholarship fund.

We had to have some money for administrative expenses, and I finally went to my lawyer to find out what would be a reasonable amount of money that we could take. And I think he said 10% would be all right out of those funds. I don't know what is done now, but I know that it always has been a very painful procedure to get any money out of those women, out of the Board, because the Board has always been split.

Q: By 1961, there was an interest in language studies, was there not? For Foreign Service women. Can you tell me a little bit about how that got started?

SPENCER: I would say from the very beginning this was a major interest of our group. Not just language training, but training for wives. And although I don't see it listed, and I'm amazed that it's not listed in any of our aims and purposes - I can hardly believe that - it was foremost in my mind, and I know in the minds of a lot of other women. Prior to 1960, women, wives . . .

(End of tape)

Q: In, I think it was about September of '61, the Foreign Service Institute took an interest in helping the women with training. Could you tell me about that?

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SPENCER: I'd like to because I feel that, rightly or wrongly, I feel that our organization was responsible for pushing the training of wives. It may have come about at some point in the future, but we really pushed it because it was just a major interest of ours. Both in language and in just a training and orientation program. And we did a lot of research, a lot of work on it. We felt that it was a responsibility of the Department of State, that they were simply not listening to the women, just simply didn't listen. We ourselves in the organization developed seminars and roundtables and one exceptional evening program for 125 women called "An Experiment in Training." And we also started language groups using FSI tapes.

Q: This was just within the new organization?

SPENCER: Just within the new organization. And I would say that during the period of at least two years, there was no orientation program at the Foreign Service Institute for junior wives due to budgetary restrictions. It was all very complicated. First of all, there was no training for wives. Then legislation was passed, allowing wives to be trained on a space-available basis. But this was just not good enough because there oftentimes was no space available, and certainly not in the language classes. So what we tried to do was to get that particular hated phrase eliminated. And in time it was eliminated.

But for a long time, there was just nothing at all in the Foreign Service Institute for the Foreign Service wives. We developed, we tried to determine what would be the best thing for a Foreign Service wife, would she need to know to go out to become a really good representative. So as I say, we had all of these seminars and roundtable discussions. It's just thrilling to look back and read the efforts of all of these women, ambassadors' wives, everybody, setting themselves down and trying to think, "What would be the best thing?"

We sent letters out to the field. We got back an enormous amount of responses. We incorporated everything into a very good letter and proposal in June of 1961, sent to Roger

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Jones who was the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Administration. We sent him a letter and then a sample of a training program and some accompanying papers on that.

Q: You made it easy for the Department to begin training you. You'd done all the ground work.

SPENCER: Well, we did.

Q: Under your excellent leadership as president, and this was in your second year.

SPENCER: Well, I don't know about my excellent leadership, but certainly we really did a lot of work because everybody involved in the organization in our group realized that this was absolutely essential. You can't believe in these supporting documents the pleas that came back from the field for some kind of training, orientation, area training, language training.

Q: From the women?

SPENCER: From the women. From the ambassadors' wives, from whomever. And I must say I had a most marvelous letter back from Roger Jones to this first letter. He said, "I read with great interest, in fact with fascination. . ."

Q: Would you like to read it?

SPENCER: Yes. (laughs) And one of the great thing is that George Morgan was appointed Director of the FSI. That was a temporary assignment, but he was there for a while, and his wife happened to be the head of our education committee.

Q: Peggy.

SPENCER: Peggy. A whiz, absolutely a whiz. So we did that and we wrote him a second letter on May 4th, 1962, and it was even in a more elaborate letter with many more

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examples and attachments on training. Eventually, this was May 4, 1962. In November of that year, I think the first training program was held by Mary Trent at the . . .

Q: Was that at the Foreign Service Institute at that time?

SPENCER: But you know the Foreign Service Institute didn't want to take on the training of wives. They thought that was unnecessary. They had their hands full anyway. They wouldn't even let us use their facilities for our big night program that we had for the junior wives. They just said that it would create a security problem. (laughs)

Q: Continuing excuse.

SPENCER: Yes.

Q: I noted in the September '61 newsletter, that an announcement went out to all the members of AAFSW announcing from the Foreign Service Institute that the recent legislation would permit FSI to provide training to members of families of the government personnel assigned abroad on a more extensive basis than in the past when it was on a space available basis. So that was a big step.

SPENCER: It was a big step, and we felt that we had to publicize not only the fact that it was available, but also the fact that it was necessary and very useful to a wife going out. Some of the very young ones didn't realize that there was a need for it. We also realized that it was not very practical for us to say they had to go when they couldn't afford babysitters or couldn't get babysitters. And we just spent hours and hours and days trying to develop a babysitting program that would be helpful for them. We wanted to use the facilities at Fort Meyer because there was a babysitting program there that the Army wives were able to use. We couldn't get the Director of the FSI to even make an inquiry about it. I noticed that the current board is considering some sort of babysitting or child care program right now.

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Q: *It's still a problem.*

SPENCER: It's still a problem. And it will always be a problem until the State Department faces up to it.

Q: *In the Washington Post article of February, 1962, by Katherine Evans, she mentions that June Byrne heads the new association and "There's Strength in Unity," I think was the title of the piece. "Strength in Unity, Say FSO Wives." "The AAFSW is doing something that's never been done before. Preparing Foreign Service women to be crackerjack American representatives abroad and, on their return to Washington, helping them to fit back into the complexities of American life." And it goes on. So there was - the growing need was recognized, and now something was finally being done about it. And you mention Mary Vance Trent as the first trainer or head of the first training session. She had an excellent background herself in the Foreign Service. I thought she did a marvelous job with that.*

SPENCER: I understand that she did. And I had a letter from someone about her telling me that the program was going to start and that the person who had been chosen for it was really a wonderful choice.

Q: *Yes, because she had been abroad in embassies and different parts of the world and had that background. She was a woman who knew what she was talking about and what other women were talking about.*

SPENCER: They followed in great part a lot of our suggestions for programs.

Q: *Had there not been some kind of, I don't know if you'd call it training, for Foreign Service women earlier than this which was mostly a protocol, social-needs kind of workshop? I think I attended one that consisted of a panel of a few ambassadors' wives who were able to answer questions. But it was pretty much protocol-oriented.*

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SPENCER: It was. And as I said earlier in this prepared statement, there had been a day and a half from time to time, or a day of lecturing on protocol, primarily, but that the course was intended more to intimidate than enlighten, it seemed to me. There was an emphasis on white gloves and calling cards and, as we spoke before, turned down corners.

Q: And I recall one young junior wife asking a question about whether she should take double old-fashions with her to Chile or not. Or what kind of glassware, crystal should she take. These were the kinds of things that seemed to be important to women until your group came along.

SPENCER: Well, I think most women, most Americans don't live a very formal life, one that is bordered by protocol, and it just seemed very scary. And so much emphasis was placed by the press, I guess. Perhaps that's why we were all called "cookie-pushers" and various other derogatory phrases.

Q: Yes. But the list of courses that I noticed in one of Mary Vance Trent's workshops ranged from "American Backgrounds and Aspects of Contemporary American Life" to "The Problems of Emerging Nations." "The Function of an American Mission and Responsibilities of Each of its Elements." "How to Answer Questions about the U.S." And these are things that were now felt to be important, not only to the officers in embassies abroad, but to their wives. And I think it shows that the Department was finally recognizing that the women had an important role abroad and was finally willing to accept that and do something to help them.

SPENCER: Exactly. It was recognized that it was the wife who sat next to the important government officials at dinners. It was the wife who went out into the marketplace, who met other wives of the country, who really represented, whether she wanted to or not, the American family. And she had to be able to talk about her country's history, she had to be able to answer hostile questions. She had to know something about the area of the country she was going to.

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Q: And I notice that appropriate social procedures was only one of many subjects that was covered in that. Others were administrative matters which were also important - housing, moving and shipping and so on. (SHORT PAUSE)

SPENCER: Mary Louise, may I say something about housing and shipping? Because that had been something that I had wanted to mention earlier. I certainly have it in my report. This was one of the great problems in the Foreign Service of some of our, of most of our families. We just had so much difficulty. I told you that in one of the State Department reorganizations, they had changed the old way of shipping. No longer were we able to use the Security Storage Company, [a well established and reputable firm]. We had to use the lowest of three bidders. And a lot of these firms who came in as the lowest were inexperienced, they didn't have the supplies, they didn't know anything about it. They were in it for the buck and then they got out. And there were just many, many sad, and sometimes tragic instances, of whole vans of furniture being destroyed or lost by these people and this was really a morale buster.

One of our very first meetings at the State Department was a meeting run by the Administrative Office telling us all of us things and letting the wives vent their feelings about this particular issue. So I did want to say that. And I'd like to say something about protocol, go back to that, too. Because it's something that I would like to address if I may. May I?

Q: Yes. Because that was very important.

SPENCER: I had written this down as one of the problems that women had faced in their time in these early years in the State Department since '54, '55 to the time we were talking about. It's a word about protocol and protocol at the post. It was this aspect of Foreign Service life that was the most frightening and difficult for many women.

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I mentioned earlier when we were talking that traditional concepts of diplomacy and protocol were changing. However, calling cards were still used and official calls were still made in many countries. They were hardly appropriate, however, in many countries in Africa and elsewhere. But they were still insisted upon if the wife of the ambassador were an old-timer. Other sacred, ancient rituals of in-service diplomatic life were often rigidly imposed, such as calling on the wife of the ambassador within 24 hours of arrival, calling her to see if one could help with a party, arriving at the embassy early before a party for instructions, and working hard to introduce guests to move them about. And to be friendly, gracious, charming and ever so helpful. Meanwhile, some of these countries had no such protocol procedures and other countries were relaxing the old standards, as were some of the newly-appointed American political ambassadors from the New Frontier. And the Foreign Service wife was caught between the hardliners, so to speak, those still following the rules of the Congress of Vienna, and the casual approach of others. And the old rules were crumbling, but there were no guides to take their place.

I would like to add parenthetically that most of us recognized the absurdities of some aspects of protocol, but eventually we came to realize the value of universally recognized rules as a means of establishing that necessary easy and early relationship at a post. We felt that protocol rules were merely tools of the trade. And as a tool, they were essential for certain purposes, but that they could be shaped and modified.

Q: As you said, particularly in some places, with the emerging new nations, or new governments in the developing world.

SPENCER: Oh yes. There's a very interesting piece in one of the early programs. This was actually a meeting of wives of the ambassadors in Lagos in Africa and for the first time, they were allowed to speak out. And one of the women was speaking about the real difficulties of meeting African women, getting to know them and talking about . . . That nothing worked if you tried to use some of the old diplomatic protocol rules.

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Q: Was that meeting here in Washington?

SPENCER: No, it was in Lagos. But it's part of our training files that we set up and used as background in preparing our course. Well, I'm sorry to have carried on about that, but I just did want to get that in because I know that protocol - it was just difficult in those days. I don't know really what goes on now in embassies, but I would think that some form of protocol would be just necessary.

Q: Well, I think in some nations, some areas, Europe in particular, perhaps parts of South America. But I noticed in the Washington Post article in July of 1963, "The calling card routine has virtually vanished here in Washington. The State Department has issued a small blue and white sheet entitled 'Social Calls - A Guide for Foreign Service Personnel at the Department of State.' No one should leave cards at the White House anymore. Incoming Foreign Service officers and their wives are now directed to place cards for President and Mrs. Kennedy and leave them at the Office of Protocol in the State Department." (laughter)

SPENCER: It makes one laugh, doesn't it?

Q: Times were changing.

SPENCER: The times, they were a-changing, they certainly were. I would just say on the training, that eventually, as I said, in November, the first training program for Foreign Service wives went into effect. That was November, 1962. And it was done at the FSI and presumably, it has continued. But in any event, what our organization wanted was for the Department of State itself to do the job that it had to do.

Q: And you were very successful in obtaining that.

SPENCER: Yes, we were then. I just hope that it has continued. We broke training down into about four different aspects. We wanted it for the junior wife, for the mid-level wife,

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for the ambassador's wife. We felt that it was very important for a new ambassador, political or otherwise - it didn't have to be a training course, but it would be some kind of a discussion with some of her peers, and, what was the other? Certainly language. But those were about the four different aspects of it. And we thought also that women coming back perhaps would - mid-level women, would have an interest in just a refresher course on what was going on in the United States in race relations, whatever.

Q: Well now the Overseas Briefing Center has not only continued and developed to keep up with the times, the workshops, including teenagers - the young people, but also has a file of videotapes in a formal library which anyone can use who is going abroad, or who can contribute to who has come back from a post and feels that information on schools or whatever would be useful in that file.

SPENCER: Well, that's grand. That is really grand. We had set up a post report file because the old post reports were just not adequate, they weren't aimed at the wife. And so we wrote to all of the embassies and tried to get updated ones. And we also had a list of women who were coming back from a post who would be willing to talk to others. And worked on school information. All of those things that are now being carried on in a much more professional way.

One of the things that interested me in looking at this organization then and now is that many of the problems remain the same, but many of them are very different. And that's because of the times that we live in. But actually, if you look at it, the basic philosophy of working for women, their children, their families, and helping them help themselves is what has remained as the lodestone of the organization.

Q: And very successfully, and is continuing to do so of course. Yes, the early post reports, as far as women were concerned, only offered information on the climate, how high the mountains were and that sort of thing, and not enough practical information.

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SPENCER: Yes, yes. Nothing about schools, nothing about housing, nothing about any of those things. Oh, Mary Louise, may I talk to you just a moment about the Housing Desk in the Foreign Service Lounge. Is it still called the Foreign Service Lounge, by the way?

Q: The lounge is adjacent to the Housing Office, the AAFSW Housing Office. I believe in the early days, the Housing Section, which AAFSW manned, was in the lounge. Now it's a separate room adjacent.

SPENCER: I see. Well, in any event, there was a very inadequate Housing Office that was in the Employee Relations Section. And in about 1959 or '60, at the time that we were getting going, it was eliminated, that Housing Section, for budgetary reasons. And the head of the Employee Relations Section was very upset about it and came to us and said, "Could you develop a Housing Section for us? And we'll give you space here." Because he felt it was a very needed thing. There were just dozens, hundreds of people who were pouring in. And needed some kind of assistance.

Q: Excuse me. The need was there, but the Department did not have any funds?

SPENCER: That's right. They eliminated their Housing Section.

Q: So they came to you.

SPENCER: For help with this. So we knew that the Army had a Housing Section for its employees and that it was run by a wives' group. So that we went over and talked to them and we sent out letters to all of the real estate agents, all of the apartments, all of the hotels in town, asking if they would be interested in Foreign Service personnel coming to them. And giving our criteria. So we got back a lot of answers. And then we set up housing files.

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And I'd just like to read you a little bit about it if I could. This comes from a letter that I'd written in early 1962 to some of my old friends who had been with me and Ann Penfield. And it has to do with housing. And this is what I say.

And it has to do with the Desk. We were really happy to be given the Desk, because not only did we want to help our employees and the women with housing, we wanted to set up files on a lot of other information that they were asking for. On schools. That's where we had our files on income tax, on drivers' licenses, dentists, everything you could think of. We had files at the desk. But the usual percentage was for housing - some for furniture rental. Anyway. But this is a paragraph that I wrote about the racial situation, and the times are so different now. I just think that it would be interesting for somebody, if they ever listen to this, to know about what was going on then.

Q: Tell me to whom the letter was addressed.

SPENCER: The letter was addressed to my old friends that I had worked with in the early days of the organization. And so it's necessarily very fluid. (laughs) But it was to Ann Penfield, Nene Dorman, Jane Hart, and Louise Stukekey, those were the women. And I say: "In January, we helped 228 people at the desk. The usual percentage for housing, very large. We had school information, jobs for wives, post information, car and furniture rental, and local facilities, medical, recreation. So that we really are very efficient and are getting to be very well known. In December, we had a terrible brouhaha over racial discrimination as reflected by our housing cards. A Jewish Foreign Service officer had gotten a house from our files, was on the verge of signing the lease, when the agent asked, "Are you Jewish? If so, the deal's off. Spring Valley is restricted."

(End of tape)

SPENCER: Mary Louise, I was talking about the racial incident that we had at the Desk in 1961. I said that this young Jewish officer had reported that he had been discriminated

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against. We called the real estate firm and said not to send us anything that was restricted. Then we sat back to discuss what to do, but before we got very far, we had a visit from Mr. Pollack's man in Personnel checking up on the Desk policy. Mr. Greenfield, a friend of Mr. Pollack's, had reported to him also - this is the young man who had been discriminated against. Mr. Pollack wanted us to write Miller Real Estate and say that because he had embarrassed a Foreign Service officer, we could not longer carry any of their listings. He indicated we should be bold in this matter, that it would be very useful for the Foreign Service propagandawise, in view of the White House's recent decision on discrimination, or anti-discrimination.

And we, the AAFSW Board felt that as an unofficial organization using the facilities of the Department, that this was not the wisest thing for us to do. We certainly didn't want to tangle with the Washington real estate people. We felt that, bad as Miller is supposed to be in this matter, it is by no means the only agency that engages in such practice and that we should, in all fairness, explain the policy to all of the agencies.

And what do you do with ambassadors and others who list their houses with us privately? Were we to refuse to take anything that was restricted in any way? If we did, of course, it would mean virtual elimination of the Housing Service and cause a majority of the people who came to us for help to suffer. On the other hand, discrimination is an offense against all of us and we're against it wherever it happens. Should we try to be practical and face the situation as it exists in Washington, or should we throw out the entire Service for principle's sake.

While we were deliberating and debating this, a very arrogant young man from G. Mennen Williams's office - he was the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs - appeared and requested to see our files and wanted to know exactly how we worked them as relating to Negroes. When he saw the "integrated" file, he blew his top and threatened Mary Ellen Bowling, who was on the Desk that day, and just said that we would probably have to sacrifice the Housing Service for the higher principle of anti-discrimination.

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It was at this point that I began to feel persecuted by all of these official types in the State Department. It all looked like a put-up job to me, in a way, closing in on the Desk. Because both of these things happened within two days of each other, and with Mr. Greenfield's name, the Miller agent would never have gotten to the lease signing stage in the first place. So I just felt that there was something very odd. We were in a very tenuous position anyway, at the Desk, as an unofficial organization. The State Department was scared to have us, but they wanted to have us. They didn't know if they were doing the right thing and all the rest.

Anyway, Mary Louise, a delegation from the Board went to Mr. Pollack. I believe he was head of Personnel at the time. And we explained carefully our operations. Why we had the integrated file, what we had done immediately upon notification of the Miller incident, that's the Miller Real Estate incident, and why we felt that this whole problem was a matter of Departmental policy that would be better dealt with by the Department than just ourselves as this unofficial organization. He was extremely good about it.

I came home and drafted a 3-page letter, putting everything on record, outlining our procedure, and asking for the Department's guidance in this matter. Which really has tremendous ramifications in Washington's official policy today. We have a formal reply from Mr. Pollack saying that we may keep the integrated file as the only practical way of dealing with the situation, telling us that we should not accept any listings that indicate discrimination, but assume good faith where it is not listed. This is shutting the eyes, of course, on many instances, but Mr. Pollack says it's the only way to do it and keep the files. And transmitting a copy of the letter which he sent to Miller Real Estate as the Department's official stand.

I had a long talk with an extremely intelligent young Colored man who was attached to the Office of Personnel as advisor on their employment practices. It was he who approved of our integrated system. It was very amusing in one way to see the Personnel Office's

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hackles rise when informed that G. Mennen Williams's office had been in on the act. They told us just to inform Mr. Williams that he could take it up with Personnel.

Can I just go on about the racial matters?

Q: Yes, I think this is a . . .

SPENCER: This is in my letter. "For those of you who don't know about the integrated part of our Housing File, it's this. In the past month, every new class of Foreign Service and Departmental staff personnel has had one or two Negroes. This is new. Our files were completely inadequate on decent places to send them to. And the old system of handling them separately by sending them to Mrs. Ambers, a Colored woman in Rugey's office, was too humiliating. So we made a great effort to find out and personally investigate decent rooming houses and hotels that were integrated.

We had kept these along with all the other cards in a section labeled "integrated." To include them with the other cards would have meant that the one or two colored employees would have had to go through hundreds of cards, and perhaps make many unhappy calls before finding a place he could stay. Granted, this is not the best way, but it seems to be the best way to meet the situation in Washington. We try to be as honest yet sympathetic as we can in working this out with the people who need help."

Now I think that is so interesting in view of the racial integration today. And you will notice also that I refer very politely to these people as "Negroes." Well, in those days. . .

Q: Or "Colored," I think, one reference.

SPENCER: Which should I say, "Negro" or "Colored?" Well, in any event, whatever I used, that was the polite way to call them. It was at the end of the '60's, am I not right, that we began to call people "Blacks?"

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Q: I believe some among themselves were saying "Black is beautiful." This was the change. I know a woman who said, "I'm not Black all of the sudden, I'm still Colored."

SPENCER: Oh, I know, they had fought hard.

Q: They didn't all agree with it.

SPENCER: No. They had fought hard to get "Colored" accepted, I think. And of course, it is so hard to realize that in 1958 and '59 and '60, Washington was still such a discriminatory town. But it was at the time of the New Frontier, when we opened up all of these new embassies with Africa, and we were exchanging ambassadors, and all of the ambassadors came here, and there were so many unhappy, humiliating situations.

Q: Yes, and this was also the time of LBJ who was so concerned about these things and did so much along with the Civil Rights Movement to change the discrimination. And we've come a long way. That's a very interesting episode. And what a wonderful service you and the other women did, not only for these people who were looking for housing, but I think also for the Department.

SPENCER: Mary Louise, if I could just end up the whole training episode and tie it in again with the racial incident, just how much times have changed in these thirty years and how attitudes have been bent. Let me just say that in 1962, the going philosophy was, as Mary Vance Trent said in her resume of subjects that were going to be offered at the Foreign Service Institute for wives, "This is an opportunity for wives to participate in service abroad such as teaching English, assisting in civic and charitable projects, and other constructive help in a local community." That's a very far cry from some of the attitudes that were taken very shortly thereafter.

Q: Yes. And the difference between the attitudes toward the wives' role abroad in not-too-many years before that.

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SPENCER: Yes. (Pause) Oh, Mary Louise, could I just say one thing before we end this? It seems that I have talked quite a lot in rather negative terms about the State Department and its attitude of members of the Foreign Service administrative staff. All of that. I don't mean to engage in State Department bashing. I'm just very grateful for the time I had abroad. It was my life. It meant everything to me and to my family and my children. And I thought perhaps before we go, I just might talk a little bit, if I could, about how it was when you came back to Washington in 1959. And perhaps things have changed now, and perhaps they haven't.

Re-entry into your own country is always difficult, no matter how long or short you've been away. But I would just say that I had discussed before with you the problems of living abroad, and, just oddly enough, the assignment back in Washington was equally traumatic. It was like going to a new post. As you know, it was just as difficult as going to any post abroad. You were very much on your own. And for these reasons - that Washington was seldom the home town of either the officer or his wife. The problems of getting settled could just be simply traumatic.

And part of that, I think, is due to the fact that you don't expect problems when you come back to America, to your own home. You're so happy to be back. You think that everything is going to be marvelous. But in 1959, that was 30 years ago, and after the second World War, there was absolutely no housing, no new housing that had been built. It was very difficult to get any place to live. There were no condominiums, there were very few houses or apartments to rent, and the thought of buying a house for just a few years seemed impossible. It just wasn't an option. There was no information on public schools in the area, and, private schools were expensive. There was just no information on the relative merits of neighborhoods. We didn't have information for the women coming back on taxes, on the comparative advantages of living in one place or another. Just lots of small and big items.

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That the Department gave no support to the returning personnel, and there just wasn't any real support for the women from the wives' group that had been established. At that time, very few Foreign Service wives worked. Money was very tight, very hard to come by. And philosophically, I would say, here and abroad wives thought of themselves and their husbands as a team. I'm sure you've heard of that many times before. But it's true. We thought that the Department truly did get two for the price of one, and we were willing to pay that price. We also thought of ourselves as having a very strong role in representing America abroad. We thought of our families as zealous portrayers of the best of American values. We thought of ourselves as somehow being a little bit special. I was so struck when I was going through all of my notes in preparation for this meeting, at the many times we used the words "responsibility" and, I don't know that "duty" was used so much, but certainly responsibility to our country, responsibility to the post, responsibility to the other members of the Foreign Service and the people where we were.

Q: And to our husbands.

SPENCER: And to our husbands. Oh, especially to our husbands. First to him. And it was a time of great joy in a way because not only did we think of ourselves as belonging to a special group, but the rewards of working as a team for our country with our husbands, with our families, were very great. I don't know how people going into the Foreign Service today perceive their roles. I would hope that they get somehow the same kind of satisfaction and happiness from working in the Foreign Service that so many of us did.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse:James Byrne

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Spouse Entered Service:1946Left Service: 1966You Entered Service:1943 (Auxiliary)Left Service: 1945

Status: Retired

Posts: 1943-45Madrid, Spain (as FS Auxiliary, unmarried) 1946-51Bern, Switzerland
1951-53Washington, DC 1953-55Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 1957-59Tunis, Tunisia
1959-63Washington, DC 1963-64NATO, Paris, France 1964-66Washington, DC

Spouse's Position: FSO

Place and Date (optional) of birth: Texas 1917

Maiden Name: June Beakes

Parents (Name, Profession):

George Beakes, oil explorer

Gertrude Beakes

Schools (Prep, University): Arlington Hall, Arlington, Virginia Junior College

Date and Place of Marriage: November 27, 1946, Washington, DC

Profession: Wife, Mother

Children: 2 daughters, 39 and 37; 1 son, 33

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:A. At Post - Volunteer: Bern - American Women's Club; Addis Ababa - President, International Women's Club; Tunis - President, American Women's Club

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B. In Washington, D.C.- Volunteer: Resident, AAFSW & served on various Boards such as Children's Hearing and Speech Center

End of interview