

Interview with Caroline Thompson Simmons

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

CAROLINE THOMPSON SIMMONS

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Initial interview date: April 7, 1993

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on April 7, 1993. I am talking to Caroline (Mrs. John Farr) Simmons in Washington, DC.

Could we talk about the early Foreign Service Wives Group, before June Byrne [Spencer] founded AAFSW [Association of American Foreign Service Women] in 1960?

SIMMONS: In the very early days, after 1936 when I was married and entered the Foreign Service, it's true that we had a sort of social organization. My husband was already in the Service when we were married; he was chief of the visa division. About a year and a half after marriage we went to Canada. In 1950 I came back to Washington, and from then until '57 John was Chief of Protocol.

I belonged to the wives group when I came into the Service in 1936. I remember our gathering for a luncheon at the Mayflower Hotel. It was a large luncheon of Foreign Service wives in the ballroom. At that time it afforded a nice opportunity for Washington wives to meet the Secretary's [of State] wife. I think it's very important to look at such an organization in light of the time in which it was formed. There weren't many women working in those days, so they had time to do things. There were very few women, actually, in the Service, and the problems were different, people did things differently.

Library of Congress

So I think making an opportunity for people to know the higher-ups in the Department was really useful in its way, too. Of course, we were a much smaller group then, too. One might guess that the Foreign Service as a whole numbered under a thousand.

Another thing I recall from the days when my husband was in Protocol was that we definitely organized in order to raise money for scholarships. Dotty Kidder confirmed this when we talked recently. We sponsored a movie premiere at what is now the Warner Theater. It sold out, we raised money all of which went for scholarships. One did that sort of thing in those days, too. I don't recall problems of husbands living abroad and wives living at home such as exist today. I think people gave devoted service, tried very hard, and had the best intentions to try to do something for other people.

Of course, these efforts weren't so highly organized as now. We were far fewer in numbers in the 30s, and individuals were acquainted with larger numbers of people, or we knew one another by reputation. I know my husband knew the name of everybody in the Foreign Service, including their middle initial! "Everybody knew everybody" because it was small. The wife customarily went overseas with her husband, and she was not usually employed at post.

Also, we were just beginning to undertake volunteer work, a new element then. I did a great deal of that in Brazil from 1941-44.

Q: It was my impression that our big thrust in philanthropic activity abroad came after World War II as a sort of extension of the Marshall Plan. You were doing things before then?

SIMMONS: We'd just arrived in Brazil when the War began. I assisted the Brazilian Red Cross and traveled all over the country. In the middle of the War I was up in northern Brazil, where the planes used to fly from Natal to West Africa, visiting all the hospitals. But I did this on behalf of the Brazilians, really. We had studied such a prospect and decided

Library of Congress

it was more worthwhile, because there was a greater need, for women to try to help the Brazilians than to send bandages back to the States. Our focus was on the wounded who were brought back and sent to small regional hospitals, providing things they needed for their own use and enjoyment.

I've always been interested in art, and when I got to Brazil I thought it would be wonderful if we could give exposure to Brazilian artists. We gave exhibitions of Brazilians — in people's houses, not in museums. Of course that's inappropriate now, there's a huge museum of modern art in Rio and another in Sao Paulo. Nowadays newer developments replace early efforts like that.

I'm amazed, looking back, at some of those experiences. For example, I didn't travel at my own expense, they supplied me a plane — a desperate plane! We came down in fields, bumpy landings in cow pastures. And we went around the whole north coast of Brazil, though not often to Sao Paulo because during the War it was difficult to get transportation except on military planes, and that was how I traveled, with the Brazilians. One of my fellow travelers became the wife of the Brazilian ambassador to the Court of St. James and we got to be great friends flying around the coast of Brazil.

In El Salvador, it was not the custom for the ladies of the country to do volunteer work, actually they rather frowned on the idea. So the embassy ladies looked around to see what we could do, and we decided to start a tearoom to raise funds for the school for the blind. That was very touching to me because when I left Salvador the whole school came, in a great big bus, to say goodbye. Experiences like this in those early days were very rewarding.

Our first child was born here. Three months later we left for Ottawa, Canada and were there for three and a half years. John was charg# for most of the time because ambassadors kept changing — Roper, formerly Secretary of Commerce, then Doris Duke's husband Jimmy Cromwell, lastly Pierrepont Moffat, who was career Service. And

Library of Congress

then we left for Brazil and were there for just over three years. Jack's first ambassadorial post was El Salvador for two years and I left with tears in my eyes, because I loved that country.

Following that came Ecuador. The back in Washington for Jack to be Chief of Protocol for seven years — two weeks less than “Lucky” Roosevelt, who told me she wanted to be the longest! (laughter) Q: As wife of the Chief of Protocol, did you hark back to the 30s in your approach and attitude? Or did you pick up from the 40s? How did you make an adjustment to the vastly increased Service after World War II? There had been a phenomenal increase — from around something like 1,200 to about 16,000, as I recall, in the war years?

SIMMONS: Well, we'd done it on a small scale, for example, in Rio, because Brazil was very important to the War. There were over 1,000 people in the embassy when we were there. Of course that included all sorts of petroleum attachés and other specialists, but the mission had grown tremendously as had the whole Service. I suppose it's good in many ways but it's also a little sad. Friendships of long standing. You know how it is, you lose that when your organization is so big.

Q: A number of women I've interviewed of your generation say that after the war their husbands resigned; it wasn't the same.

SIMMONS: Well, I always loved the Foreign Service. I truly had a sense of mission about it, of what it could do and wanted to do. And I remember being asked to talk to Foreign Service wives about the Service. We used to have panels at the Department [of State] — I helped Mrs. Blake (Regina O. Blake, who directed spouse training at the Foreign Service Institute, 1955-60) with her panel. (laughing) I have to laugh remembering the guide on protocol we wrote — have you ever seen it? (Fenzi says she has) Well, I mean did you wear a hat or didn't you to — but those were necessary things to know at that time, and people who came from distant places who were unaccustomed — were helped to feel more comfortable knowing what was the right thing to do. So why not.

Library of Congress

Q: Mrs. Blake was in charge for about five years, and during all of that time contingency funds were used, they weren't congressional — Harold Hoskins waved a wand and found money to hire Mrs. Blake, on contract. And Congressman Rooney — remember him!

SIMMONS: Oh yes, he was the one when you shipped your wine glasses you had to call them jelly glasses. (laughter)

Q: Well, Congressman Rooney rapped Hoskins's knuckles, saying "you don't mean to tell me you're training a dependent with non-authorized funds?" And Hoskins replied, "Yes I am because I believe in it." And the committee made him close down spouse training, I think for about two years. On the other hand, [Foreign Service Officer] Mary Vance Trent, a professional, came in in 1962 when there were congressionally appropriated funds and set up a new spouse training along less social, more substantive lines.

SIMMONS: This may amuse you but at some point between '50 and '57, I think it was, I was approached to see if I would like to do something like this. It may have been the interim during the Department's search when Mrs. Blake turned up. Nobody ever pursued me, anyway. And at that point I had three small children, Jack was Chief of Protocol, and I was Mrs. [John] Foster Dulles's secretary (John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State, 1953-1959). So, I had quite a lot to do, that plus an older relative living in my house. And no money. The Chief of Protocol's salary was \$15,000 a year, and, no driver. (laughing) Things were very tight in those days.

Q: How did you manage being completely on your own acting as Mrs. Dulles's social secretary?

SIMMONS: Well, it was almost impossible. I used to go every morning from nine to twelve. I loved Mrs. Dulles dearly and I did that for a couple of years. I don't think I was a very good secretary, except that I did have contacts with the diplomatic corps and knew people... You see, I'd grown up in Washington, we came here when I was three years

Library of Congress

old. Before we were married, we young girls were tremendously interested in diplomatic life and embassy scenes — the whole situation being smaller — and as young women we were invited to go to embassy dinners. We'd sit below the salt, true, but we were invited, we were in touch. We thought it was a lot of fun. I don't think young women are interested so much, now, they have other things they like.

Q: Like everything else it's changed. How many debutantes are there who are brought together with young FSOs these days to go to homes like Mrs. Bliss's and Mrs. Bacon's. (Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss and Mrs. Robert Low Bacon, along with Mrs. Truxton Beale, "the three Bs", were famed as Washington hostesses in the 1930s and 40s.)

SIMMONS: And it's too bad, isn't it. Yes, well, I don't think my granddaughters are interested, they were brought up in France. I think foreign life had a great appeal in those days, don't you think so? Everybody traveled. The year I graduated from college I got a scholarship to Geneva. There were no planes, I went on a boat, and took a trunk with me. Sounds antediluvian, doesn't it.

Q: To my first post, in 1958, I took my mother's old college steamer trunk. (both laugh)

SIMMONS: I had a marvelous summer in Geneva, met people from all over the world. Later on lots of them became representatives at the UN and other international organs and I'd run into them again. I must say, too, that my college majors, art history and archeology, have stood me in very good stead, because in almost every country you go to there's something you can follow up on. In every country we've lived in I was always interested in what went on in the art line. I suppose no (she laughs) one would do better to study economics, probably. Or learn computer science, in which I have to confess I'm absolutely illiterate. I think I'm going to finish my life dealing with things out of touch, not through a machine but some other way!

Library of Congress

Q: Leaping back to 1936, could we talk a bit about the Wives Group in that period. I gather you all knew one another, there was really no need for the formal organization was there?

SIMMONS: Unless you want to have a project and do good works I think that that would have been nice. But I remember that we were very worried about the young wives who lived even that early “way out” by Falls Church and Silver Spring, places like that. We wanted to bring them in somehow and social gatherings seemed the way to do it.

Q: I have a demographic chart of the people I've interviewed, and it is interesting to see how demographics move out from Sheridan Circle and Georgetown and Chevy Chase to unbelievably far out today.

SIMMONS: It was in the 50s, I think, when we were trying to get closer to the more distant young wives, they would have us to their houses. I can remember going (laughing) to the end of nowhere in Silver Spring. That was when I was so terribly busy with Mrs. Dulles and all of that. It was just too much, yet it was very nice of them to invite us to go out there. It was a simple affair, really, a sort of coffee, not a meal. They were trying to make it a neighborhood get-together, to which you were invited as a sort of, to put it crudely, VIP. They wanted to have “senior wives”.

Q: Well, it's true, because coming into the Service as a junior officer's wife I can remember Peggy Beam very kindly inviting me over because she knew my husband's family, that's how I was included in these things.

SIMMONS: Well that's it! I was talking to Dorothy Kidder on the phone this morning and she said, “There must be some reason why I had nerve enough to talk to you because I was so junior!” (laughter) I came in more at the top of the Service, I never was a junior wife so I never had to go through all that.

Q: Did you ever meet Cornelia Bassell?

Library of Congress

SIMMONS: Oh I knew her all my life because she was a great Democrat and my mother was one of the founders of the Woman's Democratic Club here. My maiden name was Caroline Huston Thompson. I can remember the Club's early days, before they occupied the present building, in a little house near Lafayette Park.

Q: Your mother must have been a great friend of Daisy Harriman!

SIMMONS: Oh yes. I have a lot of the early material on the Democratic Club.

Q: This is of interest to our oral history program because one of our members hopes to write a biography of Daisy Harriman, so this tape might be useful to her too.

SIMMONS: When I came back from having been a foreign student in Geneva I was asked to give a speech at the Democratic Club, which I did. And I gave them a letter Mother received from Edith Bolling Wilson (Second wife of President Woodrow Wilson) saying how much the Democratic Club had meant to her and that she felt she'd received much more than she had given. *Q: That history really needs to be done for the Club's 75th anniversary in about five years.*

SIMMONS: They have a lot of material in their archives.

Q: Miss Bassell was very much involved in the Club too.

SIMMONS: She was of course one of the early ones whom the young FSOs used to go to for advice.

Q: Well, she was hired to do that. But she wasn't hired to voluntarily extend her fondness for those young officers into taking care of their wives. I was prompted to ask if you'd ever encountered her because Elsie Lyon told me she hadn't because she'd grown up in the Service and so didn't need any instruction.

Library of Congress

SIMMONS: Cornelia Bassell probably figured that out, she knew who needed help and who didn't.

Q: I find Miss Bassell interesting because in 1938 the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) did an article about her and her work at the Department of State as the assistant to the director [of the Foreign Service Officers' Training School, precursor of the Foreign Service Institute and the National Foreign Affairs Training Center], and never once mentioning the wives, only mentioning the officers! There just didn't seem to be a perceived need in the Department then for any training for wives. She perceived it, I guess, because of her work with the young officers, and really gathered young women under her wing.

SIMMONS: The one person who knew Miss Bassell really well was Mrs. Walter Dowling. Her husband was ambassador to Austria and I can't recall where else. We were together in Rio. I know she was an intimate friend of Miss Bassell. In those days we had such a wonderful collegial relationship in the Foreign Service. I think we were all trying our best to help the younger people with their problems as we saw they needed at that time. I remember trying to find the right arrangements at post for one young woman who had a Downs Syndrome child. Of course this sort of thing was all done informally, it would be handled officially now.

Q: Your husband left the Service in '57. When June Byrne was organizing AAFSW, did you still attend meetings?

SIMMONS: Yes, I did, and some of the discussion groups held at the Guy Mason Center on Wisconsin Avenue. I first heard June Byrne talk about the Association at Walter Lippmann's (the noted political columnist who joined The Washington Post in 1962.) house — June's husband was Helen Lippmann's brother. I remember June's saying “We've absolutely got to do something” and I think she was right — she was young, she'd just

Library of Congress

returned from a post where she could see the whole picture, and she got the thing started. But I do think she should look sympathetically on what was done before.

Q: That's an insight I don't have in any of our interviews, so I appreciate what you're giving me now.

SIMMONS: We all had a wonderful feeling about the Foreign Service. There was a particular group of officers at the post of whom one would say were “old school tie” but I don't think they necessarily were. They'd grown up together, had been together in the Service for years, they all knew each other, we all knew each other. For example, my husband was a witness at the John Cabots' wedding in Mexico City. She died recently. Perhaps at her funeral, perhaps at another's, I heard someone say almost disdainfully, “Foreign Service always looks after its own.” In those days you knew people, you were close enough to the families to support everything that happened in their lives, you know. It's a little different now. Too big.

Q: Tell me who some of the officers were at that time.

SIMMONS: There was [Philip] Bonsal, Tom Wailes, Julius Holmes, Selden Chapin... They're all gone now, mostly. There were maybe 20 of them.

Q: And the era of Chip [Charles E.] Bohlen and George Kennan?

SIMMONS: Bohlen was a bit younger. I knew Kennan and his wife but not very well, they were overseas for so long, and so many years in Russia. The [Jacob D.] Beams were of that group — I knew him in Geneva in 1931 when I was there on my scholarship. And Marvin Patterson, in Berlin at the same time as the Kennans [and Jake Beam]; she was my closest friend.

It was a very close feeling. On the other hand — don't quote me — it may have made other people feel left outside — those who were out in the field, say, who didn't come back

Library of Congress

to Washington because of course this was before the rule that you had to come back, you see, and there were people who'd been out in the field forever.

Q: I think that's important to note — that they were “out” for years and years, never came back. Mrs. Blake said she was out for 16 years, never had a Washington assignment.

SIMMONS: That's it. Now of course the situation has improved, more money is provided to send children home for education. None of that used to exist, people couldn't afford to send their children home, so they were brought up in foreign schools. In El Salvador we had the first meeting in the embassy for starting the American school there. I got that going because I had two children, I'd gone around and looked at schools. I often thought afterwards that the Salvadorans seemed to like the American school but I also wondered if they really did because it took a lot of people from their own native schools. It was run as an American educational institution but it was open to everybody.

I was on the board of the American school in Ecuador. There was already a flourishing one in Brazil. In Canada our children were too little. I did another thing in Salvador, probably it wasn't even legal, but there was no English speaking Protestant church or Sunday school or the equivalent in Salvador, and I just thought this was an element missing for the children, so I started a small church group, it was really, that met in the embassy. Later on I thought perhaps I shouldn't have used the American Embassy in that way, but on the other hand several Catholic priests said to me, “We just want to congratulate you on doing this, it was something that needed doing.” It was a very simple, ecumenical service — reading the Bible, and the British ambassador came and read at Easter time. It provided something for the children who had no opportunity of that kind.

Q: It sounds as if you put your experience into full play as ambassador's wife. That must have been fun to do.

SIMMONS: Well, I was inclined to get involved, I didn't want to stay on the side.

Library of Congress

(laughter)

Q: But if we had stayed on the outside all those years, we never would have lived!

SIMMONS: (laughing and speaking emphatically) And you see this was my argument with these girls who don't want to do anything in the embassy! I cannot imagine it, I simply cannot imagine it. To me the whole fun of the experience was being part of the life of the country. If you're trying to withdraw from it all the time, how can you be getting the maximum out of it? I don't understand. So, I most certainly belong to the old school.

Q: These days, everyone is so used to working, having a job. I do really maintain that if women were paid to be the kind of spouse that you and I were, I think they'd do it.

SIMMONS: But why should money be the criterion?

Q: Because unfortunately that's what we measure our success by in our society.

SIMMONS: That's the unfortunate thing.

Q: In one of the closing interviews in our book [based on these interviews], the young wife says that before the 1980 Foreign Service Act she could not work full time because she had three children. On her husband's salary, they almost qualified for free school lunches.

SIMMONS: Oh, well, think of \$15,000 for the Chief of Protocol!

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: John Farr Simmons (deceased)

Library of Congress

Spouse Entered Service:1914Left Service: 1957You Entered Service:1936Left Service:
1957

Status: Widow, Parent of FSO John Farr Simmons, Jr. (deceased)

Posts: 1936-38Washington, DC 1938-41Ottawa, Canada 1941-44Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1944-47San Salvador, El Salvador 1947-50Quito, Ecuador 1950-57Washington, DC (Chief
of Protocol)

Spouse's Position: Political, Chief of Protocol

Place/Date of birth: Denver, Colorado, 1910

Maiden Name: Caroline Huston Thompson

Parents (Name, Profession):

Huston Thompson, Deputy Attorney General, and Chairman, Federal Trade Commission

Schools (Prep, University):

Madeira School

Bryn Mawr College (magna cum laude);Amherst (honorary) MA

Date/Place of Marriage: November 11, 1936

Children:

John Farr (deceased)

Huston T.

Library of Congress

Malcolm M. Simmons

Profession: Community Service (See Who's Who in American Women)

Positions held:At Post: Rio de Janeiro - Chairman, Brazil-American Red Cross; San Salvador - Chairman, Community School for the Blind; Quito - Committee to aid earthquake victims

End of interview