

Interview with Rita M. Wysong

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

RITA M. WYSONG

Interviewed by: Frances M. Caterini

Initial interview date: April 10, 1996

Q: Rita, did you work before you became a Foreign Service wife?

WYSONG: Since wives didn't work in the Foreign Service back in the 40's, I didn't either. However, in 1966 at our last post, Khartoum, Sudan, I was hired by two lawyers from a private foundation in the States. For several months I typed court cases. I believe I had to have permission to do this. When we left Khartoum, I recommended a friend to continue the work I had been doing.

My husband retired, and after we returned to the States, he attended graduate school. I was employed by the Multiple Sclerosis Society and then took a County/State job.

Q: Could you tell me how you and your husband met, and something about your various posts in the Service?

WYSONG: Well I met my husband in Oklahoma at the college in Stillwater. Bob was in the Army, and I was a WAVE in the Navy. Shortly after I was sent to Washington to work in the Department of Communications, he was sent to the University of Minnesota where he studied Swedish. The following year (1944) he was stationed near Washington, where we married.

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We lived in California and then in Panama. In 1946, he was flown to the State Department to take the oral exams for the Foreign Service. We were both pleased to hear that he'd passed the exam (he had previously passed the written exam).

In 1947, we were both sent to Washington, D.C. so he could take the training program at the Foreign Service Institute. There were about five other wives in the group and we often sat in on the sessions.

Q: Then, your first posting was?

WYSONG: Mexico City.

Q: What was your reaction to Mexico City?

WYSONG: Well, I loved it. So did Bob. However, after a while, he got tired of doing mainly visa work and wanted to branch out. I had some say in this since we had a 9-month-old baby girl.

Q: When you transferred later to Merida, Yucatan, what were some of the problems you faced?

WYSONG: A lot more problems than in Mexico city, that's for sure. The food situation in the markets was not good. Fortunately, we'd had a large food order of canned goods sent to supplement our fresh food supply.

Q: And from there you went to Sao Paulo, which was quite an adjustment, I'm sure.

WYSONG: It was a "plum," and was referred to as the "Detroit of Latin America."

Q: What are some of your most vivid memories of Sao Paulo?

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WYSONG: We enjoyed the social life, which included dining at restaurants and attending theaters—not found in M#rida.

The fresh fruits and vegetables were abundant and cheap. I remember dahlias in vivid colors, alarge around as dinner plates.

Q: What was your next post?

WYSONG: We were assigned to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Q: What was your first reaction when you got there?

WYSONG: I could hardly believe my eyes, because it looked like a medieval city. The old wall around the town had just been torn down, and it looked very primitive. The Embassy driver took us to our modern, pre-fab house at the Embassy compound located outside of town. I remember my nephew, who is a professional writer, saying that here was his aunt, a midwestern girl, being sent to the “land of the veils.”

Q: I know that your book had a vivid section on Jeddah social life.

WYSONG: At the first big party we Embassy wives attended, I felt as though we were in a scene out of “Arabian Nights.”

Q: Tell about some of the holidays in Saudi Arabia. Easter, for instance.

WYSONG: We women made little Easter baskets out of coffee cans we had painted and filled with colored eggs.

For Christmas, Santa came to Jeddah by sea. The children were excited to see him being rowed to the shoreline in a little boat. We assumed he must have been very warm in his red suit.

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Q: Could you do shopping in the local markets for trinkets?

WYSONG: Occasionally. We bought copper and brass pots. Later, Bob got a very good buy on some Persian rugs which are still beautiful.

We did a little shopping in the markets for food. Almost everything was imported. We had a large shipment of canned goods from the States. To supplement our food supply, we often went fishing in the Embassy launch. The fish from the Red Sea were excellent.

Q: Tell me about some of the hobbies you enjoyed in Jeddah.

WYSONG: Let's see, actually there weren't too many hobbies. We women met once a week for coffee and also attended teas with the other English-speaking wives.

I don't think we hardly ever got sick while in Jeddah.

Q: Really? Too dry? The germs didn't thrive?

WYSONG: I guess not.

Q: Your children enjoyed swimming? Did they swim in the sea?

WYSONG: Yes, they loved playing in the water at the beach.

I am almost sure some of the Arabs were scandalized when they saw us American women in our bathing suits. Arab men and little boys wore bathing suits, but the women sat on the banks sweltering in the heat. They were completely covered in black from head to toe.

Q: Any other memories you have of your time in Saudi Arabia?

WYSONG: There were the rich and the very poor. Some Saudis were very wealthy, and so were officials of Middle Eastern embassies.

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The very poor — including the nomads — seemed to be resigned to their lot in life. When Jeddah was hit by a locust plague, and every green thing in sight was consumed by the locusts, the poor Arabs watched the sky and ate locusts when they came down. They also liked the insects roasted.

Q: Could you tell us about your next post in Tijuana, Mexico, and how you lived in Chula Vista, California?

WYSONG: Every morning Bob would get up , drive to work and cross the border into Mexico.

Q: Did you have to go to Mexico to do any entertaining or go to social events?

WYSONG: Yes, we did go to social events. And we went to a bull fight once. Actually, we didn't spend much time in Tijuana. It was a wide open town.

Q: Not so pleasant to be in ?

WYSONG: No, it wasn't. I recall one evening when Bob and I were walking down the street, hand in hand, and a little boy came running up to us and said, "Do you want to get married?" (They had marriage mills along the streets). We said, "No, we are already married." Then he asked, "Do you want to get divorced?"

Q: Could you tell us about Bob's work at the consulate?

WYSONG: Some interesting things happened. Once a phoney "America vice consul" set up shop in Ensenada, south of Tijuana on the coast. He fooled everyone including the police, and bought a car and other goods on credit from local merchants. Bob was sent down to inform the Mexican authorities and assure them that the man was not an American consular officer.

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Another time, Bob helped the U.S. Navy find a torpedo lost on the Baja California coast.

Q: Now, let's talk about your assignment to Beirut, Lebanon.

WYSONG: When Bob received word that we would be going to Beirut, he was excited because he was going to be doing something that had wanted to do for ages. An Arabic class was about to begin and we had to be there in about three weeks. My Dad had been living with us for two years and we had to find a place for him to live. We sold our car and some of our furniture. It was quite stressful getting everything done. We took a plane, and were off, arriving in Beirut on time for the beginning classes.

Q: You had how many children at this point?

WYSONG: We had four children. We loved Beirut from the start. The children went to school and learned different languages. We celebrated our American holidays. The highlight for the children was the 4th of July picnic at a nearby beach. Their dad was dressed as a clown and they were very excited when they recognized him.

Q: I want you tell the story of your evacuation because that was a hair-raising experience.

WYSONG: It was June when there were many bombings downtown. Everyone was getting uptight. There was a good deal of fighting among the political rivals in the country. There was talk of evacuation, and we wives really resisted the idea. Some of us were pregnant and didn't know if we could come back.

We made our final decision when the children couldn't go to school anymore. There were blockades in the streets, and they had to stay home. A nun who taught our children at the Italian Girls School had a narrow escape downtown. A bomb went off and she was hurled to the street. Someone stole her purse. She was so frightened, she said she would never go out of the school again.

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Social life was almost nonexistent, although now and then we attended dinner parties in the less dangerous sections of town.

Shortly after that, Bob came home and said he thought we would have to pack up and leave. I remember thinking, "Oh no, I'll ride this out with Bob 'til the bitter end." Since we lived in a rather exclusive part of town, there wasn't a lot of bombing or fighting in that area. We could look out over the balcony and the Mediterranean. So we thought we would be safe.

Bob left the final decision up to me. I finally agreed that it would be too dangerous to stay. I remember packing the trunks with all our clothes. The kids were looking forward to the trip as though it were a big, exciting adventure.

Just before we boarded the plane for Rome the next day, Bob chucked me under the chin and said, "Now, Rita, it's all in how you look at it." I didn't feel very light-hearted about the whole thing and I was frightened. I had four children and was expecting another one. I had just had a miscarriage before we left California.

Q: Where did you stay in Rome?

WYSONG: We stayed at the Villa Eva. It was a little boarding house. They provided us with rooms, bathrooms, and all the meals. The State Department paid for everything.

Q: How long were you there?

WYSONG: We were there four months. In August, Bob got a flight on a military plane and came to see us. Then we went to Trieste where my very good friend lived. She had been asking us to come and visit. She said it was really a shot in the arm for her. Bob went back to Beirut. He wrote and said that was one of the best vacations he could remember. So we really did — we tried to make the best of it.

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Q: Did you go back to Beirut, then?

WYSONG: We went back in October. We had already put the children in school in Rome. I had made arrangements for when I would have the baby in the hospital and all that sort of thing. I had a terrible time getting back. They didn't want to put me on a plane because I was so far pregnant. And in those days they didn't. Finally, however, I was given permission to fly back.

I like to think of our homecoming. Of course, the house had been empty for four months and Bob hired somebody to go over and clean everything. He had roses in all the rooms, and champagne on ice in the fridge. We were very happy.

Q: What were you, seven or eight months pregnant at that point?

WYSONG: There was a problem about my due date. They didn't know when I left Beirut whether I was two or three months, or whether I was just started. One doctor had said November, and one had said December — and the doctor in Rome said January.

Back in Beirut, I kept getting false alarms and Bob would rush me off to the hospital. November; came and then it was December and still no baby. The doctor then told me, "You choose your date." So, I chose the day after Christmas. I had a big party for our daughter's birthday the week before, and the day after Christmas, Bob drove me over the hospital and the baby was induced. And you can't imagine how they induced babies in those days. Do you want to find out?

Q: Yes.

WYSONG: I had to gulp down a big glass of orange juice with a spoonful of castor oil in it, and then I had to wait.

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Finally, I said, "OK." I was placidly reading my book and the time had come. The nurses rushed in and taking one look at me, one said, "You have your babies very quickly, don't you?" I felt like saying, "Quickly? I've been waiting a long time for this child and having false alarms." They said, "Wait until you get into the delivery room." Now, how was I going to wait to get into the delivery room?

Q: What were the nurses, were they French?

WYSONG: I don't remember, but I do remember that it wasn't a very clean hospital. A few days later, I remember that Bob drove up and it was time for us to come home. We had this little bundle in a yellow blanket and all the kids wanted to hold him. He was the little spoiled child.

Of course, the Lebanese maids always spoiled the little baby boys. Isn't that something? The old Arabic custom was that little boys are best, and believe me, I saw it first-hand. In fact, there was one Lebanese woman at the hospital who was having her baby and we heard she had a girl. The husband would not even come to see her because he was so upset that it wasn't a boy.

Q: It's that way in India, too. So how old was your baby when you left Lebanon.

WYSONG: When we left Lebanon, Johnny was going on three.

Q: Did you have any more difficulties with the political situation?

WYSONG: No. In fact, in most places you could hardly tell there had been a war on. We were six flights up in an apartment building, and when Bob came back to the apartment to get it cleaned, he found a spent bullet on his desk. That bullet had come through the window six flights up, ricocheted through the slats of the venetian blind and landed right where Bob always did his studying, so that was about the only memento we had of the war.

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Q: Lucky, actually.

WYSONG: Yes, we certainly were.

Q: So, from there then you went to Washington and then to Khartoum.

WYSONG: That's right.

Q: When you came back to Washington, was it easy to get back into the swing of things in America, or had you found things had changed?

WYSONG: No, it was not easy. And I was so surprised. I thought, well I don't have any status here as a Foreign Service wife. Bob did, but I lost mine. And I was just a housewife in the neighborhood. I thought, "Here I am in a beautiful new, split-level house; I have supermarkets and everything I need. Why do I feel so unhappy?"

At first, I couldn't understand it. I felt terrible that I could be unhappy under those circumstances. But I wonder if people realize that coming back is harder than leaving. It must happen to other people. I'm sure it does. So, we made new friends, explored historic places, visited the museums and art galleries and became re-Americanized.

Now and then, Bob would say that some of our old friends were back in Washington, maybe posted here or passing through on home leave. I remember one woman saying, "Oh, now that we're stationed here, I have to do all the diapers myself."

I guess I had an "attitude" at first. That was really hilarious, considering some of the places I had lived in. But I had had a privileged position as the wife of a Foreign Service Officer. We were here four years, and then Bob was transferred to Khartoum, Sudan. The situation was unsettled there, so Bob was told not to bring his family. After four months, the children were out of school, and we could go over and join him.

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Q: How did the children feel about leaving?

WYSONG: Leaving America? Oh, they thought it was a big lark. They were always great. They thought it was a big adventure. Our oldest daughter stayed here and finished her senior year in high school. She stayed with a family that were friends of ours.

Q: So how did Khartoum look when you got here? Any reactions to Khartoum?

WYSONG: Well, when we got to Khartoum, all we could see and feel was the incredible heat and sand. There was sand everywhere. And the children, the boys especially, ran from room to room in our great big house. Our oldest son, Bobby, was happily finding some lizards to play with.

While writing my book, I asked each of our five children for some input on their memories of Life in the Foreign Service. When Bobby gave his input for my book, he gave me pages and pages of tiny computerized text. He had paragraphs and paragraphs on different things he remembered. And he said, "Mom, I've got about twice this much in my brain that I could give you if you want it." I said, "Bobby, I'm supposed to get this book down from 60,000 words to 40,000. Khartoum is almost all about you and I can't throw any of this stuff you gave me away, because it's so good. It's so well written." He was about 9 years old when we arrived and 11 when we left.

Q: So you had a good time with your family together once again. The political situation was calm there? No problems?

WYSONG: It hadn't been calm. In fact the airport had been closed for a while before we got there. And I think there was a lot of trouble after we left. There were some rather violent street demonstrations while we were there.

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But I was never worried when I drove my car downtown. Actually the main thing I had to worry about when I first got there was to be sure that I drove on the left side of the road. Once, I forgot that very important little requirement, but fortunately nothing happened.

Q: Any memories you have of how you celebrated holidays? There's a particular story I'm trying to remember about a trip.

WYSONG: The safari?

Q: Yes, why don't you tell that one?

WYSONG: It was a safari to Dinder (southern Sudan). We had some friends who were going to Dinder and they asked if we'd like to go along. Michael (our Dinka houseboy — he was a real treasure) said he would do all the cooking. An elderly woman relative of his came in to babysit while we were gone.

We traveled to Dinder on a train. Everything was so dirty in there. I just love good, fresh water, but there was little at the camp. I never did find out where they got their water. I think they had to dig and find little springs or something.

Q: Anybody get sick on that safari?

WYSONG: Some boys got sick that first night. We were there about three days and we ate in a big, covered mess tent. We just had spaghetti, spaghetti, and spaghetti. Finally we said, "Where in the world is the meat?"

One of the guides shot a femalantelope. He had not realized it was a doe, and was desperate to get some meat for all these people. We were spending money like crazy and not getting any antelope to eat.

After he'd shot the doe, he looked off in the woods and saw two little fawns. Without the nursing mother those little fawns would die. He felt terrible. He didn't tell any of this story

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until after we had eaten. For about two days we gorged on this wonderful antelope. He said he couldn't eat it and he was practically in tears when he told us the story.

Q: But any other exciting adventures. Did you ever have any difficult ambassadors' wives to work with?

WYSONG: No, not at any other posts except M#rida. I think I went into that a little bit in the book. The wife of the consul was a step above me, Bob was second man at the consulate. She was from the south, and I think she still thought of herself as a Southern belle. She knew I came from poor beginnings from a big family in the Midwest.

I remember one day at a party when she mentioned in front of guests that I'd gone into the Navy and had become a WAVE. She said, "My mother would have never allowed me to do that." I told her that we were two different generations, and my mother's mother wouldn't have let her join either. Then she added, "Good cradle shows." This was a direct hit at my humble beginnings and it hurt.

I resolved them and there that never, if I were in that position, would I act that way to anyone whose husband was on a lower rung than mine.

When my husband was on a higher rung at another post, I tried to be doubly courteous to wives, because I remembered some miserable times in M#rida. Of course, you do have to put on a mask and play the part, and we both did. This woman did some nice things, too. She wasn't an "old witch" or anything like that.

Q: So, were you sorry to leave the Foreign Service? Would you have liked to continue?

WYSONG: Bob wanted to go back to school and get his Masters and Ph.D. in Linguistics. When we came back here, he enrolled at Georgetown University. At that time I was working at the Department of Social Services in Montgomery County.

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Without my daughter Susan's help, I don't know how I would have ever done it. (Our oldest daughter, Linda, was in college in Michigan.) Susan was here when the other three children came home from school each afternoon.

The change in my life was very hard. Before we left the Service, I had made the mistake of wrapping up my whole identity in the role of a Foreign Service wife. That, to me, was something no one else that I knew, had ever even come close to doing. I thought at the time, that my sisters might think, "Oh Rita, she thinks she's quite important since she is a Foreign Service wife." So there was a big change in status.

I really loved the Foreign Service. But a wife should have an identity of her own. She shouldn't have to rely on her husband's career.

Q: So it wasn't until after you left the Foreign Service that you started your own career.?

WYSONG: Yes. Bob went to school and I worked. It was hard but the work was satisfying for me. After Bob graduated, he also took a job with county government. Both of us continued with our jobs until we reached retirement age.

Q: I next took a journalism course in a local college. I interviewed and wrote about senior citizens in the county for a weekly newspaper column. But the work involved in writing my book was most satisfying of all. I may write another one — possibly about a little boy's adventures in Africa, based on Bobby's experiences.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Robert C. Wysong

Spouse's Position: Retiree. Consular officer, administration, political officer

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Spouse Entered Service:5/47Left Service: 5/67

Posts: 6/47- 4/48Mexico D.F. 4/48 - 5/51Merida, Yucatan, Mex. 5/51 - 1/54Sao Paulo, Brazil 1/54 - 6/55Jeddah, Saudi Arabia 9/55- 9/57Tijuana, Mexico 9/57 - 10/60Beirut, Lebanon 10/60 - 2/64Washington, DC 2/64 - 5/67Khartoum, Sudan

Place/Date of birth: Howard, South DakotaJuly 15, 1923

Maiden Name: Rita Neises

Parents (Name, Profession):

Laurence Neises - worked for a dairy

Margaret Neises - housewife

Schools (Prep, University): I entered WAVES in 1943. Went to Oklahoma A& M for secretarial training. Worked at Navy Dept. of Communications in Washington, DC, 1943-1945.

Profession: Worked for Department of Social Services 15 years. Retired at age 60. Took journalism course at local college. Wrote weekly column on senior citizens for over seven years.

Date/Place of Marriage: St. Patrick's rectory - Catholic Church, Washington, DC, 11/24/44

Children:

Linda - married - lives in Alaska - 3 children

Susan - married - lives in Gaithersburg, Md. - 4 children

Mary - married - lives in N.Y. - 2 children

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Robed L. - married - 2 children

John - married - 2 children

Positions held (Please specify Volunteer or Paid): A. At Post: Paid position - part-time typist (law cases) for a foundation based in the States for several months.

B. In Washington, DC:None - except church work (volunteer)

End of interview