

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR MATTIE R. SHARPLESS

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POSTS

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 13th of April 2010. This is an interview with Ambassador Mattie R. Sharpless. What does the "R" stand for?

SHARPLESS: Raye.

Q: And you go by Mattie?

SHARPLESS: Yes, I go by Mattie and also Mat-T.

Q: Let's start at the beginning, when and where were you born?

SHARPLESS: I was born in Hampstead, North Carolina. That is near Wilmington, down on the southeastern coast line of North Carolina.

Q: When were you born?

SHARPLESS: I was born in July 1943.

Q: Alright. Well let's talk about your family. What about your parents; your father's side, what do you know about them?

SHARPLESS: My father, James E. Sharpless Sr., who is deceased, was from a little town called Maple Hill, which is about 17 to 18 miles from where I was actually born and raised in Edgecombe, NC. My father was one of 13 children and his mother was Cherokee Indian. My grandfather was deceased, but I did get to know my grandmother on my father's side, and some of my aunts and uncles. We had a car and we visited those relatives as often as we could when I was growing up.

Q: Well what do you know sort of about the Indian side?

SHARPLESS: I really know very little or nothing about the Indian side because I only knew my grandmother. Because of my traveling around the world and interest in other

cultures, I have been telling my family that I plan to go to the National Archives to begin researching the history of our family. However, I have not yet gotten around to it. Time gets away; but we really do need to do some more work to pull our father's side of the family together. I continue to remind my sister that we need to hold more family reunions on our father's side, simply to get to know more of our relatives.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

SHARPLESS: There are nine of us; five brothers and three sisters.

Q: In this small town, what was your father doing?

SHARPLESS: My father worked for the local railroad company which ran between Jacksonville and Wilmington, North Carolina. I understand he was doing what is done in railroad work. He was laying piles and this type of work. As I recall, he twisted his hip at one point at work and he eventually began to have a limp from that accident. My father died from bone cancer at the age of 39, when I was 11 years old. My family always wondered if that accident on that railroad could have caused that bone cancer.

Q: That's pretty rough. What about your mother; what do you know about your mother's side?

SHARPLESS: I know my mother's side of the family very well. We live in Hampstead, NC where all of the relatives of my mother's side of the family also live. My mother, Mrs. Lecola Sharpless, who is 89, and my sisters and brothers also still live there. My mother is from a family of nine children. And as it stands now, she is the oldest in the family as her siblings have gradually begun to die. I knew my grandmother and grandfather very well. They died in their 80's and 90's right there in Hampstead, NC.

Q: Well, let's talk about Hampstead. What was Hampstead like as a small child?

SHARPLESS: Hampstead was really a largely rural, farming area when I was growing up. Hampstead is actually our postal address. However, Hampstead is actually about 10 miles from our community of Edgecombe, NC. There were several small communities of Black and White residents. The Black communities on our side of Pender County were Edgecombe, Woodside, Topsail, Brown Town and Harrison Creek. Each community had its individual one-teacher school that taught classes from the first to the sixth grades. The elementary and high school students of these communities traveled by bus, some 34 miles round trip daily, to attend school in Rocky Point, NC.

I think it was back in 1956 or so when an elementary school was constructed in Hampstead, NC. Thus, the students from the first to eighth grades were enrolled at Annandale Elementary School, thereby having a much shorter distant to travel by bus. I was in the eighth grade at that time and was transferred back to Annandale for that year of study. Of course, the high school students continued to be transported to Pender County Training School in Rocky Point, until the schools of Pender County were integrated in 1969. The primary source of income for residents of those areas was pretty

much farm work, house work, or employment at the U.S. Marine Base in Camp Lejeune, NC.

Q: The Marine Corps?

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: Training camp?

SHARPLESS: Many of the adults worked at Camp Lejeune in some technical or manual labor type of job. I would say that the majority who worked at Camp Lejeune worked in the laundry facility or as domestics in the living facilities of the officers of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Q: Before we get to the school, tell me about your life as a small child there. What did you do? Go out and play in the fields? Were you sort of turned loose?

SHARPLESS: As a small child in my community, I went to church, and church, and more church. We had freedom to play all over the neighborhood which was completely safe. We walked throughout the neighborhood as few families had cars. But cars were not needed to move about our community. We walked to school and to church, about 2 miles or so. We had many games, especially soft ball games. And we also had great, great times at the beach. And, as in most small towns in rural areas, we had our clubs, or “juke joints,” in our communities. There was usually a juke box with music, and sodas, peanuts, crackers, etc. were also sold. We would drop a nickel in the juke box to play the latest record. This activity usually took place on Saturday afternoons or so.

Q: Oh yeah, sure, put another nickel in the nickelodeon. (Laughter)

SHARPLESS: We would have our pleasure dancing to whatever was the latest on that jukebox. For most of my young life, we did not have a television. I can recall vividly when one family in the neighborhood purchased the first television. Every one would go over to that person’s residence, particularly on Sunday night, I think, to watch Amos and Andy. And that was our amusement for a movie outing, so to speak.

We lived about three miles from Topsail Island on the ocean. So, we had a lot of entertainment just going down to the beachside. Literally, every Sunday, we went to the beach. The various families and the kids roamed up and down the beachside, for swimming, picnics or just hanging out in the breeze. The adults used the Sunday beach outings for social gathering and to meet visitors from other areas.

Q: Okay, church; what kind of church, Baptist, or?

SHARPLESS: We had a Baptist Church and a Holiness Church in our community, which

still exist today. We also have a Methodist Church in the neighboring community of Woodside. My family's church, the Manhollow Missionary Baptist Church, is a really, really strong anchor within our community. As far back as I can remember, the Manhollow Missionary Baptist Church has historically been the strength and stability of the residents of the community.

Q: What sort of things would you do in the church?

SHAPRLESS: The church served as the spiritual and social network of the community. All types of religious programs were held, especially bible studies, revival services, Sunday school, missionary outreach, choir participation, ushering, Mother and Father's Day programs, Easter programs, Christmas programs, and various activities for young children's involvement in church services. And at times, we used to hold what we called fish fries and events of that nature in order to raise funds for the renovation of the church or other major activities. The Manhollow Missionary Baptist Church is about 150 years old. Each year now, the church holds a "Homecoming Program," which is a very effective fundraising activity.

Q: Where did the preachers come from?

SHARPLESS: Most of the preachers came from Wilmington or around the Wilmington area, which, again, is about 25 miles south of our community. One preacher I can remember far back in my life was Reverend Willie Pugh, who came from Supply, NC, about 30 miles away. At that time, we held church service only twice or so per month. Subsequently, the church continued to grow and church is now held each Sunday. The church also decided to construct a pastor's residence near the church so that the preachers could overnight in the community instead of traveling such long distances for the morning services. Practically all of the ministers of the church also had other sources of employment.

Q: Did you have any sort of particular things you were involved in the music, or the teaching or anything else particularly when you were a child?

SHARPLESS: I sang in choirs and I still sing today to the best of my ability. I did not play any musical instruments or anything of that nature. Learning to play instruments was rather difficult as a child as there were no teachers in the area. However, in high school, we were able to learn to play musical instruments, participate in bands, and take piano lessons. I was an active member of the high school choir and we won many awards in high school choir competitions. I think I probably did a little bit of dancing or something of that nature, but it was usually tied to the school or a church program. I participated in church and school plays and I actually grew up thinking I should have been an actress. Sometimes, even today, I feel as though I should pursue my acting interest; and some of my friends tell me that I do "act" a bit.

Q: Well it's a wonderful attribute. I, as a kid, I grew up in the 1930s and I thought I should really learn tap dancing; you know Fred Astaire and all that; but I think the dance world was saved. I don't have rhythm.

In schools, let's take the elementary schools, this being one teacher in six grades and one teacher, - I had a couple of years in a three teachers, sixth grade, eighth grade environment as a matter of fact, but it must have really put a strain on the teacher; but in a way as a young child you were learning way over your head, weren't you?

SHARPLESS: I would think so; and I would have to say, personally, now that I have become an adult and traveled around the world, and just look at the sophistication of institutions, we just had unique teachers. I mean they were like heroes. My teacher, Ms. Lillie Mae Billingsley, was just dynamic. She taught at my school, Sloop Point, for many years. Today, when you see teachers having difficulty maintaining conduct in the classroom, our teacher not only had to deal with all of us at all the different grade levels, but also at the different levels of education. I don't know if the teachers were trained to deal with the varied levels, or if we were more disciplined at home, which was also the case in school. However, I think that those of us who rose through the grades probably reached back to help the lower grades much more than we realized, you know.

I imagine those sixth graders were helping the first graders learn to read and write, and we ourselves were helping to teach the younger ones. It had to have come out of the schools because the average one of our parents did not have an education much beyond the fourth or fifth grades. I think my mother probably went to the seventh or eighth grade and my grandfather and those of that era also only went to the seventh or eighth grade and learned to read and write as best as they could at that point. So, we were almost in a way being self taught with the guidance of these teachers. But these teachers had to have been gifted extraordinarily to be able to guide us and some of our students came out of grammar school with beautiful penmanship. My sister, Glorious, has a fantastic penmanship and she also studied calligraphy, which just flows. However, my penmanship was not so fortunate.

Q: There's a type of penmanship that they really taught especially with those dipped pens. I assume that particularly up to at least through elementary school, schools were segregated there?

SHARPLESS: All of the schools were indeed segregated. As I said earlier, the schools became integrated in 1969. The schools were segregated and not only that, but each school in each of those individual communities, in my mind, was a little different from each other. None of the schools had inside heating facilities or inside restrooms. All facilities were outside. So we would have to go to school and collect wood in order to make a fire in the school heater. And then we brought whatever lunch we had, and that usually consisted of whatever you might have had for dinner the day before. Or if you were fortunate enough, you might have had money to be able to buy peanut butter and jelly for a sandwich. All my elementary school years, I ate an apple butter sandwich or a bologna sandwich; and to this day, I do not eat those food items. I had my share of those items in my younger years. But that was the consistency of most of the lunches. And then I can recall that the County provided milk for the schools. There was no refrigeration. Thus, the milk would be placed in the water in the ditch to keep it cool until lunch hour.

Most of the maintenance of the elementary school was done by the students, you know. We had the tasks of helping to clean, i.e., sweeping, cleaning chalk boards, burning trash, and collecting wood for the heaters. And after years in that elementary school, we would board the bus to travel to Rocky Point, which was some 17 or 18 miles each way. We would, of course, pass the white school in Hampstead, which was a nice brick building, with entire inside heating and restrooms. We went off wondering why we have to pass this school to go to our school of huts without any facilities.

Our high school, the Pender County Training School, in Rocky Point, consisted of several detached, individual buildings. Each of the buildings had an individual pot belly heater, in which one had to build a fire in order to heat the classroom. When the students transferred to different classes, they always had to go outside to get from one building to another. So in the winter, of course, going from one class to the other meant being chilled throughout the day. Not all classrooms always had adequate heat. Much of the heating situation depended on the diligence of the homeroom teacher.

Q: Well, getting back to elementary school, in school and out of school, was there much contact with white people, or not?

SHARPLESS: You know, in the community, the white people and the Black people managed themselves like ordinary neighbors and they went far, far back. Even my grandfather, Auguster Shepard, who was very entrepreneurial, and owned quite a bit of land in our area, had a long-term relationship with his white neighbors and the business owners. Both white and Black people were all heavily into farming. They all helped each other on and off the farm.

The local grocery store and the auto mechanic type operation were owned by white people. However, a large part of the mechanics work was done by the Black people. When the Black neighbors did not have sufficient money to purchase food and other needed items, credit was provided by the store owner. The kids actually grew up playing with each other throughout the community.

However, the schools and churches were segregated. When the schools became integrated, most of the kids of the neighborhood had little problem in joining each other in classes. Those same students have led to numerous biracial marriages in the area. Although many of the parents did not necessarily approve of the biracial relationships, the young people had grown up together and had a different perspective on life.

Q: Well it's an interesting thing because you're coming from - it's the cities that were often the problem to a certain extent that I gather, but certainly where you were going to school, obviously the parents had to be involved in the school, the children had to be involved in the school to make sure you had heat, it was clean and so there wasn't any time to sort of challenge the system of teaching you know, you just had to get educated.

SHARPLESS: Well, yes, and I think everybody sort of recognized that and did what they had to do. Some parents were more outgoing than others and some parents made a little

more money than others, and I guess they put a bit more money in the pot. You take someone like my mother, who had nine children; well, she didn't have much to put in the pot monetarily speaking. But her many children had many arms, and we were always a family that reached out to help in the community, in church, and with relatives also.

Q: Were there many stories about the days of slavery or the Civil War or you know how it was? I mean were there many, I don't know if you want to call it slavery because we're talking about a much closer time than that?

SHARPLESS: I don't recall too many stories about slavery and the Civil War concerning people around our neighborhood. However, we had quite a few people who served in the military, including my uncles. They spoke of their service in Germany, Japan, and Korea. And there is one gentleman in the neighborhood right now who served in one of the wars, but I don't remember exactly which one. Concerning slavery per se, I know that my grandfather spoke of his parents, who were in enslaved; but I just did not know of their stories personally.

Q: Well in school, what subjects did you particularly like and what ones didn't you like or how were you as a student?

SHARPLESS: You know, I can never say there was a subject I did not like. I always came out of classes sort of above average. I think that was just because of a built in mechanism that I have that you have to do well in whatever you do. Sometimes I am told that I am a perfectionist, too organized, too picky, and too rigid or whatever. But I remember that I had a father who was a very hard worker and was very precise. He liked everything to be done well, on time, and correctly. He wanted everything spotless and if he saw a crooked nail, our job was to go and straighten it out. Without a doubt some of my upbringing came from what I learned from my father, my high school teachers and college professors. But as for the subjects I liked or didn't like, I pretty much liked all of the subjects about the same. Nothing really stood out; but when I was in high school, I became very interested in typing and business classes and moved in that direction in college.

Q: In a small town, was there an equivalent, did you have access to the library to read?

SHARPLESS: No, we had no library in our small town. I guess the only library we really had was in high school when I got to that point. But in our small town, we basically grew up with no newspaper, no radio, until someone could afford to have one; and if they had a radio, they were probably listening more to sports or the music and church programs. We also had no television in the community, until the family I mentioned earlier purchased a TV. So we grew up with access to information in school or whatever materials your parents might have brought home from where they worked or what the minister would bring into the neighborhood. Our community was just that rural and small.

Q: As you were growing up, I suppose for a significant part of the time you couldn't vote, I mean your family couldn't vote; but how was it in North Carolina at that time?

SHARPLESS: Well, I guess probably the older relatives did not vote until more recent years. As many of the elderly could not write, they probably just voted with an "X." But to the best of my memory, the people of my community have been voting for as long as I can remember. However, I imagine my grandparents and even my mother also probably experienced some problems in voting. They probably didn't vote too much unless someone carried them to the voting stations, as there was limited transportation. Because of this situation, today, there is a large outreach effort to get the elderly to the polls to vote. Of course, this effort was initiated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to ensure that every one was able to vote. The NAACP has a strong and active presence in our community today.

Q: When you got to high school, was that a separate high school, was it segregated at that time or not?

SHARPLESS: As noted earlier, after studying for the first six grades in the one-teacher school, I spent two years in elementary school, before entering high school at Pender County Training School in Rocky Point. Yes, the high school was completely segregated. I attended all segregated schools for the first 12 years of my education. I graduated from high school in 1961. Pender County Training School was closed in 1969 when the schools became integrated in Pender County, North Carolina.

Q: How did you find the high school, was the facility fairly limited?

SHARPLESS: As I described earlier, the high school complex consisted of wooden buildings. I think about four or five of the buildings served as different department, i.e., math and sciences, English, business, geography and history, home economics, and agricultural education. We brought in the students from those five different villages I spoke of plus those from Rocky Point. The students, of course, all had educational levels based, I guess, on how they applied themselves or the level of dedication of the teachers.

From our high school, I think the classes of 1958 and 1959, the classes of my cousin, Olith Batts Epps, and my sister, Glorious Sharpless Leaven, were the first classes to actually have students head off to college. Those graduates were role models which led to many more of us going off to college. But the high school overall did not have many students who went off to college because of a lack of guidance, counseling, and financing. However, we had two high school teachers, Mr. Sinclair Anderson, the Agricultural Mechanic teacher, and Mrs. Vernetta Anderson, the Home Economics teacher, as well as the Principal, Mr. John Thomas Daniels, who devoted much interest and attention in reaching out to help the students pursue a higher education. They worked with the parents and the NC State Department of Education to acquire scholarships to go off to college. The parents just did not have the finances to afford college expenses. Once in college, many of us had to secure jobs to help with the education expenses.

Q: Oh, yes. Did the State apparatus extend down to your town or village very much or were you pretty much on your own?

SHARPLESS: I think we were able to get support or assistance from NC State if we knew how to get it. When I was in high school getting ready to go to college, Mr. Daniels, the Principal at my high school, recognized my capabilities and provided guidance to my mother to secure a NC State scholarship for me to go to college. But there were people in the neighborhood who were very involved in civic and other organizations. By participating meetings of the Parents and Teachers' Association and other activities, they also learned of openings and opportunities where they were able to get funds and support for their families.

Q: Well, what sort of activities did you get involved in high school?

SHARPLESS: Oh, I was rather active in high school, as noted earlier. I was in the choir and traveled to participate in concerts and competition. I had the particular job of typing and distributing the weekly menu for the school's cafeteria. I was very active in the Home Economics Department and sewed outfits which entered the competition in the County and State Fairs. I also participated in plays and was a very competitive member of the debating club. As a matter of fact, I was judged by my senior classmates to be the female "Mostly Likely to Succeed." Our high school did not have too many extracurricular activities. However, we did have a basketball team and a band. We did not have too many creative activities or other sports.

Q: Well, what about in high school, did the outside world intrude much as far as news from Washington, or Raleigh or from Europe and all?

SHARPLESS: The students in the high school had more access to news from the outside world through newspapers, information from radios, and information shared by the teachers. We were able to read much information from the newspapers in the library on campus. Other than the newspapers, information from the radios was shared among students. A few families also had televisions and those students might have exchanged information and stories. But the teachers in the schools were a wealth of information which they taught and shared with all levels of all classes. But, in general, access to the outside and foreign world was rather limited for the students of our high school. It was, of course, another world compared to the communications and exchange of information today with internet and cable television, where you can just sit in your living room and go around the world.

Q: Well was there much contact when you got to high school with Camp Lejeune and what was going on there in the military and all?

SHARPLESS: Really, the only contact with Camp Lejeune was by the various adults from the various communities who went there for their various occupations. Periodically, the U.S. marines would travel between Camp Lejeune and Wilmington for social events or other activities. At times, some of them would stop in our communities and we would get to know some of them and/or learn more about the military activities. Other than that, I don't think there was much contact and probably still isn't today, other than going on

and off the base for work.

Q: Well in high school, you say, what did you feel yourself as a young Black woman from a poor neighborhood, did you feel this inhibited you or what were you after?

SHARPLESS: In high school, I did not feel inhibited as a Black woman from a poor neighborhood because I did not know a difference. However, I would say that the teachers, at all levels, were probably the greatest role models for all of us. I can definitely say that was the case for me. I think my senior high school teacher, Miss Lillian Dupree, probably was the one teacher who made the greatest impact on my life, and who set the standards for me. She was a very sophisticated, very professional, highly educated, rigid, upright lady. I sort of visualized that one day I would like to be like Miss Dupree. And so I went off to college to become a teacher and obtained a degree to teach Business Education. But, of course, my career path and life spiraled off into another direction. However, I was greatly inspired by Miss Dupree, her way of teaching, her level of professionalism and how she carried herself as a lady at all times.

Q: Well talk a little about, what do you know about her? I like to pick these up because eventually this will go into the Library of Congress and teachers who inspire I think get if nothing a little recognition.

SHARPLESS: Well, Miss Dupree, who taught English, was the senior class home room teacher. She, along with the other teachers, usually came from smaller towns throughout the State, with different walks of life. Miss Dupree was from the small town of Farmville, NC. Most of the students feared Miss Dupree because of her high level of expectations of the students. She expected each student to come to class having done his or her homework and be prepared to fully participate in class work. If a student was a bit quiet in class, she would call on them directly to ensure that all participated. Her method of reaching out to students made them uncomfortable as many of them were unprepared with their class work.

She was rather rigid and firm, but she also reached out to help the students learn. She was highly respected by all and everyone came into her class on time and conducted themselves in the most appropriate manner. No one came into Miss Dupree's class to clown around. I am so glad I had the opportunity to have studied under her. However, I think she would have also made an excellent college professor.

Like the average teacher of our high school, Miss Dupree was single, and never got married to my knowledge. Many teachers came to our high schools in the beginning of their careers and remained there for many years. Thus, many remained single, though, there were a few teachers who were married.

Miss Dupree was very instrumental in preparing me to head off to college. She exuded such a strong sense of confidence and high self esteem that you felt you could accomplish anything. She was an excellent, excellent English teacher and did a superb job of helping students to improve their penmanship. She was head of our Debating Club and I worked closely with her in preparing my debates for my presentations. I was the lead female debater of my high school, thanks to Miss Dupree. When I went off to college, Miss

Dupree remained for several years. However, she finally retired and moved back to her hometown. She passed several years ago. I can still vividly place myself in her classroom, some 50 years later.

Q: I note that as we're talking I don't detect a strong southern North Carolina accent. Was this a local type of form of speech or did you work on your accent or what?

SHARPLESS: No, I did not work on my accent. However, by traveling abroad and beginning to live abroad in my early 20s, I probably began to speak with a slightly different diction. Also, by studying and learning to speak foreign languages also undoubtedly put a twist on my tongue to speak foreign languages with the proper accent. Many people seem to think I have an accent which could come from the Caribbean Islands. I really don't know why. So far as where I come from, I don't think there is a pronounced North Carolinian accent in our area per se. I cannot hear it. I can sometimes hear specific accents of residents of other parts of North Carolina. But people often tell me that they hear a southern accent in my voice. I say that is fine because I am from the south and proud to be from the south.

Q: Oh, absolutely.

SHARPLESS: And some people get a chip on their shoulder that, oh, they cannot be from the south. Today that is where everybody is going.

Q: And then, what were you, you were going to graduate in 1961, is that right?

SHARPLESS: From high school, yes.

Q: From high school. What were you pointed towards and how did it come out?

SHARPLESS: When I came out of high school, as I said earlier, the principal of the high school, Mr. Daniels, advised my mother about how I could get a scholarship to go to college. That scholarship, of course, was geared toward my becoming a teacher. So I received a NC State scholarship to go to North Carolina College to become a business education teacher. Accepting the scholarship was on the condition that I taught in North Carolina for three years or repay the scholarship.

So when I graduated from college in 1965 with a BS Degree in Business Education, there was a surplus of teachers in North Carolina. As it was difficult to get a job, I, along with several of my college classmates, moved to Washington, DC to work in the Federal Government since we were unable to find teaching positions. However, as soon as I arrived in Washington and was fingerprinted to work in the US Government, I received a call from Dr. Mary F. Suggs, my college adviser, referring me to accept a teaching position in North Carolina. But because I was already in Washington and fingerprinted by the U.S. Government, I said, "Oh My God", I have been fingerprinted by the U.S. Government. I guess they have me now for life. So, I did not attempt to resign from the Government to return to North Carolina for the teaching position, thereby being

compelled to repay the scholarship. That was alright with me since I had come to Washington with 13 of my college classmates and was getting to know a new life. I decided to remain in Washington and to just make the most of my new life and environment.

Now, although I was trained as Business Education teacher, I never did any formal teaching after graduating from college. I think if I had begun teaching, though, I probably would have been teaching throughout my career. I also believe that I would have been an excellent teacher.

Q: You went to North Carolina College?

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: From when to when?

SHARPLESS: I went to North Carolina College in Durham, NC from 1961 to 1965.

Q: What was it like?

SHARPLESS: Going to college was a new and challenging experience in life. I had the perception that since I had gone to a one-teacher elementary school and to a high school that I felt might not have been on par with the other high schools; I wondered whether I would have the capability to get through the college material. But I fully applied myself, worked harder and did quite very well in college. I had the chance to meet so many more people from different backgrounds, from different parts of North Carolina and from other States, and even students from foreign countries through our foreign exchange program. Being away from home and living on and off campus gave me the opportunity to mature, to make decisions, and to be responsible for my own livelihood. Had I not gone to college, I probably would have never shaped my life in the manner in which it evolved.

Q: Was the college sort of broken down, did it have sororities and various other activities going on there?

SHARPLESS: Oh, no, North Carolina College was a very well established Liberal Arts institution. It was probably one of the better Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the country. The college had a very high academic standing, issuing degrees in the sciences, education, business, nursing, and law. It had a renowned choir, a strong drama department, all major Greek letter organizations, and very strong athletic departments, including participants in the Olympics.

I think the enrollment at that time probably was around 1,200 students and again it was a college that had a very well established infrastructure. The campus was really a community village with all of the facilities right on campus. We had some very dedicated professors also who did their best to ensure that the students received the highest level of education at the institution. We have had many graduates, including myself, who have achieved great heights in their paths of life. Then, I think it was probably in the late

1960s, the college became a part of the system of universities under the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina College became North Carolina Central University.

Q: Well, had the civil rights movement started in the southern States, I mean had any of that started when you were in college?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, the civil rights movement activities started during my sophomore year in college.

Q: I was going to say, were you close to that?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. I was a very active participant in the civil rights movement activities on my college campus. As a matter of fact, I was also arrested and taken into jail while we were demonstrating and protesting at restaurants and eating facilities during the sit-in demonstrations. When the four students from Agricultural & Technical College (A&T) refused to move from the counter seats at the Woolworth in Greensboro, North Carolina, similar protests quickly moved to other facilities through out the region.

Greensboro and Durham are just about 40 or 50 miles apart. Thus, once the A&T students occupied those counters, the protests just moved from one college campus to the other. And, so, the students at North Carolina College began demonstrating and protesting at restaurants and food counters, where we all were arrested and put in jail overnight. I think that was probably in 1961-1962, as I recall, when most of those demonstrations in civil rights were taking place on those campuses.

Q: Well let's talk about this phase of your criminal career. (Laughter) I mean this was extremely important. Did was this – I mean when this movement took place, I'm sure an awful lot of the students didn't want to get involved; I mean you know it's dangerous. What drove you to it?

SHARPLESS: I think there was a group of us on campus who were always fighting for the rights of the less privileged, even in various organizations in which we participated. Then, when the civil rights demonstrations began to take place, it was just natural for us to move on into that phase of our conviction. There were some of us who were a bit stronger than others and we were encouraging others to come along. And as you say, there were some who said, "Oh, no I'm not getting involved in this, or my mother or father would kill me." Some of the students called their parents to tell them what they were doing. My mother didn't have a telephone, so I made a decision on my own that I was just going to join and work for the right of justice and equality. So, I just joined my schoolmates and off we went to the protests. And, as I can recall, we protested at the Holiday Inn, one spot for sure, and at Howard Johnson; maybe some students went to other places.

Some of us faced shotguns, while others faced shovels, where people were going to bat us with the shovels. We refused to move, which ultimately led to a massive arrest of all

demonstrators. We were put on buses and taken down to the city jail where we stayed there literally over night. However, we were not processed and were released in the early hours of the morning. The protests laid the foundation that the African-American students on that campus were going to continue demonstrating in Durham until we got access to the eating facilities. So the demonstrations spread throughout the southern and western part of North Carolina and into other States, which ultimately led to the opening of restaurants doors to all citizens.

Q: Did you find support sort of from the religious side? Because one thinks of, you know, the song "We Shall Overcome" and all, all of which have, I mean, was there sort of a religious sustaining factor in your decision and your work and your colleagues?

SHARPLESS: I don't think it was so much of a religious stance, as it was the nature of the person in reaching out to help bring about a change, you know. Most of the people, my schoolmates who went, we didn't think of religion at that particular point. I think, as I said earlier, we were just active in various activities on campus and we had been active in these sort of activities all of our lives, so it was just a natural next step. Religion probably came into play once the demonstrators were there together, and then we brought about some unity and songs like that picked up because of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of course. Most of us were very spiritual and went to church religiously, as I might say, but we grew up that way also, you know.

Q: You mentioned activities on the campus, I would think that you know from what I've seen from sort of the Spike Lee movies about the traditionally black colleges the fraternity-sorority systems are pretty strong and it was in its own way discriminatory; did you get involved with this?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. I became a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority back in 1962. As a matter of fact, I am very involved with my sorority today. I wouldn't say the sororities, the Greek organizations, were discriminatory, per se. I would say they were organizations where those college students who held themselves at a certain standard felt inclined to join those organizations. Most of the time, it was a matter of finances that kept some students one joining the sorority or fraternity, even if one had the interest or scholastic average to do so. We had an initiation fee and a membership fee. And while those fees were relatively small, they were expensive if one didn't have any money to spend on such an organization. I can recall that I borrowed my initiation fee. When I told my mother, she soon sent me the money to repay the amount. I joined the organization because it served as a sisterhood, a support group, reached out to help others, and provided guidance if needed. Not only that, the sorority had a history of members remaining close and sisterly throughout their lives, which is happening to me today.

However, there were certain students who felt they did not have to be a part of a Greek organization to be themselves or to be a part of any organization. But most sororities and fraternities on campus just sort of stood out in their own way. We knew we had to maintain a certain scholastic average to remain in the organization and to live up to the standards of the organization. For example, my particular sorority's motto is Service to All Mankind; and once we join the sorority, we are committing ourselves to serve

mankind to the best of our abilities throughout our lives. And we do just that.

Q: What about the gender issue on the campus? I take it, this is a mixed, I mean, male and female in the schools and this doesn't pertain just to traditionally black but all colleges, where the guys sort of subdue the ladies and take over the leadership; but how did this play at your school at your time?

SHARPLESS: At my college I would say that the sororities and the fraternities probably set the leadership role when it came to gender. Most of the time, now that you mention it and I think about it, the presidents of the student union and these types of organization were probably led by men. I don't know if women just did not run for those positions or they were expected that a male would be the candidate for President of the Student Union or whatever; but I recall women being involved; maybe they had other roles, secretary, treasurer, or whatever. But I think the gender leadership at North Carolina College was pretty much set by the leaders of the Greek organizations. Sometimes, the football players would have leadership roles, but that was because of the dominance they had in dealing with activities on the campus. And at times, the law students took over leadership roles more predominantly than others.

When I think about it, leadership roles varied by gender on our campus, depending on the activity. Student leadership activities were led by both men and women, while leadership in organizations and other extracurricular activities were more likely to be led along gender lines, depending on the activity, such as choirs, athletic activities, etc. We had male and female dormitories which were, of course, led along the gender lines. Male and female seniors, who served as Assistant Resident Managers in the dormitories, also served as counselors and role models to the undergraduates. More than likely, the students serving in these roles were also a member of a sorority or a fraternity.

Q: Well as far as aspirations go for a woman in America in that period, it was still a wife, secretary, a nurse or a teacher, I mean, that's sort of the way it was, I mean was that sort of the ethos of the times?

SHARPLESS: I guess you are about right in general, but particularly when it is viewed from the perspective of African American women. When we think about it, becoming a teacher was probably the most aspired position. For nursing, I did not know too many people interested in nursing, but that was a gender employment at that time. We had a good nursing school at our college. Being a wife would just be there whether you had a profession or not. A secretary and an administrative assistant was the most likely jobs available, depending upon your environment and whether you went some place else to work and whether you were educated to do that. The 13 of us who moved to Washington all had degrees to teach. However, we were placed into secretarial positions within the various U.S. Government agencies which hired us. We were told that we did not have the grades nor scored high enough on the test to be placed into the professional ranks, which I do not believe today. But that was the way it was then.

Q: Well then you came to Washington in 19 - ?

SHARPLESS: 1965.

Q: 1965. Was Washington sort of the place where an upwardly inclined Black college graduate female would sort of head for, as opposed to New York or Miami, or some other place?

SHARPLESS: I think I came to Washington, DC primarily because the U.S. Government had come to the college to interview and recruit us. Most people coming out of college were heading toward New York, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and places of this nature. I don't recall too many people going to the south in that era; but most of them were going to New York or even New Jersey. Then it seemed that in the mid-1960s or early-1970s, more people began moving to the Washington, DC area.

As I said, had I obtained a teaching position in North Carolina, because that was my education and for which I had secured the scholarship, I probably would have remained in North Carolina. Also, I probably would have become a teacher, would have gone to graduate school, as I did later in life, and probably would have taught in a college, if I had just remained in North Carolina. And I probably would have become a wife and a mother with two or three little children, with a lovely home, with a little garden and a little car in the garage. That is probably what would have been my path of life.

Q: Well, we all look at how things work out, you know; there are lots of different paths one can take.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: Did you go with a group up to Washington?

SHARPLESS: Well, as noted earlier, there were 13 of us who moved to Washington because we just accepted the jobs for which we were recruited. And we all eventually landed in Washington at about the same time. Of that 13, I think there are probably about eight of us still in the Washington area; while the others have gone in different ways of their lives. But we have always reunited.

Q: Well what did you do when you came up? Did you know where you were going? Did you have any idea of what sort of job you had? (Laughter)

SHARPLESS: (Laughter)

Q: I mean this is the first time you were in the, I hate to say it, the big city; but I don't think of-

SHARPLESS: But it's true.

Q: - Washington as a big city.

SHARPLESS: It is true. And I recall getting on a Greyhound Bus in Jacksonville, NC, and my mother putting me on the bus and tears coming to my eyes, as I get emotional now, looking at them going away, thinking where in the world am I going? (Laughter)

Q: (laughter)

SHARPLESS: And I boarded the bus and arrived in Washington, DC. There were two other friends from the School of Business in college; and we decided we would live together. But not immediately. We went into the YWCA to live when we first arrived in Washington. And then I recall also that I didn't have much money. After I had registered in the U.S. Government, I then learned I would not get paid until I worked for four weeks. You know you worked the first two weeks and they stashed that away somewhere; and then you worked the next two weeks before you received your salary. .

Well, I did not have any money while living at the YWCA. So, I wrote my mother and asked if she could send me some money until I got paid in two weeks. She sent me one dollar. I thought, well, this will not go very far, but that was all she had. However, at that time, we could buy a hot dog for ten cents, a hamburger for twenty-five cents, and I think a soda cost a nickel. That is the way I managed to feed myself until I received the first check of my salary. I never did use the dollar that my mother sent me. I thought it was so touching, bless her heart. If that was all she had, I should just keep it. And I still have that dollar bill today. I have always used that dollar as my basis of always having a dollar. When I came through that situation, I vowed that I would never depend on anybody else to get anywhere or to feed myself. This is just how life is, you know. And so then being at that YWCA, I began looking for someplace to live. And, of course, Washington, DC was huge, enormous, and expensive. My girlfriends and I started looking for an apartment that we could afford. We soon found that we really could not afford an apartment. Then we began looking at homes where we could rent a room or an apartment. Thus, the three of us found an apartment on the second level of a couple's home in upper Northwest. We had quite a bit of space and the apartment was nice, though a bit away from the center of the city.

It did not take very long for us to get on the landlady's nerves. Apparently, we were making too much noise over her head. She should have known that three young ladies over her head would make noise just walking upstairs and making noises while moving around upstairs. And when we began inviting friends over, especially male friends, it all became just a bit too much for her, especially three young ladies with different sets of friends coming and going in the neighborhood at different times. We quickly decided that we would not live under such restrictions and began to search for another apartment. We found a charming two-bedroom apartment on 15th and Girard Streets, NW that enabled us to be more centrally located.

Q: Before we get to the job, how did the big city hit you?

SHARPLESS: I suppose I really didn't have time for the big city to hit me per se because I think I got out of school one Friday/Saturday and the next Friday/Saturday, I was on the Greyhound bus heading to Washington, DC. The following Monday, I was in the U.S. Department of Agriculture finding my way to the appropriate Personnel Office to get registered for work. I suppose with such short timeframes, I did not have time for the Big City to hit me. It was all in the process of getting settled and adjusted and I moved along quite well. And again because we had a group of several friends and college mates, we had our own built-in social network. We were also getting to know different people, attending various events and functions, and life just rolled along.

Q: Well you really were very fortunate being able to come up with a group. I mean it makes the city seem much more livable and all that.

SHARPLESS: And I may use the term "group." I just say group because all of us came up at the same time and we knew each other. Some of us had relatives in Washington; some had apartments in other parts of the city, and some of us lived in Maryland. It did not matter where we were; we had connections to stay in contact with each other.

Q: Well did you just sort of go into a generalized governmental pool and then they sort of decided where to send you, or how did that work?

SHARPLESS: When we took the examinations, we were somewhat classified for positions. We took the examinations for secretarial/administrative type positions. We were either classified as a typist, clerk typist or clerk stenographer and the lowest grade was a GS-3. And then based on how you scored on that examination, you were recruited by the Government agency. I was employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); several others were recruited by other agencies. I was employed by the Soil Conservation Service, which existed at that time. One was placed into whatever secretarial position that was available in the recruiting agency for the available ranking or what the needs were of the agency. Thus, I was placed as a GS-3 clerk typist in the Soil Conservation Service.

I had always had an interest in traveling abroad. While in college, I met the foreign exchange students who came to North Carolina College and I had an interest in joining the U.S. Peace Corps. I took the Peace Corps examination, passed, was accepted, and placed in Sierra Leone. I then told my mother what I had done. And she said "I don't think you are going into the Peace Corps." She said she needed me to help with the children since I had finished college and since I had used the money we had received from the tobacco she raised to help me go through college, along with the scholarship. I always felt I had to help my mother but I thought I could do it through the Peace Corps. I think at that time all we knew of the Peace Corps was from Bob Hope on TV talking about the Peace Corps. One could work overseas for three years and then they would receive \$1,500 when they returned to the United States at the end of the tour. I told my mother I could give her all that money and start all over again. As I sit here and talk about

it, \$1,500 must have seemed like \$150,000 in that era. But, no, she wasn't buying any of that. So, that is really why I just came up to Washington, DC to work.

It did not take me very long to realize that although I had my BS Degree, had taken the examination, and had been classified as a clerk typist, that there were people there who had just high school diplomas, but were earning higher salaries than I was in the same job classification. So I think I had probably been in the U.S. Department of Agriculture for about good six or seven months when I learned about the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), an agency in which I could travel abroad. Because I thought I had been rated much lower than I should have been, I applied to transfer out of the Soil Conservation Service and into the Foreign Agricultural Service, classified as a GS-4 stenographer.

Shortly thereafter, perhaps nine months to a year, I was off to Geneva, Switzerland as a part of the U.S. Delegation to the Kennedy Round Trade Negotiations. And that was another challenging ordeal in my life's journey.

Q: So you're off to Geneva, when was this?

SHARPLESS: I think, let me see, I came to Washington in 1965 and it must have been in 1966-1967.

Q: Did you get any kind of, before we get to this, about the Foreign Agricultural Service, I mean, was this, what sort of organization did it strike you as being?

SHARPLESS: I think I had more of an interest in really going abroad and being adventurous than an agricultural interest because I was in the secretarial, administrative assistant type of work. You know you can apply that to any field. I was just getting out of the Soil Conservation Service because I did not think I had been placed in a job commensurate with my educational capabilities at that time. When I saw the opportunity to be promoted, to go abroad, and to move out of the Soil Conservation Service, I was pleased to be able to do that. So my reason for going into the Foreign Agricultural Service was basically to travel abroad. I think I was in the Foreign Agricultural Service for a good month or two before I was placed in a French language class. This was a natural since I had studied French in high school and college. So I began the early morning French language classes. I thought, this agency is serious, even more serious than I am about my traveling abroad.

Shortly there afterwards, a secretary was needed to travel to Geneva with the USDA delegation for the Kennedy Round Trade Negotiations and the FAS Assistant Administrator asked me if I would like to go to Geneva as a part of the delegation. When I made this approach to my mother, she wasn't very happy to hear that either. However, she finally relented and I was off on a temporary assignment to Geneva with that delegation and kept moving onward thereafter.

Q: Well, was there, I would have thought that there would be a tremendous competition

to go overseas or maybe, you know, I come from sort of the Foreign Service background; this is where I want to go. I'm kidding, but you know, I mean. I've always wanted to go overseas. But there are an awful lot of people in Washington; and did you find that sort

of the Foreign Agricultural Service is considered kind of the oddballs in the Department of Agriculture early on, I mean when you were there?

SHARPLESS: I suppose when I first began working in the Foreign Agricultural Service, in my mind, I probably did not foresee myself becoming a part of the Agency's Foreign Service and to travel around the globe as a Foreign Service officer. I just saw myself maybe as being a secretary and always being a secretary and maybe going on some assignments here and there as I did with the Kennedy Round Trade Negotiations. But when I went to Geneva as a part of the U.S. Delegation to the Kennedy Round Negotiations at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, I was the only secretary for a group of about six to eight USDA officers. I was also the only secretary there to do all of the work for all of these officers. I found myself, like all of the other members of the delegation, working 10-12 hours a day. Finally the negotiations came to a conclusion, the big questions were what are you going to do next? What is FAS going to do next? Where do you go from here?

We had a Foreign Service secretarial program, such as the one that was in the Department of State, and other U.S. Government agencies. However, FAS had offices at the most developed posts around the globe. So, I had been in Geneva for a year. After that year, my interest was to go back to Washington, DC to just give up foreign assignments in the Foreign Agricultural Service. Although I had adjusted well on that assignment, met many people and found a support group, I wasn't so sure I wanted to travel around the world anymore; but to stay in Washington with my friends and all of us who had come up from the college. During that period, some of my college's friends had become established in their lives. Some had gotten married, moved into their little houses, and had begun families. And there I was out there in left field.

But FAS had advised me that since I had performed so very well in Geneva, I suppose with French and adjusting to the foreign environment, they asked me if would like to go work for the Agricultural Attaché at the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in Paris, France. And I thought Paris, "Oh No." I have to get back to Washington and get with my friends, you know. Then a colleague said "You are crazy, you can always be with your friends in Washington. You should seriously consider this offer because it is a rare assignment to be offered to go to Paris." I then discussed the assignment with my mother and she said "Well I suppose you could; you are already over there." So I came back to Washington and spent three or four months in advanced French training, sharpened my secretarial/administrative skills and was off to Paris as Secretary to Dr. Kenneth E. Ogren, Agricultural Attaché, at the U.S. Mission to OECD.

And while in Paris, I had a second supervisor, Mr. Gordon Fraser, to arrive. At this stage, I had reached a level of doing some of the work for the supervisor. I then had thoughts of taking steps to climb further up the career ladder. I decided it was time to perhaps to go to

graduate school to get a Master's Degree and then begin to climb the career ladder on the professional side. And that is exactly what I did. In 1972, I went on leave without pay, entered the School of Business at North Carolina Central University, at my own expense, and secured a Master's Degree in Business Administration and Economics. FAS wanted to pay for my graduate studies. However, I decided to pay my own expenses so that I could have freedom and flexibility after graduate school. After graduate school, I returned to FAS and began employment in the professional ranks instead of in the secretarial/administrative position classifications.

Q: Well, let's talk about, I mean, the first place, you were in Geneva for the first time and for about how long?

SHARPLESS: I was on a temporary assignment in Geneva for about nine months. As I recall, it probably must have been from October to the spring or to the following summer of 1966, I think.

Q: How were you used?

SHARPLESS: I was serving as the secretary to the USDA Delegation of agricultural officers. As I said earlier, there were about six officers at any one time and it was my job to make sure that all the documents for the negotiations on the trade of agricultural products were prepared, presented, and kept in tip top shape.

Q: Well did you feel, or did anybody sort of say hey she's got potential, because basically you were a secretary, and usually there's somebody somewhere who can sort of say he or she is good for higher things or something. Was this happening at all at that time?

SHARPLESS: Yes, that happened to me on several occasions. At that time, I think I had a supervisor, Howard Worthington, who saw this capability in me. I think, along with Mr. Worthington, the FAS personnel staff back in Washington also saw these capabilities. I think that is why I was asked to go to work in the U.S. Mission to OECD in Paris. I, myself, also felt I had the capabilities; but I had the shortsightedness of always being concerned about always being with my friends rather than focusing on climbing the career ladder, if you want to call it that at that time.

Q: Well I mean, were you, I mean obviously there was a career ladder open for a young woman in the Department of Agriculture at the time which I don't imagine there would have been some years prior.

SHARPLESS: No, it wasn't. Also, had I not looked at myself when I was with the Soil Conservation Service in the Department of Agriculture and decided it was time to move out of there and into the Foreign Agricultural Service, I probably would have never had my career path. But I have always been taught, especially by my professors in high school and college, to set standards higher than those of the norm and to reach out to achieve those standards.

That is one thing I learned from Miss Dupree in high school, you see. And I learned that again from Dr. Mary F. Suggs when I began college. Dr. Suggs was another Miss Dupree in my life journey. Then when I was in graduate school, I learned that lesson again from Dr. Tayel Shehata, who was an Egyptian professor at North Carolina Central University. And those professors all seemed to have had a certain mode and model that seemed to have inspired me to set higher standards and to make the greatest efforts to achieve them. And while climbing my career ladder and working with staff members, I continued to set this level of standards and expected the staff to perform accordingly.

Q: Well it's sort of important these, the people along your way when you take a look back at people who set the standards, schools, what have you. Do have this great influence on a person. Of course, you do it; the point is somebody is giving you sort of the push or the guidance.

Now let's see, let me get this straight, with the Paris thing, you didn't go, you went to graduate school instead? No, you went to Paris.

SHARPLESS: I went to Paris and I went to graduate school after I came out of Paris.

Q: How long were you in Paris?

SHARPLESS: I was in Paris from 1968 to 1972.

Q: That's four year?

SHARPLESS: Yes. I was there for about four and a half years.

Q: Well let's talk, what were you doing in Paris?

SHARPLESS: I was the Secretary to the Agricultural Attaché in the U.S. Delegation to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Our office staff consisted of the Agricultural Attaché, who was from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, an Assistant Agricultural Attaché from the Department of State, and myself as Secretary. There were also officers from the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and, I think, one from the U.S. Department of Labor. But most of the U.S. Delegation consisted of Foreign Service Officers from the Department of State who served as the Political Officer, Economic Officer, Administrative Officer, and a Science Attaché. It was these various officers in the U.S. Delegation to OECD who developed positions and recommendations for U.S. policies in relations to other OECD Member States.

Q: Well, you were there, you served from 1968 was it?

SHARPLESS: Yes, I served there from 1968.

Q: Were you there in time to get into the May, June 1968 in Paris when the students

protested?

SHARPLESS: Yes, those were “The Almost Riots?”

Q: Yeah.

SHARPLESS: Yes I was in the middle of those events also.

Q: Was that kind of, did you find that interesting?

SHARPLESS: As I recall, I was in the Latin Quarter that famous night, right in the streets of the Sorbonne University. As a younger person at that time, I was taken back to the period of the civil rights activities in my life, you know. But that was a very interesting time in France and in my life. It somewhat launched me off into another direction also because it was there that I realized that I was not living up to my capabilities. And that’s when I decided to go back to graduate school and to get out of the secretarial field and get into the professional side, you see.

Q: Well who were some of the people you dealt with, the cultural attaché, State Department people? What were your impressions of these people?

SHARPLESS: As in most economic situations around the world, agriculture always seemed to be the pivoting point when it comes to negotiations; when it comes to trade policy; when it comes to one President shaking another President’s hand, usually it is focused on food security or some related subject. Agriculture is always in the midst of any economic situation. So in OECD, agriculture was just a major component of the work there also. The agricultural policies of the Developed Countries set the stage for world economic stability and food security. Thus, we had a very important role of developing and putting forth the U.S. position on the various issues.

Ambassador Philip H. Trezise was the head of U.S. Delegation to OECD (USOECD) when I arrived in Paris. I recall him being a very stern and firm Ambassador, probably just like many other Ambassadors of that era. The U.S. Delegation was located in a little castle on Rue de la Faisanderie, very near the corner of Avenue Foch in the 16th Arrondissement. We had our own little world over there at the U.S. Delegation and the Office of the Agricultural Attaché, of course, had its own suite. The Agricultural Attaché compiled and reviewed the agricultural policies to put into the components of the Ambassador’s position papers.

While I was at USOECD, I also viewed my work from a professional angle. My supervisor, Dr. Kenneth E. Ogren, was an employee of the Economic Research Service, which is the key economic analytical agency of the Department of Agriculture. The Assistant Agricultural Attaché was a junior economic officer from the State Department. We all worked very closely with the other Delegations to OECD. There was the Agricultural Secretariat, a very important component of OECD, which was headed by Albert Simantov, who was a Greek national. We closely reviewed all of the documents which were, of course, compiled with the various agricultural policies of the Developed Countries. Now, of course, we were located in the middle of France. With France being a

heavily agricultural oriented country, it, of course, had significant input into the entire process, as well as being a member of the European Economic Communities.

It was a very enlightening experience. While I was there, the OECD built a new Annex to its complex and the U.S. Delegation moved into that new facility at the Chateau de la Muette. Moving into the OECD complex enabled us to have more interaction with the organization as a whole and to meet more foreign nationals who worked in the OECD Secretariat. Again, the move and working more closely with foreign nationals, expanded my horizon and opened new visions in my life. I just had an explosion of different people from different walks of life. While in the castle, the U.S. Delegation was somewhat isolated, in our own little world, without too much interaction with other OECD employees. That was a great opportunity and I am so pleased that I had the opportunity to move into the OECD complex and to meet so many new people. I still maintain contact with some people from that era.

Q: Well did you find that you were beginning to move into circles other than being sort of a secretary? I mean getting included in social occasions of people who were, you know, working on a different level, a professional level?

SHARPLESS: Oh, Yes. I found that to be the situation. Also, because we could almost predict what our workload would be, we could arrange time to be away from the office. Work at OECD at that time was geared toward many Committee meetings and Agriculture Committee meetings. We prepared documents which were forwarded to Washington to get input or guidance for future Committee meetings. At times the Secretary of Agriculture or one of the Under Secretaries would come to attend Ministerial level meetings.

Our job was to ensure that we had all of the appropriate input. Many times when my supervisor might have been in a meeting, I was preparing the documentation for an upcoming meeting, or drafting correspondence to the point that I was really doing the drafting for him. And then my drafts had gotten to the point that my supervisor would not even have to make revisions. He merely just had to sign the finished product. I thought, well, I think I can do some of this also instead of just sitting here typing it all up or drafting it up all the time, or receiving dictation here and there. And that is when I decided to expand my brain cells and go to graduate school to get into the professional side of the career ladder.

And so I worked at the USOECD, as I said earlier, for four and one-half years. I had the opportunity during that period to meet a many, many people, to do much traveling across France and Europe and to meet people from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Just working in the OECD complex, I had the opportunity to attend many receptions, work related professional and social events and activities. I also became a part of the OECD travel organization and traveled many places with that organization or with colleagues of the U.S. Delegation.

Q: Did you have much contact with say the French, British, German people?

SHARPLESS: Oh Yes. France, the U.K., Germany and many other European countries were OECD members. Therefore, these countries also had Delegations to OECD. Likewise, many employees of the OECD Secretariat were citizens of these countries, especially French employees, as the organization was headquartered there in Paris. Much of the contact was also related to work of the Agriculture Committee. I also attended various functions of the various Delegations to OECD.

Q: Did, how about social life?

SHARPLESS: Well, I have always been one who organizes groups and events. I had a very active social life because I was one of the few secretaries who spoke French fluently. My French language enabled me to cross culture boundaries more easily and move more easily out of the American community. I was able to communicate with different French speaking people living in Paris. Thus, I had a group of French friends or contacts at OECD and Paris, as well as acquaintances from Francophone Africa, Viet Nam or other French speaking countries. I also had friends and acquaintances from Italy, Belgium and from other European countries. There was also a large network of African-Americans and Americans living in Paris who I got to know quite well, many who were married to Europeans. I had a very active and wholesome social life in Paris.

Q: Well, in part because so many Americans, it is not just American secretaries, but particularly secretaries who were usually single women went to Paris and found themselves very isolated; I mean you know, it's a big Embassy and everyone's busy and they don't have time to form a team as they do in smaller embassies. And the secretaries were often odd girl out.

SHARPLESS: You are so correct. However, it is a part of my nature to reach out to people – you know I probably did it also because I was in a real minority environment. Almost everywhere I went, I was the only African-American and I had to make an effort to be a part of the social network. Otherwise, I really would have been isolated. But I suppose that probably began from my period of working in Geneva from the very beginning. I was the only African-American among the secretaries and staff members and whatever was happening, I just made an extra effort to be a part of the happenings. As a result, it was always: “Where is Mattie? Well, Mattie is organizing something,” you know; and it probably spun off from there.

But Paris, of course, is a very large post. Everyone opens their arms to welcome you for the first three months or so. And for the next three months or so you are wondering where the welcoming arms are? What happened to them? And after that six-month period after arrival, you really have to make an adjustment and develop your own pattern of movement and lifestyle. A large post, as you know, has so many different activities, and different places to go. It is also a post with many families, as you say, secretaries were usually single and we had to develop our own network of friends and acquaintances, as families just sort of associated with each other and their children. .

Q: Okay, you are with our Delegation to OECD as secretary getting ready to go to

graduate school. That was when?

SHARPLESS: That was 1971-7192.

Q: Before we leave Paris, Paris at one time had a rather – over a long period of time, certainly going back to Josephine Baker and all, had a substantial Afro-American community, and I think James Baldwin, was there much of that when you were there and did you touch in on that at all?

SHARPLESS: Oh, Yes. There was a substantial African American community in Paris in two phases; I guess, one could look at it that way. You had the Josephine Bakers, the Richard Wrights, and the James Baldwins of the world who had been there for quite some time. And then there began an influx of younger African-Americans coming to Paris, who were primarily jazz singers, jazz instrumentalists, writers, and a heavy influence of gospel singers. There still is a rather large, closely knit African-American Community in Paris and the surrounding areas. Many are also married to Europeans and have settled in Paris with their families and children.

Q: Were you able, while you were there initially, at that time to plug into that community or was it pretty much French-oriented as so many things connected with the American Government are hard to get into –

SHARPLESS: I was able to plug into the African American Community and into the Franco-American Community in general. As I said earlier, it was my nature to reach out to others. I had the opportunity to meet James Baldwin and some of the many other artists who lived there or who traveled there for concerts or as tourists. But I must say it was a challenge to do so because most of those people were a bit suspicious of U.S. Government employees and wondered about what might be their interest in being an acquaintance. But little by little, I guess, they concluded that I was just merely getting to know every one, moving from one place to the other. And I became a grounded part of the African American community in Paris. I still have many friends there now, to be quite honest.

Q: All right, well you went in 1970, what to grad school?

SHARPLESS: I went to graduate school in 1972.

Q: And you went for what two years?

SHARPLESS: I went to North Carolina Central University and received my Master's in Business Administration and Economics.

Q: How did you find the course?

SHARPLESS: Again, as I said earlier, every time I start out on a mission I felt a little uncomfortable, asking myself if I am able to do it? Do I have the capabilities of doing it? The Foreign Agricultural Service wanted to pay for my graduate studies. However, I did

not want to accept their financial assistance because I wanted my flexibility and freedom to be able to do what I wanted to do after graduate school. So I paid my expenses for graduate school.

I took all my household items and other possessions that I had acquired and stored them in my mother's house. I then launched off on this second mission of my life of going to graduate school. I actually lived in the dormitory, which put me in a different frame of mind from being out in the world, having traveled and lived in Paris. And it's probably the best thing that could have happened to me. This experience enabled me to again meet other people, who were younger people. I had a different mindset of returning to the dormitory from classes to study. It was quite interesting and I graduated with honors. I even had the audacity to take statistics as an elective. So, I did quite well in graduate school.

Q: Did you find yourself almost acting, because you were the ripe old age of twenty-something, as almost the unofficial dorm mother, or not?

SHARPLESS: No, because quite frankly the graduate program in the School of Business at North Carolina Central University at that time was geared pretty heavily toward the adult working environment in the Raleigh-Durham area. Thus, most of the graduate classes were conducted in the evening. I, in turn, had various and sundry activities during the day, and in the evening, I would attend my classes. I would study until midnight or one o'clock in the morning, because I knew I did not have to get up to head off to classes in the mornings.

Q: What were you doing in the daytime?

SHARPLESS: Sometimes I worked with the graduate department of the School of Business. Other times, I would be teaching business classes to the undergraduates, of course. And at times, I worked with activities of the Alpha Kappa Sorority, or just studied to get ready for the next steps in life.

Q: Well as you got into this, were you sort of briefing yourself or getting the knowledge of agricultural affairs? I mean Raleigh, I mean North Carolina is a big agriculture state and all that did you sort of look at agriculture as sort of being your major field?

SHARPLESS: Oh No. I was focusing on national affairs and international trade policies and how they were related to agriculture. Most people think agricultural services are production oriented. But we deal with agricultural trade, marketing and promoting the export of U.S. agricultural products. The U.S. Department of Agriculture covers over 40 some-odd agencies, dealing with agricultural production, soil conservation, animal and plant health, and almost anything else you could name. I was rather focusing on subjects related to the business world, economics, international trade policies and trade agreements. That is why I was chosen to be a member of the U.S. Delegation to the Kennedy Round Trade Negotiations, you see.

Q: Well then about 1971, 1972 you were off to – where did you go?

SHARPLESS: In 1973, I obtained my Master's Degree and although I paid my expenses in order to maintain my flexibility, I didn't quite know how to go about getting a job. I was on leave without pay from the Foreign Agricultural Service. So, I decided that I would return to that agency for a while and then see where I would go from there. So, I packed up my few possessions and retrieved my dust balls from my mother's house and returned to Washington and back into the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS).

The Agricultural Counselor, Mr. Gordon Fraser, with whom I had worked with in Paris a year or two before my departure for graduate school had also been reassigned to Washington. He had strongly encouraged me to attend graduate school. Upon returning to FAS, he requested that I come to his office before reporting to the Office of Personnel. He then took me to the Personnel Division and introduced me, just as if everyone in the Agency did not know me. He then stated that I was going to be working in his Program Area, International Trade Policy. And then I thought and said, "Well, Mr. Fraser, I don't think I am ready to go in International Trade Policy. I need to be in the Personnel Division. He then said, "You will never get anywhere in the Personnel Division. You will go to a certain point and then dead end.

Q: It's true.

SHARPLESS: He said "You can come to work in International Trade Policy as a Program Analyst. Then we will see where it goes from there." So, the Director of the Personnel Division said okay and off I went to complete the paper work to be assigned in the International Trade Policy Program area. I think just by having worked with him in Paris and his having seen my capabilities and my motivation to go back to school and to continue to develop myself, he probably had a little more confidence in me than I had in myself.

So, when I began working in International Trade Policy, I found that some of the colleagues, who had graduated from some of the Ivy League universities and other major universities, had more problems than I had in performing the duties. Much of the work meant applying basic everyday common sense, negotiating with foreign governments, and researching the background of the various trade negotiations, the tariff levels, non-tariff barriers, and similar information. Many colleagues were so driven to excel that some of them were having emotional stresses and problems in just getting established to working in the government.

Q: Well what was your initial job in this area?

SHARPLESS: As I recall, my initial job, and that dates all the way back to 1973, was working in the division that structured the documents and requirements for establishing programs related to the Trade Act of 1973. I had to help develop the procedures and processes to establish certain Agricultural Trade Advisory Committees. These Committees would provide advice from the private sector to the U.S. Government for the agricultural components of the trade negotiations.

Q: How did you find in trade negotiations, let's say soybeans. Was there a soybean producer association and if there was, I mean, the various products, would they weigh in with you, I mean would we bring them into the negotiations?

SHARPLESS: Oh Yes. And there is the American Soybean Association in action today. They would provide advice on the negotiations related to their product coverage.

Q: I would assume so.

SHARPLESS: Yes. There are many agricultural commodity organizations and associations. These are the associations and organizations which I worked to get established under the Trade Act of 1973, where the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would seek private sector advice from the various Committees, according to product covers, for the trade negotiations. Our goal, as you know, is to make sure no foreign government would erect a tariff or non-tariff barrier that would negatively affect U.S. agricultural trade and not in compliance with rules of GATT, at that time, and the World Trade Organization today. And, yes, USDA would seek advice from the commodity associations, producers, processors, and farmers of all major agricultural export commodities. Whether the U.S. Government would seek the advice from these entities or not, they would bring their advice and recommendations to the government anyway and would expect it to be taken into consideration during the trade negotiations.

Q: Well the 1970s was a period that I gather was of particular contention with Japan as far as certainly on textiles, but in other areas also; all sorts of barriers. Did you get involved in the Japanese negotiations?

SHARPLESS: No. I did not get involved at all with Japanese issues or with any of the other Asian countries. I was mostly concerned with European countries. I guess the most famous trade issue that we had was the US-EC chicken war, you know, the chicken/ cognac war.

Q: This was basically Europe trying to keep American chicken products out of Europe where we had a very efficient process and theirs was pretty much a local one, where as we produced better than they did.

SHARPLESS: Yes, that's right. They wanted to keep our lower priced chickens out. They increased the tariffs on our chickens. We, in turn, increased the tariffs on their very expensive, exclusive cognac. It was just a battle going across the ocean for many years.

Q: Yeah, this is known as the chicken war

SHARPLESS: Yes, yes.

Q: Well, you were right in the middle of it.

SHARPLESS: Yes, I was in the beginning of the chicken war. I think it was “The Economist” that had a cover page which pictured a cannon in the shape of a cognac bottle shooting out a chicken (Laughter).

Q: What was your role sort of when you were in Washington? Were you sort of getting statistics? I mean what were you doing?

SHARPLESS: At that time I was the staff person, I was on the staff of, as I recall, Richard Schroeder. And just as with most staff persons, one is assigned to work on certain region of the world. We were required to research and keep abreast of the agricultural trade and policies, and maintain trade statistics of the particular assigned countries. I was in the European area and we worked directly with the staff of the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR).

We would actually examine tariff lines of each of the agricultural trade items of the various countries to create a historical pattern of the trade of those items. We would follow very closely actions the European Parliamentarians were taking to ensure that their governments were not erecting rules or regulations that would negatively affect U.S. agricultural exports. At the same time, the Office of Agricultural Affairs in the various American Embassies, at the U.S. Missions to the European Communities and to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in Geneva, would closely monitor the various issues much more closely. Field staff would forward concerns to headquarters in Washington via air grams. At that time, air grams and other forms of communications were transmitted to Washington via air pouch bag. We would receive and analyze concerns coming in from all over the globe. We would then prepare material for the Secretary of Agriculture and other officials who were representatives or trade negotiating team leaders for USDA. You know, USTR is the head of all U.S. trade negotiating teams. But USDA, State Department, Department of Commerce, and at times, the Labor Department, would be a part of the delegation to cover issues related to their respective areas of work.

Q: Well in that period, I mean, this would have been the Nixon period I guess, wasn't it?

SHARPLESS: Whoever was there in 1973. I don't quite remember. It might have been during the Nixon era. I think it was – I don't know, Orville Freeman was in there back in 1973 in Agriculture but I think it was before Nixon, wasn't it?

Q: Well Orville Freeman I thought was the Secretary under Kennedy.

SHARPLESS: That was 1973.

Q: I know but Kennedy was 1963.

SHARPLESS: Yes, but Orville Freeman – Oh yes, I see what you're saying. He was there when I came into the Department of Agriculture. I would have to go and check who was there in 1972.

Q: Did you find that because there were various Secretaries of State, Secretaries of Agriculture, did they take an active interest in these trade negotiations?

SHARPLESS: To be quite honest I can really probably say 98 percent really had a strong interest in agriculture, agricultural trade, and international affairs. The beauty of our small agency, the Foreign Agricultural Service, is that when as we climbed the career ladder or when we were posted on foreign assignments, or even before departing on foreign assignments, we all had the opportunity to personally meet with the Secretary of Agriculture. Throughout our careers, we would get to know the Secretary, to sit down with him or her and literally communicate on a personal basis. This was very important to those of us who rose through the ranks to become Heads of Office. Yes, most Secretaries of Agriculture and State did give priority attention to the trade negotiations, especially to the component affecting international agricultural trade because the agriculture sector is such an important part of the U.S. economy and of politics.

Q: Well then, how long were you in Washington during this particular time?

SHARPLESS: I returned to Washington after graduate school, in the period of 1972-1973. I was assigned to the U.S. Mission to the European Economic Communities in Brussels in 1977. That was my first assignment when I was making the shift from secretarial/administrative work to the professional ranks. I applied to be assigned as an Assistant Agricultural Attaché. I said that I would go to anywhere in the world except the U.S. Mission to the European Economic Communities (EEC). And, of course, I was assigned to the U.S. Mission to the EEC.

Q: Yeah, well, I mean – (Laughter)

SHARPLESS: (Laughter) I did not want to go the U.S. Mission to the EEC, because it was such a complex, challenging post. You know, one had to read all the EEC regulations in French, digest and analyze them and send the analyses to Washington indicating the impact of the regulations on U.S. policies. However, in 1973, the United Kingdom and Ireland joined the European Economic Communities, and regulations were then required to also be published in English. Prior to that time, one was required to work and translate from French, which meant putting the French/English dictionary, pencil and paper, and much elbow grease in action to get the work done.

Q: And, of course, when you are reading regulations, that's not high school French. I mean that's very technical language. First place, when you came out of graduate school were you given essentially officer status in the Foreign Agricultural Service?

SHARPLESS: Yes, I was placed in the professional ranks upon returning to FAS from graduate school. However, at that time FAS did not operate under the Foreign Service Act. The Foreign Service component of FAS consisted of the Agricultural Attaché

Service. We were ranked and assigned to various posts based on the professional rankings of the GS Schedule. I remember distinctly having been re-employed in FAS in the professional ranks of a GS-9, Program Analyst. I had reached the highest level of the GS schedule for secretaries, that of a GS-7. Some personnel staff thought that I should have been rehired at the GS-7 professional rank. I fought that and several others, especially since I had served my time as a GS-7. I didn't care what it was called; I had served my years working at the GS-7 level. Thus, I returned at the GS-9 level, in the professional series ranging from GS-7, GS-9, GS-11, etc. So, we were ranked on the professional scale of the GS Schedule. Then FAS became a Foreign Affairs Agency under the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

Q: What was the head of our delegation at the European Economic Communities? By this time it wasn't the European Economic Communities, it was the European Communities, was it the common market, the European –

SHARPLESS: It was The European Union.

Q: The European Union?

SHARPLESS: I mean it was the U.S. Mission to the European Communities.

Q: European Community, yeah. Who was the head of it?

SHARPLESS: Who was there when I was assigned there? It was Ambassador Dean Hinton. Yes, it was Ambassador Dean Hinton, a very hard core career ambassador.

Q: Yeah. Well he had quite a reputation for being a real professional.

SHARPLESS: A real tough professional too.

Q: Yeah. How did you find working with him?

SHARPLESS: I found it very challenging. However, I also found it very rewarding because I think Ambassador Hinton and I had some of the same characteristics. He really required top notch work. He played and had fun with you. But when it came down to business, he wanted his business done, done right, and done today and not tomorrow. And I received many compliments from having worked under him. I learned quite a bit working under him and took on many added responsibilities. One of my proudest moments was right there at the U.S. Mission to the European Communities. I learned a lot there. Although I was shaking in my shoes when I went there, I left there wearing spike heels.

Q: Well, I think this, and our talking with you, has characterized you as willing to jump ahead into something that you feel that you are not really fully qualified for at the time, but you can learn and this is really the thing that allows somebody to move up.

How did you find at the European Communities (EC), say some of the major countries,

let's take the French, particularly when you move into agricultural policy, it is a real problem for Americans.

SHARPLESS: Back in the 1970s, late 1970s, when I was at the U.S. Mission to the European Communities, I think the Germans had more of a leadership role in those EC countries at that time. While France had always been a competitor with the United States in international agricultural trade, Germany sort of had the leadership role in moving US/EC relations. I think that was because there was the perception that northern Europe was a big player on the block and southern Europe was just given whatever subsidies or programs they needed to keep them placated while northern Europe was carrying on with the U.S., Japan, and other major players of the world. And then as the EC enlarged, there were more voices in the south. Gradually, the Southern Members States began demanding more attention. I think that is when France began to take on a stronger role. And today, when I look at it, and even when I served in France in the latter years of my career, France has become more of the leader and spokesperson for the European Union.

Q: At the first place, who was the Agricultural Attaché? You were the Assistant Agricultural Attaché.

SHARPLESS: I was at the U.S. Mission to the EC, was one of our largest posts. The Agricultural Attaché was John Montel and Donald Phillips was the senior Assistant Agricultural Attaché. In addition, Lyle Sebranek and I served as junior Assistant Agricultural Attaches. Lyle covered scientific and technical affairs, while I covered commodity and developmental affairs. Don Phillips covered grains and all those type of commodities, while I covered horticultural and tropical products, i.e., fruits and vegetables and other plant and tree products. As you know, there is much competition in horticultural and tropical products in international trade. But the general trade policy programs and most of the issues were dealing with grains and grains products, the monetary system or some horticultural products. California is a major producer of all of those horticultural products which compete with many of the same products produced in the southern European countries. The EC had bilateral relations with Israel who also produced many of the same type of products. We were constantly dealing with the EC trade barriers affecting trade in horticultural and tropical products.

Q: Well, we got involved too, didn't, we, with bananas? Although we don't produce bananas, we have American companies. You know, the old banana republics with the United Fruit and all this and the Europeans have fought long and hard to keep sort of Central American bananas out of Europe and we, I think we produce a better banana, but anyway –

SHARPLESS: Well, yes, that came into play primarily because with the U.S. companies producing those bananas in Central America and exporting them to Europe, those bananas were competing with the bananas the EC was imported from the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries. The EC had a preferential trade agreement with the ACP countries and that was the cause of most of the conflict. But I think, as I recall, when they took their concern to the GATT or the World Trade Organization (WTO), one

of those companies was undercutting the ACP trade. I won't say that subsidization was taking place because I really do not know. I did not follow that particular case that closely, as that was most recently.

But back in our era, during in my time in Brussels, it was pretty much tree nuts and prunes and all of these types of products that were causing us a lot of grief. And again in the industry, the Agricultural Trade Advisory Committee would come in and advise the U.S. Government of what was happening and recommend and/or propose particular action to take to avoid trade disruptions. Sugar was always another major problem. With the U.S. sugar program and sugar being exported to the EC by the ACP, in accordance with their bilateral agreement, there were always disputes about the U.S. subsidized sugar production and its effect on the price of sugar on the world market. And those disputes in sugar production and the trade of sugar on the world market are forever going on.

Q: Well it's a battle, I guess, in different forms that are still being fought today. I mean there will always be the various interests. You know one of the arguments that come out of Europe is well we want to preserve our family farms, when it turns out that most of the family farms are like our family farms. They're big agricultural concerns with maybe a farmer Ted and his 20 acres sitting off on the corner, but they play up farmer Ted rather than the big corporation that is producing most of the stuff.

SHARPLESS: Well, that is true. But you see, U.S. agriculture has become highly mechanized. It is commercialized and I think there is only about 2 percent of the U.S. population which is employed in agriculture. And you will find in Europe, especially in places, such as France, southern France, almost everybody is into farming. You will have rich farmers or you will have large farm areas. But their main goal is to keep those farmers in the rural areas so that they do not have to deal with unemployment issues if those people migrate into the cities.

So France has done a magnificent job of helping to keep their small farms, quote-unquote, in place. They even have a tourism program where you can go and live in a residence, which is called a "Gites de France," on the land of some of these farms, and eat the foods that are prepared by the family as you travel through and enjoy the countryside. Switzerland, for example, although it is not in the European Union, is another country that really keeps its farmers and its small farms in business because that is just their whole tourism, throughout the entire country. And it is beautiful.

Q: Well, did you find you were personally conflicted when seeing that when these European countries are trying to preserve the people on the farms, which makes eminent sense but at the same time this means that it diminishes the American percentage of the market from our large farms and was it difficult for you to support sometimes our programs?

SHARPLESS: No, it was never difficult for me to support our programs because we took an oath of office to serve our country and to follow the policies of our country. Most of the time, the issues that in my time were conflicting concerned a particular commodity,

not on a farm per se. You take foie gras, which is produced by a small farmer somewhere in a particular French territory. However, many people had a problem with foie gras because of how they felt about the way the goose was being fed to produce the product.

Q: Yeah, force feeding.

SHARPLESS: But when foie gras is exported to the United States, it becomes a very expensive, high-value product for the French. And when we have a problem with something and begin to levy a tariff or a higher tariff on a product, such as foie gras, you automatically strike a match because the product is dear to them, their pockets, and to their pride. At the same time, the product is dear to the income of that small farmer in that particular foie gras producing area of France. So, we never had a problem doing what we had to do because we were there to play by the WTO rules, and that's what we were doing.

Q: How did you find the life of Brussels? I mean you have so many missions there; you have NATO, all of the others; I mean it must have been almost a pretty complicated life there dealing with all the various entities?

SHARPLESS: I found it very interesting because one of the particular areas I did cover, although I forgot to mention it earlier, was the inter-liaison relations with other organizations. I was the Liaison Relations Officer with the Missions of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and to a certain extent, Australia and New Zealand and those countries who were not really in the ACP category, but had ties directly to US/EU relations.

During that era, the diplomatic world was really the place to be. Everybody was proud of their country. You had, I won't say peace, but less frictions around the world. There were numerous diplomatic activities being conducted. There were many leaders and dignitaries traveling around the globe caring out their various missions. And the social life in Brussels was really quite demanding.

The United States had three missions in Brussels. Yes, we had the American Embassy, the U.S. Mission of to the European Communities, and the U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Of course, we also had three U.S. Ambassadors in Brussels, one appointed to each mission. However, the Ambassador accredited to the American Embassy and Belgium was always the lead Ambassador when all three Ambassadors were involved in any one diplomatic event or activity at the same time. That is Protocol, you know.

Q: Yes, when you put three ambassadors in a single place, it is true in Geneva too, it gets a little bit, and people get rather touchy.

SHARPLESS: Yes. I remember when, I think it was President Jimmy Carter, who visited Brussels, and all three ambassadors were to meet him at the airport, and the question surfaced, well, who stands where, who shakes his hand first, and all of those types of protocol procedures. But it was all handled properly, of course.

Q: Did you have much interaction with the Belgians?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. I had quite a bit of interaction with the Belgians. We had two offices in Brussels, the Agricultural Attaché at the U.S. Mission to the European Communities, as well as the Agricultural Attaché in the American Embassy covering US/Belgian bilateral relations. The two offices were located just a block or two apart and our work was closely intertwined. Many times, I would be involved in some of the Embassy's activities or working directly with the Belgians, and quite often, the Belgians were in some key positions over at the Commission of the European Communities. That was understandable since the EC, being headquartered in Brussels, would naturally have a larger number of Belgian employees compared to those from other EC Member States.

But I also became acquainted with many Belgians and many of the EU officials just by reaching out to get to know them both officially and socially. I was able to gather much information and up-to-date positions on various issues in my area of work. Some of my colleagues indicated that they had been working in this area for years and were never able to get into Mr. So and So's office and to sit down and have a conversation with him, you know. And I still have friends in Belgium. I have friends everywhere. I return on visits, on ski outings, and stay in touch via Christmas cards and notes, for example.

Q: How did you find the German presence in the European Community at that time?

SHARPLESS: I did not know that many Germans in the EC Commission in Brussels, although they were there, with Germany being an EC Member State. However, as I recall from our various meetings and communications, the Agricultural Attaché's Office in Bonn was also a very demanding office. We had a very large staff at the American Embassy in Bonn and most of the communications affecting US/EC/German related issues transpired between Bonn and Washington. At that time, however, I know there had to have been numerous Germans in various positions because, as you know, the Presidency of the European Communities rotate and just by Germany being a Member State would require adequate staffing in their Missions.

Q: Every six months at that time, things changed now.

SHARPLESS: Oh yes, The Presidency rotated every six months. I am sure we had more interrelations with the Germans when they rotated into the Presidency.

Q: Did you find that our positions we were talking about, you were there from - ?

SHARPLESS: I was at the U.S. Mission to the EC from 1977 to 1979. I was then reassigned to Washington prior to the completion of my tour of duty. Back in Washington, I was assigned as the Leader of the Western European Group in the Trade Policy Program Area. So, I put on another hat and took up a high level of responsibility as Leader of that Group.

Q: While you were in Brussels how you did find the stance of the American policy towards the European Community? Were we confrontational or were we able to work with it in a relational way?

SHARPLESS: To be quite honest, at any one time or another, there would be some trade conflict or dispute. Now it could be agricultural related, or it could be military related or, as I recall, you know we had some issues with NATO. I recall even when I was at USOECD in Paris; the NATO Headquarters were moved out of Paris and up to Brussels. But I think it again depended on the leaders and the relationship they had pretty much with each other and also the Secretary, the cabinet level officers of our government and their relationship with the various ministers in those countries. And as I recall in the Department of Agriculture, we had a rather productive relationship with the various ministers as memory serves me.

Q: I would assume that you would have had relatively frequent visits by whoever was the Secretary of Agriculture to Europe because this is a big part of his or her job.

SHARPLESS: Yes. That is correct. The Secretary, Under Secretary or other high-level officials would visit quite frequently, depending, of course, on the issue and the magnitude of the conflict. They would come, accompanied with large delegations. Our job was to ensure that materials related to all policies of the issue and/or conflict was appropriately and adequately covered in their briefing books. As I recall, the Secretary really traveled quite a bit at that time to attend meetings, conferences and other related activities. However, in later years, it seems as if the Secretary delegated the responsibilities down to the Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary level unless the Secretary's presence was really required to make a significant difference or impact in resolving some high level conflict or dispute.

Q: Well then you came back to Washington in 1979?

SHARPLESS: Yes, that is correct.

Q: And you were in Washington how long?

SHARPLESS: I think I was next posted out again in 1983.

Q: In Washington, you were part of this group dealing with, what was the situation?

SHARPLESS: In Washington, our Program Area was organized on a regional basis. We had an office covering European Affairs. I led the Group covering bilateral issues related to Western Europe, and the other Group covered issues related to Eastern Europe, Russia, and that area. The bulk of my work centered on issues with the Member States of the European Communities. And our job, again, was to follow the agricultural policies of all Western European countries, to prepare briefing material for the Secretary of Agriculture for meetings with visiting Ministers of Agriculture or for the Secretary and USDA Delegations traveling to various countries, for international conferences, or trade

negotiations.

We also prepared USDA position papers for input into U.S. strategy and policies for trade negotiations headed by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. We also drafted USDA positions to be included for input in the briefing books for bilateral issues which were being chaired by the U.S. Department of State, either in Washington or during bilateral discussions when meeting with their counterparts or other dignitaries while traveling around the globe. And, again, the Offices of the Agricultural Attaché in the respective countries would provide the latest positions on every issue which we would wrap into the briefing materials being prepared in Washington.

Q: Well, by this time the Foreign Agricultural Service sort of became a part of the general Foreign Service, where various departments had their own Foreign Service, but all part of the general Foreign Service Act - ?

SHARPLESS: Well, yes. The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) became an official Foreign Affairs Agency when it began operating under the regulations of the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

Q: How did you see that? Did that make sense?

SHARPLESS: It made sense to me, personally, and to many others of my FAS colleagues, because so often other foreign affairs agencies, particularly in the State Department, did not really want to view FAS employees as Foreign Service Officers. In my mind, we had responsibilities that were just as important as or even more important than the Political or the Economic Officer. We had meat on our skeletons when we had issues to deal with. We were not dealing with generalities. We had to handle agricultural issues with fork and hoe, depending on the commodity of concern.

Becoming a part of the Foreign Service Act also gave us a basis to be able to receive the privileges and benefits that all Foreign Service Officers enjoyed, which we were unable to receive until that time. We also had the opportunity to work under the same ranks of our colleagues in other foreign affairs agencies. I do not know whether the Department of Commerce incorporated the Foreign Service Act in 1980, but I think that they did so also. Where the Department of Commerce tended to seek their Congressional representation to get support of its demands, USDA/FAS fought for its rights down on the farm, as we call it, and little-by-little, the Congress included our agency under the Foreign Service Act.

Now I would be totally remiss if I were to sit here and say that everything went well within our Agency after the transition. Gradually, the working relationship between the Foreign Service Officers and the Career Officers and the career staff employees of our Agency began having problems with the Foreign Service side. The career employees began to hold the perception that the Foreign Service Office thought that they were a notch up over them, you know. And for years, we worked to impress upon our Civil Service employees that nothing had changed other than the ranking and the legislation under which the Foreign Service Officers fall. But even today, may Civil Service

employees still hold those feelings and perception.

Q: I know. Well when you try to put several agencies together, it is never a clear marriage, it's like most marriages. I have to say I served on country teams in Greece and Yugoslavia and their Cultural Attaché always had a very powerful position at these meetings because here is someone who spoke, and Korea too, and who all spoke with authority and nothing we recognized better than authority. If you know what you are talking about, it's very important and many of us knew nothing much about agriculture.

SHARPLESS: And in another aspect of our job, we traveled throughout the country. We went any and everywhere you could think of going. Many times we would cut paths and open doors for the Ambassador, doors that the Ambassador did not even know existed, you know. Because the Agricultural Officer was frequently out in the countryside, and people were reaching out to the United States, we would develop very productive programs for the Ambassador. Quite often, these working relationships would help curtail a problem even before it developed, you know.

Q: What about, I realize you were dealing with Western Europe, but all through this period, we are talking about our relations with the Soviet Union as it was at that time, particularly wheat sales were very important. Did you have any view or dealing with the Soviet problem?

SHARPLESS: I did not have any particular dealings with issues related to the Soviet Union per se. But just by working in the Agency and being in the Foreign Service, I was aware of the U.S./Soviet Union bilateral issues. Being a Foreign Service Office, you were expected to keep abreast of the major issues affecting U.S. agricultural trade policies and exports, be it by newspapers or listening to the news. We all were fully aware of the U.S/Russian grains problem. We were expected to be kept up-to-date because at any time you may be called upon to attend any meeting which might also include your area of work and its relationship to the U.S/Russian issue. We had to maintain a broad knowledge base, you know. And, yes, we were fully aware of the U.S. Russian grains deal. I think that occurred back in 1973 also. I don't remember exactly.

Q: Did you, I remember you talked about your specialty trade is something quite different, but did you ever get yourself on a trip to the farming community in the states?

SHARPLESS: Oh Yes. When we are employed into FAS as junior officers, we are entered into agricultural related training programs. After my graduate school in Business Administration and Economics, I was constantly taking agricultural related courses at the USDA Graduate School, or from the University of Maryland. We would also be placed in a Junior Professional program which could ensue from one-three years, prior to being placed on a foreign assignment.

We would also travel across the United States to learn and become familiar with all aspects of U.S. agriculture. That was just one part of our training program. Traveling throughout the country enables you to really gain an appreciation of the diversity of U.S.

agriculture, from whatever is produced and exported from the West Coast, and particularly from California, the Midwest, the South and the Mid-Atlantic regions of the East Coast. We are provided a global exposure of U.S. agriculture before we are assigned abroad so that we are as equipped as possible to carry out our responsibilities in the Office of Agricultural Affairs. And many of us need the training because of some us might have attended Ivy League universities, while others lived in urban area, and a little bit of corn dust behind the ears help all of us before we get on the ship to go abroad.

Q: Well I was with the Senior Seminar, Department of State, and I know we used to take trips and we would get farming in communities and it was a real revelation; most were city boys and we just didn't really know some of the complexities and abilities of people in farming business.

SHARPLESS: And one of my most rewarding experiences occurred when I was in Brussels at the U.S. Mission to the European Communities. We had a major problem with exporting raisins to the European Communities. I think our raisins were competing with the currants imported from Turkey or whatever country it was. The bottom line being, we invited the Director of the Horticultural Division at the Commission of the European Communities to come to the United States, to travel to California to gain an appreciation of the U.S. raisin industry. And I was designated to accompany the Division Director on this trip. And you are really talking about one major agricultural production and its operations. It was just an incredible learning experience to have traveled with the Division Director to explore the inner bowels of the U.S. raisin industry.

We were flown by the President of the Sun Maid Raisin Company over some 30 miles of raisins lying on brown paper in the fields being dried by the sun. Now we are talking about a mass commercial production and operation. When the grapes are harvested, they are just placed in the middle of the rows on brown paper as they are cut from the vines. And they remain there until they are properly sun dried. The EC Division Director was just so utterly shocked at the magnitude of the U.S. raisin industry. He, of course, was comparing the U.S. commercial operations to that of the smaller European farmer operations. That's why I say when you deal with U.S. agriculture, you have a massive operation, such as was demonstrated in the raisin industry. The Division Director really had a different view and appreciation of U.S. agriculture after he returned from that trip. No one was trying to twist his opinion; we were merely acquainting him with the operation of just one of the U.S. agricultural sectors and why international trade was so important to that industry.

Q: Well then, where did you go? What are we talking about 1981 or 1982, you left Washington again?

SHARPLESS: Around 1983, I was posted to -- To be quite honest, during that era, I was assigned to be the Agricultural Attaché to the American Embassy in Brussels to cover Belgium. I was the most qualified for the position; having served at the U.S. Mission to the European Communities, having the French language, and knowing the lay of the land. Yes, that was during the era of the Reagan Administration. The ambassador at the

American Embassy said outright he did not want another female in “his” Mission. And I knew then that he did not only want another female, but he definitely probably did not want a black female assigned to the Embassy.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

SHARPLESS: He said that he had three women heading up offices, and he did not want – No, he had two other females heading up offices and that he did not want a third one in the Embassy. I mean just imagine the blatant discrimination. And he was a – his name slips me; but someone said he wanted to become the ambassador to London and he did not get that post. Thus, he was staying in Belgium. We had a royal battle with my being assigned there.

Q: I'll throw a couple of names at you.

SHARPLESS: I think it was –

Q: Firestone?

SHARPLESS: - A President of some chocolate company.

Q: Price?

SHARPLESS: Yes, Charles Price.

Q: Charles Price.

SHARPLESS: Yes. And so at that point, this was the first time out of all my struggling to climb the ladder that I had to decide: “Does this man really does not want me because I am not qualified? Does he not want me because I am female? Does he not want me because I am African-American? Or does he just not want me, period?” And so FAS went to the battle and my name went all the way up to the Office of the President.

And my mother said, “Why don’t you just leave those people and their mess alone and just stay home? I said, “But mother, you just don’t go so far and someone just come along and tell you, after all your years of working and developing yourself, that you should not be assigned to a post. And then I think the Commerce Department had the same problem. I don’t remember exactly what the other agency was, but it was the State Department; probably had an Economic Officer or a Political Officer or someone was heading up a Section. And, finally, I had to sit back and search my soul to determine what I should do. I received all types of advice from a diversity of friends and colleagues, stressing the discriminatory factor and that I should just fight it to the end. Well, you couldn’t fight any higher than the Office of the President of the United States of America. And finally I decided, one could win the battle and lose the war, what’s the expression?

Q: Yes.

SHARPLESS: I thought even if we fought and received the President's concurrence to be assigned to the American Embassy in Brussels, it would be a miserable tour of duty. In my mind, there would be absolutely nothing I could do to satisfy that ambassador. Was it worth my filing a discrimination complaint? Because whatever you filed was going to trail you and take forever to get resolved. I could be standing in place for 10 years or so going around a pole trying to deal with the situation. One of my colleagues, who was Jewish, felt he had been discriminated in such a manner, and he strongly recommended that I file a suit in the case. I thanked everyone for their advice. However, I had to make a decision of this situation on my own terms.

So after much soul searching, I just made a conscious decision to not fight any further to get assigned as Agricultural Attaché to the American Embassy in Brussels. I told my superiors of my feelings on paper and everywhere else and I got pissed off, excuse the expression, I decided to stay in Washington. I bought myself a condo and some buckets of paint and painted up my new condo. And soon thereafter, a post opening occurred, and I was assigned as the Agricultural Attaché to the American Embassy in Bern, Switzerland. The assignment to Bern was a better posting, a different environment, and an entirely different tracking for my career path.

Q: You probably made the right decision because you know you get into these things and sometimes it has to be done for the principle of the thing, but other times, I mean, it's okay. It's a fight you have to win; but what the hell, you have a life to live and, you know, it's not as though you didn't have other choices.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: Alright, you went to Bern, is that right?

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: In Switzerland, how long were you there?

SHARPLESS: I went to Bern I think it was probably in 1984 or 1985.

Q: And how long?

SHARPLESS: And then in 1987 or 1988, 1987 I think, I was requested to transfer to Rome from Bern because the Agricultural Counselor in Rome was being transferred back to Washington to become the Director of the Livestock Division. And I said, "Well Jesus, I can't seem to be able to stay in one place to finish my tour. When I get to a point of feeling comfortable in my work and the country, enjoying it and meeting people, you keep pulling me out to go someplace else." And I said, "Rome is a huge post. I am just trying to learn how to run a post in Switzerland." I had two Foreign National employees in Switzerland and in Italy; we had an Agricultural Counselor's and an Assistant Agricultural Attaché at the Embassy in Rome and an Agricultural Officer in Milan. I had a staff of nine employees, including the Foreign National employees at the offices in Rome and Milan. With the past of my being uncomfortable going to the U.S. Mission to

the European Community, here I was, again, in these shaky shoes going to an even larger post.

Q: Well let's talk about Bern first.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: What was Bern like as a place to work in our embassy there, before we move to the issues?

SHARPLESS: Bern was sort of unique, just like Switzerland. In the scheme of things, Bern is a very small, but a very focused mission. And with Switzerland being Switzerland, like anything else, you have to adjust to the Swiss way of life, the Swiss environment, the Swiss rules and policies, and whatever. I really enjoyed my tour in Bern. Most people seemed not to understand why I would have enjoyed my tour in Bern. But I think I have some Germanic make-up like the Swiss, you know.

Q: You mean like things should be done this way - ?

SHARPLESS: Yes, and on time and let's get moving and get it done and set it to the side. Switzerland is definitely unique. You find anybody and everything, or anything you want in Switzerland. But you never know it's there until you turn the stone to find it, you know.

Q: Who was our ambassador when you were there?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes, that was Ambassador Lodge.

Q: Who?

SHARPLESS: Ambassador Lodge.

Q: L-o-d-g-e?

SHARPLESS: Yes. Was his first name John? He was unique.

Q: Yeah, John Davis Lodge.

SHARPLESS: Yes, the brother of Henry Cabot.

Q: Yeah.

SHARPLESS: He was unique. He was a political appointee and –

Q: He came from a very prominent family.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: Had he been a senator?

SHARPLESS: I don't recall. I know he was, I think, maybe in his 70s and he had a different outlook on life than the average one of us; definitely from mine, coming from my background.

Q: Did he pay much attention to your type of work?

SHARPLESS: That was my challenge. Even the Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service and the Department's Under Secretary came to Bern once when I said I had difficulty when my Ambassador questioned why I needed to be there. When they left, they said I needed to have an extra star in my crown. But, again, I did the job that I was sent to Bern to do. Switzerland turned out to be one of the most productive assignments I have had, to be quite honest. Even today my colleagues who cover Bern say that when they go there, the Swiss inquire about Agricultural Attaché Mattie Sharpless, you know. Because, again, I traveled throughout the country myself, doing what I had to do, and that was to promote the sales of U.S. agricultural products.

And at that time we knew the policy and know the agricultural policy of the Swiss. They have a system in place where every Swiss should produce a certain amount of food. Each Swiss family should have a certain amount of caloric intake stored in their home to last for three months. The system is in place because of occurrences which took place during the war era. The Swiss determined that they would never get caught again without being able to take care of themselves.

One major aspect of my job was to promote U.S. agricultural products and one of those products, of course, was American wine. U.S. wine being sold and Switzerland producing wine also? Ambassador Lodge said we could not be selling American wine to the Swiss; they have their own wine, what is wrong with you? I said but Mr. Ambassador we have a different variety. And then I made it a point to go to the very upscale, luxury resorts in Switzerland to promote American beef, American wine, and to promote an American menu of food products as a package. These luxury hotels were sites where foreigners would visit and promotions would take place without encroaching on the general Swiss market. I was quite successful in the promotion U.S. food products in that manner.

Not only did we have grains as an issue, rice was also an issue, as you probably know. The Swiss import a certain amount of basic products, i.e., grains, rice, and sugar, every year to keep in storage, but they turn over the products on a programmed basis. They have a policy of obtaining the best quality product at the best price. And at the time, we were working to provide U.S. rice. However, Thailand and other countries were also sources of rice for the Swiss market. However, the Swiss were adamant about the quality of the rice as they wanted neither a tainted product nor a product which would become tainted in a short period of time. Switzerland was not only the hub of international trading, as you know, going through business in Geneva, and/or Zurich, but those

businesses were also the best source of price data and other information that they needed to know about the prices of commodities moving through agricultural trade and the

industry. I was involved in all of this type of work, along with just being in Bern, with Geneva in close proximity when it came to the trade negotiations and business of that nature.

And because Switzerland is so small, the Diplomatic Corps had a special relationship, you know. We all knew each other and we frequently entertained each other in our homes. When you might have had a problem in Australia, the Australian Agricultural Attaché in Switzerland may know just about as much about the issue as our colleagues in Washington, and sometimes maybe more, you know. As a result, I would have the opportunity to gain different points of views although I might have been in a faraway country that was unrelated to whatever might have been the crux of the issue. I could then provide this point of view of information to headquarters in Washington. Yes, I really enjoyed my tour in Switzerland. I think Bern is where I had my greatest accomplishments because I was there alone, cutting a path of my own.

Q: When you were going to these luxury hotels, how would you sell a package of American beef, wine, and other luxury items?

SHARPLESS: We would develop menu promotions. We would work with the hotel manager to develop a menu promotion for a week or during a certain period of the year. The hotel managers would connect with the suppliers of these products and we would develop the menu based on the available products. We would also develop some particular events around the same time period. We would usually choose a week when a special event was being held in the country. We would then invite dignitaries who might be in Europe for the particular event for a ribbon cutting to officially open the menu promotion. Gradually, Ambassador Lodge realized that I was successfully carrying out my duties.

The Swiss newspapers frequently carried a story of one of the promotional activities. I received wide newspaper coverage throughout Switzerland and had become known as Madame Ambassador Sharpless, as they called me, carrying on the agriculture work. And on one occasion, the newspaper had a story of my inspecting the wheat fields with the officials of the Swiss Wheat Association. The ambassador mentioned that I was getting more publicity than he was. I then indicated that press stories in the areas I visited were mostly of local activities. Thus, news of an international nature was gladly printed. The ambassador began to participate more and more in agricultural-related trips and programs. I also began to organize some of the events which included his participation, which turned out to be very good and productive. And we sold much high-quality beef in Switzerland. I think we were also able to begin selling U.S. beef in some supermarkets.

Q: Did you find others, like the French or German Attachés, or business representatives were sort of trying to crowd you out? Did you find yourself sort of in competition with them?

SHARPLESS: No, not really, because at that time, policies with the European countries were so heavily centered in Brussels. It is not so much that way now, but that was the situation then. The French and German Attachés and others were working pretty much on a bilateral basis and not so global, you know. The U.S. had a special spot because, as I recall, we had a special relationship with the military also. Switzerland was also a major commercial hub, especially in Zurich and Geneva, for the grains trade, which was booming all over the place, you know. It was a great time. And then one lived in the Swiss lifestyle, you know. They loved nature. One would take journeys walking and hiking the mountains. On Sundays, the Swiss and their families would spend the day down on the riverside for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And as you got to know the Swiss, you tended to gradually adapt to their lifestyle and would tend to practice the same level of relaxation. I became closely acquainted with my German instructor, Mme. Margaret Giovannini and her family, and still remain in touch with the family today.

Q: Well then you are yanked from this place where you were really feeling at home by the end and off to Rome. You were in Rome from when to when?

SHARPLESS: I think I was in Rome from 1985 to 1988-1989. And before I could finish my post in Rome, my Administrator requested that I come back to Washington to serve as the Deputy Administrator for International Trade Policy.

Q: Alright, well let's take Rome. Who was the ambassador when you arrived there?

SHARPLESS: Ambassador Max Rabb. He was there for a long time, about seven years.

Q: Yeah, Rabb.

SHARPLESS: Ambassador Rabb, yes; Rome was another post.

Q: How did you relate to Ambassador Rabb?

SHARPLESS: I was the Agricultural Counselor. As I said earlier, we had nine employees in Italy. Ambassador Rabb had been there for quite some years, I think about seven. He was closely guarded by the Deputy Chief of Mission and the Economic Counselor. Ambassador Rabb had an agricultural issue which he had been trying to resolve for some years. And that was to get the United States to accept prosciutto ham from Italy. I arrived just as this issue had gotten heightened to the point of being resolved. My predecessor had only been in Rome for a year or so before being reassigned Washington. So I arrived at a post, moving from a staff of two Foreign National employees, to a staff of nine people. This automatically threw challenges in my lap in dealing with human resources of managing the staff in Rome and in Milan.

To add to the challenge, I did not have the time to study Italian before transferring to Rome, except two weeks of early morning classes prior to leaving Bern. So, I did not

have a proficiency of Italian under my belt as I did with French and German prior to landing in Bern. Thus, I immediately enrolled in daily morning Italian classes at the Embassy. And the average Italian official or native did not speak English. In Bern, for example, you could operate in English, French and German. So I had a challenge just getting grounded in Rome. The ambassador's interest and concern was his highest priority, that of exporting prosciutto ham to the United States. I explained to the ambassador that I understood his priority. At the same time, my key responsibility was in monitoring agricultural trade, trade policies, and US Italian bilateral agricultural relations, as it relates to the European Union. Rome is a large embassy, with several U.S. Government agencies covering various interests key to US/Italian sectors. My job, of course, was to promote U.S. agricultural products; to monitor Italian trade policies, to travel throughout the country to gather data for agricultural commodity reports.

A year or so later, or perhaps less than a year, I am called to Washington to attend an Agricultural Counselor conference. Ambassador Rabb requested that I meet with the Secretary of Agriculture while there to determine the status of the legislation that would allow prosciutto ham to be exported to the United States. He also requested that I call him to report on the status, regardless of the hour. And I asked if he were sure and he confirmed yes. Apparently, the legislative process had gone to the point of the regulation being signed. It had gone through the Federal Register process. It also had been revamped for two or three years prior to this time.

When I had the opportunity to discuss the situation with Secretary Richard Lyng, I told him that though I was assigned to Rome to promote U.S. agricultural products, I had been spending some 60 percent of my time trying to determine the status of the regulation which would enable prosciutto to be exported to the United States. I also advised the Secretary that Ambassador Rabb had instructed me to speak with him to determine the status of the legislation and to remind the Secretary that he had promised the Ambassador that he could announce the signing of the legislation when it was completed.

The Secretary said, "Well you go call Max and tell him that the regulation is going to be released today. I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Secretary." He said, "Yes, tell him it is going to be released today. I didn't want to doubt the Secretary or question the validity of his statement. So, I just said Okay, Mr. Secretary, because the ambassador had told me to call him the moment you said it is going to happen. It was about 11 PM or so in Rome and the Ambassador told me to call him at any hour to let him know. Then I asked the Secretary the location of the legislation and what I had to do to get the legislation signed.

He told me to go to So and So's office, I don't quite remember the exact person now, and tell him that the legislation is to be released today. I tell you, Mr. Kennedy, I had never had such a revelation in my life as I experienced that day.

So, when I called Ambassador Rabb to tell him that the Secretary said the legislation would be signed and released today, Ambassador Rabb had doubt and instructed me to call him back when I had the signed legislation in hand. After the call of confirmation, he would then take steps to announce the release. So, I scouted all over the Department of

Agriculture that day getting the proper papers and signatures. That is when I learned that when a piece of legislation is to be signed, the person who is actually signing the legislation has to be physically in the building. One cannot use one of these automatic signature pens to sign the legislation. And the person signing the legislation has to be the highest ranking person present at the time of the signature.

It turns out that the person who would be signing the legislation happened to be the person who initiated the legislation years and years ago while he was posted in Rome. His signature is on that legislation. Not only that, when I was going from office to office advising that the Secretary said that the legislation was going to be released today, these people didn't know me from Adam. They queried, "Who are you? We are not releasing this regulation until the Secretary tells us to so personally, you know. And it was up the scale and down the scale, but I moved every block to get it done. So, I called Ambassador Rabb to tell him that the regulation would be released that day. He still could not believe me. Finally, I convinced him that the regulation had been signed and would be released. From that day to this one, the Ambassador's pride and one of his utmost accomplishment when departing Rome was having opened the U.S. market for the export of Italian prosciutto ham.

Well, it didn't matter that the prosciutto ham was so expensive when it hit the New York market that the average person would not be able to purchase it. But that was one trade blockage right there; one friction, just to give you an example of the type of work we did that make a difference in our jobs. Getting that one issue resolved then just launched me off to happy sailing in my assignment. When I returned to Rome, the ambassador said, "Now, don't you really feel like a queen?" But even before I returned to Rome, he had requested me to ensure that we set up a program to go to Parma so that he could make the announcement of the release of the regulation with the mayor of Parma.

Q: Yeah, that's one of their sources for prosciutto.

SHARPLESS: Yes. And I thought my goodness, now I am over here in the States trying to get back to Rome. But I got in touch with my Assistant Agricultural Attaches in Rome and Milan and we arranged that program while I was en route back to Rome. We secured a small private plane to travel to Parma. Of course, I was one of the few right there with the ambassador, getting off the plane in all of the fanfare of Parma. It was really a fantastic occasion. And I said, "Now, this is what you call diplomacy at work," you know.

Q: Did you get some of that prosciutto with melon?

SHARPLESS: Oh. Yes.

Q: It is just something that my wife and I, I was Consul General at one point in Naples, die for, I mean that's –

SHARPLESS: Yeah.

Q: - so good.

SHARPLESS: But that's Parma ham because, as is said, there is no other ham like the Parma ham. So I went to Parma to see how the ham was produced, why it would be so expensive, and why everyone was dying to get Parma ham into the United States. I then had a much better appreciation of why the Italians really had such great pride for their product. Not only is it cut in a certain manner, it is hung a certain way and a little bit of salt is applied in a certain manner, at about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. They then open certain windows and turn the ham in a certain direction because a certain breeze passes through at about that hour, you know. So the curing process is so precise and delicate. Thus, genuine Parma ham on melon sort of melts in your mouth.

Q: Yeah, oh boy (Laughter). Well, what were some of the other products that were challenging for you? Were there any American products that were a challenge?

SHARPLESS: Ah, yes, and that was American wine. The Italians host a major wine festival every year in Verona. So, I proposed that we put a U.S. pavilion in the Verona wine festival. Secretary Lyng told me that that was like "taking coal to New Castle." I said "Yes, but we have good wines and California was pushing us to promote their wines. So, I decided that we were going to put in a U.S. pavilion, which I thought would go quite well. We established the U.S. pavilion in our red, white, and blue, with participating vintners from several states. We had Congressman Kiki de la Garza, who was Chair of the House Agriculture Committee. He had been Chair of the Agriculture Committee for many, many years. He was –

Q: In Congress, yeah.

SHARPLESS: - from Texas and he had much Texas wine coming to the U.S. pavilion. We also had Congressman Charlie Stenholm, who was very close to Agriculture, Secretary Lyng, and FAS Administrator, Tom Kay. We had a fantastic U.S. wine pavilion in Verona with those Congressmen and the high-level USDA delegation. Other wine producing countries did the same thing, of course. But it was amazing to see the reaction to the American wine products, although you know that you are in the door of the Italian wine market. And little by little, American wine began to be sold in the Italian market. We took great pride in that U.S. wine pavilion and how successful it was.

We had many different programs going on in Italy in general. Italy also produces many horticultural products. The Italian products compete with U.S. products on the international trade market, but not as widely as the French agricultural products. Most US/EU trade issues usually resulted from a U.S./Italian trade friction. And the U.S. exports quite a bit of grains, i.e., wheat, to Italy to blend with their grains for the production of their breads.

Q: And for their pasta?

SHARPLESS: - and for their pasta.

Q: They have to have a hard grain, I think it is?

SHARPLESS: Yes, yes. But then you have the trade associations who visit frequently to meet with their counterparts. This makes my job a little easier.

Q: How did you find the Italian business community?

SHARPLESS: Italy was one of my most challenging posts. I don't know if it were - I cannot say it was because I didn't have a total command of Italian, because with my knowledge of French and taking Italian lessons every morning, the Italian was coming along. But I think the Italians just have a different way of doing business than the northern part of Europe that I was accustomed to.

We had a closer working relationship with the Italian Government officials who seem to be the spokespersons for the Italian agricultural industry more than the Italian private sector. But we did do quite a bit of traveling throughout Italy and the Italian agricultural industry was one of the most generous with whom I had ever worked. They religiously invited the Diplomatic Corps; I am speaking of the Agriculture Diplomatic Corps, to different parts of their country, all the time providing us with their food products. I mean there were huge luncheons, dinners, and whatever other items they were providing, including baskets of the products produced in the region.

When one traveled on an Italian field trip, you came back with enough locally produced food items to feed your entire staff for a whole week, particularly with fruits, veggies or whatever. The Italian Ministry of Agriculture officials really worked to cultivate a meaningful relationship with their foreign dignitaries and I enjoyed it. But Italy was just a difficult post for me because the traffic in Rome was just unbelievable, without major public transportation, except the buses. Plus, the pick pocketing and petty theft was just unbelievable. You just never felt comfortable in Rome.

Q: Did you get caught up in all the strikes too?

SHARPLESS: Airline strikes, yes. They seemed to come periodically throughout the year.

Q: These strikes are just sort of an inconvenience, maybe just a six hour strike or something. But just when you wanted to go somewhere or do something, you find the bank was shut or –

SHARPLESS: And the government would fall every other year; but they would pick up and go on again; just as you would never know that they were falling.

Q: Yeah. Well then you –

SHARPLESS: They had a saying in Rome that when you didn't have any government in place, it worked just as well.

Q: Yeah.

SHARPLESS: They are some proud, sophisticated people, the Italians.

Q: Well did you have much contact with the Ministry of Agriculture?

SHARPLESS: Of course, very, very much so. As I said earlier, I think the diplomatic relations with the Italian government officials and the Ministry of Agriculture was much stronger than with the private sector. I think that was the case in general with the various sections of the American Embassy in Rome.

Q: Were we competitive with olive oil? I mean that's, of course, one of their big products.

SHARPLESS: No, we were not competitive with olive oil. As I mentioned earlier, the Italians always felt they were the underdogs in U.S. /EU relations. Don't ask me why, but whenever tariffs were being increased on some products to retaliate against the European Community, the retaliation seemed to always fall on Italian products. So that is why the Italians were very protective of their products exported to the United States. And most of the Italian trade consisted of niche market products. I think the Italians really had their antennae up at all times to ensure that they were not given the short end of the stick. When it came to trade with France, and all of the bilateral consultations were taking place, the French products tended not to be touched. The Italians produced an excellent quality niche market product, especially when it came to the pastas and oils. And they have a fantastic restaurant industry, as you know. It is really to die for, to dine in one of the finer Italian restaurants.

Q: Oh yeah, they enjoy cooking and they really do, it's superb over there.

SHARPLESS: Yes!

Q: When you got called away again to be in, what was the position in trade?

SHARPLESS: To become the Deputy Administrator for International Trade Policy (ITP). That is when I returned to Washington back in 1989 to assume that responsibility.

Q: This was a promotion?

SHARPLESS: Yes, each time I was transferred from one post or position to the other, I was always promoted up the career ladder. It was like starting all over again to get myself reestablished.

Q: You were there from when to when?

SHARPLESS: I served as Deputy Administrator for ITP from 1989 to 1990 I think, or

1988 to 1989, it was about a year or a year and a half. Then, the Administrator asked me to become the Deputy Administrator for Foreign Agricultural Affairs, in essence the Director General of FAS' Foreign Service, another bump up and another whole story.

Q: Well, let's talk about the trade policy. What were the issues you dealt with?

SHARPLESS: Well, FAS had Program Areas covering the analysis of all commodities, especially grains and oilseeds, international trade policy, export credits and food security, and the Program Area which managed the Foreign Service posts. The responsibility of the International Trade Policy (ITP) Program Area was to develop USDA's position on all global international trade issues and/or negotiations which were handled by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative or the Department of State. Each Program Area was headed by an Assistant Administrator and a Deputy Assistant Administrator and various Divisions. I was one of the Deputy Assistant Administrators handling issues affecting Western Europe, North and South America and Africa, while the second Deputy Assistant Administrator handled issues related to Asia and Eastern European countries. My job was to manage the staff and develop position papers for the countries which I covered. So, the trade policy staff members represented USDA on the Interagency Trade Policy Committees during bilateral and international trade consultations and negotiations. We had responsibilities for monitoring trade policies around the globe that included Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and central Europe, Asia and North and South America.

Q: Well this was a time of great change particularly with Eastern Europe which had just come free, you know, and the Soviet Union was no more or was just becoming no more –

SHARPLESS: Yes. Becoming no more.

Q: Did this occupy considerable amount of your time as we tried to adjust to the changes there?

SHARPLESS: It didn't occupy a considerable amount of my time because while we were adjusting to the changes, I think, for Eastern Europe, we were providing input on whatever issue we had to deal with for a particularly commodity, per se, more than for the overall general trade policy. When we had to deal with a major problem, be it with grains or any other commodity, including chicken, the staff would provide USDA's position for input into the overall U.S. Government position. We also had a major problem with Russia, with grains and chicken, I think. But most of the time, the issue concerned the negotiations of tariff or non-tariff barriers, or some type of import or export tax affecting some commodity in which the U.S. had a substantial share of the world export market of the commodity in question. To deal with the specific issue, bilateral consultations and trade negotiating delegations included representatives of all concerned US Government agencies to resolve the issue to maintain U.S. export trade.

Q: Putting out fires!

SHARPLESS: Yeah, yeah. And our International Trade Policy staff was very involved

with working with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which has subsequently become the World Trade Organization. We also monitored very closely the agricultural policies of the OECD countries. And, of course, there were always commodity trade fires. When they blazed up, we would have to help put the trade fires out. We were assessing the potential negative trade policy effects, you know, and ensuring that no trade barriers would be put in places which were against the international trading rules.

Q: Well, then suddenly you find yourself the Director General of FAS' Foreign Service, which I assume this is as with the Director General of the State Department's Foreign Service. This is the major position of seeing that the Foreign Service is run correctly and all that.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: You did that for how long?

SHARPLESS: Six years.

Q: Six years?

SHARPLESS: Yes. The longest serving person in that position at that time.

Q: My God. Well, let's talk about it. How big was the Foreign Agricultural Service's Foreign Service at that time?

SHARPLESS: As I recall, we had about 75 posts around the world. We had about 120 American staff members, officers and secretaries. We also had some 700 or so Foreign Service National employees in our offices around the globe. Those are small numbers in the sense of the size of the State Department. FAS also had some 500-600 Civil Service employees in Washington throughout the various Program Areas. We had another USDA agency, the Organization of International Cooperation and Development (OICD), that later merged into FAS, thereby giving FAS over some 1,000 employees overall.

The Foreign Service operations were the core of the Agency as far as matters related to foreign relations were concerned. FAS assigned officers to posts for a 4 year tour in general. However, one could return and remain in Washington for up to 10 years or so before being reassigned to another post. However, when the Agency began operating under the Foreign Service Act of 1980, the regulations and the assignment process were applied in accordance with the Foreign Service Act. The Agency had been operating under the Foreign Service Act for about eight years or so when I became the Assistant Administrator for Foreign Agricultural Affairs. Thus, the Agency had become somewhat adjusted to the new rules of the game about that time. It was a very interesting, very challenging, and a very demanding job. Everyone wanted to get promoted; everyone wanted to get posted to post x-y-z; and everyone thought that they had been treated unfairly. (Laughter)

Q: Well, was there sort of a Director General Foreign Service mafia? I mean in other words, did you get together with the State Department Director General and maybe Commerce or Treasury, I mean was there sort of a consultation or were you each sort of at your level acting on your own?

SHARPLESS: We acted on our own so far as the as the Foreign Service of the Foreign Agricultural Service was concerned. I think each Foreign Affairs agency operated in the same manner. But each Agency incorporated its own Foreign Service operations in accordance with the regulations of the Foreign Service Act of 1980. As I recall, the Director General of the State Department's Foreign Service at that time was Ambassador Edward Perkins, who chaired the Foreign Service Board. He would conduct meetings perhaps every quarter with all of the Foreign Service agencies. We would discuss various issues that affected our respective agencies and explore how we could best resolve them. At the same time, we would make a great effort to work in a more coordinated manner. This was important because the working relationship in Washington also transferred to working relations at the posts around the globe.

At the same time, employees of the various Foreign Affairs Agencies keenly monitored the application of benefits and/or privileges in the respective agencies. The officers and staff at the posts would notice whether some employees of certain agencies were being treated differently. The question was why there was different treatment since all agencies were operating under the Foreign Service Act. And why can't we have the same privilege that State Department or the Commerce Department officers are getting? Why is he getting this and I'm not getting that, you know. I say most of the time when one follows the Foreign Service Act, you followed it. Some agencies were more outspoken than others and sought congressional assistance at times. However, we felt we should resolve our problems within our Agency, and that is what we did.

Q: Did you find that the State Department was a good landlord or not because essentially they had the embassies where you were located?

SHARPLESS: Our Agricultural Attaché Service dates back many, many years, you know. We were established back in the 1930's, and later abolished and assigned under the State Department. Then Congress passed legislation in 1953 which re-established the Foreign Agricultural Service. So there are some parts of FAS that felt that State Department had always been envious of the Foreign Agricultural Service once we were re-established under our own jurisdiction. There are other parts who say that we should really be a part of the State Department anyway under its economic cone, you know.

FAS has always had very strong congressional support of our being a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture because one of our primary responsibilities is to promote the export of U.S. agricultural products. Therefore, you are promoting what the farmer, their vote, had to put on the truck to take to the market. State Department, I think, had a certain amount of respect for us from that perspective and State Department also knew that we could help them just as much as we could harm them. All of the embassies in which I

have worked, and, again, I worked in Western Europe, I learned later in life, that being in Western Europe, one got a different type of operation than you have in some other parts of the world. We always had nice office space and, of course, that came about with whoever was the strongest person when it was time to relocate or get space designation. But until we began operating with, what is the regulation where all agencies put their funds together -- pool their funds to manage the embassies?

Q: Basically a joint administrative program.

SHARPLESS: Yes, the ICASS (International Cooperative Administrative Support Services). I think, until ICASS was established, FAS at times felt that we were being treated pretty fairly until it seemed we were then being charged for each pencil we sharpened (Laughter). But that, too, was a challenging job because at almost every post where I served, my colleagues, sometimes my superiors, and sometimes my counterparts from other governments, looked at me as if to say, well you are too young to be in this position, or you look too young or you don't look as if you are going to know what you're talking about or doing.

I really had that impression when I went to the U.S. Mission to the EU in Brussels. I was told that the EU officers weren't going to pay any attention to me; that I was too young to be dealing with those men in the European Communities. I had the same impression in Bern. But as the Foreign Service Officer in the job I said, "Well, here I am, here I am. Now supervisor of some of our top notch officers with whom I worked for many years were now saying that I cannot be their supervisor. So that a challenge I had to deal with.

Q: Well one of the jobs, I assume at the Agriculture Services, is the same thing, is dealing with personnel and this can, I mean, when you are dealing with people, you are dealing with probably the most volatile of products.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: You know I mean family break-ups, alcoholism, this is a period of people I can't think of the name of it now, but, you know, inappropriate behavior. I mean people were very sensitive on all sorts of things; plus the very fact, say you did have people with medical problems and alcohol problems and family problems; I mean this must have consumed a lot of your time.

SHARPLESS: Yes, it did. Because I am single, I think I probably dedicated more time to my job than the average person. I didn't necessarily work all weekends, but I did work long hours and I did work weekends sometime. I always took work home and that consumed a lot of time. I was the type of Director General who was accessible to the staff members no matter where they were in the world. If they needed me, they could call me and discuss whatever issues they had. And I'm glad I had that position because it helped some people who were having some of these problems in different parts of the globe, including home leave and all these types of situations.

But most of the problems dealt with personnel wanting to be promoted or filing discrimination cases of why they weren't promoted, or, I won't say discrimination, but filing complaints, or feeling that they were unfairly treated when they didn't get posted where they wanted to be or didn't get a follow-on post or something like that, you know. Under the Foreign Service Act, as you know, it is very competitive, either you compete with your colleagues and go up the ladder according to results of the promotion panel or you start moving laterally. If you didn't get promoted somewhere pretty soon, you would be reaching the Time-In-Class (TIC) level and get TICed out, you know. That's what was a major concern for a lot our employees who really weren't accustomed to being under the Foreign Service Act.

Q: This is, of course, the difference between the Civil Service; where if you have a Civil Service job that is your job almost unless because of pure incompetence or something and you can sort of sit there. But in the Foreign Service, you are supposed to (1) move around and (2) you know if you are not getting good grades, you can be kicked out or retire.

SHARPLESS: That's right. We had a policy knowing that we joined the Foreign Service to serve around the world. We had a policy whereby you could not remain in Washington for more than eight years. If you were needed in Washington for a particular job or skill base, then the Secretary of Agriculture would have to grant a waiver which would authorize you to remain in Washington beyond the eight-year limitation. And I was reaching that point. So, I said, "Well, if I am in the position of Director General, and I am hitting the eight year point. I then decided that I would retire or decide whether I wanted to continue and apply for an onward assignment. Thus, I decided to apply to be assigned to Paris and that's where I was posted.

Q: Did you have an Inspector General of your Foreign Service, or not?

SHARPLESS: We had the Office of the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Agriculture which also covered the Foreign Agricultural Service. We also had an Assistant Administrator for Administration within FAS and that office handled the administrative aspects of the Agency, along with the Director General. When we had a problem or foresaw a problem, or was informed of a problem by the Department's Inspector General, we would work together to look into the issue and the Office of the Inspector General would then take steps to investigate the situation. So, yes indeed, we used the Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector General, when necessary.

Q: Did the State Department inspection corps, which is quite extensive, did they feed you information of problems and all?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. When the State Department inspection teams were making plans to inspect posts, they would come to the Department of Agriculture to meet with us for briefings and to become aware of any issues that were known to us. After being advised of the post they going to inspect, we would provide them with any information we may

have on any issue-related situations. Upon their return to Washington, they would also visit the Agency to provide us feedback and their findings. And with FAS being such a small agency, it didn't take long for someone to know if something wasn't going quite right in the Agency, you know.

While I was serving as our Director General, I had the opportunity to travel around the world quite a bit. At that time, we would conduct conferences in different geographical regions for the staff members of the particular countries of the region. We would also hold these conferences around travel of the Secretary of Agriculture and other cabinet-level officers and well as congressional representatives. Those days are over, but it was really a learning experience to arrange all these conferences to bring the field staff and the high-level Washington officials together.

Q: Would you bring along agricultural representatives of trade organizations?

SHARPLESS: Oh Yes. Sometimes the representatives of the farm organizations and the trade associations would attend the conferences. We would have our Market Development Cooperators also attend the conferences to bring us up-to-speed of what was happening in their respective commodity sectors.

Q: At that time the World Trade Organization was really developing as a major factor, wasn't it?

SHARPLESS: Yes, you are correct.

Q: How did you view, or your Department view, developments in the world? I mean were they based positive as far as you know, the World Trade Organization, or as far as developing a good market for American goods abroad and agricultural goods?

SHARPLESS: Well, when the World Trade Organization (WTO) succeeded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), everyone seemed to have become more vocal and almost any time that there was an impasse, it was dealing with agriculture. The Department of Agriculture would have numerous large delegations shuttling back and forth to Geneva to deal with trade disputes. We then expanded our staff in Geneva because there was just a substantial increase of demands on the Agricultural Counselor and one secretary who was posted there.

So with the expanded staff in Geneva, I think the Office of the Agricultural Counselor at the U.S. Mission to the European Union (EU) in Brussels became a bit more coordinated with the Geneva staff. The US/EU agricultural trade related issues were being moved from Brussels to Geneva and then to Washington. It was somewhat a triangle of trade dispute resolution. And the staff is still quite large, as a matter of fact. We closed the Office of Agricultural Affairs at the Embassy in Bern and shifted the bilateral post coverage to our office in Geneva, along with one staff position. So that just shows how the interest and level of importance of the WTO was to the Department of Agriculture and the U.S. agricultural sector. I think this Administration, the Department of

Agriculture and everybody else is hoping and praying the current round of trade negotiations will get off the ground again. But who knows what will happen? But again Agriculture is right in the middle of the components.

Q: It's always agriculture; that's the problem.

SHARPLESS: Yes, that's true.

Q: When you left that job where did you go?

SHARPLESS: I was assigned to Paris in 1995.

Q: Okay, this is 1995, what are you going to do in Paris?

SHARPLESS: In 1995, I was appointed as the Agricultural Minister Consular at the American Embassy in Paris.

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time?

SHARPLESS: In 1995, I have it right on the tip of my tongue –

Q: Was that Pamela Harriman?

SHARPLESS: Why yes. It was Ambassador Harriman. Yes, she died while I was there. Yes. Ambassador Pamela Harriman!!!!?

Q: And Avis Boland was the DCM?

SHARPLESS: I don't think so. I need to shake my memory bank. But the DCM, if I'm not mistaken was, and he's on the tip of my tongue too, and he recently retired. The DCM with Ambassador Harriman was Donald Bandler.

Q: What was the state of American versus French agriculture in 1995 when you got there?

SHARPLESS: Are you asking me the state of the agriculture or the state of the U.S.-French relations?

Q: Well U.S.-French relations in general and then let's move down to agriculture. But let's do U.S. -French relations. How was that at the time?

SHARPLESS: Well, you know the U.S.-French agricultural relations have always had its ups and downs, or we might say peaks and valleys. I think a large part of that relationship somewhat depends as, anything, on the Presidency and the relationship of the two countries from that level down. At that particular time, as I recall off the top of my head, the United States had really begun to shift into agricultural production with biotechnology. We were making an effort, I suppose, to educate the Europeans of the benefits of producing with biotechnology, and the world also. The mere fact that the

world population is continually increasing, the land base is not expanding, one has to find another way to be able to increase agricultural productivity and output. And as biotechnology was being used, we were working to encourage the Europeans to begin to consider producing with Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO's). The European society was somewhat opposed to that concept of agricultural production. And that issue was pretty much what was driving the overall U.S.-French general bilateral agricultural relations at that time.

And you know France, if you really look at France; it is really somewhat of a picture, mirror image of the United States. The country is sort of laid out with its mountains, valleys, rivers, and coastlines. And France's agricultural production is almost like a carbon copy of what is produced in the United States, other than soybeans, you know. You know neither country has a significant production of tropical products. However, the European Union, and, hence, France, have trade agreements with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, from which tropical products are imported. Also, I think during that time at the Embassy in Paris, and, of course, I am again talking off the top of my head, there was probably a drought situation underway which dramatically affected wheat production, which in turn greatly affected the worldwide wheat market prices. There were some rather prickly times back in the mid-1990s.

Q: What sort of, what were you doing there? I mean you had this genetically modified –

SHARPLESS: GMO's, as they were called, Genetically Modified Organisms.

Q: Yeah, or as some of the Europeans termed it Frankenfood after Frankenstein. But I mean, I would think you would have had a very difficult time because, particularly the intellectual left of the French, was just thirsting for something to beat the United States over the head with and genetically modified food was as good as anything.

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: Did you feel that was a factor?

SHARPLESS: Why, oh yes. Some French entities wanted to produce with biotechnology, while others highly opposed such production. The issue became such a political hot ball that I guess the French Government decided not to support agricultural production with GMO's, which also began to alter positions throughout the European Union. Then the issue and opposition began to be expressed throughout Europe, not just within the European Community. There were non-GMO protests everywhere, proclaiming, "We don't want btn corn; and we don't want the United States ramming things down our throats," and this thing, that and the other. But gradually more GMO products were being produced in the United States, especially corn, soybeans, and cotton, for example.

The problem the United States faced, however, was that we were exporting an enormous amount of processed food products to the European market. The point being almost anything that is processed has an amount of soybean by product, such as soybean oil, or

something in the processed product. The Europeans maintained that the product had been contaminated just by the inclusion of some soybean or corn oil, or something in it that had been produced from a GMO produced raw product, you see. And, yes, they were of the impression, like Frankenstein, the parts of the body would begin to show signs of gigantic growth. And there was one Frenchman who was so adamantly opposed to GMO production, that he sort of attacked some of the McDonald restaurants throughout France.

Q: This is Jose Bové -

SHARPLESS: Yes.

Q: - and his crew.

SHARPLESS: Yes. And then there was the Greenpeace and several other types of opposing organizations, similar to Greenpeace. My job was to try to promote the U.S. policy and to work with the ambassador to do so. I suppose my first two years at the Embassy in Paris were not as prominent as my last two years there, so far as the protests and all that are concerned. But working with Ambassador Harriman, we did a fantastic job of promoting America and American food and wine products, and things of that nature. Each year in Paris, a huge SIAL food show is held. FAS, working in conjunction with the private sector and our Market Development Cooperators, always had an enormous U.S. pavilion in that food show. I can recall most vividly the last time Ambassador Harriman and I were at that show promoting U.S. food products. We also had the visit of the Secretary of Agriculture, the FAS Administrator, and some congressional representatives to open the U.S. Pavilion at SIAL. Ambassador Harriman spent hours going through each booth of the U.S. pavilion. It was a great opportunity to be a part of this fantastic, very successful undertaking.

Q: Well did you find that, I mean was there still, did sort of the selling of American food stuff fall off considerably or was there a real effect or what?

SHARPLESS: Well, I don't think it had a really devastating effect, especially at that time, when you looked at the French needs for soybean meal for their poultry production and for corn. But France, of course, produces a large amount of its corn. But there was a demand for some of the key products we were exporting, such as some types of the wheat they were importing for their breads. But, of course, GMO wheat was not being produced or anything like that. I think at that time wherever the French could increase their production of whatever they were importing from the United States, they were doing so or turning to other sources for imports, you know.

Eventually, the trade statistics did begin to show a decrease of U.S. exports of certain products to France. But I think over a matter of time it sort of balanced itself out. I think even with the soybeans, the French probably began importing from Brazil or Argentina. However, little by little those countries also began producing GMO products. To be quite honest, I haven't looked recently as to where biotechnology is standing in the U.S. trade relations these days. But it was quite a challenge in global agricultural production. I also

had the challenge of including statements supporting biotechnology in the ambassador's speeches. The statements in the speeches would focus on the need to view biotechnology in agricultural production as a means of reducing hunger around the world.

Q: Well did you have to go out and debate with the opposition to our trade of American agricultural products?

SHARPLESS: Why, yes. I traveled across France making speeches on biotechnology and on U.S.-French bilateral relations in general. My staff would write the speeches and I would deliver them in French. I was published in the local agricultural magazines and was on local televisions in the areas where we were visiting. I also made speeches to some of the agricultural think tankers and at agricultural universities, and places of that nature. I was doing my best to put the U.S. Agriculture foot forward as we were following the policy from Washington, based on the guidelines that the U.S. agriculture industry was following in Europe and in the United States. Though it was challenging, I got through it and was quite proud of my having accomplished the tasks.

Q: How long were you there?

SHARPLESS: I was at the Embassy for four years.

Q: The French politics are as intense as they are in the United States as anywhere else; did you find that American politics became inserted into French politics?

SHARPLESS: Yes, as I said, there is an exchange, a parliamentarian exchange that takes place between the U.S. and European parliamentarians. Almost every other year or so, there would be a group of parliamentarians who would visit the United States or a group of U.S. congressional representatives who would visit Europe. They would visit different countries to speak in their parliaments and just discuss the various policies of each side. And, of course, agriculture was always a key part of the discussions and deliberations.

Quite frequently I would prepare visits for the Chair of the Agriculture Committee of the House of Representatives, Congressman Kika de la Garza. His delegation would consist of several other congressional representatives. We would accompany the delegations on travel throughout the French country side, and vice versa during European delegations' visiting the United States. So politics were always intertwined. You know how heavily involved the agriculture industry is in U.S. politics. It is pretty much the same situation in France, you know. And many of the parliamentarians come from the rural areas in France, go right into the parliament. They move and flow with the ebb and flow probably just as the congressional representatives do in the United States.

Q: Did any particular opponent or supporter in the French scene stick out in your mind?

SHARPLESS: Not exactly, off the top of my head; and if they stuck out, they probably weren't doing it so much openly, verbally or publicly, put it that way. They were probably working it behind the scenes throughout the European Union. Prior to my being

assigned to Paris, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and the French Minister of Agriculture had not had a close working relationship. As a matter of fact, it had been 10 years since the two counterparts had had a meeting together. Thus, I was quite proud to be able to arrange for the Secretary of Agriculture, which was Dan Glickman, to come to Paris to meet with the French Minister of Agriculture before I left the post. Now you are going to ask me the name of the French Minister of Agriculture at that time, but it slips me. I have it, of course, in my records. And it was a great accomplishment to observe those two ministers sit and discuss issues. I think that meeting also sort of helped bring U.S. relationships back around a bit. Also, the U.S.-French agricultural relations seemed to have improved; but, again, quite a bit of the overall relationship is worked out of the European Union in Brussels, you know.

Q: You had I guess two ambassadors while you were there, first Pamela Harriman and then I can't remember who succeeded her.

SHARPLESS: Felix Rohatyn, Ambassador Rohatyn.

Q: How did they run the Embassy? Was there an equivalent to a Country Team?

SHARPLESS: Oh, yes. The American Embassy in Paris, as I am sure you know, is an extremely large Embassy. There were some 40 different U.S. Government agencies at the Embassy. The U.S. has two ambassadors: The Ambassador to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; as a matter of fact, there were three Ambassadors; the Ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, and the Ambassador to the American Embassy accredited to France, of course. The American Ambassador to France was the lead Ambassador in the country, as you know. The Embassy's Administrative Section sort of covered the three contingencies there. The Ambassador at the Embassy had a very strong country team and, of course, operated like in any embassy. The Ambassador was, of course, the Chief of Mission, with the Deputy Chief of Mission managing the day-to-day operations of the Embassy.

When the International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS) system was instituted at the Embassy, whereby all agencies would allocate budgets to the joint administrative funds, based on the size of the staff of the particular agency, the DCM asked me to Chair the ICASS for the entire Embassy. I served as the ICASS Chair for two consecutive years. And that was a major challenge and a major feat because the small sections of some Departments, such as the Department of Labor, for example, who might have had a staff of two or three employees, were counting every pencil. And the larger agencies sometimes somewhat felt, well, maybe, they were subsidizing the pencils for the smaller agencies. At times the funds were getting rather tight and everyone was looking at all components of their budgets. And the American Embassy in Paris has a large Public and Cultural Affairs Section. It is quite an operation, that Embassy in Paris. I was extremely proud to have been a key part of the Embassy.

Q: Did you feel that the Ambassadors did pay attention to the agricultural side?

SHARPLESS: Yes. I would think that any Ambassador serving at the American Embassy in Paris would have to give attention to the agricultural issues in France and the European Union as a whole. Agricultural trade issues are just a part of the politics of survival at the Embassy in Paris. U.S.-European relations, as I mentioned earlier, and with France in particular, are so powerful when it comes to issues related to agricultural trade and production. The agricultural industries, the farmers, and the cooperatives are so powerful politically, in the United States, in the European Union, as well as in the individual EU Member States, especially in France. In France, and the EU also, the farmers protest rather mightily when they bring an issue to the attention of their governments. They destroy crops in the field, pour milk in the streets, and block transportation in getting attention to their issues. I can remember when the price of cauliflower or broccoli had gone sky high and the farmers disrupted the entire train transport system in the part of the country where these items are produced.

Q: This was not part of an attack on what we were doing; this is just the agriculture people, those involved in farming and trying to control the market in the country?

SHARPLESS: Yes. It was just a reaction to the French Government. The farmers did not think that the Government was doing enough to help them. They felt that their market situation had just gotten out of balance. It was total internal politics. And when we have a problem like that in this country you know, the agricultural organizations and the farmers will come to Washington and protest and go to the Hill; but I don't know too many of them that have gone out there and torn out their fields and plowed up their crops or stopped transport.

Q: We did that during the depression it happened from time to time.

SHARPLESS: And I remember the huge tractor protest that came into Washington, maybe, in the late 1970s early 1980s. Here, again, the farmers were bringing their concerns to Washington and directly to the Congress.

Q: Did you find sort of, I don't want to overemphasize the social part, but here you are an Agricultural Attaché, Consular for Agricultural Affairs; I mean this is quite a different position within the Embassy, did you find that changed your sort of social life in France, moving with a different crowd, or not?

SHARPLESS: Oh yes, to a certain extent. However, I had served as Agricultural Consular in Rome and that had already thrown me up to that level of a sort. But in Paris, of course, because it is such a large mission and because there are so many embassies attached to France and different organizations located in Paris, such as the OECD and UNESCO, and many other UN organizations, and because it was the United States and I managed the agriculture portfolio, it was quite an interesting time when I was there. I was also often invited by Ambassador Harriman to the residence for various events. Both she and Ambassador Rohatyn hosted many agricultural promotional programs and events at the Ambassador's Residence.

While working with Ambassador Rohatyn, I organized a U.S. wine promotion in Paris. It

was very successful, to the point that some of the top level restaurants in Paris added some U.S. wines from that exposition to their menus. My ultimate goal was to get top quality U.S. wines known in France. Many people thought that I was “crazy.” However, my staff and I set up the wine pavilion. I told the U.S. vintners to provide their wines and an expert from their firm who could speak to their wines, as my staff and I could not sell their wines for them. So the wine vintners sent their wines to us in Paris. We stored the wines or we housed the wines. We set up the pavilion in the Talleyrand Building, an Annex of the Embassy. We had about 400 participants in that wine exposition. The promotional event was just fabulous. My staff and I decided to create a mini vineyard for the exposition. We used fresh grapes draped over trellises in the pavilion.

Ambassador Rohatyn did a fantastic job of supporting the Agricultural Section for the wine promotion. And it is through these types of events that U.S. products become better known. At the same time, these events help to improve U.S. –French and/or European Union relations with the United States. These events enable the bilateral officials on both sides to relax a bit more. They then discuss issues in a more amicable manner instead of always having their little toothpicks handy to prick at each other.

Q: Was this a time, at one point there was a movie about a California wine that went to Paris and won a gold medal. Was that sort of around that time?

SHARPLESS: Yes, it was somewhat around that time. The Agricultural Counselor had some blind wine tastings and the American wines won twice over the French wines. I think my colleague Wayne Sharp, who was at the Embassy in Paris four years or so before I was assigned there, initiated the wine tastings. During my assignment, I continued to strongly promote American wines. With the wine tastings and little by little we kept bringing American wine, not only onto the French market, but also onto other European markets. Recall, I promoted American wine during my assignments in Bern and in Rome. American wines became quite well known and European and others began to gain a better appreciation for American wine. During travel to these countries, travelers would get to know American wines much better. Exports of U.S. wine to the European market are still doing quite well. Our problem is, while I was there and probably now also, U.S. wine prices were a bit higher than what I thought they should have been. The U.S. wines were sort of pricing themselves out of the market, you know. But that’s trade, international trade.

Q: Yeah. Well then, sort of on this high note, then what did you do? You left in 1998?

SHARPLESS: When I was about to leave Paris in 1999, Secretary Dan Glickman came to visit the French Minister of Agriculture, around the last two weeks of my tour there. He asked what I planned to do after leaving Paris. I advised that I would be returning to FAS/Washington and I hoped to have a job where I could make the greatest contribution commensurate with my rank and my experience. I also told him that I would very much appreciate being considered as USDA’s nominee for the ambassadorial candidacy program, you know. And he said, “Oh that would be nice; you want to be an ambassador?” I replied that I thought I could serve as an ambassador. However, I knew

that a candidate goes through the nomination process not knowing the outcome. After my return to Washington, Secretary Glickman nominated me as the USDA's candidate for the ambassadorial program the following year.

Q: So what happened?

SHARPLESS: You know, when someone is nominated as an ambassadorial candidate, you know it. And in my case it was the Secretary of Agriculture, who submitted the candidacy, but nobody else knows. The nomination is kept quiet as you are told to do so. I completed the application and my candidacy was sent over to the State Department, as with all the applications of candidates from the other agencies, primarily applications from the State Department candidates. I was the second candidate from USDA to be nominated as ambassador. Traditionally, candidates were always Foreign Service Officers primarily from the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to a certain extent and perhaps others from the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). I think candidates from the Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Commerce were nominated much later. As a matter of fact, I think it was Ambassador Ed Perkins, who was the Director General of the Foreign Service, and when I was serving as head of FAS' Foreign Service, who recommended that consideration should be given to candidates from all Foreign Affairs Agencies.

Q: I think there was an ambassador back in the 1950s from the Agriculture Service who went on and sort of moved in sort of you might say the regular ambassador corps after that, served in a number of places, but came out of the Agriculture Service.

SHARPLESS: Well I think, if I am not mistaken, I think Melissa Welles came out of Agriculture and I think she became an ambassador. But I don't think she came through the nominating process, as is done by receiving the nominations of all the candidates from the various agencies to go through the Deputy Committee at State Department, you know. But I do think that she did become an ambassador. Now, FAS has the fourth Ambassadorial posting. Ambassador Christopher Goldthwait was the first, who was assigned to Chad. I was the second appointee from FAS, having served as the Ambassador to the Central African Republic. Suzanne Hale was the third appointee who was assigned to Micronesia. And the fourth FAS appointee, Asif Chaudhry, is currently serving as the Ambassador in Moldova. Why am I having senior moments this morning?

Q: Well we all have; I suffer them on a daily basis. (Laughter) But anyway, what were you nominated for?

SHARPLESS: I was initially nominated for, I think, the very first nomination was for Mauritania. Then, as I recall, I was approached for the second possible posting, I think that year, for Mongolia. The next year I was nominated to be posted to the Central African Republic. And that is where I was eventually appointed to serve.

Q: Okay. So you went to the Central African Republic in 2000?

SHARPLESS: Actually, I went to the Central African Republic in 2001. I was nominated in 2000 and then with the transition of the Presidential Administrations, my candidacy shifted from having been nominated by President Bill Clinton to President George W. Bush. And then, of course, Secretary Glickman transitioned out of Agriculture with the Clinton Administration. Ann M. Veneman became the Secretary of Agriculture under President Bush's Administration. During that transition of the Clinton/Bush Administrations, I had been appointed to serve as the Acting Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service. I was in this position when Secretary Veneman arrived at the Department of Agriculture. I advised her of the pending USDA nomination of my candidacy in the ambassadorial program. She was very pleased to learn of my nomination. I had known Secretary Veneman from many years back when she first worked in FAS as the Assistant to the Administrator. Over the many years, she had risen through the ranks to have been appointed as the Secretary of Agriculture. She strongly supported my candidacy and so advised Secretary of State Colin Powell. So in the next term, I was confirmed and appointed as the Ambassador to the Central African Republic.

Q: What were you doing between Paris and before you went out?

SHARPLESS: When I returned to Washington from Paris, I served as the Special Envoy for Emerging Markets. In that capacity, I worked directly with the Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service to help expand U.S. exports of small and medium sized private sector firms. We developed trade teams and took them out on trade missions. I will say small and medium sized firms for certain products. Most of the trade was for processed products or niche market products. We took the trade teams to various markets which we had determined had the greatest potential for expanding the export of U.S. agricultural niche market products.

I was very proud of our efforts which resulted in our taking a trade mission of 30 small to medium sized agribusiness firms to Africa. The trade mission visited five African countries and conducted programs to seek the best opportunities that would lead to increased exports and agricultural investment in Africa. We later also established and led a trade mission to Latin America and South America. We worked closely with the small to medium sized businesses, along with the Market Development Cooperators, to expand U.S. agricultural products in all emerging markets.

After working in this position, I then, of course, transitioned into becoming the Acting Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service. As Acting Administrator, I was responsible for carrying out all of the Agency's programs. I participated in Congressional Hearings presenting the Agency's budget. I also traveled around the globe, as necessary, to ensure that the Agricultural Attachés, the Agricultural Counselors, and the Agricultural Minister Counselors were effectively carrying out their duties and responsibilities. And it was a very demanding job. However, I rode with the waves and kept riding until the tides changed my path.

Q: Well it's very difficult to break into these countries. I would think also trying to push

the smaller items would be more difficult because these tend to be more home grown, weren't they in a way. If it's Soybeans, soybeans are soybeans and that's just a big product; but if you are doing something, I can't think of something in the agriculture field of a smaller scale, that's probably competitive with somebody in the country, isn't it?

SHARPLESS: Yes it's competitive, not only with producers within the country, but also with other competitors from around the world who were producing similar products and shipping them in. That's why it is almost always necessary to have a niche market product. The small and medium sized initiatives we had developed were also seeking minority firms; and some of these companies were rather small and needed some guidance on how to penetrate the export market. As a matter of fact, FAS still carries out these programs. However, we not only deal with the firms and their niche market products, but we also make a great effort to educate the firms on the path they must take to get their product on the market in country x, y, or z, you know. The firm and products must meet all of the standards and import and export requirements in accordance with the standards of the World Trade Organization, or in compliance with the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Rules and Regulations. But the firms which were creative and brave enough developed ways to create some niche products to be sold; especially the business women who were very good at packaging some of these items that were very attractive. These items would sell quite well when the producers themselves participated in trade shows and/or in the trade team missions, and areas of this nature.

There are quite a few U.S. Governors who also take their small to medium sized companies out on foreign trade missions. We are in the field to help these trade missions also, especially if they are promoting the agricultural private sector. And with the President today, with the National Export Initiative, more and more of these types of initiatives have to be done if we are expand U.S. exports overall and advance the concept of international trade. With an increase of exports on the international market, there is also an increase in jobs in the United States, you know.

We in Agriculture have been working with the private sector for years to assist the industry to expand the export of U.S. agricultural products. Like you said, the soybeans, wheat, corn, are major crops in demand that will sell themselves. But when you get down to High-Quality beef, for example, which is another product of great quality, but which exports became quite thorny when many countries felt that the use of hormones in production contaminated U.S. beef. And, of course, I had to deal with some of those thorny issues while serving at the European posts. Also, when serving as the FAS Acting Administrator, we were really handling a great deal of issues with Korean, Japan, and with many other countries related to High-Quality Beef. .

Q: Oh, yes. And, of course, mention this again, I mean there are obviously legitimate concerns; but you were up against the fact that so many things were number one and you've got all these other countries that are competitive with us, who want to knock off number one (Laughter). I mean it's just a natural thing; the Brits used to have this.

So you finally ended up by going to the Central African Republic. Had you ever been

there? Did you know anything about it before you went there?

SHARPLESS: No. I had never been to the Central African Republic (CAR), but I had traveled to different African countries on numerous occasions. While in the position as Special Envoy to Emerging Markets, I coordinated a trade team mission to five African countries, as well as a Presidential Mission to Africa with Secretary Dan Glickman. I had also worked in U.S.-African affairs because of the European angle and of my having served at the U.S. Mission to the European Union. But to the Central African Republic per se, no, I had never traveled there. When I was officially nominated, I went to all the libraries and on line to find whatever I could about the Central African Republic (CAR). And there wasn't much printed on the CAR, as we refer to the country, and what was there, almost always took you back to -

Q: Bokassa, to Bokassa.

SHARPLESS: Yes, to the Bokassa era.

Q: The Emperor of what was it, the Central African Empire?

SHARPLESS: Yes. It took you back to the Jean-Bédél Bokassa era and pretty much to the Franco-Central African Republic relations. Even today, when I tell many people that I served in the Central African Republic, they will ask, well, what part of Africa is that? I will then point out that the CAR is located right in the center of Africa. They will then undoubtedly want to refer to the CAR as the Congo or some other country, you know.

Q: Well it's one of the poorer, when we went there; I suppose it still is today one of the poorest countries in Africa.

SHARPLESS: Yes, the CAR is one of the poorest countries in Africa economically speaking; but it is one of the richest countries when it comes to natural resources and what you might call it, fertile land.

Q: Really?

SHARPLESS: You know, it is said that in the CAR, one only has to drop a seed and it will grow. And that is true. Unfortunately, the CAR has had so many political disruptions, so frequently, and for so long. The country can't seem to get its political base solid enough to bring about some longevity. As a matter of fact, while I was there, I mean just before I arrived there, when Ambassador Robert Perry was there, there was an attempt *coup d'état*. The situation calmed down, the living conditions returned to normal and I was then appointed as Chief of Mission to the CAR. I said, Wow, it's nice and calm. My staff and I worked hard to develop economic and outreach programs. I traveled across the country, met with local legislative officials, and developed an excellent working relationship with the President and his cabinet members. I was there pretty close to a year when political disruptions began again.

And this time, the disruptions eventually led to overthrow of the Presidency of Felix

Patassé in 2003. I was ordered to evacuate the post in November 2002. I was traveling back and forth to post from Washington for a year or so, monitoring the political stability of the country to determine whether the post could be reopened. In March 2003 Francois Bozizé seized power of the Government and was democratically elected as President of the Central African Republic in 2005. The Embassy remained closed for five years or so before another ambassador was appointed to succeed me. However, I do not think that the Embassy has yet been completely restaffed at this time. The country is still not totally stable.

Q: Well you mentioned it had great potential. I mean looking at it on the map, it seems next to a couple of rather desolate states like Chad and the Sudan, but the Sierra did not get down that far?

SHARPLESS: No, the Sierra didn't get down that far. But when you look at the Central African Republic, being surrounded by the five countries, the desert area of Chad and the western part of Sudan, the desert areas were where there were most of the problems that led to political disruptions. These areas were usually routes where the rebels would enter the CAR because the government had very little border control of the area. Further south into the CAR from the borders of Chad and Sudan, the country side was very dense in forestry, with rivers, and fishing. The rivers provide a significant production of fishery products. There are also quite a few agricultural products that are produced there. Many products are produced by Chinese farmers, who produce fruits and vegetables, as well as poultry products. There is a very nice fruit production that grows naturally in the CAR. The CAR also produces a pretty good quality of cotton, but it doesn't always get to the market.

Q: How do you get the stuff out of there?

SHARPLESS: That is the problem. Because the CAR is so landlocked, one either has to truck items over into the Cameroon and, most of the time, truck it down to Douala if one is attempting to export the item out of the CAR. Locally, one crosses the river between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic. The Congo Brazzaville border is just across the river from Bangui, traveling via small boats. The two countries are really quite close, as one can actually see across the river, which is used mainly as a port of transportation. Where the items go once they land in the DRC and how they depart the DRC, I could not tell you.

And when the Central African Republic was really quite stable years ago, I guess during Bokassa's reign, the country was really a vacation get-a-way for the French. Bangui is a beautiful city along the river. There had been beautiful villas before the environment was just destroyed during political upheavals. Personally, I feel that one day the CAR and Bangui will become politically stable and the city will sparkle again. Why do I have this feeling? I cannot tell you why. But the CAR is like a little paradise or a diamond in the rough tucked away in the woods. That's what it is like.

Q: How did you find the political class there?

SHARPLESS: Like most of the African countries, the Central African Republic also had a mass of ministers who were usually educated in Paris or some other place in Europe. Most of the Ministers had been moving from one seat in the government to the other. With the breakdown of the political parties, you know, the officials seemed to move and manage along their political party line. I think there were some four or five different stronghold political parties or groups. Because the political parties were really always struggling among themselves, it was doubtful of who won a position in the government. Most of the officials were just appointed by whoever was the President, as was the situation in many cases. And then most of the officials shifted out whenever the opposition party might have won and moved into other jobs in banks and places of that nature or transferred out to represent the government in foreign countries. But, basically and politically, there were just a handful of people operating the country. The CAR Government was closely tied to the French and the French Government, you know.

Q: Well then, did we have any particular interests there?

SHARPLESS: I think initially and, as usual, we, the United States, tend to have bilateral relations with most countries that are democratically elected. That is the relation we had with the Central African Republic until the trends of coups d'état or attempted coups began and people began overthrowing the democratically elected president. I think when President Patassé was democratically elected, the United States then reestablished its relations, as we have now with President Bozizé. But I think now it's strategically located from a trafficking across Africa perspective. The CAR has become much more of an interest to the United States because of open borders.

Q: Well, certainly they say Central Africa is certainly central. What about AIDS was AIDS a problem?

SHARPLESS: Yes. HIV/AIDS was a major problem. As I recall, about 14 percent of the population, a population of about three to four million people, was affected by HIV/AIDS. A large part of this prevalence was in the military, as well as in the areas where there was trucking going through the country, you know.

Q: Truck drivers –

SHARPLESS: Yes, truck drivers and incidents of that nature. The women, of course, who acquired HIV/AIDS usually received it from their transient husbands, and then affected the children, to some extent.

Q: Did you get involved in some of the things that have concerned us, obviously the sex trade, sexual mutilation, and that sort of thing? I mean was that a problem there?

SHARPLESS: That was not an issue that surfaced so much to us while I was there. But, HIV/AIDS, back to that, that was the real issue. So much so that during my time in the CAR, Bill Gates, Sr. and President Jimmy Carter came to Africa on an HIV/AIDS

Mission, and happened to stop in the CAR. They were traveling across Africa and they wired in to see if they could stop in Bangui to refuel their aircraft. We responded, of course. Working the issue through the Prime Minister, as the President was out of the country at that time, we arranged for the stop to refuel the aircraft. The Prime Minister strongly insisted that since they were stopping and because of their prominence, surely they would have to come in and meet with the CAR Government. Despite my repeatedly advising to the contrary due to a very tight travel schedule, the Prime Minister was so adamant that they agreed to meet with the Prime Minister at the airport. Well, the Prime Minister, being very strong minded and I guess taking advantage of the opportunity of the stopover of these two dignitaries to showcase the CAR, persisted that they had to come into the city and not just meet with CAR Government officials at the airport.

So, we finally arranged for President Carter and Bill Gates, Sr. and the HIV/AIDS Mission to visit the one HIV/AIDS center in the Central African Republic. The HIV/AIDS center was located in Bangui and was managed by a Japanese organization. President Carter and Bill Gates, Sr. were so touched when they observed the operation of the Center. The Japanese organization was training those HIV/AIDS affected women how to make aprons and other household type items which were sold to secure funds for the HIV/AIDS project.

Well, Bill Gates, Sr. and President Carter, who were accompanied by Helen Gayle, who was the Medical Director, but who is now the Head of CARE, were just amazed that there was only this one small center to deal with such a major problem throughout the country. While going through the Center, I overheard Bill Gates, Sr. tell President Carter of the pity of such a small center and that they had to do something to help the Center. So, as they were leaving, they were given beautiful little wood carved gifts in thanks of their brief visit to the Center.

When the HIV/AIDS Mission returned to the States, the Bangui HIV/AIDS Center received, I think, \$500,000 from the Bill Gates Foundation. The funds were to help the Center acquire more equipment and things of that nature. That outreach of assistance was also quite touching. I am sure the Bangui HIV/AIDS Center will never forget that visit and neither will I. It was really a great opportunity to reach out to the Central African Republic.

Q: Well, were the politics there that were causing all the problems, just sort of standard tribal politics of who's got the patronage and that sort of thing?

SHARPLESS: I think the politics centered on who was elected to office and the length of their stay in Government. If the elected government remained in office for a sufficient time to demonstrate how they would function and give attention to major issues of the countries, the government would remain in place for a year or so. However, on average, any one government would remain in place pretty much on average from one to two years. After about a year and a half, if one looks into the pattern of political stability, as I, some type of political upheaval or disruption would surface.

In the particular case during my time in Bangui, there had been an attempted coup d'etat,

as I said earlier, prior to my arrival. At that time, the Government of Libya was securing the Patassé Presidency, even to the point of air droppings to root out the rebels. This situation caused a very high level of anxiety in Washington and concern about the danger of the American staff still being in Bangui. The United Nations had evacuated its staff even prior to the ordered departure of the American Embassy staff members. When I departed Bangui with the American staff and citizens, I also brought along several diplomats and citizens from other foreign countries and governments. The Heads of those Foreign Embassies had requested my help to secure the safety of some of their citizens. Also, it was the first time of all of the coups or attempted coups d'état on the City of Bangui that attacks were targeted at the Diplomatic Missions based in the Bangui. Normally, those Mission were not touched during the political uprisings. However, on this occasion, even the residence of the Ambassador of the European Union and his family were in danger.

Q: Why was that?

SHARPLESS: I think during this time, the Diplomatic Missions were attacked primarily because of the socio-economic conditions in Bangui and throughout the country. There was a large amount of young people who were unemployed, uneducated, consuming drugs, with a large number of children who lived on the streets in Bangui. During my stay there, I think there were some 3,000 "Street Children" in Bangui, with nothing to do. So when these disruptions and political upheavals occurred, it provided an opportunity for these children and others to get whatever they could for themselves.

Again, maybe it was the Lord, but I want to think it was because of the relationship I had established with the citizens of Bangui, throughout the country, and also with President Patassé, but none of the U.S. properties were touched. We have some six properties there, you know. But absolutely none of them were touched. However, the residences of some residents, government officials, and parliamentarians were cleaned out. Just totally ransacked and property stolen, and things of that nature.

I was ordered to depart the post and I had a short time to evacuate everyone. I think one of the finest letters I have ever received was a letter written by an American gentleman who was in Bangui on business. State Department was keeping in touch with his wife to let her know of this situation. When he arrived home, he wrote Secretary Colin Powell a letter indicating how proud he was of being an American in view of the manner in which I carried out the evacuation to help him get home safely.

Q: Well how did you get out?

SHARPLESS: We were advised to cross the river on those little boats to go into the Democratic Republic of Congo. We could then be picked up there by a U.S. military aircraft. That is the route that the United Nations had taken to evacuate their employees also. However, I told my colleagues in Washington that I would like to see if we could bring the military aircraft into Bangui. They were somewhat hesitant to consider that route because the airport was under control of the Libyan military. After much

convincing, I was finally authorized to go over to meet with President Patassé. With key staff members, I went over to meet with the President, explained the situation, and indicated that I needed his assistance on a short timeframe.

I requested his concurrence to permit the landing of a U.S. military aircraft to evacuate the Americans of the Embassy staff and all other Americans who wish to depart Bangui with us. And, of course, President Patassé was livid; he said had difficulty understanding how the United States could be leaving the Central African Republic during this time of turmoil, especially since he had made a great effort to reach out to work with the U.S. Government. Then he asked me specifically how I could be leaving with as much as I had been doing as the U.S. Ambassador throughout the Central African Republic. After further discussions, President Patassé finally granted me authorization for a U.S. military aircraft to land at the Bangui airport. The U.S. Regional Military Attaché, who had travel to Bangui from the American Embassy in N'djamena, Chad, worked with the appropriate CAR Government officials until the aircraft had been grounded in Bangui. We had established a very effective communications system with the American citizens living in the areas around Bangui and --

Q: Sort of a warning system.

SHARPLESS: Yes, exactly. Fortunately we had established that communications system and outreach to the Americans there, who were mostly missionaries. I think for the first time for some of them, I had invited all of the Americans in Bangui and the surrounding areas into the Ambassador's residence for a Christmas event. Then by the time we had to deal with the evacuation, we had all gotten to know each other face to face, and via our walkie-talkie communications system. I also had made an effort to go out to visit with many of them in their various missionary areas, schools, in their homes, and things of that nature. Those Americans who wished to leave Bangui came along with us. Others who had been through similar situations and turmoil in the past again decided to remain in the CAR. After the President authorized the landing of the aircraft, several countries, particularly France, Japan, and several others requested me to take out some of their citizens. At 11 AM the following morning, we were all at the airport and off we flew out of the Central African Republic.

Q: Did we have a Peace Corps in there?

SHARPLESS: No, we did not have the Peace Corps in the CAR at that time. However, the Peace Corps had been previously based in the Car but had been evacuated because of a previous political upheaval. I think the Peace Corps had left the CAR back in 1996, if I am not mistaken. The stability of the country had returned to the point that I had worked with the U.S. Peace Corps to have had a small mission sent to Bangui to assess the possibility of returning. We had surveyed the country and we all felt that the country was stable enough to have a small number of Peace Corps volunteers be reposted to the CAR. But just before the Peace Corps was scheduled to return, our judgment of safety did not hold very long, as we were ordered to depart just before their reassignment. But there is one thing for sure, speaking of the U.S. Peace Corps. When I traveled around

the Central African Republic, if they knew nothing about the United States in general, the Central Africans all knew about the U.S. Peace Corps. The Peace Corps is one program whereby the CAR citizens met Americans, learned about the American way of life, and had the highest respect and regard for the Peace Corps and the United States. They really wanted the Peace Corps volunteers to return to the CAR. I also had the occasion to meet some Peace Corps volunteers who had served in the Central African Republic.

Q: Well, it's a great experience. I must say that I hold them in the highest regard.

SHARPLESS: And one of the Peace Corps residences was still there. And when the Peace Corps Assessment team came to Bangui, we went to visit the residence. It is still there and, apparently, it is one of the better Peace Corps residences in Africa.

Q: What about, did you get any reflection from things happening in the Congo/Zaire.? That was undergoing a lot of problems.

SHARPLESS: There were an enormous amount of problems in that country also. As a matter of fact, there was some indication also that some of the leaders in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or rebel groups based there were causing problems within the Central African Republic. Prior to my arrival in the CAR, I think one reason that the Libyans had been requested to protect the Patassé Regime was because of the rebel activity in the DRC. Eventually that disturbance also somewhat became stabilized. But the Central African Republic itself has had a long history of political instability. When one really look at the situation, the average CAR native is the one who is suffering the most, you know. The country is so landlocked and the citizens really cannot go very far in any direction with the lack of transportation. Most of the exits are usually through Cameroon or somewhere in that direction as it is very difficult for them to move around. When I was living in there, even traveling to Bangui commercially was challenging. Travelers had to book flights from Bangui over to Yaoundé to connect with other flights. Basically for international travel, there was an Air France flight that came to Bangui once a week. Other than that, the transport was pretty much landlocked for all of us also, you know.

Q: Well you left there and came back to Washington.

SHARPLESS: Yes I left the Central African Republic and I returned to Washington. As I said, although we had evacuated the post, we were still staffed to the American Embassy in Bangui. From Washington, we were working with the Foreign National (FN) employees who we had left in charge of the American Embassy operations. At the same time, I would travel back to Bangui periodically to meet with the Foreign National employees and to assess the security situation in the country with the hope of returning to reopen the Embassy.

The last time I traveled to Bangui, I was accompanied by Vincent Valle, the Deputy Office Director of the African Bureau at State Department. When he and I visited the post, we knew that I would not be returning to Bangui to continue my tour there. Thus, I organized and hosted an event to really thank the Foreign National staff members for all

that they had done and were doing to keep the American Embassy and the U.S. properties in Bangui secured, very well maintained, and all in operation. I awarded the FN leaders and the various groups, at my own expense, to personal thank them for their sincere dedication and professionalism in maintaining the American Embassy complex. I was very, very proud of those Foreign National employees.

You know, while I was serving in the CAR, I also had a school named in my honor, the Primary School in Boussimba/Molangue. I always wanted to return to Bangui and to go back to that school and to provide funds and supplies for the school. I still have a keen interest in doing that. However, unless and until the security in the Central African Republic is very much more stabilized, I don't think the State Department would authorize any such visit. But I keep my eye on the prize that I would like to go back one day and contribute some funds and supplies, upkeep or whatever. I was going to get in touch with the current ambassador just to see what his thoughts might be of a visit there, but I haven't taken that step yet.

Some of the staff, I think some of our Foreign National staff, has subsequently been reduced because of the lack of a larger American staff to carry out the U.S. missions in the CAR. I think there is still a key corps of FN staff members managing the Embassy in Bangui.

Q: Well what did you do when you came back?

SHARPLESS: When I returned to Washington, I worked in the State Department for a year, working to and from the American Embassy in Bangui. In July 2003, I returned to work in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I served as a Special Advisor to the Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, Dr. James Butler. That is the Office of the Under Secretary that covers the responsibility for the Foreign Agricultural Service. So, as the Special Advisor, I was doing quite a bit of liaison work with the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Office of the U.S. Special Trade Representative (USTR), and at times with some Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). The work focused primarily on U.S. issues related to African agricultural development, policies, and other programs. At that time, again quite a bit of attention was focusing on agricultural productivity with biotechnology. I also had relations with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) office here in Washington, you know.

Q: Of the United Nations?

SHARPLESS: Yes. I traveled to Rome and to certain African countries for conferences and other work projects of that nature. And then, of course, the negotiations of the World Trade Organization were in its hiatus and the negotiations of cotton became so prickly that the negotiations were brought pretty much to a standstill. The U.S. was making a great effort to encourage the African countries to be more forthcoming with the cotton negotiations. We provided information and recommendations to the African cotton producing countries of measures they could undertake to improve the output of their

cotton production. We organized a very successful visit of the Trade Ministers and the Ministers of Agriculture to the United States to enable them to become fully aware of all aspects of the U.S. cotton industry, from the point of production, grading, and manufacturing of cotton products. We also showed the Ministers of these African cotton producing countries the advantages and benefits of using biotechnology in the production of cotton. The Agriculture Minister from Burkina Faso, out of the four countries who were visiting, was most impressed with the advantage of producing biotech cotton. The Minister returned to Burkina Faso and planted BT cotton. He was very impressed with the results of his plantings. He said that he did not believe it would occur and he had to plant it to be convinced. And it all turned out very well.

We were also organizing various seminars and conferences around the United States on science and technology, with emphasis on agricultural production with biotechnology. We also conducted conferences in certain key parts of the world where we brought prominent scientists, agricultural research organizations and agricultural producers to speak about how the use of science and technology could increase agricultural productivity.

Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman hosted a conference in Sacramento, California which brought the whole world in and took them to the universities to show them how the research had come about. We also conducted a similar conference in Costa Rica bringing that part of the world together to exchange the same information. Then, I coordinated a conference in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso to bring the African countries together to exchange the information on the advantages of using science and technology in agricultural production. The Minister of Agriculture of Burkina Faso was so impressed with his newly gained knowledge on biotechnology that he made a significant effort to ensure that the conference was successful. He also wanted Burkina Faso to be the showcase of using biotechnology for agricultural production in Africa. He even invited Presidents of five African countries to attend the conference in Ouagadougou. The Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services, Dr. J.B. Penn, headed the U.S. Department of Agriculture Delegation, and officials from several other U.S. Government agencies also attended. It was really a dynamic conference and event.

We then began to work with the African regional organizations to look at the advantages of using biotechnology to increase agricultural productivity. Representatives from USAID, FAO and all other related organizations attended the Burkina Faso conference. At the same time, the U.S. Delegation traveled across Burkina Faso to become acquainted with the cotton production, grading and processing aspects of the industry. We were very proud to be able to help Burkina Faso, if no other country, to see the difference of using biotechnology in cotton production. And as of today I think Burkina Faso began producing organic cotton. I also understand that Burkina Faso has a contract with Victoria Secret to provide organic cotton to product their lingerie garments. So that's a part of history that I am so proud to have been a part of. And, again, it brought about economic development which was our goal in reaching out to help the African countries. So that was pretty much my main area of work from 2003 to 2006. I worked in various capacities of advising the Secretary, the Under Secretary and the Deputy Under Secretary

at the Department of Agriculture, while serving as the liaison between USDA and other government agencies for various programs and projects.

Q: And so after that, what?

SHARPLESS: And after that? In January 2006, I decided that after 41 years in the U.S. Government, maybe I should begin to look at what else I should do with my life. I decided to retire from the U.S. Foreign Service and my many years with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and the U.S. Department of State. I was so touched when I retired. You know, there is a ceremony when an Ambassador retires. The Ambassador is presented with the U.S. flag which flew over his/her Embassy, along with an Ambassadorial flag. The ceremony was conducted at the U.S. Department of Agriculture during a farewell reception for me. At that time Robert Pearson, who was my Deputy Chief of Mission in Paris, was the Director General of the Foreign Service at the State Department. Thus, I requested Ambassador Pearson to present the flags during the ceremony.

Also in attendance was Ambassador Ruth Davis, who was the Director General of the Foreign Service during my tenure in the Central African Republic, and who was currently working with Assistant Secretary of African Affairs, Jendayi Frazier. The ceremony was rather sacrilegious and emotional, just to have the presence of Ambassador Pearson and Ambassador Davis, both who had played such a major role in my career path to be able to launch me off on the next path of my life's journey. The entire event and the ceremony were very humbling especially since Ambassador Robert Pearson, who had also been appointed ambassador in his career, wrote the letter of recommendation for my ambassadorial nomination back in 1999 while he was still in Paris. Ambassador Davis was also one of the more dynamic African American female trail blazers in the U.S. Foreign Service, you know.

Q: She was Citizen Services Officer in Naples when I was Consular General.

SHARPLESS: Yes? And I think she served as Ambassador in Benin. She still has a connection with that country also that goes back many years.

Q: So what are you doing with yourself since you retired?

SHARPLESS: And so I retired and then I was going to just relax. But I think the relaxation sort of lasted for about 30 days or something like that. Shortly after I retired, I was appointed as a member of the Trade Advisory Committee on Africa at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative in the Executive Office of the President. I decided to undertake this responsibility since the role would not require traveling, but would also enable me to continue to contribute in the area of my career. In working on the Committee, I collaborate with other members from several private sector firms, agricultural and industrial organizations, as well as the banking industry. The Committee's mission is to provide recommendations and input from the private sector to

the U.S. Trade Representative for the President's foreign policy with Africa. The primary focus is to develop recommendations to facilitate trade and investment in Africa.

I also began attending many workshops and seminars of the Corporate Council on Africa (CCA). I also served as a member of CCA's Agribusiness Committee. I have really been becoming more involved with all of these organizations, workshops, and conferences and keeping abreast of what is happening in the world on Agribusiness issues, particularly as it relates to small and medium size business trade and investment in Africa. I also attend and participate in workshops, conferences, and seminars at the Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa.

There are a large number of organizations in Washington that work toward enhancing U.S.-African relations, from the Leon Sullivan Foundation, which I participate in some of their activities, to the Constituency for Africa, which is an advocacy organization, and also the Society for Africa, which works to help educate the young people in this country more and more about Africa. I also participate in some programs for the African Democracy Foundation. I also participated in programs of the Foundation while I was still at USDA, attending some of their conferences and serving as keynote speakers and panelist.

I spend quite a bit of time with my sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where we work to help humanitarian efforts, sometimes in the food banks and working with schools to provide scholarships to deserving students going to college. I am also very involved with church and working with CROP Hunger Walks where I raise funds to help reduce hunger in the United States and around the world. As a matter of fact, I have a CROP Hunger Walk coming up here in another week or two.

Q: CROP Hunger Walk meaning?

SHARPLESS: CROP Hunger Walk, as it is called. CROP meaning, "Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty," which is coordinated by the Church World Services. There are some 2,000 communities across the United States which walk to raise fund to help reduce hunger in the United States and around the world. The walkers consist of community groups, church groups, or other humanitarian organizations. I won't say a marathon, and those of us who walk, we reach out to others to sponsor and support us by donating funds. Those funds are raised to help reduce hunger. There is a logo that goes with the walk which says: "We Walk So Others May Eat." And the funds that are raised are distributed by the Church World Services and this year, emphasis will be put on funds going to help the Haitians after that earthquake last January. I have been walking for the past three years or so. Each year, I have been the largest contributor, having contributed about \$6,000 just from my walking, you know.

Q: You know in my interviews, President George W. Bush had been disparaged by many people because European policy and all but people have said, the Foreign Service people said, he really took an interest in Africa and it had a very positive effect. Did you feel that?

SHARPLESS: Yes I really did feel that President Bush showed a keen interest in Africa. And when I returned to the Department of Agriculture after my return from Africa, I coordinated the USDA African Ambassadors Dialogue. I advised the Under Secretary and the Secretary to establish this organization. We would invite the African Ambassadors over to the Department of Agriculture so that we could discuss agricultural needs of Africa and the challenges Africa faced in trying to expand its agricultural sector. The dialogue was a very useful tool. Officials from the State Department, USTR, USAID, as well as many USDA agencies were also involved in the deliberations. The African countries which attended were pretty much those countries that really had a keen interest in developing their agricultural sector, which they all do, you know; but some are just more agricultural prone than others.

And it was just about the time that the Millennium Challenge Corporation was being established. While many of those countries know that agriculture is the backbone of their economic development, they were looking at infrastructure as a way of gaining funds to help develop their economy rather than seeking funds to develop the agricultural sector. But I think now many African countries are beginning to tie agriculture and infrastructure together. One may be able to produce a better product, but unless one is able to get the product to the market, the whole purpose becomes defeated. So now we are working more and more with these various organizations to see how we can go about getting more U.S. companies to go to Africa and to help in infrastructure investment. We all know that China is heavy involved in Africa, especially for building roads, stadiums, buildings, etc. Japan also puts quite a bit of funds into Africa in those areas, and little by little, the United States is becoming much more involved.

I think President Barack Obama has set a priority on food security and that includes food security around the world. And with the global food initiative and the Lugar-Casey food security bill that is in Congress at the moment, more and more attention is going to Africa. And I think now that the African countries also realize that they must begin to take on more responsibility themselves. The Chair of the African Union, Jean Ping, and a delegation of 17 were in Washington last week meeting with many government agencies and many organizations. I attended the session held at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The delegation wants the United States to become more acquainted with the African Union and its role in pulling various African countries together, especially to help expand economic growth and to resolve many of the conflicts throughout Africa. And I think the timing is just about right to be doing more of that.

Q: Well, Mattie, I want to thank you very much for this interview. This has, I think, opened whole new fields in our oral history program, particularly with emphasis on the agricultural side, which is so terribly important. Thank you.

End of interview