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

ALICE MCILVAINE

Interviewed By: Jewell Fenzi
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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Thursday, February 18, 1988. I'm interviewing Alice McIlvaine -- Mrs. Robinson McIlvaine--at my home in Washington, DC. Alice served in Dahomey, Guinea and Kenya and we are here today to talk about her African experiences, and also her experiences about coming into the Service as an Ambassador's spouse.

MCILVAINE: The coming in as an Ambassador's spouse, as an outsider was an intriguing experience.

Q: Well, intriguing because you've had your own career for how many years, about 15?

MCILVAINE: Oh, my goodness, about 15 years, yes.

Q: ...and then all of a sudden there you were in Dahomey with a role to play.

MCILVAINE:...the role to play and a whole new world.

Q: And you did mention on your topic sheet that you got some extraordinary advice from other senior wives.

MCILVAINE: I think the old guard were quite intrigued when they had this woman suddenly coming in as Ambassador's wife and they were very good about it. We did not have a Foreign Service Institute in those days, and they didn't have a regular briefing program. So a couple of them got together and they arranged for me to have a few little briefings. Mind you, we were going to be married one day and heading out for our post the next, so time was of the importance. We did find one man in the State Department who'd actually been in Dahomey, West Africa. He was _____Ferguson, and he told me what little he knew. Of course, Africa in those days was a new continent for the Americans. We had had a Consulate in Dakar, we'd had one in Kenya I believe during the war. We had an Embassy in South Africa. But as far as the rest of black Africa was concerned we did not have any posts until after World War II. About '58, '59, '60 the African countries started becoming independent. There were no Post Reports. There weren't any people who had been there. No one had been to Dahomey. There had been a resident American Ambassador in the Ivory Coast who had been there once. So this really was a brand new experience. The girls in the State Department, some of the old hands, Avis Bohlen, June Byrne, saw to it that I had a few little briefings which were pretty funny. They were giving me the grand old school -- the Ambassador's wife -- and I must only sit on such and such side of the car, which side I got in, which side I got out. "Whatever you do, my dear, don't make friends with anybody but the Minister's wife, the President's wife. Please don't go

around with hair dressers, and things of that sort. And you must never let anyone on your staff call you anything but Mrs. McIlvaine. The servants must only call His Excellency, 'His Excellency', or the various titles." This kind of very useful information to head out to Dahomey, to a country that had never had an Ambassador. We got married one day -- the State Department wouldn't even give me a passport until the next day. They had to see the wedding license. The State Department wouldn't even pay my way out. Bob's orders had been written from his previous post direct and so there was nothing in the original travel orders to pay my way. Nobody could tell me what to take. Nobody could tell me what the weather was like. There were no Post Reports. The State Department finally broke down and said, "Well, with great generosity, they would send a little footlocker for me." You can imagine going out as Ambassador's wife...and I had a hand bag and 44 lbs. of luggage heading for this strange country. I remember stuffing the funniest things in -- books of poetry, needlepoint, dumb things like artificial flowers. I had a book on protocol. Nobody briefed me on what the technical requirements were. For instance, did they provide the silver, the china, the glassware. I would write Bob and I'd say, "Bob, what should I bring?" He say, "Don't worry, don't bring anything. Just come on out. We've got everything here." And, of course, I got there and there was absolutely nothing.

Q: A bachelor's pad.

MCILVAINE: They had supplied these funny little houses with the silver, the glass, and the china. Then we found the best way of entertaining was picnics, barbeques, dances in the garden. So I wrote back and asked for some plastic plates and some ice coolers and things of that nature and they said, "Oh, my dear, you can't do that. The Ambassador's wife can't have anything but the gold and white crested china." Anyway, we had a wonderful honeymoon on our way out: two days in Brussels where we visited my sister who had one of those glorious houses. Her husband was No. 2 in Brussels. An impeccable staff, a beautiful residence, and we went to Douglas and Wahwee MacArthur's for dinner, and again, the real old Ambassadorial style. The next thing I know we're landing in Ghana and there the post had been set up for about a year or two. They had a lovely house and everything was cool and lovely and well-organized. Then Bob and I get in our little Peugeot station wagon and we headed out for Dahomey, and we drive, and we drive, and we drive and it is bush, and it is sparse, and it is a red dirt road, and it's going nowhere. And there's nothing to be seen, and we finally arrive in our little post, and we have no residence. Loy Henderson and some of his staff had gone out and managed to rent a tiny cement bungalow which had become the chancellery, and behind it, in a sand pit, was a cinder block cement bungalow which was about to be started and that was going to be our little house.

In the meantime, we drove through the little town which was very simple, very plain, but it did have trees, and it was on the coast. We drove up to the funny little old French hotel on the coast which would be our home. It turned out that the French manager absolutely hated Americans. We were the only Ambassador in the country, we were the first Americans. He had given us the worse possible room in the hotel. It was in the back, it was over the kitchen, it was on a street. One window was on an open courtyard where they had the outdoor movies at night and all night long you'd hear the roar of the crowd as Marilyn Monroe...with the translation in French, or the cowboy stories – the roars of the crowd. The funny little room had a sagging bed, it had a table, it had no closet. The lovely

Ambassadorial trousseau was hung on the shower curtain rod and each time you took a shower you had to take all the dresses off so they wouldn't get wet. The air conditioning would stagger on periodically. The walls were painted the Dahomean national colors...

Q: Which are?

MCILVAINE: Orange, green and black. I think all the African colors for all the new nations were the same. There was no toilet -- one had to go out to the hall and down, and there in great splendor, was the public toilet with the toilet itself up several steps, and cockroaches and salamanders, and all kinds of slimy things all over the place. The old toilet bowl was yellow with age and you pulled the great chain and water came -- or didn't come, as the case may be. And, of course, I immediately got disease and spent most of my time clutched in agony sitting on this throne.

Q: ...wondering why you were there.

MCILVAINE: ...wondering why I was there. It was about the smallest embassy you could get and when I arrived everyone was sick. We had a DCM who was in good health but his wife had terrible pneumonia. The one commo clerk had hepatitis and was quickly evacuated. The Admin Officer had hepatitis, and was evacuated. The USIS officer had a heart attack. There was one junior officer and she was wonderful, very vague, but had been educated in Paris and knew all of the scene, and knew a lot of the mean government officials -- but very vague, and the first thing, as I remember she did when I arrived, she'd lost the Great Seal. She'd put it somewhere wrong in the embassy, and couldn't find it.

Q: That is sacrilege, too.

MCILVAINE: So we pulled up to the little hotel, which was going to be our home, and she was sitting on the terrace waiting for us and the rest of the staff, as I say, were all sick, it didn't exist. We lived in that little hotel for three months, entertaining out of it. We'd have the staff up and they'd sit in their wet bathing suits on our sagging bed and we'd drink warm beer or something... and it really wasn't what Mrs. Bohlen had pictured as Ambassadorial wife.

Q: When you mentioned before we turned the recorder on, when you mentioned that you were an outsider, you were an outsider to the women here in Washington, not in Cotonou. There were no outsiders down there it would seem. Did you gradually win the French hotel owner over?

MCILVAINE: Not at all, not at all, and eventually he either was knifed by his irate staff, or was murdered, or somehow or other he disappeared, and eventually we did move out of the hotel into this silly little cement bungalow which wasn't very glamorous but was perfectly adequate. I think some of the people who build these very elegant residences make the local people, when they come to your house, feel very uncomfortable because of the differences in the standards are so enormous.

Q: You set yourself apart.

MCILVAINE: So our simple little house, even though when the first inspectors came, they were just aghast. I didn't realize that the State Department would pay for rugs and curtains. I tried to bring a few of my favorite paintings and pictures to put around, and I'd gone to the marketplace and bought local fabric and used thumb tacks and stuck them up. Nobody told me you got reimbursed for things like that and later when I found out that all the money we saved in decorating our little house, that had been left over at the end of the year, was sent to Paris where they were going to put one more hand done needlepoint elegant gold chair in the front hall in place of pebbles in our front driveway.

Q: But no one really informed you -- there was no Budget & Fiscal Officer to tell you what you could do?

MCILVAINE: The staff was very, very inexperienced and I didn't know until we had our first Ambassadorial wives meeting up in Ivory Coast, about six months later, when I heard some of the other wives talking about how they kept their accounts. I said, "Really? I mean you can charge off the toilet paper to representational expenses?

Q: And the light bulbs...

MCILVAINE: ...and the light bulbs, and you could even have furniture and things sent out. They had opened up the posts so quickly all over West Africa that the Foreign Buildings Operations had simply gone out and bought 13 different sets of what I would call dentist waiting office furniture -- rather modern, rather simple. Nothing wrong with it but certainly nothing very elegant. Such things as ice chests, and things you might need out there, were nonexistent and we just went down to local stores and bought them. I was horrified later to find out you could be reimbursed.

Q:...because you didn't save all your slips or anything, no. And you were there from 1961 to...

MCILVAINE: 1964.

Q: You were there three years -- we were in Sierra Leone about those same three years.

MCILVAINE: Another thing that was particularly hard about it -- there was nothing written about this country. One anthropologist, named Le Herisse, had written a book on the anthropology of Fon tribe and Richard Burton -- the famous Richard Burton of Arabian Nights -- had been the British Consul in Fernando Po, and he'd been over in Dahomey in 1860 and he had some wonderful descriptions of going in the old king's so-called palace, which is really a mud hut, where they used human heads instead of flowers to decorate. And this was the famous era of the slave trade and the Dahomean kings were the most famous for it. They would enslave and sell as slaves as many as 20,000 a year. These were the only two books that I could find that had anything on Dahomey. Herskovits did a great study on the Fon tribe. They are quite an intriguing tribe. They were the great witch doctors. All of the voodoo in Haiti comes from the Fon tribe, and the famous voodoo ceremonies in Haiti still use the Fon language in their ceremonies.

Q: Oh, of course, there's a Dahomean influence in Brazil because some of those slaves

were brought over to Recife which is only about 1,000 miles away or something like that. I will show you the Abomey applique with the red bull and the red ceramic bull from Brazil.

MCILVAINE: ...and many of them found their way back to Dahomey. The names of many of the top men in Dahomey were all Portuguese – Louis *?* Pinto was our Ambassador to the UN and he was an impeccable gentleman -- goodness, he was brilliant. Our Chef de Protocol was de Silva. Of course, some of that could have been the Portuguese presence which had been there. They had a little fort in Dahomey which they refused to give up until the very end, and then instead of turning it over as a library or a museum to the government...this one little house with all the documents going back to the 1492s, and all the artifacts...the Portuguese said they would never give up their territory and they burned it. This was when we were there.

Q: ...and this was in the '60s then? Two hundred years of history just...

MCILVAINE:...just gone right out the window. So the witch doctor -- the fetishism -- was a very strong influence in Dahomey, and it was quite fascinating. When we first got there the very first thing Bob did was go to a trial. They were accusing one of the senior officials who later became president, of having hired a witch doctor to turn a would-be killer into a disguise so that he could sneak into his enemy's -- the president's -- house and murder him. The trial went on and on and the accused, who was a doctor trained in Paris, said, "No way. I am an educated man. I would never think of using a witch doctor to hire a killer and then disguise him." He went on at great length about this and then said, "…and furthermore I would never have hired that tribe's witch doctor, my own is much better." That was kind of the end of the trial.

The president himself told us that at the time we were having our very first Independence Day celebration, and it was very carefully picked to be at the end of the rainy season because he'd invited all the heads of state from all the big countries in Africa and the world -- as many as he knew to come -- and had built a new palace, and there was going to be this great exciting time -- and they came and the rain was pouring down and so the president who was a Catholic, a very devout Catholic, immediately scurried around and fired his witch doctor and hired another one and within eight hours the rain stopped. It was clear as a bell the whole Independence Day weekend, which was a blessing because we all had to do everything outdoors -- the housing was so small. The day the last president was going off, the rains came down again so he gave all the credit to his wonderful witch doctor.

Q: So you really had carte blanche to do pretty much what you thought was the right thing to do in Dahomey at the time, as far as entertaining people, or what you did because a lot of what the ladies had told you here in Washington just simply didn't apply.

MCILVAINE: Absolutely. The wonderful instructions on "don't make friends with the hair dresser," was particularly inappropriate because she happened to be the niece of the president and married to a very fine old Swiss family -- her husband was from a Swiss family -- and she was the president's favorite person, and a power house in that country. So you very definitely wanted to make her your very best friend.

Q: Your hair dresser and your best friend.

MCILVAINE: Yes. She knew more than anybody. There was practically no protocol. I went to try and pay my calls on the Foreign Minister's wife, the president's wife, and they had never heard of an Ambassador. We were the first ever there. There was no Diplomatic Corps, we were the only ones. You would go to call and they would present some woman who would receive you, but it turned out it wasn't the Foreign Minister's wife at all, but it was wife No. 5 who was the youngest wife who'd been educated and who had learned French, and was the one who was sent out to receive you. It was always about 10:00 in the morning and they were very much under the French influence, everything they did was influenced by the French, and many of them were educated at the Sorbonne, the men, and traditionally you would go in a very simple little piout and there at 10:00 in the morning on the tray would be the champagne, the brandy, the cassis, and, of course, you'd gag and have to try and sit out one of these things in this deadly heat.

Eventually a few other Ambassadors began to arrive. The French finally came. We had a German charge, and we ended up with a little group of about six or seven. But you are quite right, we could do our own style of entertaining and had to work our own way. Some of the ways I used to entertain were most amusing because we had electricity and I remember the Foreign Minister's wife returning the call was most intrigued so I spent the time letting her turn the light on and off.

Q: Electricity was that much of a rarity? I never got to Dahomey or Togo. My daughter was in Togo in the Peace Corps and we just stopped in Ghana at the airport but I did know Nigeria and Sierra Leone and Guinea, and Mali. We travelled quite a bit but I didn't get to those two little finger countries, but you did quite a bit up country--it really was up country.

MCILVAINE: Absolutely, straight up...

Q: ...from the coast. How far was that? A couple of hundred miles?

MCILVAINE: It would take maybe two or three days to get up to the famous game park which was in Porga, a very exciting trip, very different tribes. As you know, the further north you got, you got into the Moslem area and the tribes would be totally different -- there'd be the Fulani tribe, the Simbas. This was one of Dahomey's big problems, the conflict always between the coastal people and the people up country. The coastal people generally being better educated, having gone to the Sorbonne, and the up-country people being more traditional. There were some fabulous trips, particularly also going up not too far from where we all lived which was Cotonou; going up to see the old king of Fon in his mud palace.

One day when we were brand new in the country we decided we'd just go up, we didn't want to disturb him, and we were having a picnic somewhere near his place -- three or four of us having sandwiches sitting on the dirt -- and a bearer came out and said, "The King wishes your company." Obviously he was very lonely, he wasn't getting much attention anymore, and we went in and there was the famous old King Fon, just like the pictures with the old handmaidens around him: one carrying the spittoon, one carrying the fan, and everyone kowtowing right on the ground in front of him. He was in his robes, and he wears

a great silver tea strainer on his nose, and this was to keep the air pure so he didn't breathe the same air as the other mortals and it caused his nose to be slightly elevated too. This was the famous king -- the same family -- that had enslaved as many as 20,000 a year, and had the fresh heads instead of flowers in his palace.

We also one day when we were wandering up there, ran into one of the king's sons and he said, "We're having a big reunion, a big conclave of all the witch doctors and would you like to come in?" We arrived at this extraordinary place and each witch doctor from this particular cult had all come in with their handmaidens, and their bearers, and even the handmaidens and so forth weren't allowed to go into the inner sanctum as we were ushered in. We found ourselves in this large courtyard with a little temple looking like a Grecian temple in the middle, and all the witch doctors sitting around and we were given a seat, and all of a sudden these women came out in white robes looking like vestal virgins from Greece, and going through these great chants, and one of them had a goat and she slit the goat's throat, and she drank out of the throat, and then she lifted it up, and then over to the other way and then heaved it right across this courtyard, and it landed literally right on our feet. It's really quite off-putting to know that you are complete outsiders sitting in this inner sanctum with all these men. So we found an excuse to get out of there fast.

Q: ...wondering what might happen next, or just...

MCILVAINE: ...just feeling very uncomfortable. Also, the old king had the famous Amazon maidens, and they were his troops that he used to conquer some of the neighboring tribes, and he still has them and they still put on their dances -- their hair being done like sputniks. The making our corn cribs, or whatever we call our current corn rows looked like amateurs. They came out stiff and then little balls on the end and each one quite different, and their robes, and supposedly each one has her left bosom cut off for the bow and arrow -- it wouldn't be in the way. One of the great highlights of any visitor's trip was to take them to see the king and the dancers, and they would go on all day long, and each movement was less interesting than the one before -- just umph- umph-umph -- so this would be a long day sitting there in your mud hut watching these dancers.

Q: An interesting parallel, I remember going one Boxing Day to see the dancers in Sierra Leone and the ones that really sparked interest were the lovely little Soussou maidens who were about 13-14 – oiled their bodies -- and they had elaborate turbans but then they only had what they called in Sierra Leone a lappa around their waists. Well, that sparked interest in the diplomatic community, but the rest were very much as you said, just...well, they would have some interesting masks and...

MCILVAINE: Not a great variety of dance steps, you would say.

Q: No, no.

MCILVAINE: Of course, dancing was another wonderful form of entertainment. They loved to dance and the weather was so hot during the day that really to give a good party you had to have music and you had to be outdoors. I think I really should charge the State Department for the pairs of shoes that I wore out shuffling on cement school building floors, dancing with the president and the cabinet all night long.

Q: It was so hot you never touched in Sierra Leone -- we did the highlife and you sometimes lost your partner, they would sort of leave in a way. There were no wall flowers -- women would just get up and shuffle around and sometimes they'd have a partner and sometimes they wouldn't, but you never touched because it was just too...I mean sticky. Was that the same...

MCILVAINE: Absolutely, and the highlife, I thought, was a marvelous dance. The president was a great party-giver and we'd be sitting at home quietly at 11:00 at night and all of a sudden you'd get a messenger beating on the door saying, "The president is having a party," and you'd go over and about 1:00 they'd all start arriving and start getting the food together, and the music, and the dance. We'd be out at his little house, which was on the beach under the palm trees, with the full moon, and you'd be out there shuffling away. Bob said he never had any trouble finding me because being six feet and white-haired through this rather dim light of the moon through the palm trees, he could see something tall (end Tape 1, side A)

The political situation was always very unstable in Dahomey because of the number of different tribes. The Dahomeans themselves were absolutely marvelous people, and the brightest of all the West Africans, I used to figure, among the French. They had been picked in the old French empire days, or the French colonies, to be the ones who were the workers, the technicians, the doctors, the taxi cab drivers, the airport directors, the hotel desk clerks, all of this.

Q: All of them through...

MCILVAINE: All of them through French West Africa, and after independence a lot of the countries suddenly realized that all the good jobs in their countries had been taken by the Dahomeans and they were expelled and sent back to Dahomey. And poor Dahomey, which had really no viable economy of any sort except for oil palm which wasn't a big source of income, suddenly found that it had all of these very alert, intelligent, well-educated, dynamic young people coming back and no jobs. So the governments kept turning over and turning over and turning over and so politically it was very unstable but nothing in a sense dangerous. The first revolution we went through, a mob stopped the car and opened the door and reached in and hugged and kissed us.

Q: That's when Christophe Soglo took over?

MCILVAINE: That's when Soglo took over and at this point our house, which had been finished, was adjacent to his -- in fact attached to it -- we were renting it from Colonel Soglo -- and it just so happened that our bathroom and our bedroom were literally the same wall as his office. So one of the jobs, as the Ambassador's wife, was to spend quite a lot of time sitting on the toilet with your ear as close to the wall as possible hoping to hear something.

Q: Did you speak French before you went, or did you study...

MCILVAINE: Oh, my French was terrible. I'd studied it in college and in high school.

Q: But you hadn't had any FSI training.

MCILVAINE: Always when you first arrive at a post there is very little to do. We were in the hotel and luckily the wife of the USIS was French and she would come over on a daily basis. Then when we finally did move into our funny little house, two or three times a week I would have whatever wives happened to be there come over and we'd have some wonderful French lessons with whoever on the staff spoke French. So we could all update our French.

It was a lot to getting settled, just surviving and finding the equipment. The visitors coming through; Governor G. Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary of African Affairs, came through -- a marvelous visitor because he wanted to see everything, and do everything.

Q: We had food flown down from London, did you have... I mean not we personally, but the local supermarket flew down food from London. I think it arrived on Friday. Did you have a flight like that? Or otherwise we had to count on the -- what was that boat called? Well, it was the boat that came down from England – Elder Dempster Lines, and they brought fresh food every ten days or so and, of course, we flew in things from Denmark.

MCILVAINE: Oh, I remember when I was going out, I asked Bob, "Should I order any case lots to be sent out?" And he said, "Oh, no, there's absolutely everything here." And he said he had already ordered a lot before he left the Congo -- he'd come from the Congo to Dahomey. He said, "It's all here." And when I arrived finally his cases came -- he, not being an expert orderer, had ordered a dozen cans of brussels sprouts and there were a dozen cases of brussels sprouts. And somehow or other, everything else had disappeared -- no, there were cases and cases of sardines.

Q: Sardines and brussels sprouts.

MCILVAINE: The French were still a very active influence in Dahomey and they ran everything in that country -- they ran the butcher shop and they even had some little restaurants, and those markets were wonderful. There were all the fresh vegetables and things you would really want, and fairly decent fish, chicken, that kind of supply and anything we didn't have, we drove over to Lagos. We had a wonderful run once a month over to pick up the things that were unavailable. That was a lovely trip, very exciting. Every country we have been in we've gone next door to the other side of the road -- we were going from French to English in every single place we were -- and switching and suddenly seeing the difference between the French colonial period and the English. The cities were differently laid out, the markets were totally different, the people behaved in quite a different fashion. I always thought the ex-British colonies -- their wonderful locals had gone to Oxford and Cambridge -- they came back, they were first Nigerians, second been-tos to Cambridge or Oxford. By the time the French got through with any of those Dahomean or Guinea students, they came back as black Frenchmen. An enormous difference.

Q: I wonder why? Of course, the French educational system...

MCILVAINE: ...you had spoken a pidgin English in Nigeria and Ghana and ___ spoke good French in Dahomey and Guinea. They didn't speak pidgin at all. So it must be the educational system.

Q: The French also took their education system with them, whereas the British, of course, continued to send their children home at the tender age of seven or nine, or whatever. I wonder if that made a difference? I wonder if your Dahomean had had a better foundation in these French schools in Dahomey and were more Frenchified and became more French even before he went up to Paris. I don't know.

MCILVAINE: Well, the French do consider themselves terribly elite and they are cultural snobs, and they pass that along. Even in the most remote areas -- Dahomey or Guinea -- when you came upon a little village with a school teacher who had been trained in France, he was so impeccably dressed in his little French business suit, and his pointed French shoes, and always the long fingernails to show he was not a member of the working class. The bottle of champagne, and the French records on a little battery-run record player.

Q: You were in Dahomey from '61 to '64, and then did you come back here and then go to Conakry in '66--so you had a break between...

MCILVAINE: Yes. Bob was called back to take over as head of the counterinsurgency, which was an organization set up -- school set up.

Q: We never got into being taken hostage in Dahomey.

MCILVAINE: That was Guinea. The big excitement in Dahomey, the witch doctor ceremonies, up-country trips and the revolutions and all of that, was finding myself pregnant there. The State Department was having a nervous breakdown because Ambassador's wives: one, don't get pregnant and two, I was much too old to be pregnant, and then three, what on earth are they going to do with me? And that is the story – it's been written up in that paper if you want to see...but I eventually...at the last minute they did call Bob and asked him to come for the promotion boards. He said, ''I can't. Alice can't travel." They said, "Well, you have to come." So I had the choice of going or not going and my little local midwife said, "We'll evacuate you. That's how we'll get you on the plane," because otherwise they wouldn't have taken me. We were changing planes in Paris when it all started and I eventually had the baby in Paris. Then came back and we stayed on with the small baby and lots of more exciting adventures with the different terrible things that happened, in Dahomey. And then come home and Bob does the counterinsurgency course which was the State Department's effort to train Americans into other forms of warfare after the Bay of Pigs as an alternate source of being aggressive, without going into actual war. This was a course which Bobby Kennedy was very determined to set up and Averell Harriman -- it was over at the FSI -- and Bob, I guess, was one of the first heads.

Q: Was he at Harvard with John Kennedy? I notice they are the same age.

MCILVAINE: Oh, no, John's much younger. Bob was about the class of '35 at Harvard and Jack Kennedy must have been the class of '39 maybe.

So then, on to Guinea after two years in Washington at which point we had two small babies, and arrived out there just in time to be held hostage.

Q: Were you planning to have your baby with a midwife in Dahomey?

MCILVAINE: Yes-no. We were back and forth the whole time. A State Department doctor came out and looked over the facilities and found them quite inadequate and said, "You must come to Ghana to have your baby." So we drove up and just after we had our first visit the Ghanaians and the Togolese had a spat and they closed the border that night and if I wanted to come up, I would have to come up and stay a week each time. That was just ridiculous. First of all the hotels were terribly expensive. As I recall back in those days, you were paying $150.00 a day for the room and to stay for a whole week just didn't seem feasible. So we went back and Bob said, "You know, my mother had all her babies at home, why shouldn't you?" He got me a copy of a book called Birth Without Fear and it showed how you can lean against a palm tree and put your hand underneath and catch it.

Q: And where was he going to be throughout all this?

MCILVAINE: He better be holding my hand.

Q: But cooler heads prevailed and you were evacuated and...

MCILVAINE: We were evacuated, really. We were going to have it there and they wanted him home, and he had a choice of leaving me there alone to have that baby in the house...

Q: Surely you weren't going to do that?

MCILVAINE: Certainly not. The airline being Air Afrique, when the American Ambassador wanted to bring his very pregnant wife, was forced to agree to it because the doctor said, "This is a medical evacuation."

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The road stretched endlessly in front, a red streak in the green bush as if it had been cut by a knife. If I had known then how many more miles I would have to sit staring numbly at that ever present strip of red, it would have been very discouraging.

Our big limousine looked out of place between the mammy wagons which rattled by with their top heavy loads of bundles, boxes and chicken coops making them tilt to starboard. Each had clever or wise proverbs painted on the sides.

In between the "mammy" wagons would dart Peugeot taxis going at top speed bulging with people. They might be rusty, unpainted and use beer for brake f1uid but somehow they kept going.

Our car swayed and floated over the rough road. I hated sitting in ·the back. It made me sick. Suddenly we flew up over a bump and came down hard, crunching and thudding. The car no longer floated -- the left rear spring had broken.

Bob looked at me anxious1y. “Are you all right?” I felt green, ·sick, hot. Red dirt had seeped in leaving a fine film of dust all over us. My dress stuck to my body.

“How much longer is it?” I asked. We had left Dahomey that morning and had driven along the coast of Togo. That had been beautiful with great sweeps of beach, groves of palm trees, fishing villages with thatched huts covered picturesquely with nets slung over them to dry. Family groups could be seen in the surf heaving in the nets with graceful movements as they sang songs in unison.

Then we had crossed the border from Togo to Ghana and were now headed toward Accra, the capital. It was flat, sparse, hot and uninteresting.

“About 2 hours,” Bob answered. I settled back. I was pregnant. This had caused concern in the State Department which really did not expect an Ambassador’s wife to get pregnant. They are supposed to be too old for that. And for an Ambassador’s wife to be almost forty and pregnant and to be stationed in a small remote African post was too much. They had quickly sent out a State Department doctor to check on me and to look into the available medical facilities.

Doctors always manage to look calm. They never seem to show alarm or emotion. Perhaps they are given a special course at medical school. Therefore, the State Department doctor’s face was expressionless when the nurse showed him the delivery room at the hospital.

The building was an old rambling rather charming wooden structure with verandas encircling the sides making it cool and open. The delivery room was off one of the verandas and had a row of about ten beds. Each was a perfectly normal delivery bed with the usual leg stirrups but near the end of the bed was a hole. Under the hole a basket was suspended. “It’s just like a chicken coop,” I whispered to Dr. Nydell. “I suppose someone comes by every so often to see if there is a baby in the basket. I’ll bet they snip the umbilical cord with their fingernails, too,” I added, remembering a description of midwives in the olden days of New England.

Dr. Nydell was asking, “and the oxygen tanks?” “Oh, no,” came the reply, “we don’t have any.” “and does the hospital keep a good supply of A-positive blood?” The nurse looked puzzled. “But, Monsieur, there is no blood supply. We call in relatives if needed.” At that point we decided not to ask to see the operating room where I would go if a caesarean was necessary and politely thanked our escort and left.

Back in the car, Dr. Nydell said, “Alice, it won’t do. This is your first. baby. You are not young. You will need certain minimum facilities. I suggest that you come up to Ghana. I know an excellent doctor and the hospital is very well equipped. Otherwise, you will have to leave three months in advance and fly to Germany or back to the U.S.

We opted for Ghana, which was just a day’s drive up the coast, which is why Bob and I were bumping along the road to Accra. We were en route to the first appointment with my doctor.

Bob turned and said, “look, we’re almost at the river. We can get a drink while waiting for the ferry. The river soon came into view. A wide muddy expanse with hordes of people all along the banks; some were washing clothes or their own bodies, or their babies. Next to them people were gutting chickens, washing pots and pans or rinsing water through large flat baskets of grain. It was a lively scene with much chatter and gayety and song.

Tables and sheds lined the road selling the usual items such as tins of sardines, oranges, bananas, small kerosene lanterns, packages or cigarettes. Behind were slightly larger shops with bolts of material, plastic buckets, sacks of grain, bars of yellow soap, boxes of Omo washing powder, plastic sandals and belts.

Then there were the “bars” – wooden shacks with a table or two and a few chairs. In the rear would be a kerosene-run refrigerator holding a supply of cold beer and soft drinks.

But we had no time for a drink as the ferry was approaching. It was a flat precarious looking raft consisting of a few boards lashed together. No sides or ends. Alongside was a dug-out canoe with a small outboard motor, which propelled the “ferry.” We can’t sit on that”, I protested, looking at our enormous limousine. “Just wait and see,” Bob laughed.

A crowd was gathering. In Africa, a crowd will gather anywhere, anytime. They spring up in the middle of the desert or on an empty beach. This time they were attracted by the size of our car, our foreign license tags, or maybe it was my height (six feet) or my white hair. There would also be furtive gestures as they reached out to touch my hair or my arm, and there would be peals of giggles if I happened to put on lipstick or light a cigarette.

They waved us on the ferry and we lurched forward. It was a very close fit but it did get on. The ferry cast off and, to my horror, immediately was swept down the river by a strong current. The small outboard motor putted away and finally began to win its battle against the current and we began to inch slowly back up the river and across to the other side.

By mid-afternoon we had bumped our way into Accra, a charming old very British looking city. How incredibly different the British had laid out their towns from the French. How different the policemen looked in their starched khaki shorts and grey wool knee socks, their sappy salutes and British accents. Yes – Sah – Even the products being sold on the streets were different from the ex-French countries.

We found our way to the hospita1, a low sprawling one-floor affair opening on to a pleasant courtyard. Alone one of the walls in the shade on a veranda was a long line of waiting women. I joined them and sat down on a wooden bench feeling very out of place and certainly very drab. My companions were magnificent with their glistening dark skins, huge turbans perched stylistically on their heads and robes of colorful batik and tie-dye material. My pale short dress seemed pathetic as did my uncovered head of white hair. My companions lounged languidly, chattering constantly with lots of graceful hand movements and dramatic tosses of their turbaned heads. If they wondered what the “European” was doing with them, they didn’t let on.

My turn came, I felt nervous but the doctor turned out to be very proficient and charming. He assured me that I was in good shape (for someone my age, that is), that all was well and

that I should come back in a month.

We were pleased and very relieved. All was going well. Everything would be all right.

But by the next month, Ghana had had a quarrel with her neighbor, Togo, and the border between the two countries was closed. There was no way we could drive up. We could fly but the plane only went once a week meaning you would have to stay over for a week after each appointment. Hotel rooms were terribly expensive, not very pleasant and what would one do for a whole week?

I didn't want to go. Bob and I talked it over – endlessly -- what to do. Finally we decided that we would just stay put and have the baby in Dahomey despite the inadequate facilities. Bob found a copy of Birth Without Fear which we read word for word and started the exercises. It was a very thorough book and even had a "do-it-yourself" chapter with lots of examples such as "if in a field, put your back against a tree, squat down, place your hand underneath…."

After a bit of search we found a well-trained loca1 doctor who we liked a lot. He reported that I was in good form and there shouldn't be any problems. We settled back relieved we had made our decision.

Being pregnant in Dahomey had great advantages. The Africans had looked askance at our childless house. One guest had commented on a decorative Moroccan bird cage we had which, being too small for a bird, had a plant growing in it. The guest said rather sadly, "oh, a bird cage without a bird is like a house without children." I was somewhat taken aback. Bob and I had talked about having children but had felt that the demands of Ambassadorial life were not conducive to raising children. Furthermore, Bob already had two children by a previous marriage so we hadn't felt any pressure to start another family.

Shortly, after the empty bird cage remark, however, I was pregnant and I have always felt somehow that the guest and his remark were to blame. It had had a bustle effect on my.

Now that I was large with child, the Africans thought better of me, became much more friendly and open. At long last, in their eyes, I was fulfilling my wifely duties.

Better still it gave me an excuse to miss some of the long social evenings. African men really do not enjoy talking to women. They not only do not enjoy it, they simply do not do it. Often they did not bring their wives to parties which meant I might be the only woman present.

Often their wives spoke no French or English and that made for a very long evening where we would sit planted in low wooden chairs looking at the room, the walls, the ceiling. If I was lucky there might be dancing which was a lifesaver. One could escape the women's corner. The music was fabulous, the men were wonderful dancers, and we would shuffle and sway to the strong beat of the West African highlife until the wee hours.

In early September about a month before the baby was due, Bob and I were lunching on our terrace which is just behind the Embassy office. One of the staff came running over

saying “Washington is on the phone.” Bob leapt to his feet. This was the first time in the two years we had been in Dahomey that Washington had called. Over to the Embassy we dashed – or rather he dashed and I followed as fast as I could. I could hear him sputtering on the phone. “But I can’t some back immediately, he said, “you know my wife is having a baby next month.” Then silence. “But the airlines won’t take women in their eight month,” he replied. There was more conversation but in the end Washington insisted that he return to Washington. It was to be an important Promotion Board assignment and would last several months.

We sat stunned looking at each other. Bob certainly didn’t want to go off and leave me alone in Dahomey just when the baby was due but the airlines would not allow me to fly. What could we do.

Finally we called our local doctor and rushed over to see him. He solved it all saying calmly, “no roble. I will order that you be evacuated. Then the airlines will be forced to take you.” Relief flowed over us. I must have been more worried that I had let on because now that I knew I was going home I felt elated – my worries were over – or so I thought.

By late afternoon the next day we were both on a plane headed for Paris. The doctor’s orders were accepted. The plane was full of official friends of ours all up in first class having a wonderful time. We were back at the end of the tourist class since the State Department did not allow even its Ambassadors to go first class. It was sort of embarrassing. Anyhow, Bob eventually was able to go forward and join in the party. I didn’t go. Not that I really wanted to but I couldn’t budge. The seat of the man in front of me was broken and would only stay in the full reclining position which with my large stomach managed to wedge me in – a very tight fit.

I am sure the pilot joined in on the party because the landings we made first in Niamey, Niger, and the Marseilles were the roughest I have ever experienced. Poor baby, I thought.

It was way after midnight when we reached Paris where we had planned to catch a few hours rest at the airport hotel and then take an early morning plane to Washington. But the airport was crowded and there was no room in the airport hotel. We waited and waited to get to a phone and started calling various hotels in Paris. We finally got a room at the Hotel California and found a bus going into town. One seat only remained and it was right over the wheel. No matter how hard I tried to brace myself over the bumps, it was still a very uncomfortable ride.

Suddenly we heard sirens and the bus came to a screeching halt. It seems we had gone through a yellow light and the police had stopped us. The bus driver opened to door and leapt down to confront the police. A classic French scene unfolded with both men shouting, gesticulating, arguing. Passengers then got off and joined it. What a free-for-all. And it would have been funny it if had not been so late and we hadn’t been so tired. Eventually it ended and with mutterings and grimaces the bus driver climbed back aboard and on we went into town.

After checking in the hotel we felt we were too keyed up to sleep and badly needed to stretch out legs and get some fresh air. Off we went for a stroll down the Champs-Elysées.

At that hour of the night we were almost alone except for some very flashy looking prostitutes. Feeling very conscious I huffed alone behind Bob. But couldn't quite keep up with Bob and there was almost one direct solicitation until she looked up and saw me looking daggers.

Next we slipped in to the famous Herald Tribune bar for a nightcap and while sitting there something happened. Floods of water started pouring from me. It was the start of labor. But the baby wasn't due for another month. The excitement and the plane trip must have brought it on – perhaps explains the reluctance of airlines to allow 9-months pregnant women to fly.

I whispered to Bob and we hurriedly returned to the hotel. There was a new rug in the lobby and I recall moving from one spot to another while waiting for our key hoping no one would notice my problem.

We reached our room and looked at each other in dismay. "Bob," I said, "let's forget it and go to sleep. It doesn't mean anything – this water business." But I knew better and the labor pains started – strong and frequent. I had to admit to Bob that we must do something. We timed the pains. They were much too close to ignore. I wouldn't be able to stall until morning or until we got to the U.S. (which was my secret wish). No way. We would have to get help and quickly. How – where – Paris in the middle of night.

Bob suddenly remembered a good friend, John Burns, was in Paris and called. The phone was answered by yet another friend of ours who happened to be visiting John with her family. Great surprise on both sides and lots of social chatter such as "what are you doing in Paris?" Bob explained that we were having a baby and needed help. Marianne squealed, went off into a long winded conversation until Bob interrupted, "but Marianne, it is urgent, we need a doctor, can you recommend anyone." This served to unleash yet another flood of words, reminiscences of previous births in Paris, charming doctors they had known, and on and on. I groaned from my corner and Bob endured and was eventually able to get some names and telephone numbers.

He quickly started calling but each number brought forth the same answer that the doctor was "en vacances" "On vacation. Of course, it was the classic French vacation period of late August to early September.

Now what. We sat forlorn and desperate. "The American Hospital" Bob said, "Of course, we can go there. They have an official American section – a military one – but I am sure they will allow State Department people, also." He called to the hotel desk, explained our problem and asked that they order a taxi quickly. Down we went and waited and waited for what seemed hours until a taxi finally appeared. Off into the night we rattled.

Much later when we reached the hospital we were dismayed to find it closed and dark. Bob groped about and finally found the bell which he rang and rang. Nothing happened. He rang and rang again. Finally a light could be seen and an old man came slowly toward the door. It cracked open and Bob quickly put in his foot saying "c'est un cas urgent (it is an urgent case) but the old guard muttered wearily – "ahh – out – mais tous les cases sont urgent." (yes, but all the cases are urgent). He started to close the door but Bob's foot kept

it wedged open and he was able to squeeze through and then pulled me in behind.

After miles of corridor – many miles of corridor – we finally reached the "military" side of the hospital where at a small desk an American sergeant presided. He and Bob had a long and not very useful conversation with Bob trying to explain that American ambassadors really were entitled to use American facilities just as much as Army personnel. He was making little headway until down the corridor appeared a young Chinese boy. He and Bob looked at each other and then fell into effusive greetings. Walter – said Bob – what are you doing here. Walter Wang – a Chinese American had been a Communications Officer on Bob's staff years before in the Congo. Walter answered in his slow rather deliberate speech that he was there because his wife was having a baby. Bob was also pleased and turned to the Sergeant and said – you see – he is the same as I am – now can you let us in. And in we did go.

What a relief it was to finally find myself in the competent hands of the head nurse who clucked sympathetically at my condition and even more so when she found out my age and that I had been on an airplane all day and night. She eased me onto a nice firm bed and gave rapid instructions to the other nurses to give me a mild sedative (usually never given as it might take one's mind off one's work) and to not do any of the usual preparatory work as it would only tire me and upset me and there really wasn't time.

How tired I suddenly felt. What a comfort to be here. Now that labor had started, the pains were really quite bad and suppose I had been all alone in a strange country with no one even speaking my language. I began to concentrate and to do all the long practiced breathing to ease the pain. It helped enormously.

There was a stir in the room and I looked up and saw our dear friend, John Burns, who had gotten out of bed to come to the hospital to help. He sat and not really knowing what else to do started to tell some extremely funny jokes. I couldn't help but laugh but each such would end up with a kind of gasp or shriek as the pains started. John finally decided he wasn't helping and wandered on home.

Another scurry in the room and the doctor had arrived. He was a young, tall and very handsome Canadian. He started questioning me and had gotten to "how do you spell McIlvaine" – when I gasped "doctor" and he looked at me, put his hand on my stomach and said "yes" and ordered the cart brought. I was put on it and wheeled quickly to the delivery room.

The time had come. The doctor was calm, helpful and again I was so grateful we were all speaking English. It did help. After a few bad moments, the baby was delivered. I was conscious the whole time and squired around so I could watch them clean him and then they gently placed him on my chest. It is a fine baby. No complications, no problems. What a miracle. What an awesome feeling of accomplishment.

Back in the room bob was waiting. We were ecstatic. And very hungry. Breakfast came and Bob slipped into bed beside me and we wolfed it down. Then reached for the phone and started calling the family in the U.S., a sister in Belgium, another sister in Hong Kong. What excitement. You are where? – Paris? What are you doing there? You have had the

baby – no -- what? A boy – on my? And so on.

Bob left to start work on getting the baby registered at the Paris City Hall and at the American Embassy. My mind raced thinking of problems. I had nothing with me as I had planned to have the baby in Washington. I had my handbag, a maternity dress, a sweater and overnight bag. The baby had nothing. No diapers, no shirts, nothing. But I needn't have worried. Word had already reached the American Embassy and the "club" went into action. One wife had met me only briefly once in Africa and she immediately called and took down a list of necessities which she promptly purchased. Several other wives, total strangers, came to call and brought other useful things such as letter paper and stamps. What a wonderful extended family the Foreign Service is.

Bob left to return to Washington but not before a long evening of celebration with various friends which ended up with John Burns and Bob in the wee hours of the night deciding on the little boy's name. It was to be Ian – Scottish for John in honor of John and all his help. John was also going to put me up in his apartment as soon as I could leave the hospital and take care of us until we were both strong enough to fly home.

I really knew absolutely nothing about babies. I had never changed a diaper. How did they sleep? Which position was the head. What did you do with the umbilical cord. I was very nervous. I was breast feeding the baby but never knew how much he was getting as the nurses did all the weighing in the nursery. Were they also giving extra feedings? Finally, just before time to leave, at my insistence the nurses let me slip into the nursery to watch. Then we had several sessions practicing. I also had a copy of Dr. Spock with I clutched and read constantly.

The day came to leave the hospital. The nurse let me have the hospital diaper and I carefully changed the baby and then wrapped him carefully in my one old sweater, put on my maternity dress and headed for John's apartment. There I found a good supply of very much needed items all waiting on the bed in my room. The Embassy wives had done a marvelous job. John's French cook hovered anxiously by and brought me a lovely afternoon tea. We were going to be all right.

But the apartment was dreary and cold. The maid didn't understand any of my French. Ian started crying just after I had breast fed him at 6:00. The maid had gone. Should I fix Ian a supplementary bottle. Should I pat him some more. Had he burped or not? He cried and cried. I change him. No good. Finally I tiptoed down the long dark hall to the kitchen. What a sight. An enormous old fashioned affair. How did the stove work. Where were the pans. Ian was in my arm crying away. I fumbled about and eventually got the formula mixed, into the bottle and onto the stove.

Ian drank the milk eagerly. My breast feeding hadn't been enough. I then patted his back, put him over my shoulder and did all the things I had been taught. Then laid him in his brand new carry-bed. Screams. Oh – God -- now what. I picked him up and walked the floor. At last he started to sleep. Gently I put him in his bed. Screams. I walked him. This went on and on and on until in desperation and against all rules, I just laid down on the bed, put Ian on my chest and fell asleep. It was dawn.

Moments later just as we both had finally dozed off, there was a knock on the door. It was morning and there was a visitor.

Five days went on like that. Ian crying all night. People coming all day. I have never felt so miserable, so anxious, so nervous,. Obviously Ian could feel all this and it was upsetting him more.

Departure day came but before leaving I had various official chores to perform. Out I went. How strange it felt to be in the outside world. How liberated I felt to be away from the nightmare of that small crying baby. Off I went – a visit to the Embassy to get Ian's passport – with an incredible picture taken of him screaming all wrinkled and wizened and hairless and toothless. That picture was in his passport for the next four years. How the Customs Officials laughed when they saw it.

Next was a long need3ed visit to a good hairdresser and finally a wonderful supper out in the best restaurant in town. I was still in my maternity dress but somehow it managed to look all right.

Departure day. The Embassy very kindly sent over a nurse to help me get to the airport. It was good to have help. I wasn't strong, the baby gear was heavy and carrying the baby in his basket through all the vast airport halls was too much. And, to my horror, I found that the stewardesses and Not allowed to help. So I was grateful to have the nurse.

Then bad luck. A heavy fog descended, no planes could take off. We waited several hours but still no change. I finally told the nurse to please go back to the Embassy, which she did. More hours passed. I went into a small crowded ladies room, took off my now famous maternity dress and fed Ian. And, as always, he cried. So I decided to feed him one of the two bottles I had fixed for the trip. Peace. Now I was getting hungry myself. What to do. Lug that heavy basket all the4 way through that gigantic hall to the restaurant miles away. No. So I sat. another hour passed. I felt desperate. Only one bottle left and one diaper. Where could I get more.

Suddenly two familiar faces appeared. I was my friends from the Embassy. How incredibly thoughtful. They had noticed the fog, called the airport, heard my flight had not gone, had dropped all their afternoon plans and rushed to the airport to be with me. I could have wept with gratitude. The wife whished Ian into her arms, the husband grabbed by arm and propelled me straight to the nearest restaurant where we ordered a drink and food. The whole scene changed. Now it was fun – a lark – an adventure. They had saved the day. Again the Foreign Service had come to the rescue.

Finally, the plane was announced. My friend found a very nice man who would help carry the baby's basket and soon we were all snuggled in all secure on the plane with a helpful stewardess who quickly produced all the necessary bottles and diapers. It was an uneventful flight with the roar of the engines lulling Ian to sleep.

There was Dulles Airport. And there was Bob looking frantic with worry at the ten hour delay. There was my sister. And, even more important, to my total joy, a sturdy pink-cheeked efficient looking nurse, Mrs. Sebastian, who folded poor exhausted Ian into her

expert arms where he seemed to have a vast sigh of relief. His training travels w4re over. He now had expert help instead of the nervous fumbling of his novice mother. He had come home, too.

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Q: Then you had two years here in the Counterinsurgency and two babies and then you went back to Guinea in '66. (recorder turned off)

MCILVAINE: There was nothing on the shelves when we got to Guinea. There were Czechoslovakian buttons, a Chinese kimono or two. As things got worse, there was only one airline flight a week and that was an Air Afrique. The only eggs we could ever get were flown in once a month from Holland by KLM which had a once a month flight. The boat stopped coming in because the port wasn't working. There was very little food to be found in the marketplace because anything that they didn't eat themselves they were using to barter across the border. They could get more by barter than they could by cash so they would go across the border and get their kerosene and their rice and so forth. I really marveled -- there was very little fish. When we first arrived there was the local man who came around with the wonderful shrimp once a week -- that disappeared. Eventually I think there was a Greek who opened an import store for food and I think we went there and got some frozen steaks from Denmark. The marketplace would have the onions, tomatoes, lettuce, beans -- always string beans. But we had to go to Sierra Leone as often as we could to buy kerosene for the lanterns, rice, oil, all the basics, particularly for the staff. They really couldn't find the food. And one marvels at what one did for dinner parties.

Q: You do really in retrospect, don't you?

MCILVAINE: What was it we served? _____ Of course, there they had after we'd all been held hostage, as things got worse and worse, they kicked out the Israelis. The French already had been kicked out, the British had already been kicked out. The Germans were kicked out. We were there with the Outer Mongolians, the North Koreans, North Vietnamese, the Chinese and Yugoslavs who were our great friends, and Poles and Czechoslovakians -- they were all very friendly and very nice. A Swiss couple and a Belgian couple, Italians, and we worked out a wonderful life style and since none of us could speak the same language we would play boles _____ with the Italians. We would dance at our house, we would go to the Greek merchants for bridge. None of us were allowed to leave town. Like in Russia, I suppose, there was a 20 mile limit and Bob finally used a little bit of force by getting the State Department to deny the Guineans permission to leave Washington; at which point he was allowed to take some trips so we had some extraordinary trips up country.

Guinea is beautiful up country. The Guinea Highlands, wonderful streams. It's the foothills where the Niger River starts.

Q: Yes, I saw those when we flew up to Timbuktu.

MCILVAINE: Of course, there were no accommodations anywhere but luckily there were -- and you do find them in the most peculiar places -- the missionaries and despite

everything else there were three or four places where the missionaries were living -- they'd been there for years.

We finally were able to get right up on the Portuguese-Guinea border. I can see why they didn't want us up there because we ran into some Cuban troops which we hadn't realized were up there. Bob is a great explorer and we would pile in our Peugeot and always take someone from the Embassy because they couldn't get out, so we always had a couple of girls with us. We would pile some food in the back and off we would go. Everyone else was locked into town -- very difficult.

Q: Absolutely great for morale -- was there swimming?

MCILVAINE: There were three swimming pools -- they were called -- to get around the appropriation committee restrictions on how the State Department wastes its money -- we would have water storage tanks. And when you think of being trapped in this country with absolutely nothing, to be denied even a swimming pool for the staff to use, and the incredible heat -- so there were three swimming pools.

Q: We did go in one -- Pierre Graham -- was he still there when you were there.

MCILVAINE: Exactly, a marvelous man.

Q: We swam in that pool.

MCILVAINE: Dr. Wilde, our Embassy doctor...the keeping up the morale for the wives was exceeding difficult because after our hostage incident they kicked out all the Peace Corps, all the Pan Am team, most of the Admin staff, so we were left with a tiny little group scattered all over town. The rains were about the worse in the world, an incredible rainy season -- it just came down in buckets. We ran out of gasoline to drive. We were put on a one-shift day. There were no telephones and we had an absolutely marvelous time.

Q: And your two little babies there.

MCILVAINE: ...two little babies. You watched the sunset day after day. The sad part of it was none of the Guineans dare come. At first a few came to the house and then we suddenly realized that this was not going to be very safe for them, and in fact every single one of our friends is dead. They were killed by Sekou Toure, even the fabulous man who had been Ambassador from Guinea to the U.S. -- all dead. We had a visit from the Chef de Cabinet just last winter and somehow or other he was able to live through his 10 or 15 years in a Guinean prison camp on one cup of rice a day and being beaten. He has a very tender, very delicate back; his eyes, he said, were terribly sensitive because there was no light in that place for 15 years. So it's very painful for him now to be around any kind of bright light.

Q: How did he manage to survive, did he tell you?

MCILVAINE: He said, his religion. He's a Moslem and he said, "I want to quickly point out that my form of Mohammad, my Moslem, is nothing like what's going on in the

Middle East." He said, "We always were trained and taught to be the most peaceful people, always looking for peace, never violence." Anyway, he survived, and how he did it is a miracle.

Q: What was his name?

MCILVAINE: _____ de _____, we called him Portos.

Q: So you really were somewhat under siege the whole time you were there -- the whole three years?

MCILVAINE: Pretty much. As I said, you couldn't get out. The servants definitely were called up periodically to report, they were constantly trying to fabricate lies. They came up with some absolutely totally faked documents at one point which Charlie Whitehouse, our marvelous DCM, later on Ambassador in Vietnam, a wonderful man, letters that he had written to Tom _____ in Kenya requesting Tom's help in raising troops or something to help the Americans invade Guinea. A rather bizarre plot, and the phraseology and the English used was all such that it was fairly easy to prove to the Guinean president that this was absolute fabrication. But they were very much under the influence of the Eastern Bloc, particularly the East German and the East German police techniques were very much in evidence all over the country. And as you know now, Sekou Toure died and they've been trying to work their way back to some kind of a healthy economy. Wonderful people.

Q: Starting right from the bottom.

MCILVAINE:...right from the bottom. They were the first country to be independent, you know, Ghana and Guinea in '58.

Q: Oh, is that why Toure gave refuge to Nkrumah when he had to leave Ghana then, they were friends from way back.

MCILVAINE: Exactly, made him deputy...

Q: So Nkrumah must have been there when you were there?

MCILVAINE: Absolutely. And this is the reason we were held hostage. A Guinean delegation was on its way to an OAU meeting in Addis and hadn't realized when they got on the KLM plane leaving Conakry that it was going to stop -- someplace, maybe Freetown or maybe in Liberia -- where they got on a Pan Am plane--it must have been Liberia...

Q: ...in Liberia, Robert's Field.

MCILVAINE: Robert's Field, and that would take them to Ghana and to Lagos and then that Trans African flight would take them over Ethiopia, and the Guinean delegation was on the plane when it stopped in Accra, Ghana, and they were horrified when they found they were in Ghana and wouldn't get off the plane when all the other dignitaries went in to have some fresh fruit juice in the airport. And someone said, "Where is the other group? Why aren't they coming in?" The Ghanaians found that it was the Guinean delegation and

someone said, “Oh, it’s the Guineans and they didn’t wish to get off.” The Ghanaians said, “Oh, boy!” and went on and grabbed them off the Pan Am plane. So Sekou Toure heard about this from his own people, not from us, because the American Ambassador which was Franklin Williams, had sent the telegram to warn us there might be trouble because the Guineans had been taken off the Pan Am plane -- or just to advise us -- and the telegram got lost, it never got to us. It got scrambled. So Sekou Toure figured, “My goodness, the Americans have the best communications in the world. Why have they not come to tell me about this terrible event?” And too, it was a Pan Am plane and therefore it must be the American’s fault. And the Ghanaians said, “We’re not going to release this Guinean delegation until the Guineans release Nkrumah and Nkrumah’s staff,” because his whole big entourage had been taken when they had the overthrow in Ghana -- Nkrumah had this big traveling group with him. They were all in Guinea and a lot of them wanted to go home, they didn’t want to stay. So Sekou Toure couldn’t think of anything to do except hold the Americans hostage until such time as his delegation was released.

Q: And that was you.

MCILVAINE: That was us, and every American in the country, every Peace Corps kid, everyone. Most had house arrest and a little mob around them keeping them from coming and going.

Q: Was anyone hurt or killed or anything.

MCILVAINE: No. The other strange thing that happened that night was the Chef de Protocol was sent by the president to the Pan Am director’s house which was next door to our house to find out what had happened. “The Guinean delegation has been taken off your Pan Am plane, would you please do something, would you tell us what went on?” And the poor Pan Am man couldn’t speak very good French so the Guinean delegation is talking to him and saying, “What happened?” and he’s saying, “Don’t worry, the plane is fine, everything went according to schedule. Everything is on course. Everything is fine.” We had just arrived and Charlie and Molly Whitehouse had planned a party for us to meet the Peace Corps and we were having a large dance for the young, it was a disco and everyone was dancing their little feet off, and the music, and the screams and the yells -- a great party. So the Chef de Protocol goes back to Sekou Toure, and he said, “The Pan Am man said everything is going fine and everything worked according to schedule, and boy, is the American Ambassador celebrating.” So that did it, they knew we’d been at fault.

Q: Oh. Did you ever feel afraid in West Africa, in Dahomey or in...

MCILVAINE: There is one little story in there, that I have written up, that I definitely did feel afraid. This was...obviously at the time the mob were attacking me, your adrenaline is flowing, and you are just as cool as a cucumber. And you just think quickly and you do everything just right, and that only went on about six or eight hours and then the next day, at noon in the silence, you could hear all of a sudden the mob coming again. And that, I noticed. We had a little Norwegian nanny with us and she and I suddenly were both looking at each other because we thought we could hear something coming again. About two weeks later when we were finally released -- no, just before we were released -- the Guinean delegation had been sent back from Ghana and President Toure was giving them a

big welcoming reception in the outdoor stadium and everybody came because this was going to be this great celebration of their victory. When they brought them off the plane, and brought them to the big stadium and the Guineans started telling the story of what had happened to them. They had been very badly treated, they had been beaten in the Ghanaian jails. You could hear, and we were listening on the radio back at the house which was not too far from this big stadium? And that brought back the memories of this terrible moment when we had been alone in the house and the mob had come screaming and breaking in. I must say I really started chewing my nails. At that point I started doing all the things I hadn't done the first time which was drawing the curtains, and filling the bath tubs with water, and I started cooking -- boiling water, always boil water in an emergency and cooking masses of tuna fish and I don't know what I was doing but running around the house getting ready knowing that mob was going to be so excited. They were going to come right down from the stadium and come straight for us again. Charlie and Molly Whitehouse came rushing over because they heard it too, and brought the children, and said, "We'll all get in here this time together."

Somebody from the embassy came rushing out and started setting up a better... we had the first time only carrier hand radios that would reach only a few miles -- putting in a big international receiver. So that this time we could really be in touch with the outside world, and call for help. Everyone was scurrying around, and I really felt terribly tense -- very tense. At that point, very sweetly and with great consideration, someone from the Guinean government -- a little delegation of three men in little business suits -- came to see me and said, "Mrs. McIlvaine, we just want to assure you that nothing is going to happen. No one is coming this time. This is just a demonstration out there, we will not come anywhere near your house."

Q: They didn't offer you any troops as protection, or anything? No, and they didn't come the second time?

MCILVAINE: The original time had all been planned. It hadn't been spontaneous. The Guineans are really very sweet people, in the right circumstances. I suppose everyone has got their point... And there were other moments, there were plenty of other moments. We were stopped all the time at night, and dealing with someone who definitely was rather poorly educated and didn't speak French, who would stop you looking for arms in your car, and finds the jack. The jack in a Peugeot looks like a machine gun, it's a very strange piece of metal in the back of the car, and they would point to that and we'd have to jack up the car to show them that it wasn't a machine gun. Night noises always are strange...

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The storm broke suddenly. Lightning and thunder shattered the sky in a series of explosions. The palm tree fronds cracked and whirled in the wind adding to the sounds of fury.

I lay rigid and tense in bed. I hate storms -- was afraid of them and now, in the big house, I waited for the children to wake up and start crying.

The first wail came. It was Kassie. Next came the sound of the door opening, a scurrying of

feet. Ian was there whispering in his trying-to-be-brave voice, that the air conditioners had gone off. We had only been in this house in Guinea two weeks but the children were already conditioned to the soothing whir of the air conditioners and woke instantly when they stopped.

Grabbing my flashlight I started down the hall for Kassie's room but she had already managed to crawl out of her crib and was running toward me.

"Come, let's all get in mv bed", I said, grabbing her and moving toward our room.

"If Papa were here," Ian said, "he could get the generator started." Oh - God - I thought, I will have to go out in this mess and try and start it. "I can do it, Ian," I said. "You stay here in my bed and keep Kassie quiet. I'll be right back."

Down the tile stairs I ran, pulled open the heavy double front doors and plunged out into the storm. My flashlight was useless but the lightning flashed so often I cou1d see my way down the driveway. At the end of the driveway was the garage and behind it the generator, an enormous metal box. The lightning now seemed to be moving away. Would it be safe to touch it. The control panel was so complicated. What had the Embassy engineer told me. I took a breath and started. Open the enter panel. Pull the red lever down – then push the switch and push the started button. Damn, I tried again pushing the started button harder. There was a cough, then two and slowly the huge machine came to life. I had done it.

I started back I heard through the noise of the storm a piercing scream – an inhuman gurgling screech. Oh -- what now. My nerves were worn thin. The first week we had been in Guinea a mob of hundreds had come screaming, yelling, throwing rocks and wreaked the house. Then we had been held in house arrest for a week. Next the Guinean Government had asked the Peace Corps, most of our AID mission and admin staff to leave the country. A cable had followed from the State Department ordering my husband, Bob, home for consultation. They had further ordered that the children and I be evacuated. I had refused feeling it unfair to send me away from the trouble while the other wives had to stay. All my extra supply of adrenalin which gives such help in a crisis seemed to have been used up.

The scream came again. Suddenly I realized it was our "Biche" our pet miniature deer. I ran toward the sound. In the corner of the garden a large yellow dog which belonged to our Chinese Embassy neighbors had our tiny deer by the throat. She had been given to us by one of the Peace Corps kids who had had to leave. She was perfection Dainty, delicate, so tame she would come into the house, she had been raised with several does, and she had been totally unafraid and run when the yellow beast had come into the garden. I kicked and beat the dog off with my flashlight and gathered "Biche" in my arms. Her enormous liquid eyes looked dazed. A red gash marked her neck. I carried her gently to her favorite corner of the garden under a protective bush and laid her down and then went for bandages. When I came back she had managed to move away somewhere else and I could not find her in the large dark garden.

Back in the house the air conditioners had started and were whirring along. The children had fallen asleep in my bed so I crawled in forgetting my dirty wet feet and went to sleep

feeling comforted by their presence.

The next morning I got up early to check on “Biche.” Mornings in Guinea were bad. The air did not start to move until late morning. The heat was oppressive surrounding you like a hot wet towel as you stepped from the cool air conditioned bedroom.

The terrace was quiet. The palm tree fronds hung listlessly as if tired from the whirling in the storm.

The ocean was calm and oily I crawled under the clump of bushes where I had last seen “Biche” and knelt until I finally found her way in the back. She looked at me with those enormous eyes. She was breathing very heavily and jerkily and her gash seemed much larger than last night. I took her some water to drink. She sucked with her nose but did not drink. Then lay back and shut her eyes. I felt sick.

Alasan, the houseboy was sitting on the terrace with breakfast. I started to blurt out that injury of “Biche” when I remembered by manners. Nothing must be said before the ritual series of greetings. A long series of “how are you” and “how is your family”. Alasan looked distressed and disappeared quickly to tell the others.

By noon the Embassy doctor had the news and came to help. He examined “Biche” gently and then said, “Alice – it is no use – we will have to put her down. I could shoot her but I am afraid the police would be on us immediately. Could your cook take care of it?” Stunned I went to Diallo who took his large carving knife and disappeared. Alice, Dr. Wilde said – it will be excellent meat and – but seeing my face went no further.

Breakfast was long. The children were listless and fussy. Even the antics of the two pet monkeys didn’t make us smile. What could we do today. Go to the local market and try and get some food. There never was much. Some small tomatoes, a few onions, some lettuce, herbs, beans, bananas, sour oranges. Never any meat or chicken or eggs. There was bread but no butter. Guinea had broken with France and now her currency was worth nothing outside the country. What little produce which wasn’t eaten was used for barter and taken across the border at night in exchange for vital necessities like kerosene, rice, fabric, oil.

Luckily we were allowed to import case lots so kept our storerooms stacked with cases of tinned butter and meat. Then there was an occasional fisherman who, if you were lucky, might sell you a handful of shrimp for an incredible price.

The Residence, as the ambassador’s house is called, was in the suburbs. Our private car had not arrived. So I was stuck. I could have called the Embassy and asked that my husband’s official limousine be sent out but how foolish I felt going to the local market in the enormous black shiny thing. And even more foolish using it to go to a local swimming pool with the children. Besides, Charlie Whitehouse, who was in charge in my husband’s absence, should be using it. For the young officers it is always a thrill to sit with the official flags fluttering on the fenders.

Charlie turned up after lunch to bring news. How welcome his visits were for without the

car and with no phone, I really felt quite cut off from the world. Today' s news was bad. The wife of our Admin Officer had been bitten a week ago by a small puppy. We had sent the head of the puppy to Paris for examination since rabies is prevalent in Guinea. The report had come back that, yes, the dog had been rabid. Mrs. Hoyt had started immediately on those dreaded series of shots after being bitten and would have to continue for the whole series. I can imagine how upset she must be. We were all going there for supper that night. Supper and bridge. Charlie would come and pick me up.

It had been a pleasant evening. We started off playing bridge with our cocktails and then each table fad beef fondue pots put down. We all happily dipped our meat into the oil, cooked it, and ate it with the many different sauces. Mrs. Hoyt was upset. Something had caused her to break out in a terrible rash and itching. Dr. Wilde was there and seemed concerned. It could be a reaction to the rabies shots, he whispered to me, which can be dangerous. I think we had better evacuate her. We had a huddle with Charlie who left after the next rubber of bridge to go to the Embassy to order medical evacuation. Mrs. Hoyt ate her supper with us, dipping her meat into the central pot but stopped often to scratch and rub her itching body.

Charlie was able to get through to Washington who contacted Frankfurt, Germany, and we were advised that a plane would be in Guinea by noon the next day. What incredible efficiency.

By noon we stood on the hot broken cement runway at the shabby airport. Mrs. Hoyt was very uncomfortable so we all took turns holding her hands so she wouldn't scratch. She was very thirsty so I went to try and find water. Finally had to go to the dilapidated office of the airport manager who had a wash basin to find any water. She was grateful for the water but was having trouble swallowing it. We held the cup to her lips and tried to help. We should have known then.

The news reached us the next day. The worst had happened. Mrs. Hoyt had died. It had been hydrophobia. Dr. Wilde and the nurse who had gone with her had spent the entire plane trip forcing their hands down her throat trying to keep an air passage open. Now they had to be rushed off for tests since hydrophobia is passed through the sa1iva.

We were stunned. We had all eaten out of the same pot with her the night before. We had held a cup to her 1ips. We all had open cuts and scratches on our hands. Could it have been transmitted to us?

I found out later than one of our group had literally taken the next plane to Paris and gone straight to the Pasteur Institute for tests.

For us a different plan was arranged. What had happened was that Mrs. Hoyt who had been given the best and most effective shots to prevent her from contracting hydrophobia had not developed the correct antibodies. The medical world was stunned. This had never happened before. This was the first death from rabies -- hydrophobia in the U.S. Foreign Service and one of the few ever in the U.S. A plan was worked out. All of us would be given a series of three rabies shots. Then our blood would be tested. If we had not developed the correct antibodies, we would have to be transferred to another post. There

were too many rabid dogs in Guinea to make it safe if you were one of those rare people who didn't develop the antibodies.

It was decided that Kass and Ian and I would go first -- to lead the way -- to encourage the others to step forward. Everyone had heard how painful rabies shots are and no one really wanted to take them. But then no one really wanted to get hydrophobia. A few other families started to trickle into the clinic to get their shots. Perhaps the others would follow. Then it happened. The AID Director who was totally bald blurted out that he had had a full head of hair until one day when he took a rabies shot. Overnight every hair in his head fell out, he said. That was the end of the rabies shots. No one else came near the clinic.

It seemed that life in Guinea would be nothing but trouble. Now more problems. It was the time for the rains. It is one of the longest, hardest and heaviest rainy seasons anywhere in the world. ___inches falls in one month. It is like water being poured out of a bucket. It is not a drizzle or a shower. It is strong, unceasing. The dirt roads become rivers -- potholes become lakes – windshield wipers were useless. So you drive bumping and crunching into unseen pitfalls.

And what to do with the children who now cannot even go down to their one play area -- the beach.

To make this rainy season even worse, the country suddenly ran out of gasoline for cars. The Russians were providing gasoline to Guinea in exchange for bananas. This year's banana crop had failed miserably because the Guineans had not been able to spray against a certain banana disease. The needed spray made by Shell -- a product of the western world -- and Guinea had no exchange money to buy it with. No bananas -- no gasoline.

Our days were spent in line at gasoline stations. A dreary business inching forward to toward the gas pumps using most of our 3 allotted gallons a day. A silly business. Some of us took to pushing the cars while waiting in line. But when the heavy rains started this became impossible.

The Embassy changed its working hours to cut out the lunch time drive home which everyone did since there were no restaurants in town. Now the Embassy opened at 7:00 and everyone worked straight through to 3:00 and then went home for the day. It saved gas. This crisis eventually resolved itself, the way they all do, but the Embassy never went back to the old hours.

More and more we were being cut off from the outside world. KLM cancelled its once a week flight to Europe. Now we were left with only one airline -- a once-weekly Air Afrique flight.

Ships had come into the port of Conakry on a regular basis but now all the equipment on the docks had broken making unloading a long and slow process. The Peace Corps had been the ones in the past to keep the equipment in good condition. Since they had been kicked out, everything had fallen into disrepair.

Ships began to stop coming as they were losing money sitting waiting to be unloaded. With

few ships coming in, our food shipments were not arriving.

Bob had returned by this time. Our Peugeot station wagon had finally turned up. We decided we would try to get to the capital of the neighboring country, Freetown in Sierra Leone to stock up on essentials. We made out our long list of vital necessities and started the slow process of obtaining permission to leave the country. No diplomats are ever allowed to leave the capital, Conakry. Perhaps the Guineans felt badly about the attack on me in the house because they ended up giving us permission to go.

Off we set but not without a few trepidations. There had been a revolution in Sierra Leone, the army had taken over, and there had been many reported incidences at the border and at the river ferries. We might be subjected to delays and harassment.

Three hours down the road we came to the first ferry. Only a few cars were waiting. A good sign. Then the truck in front of us stopped right in the middle of the narrow road. There was no way around it. Then to our dismay two men descended from the truck, walked slowly around to the rear, opened the door and even more slowly started to pull boxes out -- one by one by one. Oh -- god.

Bob walked over and smiled and politely, very politely, asked if they would be so kind as to move over just the slightest bit. Ugly stares -- grunts -- a rude answer.

We looked at each other. We would have to try a new tactic. Slowly we wandered by to look at the river, stood near the truck, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one and then casually offered the pack to one of the men. It was accepted. Everyone lit up a cigarette. Then we strolled back to our car, opened the rear and took out some cold beers. These were passed around and a conversation was started. It wasn't too long before the men grinned, got in the truck and moved it over to the side of the road. We smiled passed out another pack of cigarettes and moved on -- getting to the river just in time for the ferry.

No other problems faced us. We were able to get to Freetown in good time and rushed about town buying all our vitally needed supplies. The station wagon was low, sagging on the ground under its heavy load of sacks of rice, tins of kerosene, bolts of material, bags of sugar, drums of oil. We did not look very ambassadorial. Then off to the Embassy to look up Mary Gill who had been Bob's secretary when we were stationed in Dahomey. She was to take us out to her apartment for the night.

She didn't look well and seemed a bit agitated. But it was only after the second drink did she tell us the story. The day of the revolution she had been caught en route to work by a bunch of soldiers. They forced their way into her car and ordered her to drive them to a certain Army barracks. Thinking quickly she managed to maneuver the car so it passed right by the apartment building where many of the single people in the Embassy lived. She had hoped, desperately, that one of them might recognize her car and see her problem. They did. It was reported immediately to the Chargé who leapt in his car and methodically started making his way through the various army camps. She had been taken to the barracks thrust in a room, stripped naked and thrown on a bed. Mary said she kept talking -- just as fast as she could -- arguing with them -- using the line of why would they want an old, fat, ugly girl like her. Miraculously she as able to hold them off – and the Chargé

finally found her and was able to rescue her. An incredibly brave performance. And even more courageous was that she did not ask to go home but volunteered to stay on and serve out her tour.

I am not stout hearted like a lion and her story left me chilled. To make matters worse, the radio was crackling with news that a group of Belgian mercenaries aided by some Americans had flown in (like at Stanleyville, I suppose) and were going to overthrow the revolution. The area in which they were reported to have landed was right smack in the area we had to drive through the next day to get back to Guinea. Thank God we had a French car and Guinean tags. They would have no way of knowing we were Americans. (What had actually happened was that a small plane flown by some Belgian and American missionaries had landed. The group consisted of four people and were not mercenaries but missionaries.)

Off we started the car so heavily laden we practically were scraping the road. It was a four hour trip to the first ferry. All went well the first two hours. Then we saw a barricade in the road manned by scruffy looking army in camouflage uniforms. Bob groaned when they approached. He could tell from his years in the Congo during the "big troubles" that they had been indulging in some kind of drugs and from their speech that these were illiterate "bush" boys.

They gestured us to stop, demanded our papers though it was obvious they couldn't read as they held our identity cards upside down. We produced only our Guinean drivers licenses. We did not want to show our American passports. They then marched around to the rear of the station wagon and motioned to us to open it. "Oh -- God Bob" I whispered, they will want to inspect everything. It will take hours. We will miss the ferry. Then what. This is bush. No place to sleep -- or eat.

They were an awful looking bunch so we hastened to open up the rear. Where to start. I pulled out my overnight case. We couldn't communicate so I acted it all out. I stuck the toothbrush in my mouth. That got a few grins. Next was an eyelash curler. That intrigued them. Then a hair brush and mirror. Now their attention was beginning to flag. They were getting bored. If I kept on, insisted they see everything, maybe they would. loose their suspicion and not insist on seeing what was in every box and bag in the car. I pulled out a hair net, a shower cap, and then they began to pull away from the car. It had worked. They gestured for us to close the car and removed the barricade and motioned us through. It had worked. We hurried away. Bob had been at first bewildered by my act, then caught on and was having a hard time keeping a straight face. He was even forced to offer praise.

Back we went to Guinea to see what was next in store. What a year it was turning out to be.

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Q: '66 to '69, and then you went directly from there to Kenya, didn't you?

MCILVAINE: That's right.

Q: That must have been a pleasant change?

MCILVAINE: Extraordinary. I mean to be in a place that had telephones, and roads, and libraries, and schools.

Q: A nice climate.

MCILVAINE: Fabulous food, wonderful climate, but there again just at the end of our tour, they had just killed the ambassador in Sudan and I think it was the Black September Group. Our intelligence people picked up information that they were going to try to get the spouse of the Ambassador in Somalia. Because the Foreign Service officers had said they did not wish to be negotiated for and therefore I think some of the terrorist groups said, "Okay, we'll go for wives and children and see if perhaps they'll negotiate for them." They also wanted her because she's a Rothschild, and she is the Austrian Rothschild and they knew that the Rothschild family would certainly come up with some sort of ransom. So they wanted to get her and we got her out of Somalia and into Nairobi and brought her in disguise to our house. We had troops around the house for two or three days and then in the middle of one night we snuck her out to the airport and into the baggage section of the plane and got her off. It's an uncomfortable feeling living that way, and then the next month we were en route home, and had retired, and we were going to stop in Cairo and see Kate and Jerry Green and it turns out the intelligence again picked up that they were going to get Mrs. McIlvaine and children. We had about a month before we left, and honestly, it was so scary because the Kenyans immediately put extra guards on us. At the farewell parties -- they were shoulder to shoulder because we were always out in gardens. You're having a perfectly wonderful time and you suddenly look and see them shoulder to shoulder and you say, "Oh, gosh, there it is again." We couldn't tell anybody when we were leaving. We had to go under assumed names. Friends of ours would call at 3:00 in the afternoon, and they would say, "Alice, where are the children?" And I'd say, "Oh, they went down the street on their bicycles." This would be the Israeli Ambassador's wife. She'd say, "Alice, you cannot let them out, don't you know?" So this kind of ominous feeling, I was so glad to get out. I don't know how the people put up with it, living that way.

Q: It's one of the differences, isn't it?

MCILVAINE: Oh! There's no way to protect yourself. It's just a question of when and where are they going to go next? If they want you, they'll get you.

Q: I never felt afraid in Sierra Leone. The only time I felt afraid was once when I was in Nigeria and I was alone in a marketplace and the driver had dropped me off. We were in Lagos for a conference. The driver had dropped me off and hadn't gone to the market with me.

MCILVAINE: In Lagos?

Q: He'd stayed with the car. I was wandering around and having a good time because I knew how to relate to the market mammies in Sierra Leone, but a great huge woman started following me around with a fly whisk -- some animal tail and sort of flicking it at me. She wanted to know why I was so skinny and why I didn't have any children, and

didn't I want some fertility things. She was enormous. I was a little afraid there, but that's the only time. But now you'd be foolish not to be afraid, I think. In some other countries, you'd be foolish. I'm not saying you should be afraid in Nigeria, maybe you should today, I don't know. No, it's not the market mammies, but when you're all alone, the only white person in a situation like that, I tried not to bolt for the car and the driver, and made my way back slowly.

MCILVAINE: You just felt simply...

Q: But I just suddenly...

MCILVAINE: Lagos is so crowded, you feel pressed in.

Q: Yes, I felt closed in on, and that could be it.

MCILVAINE: I remember rushing in to the big department store there early in the morning to do my month's shopping and somebody bumped into me, and I had my wallet with my passport and everything, and an enormous amount of money for a couple month's shopping, right on the top of my shopping bags, stupidly. This man bumped me and I looked, and he was gone. And there I was, 9:00 in the morning, had a whole day of shopping to do before I was going to meet my husband at 6:00 and drive back to Dahomey. I ran and screamed, and do you know everybody on that sidewalk turned around and they grabbed him. They got him, and they got my wallet. I've never seen such instant action. You would have thought they would have laughed and said, "Oh, boy, it would be fun to have..."

Q: No, no, not even in the souks of Morocco. When we were shopping one day and the Peace Corps director's wife had her purse slung over her shoulder, and someone picked from it. The boys on the street of the Medina, Casbah after him in a minute and got her wallet back.

These were all woman and this woman was very big and flicking this thing at me, and trying to intimidate -- probably just wanted me to buy a turtle shell or something for its aphrodisiac qualities.

MCILVAINE: That's interesting about being childless in Africa. We had no intention of having any children. Bob had several grown ones by his first marriage, and I was elderly, and certainly it does not fit in with the Ambassadorial life. You really are out a lot. But the Dahomeans kept coming in the house, and there was a famous French poet -- I can't think who it was -- and they all quoted the same poem to me because I had one of those Moroccan bird cages and there was no bird in it. They would quote this poem which said something -- a cage without birds, is like a house without children -- looking at me to see, and within weeks I was pregnant. I could feel the difference, I could feel them all suddenly relate to me. They all are pregnant all the time, and suddenly I was normal. So it made me a friend of theirs.

Q: Well, I kept telling her, "I have children, they are with me. They are at school."

But you must have had some marvelous trips in Kenya on safari. I loved it, it was my favorite trip and we were just there as tourist. I thought, "It must be heaven, in some ways, to have a tour there."

MCILVAINE: Not as an Ambassador's wife because it was a busy post. Obviously, no one came to visit us in Guinea. No one came to visit us in Dahomey. But you find yourself in a place like Nairobi, Kenya, you are at that airport every Sunday morning at 8:00 meeting a Congressional delegation. It was the headquarters for so many different branches, and we had just constant... wonderful visits from either scientists, or astronauts, or musical teams, it was just never ending. So we never did get out, and if we did it was occasional weekends and just at the lodges. So finally Bob did retire out there and we took up a wildlife conservation job where we had our own Land Rover, and our own airplane, and our own time. So then we had two or three lovely years there.

Q: What was he doing, sort of tracking the herds, or...

MCILVAINE: He was there in the African Wildlife Foundation -- they have a big program out there.

Q: So you continued to live in Nairobi?

MCILVAINE: We moved out of our residence and into the bush out in ____, and stayed.

Q: And what did you do about the children's school? Did you teach them?

MCILVAINE: No, there were plenty of schools in Nairobi.

Q: So they could go into Nairobi to school?

MCILVAINE: We still had very close contacts with all our friends in the diplomatic service but you could just pick the parties you wanted to go to. It's interesting to watch the change over the years of the seven nights a week parties, and the Independence Day functions, and all that, and as the years go by you find that more and more the wives don't turn up. "Madam est fatigue."

Q: Fatigue, a wonderful French phrase. And when you were having a sit-down dinner in Morocco, and there were more "fatigue" women in Rabat when it was time to go to dinner at the American embassy houses than you can ever imagine. So one just didn't have sit-down.

MCILVAINE: If we did have sit-down, we had a whole bunch of little tables -- tables of six or eight, and you could _____ because, as you know, sometimes they came and brought everybody they knew. As you also know, sometimes they considered it just a general open invitation and would come the next week. It didn't matter, this was just a... So the small round tables helped, but as you say also, the buffet and definitely the music so they could move around, and the barbeque – the ____ outside.

We also developed our own form of dress and we even had printed invitations with

"S.V.N.C." at the bottom, for dress. Anas ____ no jacket, no tie. We all went into the Philippino, the men-type shirts, or what they called red sea kit which would be what the British used in the tropics which is an evening shirt and the red cummerbund...was there a tie?

Q: I don't think so. I think you could, or couldn't.

MCILVAINE: It really made such good sense. Then some of the countries like Liberia where you had to have all of the dress outfits -- the morning, the white tie... We felt so sorry for those poor darlings.

Q: Especially in Sierra Leone because there was no dry cleaning. We would take our dry cleaning either to Lagos or to London, if you can imagine. The dry cleaning was usually the clothes that you'd worn for two weeks or whatever on R&R in Europe, then you had no way to get them ready for the next trip unless you happened to go to Lagos or something.

MCILVAINE: When did Sierra Leone get its independence?

Q: We went out in 1962 and we were the second group, so it must have been around 1959 or '60.

MCILVAINE: So you had the two, Ghana and Guinea, and I thought the song that went along went, "Ghana, Guinea, Mali..." wonderful highlife music, but maybe Mali didn't get it then. That was '58, and then ____ was later which was '60. So you were '59 or '60.

Q: It must have been '59 or '60 because we were relieving the first group that went out, and I'm sure they only went out for two years, so it must have been late '59. A man named Tom Reiner, who had been in Liberia, came up and got housing. The Lebanese, of course, were building all of the attractive housing that anyone would want to live in, but Reiner thought we should rent from the Sierra Leoneans. So I can tell you some of the original housing was just not to be believed, and by that time we had another Ambassador who didn't think we had to abide by that and so people were gradually moving into newer housing built by the Lebanese.

MCILVAINE: I remember we had the most marvelous time going around and comparing notes at each other's posts, because we had all been issued the same kit. "Why did you get that table?"

Q: And going to everyone's house and having exactly the same rattan furniture.

Your last year in Kenya was after the 1972 directive. Did that make a great deal of difference in your life as an Ambassador's wife?

MCILVAINE:I feel fairly philosophical about it because the members of the staff who were really interested in the Foreign Service, and were really helpful, and really good, still continued to be and found it a very rewarding experience. And I noticed that the ones who really hadn't ever been very helpful, were the ones who immediately stopped coming and it was no loss because they'd been a dead horse anyway. As far as I'm concerned, I think it's

one of the most natural relationships -- that's not quite said right. I think it's the most wonderful team -- I think it's the most wonderful working team, that you have with your husband in the Foreign Service. I'm sure Congressmen's wives feel the same, and minister's wives feel the same. And I'm sure there are some businessmen's wives, but really it's such a natural relationship to be working together with your husband. You have a chance at last to be really helping, to be really supportive. He needs you desperately. Mind you, you can hire a housekeeper to run the house, fine. But there is that little touch, the warmth of a family around. It really...you could take being in the Third World countries and having the children and the wife makes the house comfortable. I say they like it. Otherwise, what are they going to have? Just an all-male relationship. I'm not talking about the silly, dumb cocktail parties when you stand on one foot and then other and chitter-chatter, but with a really good working relationship with your husband, you can do wonders at a dinner party. The things you can find out from the man on your right, or the things you can talk senior officials into doing as a woman that a man can't do.

We had a couple of cases in Kenya. We were in a terribly embarrassing position because Secretary of State Rogers was coming and it was the first time a Secretary of State had ever been to Kenya. Kenyatta was an old man and he was surrounded by his staff who never let anyone get near him. We were going through channels trying to get the official request for Secretary of State Rogers to see President Kenyatta, and we couldn't get any answer. Bob and I went to a wedding of one of Kenyatta's family and he was there, and I just sashayed right up to him in the middle of the wedding and started chatting him up, and said how excited we were that the Secretary of State was coming. And he said, "Oh, that's wonderful. I hope I can see him." And I said, "I certainly hope so too, Mr. President, when?" He said, "Well, Alice, let's see. Why don't you come out for the weekend of..." Now Bob, being the Ambassador can't go and attack the President in that fashion. But you can do things, as a woman, that a man can't do, and I think you can be very, very useful.

I am sorry for the wives that don't go on post with their husbands. I am sorry for the ones that feel they have to work. I think the experience of being at home with the children, in a foreign post, is terribly important. I think they need you desperately, and I think wives that get so involved with their own careers is a mistake. Mind you, I had my career first and so by the time I got married I was just delighted to be at home and be doing something different. I worked until I was 39 and that was enough.

Q: I wonder if these women today feel that their career is going to get away from them if they go abroad and play the Foreign Service role for 20 years or so, and then try to pick up the pieces when they come back may be impossible. I don't know. But I would think where you are in your own personal career would make a big difference because I had a very successful interview with a male who had come in as a spouse last week. The reason he could take this role very much in stride is because he has already had his own career. He's 56, had his own first family, had five children and now he's off on a new life.

MCILVAINE: This was probably the same as my experience. I had had a full career and ready to settle down. It does make a difference.

Q: So you were really very fortunate in that respect.

MCILVAINE: However, there is this impatience when you're young to get on with it. I think they forget they're going to live until they're 85 and there will be a lot of time for careers afterwards. This would be true of having the children. Just take it, there's no great rush, take out ten years and have your two or three children and then go back in. They're not going to lose...

Q: I think some worry too that they're not going to be married, you know, and they need to have something to fall back on if they are going to be self-supporting. I think the divorce rate has leveled off to about 50% of the people in the country.

MCILVAINE: It will come back now with the new change in relationships because of AIDS. I've had at least ten young people say, "Well , I'm going to get married. I'm not having fun playing around anymore, scared of AIDS so I guess I'll get married."

Q: It should last longer too because they don't want to go back to that same thing. Amazing, isn't it?

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BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Robinson McIlvaine

Spouse entered service: 1953 Left service: 1973
You entered service: 1961 Left service: 1973

Status: Spouse of Retired AEP

Posts

1961-1964	Cotonou, Dahomey
1964-1966	Department of State, Washington, DC
1966-1969	Conakry, Guinea
1969-1973	Nairobi, Kenya

Spouse's position: Ambassador

Place/Date of birth: Washington, DC February 19, 1924

Maiden Name: Nicolson

Schools: Western High School, Sweet Briar College

Date/Place of Marriage: Washington, DC; 1961

Profession: Administrative Assistant – 4 years British Overseas Airways Col; 1 year Sunset Magazine, San Francisco; 1 year Television Digest; 10 years CIA, Washington, DC, Frankfurt, Germany and London, England

Children:

Ian McIlvaine 1962
Kass McIlvaine 1964

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:
At Post: Volunteer – unpaid jobs consisted of serving as Ambassador's wife which involved constant and non-stop residence management and official party giving plus all the required charity benefit activities.

In Washington DC: Paid: see profession above.

End of interview