

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

NANCY NEILL

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is October 25, 2025, and this is a Fulbright interview. Can you state your name and just spell it for me please.

NEILL: My name is Nancy Neill. Last name: N, E, I, L, L, first name N, A, N, C, Y.

Q: Perfect. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?

NEILL: I grew up in Mississippi in the 1950s, an interesting place and time. The town was Calhoun City, with a population under 2000 -- an easy drive to the University of Mississippi in Oxford. By the time I graduated from high school dramatic changes were shaking the foundations of that community. Small farming was starting a gradual shift to corporate agriculture and, at the same time, the schools were shifting from segregated to integrated (prompted by the 1954 decision in Brown vs. Board of Education). By the time I reached college and came home for breaks I was seeing a very different world. Fewer people I knew lived on a farm anymore and the school system was integrated. Do you want me to comment further on some of that?

Q: Yeah, sure. Go ahead.

NEILL: Some of this may sound a little hackneyed because it's so typical of the times. My mother and father met at the University, where he earned his master's. He started a career in teaching and they married and started a family. One of his early teaching assignments was at a boy's school in Biloxi (on the Mississippi Gulf coast). He loved fried oysters and would later have them brought to north Mississippi for school events.

During this period he also inherited land from his father, a few hundred acres located two miles from Calhoun City. He and my mother moved back to the area and built a house on their new farm while he started teaching in Calhoun City High School and then at Vardaman High school, to assure the family had an income while developing the farm. The farm included five tenant houses. Nearby they built a barn, a stable for the cattle, a

pond, a one-acre garden and a lane for driving the cattle to and from their grazing area each day.

An important figure on the farm was the overseer, a lean and gentle black man named Bob Pratt. Even as a young child I observed that he was always treated with respect by my parents. He and my father would meet in our house periodically, to talk about the work that needed to be done. Later I found out they were also trying to figure out how to improve the black school in the area (by supplying better books and other things).

Years later, after I had completed my undergraduate work at the University, spent a year abroad on a Fulbright Scholarship, married and had my own family, I decided to look up Bob Pratt's son. He was living in town, not on a farm (by this time, small farms had all but disappeared). He told me that his daughter (Bob's granddaughter) had been valedictorian of my high school. She had then gone on to Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW), where my father's mother had once been a student. That conversation captured the two changes I mentioned earlier: few people lived on farms anymore, black or white, and black families had gained educational opportunities. An era had passed.

Q: So can you tell me, how did you hear about the Fulbright program, and what sparked your interest in applying for that program?

NEILL: When I was attending the University of Mississippi (as a literature major), I was fortunate to be in the Honors Program. That allowed me to have an individual class with a literature professor, and she's the one who suggested I apply for the Fulbright. As it turns out, a good friend who was also a "lit" major, Charles Matthews, also received a Fulbright award that year -- to Germany.

Q: Yeah. So where did you go?

NEILL: New Zealand. That professor helped me figure out which country matched my interests and my academic focus.

Q: So how did you come up with your Fulbright topic?

NEILL: Again, my advisor had more than anything to do with it. We were talking about where I should go, and she just started naming places that might interest me. I was familiar with the work of William Faulkner, who had lived in Oxford (near the University of Mississippi) and knew his novels included characters who were native American and African American. When she suggested New Zealand it just made sense: it would be so interesting to focus on how authors in New Zealand depicted the Maori population.

I wasn't disappointed. I was attending Otago University in Dunedin (on the South Island) but my project included visits with a number of New Zealand authors in different parts of the country. I had a great year of visiting them in their homes and learning what had inspired their Maori characters. In the end I completed a book about the Maoris in New Zealand literature.

My social experiences in Dunedin were unusually rich, too. I lived in a dorm for a semester and that gave me a closeup look at the lives of the students. For instance, I was surprised how common it was for students to bring their hiking boots to school. (The exercise trend hadn't hit the States yet.) In the spring, one of the students even invited me to stay at her family's sheep farm during lambing season.

During the second semester I moved into an apartment (flat) with two other students who were sisters. One of them, Phillipa McDonald (Pippa at the time) became a lifelong friend. In fact three generations of the McDonald family later came to visit me in the U.S. First Pippa (who had married Roger Christmas by then) came with her husband. Then her parents (Mollie and Morris) came. They had heard that everyone in the States ate hamburgers so they wanted to visit McDonald's as soon as they arrived. Years later Pippa and Roger's son came as well. He was the third generation to visit. By then I had also married, and my husband and I returned the favor and visited Pippa and her husband in Wellington for a week. We were lucky: they were proud of New Zealand's wines so they shared with us some favorites from their wine collection.

Q: Wow, so pretty much lasting friendship and connections and relationships between two different cultures and countries, right?

NEILL: Absolutely.

Q: So what did you learn about as a Fulbrighter -- about their culture but also about your own country? And what were some of the lessons learned from that experience?

NEILL: First of all, it was tough to be from the American south. When I spoke to groups of people in New Zealand some were students from Africa. Since I was from Mississippi, they assumed I was prejudiced and started questioning me about recent events there. I explained that my family had actually supported integration in the schools. I didn't blame them for their suspicions, but the irony did not escape me: they were judging me because my skin was white. Fortunately, the exchange ended up on a positive note.

Q: So, as you said, you joined the Fulbright Association later on. Can you talk a little bit about that experience, and how did your Fulbright experience push you or influence you to continue serving and supporting the Fulbright community?

NEILL: Since my year in New Zealand had been such a positive experience I was very happy to learn in later years that an alumni association had been started. I spotted an ad in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, got the phone number for the national organization and contacted the Atlanta chapter immediately. I became very active and ended up serving on the board and as president of the chapter. Part of our role was to host incoming Fulbrighters and my husband and I enjoyed getting to know several of them. They also came to the chapter's programs and we all went on tours of Georgia together. I had also attended several national Fulbright Association conferences and got to know some

members of the leadership team. Later I was fortunate to become a board member of the national association and served as national president.

During this time on the national board something interesting happened that helped me understand why I wanted to keep up with Fulbright. I was serving as development director and called on some previous donors to encourage them to keep supporting our organization. One of them lived in the agricultural part of Maryland, pretty far from DC. So another board member and I drove out and we talked to him on a pleasant sunporch, looking out on his land. After a while he started to stand up, signaling that we were finished. I asked him to bear with me while I described the travel program we had started. He laughed and asked, "Where do you get your passion?" I didn't know quite what he meant but he sat down and heard me out. Fortunately, he became a strong supporter and I figured out that passion equals deep commitment. I definitely had that.

Q: I'm curious why the Fulbright program matters, or actually why the Fulbright program is important for U.S. diplomacy and our relations with the rest of the world?

Get ready for another story. I believe our country is generally a good country. We hit some bumps now and then, but I think the system we're under, our democracy, is a privilege to be part of. When you're in other countries, you realize how difficult it's been for some of them to achieve that, actually build a democracy. For example, in Albania, I went to visit Spaç Prison on a service trip. A former prisoner described the misery of the years when they were under communist control and people were put in prison for political reasons, as he was. He worked in the mines at Spac, digging coal under such bad conditions that he barely survived. It made me aware of the importance of democracy, both there and in the U.S.

By the way, the goal of our service project in Albania was to help restore buildings that were a couple of centuries old. My particular team was working on an arch above a gate to one of the ancient stone houses. Fortunately we were working with brick masons who actually set the stones in place. Our job was to stir the mortar and get it ready for them. One day, the mayor of the town stopped by to see what we were doing. Before we knew it, a photo had appeared in the local paper showing Fulbrighters working to help restore their old buildings.

Q: Perfect! Anything else that you would like to add to everything you've just said during this short interview.

NEILL: The Fulbright program is a wonderful program that appeals both to our intellect and our desire to visit and understand other countries in the world. It creates strong friendships like the ones I've described. And in doing so, it creates another link of understanding between the countries. We really need that today.

End of interview