

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

CONSTANCE RICE

Interviewed by: Charles Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Constance. Rice.]

Q: Okay, once again this is an interview with Constance Rice being done for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy, and today is the second of September 2016.

And to begin with, you were born in Quincy, Massachusetts, when?

RICE: February 8th, 1931.

Q: Well, did you grow up in Quincy?

RICE: I did, but when I was going to high school my parents said I should go to boarding school in Wellesley. I went to Dana Hall School—Ten Acre, then Dana Hall.

Q: How was Dana Hall? How did you find Dana Hall?

RICE: I don't know. It was my parents that found it.

Q: No, but I mean, how was it?

RICE: Oh, I found it—it was a wonderful place, yeah. I met kids from all over the world. One of my roommates was Joan Selznick and her uncle was David Selznick, so we had all the movies we could possibly—

Q: Oh, yeah, Gone with the Wind and all?

RICE: Yes!

Q: Oh yes, well, in Dana Hall, what were your favorite subjects?

RICE: It was math, strangely enough. I'm an artist.

Q: Oh, and art—what were you, were you doing much in art?

RICE: No. I had to do it when I got into college and I studied zoology. I did my first drawings in zoology, and then I said, "This is what I like."

Q: Well, then you went to college where?

RICE: Smith College.

Q: What class were you in?

RICE: '52.

Q: '52. I suppose that's about the time my wife, she went in 1954 I think. So in Smith, you were a zoology major?

RICE: Right.

Q: How was Smith in those days?

RICE: It was great. Wonderful. I lived in the quad, and walked everywhere, and I'm an athlete so I did a lot of sports. Let me see, what happened. I finally graduated and I went into work in cancer research in Philadelphia.

Q: Ah. What were you doing? What type of work, I mean?

RICE: I can't remember now what I was doing then. But it was all—the head of the paper just told me what to do and I did it. I took care of animals and I did—I learned how to do dissections, and staining, and stuff like that.

Q: How long were you there?

RICE: About two years.

Q: And then what?

RICE: And then I got married and my husband wanted to join the Foreign Service, so I came to Washington and he got in and so off we went to Africa. I mean, to Italy first, to Naples and Rome. And then we went to Guinea, West Africa.

Q: What is your husband's name?

RICE: Donald Herdeck. H-E-R-D-E-C-K.

Q: And where did you meet him?

RICE: I met him on a ship coming back from Europe when I was a junior in college because we had a junior year somewhere abroad where we visited England, and France, and Holland, and Switzerland.

Q: How—did that sort of, get you set for Foreign Service?

RICE: Definitely. Now, I love to travel.

Q: Your first house was, were you in Palermo itself? What was living in Palermo like? This would be in 1950—what?

RICE: 1953 or 1954. It was interesting because I don't think the Sicilians really feel a part of Italy, so, they have a whole life of their own. We travelled around the island and saw all the, you know, where the Greeks came in—

Q: Syracuse was uh—

RICE: Right. And then we took a boat from there over to Egypt for a trip, and we went down the river.

Q: The Nile?

RICE: Yeah, the Nile. And—boy, was that exciting, to all the old places where people used to live.

Q: Did—who was the consul general in Palermo when you were there?

RICE: I don't remember.

Q: It's not important. But how did you find—what were you doing in Palermo?

RICE: I was going to art school, but my husband was an economic officer.

Q: Well, art school is a good place to study art?

RICE: Yes, and then we were transferred to Naples and we—I got to go there, and then we were in Rome for two years.

Q: How long were you in Naples?

RICE: One year.

Q: I was consul general in Naples.

RICE: You were—Oh really? For heaven's sake!

Q: In the '70s.

RICE: Oh, God! That's—I was there a little earlier. I loved Naples. We had an apartment that overlooked all of the harbor and all the islands. It was gorgeous, very beautiful. And we got transferred to Rome.

Q: In Naples, were you continuing—

RICE: I went to art school and my husband was an economic officer.

Q: The art school must have been quite demanding, wasn't it?

RICE: Yeah, I mean, it was you know, not impossible, so.

Q: What did you specialize in?

RICE: Well, I was learning everything, so I had to do paintings and drawings and sculpture and stuff like that. I can't even remember the teachers there.

Q: Well, did you get around the neapolitan area at all?

RICE: We went everywhere, all the time. We were always—and there were lots of islands that were fun to go to. And we went to—oh, I've forgotten. I'd have to get a map out to remember.

Q: So, did you have many neapolitan friends?

RICE: I had a couple. That's about it, because I was only there for a year. So.

Q: Did you find—was the Neapolitan world different than the Palermo world?

RICE: Well, it was much busier. Palermo was quiet as hell. You know, I mean, we mostly travelled around Sicily to all the different towns and where the Greeks used to live, etcetera, etcetera.

Q: There are some beautiful ruins there.

RICE: Yeah, definitely.

Q: Did you have any problems with—Naples has, had and still has, a lot of crime. Was that a problem?

RICE: I don't think they paid much attention to us. We were probably too young and didn't have enough money or something. But we never had a problem, so. And I went off by myself everyday to art school.

Q: Where was the art school?

RICE: Oh it's downtown someplace, I can't remember.

Q: Were there many international students there?

RICE: Not too many, no. I think they'd go to Rome.

Q: There, when you went to Rome, for what, another year or two?

RICE: Two years, yeah. And we lived right near the Spanish steps. We could walk to the embassy and all over the town. We were up on the fourth floor and we could see all over the great Roman buildings.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

RICE: It was marvelous.

Q: Were you taking art again?

RICE: Yes, I finished my schooling and then if I had stayed I would have just gone on and done creative work.

Q: What—did you find you wanted to specialize in any particular branch of the arts?

RICE: Well, I'm a painter, a drawer, and a sculptor. But I did the sculpture when I came back after leaving the Foreign Service.

Q: Well then, when you were in Rome, did you get involved at all in embassy life?

RICE: Yeah, whatever was available. It was fun.

Q: Did you by chance happen to remember who the ambassador was at the time?

RICE: I can't. Isn't that pathetic? It was 1950s.

Q: Clare Boothe Luce was there at one point?

RICE: It wasn't Clare Boothe Luce; I would have known if it was a woman. So, I've forgotten. I could look it up, you know, in my notebooks. The ambassador was the same for like two or three years. It wasn't changed very quickly, so.

Q: Were there any political events or anything that sort of stick in your mind?

RICE: Not really. This was post-war, and we were working with the Italian Government to help them get over what was a mess and my husband was—what did he do? I've forgotten. But I never got really involved because it was kind of secret-ish. I don't know why, I can't remember why.

Q: Well, part of the thing was that we were very concerned about the Communist Party in Italy.

RICE: Oh yeah, that's for sure.

Q: And we were giving, I think, financial support to the CDU (United Christian Democrats).

RICE: To who?

Q: To the Christian Democrats.

RICE: Oh, okay, well that's good.

Q: Well then, when you came back, you came back to Washington.

RICE: Hm, where were we assigned next? We were assigned to Conakry, Guinea.

Q: Oh.

RICE: So we took off, and went to there. And we stayed there quite a while and that's when we left the Foreign Service.

Q: What were you doing?

RICE: In Guinea? Actually, I was working at the hospital because I had been trained to stain tissue and cut it and teach kids how to do it.

Q: That's from your cancer research?

RICE: Right. And it was interesting to get involved with people because otherwise we were totally isolated because this was run by communists.

Q: This was Sekou Toure?

RICE: Yeah, right. He wasn't anxious to listen to what we had to say.

Q: It must have been a difficult time. Was it hard being there?

RICE: Well, it was curious. I mean, we had a lot of nice friends, all of the other embassies that were congenial with the United States. And the friends from our embassy, so, we got away every once and a while, to an island or something like that.

Q: What kind of housing did you have?

RICE: I had a beautiful house right on the ocean looking out towards South America, I guess, by the spacing.

Q: Yeah, you were by that bulge of Africa.

RICE: And then we go to take a trip up to Cotonou and we took a boat up the river in the next country, and I can't remember what was just above Guinea.

Q: Might be Niger.

RICE: What?

Q: I was thinking of Niger, or—

RICE: No, no, that's on the other side of the continent. So. Yeah. But we were watched constantly. I mean, I don't think we got away with much.

Q: Well, back out, back at the—in Guinea—was the embassy, was it a happy embassy?

RICE: It was a hard-working embassy. And there wasn't much time to just joke around. So, we were trying to reach people in the government, and the government was new so they didn't know—all the underlings didn't know exactly what they were doing and we were trying to understand what they wanted and how we could help. Even though it was communist.

Q: Did you know people who later were arrested or not?

RICE: I don't think so, no.

Q: Did you have a chance to paint?

RICE: I did a little bit. But basically I got a job at the hospital teaching kids how to cut tissue and stain it. Because they didn't have any way to find out what kind of illness people had. And I had experience so I taught in the hospital.

Q: At the hospital, did they have much equipment?

RICE: Enough to do what we needed to do; I don't know about operations and things like that. And everybody was so isolated, they didn't want to talk much to us, because, I mean, we weren't communist.

Q: Could you get things in the market?

RICE: Yeah, but we also ordered from Denmark. And that would come once every two months into the port, whatever we ordered, so, otherwise we wouldn't have had much to feed people with. So. And we had lots of help in our house because the help was very inexpensive, so, I didn't have to clean house, or I didn't have to cook. So, it was quite nice.

Q: You left there, when?

RICE: We left the Foreign Service then, and it was 1950-something. And we took a year off and went to southern France and then we came home and my husband started teaching at Georgetown.

Q: Why did you and your husband decide to leave the Foreign Service?

RICE: Right, I don't know. I mean, it's very confining when you're in a place like Guinea. I mean, there's nothing you can do: there are no movies, no theatre, no—zero.

So, unless you're totally inspired by what's going to happen there, and then it gets to be boring after a while.

Q: I can imagine.

RICE: We had book clubs, and this kind of club, that kind of club, but it didn't always work.

Q: How about other embassies? Did—were they good contacts?

RICE: I think everybody was very cautious because if they wanted to get anything done they couldn't be seen talking to Americans. And the French just left, so, that was the end of them.

Q: The French actually had an embassy there, is that right?

RICE: I think they must have, but they were not allowed to have one anymore. They were not invited to have one.

Q: Well it was—I think when Duval pulled out, because Sekou Toure would not, sort of, join the French—former French holidays, in sort of a _____, and they would pull everything out.

RICE: Right, right.

Q: It was not a—

RICE: Well, I'm sure it just sort of died down till practically nobody was there because you couldn't do business. So, the poor people that wanted to do business had to leave and go to another country.

Q: Did you ever think of being in the Foreign Service yourself?

RICE: Myself? No. I wouldn't like to write all those letters six times. That wouldn't have pleased me at all.

Q: Well, then you came back and had a year off in southern France.

RICE: France, yeah.

Q: Oh well that must have been delightful.

RICE: It was; it was gorgeous. We had somebody's apartment on the Riviera. So, it wasn't bad at all.

Q: Well, you know, I mean, this is the way to do it.

RICE: Yeah.

Q: Well, did you—you spoke French?

RICE: I can speak French and Italian.

Q: Well, how—were you able to continue with your art?

RICE: I tried to do a lot of work in southern France. And I did a few things. But basically after about a year we came home and my husband got a job teaching at Georgetown University.

Q: Where'd you live at Georgetown?

RICE: We lived—we always lived in Cabin John. So, we bought a house. I still have it.

Q: Was there a sort of a fun park, or amusement park going while you were there?

RICE: At Cabin John? Yeah, oh yeah, only in the summer time.

Q: I have to tell you I was in Yugoslavia in the 60s. And when the district got rid of its street cars, it sold them to Yugoslavia. And I remember—and they were running in Sarajevo. And they just arrived and I remember seeing a car—a street car—with its sign on top, you know, its destination said Cabin John.

RICE: You're kidding! That's marvelous. I wish I had seen that, I would have laughed out loud—a storm! Oh, God. So they hadn't even replaced those things.

Q: Well what were you doing in—when you first arrived in Georgetown?

RICE: I started going to school at the Corcoran. And I became a teacher there, teaching sculpture. And my husband was a teacher at Georgetown. He always loved teaching anyway. So.

Q: So, how long did you do that?

RICE: Well, eventually, he got sick and he didn't—he passed away. And I just stayed in Cabin John and my ambassador from Guinea lived two streets away in Cabin John and introduced me to my new husband, which was Andrew Rice. And he was head of an international organization—the Society for International Development—we had a lot in common. Eventually, we had to go overseas too, so.

Q: So where did you go?

RICE: We went—where did we go? I can't remember. I'd have to go back and look that

one up because we didn't stay very long. He was just getting to know everybody that was part of his organization in the various capitals.

Q: So, what were you doing?

RICE: What was I doing? I was teaching at the Corcoran. I have a whole—well, I can show you pictures. I have a studio in the back of my house, which I can't go to now because I'm here. This is my work, I guess. I started a school in my house. And these are my sculptures.

Q: Oh, yes.

RICE: Yeah. This is a show I had.

Q: Beautiful wood.

RICE: Yeah, I love it.

Q: Oh, yes.

RICE: And I have photographs of sculptures.

Q: At the Goodwin House we have a sculpture like that with—down in the lobby.

RICE: In the lobby?

Q: In the lobby at Goodwin House.

RICE: Oh, for heaven's sake, where is that?

Q: It's a retirement home in Bailey's Crossroads.

RICE: Oh, for heaven's sake. Okay. Well these are all my sculptures. And so I don't know if you want to look at them, but, have you seen enough?

Q: Well, no, you know, I mean, I'd like to see these. Wood.

RICE: Wood, yeah. And this shows you how I did it. This was my class I taught in my house. Okay, the rest of it. This is just the shows we had.

Q: These are beautiful.

RICE: Oh, here's the making—

Q: Wood.

RICE: Yeah.

Q: Wood sculptures. Making natural wood.

RICE: This was what I had in my backyard.

Q: Oh.

RICE: The garage was my workshop. And so I would design something and then go out and start building—chainsawing. And, this is Cabin John. And I did it for ages.

Q: What did you do—how did you sell these?

RICE: Yes. Every time I got a chance, yes. Here's one work that I sold to some place, I can't remember now. But here it is. I think it's a school over—you know, it's a school. Here's a show I had in Italy. When I my name was still Herdeck. And most of these are my friends that I showed with. I was a painter for a while so I did paintings.

Q: Oh, yeah.

RICE: This is my beautiful backyard, which I now have to leave. Where I did the sculpting. This is my house. And this is the studio.

Q: Oh, yes.

RICE: And I could just get a logger to bring wood to the backyard, hard wood, and then I was all set.

Q: What kind of wood did you get?

RICE: Hard wood. But they were tree cutters, and they sold it, so they got money for it, more than they normally would. So, we're all set.

Q: Are you able to do any of that here?

RICE: What?

Q: Are you able to do anything here?

RICE: I can't chainsaw anymore.

Q: No, no, but it is, what I meant—

RICE: I can paint, I can pretend to have ideas for sculpture but I can't make sculpture here. Well, that wouldn't work at all. So, that's about it. Oh here it is, you can see how I worked. Did I show you?

Q: Yes, this is—

RICE: That's the back end of it, where they left the logs. And that's where I worked. And I taught at the Corcoran.

Q: Did you do this type of sculpture?

RICE: Yeah. We had to, we got different wood, but we got—

Q: It was basically wood that you were sculpting?

RICE: Yes, yes, I didn't do any other kind of stuff.

Q: Where did you go—did you live overseas with your new husband?

RICE: No. He was head of an international organization that was located here. So, we didn't leave. We went on conferences, but that's about it.

Q: What were they doing?

RICE: The Society for International Development—it was all international thinking and they would have conferences in different parts of the world where they had a theme, which then drew all the members to come. And they'd discuss it. And stuff like that. My husband was Andrew Rice and he was head of the Society for International Development.

Q: Ah.

RICE: Have you ever heard of it? SID (Society for International Development), yeah. It's a big organization and they were busy all the time. Yeah.

Q: Did you get involved in any of their activities?

RICE: No, no, I just did my work. I was getting older and I thought I better concentrate.

Q: Well, I mean, you're producing something beautiful.

RICE: Thank you.

Q: You really, really are.

RICE: Yeah. But, he had an awful lot of conferences and foreign visitors and stuff like this, so, we were pretty busy, entertaining, and taking trips to various places where everybody would come and meet, and they'd have an international conference on a subject they had determined about the year before.

Q: Well this is the city for conferences.

RICE: Boy, you're right! Yeah. How did you get involved in all of this?

Q: I don't really, I'm going to a conference in Cambridge, England, it's a university there, talking about diplomacy in the 1800s.

RICE: Oh, my god. That would be interesting.

Q: Well, it's a—what was this you call? Branch (British American Relations Nineteenth Century Historians).

RICE: Oh, interesting.

Q: Well, I don't know anything about it, but they picked me out because they needed somebody. I'd written a book on the 19th century consuls.

RICE: Nineteenth century. What consul?

Q: Oh, just the consular service during that period.

RICE: Oh, I see.

Q: And a very active consular service. It's not much heard of.

RICE: What are they counseling?

Q: Well, it was, I can never differentiate between c-o-n-s-u-l, which is my branch, and c-o-u-n-counseling, counseling.

RICE: Oh, it's analysis of history then?

Q: Well, it's analysis of what these, well, members, diplomats, these consuls were doing in various places.

RICE: Oh, I see.

Q: Well, so did you keep this work up to—

RICE: Now? I can't chainsaw here.

Q: No?

RICE: No.

Q: When did you come here?

RICE: About a year ago. So.

Q: You have all your fingers still?

RICE: Yeah, I'm okay. I had people helping me. Some of my students would work for me, from the Corcoran, so.

Q: Can you get a—is there such a thing as a very small chainsaw?

RICE: What do you mean?

Q: Well, in other words, a regular chainsaw—

RICE: Oh, yeah! I know what you mean. I thought you said “chain store.” I have three chainsaws that will go eight hours a day.

Q: Do they make a chainsaw that is designed for artistic work?

RICE: No, you just buy the regular chainsaw. Carve away. But there are other, I mean, all the art supply stores have things that refine the wood, or the metal, or whatever you're working on and they have special ability to do this, that, or the other thing. So.

Q: Well, it's a beautiful, beautiful thing you're producing.

RICE: Well, it was fun. And I'm mad that I'm physically disabled, so.

Q: Can you move over to painting?

RICE: I could. But somehow, I end up having a canvas sculpture.

Q: Yeah, I guess it would be hard to move from sculpting to putting the stuff on canvas.

RICE: Well, it wouldn't be as interesting to me, and you tend to do what makes you happy.

Q: Absolutely.

RICE: Yeah, so. And not what—what you do doesn't necessarily support you, so you have to figure out how to manage both. But, teaching helped.

Q: Well, I mean, that pretty well takes care of it. I will send you a draft of the transcript. It will be awhile. And you can edit it all.

RICE: Very good.

End of interview