

Foreign Service Spouse Series

CECIL B. LYON

Interviewed by Jewell Fenzi

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[The following is a transcript of a conversation between Jewell and Guido Fenzi and Cecil and Elizabeth (Elsie) Grew Lyon.]

OBSERVATIONS ON MISS CORNELIA BASSELL [In the Department of State Biographic Register Bassel is spelled with one 'l'. In her book, "Legacy of Love: A Memoir of Two American Families" (Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1961), Julia McDonald Davis, stepdaughter of Miss Bassel's sister, Nell, writes Bassell with two "l's". The Davis and Bassell families were from Clarksburg, West Virginia.]

Q: I got an old, old Register, 1926, and Miss Bassell was a clerk in the Department. Then someone from the Historian's office at State [Dr. Slany's office] gave me a 1932 Register, showing she was Assistant to James B. Stewart, Director of the newly formed Foreign Service Officers' Training School. So she really was there to take care of you young Officers instead of the wives, wasn't she?

CLYON: Oh, she was marvelous. She was sort of the mother hen to us young chicks. Really, I don't think there was a Foreign Service School just then, she was just it. We were brought back, oh, for about a month, I think. I went to Cuba for my first assignment, for about a year; then we came back. Well, I guess they did call it the Foreign Service School. But the "school" was [laughing] "Neel" Bassell, and she taught us all the polite things we had to do.

In those days we had to leave cards on all the senior State Department officials. She was very good with young timid wives who had never come out into the world. She told them [laughing again] how to drink tea, and how to eat if necessary. She was wonderful, and she did it all so nicely. We all loved her. She had a nice house in Georgetown where we'd go occasionally for cocktails and things. She was a member and she may have been an official in the Women's National Democratic Club. Her sister was married to John W. Davis, a candidate for the Presidency, and I think she arranged for us all to meet him, which was a great thrill for all of us young brats. This would be 1932, because I entered the Service in January 1931 and went off to Cuba for a year and then came back.

She not only was nice when we were there at the School and arranged for us to meet all the officials in the Department, but when we went off to the field she sort of would write us letters every now and then, and we'd write back to her. She was interested in what happened to us, what became of us. She was just a thoroughly nice person. Don't you agree, Elsie? [addressing his wife]

Q: Everyone says how nice she is, how wonderful she was, everything that she did for - she must have been a very decent, competent -

CLYON: Warm-

ELYON: Put people at their ease.

CLYON: Well-brought up. She was southern.

Q: How old was she? You know, in the great delicacy of the 1920s her birth date didn't appear in the Register - none of the women's birth dates were included. So I had no idea how old she was when -

CLYON: I'd have to just guess. I should think in my day she was in her 50s. That's why I said there's not a great deal to say about her except that how nice she was, how she nursed us all, how she encouraged us, how she taught us our p's and q's.

Q: And she did the same for you just as an extension of her interest in the young Officers.

CLYON: I don't think she did much for Elsie. She did for the young men who brought their wives back with them, the young men who were already married. You see, by the time Elsie knew her, we'd been married for three or four years: five years maybe. And that sort of age of people I don't think - she was friendly and warm when we went to drink with her and she came to dinner with us and things like that, but I don't think she did much "instructing" of the older ones.

Guido Fenzi: Did she have a particular course for the wives, for the spouses?

CLYON: There was a course set up by Homer Byington, the then Chief of Personnel - oh for the wives: no, I don't think so. I think she just did it sort of slap dash. We weren't nearly as much organized in those days. Thank God.

Q: The point of all of this, you see, was that the very early training for wives was nothing that the State Department set up at all. It was simply that this woman was so dedicated -

ELYON: That she did it.

Q: That she did it on her own. Now, could you describe her physically?

CLYON: She had a warm voice, a warm Southern voice. She was medium size, not as tall as you or Elsie. She was slightly plump. She had gray hair, and she had a wonderful chuckle, a charming chuckle. She was active; if you asked how old she was, I don't really know; I think in the 50s but -

ELYON: Ageless.

Q: I would think 50s, because she'd had a rather extensive career in various other Departments before she came to State. She'd been in - I forget, but say Agriculture, Labor, Commerce; quite a few other organizations. And she came to State as a clerk, according to the 1926 Register. Then by '32 she was a Special Assistant to Stewart.

CLYON: They probably just called her that so she could do this work of training the young FSOs.

Q: Her salary at that time was, as I recall, something like \$1,500 a year.

CLYON: But she must have had more resources than that because she had this nice house in Georgetown. After all, her brother-in-law was a partner in one of the biggest law firms in New York. Maybe her family were well-off, I don't know.

Q: Her maiden name was?

CLYON: She wasn't married; she was Miss Bassell. She was "Neel" Bassell, I suppose "Cornelia." [This was confirmed by the interviewer.] And her brother-in-law was John W. Davis, a candidate for the Presidency, a Democrat I believe - she was very Democrat - and he was a partner in Davis, Polk & Wardwell.

Q: So she had the young officers over to her home in Georgetown.

CLYON: Oh yes, frequently.

Q: For dinner, drinks?

CLYON: Drinks I think, mostly. I don't remember dining there; we may have. But she sort of launched us and followed up and saw that we did the right things. And I suppose she told the ladies if they'd been out to lunch somewhere with some senior person to write them a note (he laughs) or send flowers. I'm sure she did. All those little details which don't seem to matter much nowadays, but she did all that. Sort of a Mother Superior.

Q: Really, she was the early social usage [person] before [the booklet] "Social Usage in the Foreign Service."

CLYON: She was about all the training we got. You asked whether they had sort of a training thing for the women, the wives. I don't think they did but they did have a definite course for us. Mr. Byington would speak to us one day, the Under Secretary would speak another day. I remember Mr. Grew speaking to us and some of the things he said. He said that every time they went to France, he got an actress from the Comédie Française to teach his daughters French diction.

Q: You went in 1919, after World War I, because your father [Joseph C. Grew] took part in the Peace negotiations.

CLYON: He went to [?] with General [?], and then we followed; then my mother went and then we were brought by our nurse in March 1919. We were there for the first anniversary of the Armistice. I'll never forget it, at night watching from the roof of the Hotel Crillon, and then the next day the parade of all the Allied soldiers.

Q: I'm also using your book ["The Lyon's Share"] as a reference.

CLYON: Very good. [he laughs]

Q: Well, it has some very nice things in it.

CLYON: It's not been properly edited. But he's writing "The Lyon's Tale" -

CLYON: I've written it but I don't think anyone wants it. I picked it up where I left off [the earlier book] and tried to write about the misery of being retired (they all laugh heartily) and trying to find things to do, and the funny things I did find. [An interval when they discuss the Service then as compared with now -more bureaucratic, etc. - concludes the interview.]

End of interview