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

ALDENE ALICE BARRINGTON

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INTERVIEW

Q: Could we start, please, by talking a bit about your family? When and where were you born.

BARRINGTON: Surely. Well, both my mother and father were born in Canada. They were married in 1880, I believe it was, and they came to the United States and went west. They were pioneers, homesteaders. They homesteaded first in North Dakota. I often wonder about my mother; she seemed to enjoy doing these things, but she was raised in a very mid-Victorian, strict family.

I was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota. But shortly thereafter, my parents went to Montana, again to homestead. They went in an area right adjacent to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The nearby town is called Cut Bank (that's a translation from the Indian name of a mountain stream with steep banks) it's near Glacier Park. I was raised on that ranch. Distances meant nothing for us. Montana was sparsely populated. Horseback riding was customary. As I grew up, my mother was a little bit apprehensive about conditions there for a young girl and thought that, for high school, I'd better be some other place. Including one semester in Cut Bank, I went to four different high schools in four different states. When I came along, they hadn't expected me. My older sisters were all married when I was very young, and they were living in Crawford, Nebraska; Mason City, Iowa; and Spokane, Washington. I graduated from high school in Spokane, where a sister and her husband lived.

Q: What was your father doing?

BARRINGTON: He was, of course, homesteading, but the Great Northern Railway had recently been pushed west from Minneapolis and father became supervisor of construction and maintenance at the Grand Forks, No. Dak, Division point. He couldn't always be with my mother at the homestead. I remember her saying that the Indians were fine, but it was the half-breeds that you had to be careful about. They would come to the homestead and they'd point to things they wanted. They loved bacon. Of course, these homesteads were far from any grocery store, and they relied upon cured meats such as salt pork, which didn't spoil. I really enjoyed Cut Bank, where I went to grade school. But it was small and rough in those days.

Q: Was it at all like The Little House on the Prairie, the famous book and TV series?

BARRINGTON: Somewhat. I can remember there were many saloons. My mother and her cohorts were trying to have them regulated, believing that they shouldn't have those girls there at night, etc., and made them move out to their own place just outside city limits. As one friend has said, "Oh, it was just a small town, you know, with saloons and a puking post!"

I don't know whether you want me to continue on this.

Q: Oh, I like a little of this. This is an interesting slice of life here.

BARRINGTON: My two oldest sisters had gone to the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks and even though I was in Montana, mother thought I should go to the same university. And so I had two years there and got a teacher's certificate. And then the family's economic conditions were so difficult, I felt I couldn't ask for any more funds to continue my education.

Q: You were born in 1902.

BARRINGTON: That's right.

Q: So this would have been about early...

BARRINGTON: About 1921.

Q: That whole area would go through very difficult economic conditions.

BARRINGTON: Well, I'm speaking of Montana now. Yes, economic conditions were very difficult (drought, poor crops) and many settlers abandoned their homesteads. We used to condemn Jim Hill, who was head of the Great Northern Railway, for pushing it through the area and advertising wonderful conditions to prospective settlers so that people flocked out to acquire a homestead.

I wondered what kind of a job I could get. Then I happened to meet a university graduate who was visiting from Puerto Rico where she was teaching school. I thought, "Well, that's great, I'll do the same thing." The War Department was handling the teachers for Puerto Rico at that time. So I applied.

Q: This was only about twenty years after the Spanish-American War, when we acquired Puerto Rico.

BARRINGTON: Exactly. And they were trying to get American English teachers there. As the summer went on, I didn't hear from my application. So I got together enough

money to send a cable to the San Juan School Superintendent, which was the wrong place to contact but happened to be great for me. San Juan was lacking one teacher for the high school fall term. So they got in touch with the War Department, and I received a telegram from Washington offering me the job.

Minneapolis was east to us, and Chicago was far east, and New York was beyond the pale--nobody knew or cared about it. Mother, putting me on the train, shook her head and said, "Aldene, I hope you're not making a mistake."

Q: How old were you at that time?

BARRINGTON: I was nineteen or twenty. I think I lied a few months about my age in order to get the job.

Q: Did your mother pack you a lunch before she put you on the train?

BARRINGTON: Sure.

Fortunately, I had a helpful sister who then was in Chicago. When the train got to Chicago, she said, "Don't be afraid, Dene. When you get to New York, immediately go to the Travelers' Aid and say that you have passage for this ship which had been booked for you." (Of course, planes weren't going then to Puerto Rico.) I will never forget this wonderful Travelers' Aid person who put me in the prescribed hotel and then came and put me on the boat. I probably would have made it by myself, but I had the comfort of having a knowledgeable companion with me in that big city.

Well, I taught there two years and saved my money to get my A.B. degree. I wasn't sure where I was going to enroll. I became acquainted with a Puerto Rican family that had a daughter, Trinita Rivera, who was very bright. She was finishing high school, and her parents wanted to send her to college in the States. Well, then the nearest place from Puerto Rico for a US college was New York.

Q: Because of the ships. What were you teaching, and how did you find conditions and attitudes in Puerto Rico?

BARRINGTON: Well, when this boat arrived (after the Captain had pulled us through a hurricane), there was so much commotion (as there always was for a boat), and I only knew a little Spanish (I had taken a bit of college Spanish, but not much), that I thought, "For heaven's sake, they're having a revolution!" But this friend, the same person I had met that had been teaching in Puerto Rico was down there at the boat to meet me.

Conditions? Fortunately, I was given the job of teaching English and Commercial Geography, in the high school, so I didn't have to go out of San Juan. Many other teachers were posted to smaller interior towns, and they experienced the relatively primitive colonial conditions that were there. I thoroughly enjoyed my two years in San Juan. I

went to the University at Rio Piedras and tried to perfect my Spanish and, as I said, save my money.

So I brought Trinita Rivera up to New York. I thought that she had already been accepted at Columbia University, Barnard College for Women. But, no, she hadn't. And, of course, I was applying as a transfer.

Fortunately I had the assistance in New York of a middle-aged person, Mary Anderson, who held a then outstanding position for a woman in a law office. She knew Trinita Rivera and family through a married sister who lived in San Juan and she was outraged on learning that Barnard wasn't going to admit this bright young Puerto Rican girl. She talked with the Registrar and then with Dean Gildersleeve, saying, in essence, "Look, you're encouraging young women from Europe to register here and at the same time, refuse entrance to this very bright girl from P.R." Finally, arrangements were made to permit Trinita's entrance after she took several courses on the Columbia side to satisfy Barnard's entrance requirements, and take exams in a number of her H.S. subjects.

Trinita received a scholarship after her second year at Barnard and upon graduation she taught in the School of Tropical Medicine at San Juan. I received my degree after two years and a summer school, the latter necessary because some of my University credits were not recognized.

Q: What was your major?

BARRINGTON: Sociology and economics. And more or less a minor in Spanish.

Q: What was the feeling then at Barnard? Was Barnard pushing women for careers, or to go out and get, as they used to say, the MRS degree?

BARRINGTON: Not that I felt it at that time. But Barnard has always been noted for pushing women for careers, and today is more than ever. But I was so engrossed in my studies and kind of afraid of all this. After all, I was with a westerner's background, in a sophisticated eastern atmosphere.

In those days the College was quite sticky in various ways. Newly enrolled students were subject to an obligatory evaluation of the quality of their spoken language--pronunciation, diction, etc. A supervisor with a typical Bostonian accent was in charge of the examination. You were required to read from a given text. If you passed muster you were excused from the prescribed course--for which no credit was given. Well, I confidently thought I could easily pass the test, confidence was based upon hearing various New York-Brooklynese expressions such as "Toity-toid Street" etc. However, I scarcely finished reading one paragraph when the supervisor interrupted, saying, "You have a western accent and must take the course." Later, however, I was graciously excused from it because of my heavy schedule due to the disallowance of transfer credits from UND.

While still strict in basic concepts, Barnard today is in the forefront of activities contributing to the advancement of women.

Q: While I've got you here, I might as well ask you, were there a lot of constraints? Were the girls chaperoned and all that?

BARRINGTON: Yes, yes. We had to be in the dormitory at a certain time at night. I think it was eight o'clock, or nine, I don't remember. Outside group activities were frequently accompanied by supervisory chaperons. Of course, the curriculum was pretty heavy. Perhaps over half of the enrollment lived in the two Barnard dormitories. However, many daytime students came from surrounding areas because dormitory accommodations were lacking. A recently added dormitory now makes it possible for all students to live on campus.

Q: When you graduated, then what were you pointed towards?

BARRINGTON: The Foreign Service, because I'd gotten this little glimpse of it and I had become acquainted with people connected with foreign endeavors. At that time, the Department of Commerce and the State Department were more or less separated in our Foreign Service. They later combined and correlated their services. But Commerce then appointed its people directly. I knew that they were opening an office in Bogota, Colombia, a Commercial Attaché office, for the first time. I learned of this through someone I had met in Puerto Rico and who had come from a South American assignment. So I applied. I got a reply suggesting that I please come for an interview. I don't remember the officer's name, but I well remember that, ending the interview, he looked at me and he said, "You know, we have this opening, and your qualifications are all right, but we couldn't think of appointing a young woman to such a primitive country." That was that!

Q: This was, what, about 19...

BARRINGTON: Nineteen twenty-seven.

Q: And so then what happened?

BARRINGTON: Well, I got a job in New York with a lawyer's office. But I still wanted to get in the Foreign Service.

The Department of Commerce took a young man for the Bogota office instead of me. At that time, one went by ship to Barranquilla, Colombia, and then up the Magdalena River. I took it later, a long trip. And when I took the trip, it was considered a rapid one--it was only eleven and a half days, because we didn't get stuck on a sandbar! But this young man, who got the job, I can imagine, was bored on the trip. There were other passengers, of course, some of them working for the Colombian government. To pass the time they started playing cards. Unfortunately, our young man mostly lost, and lacking cash, he continued to give his opponents I.O.U.s. When he got to Bogota his office work, which

was clerical, included being a disbursing officer, one who could write government checks to pay local employees, etc. With such a source of money, he paid off his gambling debts!

That's when I got a telegram from the Commercial Attaché to me directly, asking, "Are you still interested?" And so that was my first Foreign Service job.

Q: You say it was eleven and a half days getting there?

BARRINGTON: That was the time it took to reach the town of Giradot where one went by rail up the mountains to Bogota, with an altitude of 9,000 feet.

I remember I had to pay my own fare. I knew enough about ships at that time, and since I wanted to visit friends in Puerto Rico, I went first to Puerto Rico and got a Spanish ship that docked there before proceeding to Colombia. This was a Spanish ship, I'll never forget. About half the passengers were priests. They were on their way to Bogota, Colombia. Many had formerly been stationed in Mexico. It was at that revolutionary time that Mexico for political reasons, had expelled them.

Q: For a long time, the Catholic religion was forbidden in Mexico because of the PRI, the revolutionary party.

BARRINGTON: That's it. We stopped in a Venezuelan port, La Guaira, I think it was, before reaching Barranquilla where many of the priests got on the same boat as myself to go up the Magdalena River. The river trip was very interesting to me, its jungles, alligators, monkeys, and torrential rains.

Q: There's no railroad going up there?

BARRINGTON: No. Today, one goes part way. There's a railway that comes in from the west coast port of Buenaventura, but it didn't go over the mountain hump to Bogota, either. Well, for the river trip you had to bring a mosquito net and your own sheets. I can remember it had only one shower at the rear of the boat. Because of the muddy river water, it was primarily used to cool off from the tropical heat. It was an old Mark Twain type sternwheeler, which would stop every so often and get wood for its fuel. After several days we reached La Dorada, an active town. Standard Oil was already producing petroleum near there. From there we went overland to skirt some river falls. We had to change to a smaller boat to go up as far as Giradot. And from Giradot there was a short, four- or five-hour train ride up the Andes to Bogota.

I can remember what happened when all luggage and freight for Bogota was unloaded on the banks of the river at La Dorada for transshipment on the upper river boat. A sudden downpour slowed the process and a trunk of mine was not rescued soon enough to avoid the storm and my newly-acquired wardrobe, carefully selected for the post, arrived in wrinkled, messy condition.

Q: What was Bogota like when you arrived in 1927?

BARRINGTON: It was very colonial. At almost 9,000 feet altitude, the climate was mainly overcast and dreary, except around the turn of the year. In December and January and February, the sun would pierce the foggy clouds and it was delightful, not too cool. Nights were always cold, there was no central heating in the building. Of course, Colombia was very Catholic, very religious. As a matter of fact, I believe it was one of the last South American countries to officially pay an annual tithe to Rome. The city was about, oh, I'd say 250,000 in population. Its center was a typical Spanish plaza with an architecturally impressive church. The Indian and mixed-Indian population was dominant. An elite segment of the population lived very well. They were mainly Spanish and European oriented and seemed to have plenty of resources. The ladies dressed in the latest fashion. Their clothes frequently came from Paris, and after they came up the Magdalena River, of course, they were wrinkled. And, as I said, my clothes were that way.

There was only one creditable hotel in the city. At this one hotel, every Sunday afternoon, they would stage a popular "The Dansante". Well, I brought out a dress to wear for this first occasion for me. It was terribly wrinkled, and I said to a friendly Colombian lady with me, "I've got to have this pressed. I can do it."

And the Colombian lady said, "No, you're not going to press that dress are you?"

I said, "Why, of course. I can't wear it this way. I must press it."

And she said, "No, don't, we never do." Because a wrinkled garment proclaimed it as having come from Europe, you see. So they would wear them with all the wrinkles. They wouldn't think of ironing them! I later surmised that there may have been some cheating on this custom--and that the wrinkles were not always the result of a river trip!

Q: Before we move to the actual work, what was the social life like then, particularly for a young American woman?

BARRINGTON: Well, as in many of the South American countries, I would say Colombia, Brazil and certainly the Argentine, the British were there long before we were, and they established various commercial and other enterprises. And there were always long-established British families living there and some in connection with an active British Embassy. Also, various German interests had been established. Because of the petroleum resources of the country, American companies were involved in the competition for drilling contracts in Colombia. So they all had to be in the Bogota capital to talk with the government officials. Many young Americans, too, and some Canadians were there. You mixed with the foreigners and a selected group of the European-oriented Colombians in the social activities. But you rarely mixed socially with the pure Indian. The Indians were very prevalent and mostly uneducated in those days. You'd see them on the streets all the time, with their ponchos, and babies on the backs of the women. And I

never, never heard a baby cry that was on the mother's back. It was told to me that one reason was that they were given "chicha".

Q: It's basically cocaine?

BARRINGTON: It is a corn beer. I've seen it in vats behind a "chicha" counter. It just bubbles up all the time. And I always thought, "Maybe that affected the mentality of a baby."

The young women of upper-class families were chaperoned when in public places. There was a slight mixture of the Spanish with the Indian. One of their first Presidents that had any Indian blood, Olaya Herrera, became President at that time.

Young women walking alone on city streets were subject to being quickly pinched by male passers-by, a custom not absent years ago in Southern Europe and some Latin American countries. Foreign women learned to cope with this ludicrous custom. Their usual, innocent-looking handbag had a strong steel frame which was felt by a surprised offender when the handbag was unobtrusively swung in his direction as she proceeded onward!

Recalling daily life then, I remember it was impossible to find sweet cream for purchase in Bogota, although a sugared sour cream was available. Long ago English colonists solved the problem by inventing what they called an "aluminum cow," a small pressurized apparatus with an aluminum bowl into which you placed milk and unsalted melted butter. Upon turning a handle a defused thick liquid spurted out--a perfect sweet cream! I was glad to have this apparatus in Colombia and also in Brazil.

Q: Where did you fit in, in the social life?

BARRINGTON: Well, of course, I was working. And so in the daytime, I didn't go to the prevalent lunches and teas sponsored by the foreign colony. In the evening, there was the Union Club which initiated various social activities. It was established by the British, who permitted elected Americans and Colombians to belong. It was quite an enjoyable center. I remember the British had a serious and amusing discussion about their national anthem. To us, it's "My Country Tis of Thee." The men that were there with different American companies all came in the office, and one became acquainted with them. So the group that you were thrown with was interesting, because it was Spanish-colonial mixed with European, English, and American culture at the same time. Because of the dearth of single American women, I was invited to various formal dinners at which Colombian officials and their wives were honored. The formal dress of the ladies frequently included a Spanish shawl, popular for the cold nights of Bogota which lacked any indoor heating.

Q: Well, now, to your work. What was your title and responsibility, and what were you involved with?

BARRINGTON: Well, in the beginning, I was somewhat unusual. American companies locating there would have loved to have found available English-speaking people to employ for clerical jobs in their offices. I was, more or less, office manager. We had a kind of a flunky, an office boy, Rodriguez, who was of an upper-class Colombian family, working there. And we had to do an awful lot of reporting. I started, on my own (I was really pushed into it, because everyone was so very busy), reporting on different commodities and opportunities for trade and investments because that was primarily what the Department of Commerce wanted. I can remember getting that Department pouch off, which was quite a task, every week, and miscellaneous obligations that I was in charge of.

Q: What was your impression of American commerce? I have written a book on the American consul. I cut it off at about 1914. But one of the hardest things was to get American trade to be responsive to the requirements of other countries, the measures and the weights, all the things each country...

BARRINGTON: And their laws.

Q: Their laws and to make them fit. How did you find this at that time?

BARRINGTON: Well, I remember one of the reports that I was pushed into writing was about doing business in...not Latin America, but the specific country. And you had to answer a lot of questions about their legal requirements and points of view and what the American company had to do in order to establish itself, pointing out the difficulties and the differences which most Spanish-speaking countries probably inherited from Spain. The government had control of industry, and certainly of natural resources, and their many minerals, which included petroleum. Such widespread government ownership was foreign to the American point of view, because we didn't have similar strict controls here. We had more freedom, from a business point of view. And one had to explain the differences and difficulties and what the company had to overcome.

Q: Was there a feeling that American companies were responding to this? Or was it a problem of coaxing? What was your office's feeling about it?

BARRINGTON: Americans, by and large, just took for granted those obstacles they had to overcome or comply with, and decide whether it was worthwhile for them to be located there. No, there weren't any adverse feelings. It was just a matter of taking into account and knowing what you had to do in order to become entrenched in the country.

Q: Who was your boss?

BARRINGTON: Walter Donnelly. And the minister was Jefferson Caffery.

Q: Both of them are well known. But Jefferson Caffery is one of our most famous and well-known ambassadors. He was still going, as ambassador to Cuba, Brazil, France, and Egypt, until 1955. What was your impression of Jefferson Caffery?

BARRINGTON: Well, he was a man that, when he gave a talk, you thought, "Oh, my God, if he'd only read it!" because he wasn't outgoing, verbally, himself. Everybody had great respect for him. I had a couple of amusing encounters. I liked him very much. He was very religious. He stopped by the cathedral almost every morning before he got to the office. I understood later that he was a convert; his family had been Episcopalian. And, of course, young Donnelly was just like a son. They were a good combination, because Jefferson Caffery was retiring and very proper, whereas Donnelly was outgoing and a salesman, and the two worked very well together. So much so (the report was) that Jefferson Caffery selected Maria Elena Samper, to be Donnelly's wife. She was a charming, wonderful person, just marvelous, and they made a very nice couple in every way. And Donnelly was grateful and devoted. He made sure that when the businessmen played cards with Jefferson, they always saw that he won.

Q: When somebody recently asked former President George Bush what difference he found in not being president anymore, he said, "Well, when I play golf, I don't always win."

BARRINGTON: There was the Barco concession for oil. Gulf Oil and Standard Oil were already there, and Phillips, with others, all were negotiating to get a slice of the concession. And Caffery was of great help to them.

Q: Was oil your main business in the Commercial Section?

BARRINGTON: No, no, no. Coffee was the big export, and some fruit, bananas and miscellaneous items, as well as some petroleum. But there were many prominent oil people there that took care of most everything related to petroleum.

Q: What about coffee? Were there any American firms that dominated?

BARRINGTON: No, not outstandingly so. I don't recall any.

Q: Any great problems with trade? Were the Colombians difficult to deal with?

BARRINGTON: No. There were so many products not locally produced and as tariffs were not too high, a lot of consumer goods could be imported without difficulty. And, of course, we were trying to increase exports from the US There were no big trade difficulties. The Germans were there, and the British were there, as well as ourselves. We were all competing. Our office would put an American exporter in touch with a prospective local representative for their products.

Q: Did you feel a sense of competition with the British and Germans?

BARRINGTON: Yes, in certain lines of business. The Germans seemed to be very steady and didn't put on a show at all, but had longstanding contacts there. They were founded in

machinery and various staples. And the British just more or less felt that it was their country and that they were long experienced in supplying a wide range of needed imports.

Q: What about the problem of...I don't know what they would call it in Colombia, but a payoff for things. Was this a way of life in the commercial world?

BARRINGTON: You mean graft?

Q: Graft by the government?

BARRINGTON: There's always that in a Latin country. And they may not consider it objectionable either, but just part of the deal. A cultural difference, perhaps?

Q: Did our office have to teach American businessmen how things were done there? Was this part of your job?

BARRINGTON: Well, I don't think we advised them to do it, no. But they themselves would possibly have been fully informed otherwise.

Q: Well, you left there in, what, 1932?

BARRINGTON: It was before that. My category was changed to Assistant Trade Commissioner, which is officer status. I think it was in 1931 that I left.

Q: You must have been a very rare bird--a young woman officer in the early '30s, particularly in Latin America.

BARRINGTON: It was unusual, but I never felt it, really. It was just a job to be done, and I never thought of that aspect of it. I realized that, sometimes, with my credentials, I could get into places that women had not been in. I was never refused at all, although maybe some eyebrows were raised. But anyplace I've been I have always made friends with the local people and devoted a lot of time to that.

Later on, in Brazil, for instance, the things I handled required doing things, and some things I probably didn't have to do, but I wanted to do, such as going down in the Sao Juao del Rei mine. I think it's one of the deepest gold mines in the world, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Well, of course I didn't realize it at the time, but there is a feeling that it's bad luck if a woman goes down. I didn't realize the superstition and was informed I could go down. Later I realized they were a little bit hesitant about it. But they let me go down that elevator shaft, and it was quite an experience. And there were other rather unusual experiences for a woman at that time.

Our work was divided up, a lot of it by commodity or topic. Among other things, I usually handled minerals.

Q: We're still talking about Bogota?

BARRINGTON: Well, we got switched there.

Q: You left Bogota about 1931.

BARRINGTON: I think it was before that. I think it was about 1930, but I'd have to check.

Q: And then where did you go?

BARRINGTON: I came here to Washington.

Q: What were you doing in Washington?

BARRINGTON: I was assigned to the Economic Section of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce.

Q: At the Department of Commerce.

BARRINGTON: Yes.

Q: What were your main concerns then?

BARRINGTON: Well, we had an awful lot of monthly reports to get out as well as economic statistics. I worked with...last name was Meehan, Joseph Meehan, all the time wanting to get back in the field. And then if you remember, we were in the Depression.

Q: I was going to ask about, being in the commercial field, how did the Depression impact on your work?

BARRINGTON: Well, the Department terminated the jobs of many people in the Foreign Service, from all over. I'm remembering only one couple I knew who later was reinstated. The people came from Europe primarily. The Department didn't have as many personnel in Latin America as were in Europe and other places. But I remember these people coming back without the hope of any future jobs. This cutoff was very disturbing, tragic. It was a difficult time for everybody. I didn't know just what was going to happen, but I was always hopeful and anxious to get back in my job as Assistant Trade Commissioner. I didn't care where they sent me, but, as we were saying earlier, most people in the Service then wanted to get to Europe or any place other than Latin America.
Q: Of course, with your Spanish, it really helped.

BARRINGTON: Of course.

Q: When Congress enacted the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, on June 17, 1930, that had major repercussions that started off a trade war. Did you feel that at all?

BARRINGTON: Yes. A lot of things were blamed on that enactment. It was rescinded later, was it not?

Q: Oh, yes, but it's still cranked up today as the horror story.

BARRINGTON: Yes, exactly.

Q: Within the Department of Commerce, was there a discouraged feeling there? You were there during the Depression, and this was before the Roosevelt administration started to kick in with a lot of activity. What was the feeling?

BARRINGTON: Well, there was uncertainty as to what was going to happen. Everybody felt it; it was very unsettling. I'm trying to think of some of the people that I knew that were returned from Europe and other places, just cut off without jobs. No, it was a very tragic, difficult period.

Q: When did you finally get out again?

BARRINGTON: I was sent to Rio, and I think that was about 1932 or so.

Q: I have 1934, but it might have been earlier. This is out of the biographic register.

BARRINGTON: I'd have to check.

Q: What were you going as?

BARRINGTON: As Assistant Trade Commissioner.

Q: What was the life in Rio like?

BARRINGTON: So very different from Bogota, climatically and otherwise. The people openly welcomed Americans. They were generous, thoughtful, fun-loving. In their clubs, restaurants and other places they made you feel at home. One had occasion to meet various outstanding Brazilians and to become friends. I made enjoyable close friendships there, including Dr. Eugenio Gudin and his wife. Does that ring a bell? He was Finance Minister to Brazil and was at the Bretton Woods Conference and all that. Every time he came to the States after I was in Washington (he died a short time ago), he'd always get in touch with me. Very kind, charming, stable people. Of course the educated, upper-class Brazilian comprised a Portuguese-oriented minority of the population. In the relatively underprivileged class one finds an African heritage due to the former slave labor imported to work on sugar plantations. By and large Brazilian laws did not militate in any way

against the black population. And the former slaves were given their freedom without going to war.

Brazil, as you know, has a very interesting history in that Dom Pedro, the King of Portugal, came with his court to Brazil when Napoleon threatened coming into Portugal from Spain. That set a pattern in those early days of outstanding Europeans settling in the country. One later had the opportunity to meet and to appreciate their descendants.

Rio is a beautiful spot. Have you been there?

Q: No, I never have been.

BARRINGTON: It's beautiful, but can be hot and humid. And, of course, there was no air conditioning in those days. In the old days, in the summer, the Court all moved up to Petropolis, which is at a cooler elevation and today less than an hour from Rio. We had a very attractive Embassy in Rio, friendly with everybody. It was delightful.

Q: Who was the ambassador at that time? You were there from about when to when?

BARRINGTON: I spent a total of almost ten years there.

Q: Up until the '40s.

BARRINGTON: There were several different ambassadors.

Q: Any particular stand out in your mind, either as characters or people?

BARRINGTON: Well, Caffery was there a while and Donnelly was my Commercial Attaché for a period. Of course, Caffery always took Donnelly any place he could. And Caffery was married there. I was at his small, private wedding. Did you ever know Fred Larkin, head of the State Department's Building Operations? It was said he worked in cooperation with the building appropriations under the direction of someone whose last name, I believe, was Rooney.

Q: I knew the name.

BARRINGTON: Fred Larkin was quite a character, quite a character--capable and with a fabulous sense of humor. He used to come down there quite a lot when they built the embassy residence, etc. He always had interesting, witty stories to relate about residential problems and desires of ambassadors or their wives around the world. Of course, now the capital of Brazil is no longer in Rio.

Q: What was your main concern in your work?

BARRINGTON: The main concern...I don't know, I had so many reports to get out. It was promoting trade, in every aspect that you could. Many reports concerned the increasing industrialization and local production of commodities, protective tariffs, commercial laws, government controls, etc.

Q: How was Brazil as a market?

BARRINGTON: Well, it loved things American. A number of American families lived in Rio and other centers, southerners who emigrated to Brazil during and after our Civil War. Also, British and other old time European settlers had married into Brazilian families. I recall Dr. and Mrs. Monson, longtime residents of Rio. Out of college with a law degree, Dr. Monson originally went to Rio as a consular officer. Subsequently he established a well-known Rio law firm and raised his family there. It was a cosmopolitan, friendly and law abiding city, very interesting. And one had no fear of street violence, whereas today, with its drugs, one doesn't go out in Rio with the same care-free confidence.

Q: How did you find access for getting information for your reports?

BARRINGTON: No difficulty. None at all. I handled chemicals. I always handled chemicals. It was kind of an involved subject, and it seemed to me that nobody knew much about them, especially the men, so that they gladly gave the subject to me. Consequently, I learned an awful lot about chemicals. I had to. It was quite an industry there, and it was growing fast. Also, their first steel mill was established and other important manufacturing activities which meant curbing some of our exports. Brazil was coming along beautifully, from an industrial point of view. We helped in that, and they were very open to any cooperation and suggestions that we could give them and that they could get from American companies. And we had many American firms trying to get into the market. And they did.

Q: Was part of your job to take American businessmen around and introduce them?

BARRINGTON: Oh, yes. Of course. Also, getting the local businessmen to come to the Embassy to meet an American representative--to help them both ways. I had rather close connections with various locally established foreign chemical firms. One was essentially a German chemical outfit in good standing that was selling German chemicals which arrived in Brazil despite war conditions.

One of the difficulties that you personally had, in that hot climate, was caused by the absence of dry-cleaning establishments. They would say, "Oh, yes, we dry clean," but the garments weren't really dry cleaned but maybe, spot cleaned. So I knew this German chemical man who was able, despite the war, to bring in chemicals, and knew that carbon tetrachloride was a dry-cleaning liquid, and I would get several gallons for my personal use through his courtesy. I lived in an apartment house that had a huge outside area on the top floor, and I'd do my dry cleaning there. And everybody was jealous and wanted to get

this liquid. Which led me into a little difficulty, because the wife of Jefferson Caffery heard about this, and she wanted some of this imported chemical, which was in short supply. So I, after a little hesitation, contacted this amiable German. He said his company had some on hand and that he would be very pleased to send some to the Embassy. It came in five-gallon tins. Of course, that would clean all sorts of articles, and then the dirt would settle and you could still use the top part for the next cleaning session. Well, I shouldn't get into this.

Q: Why not? Time has passed.

BARRINGTON: When the price came (I don't remember how much she got) I think the cost was in the low $60's. She hit the roof. She said it was too expensive and she just would not have it. She didn't talk to me directly. All was through her assistant. I just didn't know what to do. I didn't want to tell the supplier, who went out of his way to help. But he sensed the situation and said, "Don't worry. It's quite all right. I'll send my man to pick it up." At a forthcoming Embassy reception, Ambassador Caffery went out of his way to casually apologize by telling me that, "The quantity was more than she could handle."

Q: Was there still, as in Colombia, the same problem of graft?

BARRINGTON: Oh, yes. I'll tell you another story. This was when Getulio Vargas was President. A cabinet member (I think he was head of the Education Department) went to him and said, "You know, the salary to support my large family is just a little less than I'd like it to be, Getulio."

And Getulio looked at him and said, "You're head of that Department, what's wrong with you?" You know, why aren't you taking advantage of the privileges? It was just part of the game sometimes.

Q: Were you there when World War II started?

BARRINGTON: Yes.

Q: Did that have any effect?

BARRINGTON: Definitely.

Q: How did it impact?

BARRINGTON: Well, of course, we had felt we might eventually get into the war, so we were helping the British as much as we possibly could. When the British ships would come in to port, the British colony would invite all the sailors to a bowling club that had been founded by the British years ago in Rio, and then recruit Americans to come and help them in a social evening.

Well, on one occasion, I found myself sitting at a dinner table next to a quiet young sailor, age 18 or 19, who appeared shy and wasn't conversing very much at all. They didn't serve hard liquor, just beer, but with several beers he got a little more communicative. We had been warned not to ask pertinent questions relating to war activities. We'd been collecting all sorts of magazines and books to put on the ships. When the young man started talking, it was with a strong, "Limey" accent. He said that after joining the ship it was six months "before he saw a white woman." I quote him to give you an idea of this youthful chap. To draw him out a little bit more and make him feel at home, I said, "Well, do you have a lot of magazines on board?"

He said, "Yes," and he looked squarely at me. "We have two--one fore and one aft."

You see, the magazine on a ship is...

Q: Oh, yes, an ammunition magazine.

BARRINGTON: Exactly. Unknown to me, apparently the British call our magazines "reviews, periodicals" or something. They apparently don't use the term, magazines.

We cooperated where we could before we got into war. At times, later, going down to the Embassy in the early morning, before the offices were open, there would be some of our merchant marine chaps who had been rescued after their ship had been torpedoed nearby. They were waiting for the consulate to open. Most Brazilians were sympathetic to our sentiments during the war.

Q: What happened to the German businessmen at that time?

BARRINGTON: Well, a number of them were married to Brazilians, and they remained calm. The sons of purely German couples were encouraged by Hitler clubs to enroll in the German army, with prepaid transportation costs, etc. And a number of young Germans did leave Brazil to fight, including the son of a German maid I had at one time.

At times, in some of the public places, such as restaurants or nightclubs, there would be a German group that would start to sing some Hitler songs, and then there would be an opposing group with British or American loyalties. There were occasions when there was some friction between the two points of view but the situation was usually under control.

I remember (occurring after Pearl Harbor) an amusing incident concerning myself at the Gevea Golf Club where I was learning to play the game. Brazil being neutral at the time, both diplomatic German and Japanese were members. I shot a ball which hit a man playing in an adjoining section. My lady companion insisted golf etiquette impelled me to apologize to him. I was astonished to discover he was a Japanese. On returning to the Club House the news had preceded me and in the Lounge Bar everyone drank to my health!

Q: Were we doing anything as far as trying to impede the German commercial effort at that point, or were we still neutral?

BARRINGTON: We were ostensibly still neutral, but we felt that we were going to get involved. It was an interesting period.

Q: You left there around 1940, at least according to the book I have. What did you do?

BARRINGTON: There was a change, was there not, around that time, and the Department of Commerce personnel was absorbed into State?

Q: I think it might have been then.

BARRINGTON: I believe it was vacation time for me and I came up here.

Q: And then you went back.

BARRINGTON: Then I went back.

Q: I have you there from '43 until '48.

BARRINGTON: I think that's right. That's right. You've got those dates better than I have.

Q: It seems like an awful lot of our effort in Latin America was keeping up what amounted to the blacklist, keeping Italians and Germans from getting supplies or anything else through the neutral countries of Latin America. Was this a major part of your work when you went back to Brazil? You went back in '43, so we were in the middle of the war at that point.

BARRINGTON: Well, we were pushing our available supplies, important to Brazil, in every way we could because it was vital to them at that time. Brazil was sympathetic to our war effort and, as you know, later declared war on Germany and also sent troops to aid in the conquest of Italy.

Q: Were we also working to identify and blacklist firms with Germans and Italians?

BARRINGTON: When you say blacklist, there's not much now in my memory about it. However, I feel sure our efforts included the curtailment of activities of black-listed companies which exported to Germany and Italy.

Q: Well, this may have been more on the political side, not on the commercial side.

BARRINGTON: Yes, it would have been. Our Military and Naval Attachés were very active during this period. You will recall that northeast Brazil provided the takeoff for our planes in the North African invasion and conquest.

Q: During this '43 to '48 period, was there any particular change in what you were doing?

BARRINGTON: I was mostly doing the same thing. The same thing. Doing more of it. We tried to supply Brazil with needed import requirements and help increase the local production of essential products.

Q: I have you leaving there in '48, when you resigned, and then you came back to the Department of State in '56.

BARRINGTON: That's right. Well, it's getting into the personal angle. I was divorced. I was subjected to taking the Foreign Service oral exams of the State Department, which I passed. And then I was kept waiting to be assigned abroad.

Q: We're talking about the '56 period.

BARRINGTON: There were too many people wanting posts abroad, and they were not giving me the preference that I felt should be coming to me for my years of work. That was one reason. And then I had been married and was divorcing.

Q: You were married where, in Brazil?

BARRINGTON: In Brazil. Married in '36, I think it was.

Q: Was this to an American or to...?

BARRINGTON: Another. You know, those regulations.

Q: Yes, that's why I was asking.

BARRINGTON: He was a Scotch-Canadian. And they said, "Oh, you can't be a Foreign Service Officer if you're married to a foreigner." He became an American citizen. But that had nothing to do with it, really.

Q: I just wanted to catch a little flavor of the regulations at the time. So, during this hiatus, when you were out of the State Department, what were you doing mainly, from '48 to '56? I may be wrong about the dates, but this is what I'm getting from looking at the biographic register.

BARRINGTON: Right. Well, I was living in New York and doing all sorts of voluntary work. And then I was in my state of Montana for part of that time.

Q: Then you came back in 1956. How did you come back into the Department of State?

BARRINGTON: Well, I wanted to be reinstated, and there were just delays on it. After the war, many young men, and women too, were trying to get reinstated in their jobs, or in new jobs in the Department. And I was, it seemed to me, just being shoved aside. And then finally I was given an appointment to Buenos Aires.

Q: I have you going into the Department of State for a short time as an Economic Officer.

BARRINGTON: That's right. Well, all these titles.

Q: But basically you were sent off to Buenos Aires.

BARRINGTON: That's right. Buenos Aires is a most cosmopolitan city, with outstanding attractions. For many years it was known as the "Paris of South America."

Q: You went there in 1957. How long were you out there?

BARRINGTON: I was there until '66.

Q: My goodness. What were you doing there?

BARRINGTON: Basically the same work.

Q: Did you find that being in Argentina was different from being in Brazil, as far as how things operated?

BARRINGTON: Oh, yes.

Q: What were the differences?

BARRINGTON: The character of people, basically, as well as the differences in the operation of the two governments. You know, they're great rivals.

Q: I didn't know that.

BARRINGTON: The Argentines were number one in South America for many years. Sophisticated, energetic. Forty percent of their immigration at the turn of the century was from Italy. Like the United States, the population consists of many nationalities, the Brazilians have a different basic character. Well, you see that if you travel in Portugal and Spain. The bullfights are an illustration. In Spain, after artistic, almost ballet movements of the bullfighters, the bull is always killed, and many times the horses are gored and slashed. In Portugal, it's a disgrace if the bull's horns ever touch one of the well-trained horses. And they don't kill the bull. And if the fighter has enough courage he jumps on the

bull's horns and leaves the ring that way. Well, that may help to typify the differences in the two peoples.

Q: You were there during the Peron period, weren't you?

BARRINGTON: No, I wasn't. Peron left in '55 and I came in the aftermath period of his rule. Peron admired Mussolini very much, as well as Hitler--at least outwardly, he didn't favor a truly democratic form of government. The government made much money exporting to Europe during the war years, because of their grain and meat products. Peron had all this money to use as government subsidies. The Swiss bank accounts were huge. He bought the railways, which had been established by the British, and took control of many basic industries. He permitted the German navy to use Argentina harbors for their ships during the war, etc. But Germany's warship "Graf Spee" as you remember, failed to make it to the Buenos Aires harbor. The torpedoed "Graf Spee" reached the Montevideo harbor but wasn't able to leave within neutral Uruguay's allotted time period. It therefore was sunk by the German captain. Much of the crew went to Argentina.

Q: That was out of Montevideo, Uruguay.

BARRINGTON: I was in Rio at the time, and we just hung on to the radio in the Navy Attaché's office, listening to what was happening there. But Peron declared war against Germany shortly before the war ended.

Q: Yes, yes, because you had to have been at war with Germany in order to get into the United Nations. Whereas Brazil had already sent a whole division to the Italian campaign.

BARRINGTON: Of course. All those German ships that were in the Buenos Aires harbor became the basis for the Argentine merchant marine after Peron declared war.

Q: I take that, as far as the American attitude there, Peron was not well liked. Our ambassador at one point was Spruille Braden, who was instrumental in helping to work up opposition against Peron, wasn't he?

BARRINGTON: Yes. We couldn't like many of Peron's activities at all.

Q: How did you find, when you got there, the attitude of the Argentineans toward the Americans?

BARRINGTON: As regards the people that you met and dealt with, it was very civil and acceptable. There was nothing at all contrary to decency and respect. Peron, of course, had the masses behind him, primarily the laboring masses. The present President was elected as a Member of the Peronista Party but what he has recently done is not at all what Peron would have done.

Q: Peron pretty well bankrupted the country, didn't he?

BARRINGTON: Yes, indeed. And his wife...

Q: Evita.

BARRINGTON: Many considered her smarter than he. I've seen all of her jewelry when it was put up for sale, bringing jewelers from Europe and all over. People said she would go into a jewelry store, pick out something, and say that she'd like to consider it and to please send it to her. And the store would never think of sending a bill. She was something and very clever in appealing to the masses. She now has a wonderful musical. Physically she was most attractive.

Q: The musical, which has been popular for years, is called Evita. Were there any particular problems in the commercial work there?

BARRINGTON: No, I went all over the country at various times and to various places, to visit factories and discuss situations. Mendoza, Cordoba, Corrientes, etc. Also to the southern Patagonia area, and to Ushuaia, the southern most city in the world. Argentina is composed of a varied, progressive population and ever since colonial days it has been outstanding in South America.

Q: Were there any particular trade problems with the Argentinean government? Was this a difficult country for American business to operate in?

BARRINGTON: Competition from European firms was acute and problems were accentuated because of the tight control of Peron and the central government. Officialdom protected their own interests and people. Approval of US projects was complicated and difficult.

Longstanding British interests prevailed in the extensive cattle and sheep "estancias" (vast ranches). With their beef exports traditionally important, we were sometimes kidded about our import restrictions which curbed Argentine meat because of presumed "aftosa" cattle disease. Descendants of British settlers influenced various social as well as commercial activities as did the German population in several western areas. The Buenos Aires telephone system was a disaster. One had to wait six or seven years to be eligible for one. New residents sought living quarters already with telephones. Foreign interests connected with an official telephone company couldn't obtain permission to produce items necessary to rectify the situation. The lack of cooperation perhaps wasn't so much against outside interests as it was to indicate confidence in the government enterprise. "This is our business, controlled by the Government." Too much so!

Q: I assume you reached retirement age, was that it?

BARRINGTON: Yes.

Q: In 1962.

BARRINGTON: Yes, it was extended until '65, because the retirement age was 60 then. I left there early '66, in January of '66.

Q: And you came back to Washington to live?

BARRINGTON: Yes. The reason is, I no longer have family in Montana. We still have a ranch there, but I divested my share of it. It's rented. And I settled here because my friends, Foreign Service people, are here.

Q: This is true with most of us.

BARRINGTON: Yes, exactly.

Q: This is sort of the center. If you're Foreign Service, this is a very good place to be.

BARRINGTON: Yes, I've enjoyed it, and have acquired this modest apartment.

End of interview