Sandy Hook, Gateway NRA, National Park Service

An Oral history Interview with Arlie Seitz, Officers' Wives Club President

1964-67

Interview by Mary Rasa, Museum Curator, NPS.

August 25, 2005

Passing of the Gavel to the new OWC President, Arlie Seitz, 1965.

Photo from Officers' Wives Club Album, Gateway NRA/NPS Museum Collection

Photo from Officers' Wives Club Album, Gateway NRA/NPS Museum Collection

Mary: Today is August 25, 2005. My name is Mary Rasa, Sandy Hook Museum Curator. I am conducting an oral history interview with Mrs. Seitz and first thing I'd like to know is please state your full name.

AS: My name is Arlie middle initial A. Seitz.

MR: And can you tell me when and where you were born?

Arlie: I was born in Overbrook, Kansas… January the 11, 1932.

MR: And… where did you attend school?

AS: Well, Overbrook and then Washburn University and Topeka and then I got an Associates of Arts degree from Monmouth College in New Jersey West Long Branch… I think it's….

MR: Yes…

AS: In West Long Branch.

MR: Yes. Okay and, tell me, now your husband was in the military. When did you meet him?

AS: I met him… in… well, I heard about him in October (laughter) of '54. I didn't actually agree to go out with him until January. I think the 3rd of 1965.

MR: And where were you living at the time?

AS: Colorado Springs, Colorado.

MR: Your family had moved there?

AS: Ah no. Well, I was there with my Aunt and Uncle. My uncle was wounded in Korea and he was in the hospital there for three years. But I met my husband through my Dad's brother who was with the American Embassy in France for thirty something years. And he would come back every two or three other years and he came to Colorado Springs because he had some friends there and their names were Vaughn, Bob and Ruth Vaughn. And they invited me to go on a picnic. And then after, my Uncle left, Ruth called me to see if I would come to their house and have dinner and play bridge and met this man that, needed to meet some, women or something (laughter) along those lines. And I declined until January.

MR: And how old were you when you did go out with him?

AS: Well, I was born in thirty-two, so and my birthday is in January. So it was just before I was, thirty two (mumbling) in fifty-four. I was twenty-three.

MR: Okay and how old was he?

AS: He was born in '28 so he hadn't had any birthday yet so, he was 26.

MR: Okay, and he had attended West Point?

AS: He graduated in 1950.

MR: Okay, and so was he serving at Colorado Springs at the time?

AS: Yes, he had come back from Austria. Served over there during the occupation and, he decided to get out of the military which he did. So when we were married he was a civilian and he was a civilian, I think from the time I met him. I believe he was.

MR: Okay, and what year did you marry?

AS: December of '55.

MR: Okay, and tell me…

AS: It's easier to add in there. I churn it up real quick that we were divorced in October of 1990. And he died. He remarried in '98. April of '98 and he died, the, Twenty, I think it was the twenty fifth of February of this year.

MR: Okay, tell me how you ended up at Fort Hancock?

AS: It was an assignment.

MR: And how did he, when did he rejoin the military?

AS: In 1957, and from that we were living in, Arlington, Virginia and he was going to Georgetown. Thought he wanted to be a Foreign Exchange Officer. And the first time he took the test he didn't pass it and the second time he took the test he got even a worse score so he decided against that. I was working to support us and then I had our first child and that's when he went back into the service.

MR: Okay.

AS: In '57, prior to that he taught in a private school in Fairmont, Minnesota, Shaddock, the first year we were married.

MR: So, was his first assignment to …

AS: It was on Hazlet, Holmdel I guess you call it. You know Telegraph Hill.

MR: Yeah, they refer it to the Holmdel-Hazlet site.

AS: First he went to El Paso, Texas for some kind of school…

MR: Um hmm…

AS: And then to that missile site. But I lived at Fort Hancock in that duplex or whatever you wanted to call those over by the Officer's Club until the houses were finished and I think they were twelve of them. He showed me a paper recently, I think that they were destroyed. I think they were called sweet heart houses. Does that ring a bell?

MR: I'm not really sure.

AS: Well, I'm not either so, they were small houses with three bedrooms.

MR: So, what was his rank when he first came to that assignment with the Nike missiles?

AS: Captain. The Battery Commanders were always Captains.

MR: And as a Battery Commander, was he in charge of both the actual missiles and the radar?

AR: Yes, the administrative part was near where we lived and the actual missiles were off someplace. I never did go see them. Both places had guard dogs on the inside.

MR: Now when you were assigned, since you were living and he had to commute to work were you active in the Fort Hancock community?

AR: At that time? Yeah. With a church in Middletown. I think it was called Middletown. You know towns aren't really towns on the east coast. I think it was called Christ Church. We were very active, or at least I was.

MR: And you attended college when you were there?

AS: Yes, I did. One year it was full time. The rest was part-time. I don't know how I did it.

MR: What did you get your associates in?

AS: From Monmouth.

MR: What degree?

AS: Sociology.

MR: You had how many children at that time? One?

AS: I had one when I started. And when I graduated, I was super pregnant with my third one.

MR: So who was your child care while you were in school?

AS: Well, the first year, I would take my oldest one, Matt to Fort Monmouth Day Care. And after that I had women that lived where we lived, probably enlisted you know, I don't remember. Well, I remember one because she called me and told her kids had the measles after they had been there. I never forgave her for that.

MR: Did they get it?

AS: Yep, they did. They were really sick. That was before my third one was born. It was sad.

MR What year did you leave New Jersey?

AS: The missile site?

MR The first time you were there?

AS: '61. In April.

MR: Do you remember anything about Fort Hancock while you were temporarily living there that was interesting?

AS: There wasn't much going on at Fort Hancock in those days.

MR: So there wasn't much activity?

AS: No. Our headquarters was on Staten Island. For functions or is there another post up there?

MR: Fort Wadsworth. That was the HQ at the time.

AS: Okay, maybe it was Wadsworth. There was something in Staten Island?

MR: That's in Staten Island.

AS: Okay.

MR: That makes sense. Where did you go from there?

AS: Went to Fort Lawton, Oklahoma. Which was absolutely the ends of the earth. He was in a communications school and then to Germany. And Germany, first I went over the same time he did with the three kids. Which never do that again. Lived on the economy for nine months. Because of the Cuban Missile Crisis. We didn't have heat all day long. At night it was awful. Thought about coming back with the kids and found out that roundtrip airfare was one thousand dollars and we didn't have one thousand dollars. I stuck it out for 9 months.

MR: So you were living on base housing?

AS: No, that was the economy (not audible) - Alpine.

MR: Oh, okay.

AS: And then we moved in the Hanau in government quarters. And then after that he got transferred to the controllers division in Heidelberg and that was a grand mine.

MR: And did you have some servants to help you there?

AS: I had them all the time we were in Germany. Even in (not audible) Alpine. I had a woman ever day even though they weren't worth a whole lot. Better than nothing.

MR: So then when did you return to the United States?

AS: In '64. And went to El Paso, TX. And from El Paso, TX to Fort Hancock the time we're talking about.

MR: What were the years that you, the second time, you were living in House #8?

AS: December of '64 until the fall of '67 I believe and then he went to Korea. And I returned to Kansas. And lived in Fort Scott, Kansas. Across the alley from my brother for a support system. For 13 months.

MR: So, was that in a military?

AS: No, that was civilian.

MR: Civilian, okay.

AS: And then I went to Korea to visit him and then we both went to Japan. And then he finally came back that fall, I think, October of ’67. No. what did I tell you. He came back from Korea in fall of ’67 so that makes him going over there, 13 months. That would be ’66 that we left Fort Hancock. Well I know for sure ‘67 is right, because I got pregnant, in …oh that might not be right. My son was born May the 3rd of 1969. So he had to have to have been around… Well anyway we are talking about one year.

MR: Okay, so when he came back from Japan, I guess.. what was your next?

AS: No he wasn’t in Japan, he was in Seoul, Korea.

MR: Okay, so you had just visited there?

AS: That was when he finished up his masters from Rutgers via correspondence.

MR: Oh, they were able to do that back then?

AS: Well, he wrote a thesis.

MR: So, when did he retire?

AS: In ’73.

MR: And then you moved back to Kansas.

AS: I came back to Kansas from Panama before he did to get the kids in school so they wouldn’t have to switch schools in the middle. And he had various medical things. And he was from Panama… I came back at the end of July maybe of ’72 and he was still in Panama until probably December of that year. And then to the hospital in, not Walter Reed, Fitzsimons (Colorado). He had his thyroid removed. Plus he had diabetes and you know various thing. And then, he already had a job with the state of Kansas and from there on out.

MR: So, let’s go back to the second time you were at Fort Hancock. He was a Major at the time. He worked with the HQ of the 52nd. Do you know what he was doing?

AS: No, absolutely never did he talk about his work. To me.

MR: Was he not allowed to?

AS: I don’t know. Women never did discuss the husbands work. Or any individual actually. Not around me.

MR: Okay. So, while you were there, you were active in the Officers' Wives Club. Now, when you became president was that an elected position?

AS: Yes, I was. I think it was only for the people dumb enough to agree to run for it.

MR: What were your duties?

AS: Make sure all the right things are accomplished according to the all of the propers and whatever the General's wife wanted.

MR: What would a typical list of activities that you would be involved with?

AS: Well, we had teas for people coming or leaving.

MR: You had a fashion show.

AS: We did things like, I think at Fort Hancock we were into making hats. There were various projects. Speaking of that club, there was a great big oil painting of a guy somehow or other connected with Fort Scott, Kansas. And maybe his name was Scott. Did it disappear?

MR: In the Officers' Club, there was a large portrait of General Hancock.

AS: Oh yeah, okay that's what I was thinking of. What did they do with that?

MR: We still have it. It's been restored. Would the Officers' Wives Club have meetings once a month?

AS: Yes, once a month

MR: Was it always in the Officers' Club.

AS: Yes, well, I guess so.

MR: Now, what was the Officers' Club like at that point in time? Was it a social place for the Officers to go? Would they have a bar at the time?

AS: Yeah they did have, Friday nights they would have what they called, happy hour. And the men went to that. And I remember that they had ham harvested locally. The things were alive and they opened them up and dip them in butter and ate them

MR: Ugh.

AS: I don't remember ever going to one of them. I remember one woman did attend those. But I never went to the Friday night, I had three kids.

MR: Was there a staff that ran it?

AS: Yes.

MR: Okay, so when you would have say a luncheon…

AS: Somebody took care of it.

MR: Okay. Was anyone living in 2nd or 3rd floor of the building at that point in time?

AS: Not that I know about.

MR: There weren't like any bachelor officers that were staying there overnight or anything?

AS: I don't think so, but I don't know.

MR: Right.

AS: The only outbuilding that I remember we had a library someplace over there. Is that still around?

MR: The library was a WWII building. It was since torn down.

AS: Oh, Okay.

MR: So the Club basically had was it a large staff or was is just a couple of people would run things?

AS: I don't remember but it was sufficient to do whatever we did.

MR: Okay.

AS: But I do remember for somebody's party, of a woman coming to my house with a bunch of hamburger for me to make the meatballs. Like 15 pounds. And then she had a roll recipe which I still have and still use and I am thankful for that one. So we did make food in our homes to take over there.

MR: Okay.

AS: You know, that would be, I'm sure it would be a special something or other. Maybe like a general arriving. When (General) Clapsaddle left and Walter Vann arrived.maybe. I can't say for sure.

MR: What was I gonna say, so I was just reading the article that was written in the *Asbury Park Press*. It's from Sunday, February 13, 1966, which is a visit into your home. Now your three daughters shared a bedroom?

AS: Ah, that's what it said. I remember two of them in the big room and one of them a smaller bedroom. There were only two great big bedrooms up there.

MR: Right.

AS: Maybe all three of them slept in that great big room. Maybe.

MR: Now did you furnish it with everything from your possessions? Or did you get things…

AS: No, the bedroom furniture was Quartermasters' (Corps). It was beautiful stuff. And there were tables around. They also had dining room sets, but I had my own dining room. I didn't use that. But there was quite a bit of Quartermaster furniture. What happened to that stuff?

MR: The Army probably took it with them. The Army must have taken it at the end of Fort Hancock's military.

AS: Oh really,

MR: Fort Hancock closed in '74 so everything that was pertaining to the Army that they could move they took out.

AS: I wonder what they did with it.

MR: I don't know. Did you provide all your own curtains or did the Quartermaster?

AS: Yeah.

MR: Okay.

AS: And floor coverings. They were all hardwood without that finish on them that we have today. You know that you can just damp mop. They were a lot of work.

MR: There were no servants while you were there?

AS: None. Well, no. Stateside I don't think people had help, because it would be too costly for our meager income.

MR: Did the, now the home has the third floor that used to be servants quarters, did you ever do anything up there? Or maybe store things?

AS: No. I went up there one time, just to look. But you know, I don't have any recall.

MR: Well, you just didn't need the space?

AS: No, sure didn't. I didn't need anymore to clean.

MR: Did you, did the Army paint before you got there?

AS: It was in pristine condition.

MR: So, you didn't need to paint when you got there?

AS: Oh, no. I never painted government quarters at anyplace. I washed plenty of walls. Not at Fort Hancock, but in Germany were required to wash and rinse all the walls.

MR: Really.

AS: Uh hmm.

MR: That's interesting.

AS: Yeah. And of course the stove and refrigerator everything had to be like new. Which was fun, you know, the law of the land.

MR: The article says that you had a little family room behind the dining room.

AS: Yeah, there was in those houses.

MR: That was originally the Officer's office so was interesting to see that was converted into a family room.

AS: Well, it was very small I just had a TV in there.

MR: So that was probably the only TV that you had in the house, right?

AS: That's right. And kids didn't watch it very often. I don't remember that they really did watch it.

MR: And did you have one telephone in the house, or two?

AS: One.

MR: And would that be in the hallway?

AS: Yeah, where that desk is.

MR: Okay, and let's see what other things about the house….Did the, was everything, I guess all the woodwork was all painted white by then?

AS: That's right. No chips. No nothing. In pristine condition.

MR: That's great. I wish I could have seen that.

AS: I remember when I left, that I of course, cleaned the house very well. And the inspectors walked in and they didn't even look around. And I said, "How do you know its clean when you didn't even look?" And he said, "I can tell by the smell." So I'm now wondering if you could put some fresh air mist in and make the house smell good.

MR: Just put some bleach.

AS: And something like that.

MR: Now the basement it says that you had a room for your brownie troop?

AS: Yes I did.

MR: Now would the brownies be both…

AS: They were military kids.

MR: Would they be both enlisted and officers kids?

AS: Oh gosh, I'm going to guess that they were. The school bus would let them off at my house and I learned quickly that they had to go to into that little bathroom, there where the desk is and go in and wash their hands because they were touching the walls. I'm just guessing, but those pictures that I sent of those kids those weren't only Officers' kids, and I don't know none of my kids seem to be in those pictures. I don't know why I was given them. But I thought there was a good shot houses from the back. The pictures were taken on the parade ground.

MR: Right. I think those pictures were taken on Organization Day as we have those pictures as well.

AS: Oh, you do.

MR: Yeah, most of them. We have the same ones. I just have to turn the tape over. Just one second. Just out of curiosity, with your children, being in the same brownie troops, what was the situation with the enlisted and the officers, they still didn't socialize?

AS: No they did not.

MR: But would the kids be allowed to play together?

AS: Yep.

MR: I guess the only time they would socialize would be when the children were involved?

AS: Oh, the parents never socialized.

MR: Oh, okay. It was just involvement with the children?

AS: Well, the children would play outside I suppose together, but never in the houses.

MR: Was the brownie troop and the Boy Scout troop, were they sponsored by the Officers' Wives Club in any way?

AS: No.

MR:So, it was just all troops that were held by Fort Hancock families.

AS: Uh mm.

MR: And did the Officers' Wives Club do charitable events?

AS: Probably, but I'm not remembering. I hadn't even thought about that.

MR:Just curious.

AS: Mostly, I don't thing at Fort Hancock, but like in Europe, I was very active in the American Red Cross. We did work with enlisted families who were over there unauthorized and couldn't afford to be there. We would give money. Very supportive of the military people. But that was through American Red Cross and not the wives club.
MR: Could you tell me about the whole series of making calls on your fellow officers' families?
AS: I don't remember doing that specifically.
MR: Well, talk about the calling cards and what you would do with them.
AS: Well, all I remember about that was the General's house on New Years Day.
MR: So you would go to his house…Explain how that worked
AS: Well, we were given a time to go. And told how long we were to stay there. It might have been an hour. I don't remember exactly if it was a large group which Fort Hancock wasn't. But some other places like Panama, probably a half hour. And you would go in one of those (inaudible) things….from the south…
MR: Oh I don't know.
AS: Anyway they were fancy affairs. And the men in dress uniforms and the women dressed up properly.
MR: And would you go visit…Explain what a calling card is.
AS: It's a little card like, a lot of civilians have them for whatever reason. Well, they pass them out you know if it's a business. Its like one of those.
MR: And you would go into a house you would place them…
AS: As you walked in. Put it in the silver tray.
MR: Now, would the silver tray be something that the wife would just have?
AS: Yeah.
MR: So they were all different.
AS: I don't specifically remember. Any small tray, it wouldn't be a great big thing. Small tray.
MR: Anything else you would like to talk about.
AS: I've probably talked too much.
MR: Oh that's okay. From your experience going all over the place with the military did you like that? Obviously, there were a lot of advantages and a lot of disadvantages to it.

AS: Right. Overall, yes I enjoyed it very much as I got to see the world. By the time he retired and the children were older and not wanting to leave friends etc, etc it became more difficult. And the moving, like I moved eighteen times in twenty eight years. That became stressful, but not anything I could not handle. My reflection is about military wives, is that they, their identity was their husband's identity in the military. And yet we were extremely independent and capable of functioning alone because we had to. The husbands' were off a great deal of time. Like in Germany, my husband was off playing war games in Grassphere (spelling?). You know and I was in a foreign country with foreigners that I didn't even like alone with three little kids. That was my worst experience and if I had that to do over I wouldn't have gone until government quarters were available.

MR: The one other thing that you had emailed me about having dinner parties. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

AS: Doing that?

MR: Doing that, yes.

AS: Well, I had a set thing that I always did because if you do the same thing over and over its easy. And so I told you I had prime rib for 8 and for 12, this would be sit down I did a half of Cornish game hen and I would have the meat people cut all those halfs and serve wild rice with that. What else I don't remember.

MR: Now you would do that all by yourself?

AS: Yep.

MR: That's impressive.

AS: And the standup dinner, except for in Germany. I did order from the Officers' Club they did a ham roll up thing for me. We had recipes like for meatballs and cheese balls. Everything that you could eat standing up. We called those standup parties. You'd have a whole room full of people. You'd serve cocktails. Usually hired a bartender.

MR: For your shopping, did you typically go to the Fort Hancock Commissary?

AS: Yes. I did always.

MR: So that would be your most typical place to buy things?

AS: Right.

MR: And for say children's clothes and that type of stuff

AS: That was awful because, I did have to buy in the PX and it was limited in what they have because shopping back in those days around Holmdel, there just weren't stores to do it.

MR: Did you have to go to Red Bank if you wanted to get things?

AS: I don't remember shopping in Red Bank. Maybe they added some stores, but I wasn't impressed with the Red Bank either. Maybe they've gotten better, I don't know.

MR: Okay

AS: In Newburgh, New York when we were there. There were these big discount stores with lesser quality stuff in there. But just regular store, if they were around I didn't know where they were.

MR: Oh okay.

AS: That place, I was very active in our Episcopal church. I did a lot of work there. I always had volunteer work. My civilian life I was in politics. I am getting too old for that. Walk talk most of the time

MR: Did you run excursions to New York City while you were at the Fort.

AS: My husband and I went to a lot of shows up there.

MR: Did you take the car?

AS: As a group and in a car, our car.

MR: Did you go to the beach at all?

AS: Uhmm.

MR: In the Fort part, or when they started the State Park in the southern end of the park. Just out of curiosity?

AS: I don't think that there was any State Park when I was living out there.

MR Well, it started in '62 and ran until '74, it was south of where the entrance, the guard shack.

AS: Well, I don't remember going there, maybe I did. What I remember was the undergrowth around, this one woman at the Officers' Club, I don't remember her name. She was decorating with all these bright red leaves and I ended up being poison ivy. She was really sick.

MR: I guess you would be.

AS: I know that area is full of poison oak unless they've gotten rid of it.

MR: It's mostly poison ivy but yeah its all over the place.

AS: Uh mm. I don't remember a whole lot about the beach. I remember seeing a flounder in the sand. With one eye.

MR: So, its sounds like you've made a number of friends from your time as an Officer's wife. And you still keep in touch with them.

AS: Yes, I do at Christmas time, and I've wondered if it makes sense to keep in touch. I'll probably never see them again, you know. But I enjoy hearing from them, and we exchange pictures of our kids and grandkids now. We all have grandkids and some are grown. And that's a fun thing. But if you're never, I have 3 or 4 years ago gone back to east coast and visited with some people in Newburgh. Actually it was called New Windsor. There's post there I think it's an airport (Stewart International Airport), because my son-in-law is a pilot and he flies in there sometimes. I don't remember what it was called. I remember it had a whole bunch of great big plum trees. It had a plum orchard on it. And we went out and picked two garbage cans full of plums one year and gave them away to people.

MR: Well, okay, I'm going to end the interview right now, that you very much.

AS: Oh, you're welcome.

MR: I'm going to turn this off.

END OF INTERVIEW.