Oral History Interview

with

Carol Meissner

Interview Conducted by
Mary Larson
September 7, 2010

O-STATE Stories
Oral History Project

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O-State Stories

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Interview History

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of O-STATE Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Carol Meissner is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on September 7, 2010.

About Carol Meissner…

Carol Meissner grew up in the town of Maramec which is located in Pawnee County. She went to nursing school at Hillcrest Nursing School which was a part of Columbia Hospital in Tulsa. She met her husband, Louis Meissner, through her sister and married him in 1953. Her nursing degree would help her and husband land a spot in Oklahoma State's program in Ethiopia in 1956.

The Meissner's were recruited as a team because there was a need for both an agricultural specialist who had a spouse that was a nurse. Mrs. Meissner took care of the students and faculty of the technical school at Jimma in a little clinic on campus. The medical facilities were sparse compared to what was in the United States. This did not prevent her from doing her job enthusiastically. She dealt with issues of tuberculosis and malaria. Mrs. Meissner also raised two children in Ethiopia during her five year stay.

She currently resides in Stillwater, Oklahoma with her husband, Louis.

Carol Meissner

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Stillwater, Oklahoma

Larson *Today is September 7, 2010. My name is Mary Larson, and we're here at the Meissner home with Carol Meissner, who is going to be talking to us today about her and her husband's time in Ethiopia for OSU. I'd like to start by getting some general biographical information from you, if I could. If you could just tell me a little bit about your family and where you were raised, where you went to school.*

Meissner Well, we grew up in Pawnee County. I went to school in a little town called Maramac. From that little tiny town, which I did not want to stay there the rest of my life, I went into nurse's school, finished, and got an RN. When I came home, we started a family. So, that was about as colorless as life could be. (Laughter)

Larson *Did you go to high school in Maramec?*

Meissner In Maramec, yes, which is still there today, but the school is not. My father farmed, and my mother was a homemaker. There were six of us children. I was next to the youngest. I didn't do any great thing except I loved drama, so I'm still doing it. I know how to do drama. (Laughter) Our school had very few girl activities. I wasn't allowed to play basketball, and I wasn't good, but we had class plays every year. I made sure that I was in every one of them that I could get in.

Larson *What was your favorite?*

Meissner Probably my freshman [year] when I first started, but they all were my favorite.

Larson *Do you remember what the play was?*

Meissner It was called "Aunt Tillie Goes to Town." (Laughs) It was kind of supposedly funny. What we did at the time, since schools were very segregated in the forties, I played an African American and was the cook for the play setting. I loved the part. I could speak the lingo just fine. (Laughs) So, for myself, I never did have a feeling of racism. Never did. I think part of that was I was human, and I think that had something to do with it. I loved the part. In fact, I played different parts later. I was even a Chinese once. (Laughs) I was an Italian once. I liked to do that, and I liked to imitate. So, that was my fun part of high school.

Larson *Once you graduated from high school, where did you go to nursing school?*

Meissner At Hillcrest. It was a hospital [with a school of nursing] at the time (Columbia Hospital) in Tulsa. I never was a nurse's aide until a few years ago. I worked at a nursing home, and you do everything there. But I went from high school right into nursing.

Larson *Now, how did you meet your husband?*

Meissner He had come to my house to take my younger sister and her friends on their graduation night, wearing robes and caps and things. They went to Pawnee. I just happened to be home on vacation. I was graduating. He was graduating from OSU and so, my mother said, "Have you ever met him?" I said, "No." So, she introduced us. He took me to the movies, and we got married that October. (Laughs)

Larson *And what year was that?*

Meissner That would have been in 1953. We'll have our fifty-seventh wedding anniversary this year.

Larson *Oh, that's wonderful.*

Meissner Yes, I think so.

Larson *When you first got married, where were you living and what were you doing at the time?*

Meissner He had been deferred from the army to finish and get his bachelor's. So, he got his bachelor's, and we got married. He finished his farm work, which he had a cotton crop to get out. Then in December, he went to Camp Chaffee, or Fort Smith, and I stayed in Pawnee and worked another month or so. Then, I moved to Fort Smith with him, and we got to stay there the entire two years. Well, he got out two months early to

go back to school and work on his master's. I worked as a supervisor of a nursery at Sparks Hospital in Fort Smith. It was just like a job to us. Other people would say, "Oh, I hate this place!" (Laughs) But it was home. Every month we could come back and visit our families. We enjoyed that. Then he got out two months early. One week before our daughter was born, we came back to Stillwater. He went back to school. I had a little girl, and then I went back to work. The GI Bill did not pay much money then. (Laughs) So, I worked in the old Stillwater Medical Center in obstetrics.

Larson *And that's your daughter Marilee?*

Meissner No, that is the daughter LuAnn, who is almost fifty-five. She will be next week.

Larson *How did you and your husband end up going over to Ethiopia for OSU?*

Meissner He was in the agricultural department, and they approached him about that, knowing that I also was a nurse. They wanted to start the university down at Harrah, so the Whitenacks were going to transfer. That left an opening for a nurse agriculture person at Jimma. When he came in, as I said, I had to ask where it was. (Laughs) But they did everything for us. We didn't even have furniture to store. We had always lived in an apartment. So, it was not difficult to throw our things together, and away we went. We enjoyed Washington D.C. We went early enough, and went onto New York City, toured Manhattan and a few things, and on the way carrying a nine month old, very heavy little girl. (Laughter)

Larson *Just at that age where you're a little…*

Meissner Right, yes. Then when we got to Rome, we spent another maybe twenty-four or thirty-six hours there. We got to see things that we had only read about. In Cairo, the soccer team—Ethiopia only had one airline—the soccer team had used the plane. So, the family we were traveling with, which was the Wiggins, we got to stay in Cairo until the plane could come and get us. So, we got to go to the pyramids and see the museum and all of the things that you hastily get to see in Cairo, and then on to Ethiopia.

Larson *When your husband came home with this offer from the university, what were things that you took into consideration, or were you both just so excited about it you jumped on it?*

Meissner We jumped on it. I'm an adventurer, and I think if anything he was kind of surprised that I was quite so willing to go, but I was. (Laughs) Then I waited. We did apply, and it seemed like it took them a long time—it

was to me, whether they told if we were going or not, but it was only I think about April when they started hiring the vo ag teachers. They pushed us. They said, "Make up your mind," because he'd have to go to school. So, he pushed on them and they gave us the go ahead answer. So, we went ahead.

Larson *And they were hiring your husband, but they were also hiring you…*

Meissner Right.

Larson *For the people that don't have the background, do you want to explain a little?*

Meissner Well, his was agriculture. Since it was agriculture business, he could fit in almost any place. He did horticulture while he was there, but his minor had been in animal husbandry, so that could have helped. It was just set up as a pair. Now, since I had a child, they only would allow me two-fifths of the time. I was on call twenty-four hours, but that was just their ruling. It sounded so good to me, that much money. I had not made that much money. (Laughs) It wasn't a whole lot, $2500 a year. Doesn't sound like a lot now, and it wasn't, but it was good for us. I mean, we grew up on shoe strings, really. It was hand-me-downs and cornbread. That was the main thing. (Laughs)

Larson *You mentioned you didn't have to take care of packing a whole lot. You didn't have to take a lot with you?*

Meissner Well, they gave us a list, and we pretty well went by what we had to have. I also contacted Gwen Whitenack about what I should bring in medical supplies. She sent me a list, and the infirmary at the college filled it for me. I didn't know what I'd need either. It was hard to know what to take for two years. Your antibiotics aren't going to last that long, you know. What do you take for pain medication? Do you not take anything? That was kind of a hard thing for me, to know what to take there. But Gwen sent, I thought, a very good list, and they filled us just like she said. If there was anything else I needed to put on it, which I can't remember that I did because I didn't know what I'd need, then that took care of that, and it was shipped. They did all the shipping. We just took a baby bed, a high chair, things for a child, and our clothes, and that was about it.

Larson *Where were you assigned to live and work when you got to Ethiopia?*

Meissner We went directly to Jimma. The housing was furnished, which you've probably heard this before. They were old, Italian houses that had been restored, but this had been a school, an Italian school before. We had a

dormitory that housed about two hundred boys, and really the cream of the crop of Ethiopia. All the boys wanted to go to school, so they had to be screened, carefully. It was entirely a secondary high school, starting in the ninth through the twelfth. They were great kids. I can't think of any of them that… Each one of us sponsored a group. They became our kids, actually, there. Louis worked in gardens with them, and he became very closely attached to them. Of course, then the next year you start over with the next class. He taught them how to grow the vegetables that I pushed for them to eat. That was kind of the way we did it. (Laughs)

Larson *That's a good back up plan.*

Meissner Right, because they did, they gave me the job. Besides being the nurse there on a compound for staff and students, I had a helper, but they also gave me a class. They called it hygiene. I called it health, because I did a lot more than hygiene with them. You had to adapt to what they had. If they went back out into the country, they didn't have running water, and often we didn't have running water. Our wells would not always produce. At first, we had electricity only part of the day. What I tried to do was then push the fact that cleanliness will help to curtail disease, and hand washing was elementary, but very important. It was just small things like that. But I enjoyed that class. You would have thought I was an A-1 teacher. I loved that class so much. (Laughs) Well, I did that for about three of the five years that I got that class.

Larson *Well, just to go back to some of the things that you had mentioned a little earlier. You talked about—and this is something people haven't mentioned yet—the fact that the school at Jimma was actually an old Italian school. Do you know what the background was for that?*

Meissner Well—I'm ashamed now—when you're older you would have dug that out better. I was so afraid of picking up some germ, I guess, that I didn't really study as well as I could have. I didn't learn the language. I messed with it, but I didn't learn it. The little history we had was the Italian occupation was in '35, and they came in and they built and built and built. Then after World War II, they kind of ran out, except who the emperor wanted to keep. The Ethiopians destroyed a lot of the road building, and burned off the tarmac is what had happened. Underneath the tarmac are just big rocks, so you had a real bumpy ride, if there was any left at all in Jimma. (Laughs) That's the way we were. We were really into the run from Addis. It would take all day to get from Addis to Jimma because it's narrow and it was hilly—well, quite mountainous. So, all these buildings were just kind of left in decay. The first group that went over had them all put in shape for us. By the time I got there, my house was in good shape.

Larson *And you got there in which year?*

Meissner We went in ’56. I felt like we had a good place to live, partly because living here in Stillwater. If I told you where it was, you would understand, but the house was just a little garage that had been turned into an apartment. It was not very nice, so this two bedroom house with a bath in it and a nice, big open room for dining and living room looked like a mansion to us.

Larson *It felt palatial.*

Meissner Right, and it had been lived in. It was very clean and cool because of the high ceilings and the thick walls, but it was very comfortable. I had no complaint about our living conditions at all. Except the electricity would not come on until two in the afternoon, and then it was off, it seemed like, around ten. So, we had to have kerosene refrigerators. The washing machine was not the best piece of things to take, but they said, “Bring one if you have it.” I cannot remember if it was the first or second time that I took the washing machine back, but I was sure it was the first time, but they couldn’t use it until two in the afternoon.

Larson *Was that the case on the campus, too?*

Meissner That was on campus, yes. We just used the city generators, but we did have our own water wells that also ran on electricity, because they were deep. The fluoride was so high in those wells that we still boiled it and still took precautions. It was such high fluoride, if we would have only known that. Some of the young children’s teeth became spotted white from over-fluoridation. In fact, our daughter had her teeth all capped because of that. When the permanent teeth came in they were spotted with white spots, and she didn’t like them. (Laughs) But our son didn’t have that. He was only two and a half when we came home, so he never had that problem.

Larson *So, his baby teeth might have been that way, but not his permanent.*

Meissner Yes, and it didn’t seem to affect him. Some of the other children, I learned, had the same thing.

Larson *Now, were there any surprises with the living conditions when you first got out there?*

Meissner I guess, because I felt like we had a good place to live. When you think of Africa, you don’t think of how modern that it could be, and really, even back in ’56 to ’61, we found that the places we went were very modern. I think part of the fact was you’re in Africa, it’s not going to be

midtown USA. I didn't feel like we had a difficult time adjusting at all. It was the flies and the dirt that kind of was hard on all of us. I mean, all of our pictures we'd go around knocking flies out of our face, and the children if they'd sit down, they'd get flies on them, but we'd just take it. This is what we thought. Now, I'm sure it's not that way today, but it was fifty years ago.

Larson *At that point, because of the Italian occupation, they were doing a lot of rebuilding, which is one reason they were starting the school at Jimma, and then the agricultural college.*

Meissner That's right, and the emperor wanted that. That was his dream. After being bombed pretty heavy during the occupation by the Air Force, then his dream was to have a university at his birthplace. We came home before going. We didn't even push to go down there because it was pretty well built up and lined up. We did go visit. I've been there and just visited, but after five years we were ready to come home, too.

Larson *Where did your supplies come from, both your household supplies and your medical supplies? You said you shipped a lot of the medical supplies over.*

Meissner We had a pharmacy, downtown in Jimma. (Laughs) It was just a store. They might only have one bottle of vitamins, but our medications and what the Ethiopians had been used to was not the same. So, I kind of used our medicines for the staff. This was not a new thing. I knew ahead of time we had a doctor from Germany that was contracted by the Ethiopian government, and they had a little hospital. It was quite a hospital. If you ever saw anything primitive, that would be it. Without electricity until two o'clock, it was hard to get an x-ray, so even then, we didn't do x-rays. They did fluoroscopes. There was also an Italian doctor there, but he was like me. He wouldn't learn English, and I wouldn't learn Amharic, and he didn't either, but the German doctor could speak Amharic quite well.

Larson *Do you remember his name?*

Meissner Yes, we called him Reuther, but it was spelled R-e-u-t-h-e-r. I remember him because he delivered our children for us. He delivered one for the Evans, one for me, and Kindells. So, I worked closely with him, with the students especially, but he worked with the staff. There's your socialized medicine. He was paid a salary, and so they didn't like for him to leave during working hours.

Larson *He was at the hospital in Jimma?*

Meissner He was at the hospital, yes. But nobody wanted to go out there and have a baby. You might think it was only like twenty year old stuff from Italy, but it was the most barren thing you could ask for. I do remember when we went in once, I took some boys in. Tuberculosis was kind of prevalent there, so I took boys in for x-rays. I'd just take so many each week. We didn't have an x-ray machine, so we would have to set up a time after two o'clock and use the fluoroscope.

We went out, and we went into this dark room. Both of the doctors sat down and folded their hands. Well, I sat down and folded my hands, and I thought, "Are going to pray or what is this?" Well, it was getting our eyes used to the darkness. (Laughs) I learned that the first trip. Boy, I thought, "Wow, I am dense!" Then they turned on this fluoroscope, and we could see. He just had the boys look sideways, and then the school paid him a certain amount of money for that.

They had to go to the hospital. Everything went through the hospital. To go to the record room, you would have been shocked, but they seemed to know where their records were. I couldn't have found them, but they made it through very well. I just marvel at how those kids lived like that. I really, really did. They felt like they were way above. They didn't act that way, but I think they really felt their fortune, that there are a lot of kids out there that would trade lives to get to be here. I thought they were very good students. My main focus there was on health and so, I didn't try to interfere with any of their teachings because I didn't know that much. When I think back, I just think, "That was a great bunch of kids!" Each year we'd graduate about fifty and get fifty more.

Larson *You mentioned sponsoring a group whenever they came in.*

Meissner Right.

Larson *So, would you kind of be the house mother and father for a group?*

Meissner We just sponsored any activity, like Halloween. They didn't have Halloween, but we made Halloween. We gave our children Halloween. Well, they needed to understand why we were doing this. We had Christmas parties and graduation. If you had the older classes, when it came to graduation we would do that. Marsha Turner taught music and taught them to sing, and they had plays. I liked that. I just thought anything that we could do to give them some outside activities, but we'd bring them down to our house. The rainy season was summer, and it was nice outside. So, we would sit in a circle outside. They didn't have to have music. They'd start with their clapping.

Larson *So, would you have just a small group out of the fifty that would come in*

each year, or each class?

Meissner Each class. We'd have a class. We'd have 9A and 9B. There were about twenty-five kids in each one. They loved our cookies and Kool-Aid. Those were things we thought would be simple. But they loved that. It was just fun to have them that way. I couldn't understand their singing because they did do it in Amharic, but it was how they did not have to have any musical instrument. They did it with rhythm and their hands.

Larson *Now, Kool-Aid brings us back to the question of supplies. Where did you get your groceries? Was that all in Jimma, as well?*

Meissner No, all of it we ordered from a commissary in Addis. All of the Americans there, the embassy, everybody had access to this commissary. We would send in an order. One of the women took care of that. We would send in an order we got about once a month or something. Well, we took groceries with us, things that were nonperishable. We each had a store room to put those in, and then to keep and add to it. We just ordered from this commissary, and they did the ordering from wherever. We used Danish hams and bacon from somewhere. It was in a can wherever it came from. (Laughs) The people in Addis actually took care of that, and we'd just order from that.

They also stocked spirits, but Louis and I, neither one of us drank, so we didn't have any problem with that. They kept cigarettes, which again, we didn't smoke, but they did for those that did. So, it was very well-rounded. Our biggest shortage was fresh fruit. We could grow the vegetables, but our fresh fruit was a little harder to come by. If they got any down in that little Italian store downtown, we just descended on it. The people they really shipped it for, I think, didn't get any, but the Americans—that was our big treat, fresh fruit. Later, we got Coca Cola in bottles, but at first it was just syrup and we bought fizzy water and made our own. We'd have a strong coke or light coke, but that was the first. (Laughs) That graduated in until we could actually buy bottled Coca Cola then.

Everything was shipped in by a truck. Now, when I say everything, I should clarify that. We did have a plane in, it would stop of a morning, then it would go on down into the country. I don't know where it stopped. In the afternoon it came back, and went into Addis. So, pretty much each day we had one plane in and one plane out, unless it was needed for something else. They were cargo planes. They weren't passenger planes. It was just cargo, which everything came on the cargo plane, from sheep to people. (Laughs)

Larson *We talked a little bit about where you stopped on your travels over to*

Ethiopia, but you had mentioned when we were talking earlier that you went over by ship, originally.

Meissner No, we flew. We flew the first time. Then for our first furlough, which was after two years—it was a two year contract—we took the first class ticket and turned it into a coach class, and went through the Far East. That way, we could go to Aiden, India, Karachi, and then Hong Kong. We all wanted to go to Hong Kong! And then from there to Tokyo and so, we actually made one trip clear around. Six weeks later we started back. Well, we came back through and went to Brussels. The World's Fair was at Brussels that year, so we went there. We did stop in London, and then we came back. We waited three years to come home that time. We flew to Frankfurt, and we had bought a car. So, we drove from Frankfurt all up through Germany, into Holland, across to—we went to Brussels again, and Calise, France. We crossed over to Dover, and then we drove around England. We parked the car, and came to New York [by ship with the car].

Larson *So, when you had these breaks, how much time off did you have between when you left and when you needed to be back? Was it basically the summer to the end of the semester?*

Meissner Actually, I think we took two weeks of vacation. That's what they gave us, I think, was two weeks, because the gardens had to go. They had to keep being watered and cared for and things were gotten ready. The school year wasn't quite the same because of the rainy season. We had to work with that, and so we didn't start school until about the first of October. I think we got out in July, for about two months. Then we had a few days at Christmas because that's when we took our trip to Alemaya and went to Harar.

Larson *I was just thinking of when you had your large breaks when you went home, if that was the summer.*

Meissner Oh, well, that was the summer. Some stayed there, because we went at different times, but that was three months, really. It was just that when we got home, we'd usually tour on the way home, and we'd plan a tour back. They gave us about six weeks at home. That was really long enough to live around with family. I have a dear, dear sister-in-law that just let us be her—that was our home base, here in Stillwater. We could pile our clothes, all the new things that we wanted to take back, and that's where we packed out from the second time. By that time, we went back… I was pregnant that trip back.

Larson *And that would have been what year?*

Meissner That was ’58.

Larson *So, you were there for two years and then you had a break.*

Meissner Right.

Larson *That’s when you did the whole circuit.*

Meissner Right, because I always said Don should write a book called, *Around the Earth before Birth,* but he didn’t. (Laughter) He hasn’t yet, anyway. When I got back, we had three little boys fairly close together. Another couple had a child, but they went to Addis. I just went up with her. I stayed in the room, kind of helped her in the room. It was a far cry from our hospitals. Then three weeks after hers was born, I had ours, Don. Then, I think it was about maybe a month to six weeks, both Evans and I stayed at the college and had it then.

Larson *So, how far was Addis from Jimma? How many hours to drive?*

Meissner It took us all day. I want to say two hundred, but I’m not sure anymore. Isn’t that awful? I’ve forgotten that because we just took it as a picnic day. There were two mission stations, Sudan Interior Mission. We had two of those on the way, about a third. Then we’d stop and get a break there on driving, because it was pretty tough driving. One summer, we drove to Asmara, [which is now Eritrea]. That’s three days to drive up there, and one day of it is all in the mountains. (Laughs) You just never come down out of the mountains. You go up like this and go down like this. It’s just a beautiful country though, beautiful. It would be rainy season, so everything was green. I’m just talking from the Jimma point of view because I understand the country, the geography, the land laying and everything was so totally different down at Harar. It looked different to us, too. It was the mountains, but it was different.

Larson *What altitude were you at in Jimma?*

Meissner Where we were it was 6000.

Larson *So you had some altitude.*

Meissner Right. You’d get short of breath very easily.

Larson *And there would have been differences with the crops and so on, because of the altitude.*

Meissner Yes. The main crop was coffee at that altitude, but corn grew as tall as this room with big, heavy, thick ears on it. So, corn was an important

crop to them. I don't know what all the farm people did put out, but they tried a lot of different things. Things that I saw from a health point of view, the animal husbandry man sent out his students with roosters, white roosters, and they were beautiful things. Well, hawks could see those white roosters too clearly, so he switched to a dark chicken, and it helped that. Then, their little chickens only had little, tiny eggs. We bought them at the market. We'd just go down to the market and buy if we didn't have enough eggs, because we had quite a few eggs and meat and things up on the campus, but we'd go to the local market. We could buy very small eggs. In a year or so, we began to see bigger eggs. And even the missionary spoke about that, too, that they were finding bigger eggs in the marketplace. So, that gave you encouragement. Not everything is going to work, but this is.

Larson *Something was working because…*

Meissner Right, and it was something they could eat, and they ate a lot of. That was their protein, really. They had beef. We didn't care for their beef, and their chicken wasn't all that meaty, but by introducing a heavier breed of chicken… The farm people, the ones that went in with their animal husbandry and their crop rotations and things, they were really… The problem was we took a tractor, and that was something that would never have worked there. They even thought the mules went too fast. (Laughs) They preferred their oxen. They went more slow and to their pace, or they did it by hand.

Larson *And perhaps, based on the type of soil and so on, it needed a little more individual attention. Is that the case, or was it just what people were used to?*

Meissner I don't even know where they got their main food, because I never learned to like it. I didn't like that hot pepper. A lot of them did, but it burned my lips. I didn't like it. It was the vegetables. Now, we could grow beautiful vegetables. The only fruit was more like the tropical, passion fruit, and they used a little short banana they shipped in from down in the southern part. We had banana trees, but they didn't seem to produce any. I can't remember. There were, I want to say mangos, but I don't think so. We had some pineapple that would grow, even at that altitude, but not heavily. We didn't do it a lot. But something like oranges or peaches or anything—that was nearly always shipped either from Israel. It was Israel, but it wasn't, because I went over into that on a trip. I did take that trip, and it was Jordan at the time. The Six-Day War came up later and drew some war boundary drawings there, but Italy and Israel were where we got most of our fruit—what we did get.

Larson *So, there were still trading ties with Italy, even though there had been*

that history during the war.

Meissner I don't know if it was actually that.

Larson *Just practicality?*

Meissner Yes, how somebody shipped it in because it would have to come in on the plane. Our plane—I don't know if it ever went all the way to Italy or not. I think Cairo was almost as far north. It may have. A lot of those things I didn't know then, and I wouldn't know now.

Larson *Now, were there any administrative problems in getting materials, either medical or other supplies, because you were working through OSU, but at the same time you were working with the Ethiopian government? Two layers of bureaucracy there.*

Meissner Right, and as long as we didn't take the doctor away during the work hours, nobody ever bothered us at all. Our students, if anything was serious, went to Addis. We just put them on the plane and shipped them. When I think now of having all those babies down there, what I could have run into. You have to know God was with us because I think about that now. (Laughs) What would I have done?

I had one that I had a real frightening experience with. The children were different ages. We had several, but they were so many different ages. This one boy, about fourteen, climbed up in what they called the Cork Tree. It was just a big old tree, but with kind of corky limbs. One Saturday afternoon, he was building a tree house up in that, and he fell. It was thirty feet they said he fell. It was rainy season, and the ground was soft under it. That probably saved him. His mother told me—his mother and I were friends forever after that—he got scratched up a little bit.

At that point, our doctor, Dr. Reuther, had gone on a leave. A fill-in had come in from Latvia. He had made friends with this family. She had him in for meals and things. So, we called him, went and got him, and he came over. He just turned to me and he said, "Give him some Tetanus antitoxin," and I didn't skin test him. That night, in the middle of the night, they came to my door saying, "Oh, my! Allen has got hives all over him!" So, we had to get the doctor back, give him Benadryl, and get that out, but I wasn't aware. They said, "Well, didn't you know to skin test him?" I said, "Well, I should have, but when the doctor said, 'Give it,' I didn't question him." I didn't skin test him.

I thought the mother would hate me forever, but we probably were friends longer than anyone else. When we moved to Nebraska, they

came every year to see us for years and years and years. So, it all worked out, but that was a scary thing. I really felt my immaturity with that, but I had been an OB nurse when I went over. I didn't know all these things. I was honest about that.

Larson *When you started working over there, what was your exact title?*

Meissner I was just school nurse.

Larson *And did you have an additional title for instructor for the health classes you were teaching?*

Meissner No, the school nurse taught under—I mean, it was like another man was in charge and he pulled me in to do that one class. So, that's how that one came about.

Larson *And what did your responsibilities cover? You've touched on it a little bit, but just to make sure we've got everything.*

Meissner Well, I've tried to make sure we kept our immunizations all up, so that if anybody traveled they had what they had to have. We didn't do yellow fever. They had to go to Addis to get that. And also, the smallpox, we still did smallpox then. They did it at the Pasteur's Institute. The French were in there, too. We were all there, helping every little boy we could. (Laughter) So, they would do that. But the rest of them, like our Typhus and our Typhoid and Diphtheria, and the baby shots and everything, that was my responsibility. The other thing was, if any injury, there were so many things I couldn't do. One boy cut his wrist pretty badly, and there wasn't much I could do but tape it, because there wasn't any point. The plane had just left for Addis, so we weren't going to see that until the next day. We just taped it. Well, he wound up with some ugly scars. I know the rest of his life he did, but that was just the risk you take.

Larson *You kept him together though.*

Meissner Right. It didn't get infected. Some of them did. Like, to cut grass they used kind of a sickle thing, and they chopped this. One boy, somehow, hit the back of his hand and laid the skin back. Well, I took him out to the hospital, they sewed it up, and it swelled up. So, I took him back to see Dr. Reuther. We didn't have antibiotics like they do now. In fact, Dr. Reuther was very, very against it. His first treatment of anything was to give Epson salts, which my crew hated, but he said, "That flushes out the poison."

Larson *You were saying that one of the reasons you weren't collectors...*

Meissner Right, we didn't collect a lot because the first two years is when everything is new. You're just so excited about everything. We kept staying, and we stayed on, "Well, we'll get one tomorrow," this kind of thing. So, we didn't come home with a lot of things. We had a leopard skin we got with the Kindells. The Kindells and we went out on a picnic. So, a waterbuck head, and just odds and ins, but we've moved several times since we've been back in the States. Every time, something gets shoved back farther, so we just don't have it out. (Laughs)

Larson *Now, you were touching on the medical facilities. Did those change over time while you were there of what was available?*

Meissner Not particularly at the hospital. We had to go to Addis for anything serious enough that required surgery, or most of the babies went up there. They started phasing out. They kind of began to let the Ethiopian director have a little more say, and us a little less. I said I had a helper, well I did. I had a fellow, Ato Furgasa. Ato I think meant mister, but he was my helper. Little by little, he began to take more responsibility of the students.

I didn't have a place to work. I didn't have anything to keep my things in. So, we had a small house on the campus there, a very small one. The students helped me, we cleaned it up. It had two rooms in it. I made one into kind of a treatment room, and the other one I had as an office where I could keep my medicines and things. I didn't see the students then, those last two years. It was in that little room there, that the Kindells little girl was born. It was just kind of shifted more to the staff after that.

Larson *When you started, where did you normally treat people? Wherever they fell out of a tree? (Laughs)*

Meissner No. I actually had a little clinic. It was in one of the classroom buildings, in the office that we had classrooms, office. I had two rooms in one place and two in the other side. We set up some beds, but there wasn't anybody to stay with them. So, that wasn't really a good plan. At that time, we boiled needles and we didn't have throwaways. I think about how really primitive the whole thing was, but we lived through it and enjoyed it. (Laughs)

Larson *From a medical perspective, you mentioned that you were dealing with both the folks from OSU who were there, but also with the students?*

Meissner Right. At first. That was sort of phased out then. I didn't keep records on them. Ato Furgasa could do that. He was what they called a dresser. He had trained in Addis. So, he wasn't just somebody that we had picked at random. He'd work with Gwen Whitenack, too. So, he was quite

capable.

Larson *And did he start working with you when you first got there?*

Meissner Right. In fact, he introduced me to the clinic. See, by that time Gwen had gone, and so I had to feel my way through that. He was very helpful with it then. I mean, it looked so austere. How do you have a clinic with this? I was too young to be scared, I guess, because we just went ahead and did what we had to do. I still say God blessed us all the way.

Larson *He kept everybody together enough to get on the plane.*

Meissner Right, where things worked out.

Larson *What were the most common issues? You mentioned that tuberculosis was a problem with the students, or a potential problem.*

Meissner Malaria. Where we were, it was high enough. Our staff liked to go boar hunting, and they have to go down into the lowlands for that. We had two. Conrad Evans was one that was very ill with malaria a time or two. With the doctor there, he was able to give him what he needed, which we wouldn't have had. I wouldn't have begun to know what to have given him. In fact, it sounded like the flu to me. As a nurse, you never diagnose or treat without the doctor, and there I was trying to do that. So, I gave him antibiotics, and oh, the doctor about had a fit! First of all, he wanted me to give him the Epson salts. It was not a tablespoon. It was an ounce. We got them in little ounce blocks. I bought those down in the pharmacy downtown. That was, he wanted to flush them out. He'd say first, and then he'd take a third of the medicine. As Americans, we didn't quite go along with all of that. (Laughs)

Larson *You mentioned the Italian doctor, too. Was he as much in contact with everyone as the German doctor?*

Meissner No, because he couldn't speak English—or he wouldn't. But no, we kind of avoided him. I do remember one of the first things that caught my eye when we came in off of the plane. It was rainy season. It was July, mid-July, and coming through the main street of town, there was a little shop there, quite a little shop. It says, "Singer," as in Singer sewing machine. That little fellow was a Lebanese merchant. I don't know what he was. He made money, anyway. They were just treadle sewing machines, but he would let us borrow them until our sewing machines got there.

Larson *And if they were treadle, then you didn't need the electricity.*

No, I could sew free time. So, I got one of them. I did use one until mine

Meissner came in. I just had a very small machine. Then I would work for a morning, but after two, I could sew, which was my hobby—that and tennis. Bill Vance—I don't know whether you've met him or not yet—but when they came to Jimma, he not only taught English, but he was the sports person. He got them into soccer, and I don't know what all. Soccer was their main game, anyway. Every kid downtown would walk along kicking, bouncing a little ball. Then he built the staff tennis court, just an earth hard, packed earth. Some of the town's people could come up on Saturday afternoons and play tennis. All of us women learned to play tennis, and we had tennis tournaments. There was no television and very little radio. Some BBC we had. In Addis, we could buy these great big disks to play on our record player. They at least graduated out of the 45s and so, we had these. Other than that, we played a lot of hearts, pinochle, and canasta. One of them was going to teach us bridge, but oh, boy! That was way above my head. (Laughs)

Larson *Did you manage to get the tennis rackets in town there, or had he brought some with him?*

Meissner No, but they had them in Addis. For Christmas, Louis gave me a Slazenger. It had come from Addis. They had them up there. You could buy almost anything in Addis. That was a very modern town. Of course, the planes came in there frequently. The other planes shipped in there. That was a big day, to get to go to Addis. (Laughs)

Larson *You mentioned social life, generally. Who were most of the people you socialized with? Other folks from OSU?*

Meissner See, there were ten families in this compound, and we just did our own. We did Christmas together, Thanksgiving dinners together. We had Easter egg hunts for the kids, Halloween, birthday parties for the kids was a big deal. I tell you, I cannot praise Joy Evans enough.

Larson *A real tight-knit group.*

Meissner Yes. She just knew how to do those things. I just can't say enough good there.

Larson *The Martha Stewart of Jimma.*

Meissner Right, yes.

Larson *As far as organizing.*

Meissner She was a great cook. She was younger than me. She is younger than me. She was a great cook. She didn't have somebody come in and do her

bread baking. She did her own. I had to have somebody bake my bread. When it came to the children's birthday parties, she outshined. Of course, she still does today with this OEA thing. She keeps it together. It's just something we need to thank her for, I think.

Larson *Yes. That's important what the social life was like there because everybody was a long way from home.*

Meissner We were. I think that's why we clung together. We saw each other through hard times. Really, I don't think we had that bad of a time. Oh, sure, there was a little flare now and then, but it didn't amount to anything. I can't even remember them, so if it was anything it was probably over who got that dresser. (Laughter) I do think there was a little rift once between Joanne Kindell and me over a dresser. (Laughs)

Larson *Another potential source of conflict I suppose, you talked about the fact that you were teaching these health/hygiene classes. Were there any cultural issues, either on the Ethiopian or on the American side, having a woman health instructor or having a woman being so involved with their personal healthcare? Was that an issue for anybody?*

Meissner I never felt that. We had women teaching in the classroom. I know when our baby was born, I taught my class that morning, graded my papers, and at three o'clock I knew I was in labor. At six, I had a baby boy.

Larson *Very efficient of you. (Laughter)*

Meissner Oh, I don't waste time! The kids in my health class they said, "Mrs. Meissner, Middy…" (there were different terms that they used) "We did not know!" I don't know how they could not have known, but they were so forthcoming. Then when we left, they followed us to the plane throwing flowers, that type of thing. So, I never felt any cultural differences at all. I had a little problem with learning to drive on the other side of the road, but so did everybody that came. (Laughs) It didn't take too long to get over there because we had American cars, so our steering wheel was on the wrong side there, really.

Larson *But it wasn't an issue for any of the Americans either, having a woman being their primary healthcare person for a while?*

Meissner No, no. They would usually say, "I think I ought to go to Addis and take care of this," and that was up to them.

Larson *Because I was just trying to think of what things were like in the U.S. at that point. You know, it might have been a little unusual.*

Meissner I don't know, because I just left Stillwater Hospital Obstetrics Department, so that was my main [focus]. After two years in Fort Smith of doing nursery and OB, and then came here and did OB for another year, almost—it was a year—that's about all I knew.

Larson *Now, you mentioned some other women instructors at the school. Who else was there? Do you remember?*

Meissner Well, Norma Prentice, who is down at Durant, I think she taught history. There was a Darlington, and she may have been an English teacher for a year. And then Marsha Turner was music and library, and photography. She worked with them on that. Before I got there, there was a Mrs. Horn. I don't remember her first name, because they were just there a little while after we came. She was also a history teacher. He was a horticulture teacher and he was leaving, so Louis took that, and then this Mrs. Horn taught history.

Larson *You mentioned that they got two for the price of one, even though you were paid more in salary as a couple. So, all of these women came in with OSU husbands, as well?*

Meissner Well, no they didn't. Some of them didn't come as an employee. They gave us tickets for them and so, they didn't have to take—with us, we had two employees there, and the tickets would be that way because they had to pay my way anyway. So, that way they didn't have to pay a nurse separate. The agriculture nurse pair helped with the Whitenacks who were going on, and they could set us in there.

Larson *What about the other people, like Norma Prentice or Marsha Turner? Their husbands were all working on the Ethiopian project as well?*

Meissner Right, yes. They were all teachers there already. I mean, hired for whatever they were teaching. But Joy, her husband, he could do almost anything, too. She didn't work there. She did plenty. She did a lot of work, but she was never paid. I don't think she was. Now, when she went to the college, she was just a gracious hostess. That was what she really was. She could entertain the visiting people and was very helpful with that. Where like, Mrs. Rouk, when they were there, she worked in the office. I don't think she taught, but they left a year after we came, or their year was up. Then the Kindells came, and Joanne didn't work either.

Larson *I can't remember if it was Mrs. Kindell or if it was Mrs. Jackson who talked about volunteering in the library.*

If Joanne did, it was while she was at the college. I don't know what

Meissner they did down there. There in Jimma, she didn't work. She'd worked all this time, and so it was kind of nice she didn't have to at that point. But there were some. There was a couple named Hydens, and she didn't work. Grace Siegenthaler was a teacher, but I'm not sure she ever taught there, but she was a secretary. She worked in the office and did that. So, some of them had other jobs, but just actually hire them for that, there were very few of us that had… Milburns was another one. She taught English, I believe. Him and her both were teachers. I know he was English, but I'm not sure. Campbells, Jack taught, but Mary didn't.

Just a mix.

Larson

Yes. It helped if they could get a pair that could work like that, because

Meissner you hated to hire just a nurse and let the man sit around and do nothing, which doesn't happen usually. (Laughs)

Just hearing all of the things that you were doing, you must have been

Larson *extraordinarily busy. Could you walk me through what an average day would have been for you, or if it was different from season to season? Tell me what you may have been doing on your average day, if you were teaching and at the clinic?*

Well, that was the main thing that I did because I had a girl that took

Meissner care of our little girl and the baby, when I had a baby. So, there was one employee. I had a boy that worked in the garden. I had a boy that cooked, and I had a boy that did the housework. So, I wasn't all that busy. (Laughs) I tried to keep people well because I always said, "If a nurse is busy, then people are sick." You don't want that, so try to eat properly and drink your boiled water, and that type of thing.

We played tennis. That was quite an exercise that we got every day. I never thought I was busy, overworked. I never did. I sometimes stumbled over, "What should I do with this?" If it's something that I can take care of or, "Should they go to Addis and get the doctor?" That probably bothered me as much as anything that I ever had bother me, was treating something properly. I got over that. (Laughs) You just learned to live with that. If they felt like they needed to go to Addis, then they went. Some of them, if they hadn't have gone they'd have been quite sick.

Joy Evans had hepatitis. That was a new thing for me. We didn't know what hepatitis was. I had known of it, but I had never seen it reactive, indigestion, what is this? She had a little baby and so, finally, Conrad said one Saturday afternoon, "I guess we'll just have to go to Addis and see." So, they put her in the hospital. Those of us at home watched after the kids, the two little kids, until she could get back home. They really

cautioned her about how to take care of herself, and she said, "Oh my goodness! I felt so much better coming home than I did going up." But she was very, very ill with that and that scared me. Then one of the other women had it later. I don't know how it came in, how it was just them. I don't know where it came from.

We had one child that had—well, we've always said scarlett fever, strep throat with a rash, and I did have to give all the other children penicillin. The doctor had me to do that just as a safeguard, but he got along very well, but his little face was just puffed out good. (Laughs) So, to think back on all those things, it's so strange.

Larson *When you were teaching your health classes, you mentioned having the gardens and trying to teach people proper eating habits, or how to get their proteins and their vegetables, and so on.*

Meissner Didn't work. (Laughter)

Larson *With the Americans or the folks in Ethiopia, or both?*

Meissner We ate well. We had such beautiful vegetables. But their diet was so limited. I do remember that one time they came and complained to me, the boys did. They said some of them wanted hotter wot than what the others want, and the kitchen was having a—now, there's where I ran into probably some cultural differences. I said, "Well, I don't know what else to do, but let's make some pepper sauce." I really didn't know exactly how to make it, but we went over, some boys and I did, and we went to the kitchen, we chopped up some peppers, put them in fruit jars with holes in the top, and I put some vinegar water over them. I didn't know how to make it, but I knew that was going to get hot. Well, I had picked them up. First of all, the cooks in the kitchen didn't care for me being in there. They did not like that, and they weren't very friendly. Well, we chopped up all these peppers, I gathered them up like this, and that night, if you think I like a jalapeno now, never! (Laughs)

Larson *That might account for your aversion to hot peppers.*

Meissner Even in the tender, here, it just burned all night long. I slept with my hand in cool water

Larson *And don't rub your eyes with it, whatever you do.*

Meissner And I happened to not. I'm just surprised I didn't, but when that hit, it wasn't at the time. It was maybe two or three hours before that burning hit and I couldn't get rid of it. There was no amount of washing that off. (Laughs) But I didn't hit it off real well with the cooks. They didn't like

a woman being in there. I could feel it. I could just sense that.

So, it was all males in the kitchen?

Larson

Right, and so, I didn't do that anymore for several reasons. (Laughs)

Meissner

You had mentioned wot being a really popular local dish, and other people have mentioned that as well.

Larson

Well, a lot of them learned to like it. I just didn't. I would pick the eggs out, if they had boiled eggs in it. I picked the chicken and kind of did this as much as I could. But as far as tasting that hot, I never did like it, and I don't like hot chili. So, that goes with me, but a lot of them liked it. They'd send for spices, and they liked that. I guess there are several stores that are carrying it for them now.

Meissner

What else was par to the local food tradition? You had wot…

Larson

The hard bread. Kind of like the Italian-type bread because the Ethiopian…

Meissner

Okay, so, the crusty, heavy…

Larson

Yes, and you could smell them baking that. Man, that was hard once you get it! But at oh, I don't know, six o'clock in the morning or something, you could smell it. Our school was up here on a hill, then you went downtown and kind of turned, then the main street was down. We had a little hotel down there. That was one of our social things was to go to the hotel. I never cared for spaghetti until I learned to actually eat Italian herbs and spices in it. Now, I don't like the plain stuff very well. After forty years I'm getting back into it. That was often a good thing we would do as a group, would go down and have spaghetti at that little hotel. There was a movie theater that if you listened real close you could hear it. (Laughs) It was the same fellow that had the Singer sewing machine [shop]. He also had that theater.

Meissner

An entrepreneur.

Larson

Yes, so if there was a movie that we liked… But otherwise, we just waited until we went to Addis, and saw a movie up there. That was always a treat though.

Meissner

As part of a tie into the social life, you mentioned you kept up a lot of the American traditions, like Halloween and so on. Were there things you had to do differently for some of these holidays? Could you get a turkey at Thanksgiving, or what did you do for a Christmas tree at Christmas?

Larson

Meissner I don't know where they got the turkeys. I guess they ordered them. We did have turkey for both Thanksgiving and Christmas. Off the top of my head, I'm thinking that animal husbandry fellow probably raised them for us or something.

Too big for the hawks.

Larson

Meissner Yes, they were speckled, and they'd chase the hawks. The hawks were really a thing. You could be roasting meat on a grill. I had a small grill because you had to use charcoal to heat our water, and so we all had charcoal. But they would swoop like this and pick your meat off and go, or you could throw it and they would swoop. I don't know where our turkeys came from, but we did have turkey, and we always had ham because they came in tins, too. Between Joy and Grace Siegenthaler, we had great meals. I mean, they could plan and cook. (Laughs)

So, there wasn't anything that was too different for the holidays.

Larson

Meissner I didn't see anything different. There was nothing to make a Christmas tree out of much, so I did order a little artificial one, but some of them used coffee trees. They would get a coffee tree and fix it. So, we had a Christmas tree of some type.

You haven't asked about what we did for church or anything, but the Sudan Interior Mission, about three miles out of town they had a mission, and we couldn't go with the students because the emperor did not want his religion messed with—the Coptic—he did not. You could mess with the Muslim or the Pagan, but leave his Coptic alone! The missionary would have a service for the students. I think he started out with his own group first, which he did in Amharic. Then he would do our students, who got their own way out.

Did they all go out on their own?

Larson

Meissner Whoever wanted to, because some of them came from mission schools. See, they were educated in missions, even though there was a government school there. A lot of them came highly educated, through the eighth grade. There were three services he would do for us, and it was simple. It was little, the little mission schoolhouse with the benches, and tin roof built out of sod on the side. They were stuffed with straw and everything they put in it to make it, but it was where they had school out there, and church as well. So, we sat in the school and there again, we had a baby dedication out there. So, that is unique, I think, to have. Joy started it, and so all of us with our babies had this little dedication in that little African building, that little Ethiopian building. I thought that

was kind of unique. (Laughs)

Where was this group of missionaries from?

Larson

Meissner Well, it was called the Sudan Interior and actually, it was an interdenominational. There was no certain church preached. They were all different kinds. They had been in Ethiopia first, and then when it got bad in Ethiopia, they went over into the Sudan and waited until things calmed down. Then they came back, but they kept that name.

What nationality were most of the missionaries?

Larson

Meissner Well, most of them were from the U.S., but they were New Zealand, England, Canada and Australia. We had them all there. They may have been from some other place too, but I know of that many different countries that they were from. And out at our mission's school, the head fellow, his family was from Michigan or some place here. Then the nurse was from Canada. The nurse was from Australia, and Bertha Zimmerman, the teacher, was from Canada. That's the way that was. And then we had others, because we visited several of those stations around. They were always very hospitable. They kept a guest room. I had learned that they would know more about a country than you would expect, but I didn't learn that in time. When we came through Hong Kong and some of those places, if I would have contacted a mission, they would have shown us what we really wanted to see instead of what a tour guide will show you. (Laughs) But I didn't learn that in time.

Larson *Now, you mentioned schools, which brings up the question of where most of the kids went to school. Your oldest daughter would have been old enough to be going to school by the time you left.*

Meissner I homeschooled her. She was just five when we came home. Siegenthaler had a little boy the same age, so I did do work with LuAnn, and she could read. By the time we got home in the first grade here in Stillwater, it was a good thing, because she was scared to death. She had never lived with people. It had always just been her little group. So, they would come and I had ordered them from Whitman's, but I had started getting them at Woolworth's or something, these little teach yourself books, but that's all I had. I'm not a teacher, but I took those and LuAnn, every day I would work with her some until she could read.

The other mothers that had children in school, they organized a schoolroom and each one of them took a class. It was very much like what you would have at home, because all the children were in the room, and then the mothers took their turn with each. You know, I teach English, I teach that. LuAnn was just ready to start the first grade when

we came home. I just had the little Siegenthaler boy and LuAnn. LuAnn turned out to be a teacher, too. (Laughter)

Must have been your good influence. (Laughter)

Larson

Meissner Well, I couldn't teach. After they got into third grade math, I began to have to scratch my head over that one. I was never very good in math. (Laughter)

Larson *We talked about keeping up American traditions in Ethiopia. Were there any Ethiopian traditions that you've picked up from the students or from the community?*

Meissner Their Christmas was not on the same date as ours. They had theirs in January.

Larson *Was it like the Russian Orthodox Church, where it's about two weeks off, or was it a little more?*

Meissner Well, they didn't get that much time out of school. I think they got more time than we did, but we didn't take off a lot of time because the boys couldn't go home. See, they would have had nothing to do, so it was better to keep them until time for them to go. Even then, they didn't always have ways out. As far as picking up any of theirs, I always thought it was kind of strange that we never—I just thought of this in the last two weeks or something—we had a family here that had done some mission work that actually were navigators. I think they said they were in South Africa. They came home and their first child, they named him Masala, his second name would be Masala, and they were only there five months. I thought, "I was there for five years and it didn't occur to me, and none of us that I know of, gave our children an Ethiopian name at all," and yet Masala was a South African name. So, I thought, "Isn't that strange?" None of us came up with an Ethiopian name.

When I hear the names, for example, a girl was at Langston going to school, and she came over to work where I was working. They told me that she has to put thirty hours in with this field, with her nursing over there in mental health. I said "Well, what's her name?" and they stumbled over her name. I said, "Let me see that," and it was an Ethiopian name. So, when she came, her English was so good! It was so good! (Laughs) But she said her brother was a banker in Jimma. It was just kind of like coming home or something. If she hadn't been able to speak English, well I'd have been just blank. I never tried to learn, just a smattering.

Were there any particular political tensions or problems that you

Larson *remember while you were there?*

Meissner Oh, among the Americans? (Laughs)

Larson *Well, no. Well, that too.*

Meissner That was a story of my own, but as far as the country was concerned, we had the—I'm not sure which was the police—I think the police had a school across from ours. If you go out and go up to the hospital, on that corner, there was the army. During that a coup [occurred], which Louis will tell [Jacob Sherman] about because he was involved with it more. We were just caught down country with it, but they kind of got into a battle. It started in Addis, and it just kind of branched out. It lasted maybe three days or something, until the emperor got back.

We didn't know what we were going to do down there. We didn't know how to get out or anything. I had the passports and the kids and things, and so did all the others. Louis had gone to Addis, so his was much more frightening than ours were. When my cook went to leave that night, he said, "Now, they're not after you. They're not after the Americans. They're at each other." But he said, "Crossfire can be very dangerous." In his way, he said it in very broken English, but I could understand him. He said, "You stay in this house. Do not go out," because he knew Louis was gone. I said, "Will you be all right?" and he said, "Oh, yes." He knew his way home without getting into trouble, and he didn't live downtown. That's where it was worse, was downtown.

We were talking about that today. That had to be about December of '59, in that area. I'm sure it was about that time. It was near enough to Christmas that we had planned a Christmas party for our class. I think I baked about forty different kinds of cookies. (Laughs) It kept me busy where I didn't have to think about it. Really, he just got home—I didn't even know if he'd make it home for the party or not, but he made it home in the afternoon before our little party. Oh, the boys were so glad to see him come home! He had one of the students with him, and it was not a fun time.

Larson *Was he up there because of the coup, or did he just so happen to get caught out?*

Meissner No, he'd been sent out in a Land Rover with a student to pick up blankets. They got the blankets and finally got out. I think Conrad Evans was up there, too. He was bringing a missionary's wife and her little boy home for the Christmas holidays. The mission's school was in Addis. She could speak Amharic and the student could speak it, but Louis couldn't. If he hadn't have had somebody with him to translate, they

would have taken those blankets, maybe, I don't know. He said it was frightening.

So, they ran into people on the way.

Larson

Yes, in a roadblock. It was the roadblock outside of Addis.

Meissner

Do they remember whether it was the police or the military?

Larson

At that point, no. I don't remember which it was. He didn't understand when they told him to stop. He thought it meant go, and the guy really got unhappy. The missionary's wife said, "You better stop." He wanted to know what he had, and Louis couldn't understand. If it hadn't been for the student and the missionary, he would have been in a lot of trouble. The way it was, the student explained, and let him feel between the blankets that they were not sneaking people around. So, they got home, but that was probably the only time that we… And I can't say that I was frightened, it was just one of those things. You're a little numb and if you keep busy, you'll get through it. At that point, Bob Meisner was the administrator or superintendent or president or whatever we call him now. He called them in, and I guess he called everybody. Do you know Bill Abbott?

Meissner

Yes.

Larson

Well, he was the one in charge of this program when we were hired. He wrote letters to all of our families, here at home. My mother never got over that. She lived to be 102 and she never got over it that he cared enough. She finally got to thank him for it. So, that was one of those nice things that you remember.

Meissner

So, this was at the time of the coup that he had written a letter saying everybody was okay?

Larson

Yes, and not to worry. That we would be allowed to be taken out safely if needed. They had heard it on the news, and she said, "I didn't think about how dangerous it might be," until she got the letter. She said, "My! I just thought, how…" She finally got to thank him for writing that letter. (Laughs)

Meissner

So, they met later on?

Larson

Yes. We were eating out one night with her, and he was in there. I told him about it, and he said, "You've just made my day!" because he was by himself. His wife was very ill and he was by himself. That was one of the nice things that was done for our families. Sometimes we forget to

Meissner

appreciate enough.

Larson *Did that stop anything that was going on at the school in Jimma? Did the classes just keep going?*

Meissner We kept right on with classes. The students were a little unnerved by it, but we never stopped. It didn't last that long. I'd say we had a couple of days or three that it was pretty tense. It was worse in Addis. That's where they were having trouble. They said as soon as the emperor came back—see, he wasn't in the country—and as soon as he came back, because I think the army had taken control of the airport. But when he came in, that little man about that tall, very impressive, very impressive. The other really good thing I remember about the emperor was the Americans put on a talent show one night. I didn't realize we had that much talent. (Laughter) It wasn't from Jimma. We didn't do it, but for the embassy people and the other Americans there, the emperor came.

Larson *And this was at Addis?*

Meissner In Addis. It was in Addis, and some of them—I don't remember the name of the opera house. We all dressed up the best we could dress up, because that was required at that point, very formal. Then the emperor came in and everyone stood up, and it was shocking how short he was. (Laughs) It was the power that he had over those people, and that quieted down. So, even though I've never heard a whole lot of great things come out of Ethiopia, I do know the emperor loved his people and he wanted this college. He wanted education for them. That was why we were there with Truman's Point Four Program. It took that long to get it going, which was in the early fifties when it started, and then Dr. Bennett of course, pushed it.

Larson *Now what, in your opinion, was the part about living in Ethiopia that tended to cause the most culture shock for Americans going over?*

Meissner The flies, and to hear a hyena squeal. (Laughs) If you don't know what it is, it's a weird sound. We would hear coyotes here, but this is common there because the market would throw out the bones and the scraps and so, you might as well keep going.

Larson *Once you got back to the U.S., what were things like? What was it like getting readjusted?*

Meissner Maybe not having a cook and a housekeeper and a gardener. I had to do my own stuff. (Laughs) I hadn't done that for five years. We lived here a year, and then we moved to Nebraska. I never really felt any change that I know of. It was nice to be back with family again. We didn't keep up

close. We all scattered when we came home, but it was always good, and it's still good, to see them. We're losing them, but it's good to see the women. It's the men that seem to have played out on us here.

Larson

Are there any questions that I haven't asked that you wished I'd asked, or anything that you wanted to talk about? You mentioned the movies. Taking movies? Was that while you were there?

Meissner

Well, we just had a little Bell and Howell. We still have that little Bell and Howell. (Laughs) That was where we could go out. Now, Louis enjoyed the hunting and the fishing up there. He has never cared for it here. You don't catch fish like that here. The camera was nice to keep us —when we look back at those pictures. There were just a lot of things on that order that keeps our memories jogged on that, but there are a lot of other things I forget, too. But when we came home, I don't know that I felt any adjustment or any change. I adapt easily.

Larson

And what about the children?

Meissner

Now, I would say that LuAnn probably had the hardest time, because she had two little friends over there just about her age, and they played together a lot. Tommy Siegenthaler was her age. They were just kind of their own little group. We got home, and we lived over on Doty, so she went to Highland Park School. She was thrown in a class with thirty kids or so. She even said, "If you hadn't taught me to read, I don't think I would have. I was so scared I didn't know what to do," and she didn't want to go to school. I had to push her to get her to go to school. So, I think it was hard for her. She just went a year, and then we moved to Nebraska, so she had to readjust up there. But she has done great. She's a world traveler, now. (Laughter)

Larson

Kids bounce.

Meissner

Yes, they went back themselves, to the Holy Land. They've been to New Zealand a couple of times. She came out of it all right. Then, in Nebraska, you notice that Marilee is Native American. Well, we adopted her up there. She's Sioux. She's here, and the other one's up there. (Laughs) One's in Dallas, and one's in Tulsa. I guess all of our kids are all over the place, especially when Gary Ray winds up in Alaska.

Larson

Well, thank you so much for sitting down and talking about this.

Meissner

Well, thank you for listening.

Larson

You had wonderful stories and we do thank you. (Laughs)

Meissner Well, I tell you, I don't know what they did to screen people, but I thought living that close together for that long of a time, that was a great bunch of people. As I said, maybe there was a little tiff now and then, but on a whole, we had good times together. We had picnics, we had camping trips. I just didn't learn to like wot. (Laughter)

Larson *Well, thank you again.*

------- *End of interview* -------